

Mysticism in Historical Context: A Critical and Analytical Study

Devajit Das

Associate Professor, Department of English, Dakshin Kamrup College, Mirza, India

Abstract

Although the credit for developing mysticism as a branch of study goes to the Western scholars, it has its earliest roots in Eastern religious traditions, particularly the *Upanishads*. Because of the diffused nature of mysticism, it has been an arduous task even for the philosophers to define it in precise terms. Yet, for working purpose, mysticism has long been understood less as a doctrine than as a spiritual temper or mode of perception emphasizing unity, intuition, and transcendence beyond rational analysis. Mystics seek the underlying oneness of all existence and aim at union with the Supreme Reality through intuition rather than intellect. Historically, mysticism has shaped major religious traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—and has profoundly influenced Western philosophical and literary thought from Plato and Plotinus to medieval and modern thinkers.

Keywords: Mysticism, history

Mysticism: An Introduction

The term “mysticism” is thought to have its origin in the Greek language and the credit for making mysticism a separate branch of study goes to the Western scholars (Abrahams, 1995, p. 5). However, the roots of mysticism are to be found in the Orient and the first evidence of mysticism is to be found at the “core of the Upanishads and such other classics belonging to the major religious traditions of the world” (Abrahams, 1995, p. xvi). Many philosophers and commentators have pointed out that it is not easy to define “mysticism” since it carries different connotations for different people. Although there is an element of uncertainty associated with the meaning of the word, Caroline F.E. Spurgeon (1913, p. 2) has expressed the view that mysticism is “a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy.” A more elaborate definition is offered by Prof. Surendranath Dasgupta who writes, “Mysticism is not an intellectual theory, it is fundamentally an active, formative, creative, elevating and ennobling principle of life...Mysticism means a spiritual grasp of the aims and problems of life in a much more real and ultimate manner than is possible to mere reason” (1983, p. ix).

The origin of the concept of mysticism can be attributed to those people who find a uniting thread among the innumerable diversities of the universe (Goswami, 1966, p. 93). In fact, the mystics make a conscious attempt to see and seek oneness of all things. Instead of perceiving any discreet identity in each and every object of the universe, the mystics look upon the individual objects as a reflection of the uniting spirit. They argue that since all the objects of the Universe are part of the Supreme Force or the One, obviously, all the qualities of the One are also present in them. They also point out that this is true of man as well since he is also an integral part of the universe. That is why they believe that by cultivating those qualities, the finite man can also reach the Infinite which is referred to variously as God, the Almighty, and the

Supreme Being etc. As the German Christian mystic of the 13th century Meister Eckhart Said, “Thou shall know him without image, without semblance and without means.”

The mystics are of the view that humanness, benevolence, charity and love can be sustained and fostered only if people realize the supreme worth of their fellow beings. These qualities are vital for a peaceful and progressive social life; but these qualities require, for their own stability “the sense of worth of the universe, totality or whole transcending nature, man and society” (R.Mukherjee, 2000, p. 449). This sense can be provided by a mystic notion which is capable of “effectively sustaining perennial, self-transcending human love, devotion and enthusiasm (p. *ibid*)”. Moreover, man is full of flaws and defects and even the society is also “too full of imperfections, injustices and cruelties” and as such, neither man nor society can claim one’s unbounded love and service. Hence it is the infinitely vast universe, which comprises all beings, nature and society as inseparable, organic parts, that has the power and potential to be the ultimate source of man’s love and respect, and it implies that “human allegiances and enthusiasms towards fellow individuals and society imply and involve initiation into the deeper mystery of the beyond-human and beyond-social (Goswami, 1966, p. 93)” and the mystics posit it as one of the basic factors behind the emergence of Mysticism.

