

WESTERN MYSTICISM FROM PLOTINUS AND PHILO TO  
ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

I will not attempt within the scope of this paper to give a definition of mysticism. Volumes have been written on this topic, and most end with the author saying that his definition is inadequate due to the ultimate ineffability of the mystical experience. Writers of various religious traditions and those outside any particular tradition agree in essence but disagree on interpretation.

The mystical experience has been interpreted as the cessation of desire, union with God, reabsorption in the One, and many other things. Descriptions of the mystical experience show a remarkable degree of unanimity, and fairly obviously refer to the same experience. As one who believes that the mystical experience is a contact with a reality, a cosmic spiritual presence toward which all great religions grope, I am neither surprised nor disturbed by this unanimity. Mystics of various traditions agree on the ineffability of the experience, its paradoxical, alogical, and contradictory nature, the feeling of complete oneness and unity, and an ecstasy which defies description. Arthur Koestler, who lies outside any particular religious tradition, is in complete agreement with the above description.

In this work we shall be concerned with western rather than oriental mysticism. All the forms of mysticism mentioned in this work, with the possible exception of Plotinus, are

unquestionably within the western mystical tradition. The great religions of the west, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are theistic rather than pantheistic. In a pantheistic theology, complete unity with Brahman, Tao, or the One is theoretically possible...In the theistic religions of the west, the Sanskrit phrase "tat tvam asi", "that art thou" must be interpreted as union of likeness and similarity of purpose (St. John of the Cross), or "of sunlight and air, or of hot iron and heat", (Jan von Ruysbroeck), rather than as literal union and identity. Keeping this in mind, we shall proceed with Plotinus.

Our study begins fittingly in Alexandria, the golden city. In Alexandria Greek, Hebrew, Egyptian and even Persian met on common ground, and came into contact with elements from farther east. As well as being a melting pot of peoples and ideas, Alexandria was a city of unbelievable wickedness side by side with unbelievable piety. While many sought sensuous pleasures, many others sought God, in many different ways. In the near future, Alexandria would become "the anvil of Christianity".

One of the Alexandrians who sought God was Plotinus. Plotinus was the greatest of the neo-Platonic school of Alexandria, who drew their inspiration from the Platonic dialogues "Timaeus", "Laws", and parts of other dialogues. Neo-Platonism was a mystical philosophy with rationalistic elements and influences from Persia and India. Plotinus spent some time in Persia studying philosophy, and died while on the way to India for the same purpose. The neo-Platonists carried Plato's idea of the Good and the world of forms one step farther. The Good and the world of forms were merely emanations of the One, which is comparable to the Indian Brahma and the Chinese Tao. All things are emanations of the One, and the One is undifferentiated unity. All things flow from the One and seek to return to it. The One is neither personal nor conscious, as attributes imply division. Through contemplation, leading a wholesome life, and wisdom, a person seeks reunion with the One. The mystical experience is reunion with the One, when the illusions of distinctions and multiplicity are eliminated, and may be interpreted in the light of the Platonic metaphor of the cave. As all things are emanations of the One, all things

are sacred, and a moral code is founded upon this. However, there is a hierarchy of emanations, the world of pure intelligence, the Platonic forms, is above ordinary mind, which is above matter.

In Plotinus one finds a great intellect, a supremely great mystic, and a great moralist united in a single individual. St. Augustine was quite right when he said that Plotinus need change only a few words to be a Christian. In spirit Plotinus would need to change nothing.

Plotinus writes in a lively yet deep and scholarly style reminiscent of Plato. However, suggestions of mystical ecstasy and intensity are more common in Plotinus than in Plato. So we leave the God-intoxicated sage of Alexandria. Had Alexandria produced only Plotinus, she should richly deserve the title "the golden city".

However, we now discuss another jewel in the crown of Alexandria, Philo Judaeus, who showed that the Hebraic and Heleno-Oriental traditions were not antithetical, but complementary

Philo has been more honored in the Christian tradition than in his own Hebraic tradition, as many, though by no means all, Jewish Theologians and Talmudists have considered him a heretic and Heleniser.

Neo-Platonism did not begin with Plotinus. In fact, Plotinus lived in the third century AD, not long before neo-Platonism was absorbed by Christianity. Philo was a contemporary of Christ, and is sometimes called the first Jewish mystic.

Philo combined neo-Platonic metaphysics with Jewish monotheism in an ingenious and rational manner. No doubt to combat the anthropomorphism common to a great part of his fellow Jews, Philo stresses the ineffability of God, and is thus considered by some the founder of the "via negativa", that any quality attributed to God is false, because attributes imply limitation, though the "via negativa" is found much earlier in India. Faced with the difficulty of combining the ineffable, unchanging God who is beyond all categories of time and space with the creator God of the Jewish tradition, Philo borrowed the Logos from Heraclitus and interpreted it as combining the

functions of the One and the Platonic world of pure intelligence. Pure monotheism was maintained by interpreting the Logos as the creative and sustaining aspect of God. Thus, the Logos is a personal aspect of an impersonal God. The mystical experience is an encounter with the Logos. Pantheism was avoided by stressing that all things are creations rather than emanations of God. This Logos doctrine is found in the Gospel of St. John and in the Nicene Creed. Jewish law and ethics were identified with the Stoic concept of universal law.

For Philo, however, the mystical experience is not undifferentiated unity, but "beholding God in all His glory". This was to become a unique aspect of Jewish mysticism, distinguishing it from neo-Platonic, Christian, and Islamic mysticism. The present writer believes this distinction to be merely a matter of words and semantics. This distinction is not made by all Jewish mystics.

Philo writes in a style which betrays both his Hebraic and his Greek antecedents and is interesting for this reason.

Philo's influence on Christianity and on Jewish mysticism would be difficult to overestimate. Philo is a key figure in the cross-fertilisation of ideas which took place in Hellenistic Alexandria.

The origin of Christian mysticism is difficult to pinpoint. There are passages in the Epistles of St. Paul which seem to indicate that he had mystical leanings. St. John the Evangelist was obviously influenced by Philo, but there is no positive evidence that he himself was a mystic.

