

THEISTIC MYSTICISM (WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON BHAKTI AND SUFISM AND COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO WESTERN, MORE SPECIFICALLY CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM)

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Abstract— It is under the theme - Deeper understanding of arts, culture, language, religion, commerce, governance and society. (My paper empathizes on Theistic Mysticism, an important aspect of Religion; and Religion is an important aspect of Society). What is mysticism? Mysticism is dependent upon mystic's intuitions, insight or is claimed that he has a direct intuitive perception of God. The paper focuses on various types of paths of theistic mysticism that also incorporates the path of devotion i.e. bhakti; which is very popular in India. Bhakti or the path of devotion has various

characteristics which are discussed in the paper. The paper also deals with theistic mysticism other than Hindu religion, that is mysticism in Islam, i.e. Sufism; and there is also a comparative approach towards Christian mysticism in brief. The path of theistic mysticism has tremendously influenced all walks of human life.

Index Terms— Theistic Mysticism, Mystical Language, Bhakti (Devotion), Sufism, Christian Mysticism, Subjectivity.

I. INTRODUCTION

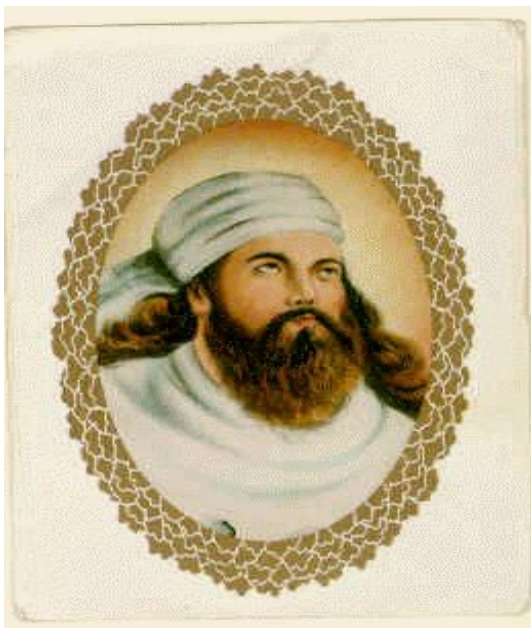


Fig. 1 Great mystic Zoroaster



Fig. 2 Mystic Guru Nanak Devji

1. Introduction

Mysticism: Mysticism is dependent upon mystic's intuitions, insight or is claimed that he has a direct intuitive perception of God. There are two types of mysticism; one is atheistic mysticism (that which is not our topic of discussion) and theistic mysticism (that has God as the central principle of belief in mystical experience). The mystic firmly believes that his experience is so unique that it cannot be described, defined, explained or demonstrated. This is so because God is such a unique Being, that no pronoun can describe God. The moment we ascribe characteristics to God, we are conceptualizing Him for we already have a concept of something and we attribute to God the characteristic of which we have concept. Then what can be said about God? The answer is we can say nothing of God because the moment we say something, we are ascribing some qualities to God, we are limiting God to that concept. Then we commit the fallacy of anthropomorphism; that is where we designate human attributes to God, thereby limiting God. No words, not even the words such as infinite, limitless can be ascribed to God. Even the word 'God' is not allowed and yet when a mystic make such a statement as 'God is the unity of all things'- is not using the term literally but only symbolically.



Fig. 3 Mystical painting by renowned painter S. H. Raza

This argument from mysticism is not accepted by philosophers. An objection is raised, even if we say that mystics' statements are not literally true but only symbolically true, even if we admit that what is literally true cannot be expressed, yet the mystics admit that there are statements and these statements of describing God is a better symbol than the other and if one knows this, is it not true to say that one knows something about that experience? We can even go a step further; if we can know this much, can we not say or ask about the thing itself or the 'being itself' of whom we gave a symbolic expression? Therefore the mystic's double claim that we do not know what the Ultimate Reality is; that we cannot say that what it is, seems to be very personal and subjective claim. The word 'mystic' comes from the Latin word 'mus' meaning 'I keep my mouth close'. Hence the word 'mystic' means one who keeps silent, not because he does not want to communicate but because what he wants to communicate is not communicable. There are very few people in the world who claim to have such experience and therefore on the basis of these few people's claim would it be right to conclude objectively that God exists?

