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THE ABSOLUTE AS A COMMON GROUND OF MYSTICISM

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the contention that an absolute is a common and ultimate foundation in all forms of mystical experience found in major world religions.

The initial question is whether we can have a concept of the absolute at all. If we were to admit its possibility, it has to be conceded that it would belong to a supra-reflective consciousness. As we know, knowledge in its initial form is pure awareness or consciousness. Here not only the object is known but knowledge itself is known. This awareness is not in a communicable form for, of itself, it never affirms; nor does it deal with anything that is not existentially in act; it does not picture itself or represent. Consequently even the idea of "otherness" of object is absent from it. This pre-reflective consciousness is to be conceived as the opposite pole of a supra-reflective consciousness. Although the possibility of the latter cannot be easily proved, it is a necessary problem for philosophy. The philosophic reflection certainly does not demand an explicit identity of various forms of thought-contents and consciousness. Yet we are aware of certain forms of experience such as pure awareness and mysticism, where knowledge works without categories. Devoid of categories, they are incommunicable. Here an "absolute" can be conceived only in terms of complete distinction or removal of the content from consciousness. Metaphysics can point to the direction of the apprehension of an absolute of the consciousness which is free from the specifying contents or logical categories. The awareness of this mystic identity resulting from the logical relation between thought-content and consciousness. This situation again throws us back to the original question whether it is possible to have a concept of the absolute. If "absolute" has to be conceived, it can be done so

only in terms of "the relation" of an awareness-content to consciousness. Then it becomes logical and falls back into the field of philosophy.

If pre-and supra-reflective consciousness cannot be brought under the discipline of philosophy, it cannot even rightly speak of an absolute either. But, in fact, from time immemorial, philosophers have taken the absolute as a very fascinating terminal point of the speculative reason. The claim of the present paper is that it rightly belongs to the field of mystical or religious experience rather than to philosophy.

The Real in the Negation of the Unreal in Hinduism

No religion lacks individuals who claimed to have had some mystical experience. The story of the mystical man in Indian religious thought is as varied as the mystical experience itself. A survey of these from a synoptic point of view can only be attempted here.

i. The known unknown of the advaitas

The earliest Indian Philosophy has to be sought in the *Sruti* literature which has a distinct mystic and religious strain. Mysticism is usually regarded as a deep spiritual grasp of life. "Belief of the mystics or mysticism is no mere intellectual registration of opinions or temporary experience; but represents the dynamic, the dominant tone of inner personality as it develops and perfects itself. It means a spiritual grasp of life in a much more real and ultimate manner than is possible to mere sense experience and reason."¹ Indian thought in general recognizes the present knowledge only as an imperfect and lower form of knowledge which has to be perfected or transcended in a direct perception of the Supreme Intelligible. In the instance of the dialogue between Gargi, the woman philosopher, and Yājñavalkya (Br. Up. 3,6)² the ascending regression in the search for the cause of that which is immediately experienced, implies the step-by-step denial of the realities below Brahman. "But the soul is not this, it is not that" (Br. Up. 4,2,4).

1. S.N. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism* (New York: Frederick Ungar Pub. Co., 1959), p. 9.

2. Cf. also *Tai. Up.* 3, 1-10; *Ch. Up.* 3, 18, 1-2.

Negation can be understood as the rejection of illusion; it is what emerges when an illusion is corrected.³ When, in the philosophy of advaita, the world is rejected as illusion, the negated is given no being at all. This form of negation brings in a consciousness of the absence of object as well as of cognition of the object with an absolute inexplicability as its ground.⁴ It refuses to be positive; it denies its assertive tendency utterly and ends in complete silence. The backbone of this negative process is a feeling of certitude about the unknowable and the indefinite which is stronger than all positive knowledge.

Although the ground mentioned above is unknowable to the categories of reason, it is not totally unknown. It is the 'known unknown' of the advaita-mysticism.

ii. The negative experience of a positive intuition

In a broader sense, mysticism is again regarded as a theory that considers reason to be incapable of discovering or realizing the nature of ultimate reality, but at the same time believes in the certitude of some other means of arriving at it. The ultimate reality in advaita is designated by the terms Brahman and Atman as approached from the objective or the subjective point of view. It offers a *svarupalakshana*, a definition with reference to the essence and a *tatasthalakshana*, a definition with reference to accidents, of the ultimate reality. The former is based on the Upanishadic formula, namely, *saccidananda*,⁵ existence, intelligence and infinite or bliss. While the *Ratnavali* of Brahmananda Sarasvati holds that the three expressions together constitute the

3. K. C. Bhattacharya, "Some aspects of Negation", *Studies in Philosophy*, 11 (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1958), p. 208, 4, i.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 210, 4, iv.