The first Christian mystic of which we may be certain is Dionysius the Areopagite. This name is probably a pseudonym, and he was probably a Syrian Christian of the second century AD. What is significant is that he was an early Christian mystic.

In Dionysius, the influence of the neo-Platonists is obvious in both "Mystical Theology" and "Divine Names". Dionysius, like Philo, was a follower of the "via negativa", of the Upanishad injunction that the Universal Self is incommensurable, "not this, not that", the negative side of the mystical experience. For example these quotations from "Mystical Theology".

"God is the Super Essential Darkness. It is not number, nor

order, nor greatness nor littleness, nor equality, nor inequality... nor is it the One, nor is it Godhead nor Goodness; nor does It belong to the category of non-existence nor to that of existence”

Dionysius reconciles this with his Christian theism in the “Divine Names” by stating that anything man may say about God is false. Thus Dionysius is a forerunner of such thinkers as Rudolf Otto in his view that all words used to describe God are of necessity symbolical and metaphorical.

Also in Dionysius we find a strong esoteric element. For example; “These things thou must not disclose to any of the uninitiated...”. “For not without reason is the blessed Moses bidden first to undergo initiation himself, and then to separate himself from those who have not undergone it...”. This esotericism is more than a little reminiscent of gnosticism, though Dionysius was very far from gnosticism otherwise. It would reappear in a Jewish guise in the Cabala.

Dionysius writes in a style which still preserves traces of its Greek antecedents, but in its incandescent manner betrays influence from farther East-Persia and India.

The influence of Dionysius was enormous. Thanks to him, a very pure form of mysticism acquired an almost canonical authority. Dionysius must be considered the forerunner of a very long and richly varied line of Christian mystics.

The gold of Alexandria is not yet exhausted. We pass now to one of the most profound and interesting of all Christian thinkers: Origen.

Origen is practically the antithesis of Dionysius. Dionysius was a mystical philosopher who was indubitably Christian, but whose Christianity is almost incidental to his mystical theory. The greater part of the works of Dionysius could have been written by a Christian, a Moslem, a Hindu, or a Jew, and in fact may be mistaken for certain passages in the Upanishads.

Origen, on the other hand, was a very versatile thinker whose mystical theory forms only a small part of his total output. Origen's interpretation of his mystical experience could only be Christian. If Dionysius was a mystic who happened to be a Christian, Origen was a Christian who happened to have

a mystical experience. From the viewpoint of mysticism, Origen is interesting because he seems in many ways to be a forerunner not only of later Christian but of Jewish and moslem mysticism.

Origen's mystical doctrine is scattered through his works, but principally in certain homilies on Leviticus and Numbers and in his Commentary on the Song of Songs.

Alexandria was a city of many Jews and there is every evidence that Origen followed the Rabbis in a great part of his exegesis of the books of the Old Testament. Thus, the Homilies of Origen show much influence of Rabbinic exegesis, not unlike the Talmud. However, this is not all. There are also strong elements of the sort of exegesis used by Medieval Cabalists. Is this coincidental? Were there forerunners of the Cabalists in third century Alexandria? We do not know.

In Origen, the mystic quest has nine stages. Eight of these stages are described in the homilies on Leviticus and Numbers the ninth in the commentaries on the Song of Songs.

The first eight stages involve the self-knowledge and purification common to all mysticism, but some parts are very interesting. A specifically Christian element, and one which will be reiterated by later Christian mystics is the "second baptism" or "second conversion". In Origen, this means a new consciousness, under grace, of the true content of Christian life.

The seventh stage is one found in the writings of many mystics, notably St. Catherine of Siena. This is the stage in which the mystic is harrassed by false visions, visions which tempt the aspiring mystic to deviate from his quest. In the homilies, this stage is identified with the Wilderness of Sin. "Sin" in the Rabbinic interpretation meanig "temptation".

The eight stage is that called by St. John of the Cross "Dark Night of the Soul", though in Origen the darks is less absolute.

St. John of the Cross uses the "Ascent of Mt. Carmel" as an allegory of the mystical quest. Origen uses happenings in the books of Leviticus and Numbers and stages in the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan to symbolise the various

stages of the mystical quest in a manner reminiscent of the Rabbis and the cabalists.

The ninth stage is the stage of mystical union, though Origen never uses this term. This stage is dealt with in the works on the Song of Songs. Here it is important to differentiate between description and interpretation.

In the description, Origen uses images of sexual love in an allegorical fashion very much like many Moslem Sufis, and also like St. John of the Cross in the *Spiritual Canticle* and other works. This is a first in the history of mysticism, at least west of India. He also uses the senses as an analogy, common enough in mystical writings. In Psalm 34 one finds "taste and see that the Lord is good".

Interpretation is another matter. Here we have a contrast with Plotinus. For Plotinus, the object is simply union with the One.

Origen comes near to this, but his Christian Theism draws him back from what might be considered pantheism. For Origen, the mystical experience is union in intention with Christ coupled with an illuminating consciousness of God in Christ. Two symbols Origen uses are instructive, the symbol of eating, which is of course in terms of the Eucharist, and the symbol of marriage, taken from the "two in one flesh" found in Genesis.

Origen was the forerunner in a great many things typical of Christian mysticism, and in fact may be considered the founder of one branch of Christian mysticism, Dionysius the founder of the other. For Origen, the mystical experience is of the "sunlight and air" or "hot iron and heat" type, involving a "conpenetration" of creator and created, but without real union or absorption. Origen, unlike Dionysius, is not Theosophic, there is no speculation on the nature of God.

Origen's mysticism is not ecstatic at any point. Also, in contrast to Plotinus, Dionysius, and Origen's fellow Egyptian Christians, the desert fathers, it is not solitary, or at least the quest is not. The role of the church is of great importance in Origen's mystical quest as the visible body of Christ on earth.

Origen and Dionysius are thus the forerunners of the major

strands of Christian mysticism, though most later Christian mystics are somewhere between the two rather than being strict followers of one or the other.

