

RELIGION VIS-À-VIS MYSTICISM A Quest for the Meaningfulness of Life

Saju Chackalackal*

1. Introduction

Human quest for the ultimate understanding of reality seems to be unquenchable. The rigour and ingenuity with which various intellectual disciplines have been formed and perfected over the centuries testify to the human ability to soar higher and higher, accessing the ever-deeper and unfathomable dimensions of reality. The undying and ever-stronger determination and commitment on the part of seekers to unravel the inner recesses of reality against the deep and profound dimensions of the same reality that challenge human inquisitiveness continue to elicit renewed spirit and novel strategies. It would be preposterous to restrict this process exclusively to those rigorous scientific disciplines and the studies that they carry out. In fact, every human attempt is capable of taking us a step closer to the understanding of reality.

2. Scientific Approaches vis-à-vis Religious Quest for Meaning

The application of logical reasoning in almost all human endeavours and its apparent success in most of such disciplines, especially in delivering instant practical solutions to human needs, have erroneously made it synonymous with the expressions 'scientific', 'systematic', 'true', etc. This equation wrongly assumes that human intelligibility is exclusively restricted to logical reasoning, although there are many other dimensions to it. It is unfortunate that anything that does not fit into the mould of logical reasoning is rejected as farce or even erroneous. It is interesting to note that Immanuel Kant, a philosopher who tried to draw the limits of human knowing or rational capacities, was in search of true knowledge. His quest for 'scientific' and 'true' knowledge heralded a novel method of combining the best from the analytic and synthetic as well as the *a priori* and *a posteriori* to such an extent that the resulting true knowledge was a *priori* synthetic judgement, which had the inherent characteristics of necessity and universality. For Kant, anything short of necessity and

*Dr. Saju Chackalackal CMI, former Chief Editor of the Journal of Dharma, currently serves as the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore. His published works include *Ramayana and the Indian Ideal* (1992), *Euthanasia* (2000), and *Unity of Knowing and Acting in Kant* (2002).

universality would disqualify it to be true knowledge at all. Yet, he was also insistent on the fact that such *a priori* knowledge has to, at the same time, be emerging from our sensible experiences. Indeed, the latter aspect became the corner stone in rejecting most of the truths that were accepted by traditional metaphysics as erroneous and, hence, transcendent according to Kant's analysis.¹ Indeed, in spite of the fact that Kant wanted to affirm human rational abilities to the core in making what uniquely human is, his rational system did not restrict itself to the speculative rationality; when it came to adopting 'truthful' patterns for acting and living, Kant did make room for a practical transcendentalism whereby he made it possible to 'transcend' the limits set by the speculative or theoretical reason itself.

Moreover, of late, even the stringent intellectual disciplines such as physical sciences have come down to admit their own inability to provide an ultimate understanding of reality; even they admit the insufficiency of the methods they employ, which otherwise were considered to be foolproof in delivering the ultimate answers that humanity was searching for. Moreover, philosophy, the science of all sciences, that attempts to solve the ultimate questions of life and reality, has not been successful in delivering its promises: looking at the answers provided by a multitude of philosophies, the situation is only compounded, defying any instant or long-term universally acceptable solution.

It is against this background that we look at the reality of religion as an equally valid human inquiry into the ultimate reality, but by adopting a different rationale that, at times, apparently contradicts with the 'systematic' or 'logical' reasoning. Religion is not a queer invention to cater to the oddities of individuals and societies; instead, religion gives expression to an important dimension of the existential need of human nature which is a fine balancing of the emotional and the intellectual, culminating in a world of ultimate significance: "in its proper mode, religion is a complex of myths, symbols, beliefs, doctrines, codes, practices, and rituals whose function is to empower its participants to make trans-natural integrations so that they may be 'carried away' into a world of ultimate significance."² This is not to undermine the role of logical

¹Saju Chackalackal, *Unity of Knowing and Acting in Kant: A Paradigmatic Integration of the Theoretical and the Practical*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2002, 32-42.

