

MYSTICISM IN THE EAST AND WEST

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Our topic for today, Mysticism in the East and West, appears to be entirely historical, but if given a closer look it gains much in current interest. Whenever the word "mysticism" is used nowadays in any western country, people generally react by showing bewilderment, they tend to think of esoteric circles of spiritualism, they associate 'mysticism' with the word 'mystification.' Both words have the Greek root 'myo': I close my eyes. (Mystificare: to pretend doing s. th.). It might be difficult to find a clear definition of mysticism, its essence and its goals. One might say, for instance: mysticism means experiencing the transcendental and at the same time finding one's own personality, or: in concentrating on one's self one succeeds in penetrating to the last ground, the prime ground of all things. But let us quote the opinion of several specialists.

Alois Mager: He sees the core of all mystic experience in the fact that the soul gains this experience through a purely spiritual effort, and he says: "Psychologically, the difference between mystical and non. mystical life is rooted in the peculiar duality of the human soul. While, on the one hand, the soul is bonded to the body to form a single nature-bound entity, it can exist, on the other hand, independent of the body as pure spirit. It should be self-evident that the activities of the soul bonded to the body and the soul detached from it are of a completely different nature. A feature that is peculiar to the activity of the pure spirit is immediate self-perception. Even in the state of being bonded to the body the soul still remains pure spirit. But its being caged in the body is an impediment to a purely spiritual activity, hence to the immediate perceiving of one's self." It is obvious that the author of this text argues from the basis of scholastic philosophy and in a typically western-dualistic manner.

The Japanese, Master Roshi describes the experience of mystic enlightenment as follows: "Then you yourself will perceive which is the state of your mind." He continues by saying that a certain revulsion takes place with so much vitality that one might call this event a 'jump of consciousness'. During mystic enlightenment, man experiences the bliss of being entirely within himself. He finds his center and his mental equilibrium, and becomes truly liberated. At the same time, he is tuned into the harmony of the universe, and this happens all by itself. Hence the last goal of mysticism contradicts—generally speaking — the tendencies of our age in which we are more and more subjected to a process of self-alienation and automation, at least in the western world.

But let us quote two more authors: Karlfried Count Durckheim speaks about Zen and mystic enlightenment. He calls them 'going in unto the ground', 'breakthrough to the essence', 'new conscience'. According to Durckheim, enlightenment is the empirical discovery of transcendental reality that breaks the existing frame of the objective perception of the empirical Ego and hence creates basically a new situation for inner man, insofar as the ground of being becomes itself the decisive, guiding force instead of that Ego. This great experience, however, cannot be gained at once. C. G. Jung who studied eastern as well as western phenomena has something quite noteworthy to say. To begin with, he distinguishes between Ego and Self, the Self being the more comprehensive of the two. Enlightenment, he says, is not a change in contents but a new state of consciousness ; literally: "It is not a question of seeing something different, but of seeing differently." He compares the experiences in Shan and Zen Buddhism with those of the Christian mystics, and is of the opinion that the destruction of the rational intellect attempted through the education of the Shan disciple creates a state of consciousness as nearly void of pre-conditions as possible. Destruction of the rational intellect may sound misleading, what is meant is rather that certain intellectual activities are repressed. While psychoanalysis brings only parts of the sub-conscious into consciousness, namely those parts that are

required for the therapeutic process, Jung believes that Satori — or mystic enlightenment — succeeds in yielding a unified overall conscious vision of the total contents of the subconscious. C. G. Jung's explanation is also in agreement with the frequently repeated assertion of the masters that Satori is not something from the outside, but comes from the inside, or in somewhat exaggerated terms: that everybody already has Satori. The moment of enlightenment, the breakthrough into consciousness, always bears the stamp of totality: "Hence the overwhelming effect ! It is the unexpected, comprehensive, completely plausible answer — one believes to have understood everything, there are no doubts left." It is, so to speak, an un-forming of one's previous consciousness, and yet a staying on in the web of cosmic coherence. Related to this thinking are also the Arabic mystic terms Fana' and 'baqa', un-forming and staying, which are familiar in Islamic mysticism (see Farid ed-din Attar).

We can perhaps define the ultimate goal of the mystic path as follows: Mystic enlightenment is a supra-rational and direct self-perception connected with a non-differentiated vision of every creatural existence, an event which conveys the impression of complete unity and, only through the dissolution of the empirical Ego, brings out fully the true Self as the personality and touches on the absolute insofar as the latter is the origin of created being, an experience that, depending on the respective overall disposition of the individual, is always accompanied by a strong feeling of liberation, felicity and assurance.

