

## TOPIC 4: EXPLORING MYSTICISM AND THE ‘COMMON CORE’

### WHAT IS MYSTICISM?

As noted in the introduction, there is no clear, objective distinction between ‘religious experience’ and ‘mysticism’. Some use these terms synonymously, while others see mysticism as a type of religious experience. Perhaps the clearest and most productive statement on the issue has been that made by Franks Davis (1989), who you will recall, sees mystical experience as one of six types of religious experience (though she is not opposed to other methods of categorisation). She has given a useful summary of the most common characteristics of mystic experience:

- i)      **The sense of having apprehended an ultimate reality.**
- ii)     **The sense of freedom from the limitations of time, space, and the individual.**
- iii)    **A sense of ‘oneness’.**
- iv)     **Bliss or serenity.**

The working definition of ‘mysticism’ which will be followed here is that it is a type, or more accurately, a related *group* of diverse experiences, characterised by a feeling of a direct experience of the Divine/Ultimate Reality/The Transcendent/The Immanent/The Real (or whatever term is used), and usually a sense of uniting with it.

Mysticism is not necessarily the highest, deepest, most valued, or most aspired to form of religious experience, as this is not something which can be measured objectively – it depends upon the tradition as well as the individual.

What is meant by ‘direct’ experience can also vary. The experience can appear to bypass beliefs and practices associated with one’s own tradition, or even challenge them. It can alternatively be closely in agreement with them, both as a channel for and expression of faith. Ultimate Reality is thus personal for some mystics and transpersonal for others. Both types of experience and interpretation can, of course, occur within the same religious tradition. The expression of a mystic may or may not harmonise with a religion’s dominant model (indeed some traditions may not even *have* a dominant model).

There is also a distinction to be made when experiencers describe feelings of *unity* with the Divine. One kind of unity involves the maintenance of separate identity. This is often compared to the unity of lover and beloved in romantic relationships, where much of the joy

and ecstatic tension is focused on the *separateness* maintained despite the closeness. The other type of unity is a complete merging, with a total loss of identity and transcendence of separateness. A common image for this is the flowing of diverse rivers into the same ocean, and a sense of becoming part of a sum which is greater than its parts.

There is also great diversity in the means by which mystics achieve these states. Some of these means are linked to a specific goal (e.g. in shamanism), while others are not. For example, meditation is not *solely* linked with the transpersonal, and prayer is not *solely* linked to the personal.

It is important to bear these issues in mind so that you read with a critical eye both the secondary analytical texts of scholars, and the first-hand accounts of experiencers. Scholars like to categorise and typologise, though their analyses are not always based upon accurate interpretations or relevant classifications.

Hinduism, for example, does not have a single dominant model. The love of the Divine is expressed variously as romantic, as child and mother, and friend and friend. Brahman, or Ultimate Reality, is seen to be within every being. The *atman*, the inner unchanging self, is one and the same with *Brahman*.

In Islam, Allah is often as characterised being wholly transcendent, though in Sufi tradition, the poet Rumi described Allah as being ‘as the dust in the sunlight’ and ‘the breath of the flute’. The relationship between the self and divine is thus expressed, and experienced, in a variety of ways even within a single religion. There are RERC Occasional Papers on all these examples, and more (including Buddhism and Christianity).

Mystic experiences, of course, also occurs outside the framework of institutional religion. The ‘oceanic’ model of unity described above is characteristic of certain Hindu and Buddhist traditions, but was also experienced by Bertrand Russell, an atheist. Indeed, even Einstein stated that the most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical, which is the source of all true science. Mysticism and science are not by definition in opposition to one another.

Accounts of all these types of experiences can be found in the RERC archive, from individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds, or none.

### **‘EASTERN’ AND ‘WESTERN’ MYSTICISMS**

It should be noted that mysticism is not confined to the so-called Eastern traditions, and that there are strong traditions of mystical practices in the so-called Western traditions. This

East/West dichotomy itself, however, is somewhat false when we remember that all three Abrahamic faiths are actually ‘Oriental’ religions: that they arose from Western Asian contexts. Furthermore, although these terms refer to where religions originated, Islam has been present in India for centuries, where it has had a profound impact. Hinduism and Buddhism are enjoying increasing popularity in the West, particularly since the 1960s; not only in their ‘traditional’ forms, but also in New Age appropriations and reinterpretations.