There are different types of mystics who adopt different paths to reach the Ultimate Reality, either to merge and become one with God or to be in service or near to God. One such path is 'bhaktimarga'. In Student's Britannica India (Encyclopaedia) Bhakti is defined as follows, "Devotion, in various South Asian religions, especially Hinduism, is predominant aspect of religious practice and expression which emphasizes an intense emotional attachment of the devotee to his personal god. Derived from the Sanskrit verbal root 'bhaj', originally meaning 'to share, to apportion', bhakti came to mean 'love, sharing, worship,

devotion’.” (Vol.1NewDelhi, 2000)



Fig. 4 Meera and Krishna

2. Forms of Theistic Mysticism:

‘Bhakti movement’ has quite revolutionary outlook. It has always challenged the orthodoxy, rituals, and religious rites. The dominance of Vedas was challenged, at the same time they believe in equanimity irrespective of caste, creed, class, and race or gender distinctions. One can love one’s personal Lord with one’s own liking, dancing, singing, decorating idols of Lord, all fall into bhakti marga (the path of devotion). Even in India, the bhakti margins became a rebelling movement as Sanskrit language was also challenged. In one’s local and native language a bhakta (a devotee) can very well adore and glorify his personal God. No doubt bhakti movement is the striking mark of Medieval India, but one can even find the term in Rig-Veda, that is as early as 1200 B. C. But clearly it can be seen in the work of Panini, who clearly uses the word bhakti for devotion. In early Buddhist text, the Theragatha (songs by elderly Buddhist monks) and Therigatha (songs by elderly Buddhist nuns), also one can see the references of bhakti. The pathway for the movement was opened up by Jainism, Buddhism and Upanishadic thought, this explicitly made clear the way for bhakti and its importance in religious, social and philosophical ideology. The above mentioned

school of thought, that is Jainism, Buddhism and Upanishads emphasized on individual effort, rather than the authoritative priestly community. So, it came as a rebellious movement against Vedic religion. Even the two great epics – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are abundant with bhakti; in Mahabharata– the relation between Krishna and Arjuna is an ideal example. In Buddhism and Jainism too - one finds the devotee has great reverence and awe for Buddha and Bhagawana Mahavira respectively.



Fig. 5 Tibetan Buddhist Thangka

The most beautiful aspect of bhakti from Vaishnavism is bridal mysticism. It started after Ramanujacharya and Madhvacharya. (The Alvars from South India belong to Vaishnava theism.)

The great mystic Haridas and his sect presented two groups –a) The Vyasakuta – those are supposed to know the Vedas, Upanishads and other Darshanas (Indian philosophy schools). b) The Dasakuta – those are the followers of Madhvacharya (language of the people was Kannada) – main disciples were Vyasatirtha and Naraharitirtha.

The bhakti movement began to spread to the North during the late medieval period when the North India was under Muslim domination. In the North there were no groupings of mystics into Shaivites and Vaishnavites as in the South. More importance was given to the avatara (incarnation) of Lord Vishnu - Lord Rama and Lord Krishna. (Though, this

did not mean that the sect of Shiva or the Devi [Shakta] went into decline.). So, 14th and 15th century saw saints like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Vallabha, Surdas, Meera, Kabir, Tulsidas, Ravidas, Namdeo, Tukaram and other theistic mystics who spearheaded the bhakti movement in the North.

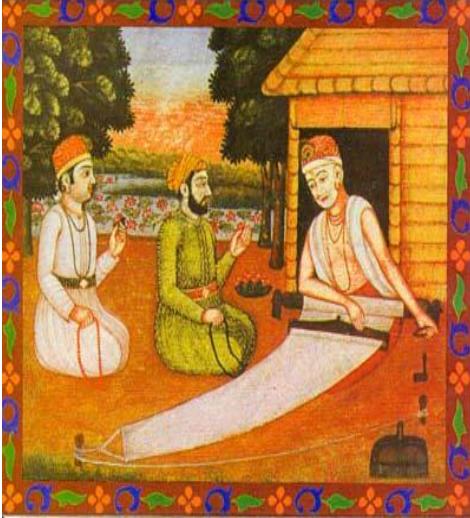


Fig. 6 North Indian mystic - Saint Kabir, weaving.