5. Cf. Tai. Up. 3, 6; Br. Up. 3, 9, 28, 7. But in Tai Up. 2, 1 we have the following formula: "Brahma as the real, as knowledge and as the infinite (*ananta*)". Paul Deussen in his *Philosophy of the Upanishads* emends *ananta* (infinite) into *ananda* (bliss) in order to have the customary threefold definition of Brahman as *sat-cit-ananda*. Authors, however, are of the view that "even taking the expression as it stands, *ananta* (infinite) may be understood as referring to Brahman's nature as bliss". In support of this position *Ch. Up.* 7, 23, 1 can be cited: "The infinite is happiness; there is no happiness in anything small (or not-infinite). Only the infinite is happiness. But one must desire to understand the infinite". Cf. A.G.K. Warrier, *The Concept of Mukti in Advaita Vedanta* (Madras: University of Madras, 1961), p. 232.

essential definition of Brahman, the **Vedanta Paribhasha** maintains the position that the three expressions can be taken as three independent definitions of the one and the same Brahman. Sankara, however, in his commentary on **Brahma Sutra**⁶ explains these words functionally as some kind of adjectives. They are not adjectives to a substantive in the strict sense because the purpose served by these expressions is to mark off Brahman, not from similar entities as adjectives do, but from all kinds of objects whatsoever. In other words, according to Sankara, the Advaitic Absolute is not capable of determinations of any kind. Expressions such as existence, intelligence etc. are only useful to tell us what the absolute ground of being is not. They can only indicate the fact that Brahman is other than non-existence, non-intelligence and non-bliss.⁷ This negative expression of a positive intuition acknowledges the inability of the human mind to formulate its experience of the transcendental essence of the absolute.

Yet the Upanishads had their own methods to speak of it namely, through the language of silence at the end of a long dialogue (**Br. Up.** 3, 6), and by the concept of the non-existent. "Non-existent was this in the beginning, thence the existent arose" (**Tai. Up.** 2, 7). Here **Tai. Up.** speaks of a non-existent not as it is understood in **Ch. Up.** 6, 2, 1 as a mere nothingness but as the source of all beings, for the preceding verse in **Tai. Up.** states that "Non-existent, verily does one become, if he knows Brahman as non-being" (2, 6).

The conception of the absolute as nothing (nothing or no object for conceptualization) is a refrain in the literature of the major religions. When the absolute is said to be nothing, non-Being, emptiness or void it does not mean that this nothing is a mere negation. It only says that the reflective reason is unable to get hold of any distinguishing mark of the absolute. Freedom from distinctions or plurality means that it is one without a second. This is a unitive mystical experience.

iii. In search of a supra-reflective consciousness

Besides the unitive mystical experience authors speak of other forms of mysticism such as isolative, copulative and nihil-

6. Cf. *Brahma Sutra*, Existent, 1, 2, 21-23; Intelligence, 1, 1, 5-11; Bliss, 1, 1, 12-19.

7. A.G.K. Warriar, *Op. cit.*, p. 239.

tive mystical experiences in Indian religious tradition.⁸ A common feature of all these forms of mystical experience, as mentioned above, is a disbelief in the capacity of reason and a belief in some other means which can bring man to an ineffable, but enrapturing religious experience, provided one could attain freedom from one's actual existential situation. One seeks freedom for the sake of something. On the basis of these aspects of freedom from and freedom for, in mystical phenomena, different varieties of mysticism are discernible. But the question whether we can formulate a perfect "typology of mystical experience"⁹ "looking at aspects of mystical experience from the perspective of the psychological development of man,"¹⁰ is rather a recent one and so it is difficult to give a positive answer to the question here. Anyhow the attempt to reduce a rich and complex religious tradition "to a particular sequence of life-stages" has its own internal weakness, for it has to meet definitely with "important examples of sudden and unexpected mystical experiences" which cannot be brought under a pattern. Yet for the sake of a general study various forms of mysticism in India can be brought under four captions.