In attempts to typologise religions and religious experience, Western religion has often been characterised as ‘prophetic’, and polarised from ‘mystical’ Eastern religion (as Ninian Smart pointed out). For example, the Buddha is seen as a great mystic, while Jesus is seen as a more earthy sort of prophet. This, too, is a false dichotomy because the state of prophetic inspiration can also be seen as a form of mysticism. Hearing the word of the Divine is certainly to be considered direct experience.

Furthermore, Eastern mystics have often been contrasted to Western prophets in terms of the former being ‘world-denying’ and the latter being ‘world-affirming’. This is easily challenged when we consider Hindu concepts of *dharma* – fulfilling one’s duty in this world (not to mention Tantric Hindu traditions). Sikhism, which is historically ‘Eastern’, has prophetic roots and is very much not world-denying; on the contrary, earning a living, marriage, and community involvement are all important elements. There are also strands of politically- and socially-engaged Buddhism in Japan and Vietnam, as well as the Dalai Lama’s Benevolent Organisation for Development, Health and Insight. Daoism also has mystical and practical earthly dimensions. Judaism and Islam have entire well-developed mystical systems (Kabbalah and Sufism), and the Christian mystical tradition is prominent and diverse, encompassing figures from the early Church fathers and desert ascetics to Meister Eckhardt, Lady Julian of Norwich, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Discussions of many of these areas will be found in the Partridge & Gabriel (2003) anthology.

### **APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF MYSTICISM**

William James discussed mysticism at length in Lectures XVI and XVII of his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. He wrote that ‘personal religious experience has its roots and centre in mystical states of consciousness’. For James, mysticism and religious experience are personal phenomena. He outlined four determining aspects of mystical experience (see p. 380ff):

- Ineffability:** It defies expression, and no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. Thus, its quality must be directly experienced. It cannot be imparted or transferred to others, and is more like a state of feeling than a state of intellect.
- Noetic Quality:** It also seems to be a state of knowledge, characterised by insight into depths of truth, illuminations, and revelations which carry a sense of authority.
- Transiency:** It cannot be sustained for long (up to half an hour or an hour).
- Passivity:** While the experience may be brought about with intent (e.g. via meditation or trance), one's own will ultimately seems to be in abeyance.

Using examples from contemporary autobiographies, as well as extraordinary religious figures such as al Ghazali, Vivekananda, and St. Teresa of Avila, James concluded that the general traits of mysticism are 'on the whole pantheist and optimistic, or at least the opposite of pessimistic. It is anti-naturalistic, and harmonises best with twice-bornness and so-called other-worldly states of mind' (ibid. 422). By 'twice-bornness' James meant the state following a painful transformation brought about by spiritual crisis.

W.T. Stace (1886-1967) divided mystical experience into two types: Extrovertive and Introvertive. These types shared the basic similarities of a sense of the experience being 'real' or objective; feelings of blessedness, peace, and contentment; a sense of connection with the holy, sacred, or divine; paradoxicality; feelings of oneness; and ineffability. The Extrovertive experience is further characterised by unifying vision, that all things are one. In contrast, the Introvertive experience is better described as 'unitary' as opposed to 'unifying', with feelings of 'the One' being within.

R.C. Zaehner (1913-1974) made a very different type of classification of mysticism, dividing it into three types:

- Nature, or Panenhenic (all-is-oneness):** Rapport with nature and the totality of existence.
- Monistic:** Realisation of oneness, and the impersonal mysticism of the soul's own interior unity.
- Theistic:** Feeling of communion with a personal God, and love of God.

Franks Davis (1989:188-9) articulated the common criticism of Zaehner's approach when she wrote that he:

...proposed a Christian synthesis which allowed monistic and nature mysticism spiritual worth, but only as preliminary stages of a spiritual journey culminating in love of God. His first stage, 'personal integration', is a re-entry into undifferentiated consciousness and the integration of the conscious and the unconscious in the wholeness of a unified personality: successful nature mystics can advance this far. The second stage is the isolation of the immortal soul and complete detachment from worldly things: this is the monist's resting place. To stop here is dangerous, however, Zaehner claims, since it leaves the soul empty and purified, ready for invasion by the proverbial seven devils, incursions from the unconscious. One must proceed with God's grace to the third stage, theistic union, and fill the purified soul with love for and of God.

