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## **THE MYSTICAL DIMENSION OF MAN**

### **Introduction**

We are in an anthropocentric world where man is the measure of everything. All our undertakings and enterprises draw their meaning and relevance only in so far as they contribute to the happiness and well-being of the human person. The second Vatican Council teaches, "Believers and unbelievers agree almost unanimously that all things on earth should be ordained to man as to their centre and summit."<sup>1</sup> At no time in human history has so much importance been given to the rights and dignity of the human person as today. All the same, we must humbly confess that violence against human beings, the desecration and the degradation of the human person continue even today in many forms, such as, the testing of nuclear bombs, environmental destruction, sale of arms and the arms race, terrorism, and especially state-sponsored terrorism, religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, tribal wars and ethnic cleansing, discrimination on the basis of sex and the oppression of women and of the weaker sections of the society, child labour, exploitation of the poorer classes and different forms of neocolonialism. Through these and other crimes human rights are violated, human dignity is down-trodden and the sanctity of wife is desecrated. We have to go a long way to consider this world fully civilised. In this context we philosophers have a special task or a prophetic role to highlight the rights and dignity of the human person and to condemn in unequivocal terms the violence that is committed against him. And in this context our reflections on the philosophy of man become timely and relevant.

### **Dimensions of the Human person**

The human person is a complex being. He is a world miniature, a microcosm and carries within himself the properties of the mineral, vegetative and animal world and is affected by them; yet he stands

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1. *Gaudium et Spes*, 12.

above them as a human being with all the characteristics proper to his human condition. Thus with the elements of the mineral world within himself he is governed by the laws of physics. With the characteristics proper to the vegetative kingdom he is governed by the laws of vegetative life and sharing the sensitive life with animals he has a sort of affinity with them and is also subjected to the laws of the animal kingdom. But as a human being, while sharing the condition of the lower beings, he stands above them endowed with reason and with other characteristics proper to human nature.

Since the human person is a very complex being we will not be able to understand him fully if we look at him only from a particular perspective. We need to study him from different perspectives and recognise his different dimensions. If we go through different schools of philosophy, study different beliefs in various religions and observe different cultures and traditions we will be compelled to recognise in him different dimensions and will be enabled to see him from different perspectives. There is a Western outlook, an outlook of *Sankya-Yoga*, a *Vedantic* perspective, an understanding of the human person according to the philosophy of *Saiva Siddhantha*, a phenomenological perspective, an existential outlook, the perspective of the human person as understood in Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Sikhism and in Tribal religions, and according to the perspectives of modern psychology. All these outlooks together definitely give a fuller knowledge of the human being. But one cannot say that these perspectives exhaust the being and the personality of the human self.

There are besides different aspects in the human person such as, biological, psychological, spiritual, moral, cognitive, affective, conative, instinctive and social. But over and above these aspects, dimensions and perspectives, we contend that there is yet another, a very important dimension which we call mystical. Unfortunately, this perspective has not been sufficiently emphasized and as a result a lot of pain and suffering has entered human life. We contend that the human person cannot be fully understood nor the human life be properly lived as long as this mystical dimension is ignored.

## **Testimonies**

There are hundreds and perhaps thousands of volumes containing the testimonies written at different times of human history by people of different religions, races and cultures, witnessing to some experience in their lives which cannot be adequately explained away by the ordinary perspectives of human lives. Though there have been stray cases of such expressions from people with a pathological background and some instances of deception, all the genuine testimonies come from people of extraordinary moral and spiritual calibre. This fact can be proved from a careful study of their lives and their works. We cannot say that all these dimensions taken together without the mystical dimension constitute fully the human person.

Going through the volumes of world literature, and above all religious literature, we come across testimonies from different authors, from different cultures, religions, races of different ages which bear witness to an experience accompanied by some change in life for the better. Such testimonies which are unrelated to each other cannot be reasonably set aside as merely expressions of vivid imagination or poetry. We find such expressions in almost all religions and cultures. And what surprises us more is that these expressions which are related to the personal experiences are almost always accompanied by some change in life at least in its moral and spiritual aspects. Referring to the unanimity of such experiences, Holmes writes, "...The witness of one conforms the witness of all others.... This is verification of the highest order."<sup>2</sup> This argument from unanimity means that all the mystics of all times, races, social traditions, cultures and religions claim to have an experience which has certain common characteristics, among which they claim to have come in contact with an undefinable Reality. Therefore what the mystics have experienced must be objectively true.