According to Gurudev R. D. Ranade, a bhakta (devotee) is markedly different from a sant (saint or mystic). A saint aspires to be one with the One. But a devotee is immersed in the ocean of devotion, where there is total surrender and immense joy in bhakti (devotion); here the distinction always remains between the devotee and his God.



Fig. 7 Bhakta Narsinh Mehta - from Gujarat, India.

Another great mystical form is 'Sufism'. The Muslim identity of India is a thoroughly Indian identity, very

different from the Islamic identity of other Muslim countries. This is unique Indo-Islamic identity that has evolved over centuries – influencing every aspect of life. The influence of Islamic tradition on other religions and vice-versa, also led to evolution of unique socio-religious traditions of the Muslims in India. (Islam by Kaleem Kawaja, 2008).



Fig. 8 The Sufi Dervishes

Indian Muslims have drawn their tradition from the Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Afghans, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Abyssinians, and other regions of India. Amir Khusro represents Indian renaissance, a pioneer in creating a new Indo-Islamic culture and tradition. (He gave Hindvi, the ancestor of today's Hindi and Urdu). Socially and culturally the greatest Muslim impact of the medieval era on India was through the Sufi movement which led to the growth of the bhakti movement with a different dimension.

Sufism means 'tasawwuf', in Persian which means inner, mystical dimension of Islam. The practitioner is called Sufi, also called 'dervish'. As defined in "The Principles of Sufism", Sufism is explained by classical scholars, is "a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else but God." (The Principles of

Sufism by Ahmed Zarruq, ZainebIstrabadi, Hamza Yusuf Hanson 2008). While all Muslims believe that they are on the pathway to God and will come close to God in Paradise after death and after the 'Final Judgment'; the Sufis also believe that it is possible to draw closer to God and to more fully embrace the Divine Presence in this very life. (From - Sufism-Sufis-Sufi Orders).

3. Conclusion:

Let us have an aerial view of the points of similarity and differences between the mystics of East and West. R. D. Ranade finds a parallel between Jnanesvara's work (i.e. Jnanesvari) and Plotinus, Eckhart and Augustine's work (i.e. Enneads, Mystische Schrifften and De Civitate Dei – respectively). Both the mystics of West and East show the philosophic and mystical wisdom in their work but the untouchable mystic of East, say Chokhamela, a pariah, has less of philosophical introspection, and more of dictates of heart; while Bohme of West show more philosophical bent and less intervention of heart. This is the difference that we do find. Again, women mystics of East like Muktabai, Janabai, Kanopatra differ in temperament from Western women mystics – like Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, and St. Teresa. The Indian women mystics tend to be more subjective; while Western women mystics have been more purposeful in their activity



Fig. 9 Christian mystic saint Teresa of Avila

Mystics in their writings had such a broad outlook where they show concern for environment in their writings, show feministic approach and through social welfare bringing about world solidarity - say, Joan of Arc or Eckhart or Guru Nanak or Kabir or Dadu or Lalleshwari or Karaikal Ammai or Ramdas or Chaitanya Mahaprabhu or Sultan Abu Said, Sultan Ibrahim Adham or Rabia of Basra or Farduddin Attar or Milarepa.....

A mystical union is the immediate transforming experience of the unification of man's soul with the Highest Reality. This is indeed the most authentic ascent of the human spirit. Mystical experience is an experience of enlightenment and exaltation of spiritual insight. As the great mystic Chaitanya Mahaprabhu says, 'O God, I do not pray for wealth or resources of family or social relationship, or for a beautiful wife or the blessings of the muses. May I attain and retain through the cycle of births and rebirths of the devotion of Thee, untainted by selfish motive.' It is obvious that theistic mysticism (or bhakti marga or Sufism) has exerted lot of influence on society. Through theistic mysticism we can develop interfaith dialogue and solve many of the contemporary social crises which have created havoc in the world.



Fig. 10 Saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

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