The mystics perceive the presence of the Supreme Being or the One in the universe not through any logic or rational analysis but through pure intuition (p. *ibid*). They believe that analysis and experiment lead to the creation of a gulf between the One and man (Dash, 1966, p. 240) , and, therefore, these should be avoided if one wants to realize the existence of a Supreme Force. The sensory-intellectual consciousness proves to be insufficient as a means “for realizing the undifferentiated unity of all” because it “assumes a duality in creation and confines knowledge to the reasoning processes” (Boreman, 1989, p. 3). Intuition, the power of understanding something without the need of conscious reasoning or study, is beyond analysis or experiment and, therefore, helpful in man’s endeavour to understand the universe and its creator. When a person manages to achieve it, the veil of doubt and uncertainty is removed forever and he enjoys a new light and knowledge. As Bertrand Russell says, “The mystic insight begins with the sense of a mystery unveiled of a hidden wisdom now suddenly certain beyond the possibility of doubt (Russell, 1945, p. 15) . By cultivating the intuitive power, the mystics realize with utmost certainty, the presence and role of a Supreme Being in the functioning of the universe and try to merge themselves with that Supreme Being in order to taste what they call the ‘mystical ecstasy’.

Mystics assert that the mystical state is ineffable, indescribable and indefinable and hence it cannot be explained or defined to any person who has not had the opportunity to experience the same (Kodama, 2010, p. viii) . Besides, they maintain, it is “more a way of perceiving or feeling than a path deliberately taken by the intellect.” Moreover, the mystics never try to express their feelings through words because they believe that language cannot do justice to such a feeling. Plato, the Greek mystic, asserted that he would never write anything on Mysticism simply because of the fact that unlike other subjects, it is not fit for expression. Arthur Koestler also said that “mystical experiences, as we dubiously call them, are not nebulous, vague or maudlin—they only become so when we debase them by verbalization” (Koestler, 1954, p. 353). That is why, instead of using conventional language, the mystics prefer to use a medium rich in images, similies, metaphors and symbols to convey their feelings and emotions (Dash, 1966, p. 240).

History of Mysticism

The history of Mysticism can be traced back to ancient times. In fact, it originated simultaneously with the major religions of the East (Goswami, 1966, p. 99). In India, mystical ideas have been quite dominant in Hinduism. Although the belief in the 'unity of all' has been one of the hallmarks of Hinduism and its long history, yet the apex of mystical interpretation is said to have reached in the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* (Boreman, 1989, p. 10). Most scholars are of the view that the mystical overtones of these scriptures are more prominent than those of the other religious scriptures such as the *Bible*, the *Old* and *New Testament* and the *Koran* (Abrahams, 1995, p. 70). From the philosophical Mysticism of the *Upanishads* originated the devotional Mysticism of the Indian middle ages. Besides the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Narada Bhaktisutra* and *Sandilya Bhaktisutra* are the other main pillars of Mysticism in India. The Hindu interpretation of mystical experience was taken to a new height by Sankara—the great 9th century philosopher who founded Advaita Vedanta Hinduism. He resorted repeatedly to the *Upanishads* to reinforce his ideas and points of view, and travelled throughout India spreading the central message of the *Upanishads*—"Thou art That". His belief in the centrality of this truth shows that he was a follower of the non-dualist tradition. In his opinion, there is an undifferentiated unity of all and proclaimed that "The Self is Brahman." The *Upanishads* professed a form of mysticism which was principally pantheistic in nature, whereas Sankara's interpretation of Reality gave monistic overtones to Hindu Mysticism (Boreman, 1989, p. 15). Another great saint, Ramanuja, the founder of the Visistadvaita tradition, put forward a theistic system which provided the theoretical basis for the Bhakti devotional Hinduism. He had three disciples—Tulsi, Kabir and Navaji—who were responsible for the emergence of three of the most prominent mystical sects of the middle ages. The Indian mystical movement of the middle ages was predominant mainly in Bengal, Gujarat, Tamilnadu, Maharashtra and the Hindi speaking region. Mystical ideas are found in Buddhism also. The central objective of all the sects of Buddhism is *Nirvana*—the concept which lends itself sufficiently to mystical interpretations. Gautam Buddha himself had said that the state of *Nirvana* is something very difficult to explain or illustrate. It represents neither life nor extinction. Very much like Aristotle's 'Law of the excluded middle', the concept of *Nirvana* also represents the realization of a mystical 'third' state between existence and extinction and one can move towards this state through meditation and contemplation (Basham, 1954, p. 386). However, among the Buddhist sects, it is the *Vajrayana* or *Tantric* Buddhism where the mystical ideas are most powerful and which endeavours "by combining yogic discipline with an absolutistic philosophy and highly symbolic language to cultivate mystical ecstasy."