Very early figures in the history of Christianity, such as St. Ignatius of Antioch and the unknown author or authors of the Syriac Odes of Solomon betray a mixture of mystic and gnostic elements. Fairly early, however, there is a separation between mysticism and gnosticism, so that Christian mystics, such as Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius, and Stephen bar Sadaili have little of the gnostic about them, while Christian gnostics, such as the unknown authors of the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Truth, and the Gospel of the Egyptians show few mystical elements. A certain parallelism exists between gnosticism and mysticism, but beyond a certain point the two diverge and in fact become nearly antithetical. This division between mysticism and gnosticism in Christianity was no doubt furthered by the fact that while mysticism was accepted as orthodox, gnosticism was condemned as heresy.

Before taking leave of this period in the history of Christianity I should like very much to recommend the writings of the early, eastern church including those of the heretical gnostics. The writings of this period have a freshness, richness, and variety difficult to equal in any time or place.

When we turn to Judaism, the situation is quite different. There was never a clear cut break between gnosticism and mysticism. In fact, it may be considered a characteristic of Jewish mysticism that while Christian mysticism early purged itself of gnostic elements (and was followed in this by the Moslem Sufis), gnostic elements have persisted in Jewish mysticism down to our own day. The reasons for this are probably because the Rabbinic tradition rejected alike gnosticism and mysticism, thus tending to at once preserve the secretive, esoteric atmosphere so typical of gnosticism, while at the same time real if generally non-violent persecution tended to keep gnosticism and mysticism united. Also, Jewish gnostics and mystics claimed to be following an esoteric tradition parallel with the orthodox or Rabbinic tradition, and hence there was a great reluctance to reject or simply ignore anything purporting to be of this tradition.

The cabalists have always claimed to follow an esoteric tradition extending back to the Patriarchs and even to Adam. In fact, the esoteric gnostic-mystic tradition in Judaism extends to before the time of Christ. Some place the origins of this tradition in the Persian period, others place it later in the time of the Seleucids or the Maccabees. We know next to nothing of the earliest period of this tradition, but from roughly the latter part of the first century BC to the rise of Cabalism in the Middle Ages, this tradition gave rise to Merkabah mysticism.

In the study of Merkabah mysticism one generally gets the impression that one is dealing not with mysticism but with a sort of visionary gnosticism. Nevertheless, I feel that Merkabah mysticism has a place in this work because at times at least one can detect a sort of ecstatic mysticism behind the gnostic façade, though expressed in odd ways, and because of its importance in the formation of Cabalism.

Merkabah mysticism is the work of Jewish sages of Palestine and Babylonia. It is known to us from the writings of now anonymous authors who used a variety of literary forms—mishnaic commentaries on Biblical texts, apocryphal works such as the Book of Enoch and the Apocalypse of Abraham, and “independent” works such as the Book of Creation.

The word merkabah means “throne”, and is derived from the vision of Ezekiel. The object of the merkabah adept is the vision of God enthroned in glory in the hekhaloth, or the great halls and palaces of Heaven. At times one is reminded of the Byzantine and Sassanian courts. The emphasis here is all on the glory and the majesty of God. Here too a rather complex angelology is developed. The core of this system could hardly be more gnostic. The soul, in its ascent to the throne of God, or, expressed another way, to the fullness of God’s light, passes through the spheres of the seven hostile planetary archons, and the literature contains vivid descriptions of the perils of this ascent. Said ascent is always preceded by ascetic practices of varying duration. Here, however, there is no hint of the Shekinah, God’s Immanence in the world, of later Cabalism, comparable to the Atman of Hindu tradition. All emphasis is on God transcendent. In gnostic fashion, a distinction is made

between the appearance of God the Creator and the indefinable essence of God.

The Creator, one of the aspects of God, is described in terms akin to the Iranian premordial man in the work "Shiur Komah", in other words, as a man of incomprehensibly vast dimensions.

In later stages of Merkabah mysticism, the seven stages of the ascent of the soul are identified with virtues or stages of perfection, thus more nearly approaching true mysticism. Also, the archons are transformed into attributes of God, - wisdom, justice, etc. The word sefiroth, so familiar in Cabalistic literature, is used to signify the ten primordial numbers and correlated with the elements of creation. Said sefiroth are portrayed in an attitude of adoration before the throne or merkabah of God.

Merkabah mysticism, in contrast to Cabalism, is fundamentally descriptive rather than speculative, in other words more concerned with the description and interpretation of visions. Nevertheless, it is at times possible to discern the outlines of an ecstatic mysticism behind the visionary, gnostic façade. Prime examples of this are that the Being Who sits on the Merkabah represents only the creative, visible aspect of God, His True Essence transcending this. Another example is the cosmic veil which conceals the Glory of God, which veil is the image of all things in the created world from the day of creation to the end of the world, and which must be penetrated or transcended before the soul may view the Glory of God. This is a clear allegory that the temporal (created) world must be transcended before the mystic can be united with God.

Merkabah mysticism is without a doubt the ancestor of Cabalism, a system or movement more truly and definitely mystical. Nevertheless it cannot be emphasised too strongly that the gnostic element is a distinguishing characteristic of Jewish mysticism, an element attenuated in Abulafia, resurgent in the Zohar and yet more potent in Isaac Luria.

A pall of anonymity falls over the Roman world in the dying days of the Empire and the barbarian invasions. As monasticism became powerful in this period, Christian mysticism undoubtedly existed, but we know little about it. Unmistakably

mystical writings survive from early Christian Ireland, but there is one figure who expresses Irish mysticism - John Scotus Erigena.

Erigena, more than any other Christian philosopher, comes perilously close to pantheism. The immediate antecedent of this pantheism is clearly Neo-Platonism, but there is another element, for Erigena states much more firmly than Plotinus the aphorism of the Rig-Veda, "tat tvam asi", "God, thou art also". Also, by this time the pantheistic elements in Neo-Platonism had been filtered out. I believe that this pantheism has its origin in the Celtic heritage of John Scotus Erigena.

According to Erigena, there is a hierarchy between creator and created: God who creates and is not created, the intelligible world, which creates and is created, the world of experience which is created and does not create, and nature, which neither creates nor is created. The final category is the return of the two that are not God to the divine unity. "From God do all things come, and to God is the return". Shades of Plotinus and of the Upanishads.

