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## Mysticism: A Journey from Images of God to the Transcendent Mystery

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### *Abstract*

The popular notion of mysticism is that it is fascinating and mind-boggling, and hence, not fit for ordinary mortals. We are from God, sustained through God, and directed by God to our destiny. Theologians and mystics view God in terms of mystery, and transcendence, thus Karl Barth said, God is an ultimate mystery and Karl Rahner referred theology as the science of mystery and Nicolai Berdyaev deemed God as an inexplicable mystery. God's transcendence means that he is outside space and time. God's transcendence and immanence are equally emphasized in the Bible. All metaphors and images, though helpful in the initial stages, they are not able to grasp fully the Supreme Being. First, God touches us in the mode of time and space images and finally as utter transcendence. Personal images and personal gods held a long time, can create conflict and confusion in humans, for they can become a mere idol carried in our own image, a projection of our own limited needs, fears, and desires. The imageless transcendent experience effects radical changes in the personality.

### **Introduction**

In philosophy and metaphysical disciplines, God is the transcendent other. It is the transcendence that makes God be God. The gap of God's transcendence and human finitude is bridged over the religious history of mankind by means of immanence which in turn helped him to develop anthropomorphic images of God. Religion and worship involve personal relation and interaction with the transcendent and bring the transcendent to the human level. In the initial stages of one's spiritual journey, one needs forms and meanings that make

sense. We start our spiritual journey with the help of our senses and in a way very personal manner; hence the image of the imageless is imperative. No one can know or relate to God in a personal way if He is wholly the other.

### **Myth, Mystery, and Mysticism**

There is a linguistic connection between three words myth, mystery, and mysticism. All are derived from the Greek word “Mysteion” to close the eyes or mouth. Therefore in its original meaning, these words have some connections to the experience of darkness and silence. By word meaning, they are not positive popular words. The word myth is often used as a synonym for a lie; a myth is often viewed as something that is not true. When someone dismisses something by qualifying it as myth means it has no value or worth. Scholars use the word mythical to refer to mistaken views of the past. The word mystery was very much revered in the East but in the West looked on with suspicion. It is interesting to note that how the adjective *mysticos*, derived from the Greek mystery cults, through the Alexandrian writers Clement and Origen (Bouyer 1963). It was first applied to the hidden meaning of the OT and finally to the hidden meaning of Christ’s presence in the scriptures. Until middle ages, it was not used to refer to any private inner experience. Christ’s hidden presence in the scriptures slowly found its way to the quality and experience of God’s presence in the soul. In the center of faith stands, the Mystery of Christ- not a secret, but a revelation to be assimilated by the Christian evermore intimately through a process until his/her personal life coincides with divine life and transcendence (Dupre & Wiseman, 1988).

Prophets had declared war on mythology. Their God was active in history and in current political events rather than in the primordial sacred time of myth. When monotheism turned to mysticism, mythology began to reassert itself as a chief vehicle of religious experience. The work of late Joseph Campbell (1988) on mythology enjoyed wide popularity<sup>1\*</sup>. Mythology has been employed to explain the inner world of psychic experiences. Myth and mystery represent psychic or spiritual reality with all the dozens of meaning to it (Kelsy, 1988). Both Freud and Jung saw mythology as a mine of valuable wealth to explore the unconscious which is a tool to come to religious experience. Archetypes of the unconscious are capable of taking one beyond itself to the divine milieu. As

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1       \* The Power of Myth is a book and six part television series originally broadcast on PBS in 1988 as *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*. The documentary comprises six one hour conversations between mythologist Joseph (1904-1987) Campbell and Journalist Bill Moyers. He presents a compelling thesis that modern society is going through a transition from the old mythologies and traditions to a new way of thinking where a global mythology will emerge.

long as we clog our minds with ideas based on sense perception alone, without reaching the unconscious, it is difficult to discern the transcendent element of life. One needs to go beyond the normal consciousness, for God can only be known by mystical experience.

### **Image of God and imageries**

I believe mysticism is grounded on the simple three questions and answers the old catechism provided which many old-timers by hearted. They are; who are you? Who created you? And why did he create you? The answers direct the learner to some basic principles of religion and spiritual life: you are from God, sustained through God and directed by God to your destiny. So you are not separate from God, from the beginning to the end. This is what is experienced in mystical level: a glimpse into the mystery of our being.