²John V. Apozyhski, "Mysticism and Epistemology," *Studies in Religion* 14, 2 (1985), 201. Opinions of two philosophers are worth quoting here, as both try to question and ridicule religious and mystical experiences. According to Bertrand

reasoning within the religious sphere, but to underline the fact that there are other effective tools or capabilities available to human beings than those employed by mere logical reasoning in accessing the inner recesses of reality.

3. Growing Quest for Interiority

A significant characteristic mark of the contemporary human consciousness is its preoccupation with the interior dimensions, which Bernard Lonergan has identified as "the turn to interiority."³ It is said that a consciousness of spiritual emptiness or poverty pervades the humankind. In fact, I tend to believe that the present generation is becoming all the more aware of a spiritual emptiness, and a consequent thirst, that the traditional forms of religious practices have not been able to quench. Many traditional religions are incapable of meeting the challenging demands of a generation that has already outgrown the human, religious, and structural parameters set in an alien milieu almost thousands of years ago. A quest for the interior or the spiritual that is visible across all continents and among all religionists shall be seen as a positive thrust of the present generation for identifying and experiencing the ultimate significance of human existence, which gets blurred amidst the increasing concerns for the mundane affairs. At this point, we find many informed seekers deserting religions of their childhood, taking refuge in some others that purport to be offering spiritual solace and mystical experience in quenching the thirst for the Transcendental: what they yearn for is *that* personal experience of the Ultimate which the traditional ritualistic practices and organizational setups of most major religions cannot offer. Many a time, these newly found religions and their norms also end up in displacing seekers from one setup to another, but ultimately failing to quench their genuine religious yearnings that cannot be catered to within any restricted framework; so, the need of such believers is not a change from one religion to another, but a readiness to transcend every limiting factor in their search for genuine

Russell, "We can make no distinction between the man who eats little and sees heaven and the man who drinks much and sees snakes. Each is in an abnormal physical condition, and therefore has abnormal perceptions" (Bertrand Russell, *Religion and Science*, London: Oxford University Press, 1935, 188). C.D. Broad holds that "One might need to be slightly 'cracked' in order to have some peep-holes into the super-sensible world." C. D. Broad, "Arguments for the Existence of God, II," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 40 (1939), 164.

³Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003, 316.

personal religious experience, which is otherwise mediated by one or another religious tradition.

Religion as a search for the Transcendental is an inherent dimension of human existence, although its external form seems to vary from person to person, tradition to tradition, and culture to culture. Religion cannot be treated as a precious stone or rare book shelved safely against all possible threats or damage, which gets a chance to be exhibited at a prescribed moment/s on the prescribed day/s (the Sunday service, for example, in the case of Christians), but a living reality that runs through every aspect of human beings who must live it wholeheartedly each and every moment in their continued religious existence irrespective of the status, affinity, or affiliation. It is a trans-rational existential approach to the human conditions; resolutions of these problems are searched for within an initial framework supplied by certain fundamental assumptions about reality, a framework which is expanded and extended by integrating insights received at the individual and communitarian levels of religious horizons.

Friedrich von Hügel, in his work *The Mystical Element of Religion*, lists three elements that are essentially present in any institutionalized religion. They are (1) organizational or institutional, (2) speculative or intellectual, and (3) experiential or mystical.⁴ Although von Hügel is of the opinion that a proper balancing of all these three elements is necessary for a proper and healthy approach to religion as a unified reality, I tend to think that any laxity on or neglect of the experiential or mystical dimension of religion will distort its own inner spirit,⁵ leaving only a lifeless structural edifice, which, in turn, would become a worn-out system incapable of providing any assistance to its believers in appropriating a transcendental or trans-rational perspective in approaching and realizing the ultimate nature of reality and in finding answers to the ultimate questions that haunt humanity from its beginnings. Moreover,

⁴Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in St. Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1923, 1:51-53.

