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WESTERN MYSTICISM; AN INTRODUCTION

definitions:

a short and concise definition is that mystical experience is the experience of the immediacy of the absolute, whatever one conceives that to be.

mysticism then is a reflection upon that experience

mystical experience is religion at its most acute and is part of every great religion.

it is the very life of religion for it centers on the communion of the human spirit with the Divine.

w/o such communion or union (an issue to be discussed later) in some form, religion fades out and secularism reigns.

mystical experience is not just visions, voices and ecstasies in which one is lifted out of oneself, tho mystics may or may not have such experiences. this could be a sign of pathological experience.

rather, mystical experience in its truest form, can be called personal prayer, worship or the devotional life.

whatever the experience it is always a journey, or a pilgrimage of growth in the life of the spirit and is a universal need of the religious life and available to all:

the term mysticism has taken on so many adverse implications that it must be "disinfected,"

to many it means occult or spooky stuff something to be avoided.

unfortunately, the theology of the reformation in protestant circles has not helped this image.

Karl Barth and the neo-orthodox movement attacked it.

if God is wholly other, the totaliter aliter of Kierkegaard and Barth, he is to be worshiped and obeyed but hardly to be met in intimate communion, still less anything to be termed union.

with Freud and Fuherbach and scientific psychology many came to beleive that anything mystical was purely subjective activity with God only a projection of the humnan ego.

many persons have turned to the oriental religions with their provision for mystical meditation which indicates a hunger of the heart that conv entional churches have inadequately fed.

the drug induced trip is often sought when deep inner needs are not more creatively and safely met.

the Charismatic movement of the 60's and 70's as well as many other cults have been an answer to this need.

JAMES AND UNDERHILL

Wm James in his famous book The Varieties of Religious Experience talks about four marks of mystical experience.

this is from the psychological viewpoint and is the most famous of these type listings.

1. first is it is ineffable ie, one can find no words to describe and yet many mystics have

tried to do just that.

the one thing common to most witnesses is an experience of inexpressible joy and peace.--a state of being in the soul whihc words can only faintly speak of.

2. second is the noetic quality - this means that mystical states are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive mind.

in other words, mystical experience adds to the subjects grasp of reality by an intuitive rather than logical approach.

it is a clearer vision from a Source beyond the self. in theistic mysticism, emphasis is laid on the Love of God.

3. third, it is transient at least in its more extreme forms, since noone can live on the mountain top all the time.

4. forth, is passivity ones will is in abaince and is grasped by a superior power over which the mystic has no control

this is true and false, since the mystic must make preperation by discipline
receptivity is the pre-requisite of spiritual energy.

for James the mystic consciousness has certain traits as well

1.an experience of unity which can be either of the oneness with diety or with nature.

2 it is optimistic a state of saintliness, a feeling of living lighter in the world.

3. it is anti-naturalistic as it moves one beyond the concern for material or mundane things.

4.one feels twice born there is a feeling that one needs someting to deliver them from something else. in the east it is generally ignorance, in the west it is sin.

EVELYN UNDERHILL

whose book MYSTICISM is still reprinted and is one of the best available on the subject of western mystical experience talks about four "notes" or rules of mysticism.

1. mysticism is practical--not speculative but experiential. one is existentially involved. mystic acts with whole being, doesn't just know about.

2. it is an entirely spiritual activity. one involved will reject supernormal powers and distinguishes between mysticism and magic. only concern is with the object of the quest not to gain power, virtue, etc.

3. total dedication of the will ; for the theist, this is love as the whole business and method of mysticism. one is absorbed with the object of love and doesn't want to study about it or explore but is whole being given in outgoing activity.

4. finally, there is a definite set of psychological experiences or processes

a. conversion is an awakening of the self to consciousness of a higher goal (the divine, or detachment from the world (buddhist) or union with it (zen)

b. purgation this is purification of the self. one realizes its unfitness and tries to work at purifying oneself thru discipline, ascetic practices, change of attitude--can be very painful.

c. illumination this is the beginning of the realization of infused contemplation. happy time but not the end as still learning and being purged

d. unitive life can be union with God, with nature or with self depending on view of reality.

these stages cannot be conceived of as linear but rather like a spiral in which one comes

around at a different level each time going deeper into understanding so there is a little of the beginner in the most advanced, and of the highest love, in the beginner. it could also be thought of as three lanes on a highway and one moves back and forth (or more correctly, the Lord moves one back and forth depending on the need.

mystical ecstasy may or may not be spiritually fruitful it depends on the person. Teresa of Avila says it is only fruitful if the love, joy and peace continue afterward.

joy is the accompaniment of any genuine mystical experience and can be present even in deep suffering.

mysticism presupposes objectivity. even if the God who speaks is within. No mystic believes that they are lifting themselves up by their own bootstraps. if one believes this or even seriously suspects it, they are no longer lifted.

humility is an absolute must.