In this connection we can quote a number of testimonies on such experiences but we restrict ourselves to only a few. St. Paul writes, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven - whether in the body or out of the body I

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2. Alfred P. Stierman, *Mysticism and the Modern Mind*, (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959), p. 14.

do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.” And he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.”<sup>3</sup> St. Teresa in her autobiography gives expression to a number of them. She writes, “I saw Christ at my side – or to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for neither with the eyes of the body nor with those of the soul did I see anything. I thought he was quite close to me and I saw that it was He Who as I thought, was speaking to me. Being completely ignorant that visions of this kind could occur, I was at first very much afraid, and did nothing but weep, though as soon as He addressed a single word to me to reassure me, I became quiet. Again, as I had been before and was quite happy and free from fear,

“All the time Jesus Christ seemed to be beside me, but as this was not an imaginary vision I could not discern in what form: what I felt very clearly was that all He was at my right hand, and a witness of everything that I was doing, and that whenever I became slightly recollected or was greatly distressed, I could not but be aware of His nearness to me.”<sup>4</sup>

Referring to such experiences the great scholar Meister Eckhart writes, “All that a man sees here externally in multiplicity is intrinsically one. All the blades of grass, wood and stone, all things are one. This is the deepest depth.”<sup>5</sup> Again he exclaims, “Say, Lord, when is man in mere understanding? I say to you when a man sees one thing separate from another. And when is he above mere understanding? That I can tell you when he sees all in all, then man stands above mere understanding.”<sup>6</sup> Referring to similar experiences Rudolf Otto concludes, “Black does not cease to be black nor white, white. But black is white and white is black, the opposites coincide without ceasing to be what they are in themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Similar testimonies can be found in the writings of almost all the mystics irrespective of their religion, culture or tradition. It will not be rational on the part of a philosopher to

3. 2 Cor. 12:2-4.

4. *Life*, p. 170.

5. As quoted by W. T. STACE, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Hong Kong: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980), p. 64,

6. *Ibid.* p. 64.

7. Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West* (New York: Macmillan Company), p. 61.

brush aside all such testimonies as mere fiction. That is why William James remarks, "There is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think."<sup>8</sup> Then he adds, "The mystic is invulnerable and must be left in undisturbed possession of his creed."<sup>9</sup> And he concludes, "The existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretention of non-mystical states to be the sole dictators of what we believe."<sup>10</sup> From these considerations one can reasonably conclude that there is something called the mystical in the human person.

### The Nature of the Mystical dimension

There is no consensus as regards the definition of mysticism. There are more than thirty definitions given by different authors emphasizing different aspects of this experience. Taking into account the nature and the content of this experience generally it is held that it is incommunicable or ineffable and indescribable. In the Indian tradition it is held to be *anirvachaniya* (incommunicable). Mystical experience concerns itself with the mystery of God, the mystery which is not communicable; hence the experience of such a mystery is also not communicable.

This experience of the divine mystery is expressed in different terms. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* stated that mystical experience is "the immediate experience of oneness with the ultimate reality."<sup>11</sup> Evelyn Underhill writes, "Mysticism, in its pure form, is the science of ultimates, the science of the union with the Absolute, and nothing else."<sup>12</sup> From theological point of view, "mysticism may be regarded as the consciousness of the experience of the Uncreated grace as revelation and self-communication of the Triune God."<sup>13</sup> It is the experience of the indwelling God. Professor R. C. Zaehner explains Christian mysticism as the direct apprehension of the deity. Sanctifying grace does in fact establish a direct relation with God,

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8. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Fontana library, 1926), p. 419.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 428.

10. W. R. Inge, *Mysticism in Religion*, (Chicago, 1948), p. 151.

11. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (London, 1968), Vol. XV, p. 1129.

12. Evelyn UNDERHILL, *Mysticism* (New York, 1926), p. 70.

13. Herbert FISHER, *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 4, p. 137.

for God is said to be actually present in a person who is in grace. However, an average person is not aware of His presence. In mystical experience, on the other hand, there is a direct apprehension of the deity. The mystic knows that God is in him and with him, his body has literally become the temple of the Holy Spirit. This is not merely a dogma of faith but an experienced fact. The essence or the keynote of mystical experience is union.<sup>14</sup>

In the ordinary religious experience also one may feel union with God. But what is specific to mystical experience is the immediacy and the directness of this experience. We read in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that in mystical experience we have "the immediate experience on oneness with ultimate reality."<sup>15</sup> Generally all our experiences are received through our faculties, namely, the exterior senses, *panchendriyas*, interior senses, and the intellect as far as cognitive experience is concerned by way of sense perception, imagination, impressions in the memory, estimation, instinct, memorizing and judgement and reasoning. In Indian philosophy different Dharshanas or the schools of philosophy enumerate different sources of knowledge or *pramanas*. Among these schools the school of Nyaya exclusively deals with the sources of knowledge and enumerates four sources, namely sense perception, inference, comparison and testimony.