The "unitive mystical experience" the most popular of the four forms mentioned here, is an intuitive realization that the sense of separation and distinction or polarity is a bondage and that a freedom from it can be finally achieved in the search "for the source, the beginning, the time before the beginning of time—the secure, eternal or pre-temporal, blissful condition of the unborn one in its source".¹¹ It represents a tendency which sought for the existence of the undifferentiated source. The mystic thought found in the Upanishads and the later advaitic tradition are examples of this type of experience. In contrast to this we have the "isolative mystical experience," to which the unity or

8. Cf. Gerald J. Larson, "Mystical Man in India", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 11 (March, 1973), pp. 1-16.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

10. Cf. *Ibid.*, The reference is to a paper of Erich Neuman entitled "Mystical Man", presented at an Eranos Conference of 1949. In it he correlated the three primary life-stages (namely, infancy and childhood, prime of life (18-54), and old age) with three types of mystical experience (viz. the quest for the undifferentiated unity, "hero mysticism or the self-assertive mysticism", and "death-mysticism").

11. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

oneness itself is a basic problem to be overcome. Here man finds himself in apparent union with the world. As long as this unity stands, freedom of the self from the bondage to the world is impossible. Hence isolative mystical tendency seeks to discover aloneness, isolation or absolute separateness from the world, God and other selves. What it looks for is the realization of pure consciousness. In the traditions of classical Sāmkhya and Yoga we have examples of this type of experience.

Another type of experience is what Larson calls "the copulative experience". It is called "copulative" because the essence of this intuitive realization consists in the experience of the presence of the "other" as the most profound occasion for the fulfilment of the possibilities of the existence of each.¹² In the later traditions of theistic piety supported by the *Bhagavad Gita*, the philosophies of Ramanuja, Madhva, and Caitanya, we find examples of this inter-personal mystical experience.

It is also possible to speak of another type of experience, namely, a "nihilative mystical experience". It is an experience in which "nothingness" or non-existence becomes the ground upon which the meaning of existence is revealed."¹³ The schools and traditions of early Buddhism which had old age, suffering and death as their basic problem, developed a type of mystical experience along the lines mentioned above.

iv. One thing common to all these forms of mystical experience, besides their correlation with the various psychological stages in the growth of man if we were to accept the contention of Larson, is the fact that they are the implicates of the intellectual or philosophical formulations of the Indian religious tradition. Hence they are supra-reflective rather than pre-reflective consciousness and so they are thoroughly rooted in philosophical certitude. Religio-philosophical systems stand as symbols which point to something other than what the conscious intellectual reflection can attain. What is this "something" in which various forms of Hindu religion find their converging point? Can it be an absolute free from specifications? This, of course, is not a problem restricted to the religious feelings in Hinduism. It is equally a problem for other religions too.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

The Experience of Void in Buddhism

It is very difficult to give a satisfactory account of the ultimate mystical stage of Buddhistic Nirvana, for, in a sense, it is absolutely contentless. "The mysticism of the Buddhist consists in a belief in the essenceless state of Nirvana as the state of ultimate perfection and ultimate extinction, to be realized by the complete extinction of desires and the supra-intellectual wisdom of the Yoga practice."¹⁴ It is absolutely non-logical and is unfathomable for ordinary comprehension.

i. Nagarjuna's dialectics of sunyata

It was Nagarjuna (50-150 A.D.) of Mahayana Buddhism who developed and perfected the Madhyamika system which propounded the doctrine of void as a philosophical position, a mystical experience. The twenty-fifth chapter of his *Madhyamika Karika*¹⁵ is devoted entirely to the analysis of the concept of Nirvana. Most of the ideas Nagarjuna developed had been anticipated in the *Mahasamghika* thought and *Prajñaparamita* works. What was most original in Nagarjuna was the dialectic that he evolved. Certain authors hold the view that Nagarjuna drew his inspiration to use a **tetra-lemma (catushkoti)** in his logic from a searching inquiry into the mysterious silence of Buddha on the most fundamental questions of Metaphysics. Chandrakirti in his *Prasannapada*, a commentary on Nagarjuna's *Karika* (22, 12) enumerates the following fourteen things as inexpressible: (i) whether the world is a. eternal, b. or not, c. or both, d. or neither; (ii) whether the world is a. finite, b. or infinite, c. or both, d. or neither; (iii) whether the *tathagata* a. exists after death, b. or does not, c. or both, d. or neither; (iv) whether the soul is a. identical with the body, b. or different from it.