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It is obvious that this goal cannot be reached right away. A more or less long path must be covered to reach it. If enlightenment itself is influenced by the nature and condition of the individual, according to his descent, cultural background and religion, by how much more must the methods and paths differ. True mysticism is no opiate for the people and neither does it lead to quietism, but it leads to the perfection of the individual and hence of society

(Mohd. Iqbal). The usual path, the truth-finding process of one's own conscience, is trying enough, and can frequently and not only in special cases lead to a conflict with the prevailing social order. The mystics of all religions and ages, as individuals or as members of mystic orders, had an influence on the religious, cultural and even political life of their time that is not to be under-estimated. They often aroused the suspicion of their contemporaries through their totally different conduct of life. Many were executed after their alleged dangerousness to the established forms of state or religion had been proven. From the Islamic sphere, I shall only mention Al-Halladsch, Ain al-Qudat al-Hamadani and Suhrawardi maqtul: in the Christian sphere one will think of the witches that were burnt at the stake and of trials like those of Master Eckhart or Joan of Arc. It should be noted, though, that the position of the mystic in Islamic society was somewhat different from that of his Christian counterpart. In the Islamic world of the first centuries, philosophers, freethinkers and mystics formed a front that was in opposition to the theologians and established lawyers. Philosophers were preoccupied with mystic subjects, e.g. Ibn Sina in his 'isharaf:

The position of the mystic in the western sphere was much more isolated, in most cases he had no connection with philosophers and freethinkers (except maybe towards the end of the Middle Ages, I am thinking of the Rosicrucians)! Master Eckhart was incomprehensible even to Ockham, his contemporary. The differences stem not only from the mystic's position in society, but also from his position within his own cultural sphere, from the so widely contrasting philosophies of life of the East and the West.

In the western world, mysticism gained a broader influence during the high Middle Ages, but afterwards became more and more an object for esoteric circles. The West that placed more emphasis on the individual and proceeded very analytically in the natural sciences, was given to thorough analysing and psychologizing in the mystic sphere, too. I am thinking in particular of Spanish mysticism (Juan de la Crus and Teresa de Avila) with its very personal and scrupulous classification of the conditions of the soul. The

influence of Ibu Abbad Rondi and, quite generally, of the Islamic Shadbiliyya is noticeable. Master Eckhart, on the other hand, as an eminent representative of the high Middle Ages and German mysticism, is certainly more en-compassing and more philosophical. He tries to reconcile the established theology and philosophy with his mystic experiences and comes dangerously close to a form of existential monism (see Farid ed-din Attar's 'Hama ost همه اوست, in the monistic sense), which brings him close to eastern thought. Mysticism was, and is probably even today, viewed as a generally familiar and normal phenomenon; everyday life is dotted with mystic symbols. But life in the East, in the Islamic as well as the Asiatic East, is drenched so heavily with mystic symbols that it is difficult to draw the line between mysticism and poetry. Hence the term 'mystic literature' includes a much wider field in the East than in the West. Also, a typically scholastic-western analytical distinction that does not do justice to the phenomenon, i.e. the distinction between 'natural' and 'supra-natural' mysticism (according to Maritain), cannot be carried through and per se does not apply in the East. There are many poets who use mystic symbols and mould them more or less intellectually without ever having had personally any deeper mystic experience. Maybe you have heard of the argument among the scholars about Omar Khayyam, Hafiz or Omar ibn al-Farid. Also in the case of Jelal ed-din Rumi it is very hard to determine which are his personal experiences and which are things he has taken from other systems and worked into his poetry. Let us briefly consider Rumi

who occupies a mediating position between eastern and western thinking.

To start with, a few biographical data: Born 1207 in the Transoxanic town of Balch, he had left Persia with his parents as a young boy, had come to Anatolia after long wanderings and settled in Konya. After his father's death Jelal-ed-din is appointed professor of theology at one of the Konya schools (1230). He becomes preoccupied ever more deeply with mysticism in

the following years. On November 30, 1244, he encounters the wandering dervish Shams-ed-din Tabriz—the place of this encounter is shown in Konya up to the present day—and this mysterious personage becomes to him the embodiment of the divine beloved, becomes, true to his name, 'sun of religion', the central sun in Jelal ed-din's life

"Thy countenance is like the sun, Shamsuddin,

Past which, resembling clouds, the hearts go by."