All the experience which we gather through our faculties carries with it the limitations of our faculties; for example, our ears can here only within certain range of sound waves. Such an experience carries with it also the limitations of the other media necessary for our experience. Thus in order to see with our eyes it is not enough to have good eye sight and the object within the range of our vision but there must be also enough light to see the object. The quality of light also affects our experience of seeing. Moreover, since all our faculties are limited, the objects of our faculties also get limited which in turn also affects our experience. Thus we can experience only the limited things through our faculties because our faculties themselves are limited. In all forms of our ordinary experience we use our faculties like crutches without which we

14. Cf. R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, (Oxford, 1957), pp. 31-32.

15. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. XV, p. 1129.

cannot have experience. Without the sense of sight we will not have the experience of colour. But in mystical experience we by-pass our faculties, we by-pass all other natural and supernaturally created means of experience and directly experience the Absolute. Since this experience is not received in any created forms it does not have any limitations proper to any forms. It is the direct and the immediate experience of the Absolute, the kind of experience is not had by the human person. It is somewhat similar to the experience of self-awareness but is richer in every way than that because it is the experience of the Absolute.

The direct experience is expressed in some schools of philosophy, especially the monistic schools, in terms of identity, while the theistic schools express it in terms of union. Henry Suso writes, "When the Spirit by the loss of its self-consciousness has in very truth established its abode in this glorious and dazzling obscurity, it is set free from every obstacle to union and from its individual properties.... when it passes away into God.... In this merging of itself in God the spirit passes away."<sup>16</sup> Meister Eckhart writes, "It (the soul) is sunk and lost in this desert where its identity is destroyed."<sup>17</sup> And again he writes, "By bursting forth (which means union) I discover that I and God are one.... I am the unmoved mover that moves all things.... Here too God is identical with the spirit."<sup>18</sup> And finally he concludes, "The eye with which I see God is the same as the eye by which God sees me. My eye and God's eye are one and the same, one in knowing and one in loving."<sup>19</sup> Plotinus writes to Placcus, "You can only apprehend the infinite.... by entering into a state in which you are your finite state no longer.... When you thus cease to be finite you become one with the Infinite. You realize this union, this identity."<sup>20</sup> St. John of the Cross writes, "In this transformation the two become one, as we can say of the window united with the ray of sunlight, or of the coal with the fire, or of the starlight with the light of the sun."<sup>21</sup> Al-Junayd, a muslim mystic of 10th century, remarks of

16. W. T. Stace, *Op. Cit.*, p. 113.

17. *Ibid.* p. 112.

18. Meister Eckhart, *Sermon*, 25 (New York, 1941), p. 232.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

20. W. T. Stace, *Op. Cit.*, P. 112.

21. *Spiritual Canticle*, 26, 4.

a mystic, "The saint.... is submerged in the ocean by unity, by passing away from himself.... he leaves behind him his own feelings and actions as he passes into the life with God."<sup>22</sup> Speaking on the *turiya* which is comparable to mystical experience, the *Mandukya Upanishad* writes, "The Fourth, say the wise.... is not the knowledge of senses, nor it is relative knowledge, nor yet inferential knowledge. Beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression is the Fourth. It is pure unitary consciousness wherein the awareness of the world and of the multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is Supreme Good. It is one without the second. It is the Self."<sup>23</sup>

There is a dispute whether the mystical expressions in terms of identity are to be taken in a mystical sense or in a metaphysical sense. Opinions are divided. "Mystical sense" means that at the moment of intense mystical experience one is not conscious of oneself as distinct from God or the Reality, but in fact he does exist as distinct from God. On the contrary, "metaphysical sense" means that at the mystical moment the ontological identity of oneself as distinct from God is totally lost and there remains only the Brahman or God. Brahman and atman or the self are ontologically identical. To be more exact, the atman does not have at any moment any ontological existence distinct from Brahman. Due to *maya* which is a kind of illusion, Atman considers itself as distinct from Brahman, but when the mystical enlightenment dawns on him he realizes that he is the Brahman - *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am Brahman), that Atman is Brahman - *Atmam Brahmanam*, that Brahman is the only reality without the second - *Ekam evam advitiam* and looking itself the Atman says that thou art - *Tattvam asi*.