As in the case of the first three sets of questions, in the fourth question also four alternatives can be found. It is not easy to determine the positive value of this fourfold formula when it is taken as a unit. The terms employed here can be reduced to such groups as (i) existence, non-existence, both, and neither-nor; (ii) self, other, both, and neither-nor, (iii) one, many, both, and

14. S.N. Dasgupta, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

15. *Karika*, a small treatise with 27 chapters and 445 verses is engaged in a thorough criticism of the categories of thought such as causation, motion, perception, quality and substance. (Hereafter *M.K.*)

neither-nor. The first term of the formulae, in all the above cases, stands for the absolute acceptance of the things as they appear. Here every element is an absolute self, a unity with its own self-being. The error of such a position is that it falls into eternalism for it can never perfectly explain cessation. In the second extreme, cessation is a total cessation and nothing of the being that has ceased to be continues to be. The error lies in the nihilism or annihilationism which is implied in this stand. The position that tries to explain the nature of absolute reality in terms of a mechanical combination is also devoid of sense. It is the non-absolute epistemology of the Jains that is criticized in this connection, for they can neither take relativism nor pluralism seriously. If they take relativism seriously so as to deny the ultimacy of difference, their metaphysical pluralism cannot stand. If they take, on the other hand, pluralism seriously, they cannot be relativists. A combination of both relativism and pluralism also cannot save the situation. Although relativism is valid with regard to the mundane truth, to conceive these relative phases as absolute is to miss the true import of the absolute. The ultimate truth, which is not anything specific or determinate, is neither describable as identity nor as difference. It is non-conceptual. The fourth extreme in the above formula expresses a position in which the possibility of all descriptions in terms of "is" and "is not" etc. is totally denied. Here the mind clings to the total denial of all ascriptions and so it is practically a denial of all knowledge and thought about the absolute. This absolute view about the indescribability of the absolute is the agnostic position which is inconsistent with itself in as much as it claims that there must be the knowledge of the thing as existent and beyond or opposed to all description. Sāstra says that such a denial of all statements, even relative, "is fool's talk".

This is also the case of sophistry or evasion. If those who deny all positions take their position seriously, it would become self-contradictory. If they don't, they are in no way superior to common man, and, as Buddha says, they are not worth listening to at all.

What, in fact, the fourfold formula of Nagarjuna is trying to say in so many words is that the adhering to any position with regard to the absolute is self-contradictory and that we cannot go beyond the silent experience or intuition of the absolute which is void itself. When silence is broken and a position is adhered to, we run into all kinds of self-contradictions as mentioned above.

ii. The meaning of the expression sunyata

The doctrine of emptiness has baffled scholars both in the East and the West. Theodore Stcherbatsky translates **Sunya** as relative,¹⁶ P.T. Raju as "ontological indeterminateness",¹⁷ Dasgupta as "the Upanishadic Brahman"¹⁸ and D.T. Suzuki as "the conditionality or transitoriness of all phenomenal existence."¹⁹

According to P.T. Raju twenty kinds of **sunyata** can be distinguished;²⁰ Edward Conze speaks of thirty two kinds of emptiness;²¹ Suzuki mentions eighteen forms of them²² These different interpretations and enumerations of meanings and forms of **sunya** make it clear that it is not easy to have a unified view about it from Buddhist literature.

Of the various meanings the following two stand out as the most central in the Philosophy of Nagarjuna:

Sunyata as criticism lays bare on the one hand that conditionedness of things to which we cling in our ignorance as unconditioned and, on the other hand, it lays bare the truth that the entities that are seen to arise and perish in their conditioned nature are themselves, in their ultimate nature, the unconditioned reality, the *nirvana*.²³

In this context **sunyata** is identified with **nirvana**, which is also equated with the Buddhist concept of **tathagata**, the perfect being. We are asked to apprehend the Buddha as **dharmakaya**,²⁴