Christian Scriptures teach “Man is created in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). ”Koran teaches “God created Adam in his image so that he could contemplate himself in a mirror” (Koran 2:32). This is why he ordered the angels to bow down and worship the first man. Since God’s image is imprinted in humans, naturally, he/she can feel one with God. It seems that God has incarnated in each human beings created in his image. Very naturally, all religions speak of how we become the mouth ears, hands, and feet of God. For the mystic revelation is not a past thing it is something that happens in his soul right now, while conventional orthodox people hold the view that it is an event firmly fixed in the past. The experience of the mystic is the experience of the living God; loving and interacting God.

It is the anthropomorphic image of God that stands out in the whole Bible. Dozens of verses refer as if God has eyes, face, feet and hands. All these are just starting point. God is spirit not flesh and blood but because we are not spirits but in the world of senses anthropomorphism help us to understand God’s nature and actions. Anthropomorphism can be helpful enabling us to comprehend the incomprehensible at least partially, know the unknowable and fathom the unfathomable.

Mystic begins with the images of God on the purification level and as he/she moves further in the spiritual journey he is slowly enabled in the spirit to grasp God with one's own very being. But it is the human words and images all we have in the beginning. One's own inner divine self is to be grasped and be fully engaged with that divine in order to grasp the unknowable without images. Love starts with the images, words, and actions of the person we love. One may need phone calls, Facebook, WhatsAapp, SMS, gifts, all to develop a relationship. Once become spouses intimate presence to each other is all sufficient, there is no need of all those previous gadgets, and they have only minimal use now. Anthropomorphism helps us to picture a loving God until

we develop spiritual faculties. Since all are not capable of developing spiritual faculties in a time bound manner we need images of God and the tools that help in the meaning making images of God.

The God of Revelation is not described as a superhuman hero, but with radiant, dazzling color, and brilliant light accompanied by the sounds of might and majesty (Davis, 2010). In Revelation, the book of symbols and images, God is the imageless God. This is consistent with the Biblical proscription against depicting God in images. Taken to the extreme the imageless god, we will be left without any gospel to proclaim.

Because God is the ground of one's being, mystics ascend to God by descending into his own consciousness. To descend deeply, symbolism and mythology are more helpful than metaphysics. Once the mystic has acquired an understanding of his own deepest self he becomes aware of the presence of God within him and can then ascend more impersonal higher sphere, transcending the limits of personality and egotism. In the mystical perspective, our world of sense impression is simply the last and outermost shell of the divine reality (Stearns, 1999). The highest form of divinity that the human mind can conceive is equated with nothingness because it bears no comparison with any of the other things in existence.

### **Personal Images of God and the Transcendent Mystery**

The idea of personal God is a very cornerstone of monotheism. Three great religions- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are based on the idea of personal God. All people born and brought up in the traditional practice of these religions therefore steadfastly hold on to the personal God and believe that this ideal represents the religion at its best. The personal concept of God and the worship of personal deities helped monotheists to value the sacred and inalienable right of the individual and cultivate an appreciation of human personality. Naturally, one is inclined to become more like the God he/she adores. Though the West slowly moved away from religion and its dogmatic concepts, monotheism and personal deities it produced led to the emergence of liberal humanism. The values of humanism are originally enshrined in a personal God: a God who does everything as a human does. These monotheistic religions believed God created man in his image, therefore like humans God loves, sees, judges, punishes, heals, creates, destroy in much bigger scale. In the history of Israel, Yahweh is begun as a highly personalized deity with passionate human likes and dislikes. Later he became a symbol of transcendence. Thus scripture began speaking in different languages other than in personality infections like- 'my thoughts are not your thoughts- The personal God reflects important religious insights that no supreme value can be less than human (Armstrong, 1993). Thus personalism has been an important and inevitable stage of religious and moral

development. It is the personalism inherent in the Judaism helped Christianity to make a human person with the attribution of divinity to be the center of religious life and worship. Buddhist and Hindus listed a personal devotion to the avatars of the supreme reality.