In the Sufi mysticism of Islam, the Supreme power of the universe is imagined as a person, especially a woman, and the devotee considers himself as a lover of that woman. The Sufis endeavour to taste the happiness of the union with that Supreme Being through love. Sufism originated in the 8th century as a response to the practical and religious needs of those for whom conventional answers were not adequate and it made use of some of the tendencies towards mystical experience that had been indigenous to Islam from the beginning.

Mysticism is an important part of two other major religions of the world—Judaism and Christianity. The foundation of the Jewish mysticism was laid in the vision of the Biblical prophets and the apocalyptic imagery of post-Biblical Judaism. The most profound and intense form of mystical Judaism is the *Kabbala* which developed in the 12th century and after. It is essentially an oral tradition and it laid claim to the secret wisdom of the unwritten Torah communicated by God to Adam and Moses and it provided the Jews a direct approach to God. *The Book of Brightness*, a major text of this sect, introduced the doctrine of the

transmigration of the soul in the 12th century and provided the *Kabbala* with extensive mystical symbolism.

A similar mystical strain has appeared intermittently in Christianity as well. Christian mysticism was influenced by the mystical ideas of the Greek philosopher Plotinus (Abrahams, 1995, p. 131), as well as by the mystical ideas of the East, more particularly by the mystical elements of Hindu religion (Huxley, 1941, pp. 58-59). The writings of St. Augustine and St. Teresa of Avila are particularly marked by a mystical temper as are the works of Meister Echart and his 14th century successors.

Mystical ideas were widely prevalent in Egypt and Greece even before Christianity came into existence. In fact, the Greeks played a pioneering role in spreading the ideas of Mysticism in the western world. Plato was a first-rate mystic who opined that every object we perceive in this world is an imperfect imitation of a perfect original called the Idea or Form. According to him, a soul, before it enters a human body, forgets much of these Ideas, though not all, and the thirst for knowledge and love of beauty exhibited by man actually reflect the endeavour of the soul to remember those external Ideas and to merge itself with the Supreme One. His mystical ideas were influenced by those of his teacher Socrates who spoke about the way of realizing divine beauty through worldly or physical beauty.

Another Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras (582B.C.—507 B.C.) propagated the idea of metempsychosis or the reincarnation of the soul and his thoughts deeply influenced the development of mystical ideas in western philosophy.

Mysticism in the West was taken to a new height by Plotinus (205-270)—the Egyptian-Roman philosopher who founded the philosophical school of Neo-Platonism. He postulated the idea of an all-sufficient Unity—the One—from which emanated the Divine Mind, also referred to as Logos, and below that was placed the World Soul. He said that these transcendental realities support the visible world. Giving a deep mystical colour to the teaching of Plato, he asserted that all things emanate from the One and that it is possible for an individual soul to rise to a mystical union with the One through contemplation (*Britannica Encyclopedia*, 2005, p. 87).

St. Augustine (354-430) played very prominent roles in transmitting the teachings of Plotinus which exercised great influence on Christian Mysticism. By the middle of the ninth century, the works of Dionysius were also translated from the Greek language to Latin by the Irish philosopher John Scotus Eriugena. In this way St. Augustine, Dionysius and Eriugena proved themselves to be a mighty factor in shaping the life and thought of the Medieval Europe (Pious Neenan, 1916, p. 10). Mystical thoughts gained popularity in France during the twelfth and thirteen centuries through the teachings of William of Champeaux 1070—1121). St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) and a group of philosophers known as Victorines also played a significant role establishing mysticism as a ‘regularly organized science’ (Turner, 1903, p. 303). The works of these mystical philosophers along of those of St. Bernard were translated into English in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in all probability, by the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

The twelfth century also witnessed the emergence of a group of women mystics in Germany who were remarkable for their spiritual intuition as well as for their literary achievements. St. Hildegard (1098—1179), St. Elizabeth of Schoenau (1138-1165) and St. Catherine of Sienna advocated and practised a form of mysticism which encouraged “energetic public service in a good cause” (Pious Neenan, 1916, p. 11). In the following century, three more women mystics emerged from the Benedictine Convent of Helfta, all of whom played a great role in popularizing mystical ideas through their literary works. St. Gertrude and St. Mechtilde of Hackborn were typical Catholic mystics of the visionary type although the former was

more subjective in her descriptions. Mechtild of Magdeburg is still remembered as the author of “The Flowing Light of the Godhead” which remains a bright example of great poetic beauty and individuality of expression.