God as the cause of things is supreme goodness, and the end of all things is supreme love.

"God as goodness and God as love, the first cause of all things and the final end of all things are the same".

If or not Erigena was personally a mystic is doubtful, yet much as his writing shows that his is a mystical philosophy beyond doubt.

"Just as the air appears to be all light, and the molten iron to be all heat, nay, fire itself, their substances nevertheless remaining... at the end of the world every nature, whether corporeal or incorporeal, will seem to be only God, so that God, himself incomprehensible, will somehow be comprehended in the creature".

In Erigena the mystical and rational elements are complementary and not conflict, and each would be incomplete without the other.

We now turn from Christianity to Islam. When the Moslems burst out of the Arabian desert into the fertile crescent and Egypt, they came into contact with Christian mystics. Following

the lead of the Christian anchorites, the Moslem mystics donned coarse woolen robes, and it is from these that the name "Sufi" is derived. As Islam expanded eastward, the Sufis came into contact with Hindu and Buddhist mystics, and this may account for the fact with the exception of Eckhart, Christian mystics are generally less bold in their speculations than Sufis, less individual in their views. Certainly no Christian mystic ever said "There is nought inside this coat but ALLAH", as one Sufi said. This boldness, plus the fact that orthodox Islam is less tolerant than Christianity of anything that smacks of pantheism produced a few martyrs among the Sufis, something not found in either Eastern or Western Christianity. The first great mystical philosopher among the Sufis was Dhu - al Nun al Misri, who held individuality to be a cardinal sin, and held that all individuality must be swallowed up in God. The influence of Plotinus is obvious. A few Sufis, under Buddhist influence, came perilously close to atheism.

It was in Persia that Sufism came to its fullest flower, indeed, some scholars hold Sufism to be an Aryan reaction against a Semitic faith. I am inclined to doubt this, but it is certainly true that Persia produced the greatest mystical poets. Persian Sufi Poetry is notable for its fire, and its rich store of allegory and metaphor including erotic metaphors, and this form was to spread to Spain, about which more later. Among the greatest of these mystical poets were al - Hallaj, a martyr, and Jalal - ul - din Rumi, who was perhaps Persia's greatest Poet.

To al - Ghazzali must go much credit for at least a partial reconciliation between Orthodox Islam and the Sufis. Beginning as a rationalist, al - Ghazzali, a Persian, significantly enough, became weary of the cold intellectualism and rationalism of Orthodoxy. He became enamoured of mysticism, and in his Theological system, the intellectual, legalistic, and formalised aspects are supplemented by meditation and mysticism. Al - Ghazzali is now recognised as the greatest Moslem theologian. In the cathedral of San Marcos in Venice is a fresco depicting al - Ghazzali as one of the Doctors of the Church.

Many, perhaps most, Sufis were analogous to the great bulk of Christian mystics, who followed Orthodox credos, and inter-

preted union with God as an identity in difference and in spirit or purpose. However, there is also another strain in Sufism, which is represented by Erigena and Eckhart in the Christian tradition, and by the author of the Zohar, Moses de Leon, in Judaism. This is theosophic or speculative mysticism.

If al - Ghazzali was the prophet of ecstatic or conservative mysticism within Islam, Ibn al Arabi of Murcia, Spain, and al - Hallaj and Jalal ud - din Rumi of Persia were the prophets of Moslem theosophy. Except for some works of al - Arabi, their doctrines are expressed in poetic metaphor, allegory, and symbolism. Here is a quote from Ibn al- Arabi: "He is and there is with Him no after nor before, nor above nor below, nor far nor near, nor union nor division, nor how nor where nor place. He is now as He was, He is the One without oneness and the single without singleness. He is the very existence of the First, and the very existence of the Last, and the very existence of the Outward and the very existence of the Inward".

Such relatively clear and crisp statements are not common among the Theosophic Sufis. Hence, there is no authoritative formulation of their credo. Here is a brief definition: There is one Real Being, Ultimate Ground of all existence. This Reality consists of God, the Divine Essence, and the world by which this Essence is made manifest.

There is no creation in time. The forms of the universe change but its essence is co - eternal with God. God is immanent in that He appears under the aspect of limitation in phenomenal forms, and transcendent in that He is the Absolute Reality beyond every appearance. The Divine Essence is unknowable. God makes His Nature known to us by names and attributes revealed in the Coran. Differentiation of these attributes constitutes the phenomenal world, without which we could not distinguish good and evil and come to know the Absolute Good. In the sphere of Reality, there is no such thing as evil. The Divine Mind rules and animates the cosmos as the Indwelling Logos. The Logos displays Itself most completely in the Perfect man, whose light irradiates the series of prophets and hierarchy of Moslem saints. He in Whom the light is irradiated has realised his Oneness with God. The similarity to Plotinus and Erigena

is clear. To change a few words would be to quote the Upanishads. The present writer believes that the difference between the ecstatic and theosophic Sufis is one of interpretation rather than experience.

One very admirable trait show among many Sufis was a tolerance and universalism. Says Rumi "If a picture of our Beloved is found in a heathen temple, it is an error to encircle the Ka'bah: if the Ka'bah is deprived of its sweet smell, it is a synagogue: and if in the synagogue we feel the sweet smell of union with Him, it is our Ka'bah".

"The number of locks upon a treasure are proof of its high value. The blind religious are in a dilemma, for the champions on either side stand firm: each party is delighted with its own path. Love alone can end their quarrel, Love alone comes to the rescue when you cry for help against their arguments. Love is like that bird: it makes you silent: it puts the lid on the boiling kettle".

"The religion of Love is apart from all religions. The lovers of God have no religion but God alone". To Rumi we owe the parable of the blind men and the elephant.

Says Ibn al - Arabi: "There was a time when I blamed my companion if his religion did not resemble mine; now, however, my heart accepts every form; it is a pasture ground for gazelles, a cloister for monks, a temple for idols and a Ka'bah for the pilgrim, the tables of the Torah and the sacred books of the Coran."

It is too bad that more of the contemporaries (and those that came after) of Rumi and al - Arabi did not follow their counsel; but a bigoted and intolerant mystic is an extremely rare creature in the history of religion.