We humans need to conceive the absolute and imageless with some kind of relativism and images to start with religion. Yet a personal God can make a lot of conflict in the devotee. He can become a mere idol carried in our own image, a projection of our own limited needs, fears, and desires. A personal greater power that can control, will, desires, and destroys whip up a lot of problems for humans. When a personal god fails to present catastrophe or seems desire it for some greater good as we explain in a simplistic fashion, he can seem callous and cruel. As persons we know our experiences are gender limited, one has to reduce this gendered understanding from the personal understanding. It is almost impossible to understand a personal God without some sort of conflicts or other. As persons, we experience the shadows of our personality and we are tended to ascribe it to God. We do not fully succeed in removing the shadows of God. This is why time and again we fall back and speaks of God's judgment, justice, punishment, and wrath. Since we worship God without fully able to remove these personal traits and characteristics we are tended to identify the God we worship. In the history of mankind, monotheistic religions had been more judgmental, penalizing, marginalizing and punishing the fellow human beings. It seems therefore that an idea of personal God can only be a stage in our religious development. We need to recognize the need for transcending the personal conception of supreme reality. We notice all three monotheistic religions slowly developed mystical tradition, which made their God transcend the personal category and become more to the impersonal realities. Christianity introduced the concept of transpersonal Trinity slowly but held the view that it can be reached with the personal deity that is through the incarnate Jesus. Muslims, I believe experiencing problems with those passages in Koran which implies that God sees, hears, and judges very much in the same fashion as humans. It is possible to read Jewish scriptures as the story of refinement (Ammstrong, 1993). It starts with a very personal tribal God and slowly encompassed wider humanity. Finally, personalized tribal Yahweh was abandoned in favor of YHWH.

Monotheism by its very nature is not essentially mystical. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are active faiths. The central motif of these prophetic religions is a confrontation- confronting one's own self to save it. In an eagerness to save others, these religions are tended to confront others and think it in terms of their duty. So, aggressive proselytism has been very much part and parcel of these religions. Monotheistic religions are devoted ensuring that God's will be done on earth. This God calls everyone to himself in love and gives everyone

a choice to accept or reject his call of love and concern. These Gods relate humans by means of dialogue and action rather than silent contemplation. The relationship with God is characterized by love and fear. As one starts to contemplate on God, negative virtues one attributes to God begins to wear out and slowly move in the direction of the transcendent and impersonal. But for the sake of relating to other human beings and in the eagerness to retain ones' cultural and religious roots, many keep images and concepts from the early stages of spiritual life.

### **Role of Archetypal Images**

Our journey towards God is not through outer space. It is a mental ascent to a reality within. The imagery of ascent is very common mystical accounts. The symbol of ascent indicates that worldly perceptions have been left far behind. The experience of God that finally attained is beyond anything personalistic in nature. It is utterly indescribable. The Jewish mystics speak of everything but God. They speak of his court, veil, garment, shields, and gaze which represent eternal archetypes. Our mind is filled with eternal archetypal images. Creative quality of mind chooses some of them based on one's cultural and religious backgrounds and create a vision that transcends his/her normal capacity. The Jewish visionary will see visions of seven heavens because of his religious imagination are stocked with particular symbols and archetypes emerge as one concentrate with required discipline and reflection. Thus Buddhists see various images of Buddha and bodhisattvas; Christians see crucified Christ or Virgin Mary. It is a mistake for the visionary to see these mental apparitions as objective or anything more than symbols of transcendence. When I say it is not objective, it does not mean it is simple illusion or hallucination of pathological nature, for creative imagination needs skills and mental balance and the ability to grasp and interpret those symbols to oneself and make a sense of whole as one proceeds through the visions and after.

Each human being is a unique epiphany of God the hidden, manifesting him in a particular and unrepeatably manner. Since we are created in the image of God we must reflect God the supreme archetype. But we will know only our own God since we cannot experience him objectively. It is impossible to know him as other people. Revelation is private and public equally. We never see any God but the personal Name that has been revealed and given concrete existence in each one of us. Every mystic knows God of ours is a symbol of the divine. Consequently, he/she sees every religion as valid theophanies. Dogmatic religion may divide people into warring camps but the god of mystics is a unifying force that transcends all personal gods.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Beatrice his beloved became the image of Divine love for Dante and through an imaginary journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven, finally reached to a vision of God. Dante contents that these are not simply combined from everyday images of mundane life through the faculty of imagination but it was in part an inspiration from God. Those employ the creative imagination on symbols and images of divine nature are inspired to take it to a whole different realm. Throughout his poem, he gradually purges the narrative of sensuous and visual imagery. The vivid physical description of hell slowly gives way to earthly paradise where Beatrice upbraids him for seeing her physical being as an end in itself. She contends that he should have seen her as a symbol pointing him away from the world to God. There are scarcely any physical descriptions of persons occur in paradise which is an indication that no human object can be the final object of human yearning. Dante has been accused of portraying a cool imagery of God in paradise. In fact, that is fitting. It reveals the utter transcendence of God, a God finally beyond all imaginations and images. Ultimately we know nothing at all about God. He is neither personal nor impersonal. He is transcendence itself.