PRESUPPOSITIONS OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

presuppositions in any field determine the nature of the procedures that are followed in it.

first is that the five senses are not the only approach to knowledge, or to other vital aspects of human living.

the material world is not the only world there is.

second, is that there is a realm of the spirit which is related to the material world but is not identical with it.

this realm of the spirit is within humans and can think, feel, will, love, reflect upon itself, set goals beyond itself and pursue great objectives.

the human spirit has the capacity to discern some kinds of truth thru channels other than the ordinary ones of sensation and rational deduction.

third. is basic that there is an ultimate reality, an absolute, a universal principle (thervada buddism has no absolute).

this one or principle is above and beyond the visible world and on which all else depends.

Christian, Jewish and Islamiac mystics all see this as God.

by whatever designation, every form of mysticism shares some such belief.

the mystic feels that since one can know God by acquaintance, no argument is needed, and if one does not have this acquaintance by way of one's own experience, no argument is useful.

forth presupposition, which binds the others together, is the capacity of the human spirit to come into union or communion with the One, or the absolute, or God.

two other presuppositions are almost always present in mystical experience, but not part of its universal core.

paradox is the idea that the infinite God is present in the finite.

also, this affirmation that the individual does, and does not, lose their own identity in union with the divine.

every genuine mystical experience is marked by its paradoxicality.

finally, this applies to Christian mysticism, and is the emphasis on purity of heart and life, with human goodness vital both to the preparation for and the fruit of the soul's meeting with the Ultimate good..

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THE NATURE OF THE ONE

how one experiences the absolute is determined by what one conceives it to be.

there are two basic views.

theistic mysticism seeks union with God who is love, but not identity with this god.

Christian, Jewish, Islamic and some Indian religions (Ramanuja and Tagore) are this type.

this is generally a journey into love, ~~for there is a relationship and is characterized by the~~
~~'gift of tears' which is in keeping with the essence of the mystical experience.~~

union with the divine is not an absorption of one's being with the divine being but rather an experience of the breath of the Divine Love as well as illumination by the Divine and warmth of love.

the mystical experience is that of FIRE meeting fire.

nothing is extinguished of the human personality but everything is set ablaze

thus, two substances (God and the human) become one as long as there is love.

in Christian, Jewish and Islamic mysticism the purging fire of contemplation seems so dark to the human spirit that it seems God is not present.

in actuality, God's light is darkness to the soul until it is purged. John of the Cross called this the dark night of the soul and spirit because it is so hard.

this experience leads to union with God such that, as John says we become God by participation, ie, the human soul becomes most truly itself, it is not absorbed or loses its identity.

MONISTIC MYSTICISM

seeks identity with the universal principle, which may be called divine ~~the may not be~~ but *yet sameness with The human spirit - Atman* does imply a difference ~~from the human~~.

one who sees and impersonal absolute will strive for a union with being

the person who takes this path will reach the experience of repose in Being

~~the characteristic of this path is one loses the capacity to cry~~ this is the path that Meister Eckhart spoke of.

Rudolph Otto in his book Mysticism East and West compares Shankara of India with Eckhart as to their paths.

tho different in many ways, both did not like any emotionalism and both traveled the path into Being.

ON THE MYSTICAL PATHS OF THE EAST AND WEST

ONTOLOGICAL VERSUS EPISTEMOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE ABSOLUTE

There are
the basic difference in these two types of mystical experience is that the journey into being presupposes that one is in essence (ontologically) the absolute. pantheism.

the Upanishads, Shankara, etc, taught that everything is god. the experience then is "I am god" atman (the soul) is God. "thou art that". as the Upanishads put it.

this means there is no difference between myself and God and only ignorance keeps one from knowing the truth.

this is quite different from the idea that we have an eternal soul or spirit which is created in God's image but is not ontologically God.