The close relation with his mystic teacher arouses the jealousy of family and students. Shams ed-din has to leave the city, but returns later upon the request of Jelal ed-din and is finally murdered by jealous students. Searching for him, Jelal ed-din grows into a poet and mystic who expresses his search in ardent verses and eventually finds the beloved in himself and identifies himself with the beloved. On December 17, 1273, Jelal ed-din dies and the honorary title of 'Maulana' is bestowed on him. The symbolism used by Rumi is derived from the Arabic-Persian tradition. Mystic wine and the beloved tavern are themes that had been familiar in poetry for a long time. Many allusions to the Quran and God's "arch-eternal covenant" with mankind. God asks the as yet uncreated mankind: "Alastu birabbikum?", and mankind answers: "Yes, we bear witness to it." This covenant seals the eternal bond tying man to God, the lover to the beloved. It is more or less a predetermined relationship. The personages of the Quran are transformed into symbols of general character. When Joseph is mentioned, he appears as the bearer of absolute divine beauty, or he is the symbol of the soul thrown into a black dungeon by hostile powers. Moses is the one to whom the divine light manifested itself and who turned the staff into a snake through heavenly force: he thus becomes the symbol of the mystic beloved who has the power to transform and give life to anything coming close to him. Rumi most certainly knew the theories of mystic love that had crystallised in the course of the centuries and culminate in the doctrine of one's own Ego being extinguished unto the beloved. The lover henceforth is only a mirror through

which the beloved manifests himself ; he has no longer an existence of himself: it is only the beloved who lives and speaks of him. This thesis, for which the ground had been prepared from the theoretical angle by the views and works of Ahmed Ghazzali (died 1126) and his disciple Ain al-Qudat al-Hamadani (1230), found its realisation in Rumi. Even though he might have been influenced by monistic trends as represented in particular by Ibn al-Arabi, he thinks more in terms of personal relationships: return to the prince, home-coming into the custody of the loving friend, complete devotion to the mysterious beloved. Jelal ed-din, therefore, was a lover who gave expression to the idea that man on his part cannot find access to the Deity, but that God must reveal himself to man (see Eckhart: the birth of God in the soul). Without attempting a detailed interpretation of the relationship between Rumi and Shams ed-din, one can nevertheless say that it was first of all a human relationship which was platonically or mystically sublimated. Concepts like 'kallos alathes', inherent beauty, can be found in Plato's works, 'kallos hyper kallos' in those of Plotinus. Earthly beauty is considered the reflection of divine beauty. Everything becomes trans-parent (Mirror motif). The famous conception of the lover and beloved that originated from Plato and was philosophically and theologically interpreted by Plotinus, has also found its way into Islamic mysticism. The three correlatives, lover-beloved-love, which are lastly to be understood in an abstract sense, are used by Ibn Sina and Ahmed Ghazzali as well as the Spanish philosopher Raymundus Lullus who took them over from the Islamic tradition. Ibn Sina probably adopted these concepts from Plotinus (Ennsad III, 2, 17. 5f.). Rumi, however, arrives at a totalising comprehension that leaves the rational philosophical, the Platonic thinking behind and penetrates to mystic depths where Shams ed-din is really nothing but a crystal within which the light of the sun is refracted. Already at this point the difference in the philosophical-theological theories about love becomes evident, between the Platonians and Neoplatonians on one side and Rumi on the other. Plato's concept of love is rational, Rumi's idea of love is irrational and cosmic, love is the ground of the universe:

گر نبودی عشق هستی کربدی

If there had not been love, how could there have been existence? Rumi expresses it in an even more radical form:

پس چ باشد عشق دریائی عدم در شکسته عقل را انجا قدم

Then what is love: the sea of non-being, then the foot of the intellect' is battered. The term 'sea of non-being' brings eastern thoughts to mind. But it is difficult to point out specific distinctions, this would mean to think along western lines and hence to split up the overall experience. Mystic experience, perhaps, can be expressed in terms of poetry or even philosophy and can be guided by a certain religion; mysticism, however, is not religion, philosophy or only poetry, the respective religious structure is transcended, at least 'subjectively'. Mysticism has been called the religion of love. Especially Rumi wrote some verses of this kind: "Here all religions are equal: Know ye: the lover is Muslim not !" (Rub. 329a.) Mysticism is also more comprehensive than a philosophy of life that derives everything from categorical and rationally analysed imperatives (see Kant's sense of duty which had an influence on entire generations of Germans, at least in the outward spheres of life). Mysticism is, as we said at the outset. a comprehension of a total and spontaneous nature that largely excludes any discursive thinking. This is evident from the methods to be practised by the novices starting on the mystic path. I need only refer to the 'dhikr' in Islamic mysticism or to the Jesus prayer in the Eastern Church which are both intended to inhibit discursive thinking by effecting concentration on a single formula. Raymundus Lullus. strongly influenced by Islamic customs, offers a number of pertinent aphorisms in his 'Book on the Lover and the Beloved'. Aphorism 54: "The lover walked through a town and sang like a fool of his beloved, and the people asked him whether he had lost his senses. He replied: 'My beloved has taken my will from me and I myself gave him my senses. Therefore, I am only left with my memory (dhikr) to think of my