One great exponent of the Christian-Moslem interpretation of the mystical experience within Judaism is Abraham Abulafia. As one would expect, Abulafia was a native of Spain, which country has produced more mystics than any other west of Persia, which contained so many Moslem and Christian mystics in the time of Abulafia, and was the home of Cabalism in its golden age.

Abulafia was a follower of the ecstatic rather than the theosophical school, and was not given to deep speculation. Like his contemporaries, the Cabalists, he held that the Torah has three levels of interpretation: literal, allegorical, and mystical. Like many Sufis, including his compatriot al - Arabi, he had universalist leanings and was on friendly terms with some Christian and perhaps Moslem mystics. He writes that he found some Christians who believed more in God than many Jews. He also writes that when talking with Christian mystics that they were in essential agreement with him and with one another, and he came to the conclusion that the wisdom of the Torah was given to all masters of true knowledge (mystics). Abulafia went beyond many Christian and Moslem mystics in his interpretation of the mystical experience as union with God and was declared a heretic by more orthodox talmudists and cabalists. Some of his followers, such as Reb Aaron Halevy of Lithuania became complete pantheists.

Like all mystics, Abulafia was well aware of the barrier which separates ordinary consciousness from the mystical consciousness, or as he phrased it, "the knot which binds the soul". Abulafia's method for untying this knot is by a systematic meditation on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and various combinations of these letters. Strange as it may appear on the surface, this method is not really different from the Hindu mystic's meditation on OM, the Christian mystic's meditation on the name of Jesus or on a prayer, the Sufi's meditation on the name of Allah or the use of music by some Sufis as an aid to meditation. It is a purgative device designed to free the consciousness of all distractions. Controlled breathing also plays a part in Abulafia's method, so that the Hindu parallel is yet closer. The goal of this process is the seventh and final step of the mystical ladder. This Abulafia interprets as the emergence of the soul into the divine light and as a temporary union of the human and divine intellect. This is interpreted by Abulafia as being the same as the prophetic inspiration, and thus his system is often referred to as prophetic Cabalism. How much to make of this I am not certain, since neither Abulafia nor his disciples were much inclined toward the sort of activity commonly thought of as

prophetic, and his system is quite far from Cabalism in both the literal meaning of the word and what is normally considered as being characteristic of Cabalism.

Abulafia has a great deal more to say of the mystical experience than this. He frequently writes of the vision of the spiritual guide or teacher, identicle to the Hindu spiritual guru. This is known in Merkabah mysticism, where the "guru" is identified with the angel Metation. Here Abulafia is more inclined to identify the guru as an aspect of God. Here Abulafia comes very close to saying that the mystic is truly united with God, and thus very near to pantheism. A number of times Abulafia speaks of the identity of the mystic and his guru. Abulafia says "now he is no longer separated from his master, and behold he is his master and his master is he; for he is so intimately adhering to him that he cannot by any means be separated from Him, for he is HE". A bolder statement of the union of the soul of the mystic with God would be difficult to find west of India.

There is at least an apparent equivocation between the prophetic aspect and the unitive aspect of the mystical experience. In another context Abulafia seems to clarify this, and also his continuity with the older Merkabah mysticism.

In speaking of the sephiroth, or primal numbers so dear to the Merkabah mystics, Abulafia states that one should begin with contemplation of the sephiroth and later pass on to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and by an untranslatable play on words, states that his system is the true vision of the merkabah.

Abulafia also describes seven stages of knowledge of the Torah. The sixth stage is that of prophetic cabalism, the seventh stage the Holy of Holies about which it is not possible to speak. This seventh stage would seem to be the unitive stage spoken of earlier. Note that in this context the prophetic stage is sixth, not seventh.

A few general words about Abulafia. His system is ecstatic, not theosophic. There is virtually no speculation as to the nature of God anywhere in his writings. Like Buddha, Abulafia

considered philosophical questions which do not aid in the achievement of the mystical experience or "untying the knots" as irrelevant and a waste of time. This is clearly very far from the Zohar or Cabalism in general.

Also note that Abulafia did not think of himself as following an incredibly ancient, esoteric tradition, but rather emphasised the newness and individuality of his system. The gnostic elements generally characteristic of Jewish mysticism are very nearly absent in Abulafia.

Also clearly, Abulafia's concept of God is quite far from the fearsome, unreachable Deity of at least the greater part of Merkabah mysticism. We now take leave of a great mystic and a great man.

At this point I wish to comment on a persistent theme of Jewish mysticism. This is the problem of the Ein Sof. Though the term is an invention of the Cabalists, the issue was very much alive among the Merkabah mystics.

The Ein Sof is the "God beyond God", the Infinite, the Divine Ground, the God of Dionysius, the God Who transcends the creator God of the Bible, God, in the words of the Cabalists, "in the depths of His nothingness". In Merkabah mysticism the Ein Sof has no special name, but only such definitions as "the indefinible essence of God".

Throughout most of the history of Jewish mysticism, the problem of the Ein Sof has been central, or nearly so. The Cabalists deny the reality of any division between the Ein Sof and the Creator God, but there have been heterorthodox systems which admit a dualism or even opposition between the two. Here we probably have the origin of those gnostic sects which identified the God of the Old Testament as a demon. Heterorthodox Judaism, under the influence of Iranian dualism and the terrible disasters to the Jewish people in the latter half of the first and first half of the second century, came to believe that while God is good, the world of matter was created by a demon. This extreme dualism is very far from any sort of mysticism. Not all gnostic sects were so extremely dualistic. The doctrine of the Essenes, for example, though essentially gnostic and largely dualistic ("The Sons of Light versus the Sons of Darkness")

still recognised the creator God of the Old testament as the true God.

However, Abulafia is a typical of Jewish mystics. In Judaism, perhaps more so than in Christianity or Islam, the distance between creator and creature is strongly stressed. "Throne" mysticism is more typical.

Contemporary with Abulafia was the great age of Cabalism, which culminated in the Zohar, the Book of Splendor.

