



REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY OF MYSTICISM AS A CATEGORY

Mousumi Roy, Ph. D.

Assistant Professor in Comparative Religion, Department of Philosophy and Comparative Religion, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal,

Email: mousumiroy.vb@gmail.com

Abstract

Mysticism is an important component of religion, representing its experiential dimension. The term itself is of western origin, adopted by Christianity, evolving over time and extending in meaning only in the nineteenth century to include experiences of encounters with the ultimate nature of Reality in religions. Thus, a category of mysticism has developed, which can be studied in a comparative manner. The study of mysticism has further given rise to various questions related to study of mysticism and various perspectives of dealing with the phenomenon. As mystical experiences are essentially associated with states of mind beyond rationality, there is a general attitude of scepticism connected to study of mysticism. However, this scepticism must be overcome. In the present-day context, when mystical practices are gaining a new level of popularity over the world, it is not only necessary but also quite possible to study mysticism comparatively and to some extent, directly.

Keywords: *Mysticism, Mystics, Mysticism and Rationality, Mystical Experiences*



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Introduction:

When we hear the word mysticism, the first question that we may ask is – what does the term mean? Is it connected to mystery? Does it mean the study of something hidden or mysterious? Something hard to comprehend? Initially, the term indeed was connected to mystery. In our times, the general understanding of the term ‘mysticism’ is somewhat negative. It has come to represent some vague or ill-defined religious or spiritual phenomenon, especially associated with a belief in the occult. But within religious traditions ‘mysticism’ is understood in a more positive light. It means the system of belief in the experience of encounter or union with a deity or the divine dimension of reality. It also means the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect. **‘Mysticism’ as a subject matter of study, is associated with the domain that deals with immediate consciousness of the transcendent category and the experience of such communion as described by people, community and traditions.** Distinctive practices, discourses, institutions, traditions and experiences aimed at human transformation through direct

experience of the Divine Reality, from all religious traditions of the world, form the core of mysticism.

Etymologically, the word comes from the Greek word 'Mystikos' which is derived from the verb 'muo'(to close) and referred to the hidden or secret dimensions of ritualistic activities. Later on, during the time of the early church Fathers, the word mysticism came to refer to the transcendental dimension of Reality: to the vision of the divine. The term "The mystic" has come to refer to the contemplative spiritual figure as a social type, which grew with the new understanding in the Christian world of the Divine residing within the human beings. This understanding paved the way for investigating mysticism and the mystics in secular spaces, in a comparative manner, as a type of spiritual phenomenon and spiritually oriented people to be found in many religious traditions of the world. Thus, as Parsons (2011,3) states, we can point to Saint Teresa of Avila, the Zen master Dogen, the Sufi al-Hallaj, the Hindu sage Sri Aurobindo – all as mystic; the Enneads, the Upanisads and the Zohar as classic mystical texts; and Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Kali, Saint Paul's ascent to Paradise and Buddha's attainment of Nirvana as mystical experiences.

Historical development of the term 'mysticism':

The term 'mysticism' has western origins with various historically determined meanings. It was derived from the Greek word *muo*, meaning *to close* or *to conceal*. Its derivative *mystikos* meant *an initiate*. In the Hellenistic world *mystical* referred to secret religious rituals. A *mystikos* was an initiate of a mystery religion. The use of the word had no direct reference to the transcendental.

Louis Bouyer (1980) notes that the early church fathers established the link between mysticism and vision of the Divine. In early Christianity, the term came to refer to hidden allegorical interpretations of scriptures and to hidden presences, such as that of Jesus at the Eucharist. It also came to mean contemplative or experiential knowledge of God. The link between mysticism and divine transcendence was introduced by the church fathers as an adjective, as in mystical theology or mystical contemplation. All these meanings continued in the middle ages.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, mysticism came to be used as a noun, as *mystic*. By the middle of the 17th century, as science and religion became progressively separated from each-other, the *mystical* was increasingly applied to the religious realm in particular, to emphasize the special approach of religion to the discovery of the hidden nature of God's universe, in contrast to the approach of science. The traditional hagiographies and writings of the saints

were designated as mystical, shifting from virtues and miracles to extraordinary experiences and states of mind. Thus, a newly coined branch of *mystical tradition* was created.

By the nineteenth century, the meaning of the term was considerably narrowed and particularized. Much extraordinary perceptions or experiences of the mind which had traditionally been called *mystic*, had been discarded and only experiences aimed at or derived from union or encounter with the divine or the Absolute or the Infinite was claimed to be genuinely mystical. Furthermore, from this period of time the term extended itself to include comparable phenomena from non-Christian religions. Thus, in the contemporary usage *mysticism* has become an umbrella term for all sorts of non-rational religious worldviews.