⁵I have no intention to downplay the thesis of von Hügel, which I am sure presents a right perspective. However, my attempt here is to highlight the importance of the experiential or mystical over the others, as both the organizational (matters pertaining to the structural aspects, such as church building, hierarchy, community, rituals, etc.) and doctrinal (those aspects related to the argumentative dimensions, such as creed, speculative treatises on the faith content, etc.) elements can receive their inner strength only from the experiential, which to my mind is more foundational than the others.

experientially-oriented or mystically disposed believers (if they are on the right track) will reinvigorate and sustain their respective religions against sheer emotionalism, self-centredness, and unbecoming idiosyncrasies on the part of individuals, and the dullness of some repetitive ritualistic practices, verbose and intolerant dogmatic assertions, and the spirit-enslaving structures on the part of institutionalized religions; in fact, they finally turn out to be a real shot in the arm that is ever in demand for quickening and renewing the religious dimension of human beings belonging to a variety of religious traditions.

4. Mystical Experience as Transcendence over Sensual and Rational

Although there are a lot of sense-related practices within religions, these practices by themselves are unable to lead a seeker to an abiding experience of the Ultimate. These practices have value only insofar as they are symbolic in evoking an initial and intermittent understanding and experience of the Ultimate, which could be further enriched and strengthened by an ongoing practice of various methods (mostly related to the structural and dogmatic practices). A lasting and abiding experience of the Ultimate could be availed at this level by going beyond rational frameworks and sense-bound experiences: it requires an inward turn so as to identify the inner or spiritual meaning. It calls for transcendence over the sensual and peripheral meaning and reach of those methods (including sacred scriptures, ritualistic observances, etc.) to the mystical, which, according to every religion, has a prime of place:

... the mystical belongs to the very essence of every religion, even though that essence usually contains other elements as well. Not only does it occasionally take a complete hold of some, but, more importantly, it shapes and informs, inspires and renews, all religious activity, whether it be ritual, moral, or theoretical. Without some share of spiritual experience religion withers away in sterile ritualism, arid moralism, or theological intellectualism... The same power which overwhelms some exerts an active, though often barely conscious momentum on all genuine religious endeavours. Each religious man and woman at times feels the gentle urge to visit, or, more correctly, to allow himself or herself to be visited by, a spiritual power that allures him or her with strange fascination...⁶

⁶Louis Dupre, "General Introduction" in *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Louis Dupre and James A. Wiseman, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, 6-7.

For a person, belonging to theistic tradition especially, experiencing the essence of his or her religion and being a mystic constitute an ongoing process, an unending pilgrimage in faith, a sojourn in love and trust in God. As Underhill puts it, a mystic is one “in whom the transcendental consciousness can dominate the normal consciousness, and who has definitely surrendered himself to the embrace of Reality.”⁷

Can this state of existence be achieved by the normal course of academic or religious discipline? Are there any specific methods employed to acquire mystical experience? Mysticism claims to know the *unknowable* without any recourse to intellectual dialectics, as that which it finally attains is beyond the domains that the thoughts and words can ever attain. Academic disciplining and initiation into various religious practices (both remaining at the level of human thought and action), though found to have aided many a mystic in attaining their close encounters with the Absolute, neither of them is said to enjoy any privileged position in facilitating mystical experience; in fact, most consider them to be of any value only at the preparatory stages. As it is asserted by *Theologia Germanica*, “let no one suppose that we may attain to this true light and perfect knowledge ... by hearsay, or by reading and study, nor yet by high skill and great learning.”⁸ “An Epistle of Discretion,” attributed to the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, captures this squarely:

For silence is not God, nor speaking is not God; fasting is not God; nor eating is not God; loneliness is not God nor company is not God; nor yet any of all the other two such quantities, He is hid between them, and may not be found by any work of thy soul, but all only by love of thine heart. He may not be known by reason, He may not be gotten by thought, nor concluded by understanding; but he may be loved and chosen with the true lovely will of thine heart... Such a blind shot with the sharp dart of longing love may never fail of the prick, the which is God.⁹

What is essential in this regard, therefore, is orienting oneself totally and generously towards the Real by cultivating an open perspective motivated by an attitude of love and communion towards every being, living and non-living. Without denying the possibility of an initial divine initiative, as it is believed by many theistic religions, I would emphasize a personal

⁷Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006, 75.