God brings us to union with ~~Himself~~ *itself* thru a journey and we become "God by participation" thru grace.

this is very different for it is Sin that is the problem, not ignorance. God removes all the impediments so we can know union with the heavenly parent.

most mystics of the west (and some of the east, like the Bagavad Gita interpreted by Ramanuja) are technically pan-en-theists.

this means God in everything and is quite different from saying God is everything.

a pantheist will see the absolute as immanent in everything but without transcendence.

the theist basically sees god as transcendent (Karl Barth, Kierkegaard believed this thus there could be no union with God in their thought. Barth commented that if there were any mystics, there shouldn't be)

the pan-en-theist has room for both the immanence of God and the transcendence. this is why most western and many eastern mystics come to this view. as it satisfies the problem of how God can be both beyond us and in us.

PHILOSOPHICAL SOURCES FOR WESTERN MYSTICISM

Western mysticism --Christian, Jewish and Islamic-- have their philosophical underpinning from Plato.

this doesn't mean Plato was a mystic but his basic view of the universe, and certain strongly mystical passages in his writings, became the source of the Neo-platonism which through Plotinus and later Augustine entered the mainstream of Christianity, later Jewish mysticism and sufi piety.

this affinity stems primarily from the Platonic theory of Ideas or Forms which are held to constitute the real world above the things of earth, while these are imperfect copies.

the supreme idea is the Idea of the Good. and Plato does not hesitate to speak of the Good and God.

the highest human goodness is likeness to God; the highest happiness is the vision of God

Virtue must be sought for the health and harmony of the soul, for goodness is harmony with the Good which is the Real.

yet the Good stands for more than virtue in the ordinary sense, it incorporates in perfect form the archetypes, or original patterns, not only of goodness but of truth and beauty.

Plato's thought was easily grafted on to the Christian concept of God as the Highest Good and the source of all goodness, truth and beauty.

thus, the supreme delight of the individual is to free oneself from the entanglements of the flesh and find the heavenly vision of blessedness.

in THE REPUBLIC the allegory of the cave has the central point of the shadowed nature of all earth-bound thinking, and the need to distinguish between illusion and reality.

prisoners chained all ~~th~~ their lives in a cave, and able to see only the shadows of men passing by would think these shadows are reality

once brought to the light they would at first be blinded and then see with a clarity impossible before and would not wish to return to the cave.

this is how one comes to the good, by effort one sees it and wants never to return to earthly cares.

while ^ Plato identifies the Good with God, it is not God as a personal being that is the object of the quest for the ultimate in beauty, truth and goodness. (hindu influence?)

in The Timaeus he seems to have a personal God who as the Demiurge fashions the world out of the chaos, but in much of his writing God is the supreme Goodness rather than a supremely good Being.

This ambiguity was to have great influence in later developments.

PLOTINUS (205-270 CE)

In Plotinus, Neo-platonism comes to its fullest fruition and no writing outside of the Bible has been more determinative of the direction which the mysticism of the West was to take.

he was not a Christian; but a Roman philosopher affiliated with no creed or institution but a deeply religious person. this shows that mystical experience can exist w/o a religious

label.

he grew up in Alexandria, a meeting place of east and west.

the last 25 years of his life were spent in Rome as a teacher of philosophy.

he wrote a great deal and these were preserved under the name Enneads or nines since they were arranged in 6 sections of 9 books each

his philosophy is hard to grasp, but necessary.

"to understand it at all one must put aside all ideas of time and space, of before and after, of here and now, of this and that, as we are aconscious of them in the phenomenal world."

Plotinus has a trinity--a threefold Godhead-- which is not the Christian Trinity tho there are some points of contact with it.

There These are three forms of the Ultimate and the Real, the second emanating from the first and the third from the second, not identical and still not seperate.

don't think in terms of layers yet there are degrees of ultilmacy in them.

there are differences in their functions in relation to the world and ourselves. these differences are not functional but ontological.

~ there are not three gods, but divinity has 3 basic modes.

the highest is the One or the Source. this is not a personal being but the source of all being from which all emmanates:

"This acan be no thing among other things, but must be prior to all things."