Mystical traditions, experiences and practices:

Mysticism is inseparably linked to religion and to the experiential dimension of religion. Every religion in the world has a mystical dimension at their inner core. The more advanced world religions have a great number of mystics whose personal experiences about the nature of ultimate reality have been preserved and sometimes indoctrinated within their traditions. Methods and techniques have developed within these traditions for direct access to these experiences by advanced spiritual seekers. All world religions have well framed ideas about the nature of the ultimate Reality and while the views held by each faith-tradition may be in conflict with the same in other traditions and the expression of experiences manifested in the lives of the mystics are couched in their specific religio-cultural settings, they, nevertheless, show some striking resemblance and commonality of understanding. For example, mystics from Christian, Islamic, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist and Tao tradition stress upon their inability to express mystical experiences through words as words are formed in the world of duality whereas the ultimate nature of Reality is non-dual. They also speak of the true nature of the world and self as identical with the Reality which cannot be grasped by thought but recognized through awakening. They claim that mystical truths can be verified through practices, disciplines and divine grace. Their language of expression is different, yet the commonality of content is unmistakable.

The commonalities however, do not undermine the importance of diversity in mystical expressions, practices and expectations of various faith traditions. While studying mysticism, both the commonality and the differences should be given equal consideration.

We have stated that mysticism is part of all religious traditions. But every religion does not give equal importance to the experience dimension of religion. For religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, mystical experiences form the apex of religious quest and the mystics are

highly revered in the community, whereas proper Islam views Muslim mystics with some suspicion and reservation. But whatever the attitude of the community, presence of mystical religious experiences of various degrees in every religious community cannot be denied.

Whereas religious experiences of some description are part of every community, groups and sects which can be called more radically mystic have emerged within every religious community. The Gnostics of the past and Quakers of the present times are groups leaning more towards the mystical ways within Christianity. The Sufis in Islam, Tibetan Buddhists among Buddhist schools, old Vedanta sects, the Nath yogis and the Tantriks of Hinduism are a few examples of groups especially oriented towards mystical views and practices. Indoctrination of mystical practices usually arises out of such groups.

Mystical elements are present in religions of non-literate societies as well (though we usually do not call them as mysticism proper). Shamanic practices and possession cults are ubiquitous in tribal and folk communities where personal contact with supernatural deities and entities form a regular phenomenon. Oral traditions around specific techniques for acquiring such powers of contact are well developed in these societies. By a broader definition of mysticism – i.e. mysticism as not only experience of the ultimate nature of reality but also experience of supernatural dimensions of reality – these supernatural experiences and magical practices can be brought under the broader category of mysticism

Studying mysticism:

The academic study of mysticism must involve studying the mystics, mystical texts and mystical experiences from various religious traditions. But that is not enough. From the academic point of view, there are a lot of controversial issues on multiple levels that must be addressed, to understand mysticism in its broadest possible perspective. Is the idea of commonality of mystical experience, mystics and mystical traditions as unambiguous and straightforward as it apparently seems? Different religious traditions use the term in different ways where as some traditions do not use it at all. There are other terms like Shamanism, Gnosticism, Spirituality, Esoterism, Occultism, etc. which also refer to certain hidden encounters or knowledge of non-temporal aspects of reality. Are these terms to be equated with mysticism? If not, then what kind of experience do they represent? What is their connection to mysticism? Then again, there is a rich diversity of opinion regarding the definition of the term *mysticism*, controversies about theorizing mysticism, methodological concerns about studying mysticism and difference of perspective regarding how to interpret

mysticism meaningfully. We must be aware of all these potential problems associated with the academic study of mysticism.

Many scholars have raised their concern about teaching mysticism in different traditions without touching upon its many problematic features. For example, Buddhologist Robert Gimello says, “it is difficult to apply any of the widely accepted definitions or descriptions of mysticism to Buddhist Praxis without the most serious reservations” (1979,173). Indeed, we cannot deny the huge importance of meditative experiences in Buddhism yet we cannot simply explain them as visions of the divine or encounters with the divine. Carl Ernst(2003,121) points out that we cannot understand Sufi forms of mysticism without understanding Islam’s forms on political, economic and social issues. Indeed, a mystic life cannot be properly understood without understanding her/his broader social context. Many scholars also object to the effort to try to understand a mystic’s life-experience as personal, individualistic phenomenon, isolated from others. They stress upon the importance of their shared life in community and their relation to the total religious matrix: literary scriptures, worship, ritual etc. Therefore, even though a mystic’s life is formed and transformed by moments of visionary, intuitive experiences of encounters which are extremely private in nature, they are ultimately inseparably related to their religious life, community life and social life which must be taken into consideration, to have a proper understanding of the life of the mystic.