⁸*Theologia Germanica*, XIX, cited in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 83.

⁹Cited in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 85.

quest on the part of individual seekers that would ultimately facilitate mystical experiences. Indeed, it calls for an ongoing interior conversion, an opening of the whole person unrestrictedly to the Ultimate in love and simplicity.

5. Insufficiency of Categories in Expressing the Mystical

Although Masters belonging to various mystical schools list a multitude of methods, no single method could be earmarked as *the method par excellence*. Every method seems to contribute its might; but no single method seems to finally doctor such an ultimate experience. The reason is, all the methods that are available to us are mediated through logical reasoning and an experience already conveyed through the linguistic categories that we normally employ for communication.

We can understand their utter inability to communicate an experience that far outgrows the categories we have mastered. A difficulty that many face in admitting mystical experiences and their claims as intelligible is the incompatibility between our ordinary (logical) reasoning and the experiences of many mystics.

It is claimed by almost all scholars on mysticism that there is a "huge disparity" or a "great gulf" between an intense experience of the Ultimate (accessible exclusively to the mystics¹⁰) and the available categories (used in the context of our day-to-day experiences) provided by any linguistic environment.¹¹ The mystics are said to be at a loss to find the right expressions that would correspond to a personal experience intensely felt within their deeper selves. For, any access to the Divine, as Thomas Aquinas has categorically underlined, needs a transcendental approach due to its very nature: "The divine essence is beyond description, containing to a transcendent degree any [*sic*] perfection that can be described or understood by the created mind. This could not be represented by any created likeness since every created form is determinately this rather than that, whether it be wisdom, power, existence itself or anything else."¹² Therefore, use of symbols becomes an essential element in 'suggesting' an approximation of the transcendental experience encountered by the

¹⁰Or else, whoever attains this ultimate experience is categorized as mystic.

¹¹Consider, for example, a passage from John of the Cross: "In order to arrive at possessing everything, desire to possess nothing; In order to arrive at being everything, desire to be nothing; In order to arrive at knowing everything, desire to know nothing." *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I.13,11.

¹²Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.12,a.2,c.

mystics. Even these symbols can be employed only at the level of logical reasoning and categories of this world. This would curtail the value of the symbolic expressions to a great extent. Moreover, the expressions that they finally use, as considered opportune and proper, will be capable of providing only a partial glimpse into the core of a personal experience, making any verification of the same all the more difficult or even impossible.

6. Religions and Their Questionable Role in Facilitating the Mystical

The role of religion in facilitating mystical experience is crucial. As most religions are anchored on one or the other foundational experience, and are expected to provide the avenues for more such experiences for those who subscribe to their views and ways of life, they are bound to be facilitators of personal religious experience ideally culminating in a lasting encounter with the Ultimate and the resulting transformed everyday life. Everything that finds a place in an organized or unorganized religion must be tuned in for this primary task. Moreover, a failure in it would defeat its very purpose, and would create a situation of absolutizing the *unabsolutizables*. A believer who is capable of distinguishing between the essentials and the non-essentials and of accepting them wholeheartedly will definitely be able to soar high in religious experience without losing the firm foundations in radical faith.

It is, however, sad to note that many religionists, and many contemporary religious leaders and leading movements tend to block proper religious experience in the name of providing the ultimate religious experience. This is found in almost all religions and different religious movements: from the New Age Movements to the Westernized Indian Gurus and Matajis, from modern cult-worship to black magic, and from the noisy Charismatic mass movements to the silent meditations practised in Indian Ashrams. Most of them function by a sheer reference to a traditional pattern that has been accepted against the backdrop of historical situations and practices:

... [Teaching] oral and meditative prayer, a certain moral behaviour, and social commitment ... are [*sic*] not much more than the grammar school of a religion, and so many ... remain stuck in an infantile state. When they grow up, they drop the childish forms without having learned a grown-up form of prayer. That is how things are in almost all religions. In Buddhism and Hinduism, too, most believers never get past a very simple form. Thus ... all religions are only on

the way towards outgrowing a childish notion of the self and growing into an adult understanding.¹³

That is, none of these religious movements tends to let individuals and communities to go beyond what they are capable of offering in a limited fashion,¹⁴ so as to let these seekers have an original, firsthand, and ultimate religious experience – an experience that would enrich the life of individuals and communities by breaking open new religious horizons, an experience that would let the religions revitalize themselves by siphoning spiritual energy out of the Ultimate Spiritual Fountain.