Tillich had a similar idea with the "ground of being"

The second element in this triade is directly tracable to Plato.

it is Nous or Mind or "the intelligible realm" the sphere of eternal thought-forms or ideás or organizing principles.

it includes the Divine Mind and all forms and patterns of its thought

in it is an identity of knower and known.

further, it knows no past or future for all things exist in this eternal Now.

this has an affinity with the Logos of Stoic thought and John's prologue to his-gospel.

it is the principle of oarder and meaning that pervades all things. it permeates the world of spirit and of values as well as of intellectual processes.

yet it is unlike the Christian Logos for there is no incarnation in a particular historical figure.

nous emmanates from the One like light from the sun.

our human minds are an organic part of it, different and separagte yet never severed from it.

the third element is the divine triade is the psyche or soul often called the universal soul or the over soul.

it is the principle of creative energy in all existence.

through it the eternal world of true being is linked with the world of tilme and space and imperfection.

from it comes the soul of humans, marred by imperfections but still belonging in the inmost nature to the world of Nous, and eternal.

the body owes its origin to the soul not the soul to the body.

matter has no reality of its own and is the source of evil, tho it is not wholly evil and the beauty of nature shows traces of the divine.

he had great subsequent influence and the key to it is the One whose presence is felt on earth through his (or its?) Mind and Soul, to which human minds and souls owe their existence and in which they participate.

there is a difference, but also identity between the human mind and soul and the divine.

because of this identity, the true seeker after God becomes what he seeks, the seer becomes the seen.

plotinus says: "He belongs to God and is one with him, like two concentric circles; they are one when they coincide; and two only when they are separated."

on this identity hinges the reality, the ecstasy and the ineffability of the mystics vision.

Plotinus has been quoted and used by most mystics since his time, in them we find a witness not only to the blessedness of the mystic's vision of God and its fruitfulness for personal living, ^{There is} but unfortunately also a less wholesome note.

to withdraw from all earthly entanglements and to seek after "a life that takes no pleasure in earthly things" is not the good life understood by Jesus, the jews or later the muslims.

it has never been the dominant note in Christian mysticism but much of the monastic movement certainly followed Plato and Plotinus in its view of the world

tho many mystics, particularly Christian, begin their quest with this attitude, the irony is that they end up re-embracing the world in love, if they are true mystics.

ascetics, those who follow harsh disciplines to wean themselves from the world, are not necessarily mystics. most mystics, of whatever tradition, come to a great appereciation of nature and of life even if they began their quest as an ascetic.

THE HERMETIC TRADITION

a little bit needs to be said about this tradition because it crops up in mysticism later, particularly in the Kabbalah, Jacob Boehme, a protestant mystic, Wm Blake, etc. It is sort of an underlying current in most non-Catholic mysticism. This tradition includes things like alchemy, numerology, gnosticism and even astrology.

From Egypt there have survived 18 tractates, generally known as the Corpus Hermeticum, the scriptures of a small mystic sect which honored the Egyptian God Thoth identified with the Greek god Hermes, under the title Trismegistos 'Thrice-greatest.' the date from the first cent A.D. and bring together wisdom from Egypt, Greece and Asia.

all are concerned to declare a divine revelation. Initiation began with a call to repentance: then comes personal instruction so the initiate was required to turn away from ignorance, grief, intemperance, sensuality, injustice, avarice, folly, envy, deceit, anger, impetuosity and malice and embrace knowledge of God, joy, self-control, continence, righteousness, generosity, truth, goodness, life and light.

this involved ascetic discipline and self discipline.

from this the initiate passed to silent meditation in solitude and then the climax was an ecstatic vision of LIGHT, delightful and joyous:

that Light is described as 'the first God'. "this alone, the knowledge of God, is man's salvation; this is the ascent to Olympus; by this alone can a soul become good."

the experience is one of rebirth. the result of this rebirth is a sense of identity with all creation, with earth, water and air and fire, as well as animals and plants.

more it is to enter into God "We must not be frightened of affirming that a man on earth is a mortal god, and that a god in heaven is an immortal man."