These expressions are taken from the *Upanisads* and they are known as the great sayings (*Mahavakyani*) of the *Upanisads*. A strict metaphysical interpretation will hold that only by becoming Brahman one can know perfectly Brahman. Hence the mystical consciousness of Brahman is proper only to Brahman. At the mystical sphere the ontological and the logical orders should merge.

22. Margaret Smith, *Readings from the Mystics of Islam*, p. 35. as quoted by W. T. Stace, *Op. Cit.*, p. 115.

23. Nihilananda, *The Upanishads*, London, 1963, p. 169.



On the contrary, the theistic schools hold that the distinction between God and the mystic persists even at the highest level of mystical experience though there is no separation between them. A total separation of the human from the divine is metaphysically impossible. In the mystical state, however, they are not only ontologically united but the one experiences this union. But this union is not substantial in the sense that the divine substance and the human substance so get united as to lose their identity. It is an accidental union where a real distinction still persists. This accidental union is both ontological and moral. It is ontological in the sense that the being of God and human being are united without losing their identity. It is moral union in the sense that the human being is conscious of this experience with the divine being. This is an accidental union of compenetration. The divine being is through and through in the whole of human being and what is specific to this state is that the mystic directly experiences this union with God without the mediation of any intermediary agency. Moreover, this experience brings about a gradual transformation in him. Commenting on this mystical union St. John of the Cross writes, "The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, in so far as possible in this life."<sup>24</sup> "The union wrought between the two natures, and the communication of the the divine to the human in this state is such that even though neither changes its being, both appear to be God."<sup>25</sup>

From a theological point of view mystical experience is the experience of union with God. It is an experience of the presence of God within oneself. When a person is justified and is free from sin God shares his nature with him and the justified man become a child of God. God gives himself to him and dwells in him. As a result the justified person becomes the temple of God. A mystic in this state experiences the life of God within him directly and immediately, a life of divine love through the impouring of charity and the life of divine knowledge through the enlightenment of faith. Mystical experience is therefore the experience of the uncreated grace through the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. A mystic here experiences directly the divine enlightenment in faith.

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24. *Spiritual Canticle*, 22, 3.

25. *Spiritual Canticle*, 22, 4.

divine possession in hope and the divine love or the self-donation of God in charity.

A further question is concerning the origin or the source of this experience because majority of people do not seem to have this experience. It seems something extraordinary, and therefore one could say that it cannot be counted among the dimensions of the human person. Moreover this experience is generally considered passive. It is passive because it cannot be acquired by human powers – It is given rather than acquired but one has to prepare oneself for it with right dispositions. St. Teresa writes, "Although this work is performed by the Lord and we can do nothing to make His Majesty grant us this favour, we can do a great deal to prepare ourselves for it."<sup>26</sup> From this it is clear that one has to prepare oneself for this experience. Therefore one could also say that if many do not have this experience it is not because God grants it only to a few but rather because very few prepare themselves for it.

It could be further asked: If the human person cannot acquire it, how can it be called a dimension of his life? Though the human being with his own powers cannot acquire this experience, still he must have at least a passive capacity to receive it. Moreover, almost all the mystical traditions emphasize the necessity of a mystical discipline proper to the tradition which is to be practised by the mystical aspirants. Such a discipline gives them an aptitude to receive this experience and to enjoy the benefits of it when it is given. At least in this sense we can say that we have a mystical dimension.

Mystical experience has a noetic aspect, which means that it implies an enlightenment or wisdom. It is not merely a feeling; one is given an insight as regards the mystery of God, the mystery of the human life and sometimes also as regards the cosmos. Hence the mystical experience does not consist in mere sentimental feelings. It implies enlightenment, wisdom or knowledge. Mystical experience is the "theory that truth can be attained by a superrational and supersensuous faculty of intuition."<sup>27</sup> Mystical knowledge is

26. *The Mansions*, V, 2.

27. Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic and other Essays*, (London, 1921), p. 12.

beyond all percepts and concepts. It is a direct and immediate knowledge.

Similarly our affective experience which is had through affective faculties and our conative experience which is had through our conative faculties, *karmendriyas*, are also limited because of the limitations of our faculties and for other reasons. The knowledge which is imparted to us in mystical experience does not have the limitations of any kind proper to our faculties or to the object of the knowledge itself because in mystical experience we know God with a special power of knowledge given to us which is proportionate to the being of God which in Christian theology is called the theological virtue of faith. Since this mystical knowledge cannot be contained in human faculties it is felt as darkness, though in itself it is the highest of enlightenment. Referring to this mystical contemplation St. John of the Cross writes, "For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love."<sup>28</sup> In his writings he calls mystical contemplation as dark contemplation. This is also called the cloud of unknowing and dazzling darkness. Since the object of this experience is God himself who is nameless and formless, any experience with an object which has a name or a form cannot be mystical.