7. Mysticism as the Breeding Ground of Genuine Religion

Opening new avenues within religious horizons is in itself a fascinating and welcome development that mystics are able to initiate, though some of their revolutionary moves are approached with suspicion by others. It is natural that the latter are unable to accept the claims of the former, especially on two counts: (1) the content of mystics' experiences is alien to others, as they have had no access to the ultimate levels of religious existence; (2) the approximate expressions that the mystics finally use tend to be disturbing the status quo, which is far more comfortable to an ordinary believer and all those who want to restrain religion to levels of the ordinary and the conventional. However, the intensity of an experience is said to force the mystics to be different and, sometimes, even to make pronouncements that bring them into conflict with others, especially those who are the guardians of institutional religions. As Neumann puts it, "The authentic basic experience of the Numinous cannot avoid being anticonventional, anticollective, and antidogmatic because it is a new

¹³Willigies Jäger, *Search for the Meaning of Life: Essays and Reflections on the Mystical Experience*, Liguori: Liguori Publications, 75.

¹⁴Without denying the positive contributions that religions make in leading believers towards the ultimate goal, scholars are articulate on the possible dangers lurking behind these same religions, if they were to assume more importance than what they are supposed to represent: "Religion may be compared to a glass window. It remains dark unless it is lit from behind. The light itself is not visible, but in the window of religion it takes on a structure and becomes comprehensible to everyone. Although religion often tends to bind its followers to the structures of the window, the ultimate thing is not the window but the light that shines behind it. Only those who see the light of God behind all the structures can realize the meaning and goal of religion. The danger is that symbols and images of God will obscure rather than illuminate the reality they are supposed to shed light on." Jäger, *Search for the Meaning of Life*, 75.

experience of the Numinous.¹⁵ It is natural, therefore, that many of them have had bitter confrontations with religious authorities, and were repeatedly persecuted, condemned, and sometimes even executed. However, here we must take note of an interesting factor: many who had partaken in the intense experience of the Ultimate never gave up their stance even in the face of the horrendous violence that they had to endure in their own persons. For, they were so powerfully gripped by the new vision they had attained that they became staunch defenders of their faith experience against any power or persecution. Although these dynamics apparently create an atmosphere of unbecoming negativity, it is heartening to note that, ultimately, the confrontations the mystics initiate turn out to be positive by promoting renewal within those religions which, many a time, initially oppose the pronouncements and practices of the mystics. So, finally, indirectly at least, the new horizons unveiled by the visions of the mystics provide acceptable novel patterns for a renewed religious life.

... Mystics are sometimes heretics (M. Stöber, "Constructivist Epistemologies of Mysticism," 112), but this heresy commonly pushes the boundaries of the stagnant metaphysics of a tradition, rather than denying that tradition. These heretics are radical in the true sense of the word: they go to the root of the tradition, to recover it. This is a much better reason. At least it deals with the convergence between theology and experience within a tradition.¹⁶

All these indicate that mystical experience, though initially doubted and resisted, is a much needed positive event in the ongoing life of religions, and that is an added reason for admitting mysticism.

Genuine response on the part of mystics is said to include a yearning within them to integrate active and contemplative strands of religious commitment, enabling them and others to see the importance of both and at the same time the dangers of exclusively stressing any one of them. Although the mystics may not involve themselves in the affairs of the world as others would expect them to do, they are said to evolve an integral approach within which they try to synthesize active dimensions with the equally important contemplative strands, as per a logic emerging from their deeper religious experience. The value of this logic may be

¹⁵Ernst Neumann, *Kulturentwicklung und Religion*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1981.