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16. Theodore Stcherbatsky, *Concept of Buddhist Nirvana* (Leningrad: Academy of Science of the U.S.S.R., 1927), p. 42.
 17. *Idealistic Thought of India* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1953), p. 253.
 18. *Indian Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 88.
 19. *Outline of Mahayana Buddhism* (London: Luzac & Co., 1907), p. 175.
 20. P.T. Raju, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
 21. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: Allen & Unwin 1970), p. 244.
 22. D.T. Suzuki, *On Indian Mahayana Buddhism*, (ed) E. Conze (New York: Harper, Torch Books, 1968), p. 44.
 23. K.V. Ramanam, *Nagarjuna's Philosophy as Presented in the Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co. 1966), p. 168.
 24. Cf. T.R.V. Murthi, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), p. 284-5. The dual nature of Buddha as one with the Absolute and at once actively pursuing the welfare of beings, supplies the philosophical basis for the theological conception of the *Trikaya* (the three bodies, namely, the *Dharmakaya*, the *sambhogakaya* and the *nirmanakaya*) of Buddha.

as one with the absolute. This Buddha, **tathagata** or **tathata** is the same as **sunya** or **nirvana** and **sunya** is the same as the essence or goal of the world. **Tathata** is the word used in **Madhyamika** philosophy for the absolute. It is the truth; but it is impersonal. In order to reveal itself, the Absolute takes **tathata** as its medium. Hence it is an amphibious being partaking both of the absolute and phenomena. It is the **tathagata** within us who makes us long for **nirvana**, and ultimately sets us free.

iii. Nirvana as a mystical experience

For Buddhism the life of man here is inevitably a mass of suffering. Birth, old age and death are the three main forms of earthly sorrows. **Nirvana** or deliverance from these sufferings is the central idea of the teaching of Buddha. Of the various interpretations, the one **Nagarjuna** gave became the most important in the **Madhyamika** philosophy. First of all he gives the following description of **Nirvana**:

What neither is released, nor is it ever reached,
 What neither is annihilation, nor is it eternity,
 What never disappears, nor has it been created,
 This is *nirvana*. It escapes precision (*M.K.*, 25,3).

The meaning of the stanza is this. In the absolute i.e., in that principle which is final **nirvana**, all elements of existence without any residue of phenomenal life will vanish totally. The absolute is a negation of the phenomenal. It is neither "being" nor "non-being."

The Buddha has declared
 That Ens and non-Ens should both be rejected
 Neither as Ens nor as a non-Ens
Nirvana, therefore, is conceived (*M.K.*, 25,10).

Nor is it the combination of both (*M.K.*, 25, 11). Hence **nirvana** has to be conceived as the limit of all constructions of our productive imagination. It cannot be conceived as something which either represents reality or non-reality or both or neither, for it is impossible to imagine something as existing or as not existing whose concrete reality has never been experienced. Again **nirvana** is uncaused, whereas the **ens** and the **non-ens** are both dependent on causation (*M.K.*, 25, 12). If **nirvana** were not uncaused and absolute, it would then be partly an **ens** and partly a **non-ens** which have necessarily dependent existences. The question what is the Buddha after **nirvana** cannot be answered: "Does

he exist or does he not exist, or both, or neither? We never will conceive it" (M.K., 25, 17). It is the **mukti** or deliverance: "The bliss consists in the cessation of all the thought; in the quiescence of plurality; no (separate) reality was preached at all; nowhere and none by Buddha" (M.K., 25, 24). In short it is an inexpressible, deathless state without origin, change and decay. It is a peace and security one has to realize within oneself through the extinction of craving for sense-pleasure and personal self.

The question whether **nirvana** is a psychological state or a soteriological suggestion has to be examined in the context of its identification with the Absolute reality or **sunya-tattva**. It is according to Nāgārjuna, (i) beyond destruction, (ii) beyond production, (iii) beyond dissolution, (iv) beyond eternity, (v) beyond oneness, (vi) beyond plurality, (vii) beyond ingress, (viii) and beyond egress (M.K., 18, 1). The Madhyamika philosophy, in fact, only negates all views about reality. The Reality itself is not denied. Hence the **sunyata** is a kind of the awareness of the Absolute. "**Sunyata** is negative only for thought; but in itself it is the non-relational knowledge of the Absolute. It may even be taken as more universal and positive than affirmation."²⁵

As to the purpose of **sunyata** philosophy Nāgārjuna says: "**Sunyata** is not used as a theory just for the sake of **sunyata**" (M.K., 24, 7). Chandrakirti in his commentary says that it is meant to silence the constant reflective process of the discursive mind. "**Sunyata** is taught not for its own sake, but for leading the mind to reality by restraining its conceptualizing tendency. It is an expression of aspiration, not of theory."²⁶