Mystical texts, methods and experiences are of immense variety not only across religious borders but usually also within the same tradition in the same time frame as well as across historical periods. However, we can still recognize *types* and can study them as they have been preserved within traditions. Thus, under the broad categories of common types we may talk of Jewish mysticism, Hindu mysticism, Chinese mysticism etc. or of ancient mysticism, modern mysticism etc. We may also study mysticism as categorized in certain themes, as meditative mysticism, devotional mysticism, mystic rituals etc.

Mysticism and rationality:

A basic question concerning the study of mysticism is whether it is at all possible to study mysticism. Mystical experiences are extremely personal in nature and are claimed to be states of experiences that are ‘non-rational’ in nature and beyond our rational understanding. In what sense then can we study mysticism rationally?

Professor Fritz Staal (1975), of the University of California, has dealt with this question extensively. He says that when we explore the relationship between mysticism and rationality we should explore it from two angles that can be formulated into the following questions: -

- a) Are mystical experiences rational in nature?
- b) Can mystical experiences be studied rationally?

To answer the first question, let us see whether mystical doctrines arising out of mystical experiences can be called rational. In order to understand this some knowledge about mystical doctrines is needed. In particular, one would like to find characteristic features shared by all or most of these doctrines.

All mystical doctrines make a clear distinction between appearance and reality. All mystics assert that there is something real which lies beyond appearances and which is not experienced under normal circumstances. Also, mystics make certain claims about this underlying reality. Staal asserts that there is no irrationality in such claims. Of course, reality presents itself to us as plural, differentiated and embedded in the flow of time. But deeper analysis may show that reality is different from what it appears to be. At least, there is no logical impossibility in that claim. In fact, this is exactly what is presupposed in most sciences and in all rational enquiries. Scientists have shown that objects which present themselves as solid are actually permeated by space and many events that appear in a certain way are known to be quite different when subjected to deeper analysis. The physical sciences in particular confirm the difference between reality and appearance – between surface reality and underlying reality – just like the mystics and the doctrines of mysticism.

While mystical doctrines deal with objective reality, mystical experiences have a subjective quality. Staal claims that the distinction between appearance and reality which primarily characterizes objective claims made by mystical doctrines is also applicable to this subjective feature of mystical experiences. These experiences are sometimes said to represent ‘altered states of consciousness’. This very expression suggests that the waking state of consciousness is normal and normative while mystical states are alternations to it. Like a true philosopher Staal argues that it is possible that the reverse is true - that the mystical states of consciousness are more basic, while the waking state is one of its offshoots and modifications.

By this argument Staal does not validate the basic nature of mystical states, he merely points out that there is no logical contradiction involved in seeing reality in an inverse way. These considerations show that many of the claims contained in mystical doctrines, whether true or

false, are not irrational. Rather, their rationality is similar in structure to that of the sciences. It does not establish mysticism as rational, but it indicates towards the compatibility between mysticism and rationality. It also indicates that it is acutely erroneous to suppose that mysticism cannot be studied. Rather it indicates that mysticism can be adequately explored. The above argument by Staal shows that mysticism is compatible with rationality. But even if someone does not accept the rational nature of mysticism, that should not deter her/him from studying mysticism. Most objects are neither rational nor irrational, and yet are objects of rational inquiry. Plants are not rational in character and are still the object for the botanists' analysis. Yet, strangely, it is precisely the assumption that mysticism is non-rational— that undermines all existing approaches to its study. Nevertheless, mysticism has so far been studied from various angles. Mystical phenomena have been studied historically, sociologically, phenomenologically and psychologically. All these approaches have both their merits and demerits, their advantages and limitations. All of these methods are authentic but indirect ways of studying mysticism. In today's world, with the growing enthusiasm for direct personal experience of mystical states, another form of studying mysticism has become highly plausible. Staal calls it the direct method of studying mysticism. With the growing popularity of Yoga, Zen and other forms of mystical methods, independent of their cultural connection, and their relatively easy availability in places across the globe, the possibility of personal access to states of experience labeled as *mystical* is growing. Staal had noted this growing trend and expressed the hope for religious scholars to introduce and validate a new method for studying mysticism based on glimpses of direct mystical experiences and reflections and analyses of them. In the present context, this directly experiential as well as critical method of studying mysticism as proposed by Staal, does not seem too far-fetched or impossible.

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