Mystical experience is the experience of union with God in love. "The measure of the mystic's real progress," says Miss Underhill "is and must always be his progress in love."<sup>29</sup> And Ruysbroeck concludes, "Thus do we grow and are carried above ourselves, above reason, into the very heart of love; there do we feed according to the Spirit, and taking flight for the Godhead by naked love, we go to the encounter of the Bridegroom, to the encounter of his Spirit, which is His Love, and thus we are brought forth by God, out of our self-hood, into the immersion of love in which we possess blessedness and are one with God."<sup>30</sup>

To love, is the most noble affective act a human person can do in this life. It is this act that brings him true happiness. The

28. *Dark Night* 10, 6.

29. Evelyn Underhill, *Op. Cit.*, p. 312.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

greater the love, the greater the happiness. Mystical experience is the experience of love. Here our love becomes perfect in so far as it is possible here on earth. Further it is love that unites. In mystical experience love unites man with God and also with his fellow-men. Mystical love is genuine and authentic love. It is the love of benevolence where the good of the beloved is taken care of. Often human love is selfish where one's own benefit, is sought, while such selfishness divides, authentic love unites. What we need today is this authentic love and mystical experience fosters this love and builds up a healthy human community. In thy initial stages even this love may consist only in the conformite of the human will with the will of the Beloved. Here the beloved is God. And the mystic's will is conformed to the will of God. As one grows in this love, it puts on the dimensions of mystical emotions and mystical passion of love. Since loving is the finest aspect of human life, mystical experience promotes and refines this finest aspect of human life. John of the Cross writes, "The spirit herein experiences an impassioned and intense love, because this spiritual inflaming engenders the passion of love. Since this love is infused, it is more passive than active and thus generates in the soul a strong passion of love."<sup>31</sup>

Mystical experience brings about human transformation. Since it consists in union with God and since in God there cannot be any moral or spiritual imperfection, a person who is thus united with God also shares the divine perfections. Gradually he gives up all moral defects and becomes more and more holy, detached, humble and loving. He overcomes not only morally imperfect acts but also imperfect tendencies.

The mystical marriage is the highest state in mystical experience. According to John of the Cross, it "is a total transformation in the Beloved in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation in so far as possible in this life. And thus I think that this state never occurs without the soul being confirmed in grace, for the faith of both is confirmed when God's faith in the soul is here confirmed. It is accordingly the highest state attainable in this

31. *I Dark Night* 11, 2.

life."<sup>32</sup> Further he adds, "Wherefore, since the soul lives in this state a life as happy and glorious as is God's, let each one consider here, if he can, how pleasant her life is; just as God is incapable of feeling any distaste, neither does she feel any, for the delight of God's glory is experienced and enjoyed in the substance of the soul now transformed in Him."<sup>33</sup> In a way, the soul in this state resembles Adam in the state of innocence, who did not know evil. For she is so innocent that she does not understand evil, nor does she judge anything in a bad light."<sup>34</sup>

The evils such as testing of nuclear bombs, environmental destruction, sale of arms and arms race, neo-colonialism, terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism, oppression of the weaker section, ethnical cleansing and other such evils are due to human pride, man's desire to dominate others and his other inordinate desires and ambitions. Religious fanaticism and fundamentalism come from ignorance and from want of an authentic religious life. But when we move from religious practices to creeds, from creeds to religious experience and from experience to the in-depth mystical experience, we find in religions a common denominator. Mystical experience is diametrically opposed to the evils mentioned above. When we struggle to eliminate such evils from this world we may think of going in search of new principles and new philosophies that will help us in our struggle. At such moments it will be a great help to us to remember that in our mystical dimension we have a latent capacity to overcome these evils and to build up a happy society.

From these few reflections we can understand how important it is to promote the mystical dimension in us. It is in this mystical dimension that the human personality becomes perfect and the desire to be happy gets satisfied. When this dimension is ignored, the human personality remains unfulfilled and the society gets disturbed. From all these considerations we can conclude that there is a mystical dimension in us which is also to be developed and perfected if we are to be really happy here on earth and for ever.

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32. *Spiritual Canticle*, 22, 3.

33. *Ibid.*, 22, 5.

34. *Spiritual Canticle*, 26, 14.