In the Cabalism of Medieval Spain we find the esotericism as expressed by Dionysius at its height. Despairing of expressing mystical truth by mere words, the Cabalists turned to strange, esoteric symbols, ideograms, and symbolic language. From the Zohar "when the thirteen fountains of the rivers of oil descend, all these are mercies".

"Also we learned that five nakednesses can be revealed on that side, which are the five judgements; and these five judgements are extended into 248 paths".

The Cabala also made use of mystic numbers and combinations of letters.

The bulk of the Zohar was composed by a Spanish Jew named Moses de Leon in the latter part of the 13th century. The immediate cause of its publication was an antidote to the frigid rationalism of the contemporary Talmudists. Ironically, the Zohar is written in a style which imitates the Palestinian Talmud, to the extent that it is written in an archaic Aramaic rather than Hebrew, Arabic, or Latin. However, a great part of the Zohar resembles a series of medieval sermons more than the dialogue typical of the Talmud.

This was also the great age of Jewish philosophy, Jehuda Halevi, Moses and Abraham ibn Ezra, Joseph ibn Zaddik, Abraham bar Hiyya, Bahya ibn Pakuda, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Abraham ibn Daud, Moses ben Maimon, and many others being citizens of medieval Spain.

The doctrine of the Zohar is theosophic rather than ecstatic. Indeed, it is nearly the antithesis of the doctrine of Abulafia. The theosophic doctrine of the Zohar, I am not ashamed to say, is the worst head-breaker I encountered in my research for

this paper. To the uninitiated it seems a mass of contradictions, words with veiled meanings, and rank nonsense.

The doctrine of the Zohar is semi-pantheistic. The universe is made of ten sefiroth, similar to the emanations of Plotinus and the phenomenal forms of the Sufis. There is a difference, however. The sefiroth are not intermediate steps between God and the world. These sefiroth take place within God, and at the same time enable man to perceive God. In the process, God's creative power breaks through the closed shell of the Ein Sof, the Infinite, the Innermost Being of Divinity, the "clear light of the void", hence the possibility of the mystical experience. The relationships of the sefiroth and their names I will not go into here. To symbolise these different aspects of Divinity, with their many gradations, the symbol of the human body is used. Though a man is one individual, hands, eyes, etc., have different functions. This is elaborated in the Zohar.

The number of symbolisms in the Zohar is vast, but at least one more is worthy of mention, the He, You and I. God, in the most deeply hidden of His manifestations is called He. God, in the stage of the unfolding of His Being, Grace, and Love, is called You. God, in the supreme manifestation, when the fullness of His Being finds final expression in the last and all embracing of His attributes is called I. This Divine Self, this "I", is the shekinah, the immanence of God in all creation. It is at this point that the mystic becomes aware of the presence of God, and there progresses into the deeper regions of the Divine, the "You", and "He", into the depths of the "clear light of the void".

Creation is the external aspect of something which takes place in God Himself. (Note: at this point Professor Stanley Lusby noted in the margin of this paper: "Not unlike Mudhyana-aka Buddhism in some respects").

I doubt if the reader knows what I am getting at, since I doubt if I know myself. Let us move on to something else, the problem of the external aspect of creation, the phenomenal universe, and its relation to God.

The core of the Zohar is semi-patheistic, as has been said, or perhaps panentheistic, to use the term of professor Charles

Hartshorne. According to the Zohar, creation takes place on two levels; that which produced the upper world of the sefiroth, and that which produced the lower world of the visible creation.

The higher order represents the dynamic unity of God, the lower order the world of separation, where exist things isolated from each other and from God. However, the mystical spirit of Moses de Leon comes to the surface, and he says: "If one contemplates the things in mystical meditation, everything is revealed as One, and He (God) fills everything, and He is everything".

On every level, creation reflects the inner movement of the Divine Life. From the Zohar: "Everything exists linked with everything else down to the lowest link on the chain, and the true essence of God is above as well as below, in the Heavens and on the earth, and nothing exists outside Him, and "Meditate on these things, and you will understand that God's essence is linked and connected with all worlds, and that all forms of existence and essence".

This pantheistic (or, rather, panentheistic) side has its limits and may be disregarded (it usually is in Jewish circles), as all created existence has a kind of reality in which it appears independent of the mystical worlds of unity. However, such was not always the case. Before the introduction of evil, everything stood in immediate mystical rapport to everything else. Note: This is one of the universal doctrines of mysticism- that which makes for separation is evil. Note the words with evil connotations derived from the Indo-European roots meaning two- du and bi - dubious, diabolic, bilious, disaster, doom, venial (b to v), doubt, The word divide has evil connotation, distract, perhaps die, violent, violate, discriminate, dis- the list is almost endless, and a similar situation is found in all Indo-European languages.

The problem of evil is dealt with in the Zohar. Separation from the unified life of God, and therefore evil, came about when some creature seeks to maintain his own self, and thus destroy the pristine unity, making a world of false contexts, which only the mystic may penetrate and return to reality. There is also a deeper origin of evil, concerned with the sefiroth. As one cannot have a mountain without a valley, so the exercise of God's

mercy and love, symbolised by the right hand, cannot be exercised without strict justice and judgement, symbolised by the left hand. When the left hand ceases to be tempered by the right, it breaks away from God and becomes evil. The parallel with Jacob Boehme is striking.

The soul of man has three divisions, nefesh, or life, Ruah, or Spirit, Neshamah or soul proper, similar to the Sanskrit Atman. The Neshamah is beyond sin, being of the same substance as God (I almost said Brahma), and only the Nefesh sins and suffers. Souls are pre-existent and have been since eternity. After death the soul returns from whence it came, save those of sinners. Reincarnation enters here. In certain cases a soul is reincarnated in a new body, partly as punishment, partly as a chance of restitution.

Much of the Zohar is a mystical interpretation of the Torah. Corresponding to the upper and lower worlds, there is the visible and practicable Torah, and the invisible and mysterious Torah. Much of Cabalistic literature is devoted to the discovery of veiled meanings in the Torah. The Sufis considered the Coran as having esoteric, mystical meanings, but the Cabalists went much further in this sort of thing, making use of sound values of the Hebrew letters (example: two Hebrew words with the same numeric values have the same meaning, therefore a word in the Torah may be construed to have more than one meaning. Likewise the Cabalists transposed letters, and if the numeric values of the letters of a word equalled a mystic number, such as seven, this was considered a sign of a veiled, mystical meaning). The Sufis almost never went beyond a comparatively simple allegorical interpretation of the Coran, somewhat like Origen's allegorical-mystical interpretation of parts of the Bible.