It is observed in the mystical literature that music and painting are capable of drawing people to a more personal experience of the mystery. Emotion and experience conveyed in music in a way bypass words and concepts. They take one more to the mystery. It is impossible to know God in conceptual terms as though he were just another being about which we could form some ideas. Iconoclasm did not succeed, for the defenders could argue somewhat convincingly that God was better expressed in terms of art than in a rationalistic discourse. Icons were not meant to instruct or inform rather they provided the faithful with a sort of window on the divine world. (Armstrong, 1993) After the intensely Christological debates of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries there evolved a portrait of God that depended upon the imaginative and mystical experience of Christians. The kingdom announced by Christ in the gospel is a union with God that everybody could experience here and now without having to wait until next life. God was not so much objective and external for Greek fathers but a subjective and personal enlightenment.

### **Transcending and Descending God**

In most of the mystical accounts, there is nothing much personal, tender, loving about God: His holiness most time seems alienating, the beholder couldn't get close to his God. When they see Him, they burst

into songs and praises or fall back. They speak about sacredness that surround, the resounding words referring to his holiness, the dread, the awe, glory, light, these are all that one habitually hear from mystical accounts. Mystics generally do not want straightforward dialogue with God whom they experienced as an overwhelming holiness rather than a sympathetic father or friend of personal nature.

We have to get rid of our preconceptions and anthropomorphic imageries. Mystic Eckhart would say, we must avoid using the term "God" itself. Man's last and highest parting is when for God's sake, he takes leave of God. Those who seek God shall not be enslaved by any finite ideas about the divine. Only thus we could achieve our identity with God, whereby God's existence must be my existence and God's is-ness is my is-ness (Colledge and McGinn, 1981). Since God is the ground of my being there is no need to seek him out there or envisage an ascent to something beyond the world we know.

All words are symbols and all symbols are limited. All descriptions of God must be taken as human approximations imperfect symbols for the symbols transcendent. Mystics through their spiritual journey finally touch upon the God of Moses who responded "I am who am"-nameless God. Again mystics finally trace that God of silence experienced by Elijah. According to our Christian understanding this God who cannot be contained in any human form, language or images condescended in the incarnated human flesh and again accented to the transcendence by becoming cosmic Christ beyond all images. Thus we observe and witness the journey of the incarnate word of form to the formless Cosmic Christ of transcendence.

In all religious tradition, it is agreed that any statement about God has to be a paradox. Only thus could people retain a sense of his mystery and ineffability. God's essence is beyond our comprehension but his energies- activities are not distant from God, the Greeks contended. Jewish mystics agreed that God always remains shrouded in the impenetrable darkness but his energies are themselves divine, flowing eternally from the heart of God. When Bible says that "his Glory had appeared" it does not mean anyone has ever seen or experienced God's essence proper. When God is revealed to the human spirit, it is more of the transcendence of God. At the same time, it tells the direct experience of God is possible through this "Glory". Greek mystic and theologian Gregory Palamas remarked that we attain to participation in the divine nature and yet it remains totally inaccessible. The distinction between God's "energies" and essence has been debated in the Greek theology for a long time. The Aristotelian school remained in the contention



human beings could only sense his influence indirectly in scripture or through the wonders of creation; it was, therefore, impossible for men and women to “see” God. Palamas insisted that the vision of God is a mutual ecstasy: not only men and women transcend themselves but God also comes out of himself and becomes united with our minds by condescension. Mysticism, therefore, lays the rock foundation which all theology upholds that it is the nature of God to share and communicate. Through the sharing and communication, we are able to experience God.