It is, therefore, both philosophy and mysticism. It is at the hour of reason's despair that the hour of truth dawns. In **nirvana** or **sunyata** "the wheels of imagination are stopped, the discursive mind is stilled, and in that silence Reality stoops to kiss the eye of the aspirant" of truth. "It is an experience of a different dimension—spaceless, timeless...The question is put at the logical level of reason; the answer is found at the supralogical, suprarational level of consciousness"²⁷

25. T.R.V. Murthi, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

26. Cited from Jaideva Singh's introduction to: Stcherbatsky's *The Concept of Buddhist Nirvana* (Varanasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakasham), p. 41.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Christian Experience of the Bottomless Ground

On a dark night...I went forth without being observed,
My house being now at rest...
To the place where he (well I know who)
Was waiting me—a place where none appeared.²⁸

In the Christian tradition also mystical experience is usually described in negative terms such as the following: It is "an incommunicable and inexpressible knowledge and love of God or of religious truth received in the spirit without precedent effort or reasoning."²⁹ This mystical idea, in the Catholic-tradition has a long history. It is in the mystical writings of Clement of Alexandria (c. 215) that we first find the familiar *via negationis* of reasoning, for from Philo he borrowed the idea that God is to be sought in darkness. God is to be reached by faith and by action: "We may in some fashion enter into the knowledge of the Almighty, recognizing not what He is, but what He is not."³⁰ St. Gregory of Nyssa also speaks in the same vein: "...In order to rise to this knowledge, a man must put away all that enters through sense, that he may climb the steep mount of theology."³¹

In the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500 A.D.) the negative method became a full-fledged "negative theology." "He is neither conceived, nor spoken, nor named; and He is none of the things that are, nor is He known in any of them."³² The *locus classicus* which is cited throughout the Middle Ages from the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius is the following:

And thou,...leave behind both thy senses and thy intellectual operations, and all things known by sense and intellect, and all things which are not and which are, and set thyself, as far as may be, to unite thyself in unknowing with Him who is above

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28. John of the Cross, *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross*, E. Allison Peers & P. Silverio De Santa Theresa, (London: Burns & Oates, 1964), p. 10, stanzas, i & iv.
29. David Knowles, *What is Mysticism*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1967), p. 13.
30. J. Chapman, "Mysticism," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, IX, 91.
31. Cf. "De Moysis, Mystica Interpretatio", *Patrologia Graeca*, XIIIV, 372-77.
32. *On the Divine Names*, 7, 3; cf. also *Mandukyopanishad*, 7.

all being and knowledge, for by being purely free and absolute, out of self and of all things, thou shalt be led up to the ray of the divine darkness, stripped of all, and loosed from all.³³

The mystical intuitive experience is a "ray of darkness" due to excess of light. It leads one to mystic silence: "The super-unknown, the super-luminous and loftiest height, wherein the simple and absolute and unchangeable mysteries are cloaked in the super-lucent darkness of hidden mystic silence..."³⁴

Employing a process of philosophical abstraction and negation Dionysius is trying to help us to transcend reason in our understanding of Godhead which, according to him, beyond the plane of the manifestation of the Trinity of Persons, is an undifferentiated unity. It is more an abstract philosophical idea rather than a mystical experience.

Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), a Dominican from Germany, also spoke of a philosophico-mystical experience of Godhead who is beyond the Trinity of the Persons.³⁵ His works seem to suggest that besides an ontological distinction between the Godhead, which is beyond description, and the Trinity of describable Persons, there is also possibility for the contemplative to go 'beyond God' in achieving identity with Godhead.³⁶ This teaching naturally aroused hostile attention of the theologians who regarded the literal sense of the statements made by Eckhart as a threat to Christian religion.

But in the writings of St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, which tried to describe the mystical operation of rising

33. Cited from, *E.R.E.*, p. 93.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

35. One of the 28 propositions prescribed by John XXII is the following: Every distinction is alien to God, whether in Nature or in Persons. Proof: the Nature itself is one, this one thing, and any of the Persons is one and the same thing as the Nature.