In Zaehner's scheme, then, 'theistic love is placed above monistic liberation'. Here Zaehner as Christian theologian overtakes Zaehner as historian of religions. This once again demonstrates the importance of engaging critically with scholarship, which includes an awareness of the scholar's background and potential biases. Otto has also been subject to such criticisms.

Ninian Smart (1927-2001) had a more balanced definition, while clarifying that his categories were not to be seen as exact opposites:

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| <b><u>The Numinous:</u></b> | As characterised by Otto; the wholly other, outside fear, trembling, respect, humility. The experience of the devotee ( <i>Bhakti</i> in Indic terms).                                                                                                                  |
| <b><u>The Luminous:</u></b> | Also referred to as the metaphysical or contemplative experience. Characterised by a disappearance of subject-object distinction, and inner non-other serenity, as well as calm, happiness, and confidence ( <i>Dhyana</i> in Indic terms) (see article in Woods 1980). |

These categories (or aspects) can be combined in various ways, so that in Daoism both the worship of the supreme gods and the life of harmonising the Dao were practised together. Medieval Christianity combined sacramental piety with contemplative practice. In *Dimensions of the Sacred* Smart added panentheistic and shamanic experiences to his discussion. Smart's flexible and inclusive approaches are models of religious studies scholarship.

None of these systems should be seen as definitive, or even in terms of 'right' or 'wrong'. They are, rather, different ways of organising and approaching the data, some more successful than others.

### **THE QUESTION OF A 'COMMON CORE'**

The idea of a ‘common core’ of religious experience (or even of religious belief in general) has been briefly mentioned earlier in this module, initially in relation to Schleiermacher. The argument states that different religions are cultural manifestations/interpretations of a common divine Truth. As Aldous Huxley (1946: 1) defined the concept (which he calls the perennial philosophy), it is:

**The metaphysic that recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds: the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality: the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being – the thing is immemorial and universal.**

This idea is not a new one, going at least as far back as ancient Greece, and is reflected in the thinking of such diverse individuals as William Blake (see his poem ‘All Religions are One’), the Dalai Lama, and the Christian philosopher Justin Martyr (100-165 CE) who suggested that the Judaeo-Christian god and the Roman god Jupiter are one and the same, simply worshipped under two different names.

In an important article (Reading 18) Robert Sharf highlights some of the problems with the search for the common core, and indeed with seeing ‘experience’ as somehow foundational or essential to religions. He argues that this tendency in Western thought depends on an *a priori* Cartesian dualism, which assumes that experiences are ‘of something’, and that the whole common-core project comes out of a post-Schleiermacher world-view which cannot be imposed on phenomena cross-culturally or anachronistically.

Particularly important to this issue are accounts which are not bound to the contemporary culture of the researcher – those from past times and/or foreign places. Similarities of mystical experiences, both among individuals of the same culture, and cross-culturally, have often been used to support the common core idea; and many even argue that mysticism itself is the common core. James used the terms ‘root’ and ‘centre’. Among the many proponents of the universality of mysticism and the idea of a common core include Religious Studies scholars such as W.T. Stace (1960), Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1981), Huston Smith (1982), S.H. Nasr (1984), Keith Ward (1987), John Hick (1989), Reat & Perry (1991), Forman (1999), and Paul Badham (2003).

It is again worth quoting Franks Davis (1989: 190-92) at some length here:

The experiences do support several relatively unramified but very important doctrines, and the fact that they can be woven into a consistent synthesis, whatever its further doctrinal ramifications, turns these relatively unramified propositions into the sort of 'common core' the perennial philosophers were seeking above.