### **Dynamics of Mystical Transcendence**

In the mystical experience, one integrates right brain functions hitherto unheeded. Everyday spirituality and religion give heavy emphasis to the left brain and leave the right brain. What is in the right brain is paradoxical, illogical and irrational. The truth is multidimensional and paradoxical. If God is a mystery as we affirm it, then it is the right brain that we should apply. The right brain is the source of creativity. In the mystical experience, it is the creativity of the right brain that is spurred. All great inventors were mystic. They viewed reality differently. The perennial philosophy was mystical and imaginative all through the ages. Truth has to be sought in scientific rationalism as well as in the esoteric mysticism. Sensibility must be educated and informed by the critical intelligence.

Self-realization through transcendence is an expression first used by Lonergan. It can also be found in Victor Frankl's writing. Both men see the process of self-transcendence the key to high-level spiritual maturity. Transcendence is going beyond; in the act of knowing, we transcend ourselves by entering a world of meaning, truth and reality greater than ourselves. According to Lonergan, there is a dynamics in us that move us from lower to higher levels of activity and transcendence which he calls “operators”. At the heart of created reality, there is a basic tension between limitation and transcendence between what is and what can be. Between maintaining a level of development and moving beyond it.

In order to arrive at the mystical union and final transcendence, one has to leave the earlier images in favor of the imageless and transcendent. Transcendence belongs to the very essence of human existence. In the level of transcendence, the ordinary rules that govern the ordinary consciousness are suspended therefore time and space recedes. Mystical journey generally begins with some kind of images of God. By continuous spiritual exercises of one's traditions, he or she is able

to transcend finally all images to reach the Supreme Being. The soul may be said to be united with God without anything intervening and producing separation. First- it is united *intellectually*- that is to say not by an idea that is based on senses which can only give a material image of God but by an idea which is internal and spiritual in its origin and makes God known to us as a being without form. Second- The soul has united to God *affectionately*. That is to say when its affections are given to God, not by self-motivated love but simply because God is what God is. When God is loved for His own sake no external motives and factors intervene to make the separation. Third- Soul is united to God *practically*. This is the case when the soul does the will of God, not by simply following some prescribed rules and forms but from the constantly operative impulse of holy love. Pure love transcends all we know before. No more senses and images. For senses and images bring only the attributes of God- his power goodness, wisdom, compassion etc. The attributes of God are not God himself. Soul's powers now fully awakened it has attained the object of its love fully. It is now reached the transcendence it has been called to.

In this vast world of innumerable finite existence, none of which is ultimately reliable, the wise abandon everything and turn to a single source of all and say with Teresa of Avila that 'God alone suffices.' In V.F. Vineeth's view, there are different layers in our human understanding: physical, mental and spiritual. This can be conceived as three eyes that see different things. Physical eye brings the images from the outside world. Mind process the data and gives new meaning and understanding to it. Thus it creates universal ideas and eternal principles. From this, the soul gets a pre-taste of what is eternal and universal which is the true nature of God. Mystical experience is not at the mind level, it begins when the mind is silenced, and at that point, God communicates to the soul not through the medium of mind but directly through the soul with a totally different way. It is expressed in the language of dark and light by the mystics.

### Conclusion

The God of the mystic is immanent and intimately present at the same time he is transcendent. Philosophy, theology, and dogmatic religion turned God into a remote abstraction. God of the mystic is generally able to touch the fears and anxieties that lie deeper than the rational. Mysticism was able to penetrate the mind deeply more than cerebral or legalistic type of religion. Its God could address more primitive

fears and anxieties before which the remote God of philosophers and theologians were impotent.

Mysticism is attractive but challenging in a world that looks what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace”. We haven’t been willing to face the fact that while the spiritual journey is joyful and full it is also long and hard. Once having the mystical experience of the Transcendent beyond all categories of human mind one cannot remain the same. It effects a change in the whole personality. Churches and worshipping places are filled with people for a sudden and painless path for change and growth. As Sue Monk Kidd remarked, “When it comes to religion, we tend to be long butterflies and short on cocoons.” We need to realize that deep things of life don’t come easily. A transformation from ego-centeredness to ego-lessness and from limited personal goals to a transcendent God takes time and hard work. Better to start the journey before too late.

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