St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) in another name without whose reference the history of Western mysticism is bound to remain incomplete. His protégé and biographer St. Bonaventure (1221-1274) “combined a contemplative nature with vast intellectual powers, and whose teaching, as a consequence, has dominated orthodox mysticism in all succeeding ages” (Pious Neenan, 1916, p. 11).

The transition from the Middle Ages to the modern period was marked by great intellectual and religious unrest because “men yearned after they knew not what, and sought for light, they knew not where” and such a state was particularly suited for the revival of the principles of mysticism. Eckhart (1260-1329), Tauler (1300-1360), Suso (1300-1365), Ruysbroek (1293-1381) and Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471) were the people who were responsible for the revival of mystical ideas in Germany in particular and Europe in general.

The elements of mysticism are also found to have been latent in the philosophy of Descartes (1596-1649) which influenced many other philosophers such as Pascal (1623-1662), Geulinx (1625-1669) and Melibranche (1638-1715). While the mysticism of Spinoza (1632-1677) contained pantheistic overtones, the mysticism of Kant (1762-1814) was led to the evolution of the romantic mysticism of Fichte (1762-1814), Novalis (1772-1801) and Schelling (1775-1854). This romantic mysticism of these philosophers caught the attention of Coleridge who passed it to Wordsworth and which ultimately influenced immensely the romantic literature of the nineteenth century England.

Conclusion

Thus, the roots of mysticism are to be found in the Orient and the first evidence of mysticism is to be found in the *Upanishadas* and such other classics belonging to the major religious traditions of the world. The origin of the concept of mysticism can be attributed to those people who found a uniting thread among the innumerable diversities of the universe. In fact, the mystics make a conscious attempt to see and seek oneness of all things. Instead of perceiving any discreet identity in each and every object of the universe, the mystics look upon the individual objects as a reflection of the uniting spirit. This spirit has been reflected throughout the history of humanity in Hindu, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and all other religious and spiritual traditions.

Works Cited

1. Abrahams, E. (1995). *A Comparative Survey of Hindu, Christian & Jewish Mysticism*. New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publishers.
2. Basham, A. L. (1954). *The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the Culture of the Indian Sub-Continent Before the Coming of the Muslims*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.
3. Boreman, N. (1989). *Mysticism in the Indian Tradition*. New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.
4. Dasgupta, S. (1983). *Hindu Mysticism*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.
5. Dash, S. (1966). *Sahitya-Sandarshan*. Calcutta: Chakrabhaty, Charatjee & Co., Calcutta.
6. Goswami, U. (1966). *Bhasa Aru Sahitya*. Guwahati: New Book Stall.
7. Huxley, A. (1941). *Grey Eminence*. London: Heron Books.
8. Kodama, M. (2010). Introduction. In M. Kodama, *George Luis Borges: On Mysticism*. New York: Penguin Books.

9. Koestler, A. (1954). *The Invisible Writing: The Second Volume of an Autobiography*. New York: Macmillan.
10. Pious Neenan, M. (1916). *Some Evidences of Mysticism in English Poetry of the Nineteenth Century*. Washington, D.C.: National Capital Press.
11. R. Mukherjee. (2000). *The Philosophy of Mysticism*. In H. Bhattacharyya (Ed.), *The Cultural Heritage of India* (Vol. III). Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission, Institute of Culture.
12. Russell, B. (1945). *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co.
13. Spurgeon, C. F. (1913). *Mysticism in English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
14. Turner, W. (1903). *William Turner*. New York: Ginn and Company.