ALCHEMY

'Alchemy' wrote Pierre-Jean Fabre in 1636, is not merely an art or science to teach metallic translations, so much as a true and solid science that teaches how to know the center of all things, which in the divine language is called the Spirit of Life."

the transmutative process is an integral part of the Great Work, which is a material and spiritual realization.

essential to alchemy is the understanding of 'correspondences' between the material and the spiritual. "As above, so below."

the alchemist was seeking under suitable astrological conditions to bring together Primary matter and the primary agent (also called secret fire.), first to produce a pure mercurial substance, then an incombustible sulphur and finally the 'philosophers Stone, which had the power of transmuting base metals into gold, but whose discovery was also a necessary part of the realization of man's full faculties, and a precondition of the discovery of the Panacea, the Elixir of Life which would transmute the human body into an incorporeal body of light, so securing for the Adept omniscience, omnipotence and the joy of divine love.

the process is picturesquely illustrated and all thru is the sense that regeneration comes thru putrefaction, life through death.

Christian alchemists do not hesitate to identify Christ, already called the Corner Stone, with the philosopher's stone. So Boehme, of all the great mystics the one most influenced by the alchemical thought: "In this stone there lies hidden all that God and Eternity, heaven, the stars and elements contain and are able to do. There never was from eternity anything better or more precious than this. It is offered by God and bestowed upon men. Everyone may have it. . . It is in a simple form, and has the power of the whole Deity in it."

Man then is the true subject of the alchemist's art. The three principles, Sulphur of his earthly part, Salt of the intellect and above all Mercury, the Mercury of the wise, 'snowy splendour', the spark of the soul, the mystical spirit, must be brought together in the Azoth or Philosopher's Egg set within the Athanor or cauldron, which is man himself.

this is done by the fire of love.

Then the transmutatiion of natural into spiritual man may begin.

The first stage of the process is Blackness, the stage of purgation.

the second stage is whiteness, the stage of illumination.

the Climax is redness, the colour of alchemical gold, and is also called the marriage of Luna and Sol, the human and the divine, the finite and the infinite.

ASTROLOGY

the concept of astrology depends on the great backcloth of the stars, seemingly operating as a single system, and the seven heavenly bodies visible to the naked eye which move independently in relation to the stars, the sun the moon, and the 5 planets Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn.

the power of the sun and the moon and the free movement of the planets make it natural to endow them with life and divinity.

the stars are sometimes treated as children of the sun and moon, or as translated heroes or ancestors. The pattern made by groups of stars suggested shapes, which in turn led to a development of myth.

in the temperate zones the course of the sun plainly affects vegetative growth on earth. The cycle of the moon and of menstruation in women correspond. It was therefore natural to see the heavenly bodies as powerful deities controlling life on earth.

with the three tiered picture of the universe prevalent until the last few centuries, earth was the abode of living humans, the dead were down below,

the gods up above. Again, divine power was in the sky,. How to fence it in, understand it, control it?

there were two main observational factors.

first the course of the sun or ecliptic (and indeed of the planets) was limited to a narrow band of the sky.

this was divided in Mesopotamia into twelve. Each section being dominated by a particular constellation or sign of the Zodiac.

second it was observed that some stars would be visible just above the horizon shortly after sunset one day, and then not seen for a period of about a month reappearing shortly before sunrise.

these heliacal settings and risings were carefully recorded. The observer divided his field of observation into twelve 'houses.'

positions were expressed in relation to signs of the zodiac and houses.

the points on the zodiac shown as triangles also gave the alchemists signs for the elements, Fire and air being over our heads and earth and water under our feet.

the synthesis of fire and water gives the six pointed star which is a sign for alcohol ('burnt water') but in Kabbalistic mysticism, because of the combination of the Hebrew consonants for fire and water gives the word for Heaven, became a symbol for God.

There are three principal ways in which astrology has affected mystical religions: first arises out of the belief that the planets, signs of the Zodiac and positions of the heavenly bodies at the moment of birth affect character and destiny.

thus the calculation of horoscopes is used to reveal the destiny of the individual.

second is through the picture of the universe as a series of concentric spheres,

with the Divine above and outside them. The soul on its way to being born descends through the spheres, and as it passes away from the Divine becomes tainted by each of the spheres through which it passes.

the spheres are dominated by the planets. Thus from Jupiter comes love of power, from Venus lust, from Mercury greed for gain, from Mars violence, from Saturn sloth.

the third is connected with a theory of correspondences, that all parts of the universe are interrelated, the heavenly bodies, and the sublunary world and the microcosm that is man, and that therefore we do well to relate all that we undertake to the total world-picture.

this is a potent element in alchemy in which the alchemical process will be invalid unless it is carried out with the appropriate conjunction of heavenly bodies.

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