36. Eckhart in his *Questiones Parisienses* maintains the position that understanding is the foundation of God's being or existence. Here he makes the *intelligence* more fundamental than *esse*. But on the contrary, in his *Opus Tripartitum* the first proposition is, "Esse est Deus", "God and existence are the same". According to Gilson this is not a change of view because Eckhart always emphasized the unity of God and that for him real unity is the property of intelligent being alone. Being belongs to creatures and so God is not being; He is a super-being; super-unity belongs to Him because He is "the purity of being", i.e., an understanding.

above the world and self and all intelligence to union with God, we find a conscious effort to be within the confines of the accepted dogmas of the Church. St. John writes:

And if in aught I stray...it is not my intention to depart from the sound sense and doctrine of our Holy Mother, the Catholic Church; for in such case I submit and resign myself wholly, not only to her command, but to whatever better judgment she may pronounce concerning it.³⁷

This confession recognizes the universally accepted principle that, although in the ineffable mystical experience of the absolute the religions find their unity, its expression, its translation into communicable terms, has to conform to the dogmas or the established structure of one or the other existing religions.

St. Teresa differs greatly from St. John of the Cross and other mystics and her writings offer a starting-point for a new tradition. In her *Life* she described four degrees of spiritual union with God in terms of externally observable psychological effects.³⁸ A person in the fourth state "can apprehend nothing with the senses, which only hinder his soul's joy and thus harm rather than help him. It is futile for him to attempt to speak: his mind cannot manage to form a single word, nor if it could, would he have the strength to pronounce it."³⁹ As to the duration of this state she writes in the same context: "Whatever may be the length of the period during which all the faculties of the soul are in this state of suspension, it is a very short one."⁴⁰ The four degrees mentioned in her *Life* is complemented by a "seventh mansion" in her *Spiritual Castle*. It is the state of spiritual marriage in which the soul starts a reverse process, that is, a coming back to the knowledge or consciousness of its ideal (or the Absolute).

37. John of the Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

38. The first is meditation (*Life*, chs. 11-13), where the natural powers of the soul are set free; in the second state the will is made subject to God (14-15); in the third state imaginations and intellect also are brought under control (16-17); in the last state a complete union is effected and consequently all the natural mental operations are suspended for a short period (18-20).

39. E. Allison Peers & P. Silverio De Santa Teresa, eds., *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus* (London: Shed & Ward, 1957), p. 109.

40. *Ibid.*

The whole discussion, for the most part, is practical and psychological in character. **It is mainly a devotional aid** to the realization of present union with God; and so far as it is theoretical, **it is a theory of the faculties** by which such a union is attainable.

St. John of the Cross also speaks of the mystical experience **in terms of human faculties**. "... For a soul to attain to the state of perfection, it has ordinarily first to pass through two principal kinds of night, which spiritual persons call purgations or purifications of the soul."⁴¹ The first night is of the sensual part of the soul, and the second is of the spiritual part. The journey made by the soul to union with God is called night because it demands a total deprivation of all the worldly things which the soul possessed; this denial amounts to night to all senses of man; again the means to attain this union is faith; but faith is as dark as night to understanding; the end of the journey is in God; but since He is incomprehensible and infinitely transcendent, He may also be called **dark night**.

The scheme of analysis behind the conception of these three nights is not that of the "negative theology" of Dionysius the Areopagite, nor of the negative dialectics of Eckhart, but the theory of faculties of Scholastics adopted by St. Teresa. What the soul attains at the end of its journey is not an intuitive understanding, but a loving union with God. The journey led the soul to "a place where none appeared".⁴² Yet the soul takes it as a "happy chance." She sings in contentment: "Oh, night that joined Beloved with love, Lover transforms in the Beloved."⁴³

Mysticism an Unsolving Solution

The above survey touched on a few representative forms of mystical experience in three major world religions, namely Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. They can be brought under two broad divisions, namely, those which aim at a final loving union and those which seek a total dissolution of every union in an intuitive awareness. This polarity in the mystical experience is rooted in a very fundamental difference in their conception of religion. It is more radical than what Paul Tillich calls "ultimate

41. *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

42. *Ibid.*, Prologue, Stanza, 4.