A survey of many different numinous and mystical experiences show that they can provide good evidence on their own for the following claims:

- i) The mundane world of physical bodies, physical processes, and narrow centres of consciousness is not the whole or ultimate reality.
- ii) In particular, the phenomenal ego of everyday consciousness, which most people tend to regard as their 'self', is by no means the deepest level of the self; there is a far deeper 'true self' which in some way depends on and participates in the ultimate reality.
- iii) Whatever *is* the sublime reality is holy, eternal, and of supreme value; it can appear to be more truly real than all else, since everything else depends on it.
- iv) This holy power can be experienced as an awesome, loving, pardoning, guiding (etc.) presence with whom individuals can have a personal relationship, to whom they are profoundly attracted, and on whom they feel utterly dependent; it may be described positively in terms of goodness, wisdom, and so forth, but all such descriptions are ultimately inadequate.
- v) Though introvertive mystical experiences cannot in themselves show that union with something else has been attained, since only the unity is experienced, the evidence of numinous experiences and the fact that experiences of awe before the numen and love of the numen can easily slip into mystical experiences when all sense of self has been annihilated make it possible that at least some mystical experiences are experiences of a very intimate union with the holy power, however that is spelled out. (Other mystical experiences may nevertheless be no more than the integration or purification of the meditator's mind.)
- vi) Some kind of union or harmonious relation with the ultimate reality is the human being's *summum bonum*, his final liberation or salvation, and the means by which he discovers his 'true self' or 'true home'.

One criticism of 'common core' claims is that they tend to ignore the *diversity* of mystical experiences. As noted above, not only are there different types of religious and mystical experiences, but different types of each *element* of experience, such as the type of unity being felt.

Ineffability is one element which has been cited as common, if not universal. It has even been argued that it is precisely the ineffable element of the experience that is universal

(see Huxley, Hick, and others). This is, of course, problematic because it is essentially basing a conclusion on an inability to express the experience. Obviously, academic study can only engage with experiences which have generated accounts, not those which cannot be articulated. To accept the argument is therefore a matter of faith. The recognition of the significance of ineffability is also not new, and was discussed by the Hindu philosopher Shankara (?mid-8th century CE). Shankara argued that the Ultimate is 'beyond attributes' and therefore beyond description. Once one attempts to place a mystical experience into language, the 'Ultimate' is accruing our linguistic and conceptual limitations. Terms for experience (Being, Consciousness, Bliss), or even personal deities, thus express levels of reality lower than the Ultimate.

Ironically, this concept is very similar to an argument *against* the idea of a common core: that even if there was such a thing as unmediated Ultimate experience, it would be so wholly beyond our experience and even consciousness that the mystic could not be expected to recall it (See Sharf, Reading 18). By the same token, the fact that so many mystical experiences are described in highly detailed terms demonstrates that ineffability is not a universal factor. This is regardless of whether or not the phenomenology of the experiences reveal similar content, and this is in some respects a different issue. Perennial philosophy positions have been argued against by Katz (1978) and others (e.g. Bagger 1999), largely on the basis that (they argue) there can be no such thing as unmediated experience. Therefore, there can be not pure mystical experience, or 'pure consciousness,' because experience and interpretation are inseparable. The key difference between the two arguments is that on the one hand ineffability demonstrates the universality and thus the reality of mystical experience; and on the other hand it demonstrates that such experience cannot exist because there is no culturally or linguistically neutral way to express it, and it is therefore apparently an experience of nothingness.

As an analogy, however, artists such as painters and musicians (many of whom do not require the 'language' of reading music) might point out that the experience they create is independent of linguistics. Indeed infants (and animals) clearly have experience but not language. Thus, we either need to extend our concept of what language is, and/or of what experience is; or we need to accept that some experience is not linguistically mediated, thereby opening the door for arguments supporting the idea of unmediated, 'pure' religious experience.

Whatever the case, there is clear evidence of religious/mystical experience being specifically relevant to the cultural or religious background of the experient. For example, it is Roman Catholics (not Buddhists) who encounter apparitions of the Virgin Mary, and Pure Land Buddhists (not Catholics) who have visions of Amida. This issue is explored in depth in the anthology edited by Almond (1982).

Two of the most important questions surrounding this issue can be summarised as: 1) The relationship between the experience and its expression; and 2) The relationship between the cultural background of the experient (including religious beliefs) and his/her experience.

New cross-cultural research continues to shed light on the debate. Yao & Badham's (2008) new study is the result of their RERC project which explored religious experience in contemporary China in comparison with Britain. This has stimulated research elsewhere, including India and Turkey, and it is hoped that the project will expand even further. As the most recent exploration of this kind, and one of such landmark scale, its research methodology (including the design of culturally relevant questionnaires) should be studied in depth, as well as its arguments and conclusions