The mystical theory of the Zohar is something of a compromise between the Merkabah, or "throne mysticism", and the "identity in difference" of the Sufis, Christian mystics, and Abulafia. The soul of the mystic reaches devekuth, or "adhesion" with the shekinah, and penetrates beyond the illusion of separation. A lower, less developed form of devekuth may be accomplished within the normal life of the individual and community, thus every phase of life may be sanctified. In the Zohar,

poverty is stressed as a religious virtue. The poor are called "God's broken vessels". This glorification of poverty is found in the psalms, but died out in the Rabbinical tradition, and was revived by Cabalism and medieval and modern Hasidism.

Cabalism is a vast study, and I have mentioned only the Zohar and Abulafia. On the Zohar, I merely attempted to extract its essence, though my interpretation should be taken with a grain of salt. Much of the Zohar I did not cover. Someday I will return to the esoteric, head-breaking study of the Cabalah.

The Zohar has since taken its place behind the Torah and the Talmud, and is often "interpreted" so that it will sound more orthodox. It is the inspiration for modern Hasidism.

What is the relation of Cabalism to the other form of Jewish mysticism, Hasidism? Though modern Hasidism is influenced by Cabalism, it resembles medieval Hasidism in these respects: Cabalism is theosophic, Hasidism is ecstatic, Cabalism is esoteric, Hasidism is exoteric. Cabalism is for the elite, Hasidism is more democratic, Cabalism expresses itself in symbols, ideograms, mystical poems, and esoteric writings. Hasidism expresses itself in simple folktales, anecdotes, and aphorisms. I have dealt with neither medieval nor modern Hasidism, though I have read Gershom Scholem's and Martin Buber's writings on the subject. However, I feel that I have given enough space to Jewish mysticism, for the time and space at my disposal. I hope the Baal Shem will pardon me for this, as certainly no disrespect was intended. For those interested in Hasidism, I recommend Martin Buber. Perhaps a comparison between Cabalism and Hasidism would be this: Cabalism is like a meal which may take longer to eat and to digest, but for those with a suitable constitution, contains much more nutriment.

A few words about later Cabalism. Between the writing of the Zohar and the expulsion of 1492, the Cabalists of Spain developed certain trends, though these are foreshadowed in the Zohar. These trends are away from the apocalyptic, messianic doctrines so typical of Judaism. Rather than communal, the salvation sought by these Cabalists was individual; rather than awaiting the end of the world, these Cabalists sought the beginning; rather than awaiting a messiah who would lead them

to earthly power and glory, these Cabalists sought union with God.

A word of explanation is needed here. What these later Cabalists sought was to return to before the beginning of time, before the Divine Unity was compromised, before the first deception of Satan. This whole idea is very gnostic, though the extreme dualism of the more extreme gnostic sects is avoided.

However we must not be misled. Strange though all this may sound, it is a matter of words rather than substance, interpretation rather than fact. Quite clearly these later Cabalists were seeking for the same thing as other mystics - to transcend the spatio-temporal categories, to be united with God.

The expulsion from Spain, the second exile or second diaspora, produced spiritual effects into which I do not wish to delve here.

We now return to Christianity, and to the golden age of Christian mysticism, from the twelfth century to the reformation. Medieval Christian mysticism has some distinguishing characteristics. With few exceptions, Christian mysticism is ecstatic rather than theosophic. The mystic union is interpreted in terms of identity in difference. Because Christian mystics had very little contact with India, and because Christian orthodoxy was more sympathetic to mysticism than Islam, Christian mystics are in general less colorful, original, or as daring thinkers as the Sufis. A tone of greater gentleness and humility is found among Christian mystics than among Cabalists or Sufis, but there is in general less universalism. In no other tradition is mysticism so closely linked with charity and love of God and one's fellow man. Says Eckhart: "If one be in mystical ecstasy, and hear of a man in need, go immediately to help him". There were no mystics in the inquisition, and mystics were not anti-semitic. What I have said applies to mysticism in the Eastern as well as the Western Church.

In the Eastern Church in the middle ages, mysticism, though no less widespread, lies under a cloud of anonymity, and specific information is difficult to come by. Mysticism in the Eastern Church differed from the West in these regards: hermits and ascetics were more common in the East than in the West, Eastern mystics were more solitary, less literary, and more in-

clined toward complete detachment and quietism, though some became popular and well known in spite of themselves. The humility and selflessness of these mystics is not to be questioned. If eastern mystics were less inclined toward taking an active part in the life of the times, they were at least the equals of their western brothers in modesty and humility, and one who came to them was never turned away.

Meister Eckhart is the most original thinker and greatest metaphysician among Christian mystics. Though he held a high position in the Dominican order, and was a learned man, his writings are plain, straightforward, and lack the beauty and polish of some other mystical writings.

Only Erigena among Christian mystics is comparable to Eckhart as a theosophist.

Eckhart's ideas, though somewhat unsystematic, are startling for their originality, and are the subject of endless speculation as to their origin. Erigena's Celtic heritage is unmistakable in his writings but Eckhart had no Celtic heritage, and almost universal mystic imagery and metaphors are not found in his writings. Rudolf Otto has made a point-for-point comparison between Eckhart's ideas and those of Shankara, the Vedantist, and has shown them to be almost identical. Eckhart was totally ignorant of Hindu or Buddhist mysticism, and the affinity is truly amazing.

What are these ideas of Eckhart which are so amazing? More positively than even Erigena, Eckhart repeats the Upanishadic phrase "tat tvam asi". For example: "In the mystical experience the God within (Atman or Neshamah) contemplates the God without. It is God contemplating God".