43. *Ibid.*, Stanza, 5.

concern."⁴⁴ Nor can it be explained in terms of the Cataphatic and Apophatic theology of Dionysius the Areopagite. His apophatic method tried to exclude all names, such as Creator, Lord and all symbols such as "being", "not-being" etc. from the notion of God. Yet for him God was a "Subject" and not a pure absolute. But Dionysius took the momentous step of introducing into Christian theology the notion of "super-Being", or "super-Personality", or "super-Essence." It is so real that it is not an Object..., it is only a Subject, nay, the only Subject."⁴⁵

When the absolute is brought down to the level of religion in the narrow sense of Tillich, the unity found through the mystical experience in various religions gets shattered irreparably.

There are, however, certain authors⁴⁶ who believe that it is possible to speak of the various forms of the absolute without destroying the notion of absolute itself: "The thesis, put simply, proposes a conception of the Absolute, as the goal of the great world religions, in which the Absolute is not one but many, that is three alternative Absolutes, each equally ultimate and absolute, yet radically irreducible to each other or to any higher, more inclusive unity."⁴⁷ The question is whether they are psychological

44. D.Mackenzie Brown ed. *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p. 4. "If religion is defined as a state of "being grasped by an ultimate concern"—which is also my definition of faith—then we must distinguish this as universal or large concept from our usual smaller concept of religion which supposes an organized group with its clergy, scriptures, and dogmas, by which a set of symbols for the ultimate concern is accepted and cultivated in life and thought."

45. Swami Vikrant, "Theology as Anubhava," *Unique and Universal*, ed. J. B. Chettimattam (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1972), p. 180.

46. George B. Burch, *Alternative Goals in Religion* (McGill: Queen's University Press, 1972). The central theme of the work can be indicated here in author's own words: "To attain absolute objectively, that is absolute Truth, is the goal of Vedanta.....To attain absolute subjectivity, that is absolute Freedom, is the goal of Buddhism...To attain absolute togetherness, with God and each other, that is absolute Love, is the goal of Christianity...These statements, to be sure, are generalizations....But the generalizations hold in general. In each case the goal is the Absolute. But the three forms of the Absolute are not identical. On the contrary, they are opposite extremes...They cannot be evaluated by each other or by anything higher. They are alternative absolutes." (pp. 23, 24).

47. *Ibid.*, p. 1. From the critical Foreword of Prof. W. Norris Clarke S.J.

Absolutes⁴⁸ or ontological Absolutes, which are in themselves independent of my grasp of them. Even if we admit the possibility of the first alternative, taking into account the goals of the great world religions, the latter would certainly run out of contradiction. Even in the former case, as Clarke points out, "each of these apparently exclusive Absolutes, if pushed all the way possible, would turn out to be implicitly complementary facets of one absolute consciousness."⁴⁹ In the latter case they are to be presented to us so that we may know and make a religious commitment to one of them.⁵⁰

What we witness here is the evolution of a meta-philosophy or a pre-religion-theory which affirms the possibility of the co-existence of three absolutes. But the affirmation of real distinction or non-identity implies that each of these absolutes should lack something positive which the other has. "Hence at least two of these three Absolutes would have to be in some way limited not including the total plenitude of all perfections possible."⁵¹ The claim, therefore, of the possibility of the co-existence of three Absolutes in the traditional sense of the term as unconditioned, actually shatters the canons of our intelligibility. The Absolute, the unifying point of all religions, may have to be sought, therefore, through some other means unknown to the logic of reason.

When Philosophy conceives the Absolute of mystical experience in logical terms, the absolute ceases to be an absolute any longer. The designation of it as **saccidananta**, **sunya**, or **dark night** arises from the despair of philosophy over the mystical silence into which the mystic is naturally drawn. When Philosophy or religion apprehends the absolute as super-being, or subject, or truth, or freedom, or love it loses its absoluteness. Only the absolute of the mystical experience, "unphilosophized" and "unreligionized," can preserve its own character as the common ground and perennial source of inspiration for mysticism.

48. Cf. also K.C. Bhattacharya, "The Concept of the Absolute and its Alternative Forms," *Studies in Philosophy* Vol. II (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1958), pp. 125-143. The author of the present article in his *Philosophy of the Absolute*, a critical study of the Philosophy of Bhattacharya, devoted a chapter on this concept.

49. George B. Burch, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

50. The three alternative forms of the Absolute hinted at here are the Truth, Freedom and Love of *Advaita* philosophy, Buddhism and Christianity respectively.

51. George B. Burch, *Op. cit.*, p. 9.