¹⁶Bruce Janz, "Mysticism and Understanding: Steven Katz and His Critics," *Studies in Religion* 24, 1 (1995), 85.

tested in terms of their ability to delicately balance every aspect of their lives, and in their availability to their fellow beings.

8. Mysticism and Otherworldliness

Along these lines, another reason for questioning the rationale of mysticism is its 'other-worldly' character. In common parlance a mystic is one who is unattached and unconcerned about what happens in and around this world, as if they are beings dropped from 'above', from a transcendental plane altogether. Although our discussion in the previous sections would indicate that every religious person must desire to be a mystic – as that would enable him or her to partake in a foundational religious experience – and must experience lasting moments of intimacy with the Ultimate, being a mystic cannot be equated with a call for retreating from the ordinary living milieu and active obligations that every human being has to fulfil. "A spiritual path that does not lead to everyday life and one's fellow men and women is a wrong path."¹⁷

Mystical experience, being a call to self-realization and authenticity, should take into account the situations of real life, enabling those who appropriate such experiences to respond to the ups and downs that an ordinary human being faces on a daily basis.¹⁸ That is, being a mystic does not mean that one should flee from cares and worries of daily living, but must be equipped to face them squarely and to respond to them from a genuinely religious perspective, which may not come in so handy with others who remain at the periphery of any religious ethos.

A new and foundational experience of the Ultimate should be capable of radically transforming mystics, whereby they will be able to bridge the gap between an active involvement in the affairs of the world and a commitment that calls for a personal detachment from the same affairs. In the case of mystics, the former does not result from any motive of personal glory or fulfilment; nor does the latter result from a reluctance or disinclination that they feel in themselves.

¹⁷Jäger, *Search for the Meaning of Life*, 48.

¹⁸Underhill insists that the life of mystics must be closely related to the affairs of ordinary people. She writes: "... for unless the history of the mystics can touch and light up some part of this normal experience, take its place in the general history of man, contribute something towards our understanding of his nature and destiny, its interest for us can never be more than remote, academic, and unreal." *Mysticism*, 444.

9. Conclusion

Mysticism has an inner necessity to reach those inner recesses of reality that no other human science is capable of penetrating (as all of them are designed within the parameters of logical reasoning). They decry the inability of logical reasoning in deciphering and evaluating the truth of mystical experience. The new or transformed consciousness that emerges in a mystic is enabled to employ a set of new rules which are trans-natural and trans-rational in character. However, it does not mean, therefore, that mystical experience is an “isolated vision,” or a “fugitive glimpse of reality,” but provides “a complete system of life carrying its own guarantees and obligations.”¹⁹ This system enables the mystic to adopt a unitive approach to the religious reality, which enables him or her to anchor in one or other religious tradition, but without being enslaved by its structural patterns, and to delve deeper and to go beyond the periphery of religious existence by a person-to-person mode of experiential encounter.

Rationality and mysticism need not be at loggerheads; the apparent difference – which is over-emphasized in many cases – between them mostly results from the methods they adopt, and the incompatibility of the ‘logics’ employed. We are yet to evolve a common tool with which the truth of both our natural sciences and mystical sciences could be ascertained.

Just as rationality is a capability that human beings are endowed with, mysticism is another capacity that is integral to, but latent within the human race, though very seldom it comes to its fruition (the reason being the lack of effective and genuine attempts). It is an ability to perceive the transcendental reality, which cannot be usually done by employing our ordinary reasoning capacity. Even though many of us do not bother to activate the mystical powers within us, the accomplishments of those who have crossed the threshold of reason to the transcendental world are also ours. Appropriating such an experience, however, calls for openness on the part of every human being, a yearning to personally encounter the Ultimate Reality. The ever vibrant and ongoing quest for the Ultimate that reverberates in the time-tested chant of the Upanisads continues to echo in our being:

Asato mā sat gamaya

Tamaso mā jyotir gamaya

Mṛtyor mā amṛtam gamaya! (Bṛh. Up. I.3.28).

¹⁹Underhill, *Mysticism*, 76.