Eckhart goes beyond the Trinity, or Positive Divine, to the undifferentiated unity, the Divine Ground, the barren Godhead, the "clear light of the void". Eckhart stressed that the Divine Ground is formless, undifferentiated. (Note parallel between the Trinity in Eckhart and the Sefiroth of the Zohar.) Says Eckhart of the Divine Ground: "God is not good, I am good". This means that the Divine Ground is beyond all categories, including good and evil, while the mystic is not.

When the soul is freed from all empirical content, and thus becomes undifferentiated unity, then it may experience the undifferentiated unity of the Godhead. Eckhart at times contra-

dicts himself on this point. At times he says that in Eternity there is no separation or multiplicity, at other times he hints that one little point of creatureliness remains on reunion with the Divine Ground. The Divine Ground, being the negative Divine, does not act, the Trinity or Positive Divine does. In eternity there is no space nor time, no past nor future. Mystics knew thousands of years before Einstein that time and space are the same. Eckhart at times seems to belong to India rather than the west. There is no distinction between subject and object in the mystical experience according to Eckhart. This contrasts with the dualistic theories of the Christian and Moslem tradition and the Zohar.

"The birth of Christ in the soul" takes place when the soul is emptied of all empirical contents. The Son is begotten by the Father in the soul of the mystic. In Eckhart's words, "I am identically His Son, and no other... I am His only begotten Son". (Separation is an illusion.) "If... I am changed into God, then, by the living God, there is no distinction between us". One may readily see why Eckhart's thinking has been a cause of amazement to scholars. All this must not be allowed to obscure Eckhart's purely Christian sympathies. He lived and died a devout Catholic.

Meister Eckhart was the leading figure in a mystical movement centered in the Rhine valley called the Beghards, or the Friends of God. Not heretical in intent, this movement was tolerated and encouraged by the Church of the 13th and 14th centuries until it degenerated into magic, frenzy, etc, when it was curtailed by the church.

We now return to Spain. Spanish mysticism has a flavor all its own which is difficult to express in a few words. I am inclined to attribute it to long association with Moslem and Jewish mystics. Christian mysticism in Spain has a longer continuous history than in any other country west of Persia, and Spain has certainly reaped a larger crop of mystics than any other country in Christendom. When the Moslem and Jewish mystics who made Spain their home is added to this, the number becomes astounding. People inclined to be bitterly critical of Spain and Spanish Catholicism keep this in mind, as well as the tolerance enjoyed by Moslems and Jews in Medieval Spain.

St. John of the Cross lived after the golden age of Christian mysticism, but Spain was not touched by the reformation, so fatal to mysticism elsewhere, and the golden age endured in Spain until the counter-reformation put an end to it.

St. John of the Cross was a less daring and original thinker than Eckhart (Paradox- a Spaniard less original and non-conforming than a German), none the less he has been called the greatest of mystical theologians. He was certainly a man of great learning and erudition, and a magnificent literary figure. Though less unorthodox than Eckhart, and though he interpreted union with God the traditional Christian-Moslem manner he has been called "a sponge filled with Christianity. Squeeze out all that is specifically Christian and the full mystical theory remains", and a "Buddhist".

However, it is as a literary figure that St. John of the Cross is so unique. His vast talent is present in his prose works, but more so in his poetry. Garcia Lorca considered him the greatest of Spanish Poets. His poetry is distinctly Spanish. I find it difficult to read the *Spiritual Canticle* and other of his poems and not be reminded of Rumi and other Persian Sufis by the erotic metaphors, the orientally fragrant imagery of clear streams, fruitful valleys, green hills, fragrant vineyards. I consider it almost a sacrilege to quote lines from his poems out of context. Says E. Allison Peers: "This poem is a gift of God to man", referring to the *Spiritual Canticle*.

In his prose works, St. John of the Cross shows great analytic ability and psychological insight. Like Eckhart, removal of all empirical content of the soul is stressed - hence the title "Dark Night of the Soul". This is the same as Eckhart's "barren desert". Unlike Eckhart, St. John of the Cross remains fairly securely in the Orthodox fold, though once again I believe this to be a matter of words.

Christian mysticism is a vast field, and I have merely touched the outer surface. The names of all known Christian mystics would run into thousands, and Spanish mystics alone into many hundreds, perhaps thousands. In Dionysius the Areopagite, Origen, Erigena, Eckhart, I have chosen four outstanding ones representing various trends.

## EPILOGUE

I hope the reader is not too weary by now. Some say my writing combines medieval wordiness with near-eastern redundancy.

I have not covered more recent trends in Christian, Moslem, and Jewish mysticism. Hasidism, even of the medieval sort, was mentioned only in passing.

Perhaps my topic was far too broad to cover in a paper of this length, but I felt this to be necessary if I wished to demonstrate the universality of the mystical experience.

One more word: What is the future of mysticism in the modern world?

Materialistic, scientific civilisation is against it as it is against most of what is best in human existence. Nazis denounce religion as being left wing, Communists and anarchists denounce it as being reactionary, and both denounce mysticism as being a lazy man's philosophy which distracts man from being a good slave of the state and member of the giant ant heap. Those who seek the cure for the ills of industrial society in some avowedly tyrannical and materialistic philosophy such as Marxism are like a drunk who seeks to sober up by drinking pure alcohol.

Yet I feel that mysticism will survive. The good, the true, and the beautiful always seem to survive somehow. If mysticism survived Nazi gas chambers, scientific materialism will not kill it. A desacralised universe is an unpleasant place to live. I might prefer Hell, since Hell might have some meaning.

Other Molochs have come and gone, but the good survives, and mysticism is indisputably a good. To those who say mysticism lacks ethical content, I say read the biographies of the great mystics. Jesus laid down one of the universal maxims of mysticism when He said: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". As Walter T. Stace says: "It is the universal testimony of those who know mystical experience transforms human life and alters character- often from the squalid and mean to the noble and selfless".

Perhaps modern man should join Buddha under the bo tree. If modern man has turned away from God (Sartre puts it the other way), then mysticism is the way to find Him again.

#### B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Much of this paper was taken directly from the writings of Christian and Moslem mystics, or at least translations of these. Here are my other sources ;

*The Perennial Philosophy* by Aldous Huxley.

*The Teachings of the Mystics* by Walter T. Stace.

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*Michael McClain*