beloved.' " Aphorism 134: "The beloved asked his lover not to forget him. The lover answered that he could never forget him as he would not be able to banish him from his memory." Aphorism 219: "The lover said to the people: 'He who thinks of my beloved forgets everything else in his memory besides him. And he who forgets every-thing to think of my beloved, in him is my beloved and will let him partake of everything.'" The role of the Koan in Zen Buddhism or other methods of meditation will not be discussed here. We can see how closely the most dissimilar methods approach each other in this respect and how well they agree in the exclusion of the rational intellect. But to demonstrate once more and quite generally the difference between East and West from the example of Rumi—one asks oneself: where does the East begin?—one can state: Rumi, having grown up against the background of a Prophetic religion, knows the difference between creator and creature, speaks frequently in dualistic metaphors as was mentioned above, but knows as well the un-forming of every individuality and the merging into the divine universe. The symbol is here the drop of water that loses its boundaries and 'individuality', and falls back into the ocean from where it came. Rumi is representative of a generation of monistically imbued mystics in Persia and on the Indian subcontinent—and in India they were surely influenced by Hinduism as well—who sang of the divine abundance of the universe (hama ost). With their experience, these mystics are close to the Chinese and Buddhist mystics who have become united with the Tao or dissolved in the nirvana.

It would be wrong to contend that eastern thinking, as a cosmic way of thinking which proceeds from synthesis and unity, was not capable of analysis and would lack thoughts on individuality and personality. I should only like to remind you of some Chinese philosophers such as Yabg Chu or Sung Hsing. However, eastern thinking would appear to me to be more encompassing in general and to proceed from the one thing, from cosmic harmony (Taiji), as it also presents itself in the historic development of Chinese philosophy. To touch briefly on the most important structures of

the Chinese comprehension of being: Much has been said about yin and yang. Some people considered them as forces, others as substances. Surely no distinction was made in ancient China between forces and substances. Occidental thinking, true to its evolution, interpreted yin-yang as the theory of a basic dualism that makes itself felt through all phenomena of the world. However, one must not forget that the yin-yang principle, even though it is recognizable in everything being and appears in it, is so to speak inherent in it, that it is a transcendental principle, i.e. that this bipolarity of all being as expressed through yin-yang must be understood as a manifestation of unity: the one thing, inexpressible and beyond all description, divests itself into those two. Yin and yang are forms, forever inseparable forms of the appearance of being in every-thing being. Yin-yang are not only modes, of working that manifest themselves exclusively in the two-ness of contrasts and phenomena, i.e. in light and shadow, heaven and earth, man and woman, God and man, above and below, cold and warm, etc. Yin-yang are given original structures of the appearance of everything being (CHi-Tor-Akademei), a pre-formation of all ontological structures that does not manifest itself until it unfolds into the quintuplicity of the elements of the given. Yin-yang are, therefore, transcendental. They are at the same time

symbols for the one thing (see e.g. light and the illuminated). Here we are coming to the Tai-ji and Tao. Let us review a number of texts from different schools: "From the Tao springs the one, from the one springs the two, from the two spring the three, and from the three spring ten thousand creatures. All creatures carry the yin and embrace the yang. The streaming fluid works the harmony." (Lao-tse, chapter 42.) "The Tao of heaven is emptiness, emptiness is the beginning of all things. Tao is between heaven and earth, there is nothing that would be larger and nothing that would be smaller." That is to say, Tao includes all possibilities of existence; the great Tao is such that one can rest inside it, but one cannot express it (texts of the Kuan-tsu of the philosopher Sung Hsing, chapters 37 and 38).

I shall omit a description of the role of positive nothingness, of the Buddhistic nirvana. To the eastern wise man and mystic, it is the highest goal to merge into the Tao, to get lost in the ground of the universe. This is in subjective partaking in being, such as in the sense of a platonic metexis, it is the unification with the one thing, achieved under loss of the individual boundaries. A personified concept of God Is nowhere to be found, of course: the starting and end point is the ground and the harmony of the universe. From these considerations it becomes basically clear where the difference between eastern and western mysticism lies. It is, for instance, not possible to compare the mystic theories of love conceived by the Islamic and Christian mystic, theories of the lover and beloved (soul and God) which express the personal relationship between an individual and his divine beloved, with the yin-yang principle, though it must be said that the experience of a duality becoming intertwined into unity and being comprehensible only through that unity certainly points in this direction. You might remember certain passages from the Islamic mystic Al-Hallaj..."With my whole being (existence) have I embraced your whole love, oh my Holiness...", and his theory of the 'Ishq dhati'. (Interpretation) Salvation, holiness and perfection are not to be found in plurality or duality, after all, but lastly in unity.

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