Synopsis for the thesis - Mysticism of Tirumāṅgai Ālvār, in comparison to the Mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux

Definition of ‘Mysticism’

The term ‘Mysticism’ does not have a generally accepted definition. It carries different meanings to different people. This is due to the variety of forms it has taken over a period of religious history and because it possesses contradictory features. The word ‘mystic’ is supposed to be derived from the Greek ‘mystikos’ which means ‘of the mysteries.’ Historically the term is connected with the mystery cults of the Greeks, according to which the mystic to whom the knowledge of divine things was imparted was supposed to keep it as a secret.

‘Mysticism’ has been variously defined. Evelyn Underhill, an important early figure in the study of mysticism, defines it as the “name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the love of God.”¹ According to William James, Mysticism is a state of “insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.”² Zæchner defines it as “The realization of a union or a unity with or in (or of) something that is enormously, if not infinitely, greater than the empirical self.”³ Abhayananda defines Mysticism as “that point of view which claims as its basis an intimate knowledge of the one source and substance of all existence, a knowledge which is obtained through revelatory experience, during a rare moment of clarity in contemplation.”⁴

¹ Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: www.sacredtexts.com, Chapter IV
Three Types of Mysticism

Three types of mysticism are usually recognized: Nature mysticism, God mysticism, and Soul mysticism. Christian mysticism has always been God mysticism. All three types are found in Hinduism. Perhaps the earliest type was Nature mysticism, as shown by many hymns in the *RgVeda*. But this was soon completely superseded by the Soul mysticism of the Upaniṣads and God mysticism of bhakti schools. Mysticism is also divided into two main pathways: the path of love and divine Grace, and the path of knowledge and self-effort, which are known respectively as bhakti-mārga and jñāna-mārga in Hinduism. Though called mārga or path, they are based on quite different ontological pre-suppositions regarding the nature of God and human destiny. Hinduism is the only religion in which these two paths have been recognized as two independent highways and have co-existed as such from time immemorial. Christian mysticism has developed mostly along the path of love and grace, though some elements of the path of knowledge have been integrated into it by mystics like Meister Eckhart and Ruysbrock.⁵

Nature of Mysticism

Mysticism defies expression; no words can express its content. It has to be directly experienced and cannot be imparted or transformed to others. It is an intimate relation with the ultimate Truth or Reality, or the One, the Absolute, the Infinite, the Supreme Self, the Supreme Being or by whatever name it is called. A person who has attained this union in a greater or lesser degree is called a ‘Mystic’. This direct relationship and spiritual union with God or the Divine are sought by means of concentration, devotion, dispassion and contemplation.

⁵ For details please see Chapter II
One characteristic of mystical experiences that cuts across cultural boundaries is the experience of unity, the perception of the universe as an integrated, unified, and interconnected whole. Though mystical states are generally regarded as feeling-states, non-discursive and therefore ineffable, they are nearly always cognitive—that is, they carry with them ideas about the nature of reality, the self, God, and so on. These ideas have probably been previously mediated to the Mystics by their culture, and incubated in their subconscious for some time. Truths are felt to be directly and intuitively apprehended in the mystic experience.

There is no one way to have a mystical experience. Nor is there a specific time in one’s life for mystical experience. The best way to define mysticism is having an ultimate realization or realizing an ultimate goal. Every religion has its own interpretation of the ultimate goal. Throughout history, the mystical experience has usually connoted communion or contact with a perceived higher, absolute, or divine reality, even to the extent of union with that reality, i.e. loss of self and absorption in it. This absolute reality is frequently deified as an almighty Being. Whether it is or not, it is called ‘absolute’ or ‘divine’ because it is almost universally conceived as transcending limitations, human conceptualisation, and the inherent finitude of language.

**Early Vedic Mysticism**

Throughout its history Hinduism has been distinguished in its mystical leanings. Hinduism has perhaps the oldest tradition of mysticism. Mysticism makes its first appearance some 3000 years ago, in some of the text of the Vedas, such as the hymns of Creation. In Hindu philosophy, and particularly in the metaphysical system known as the Vedānta, the self or ātman in a person is identified with the Supreme Self,
or Brahman, of the universe. The apparent separateness and individuality of beings and events are held to be an illusion (māya), or convention of thought and feeling. This illusion can be dispelled through the realization of the essential oneness of ātman and Brahman. When the religious initiate has overcome the beginningless ignorance (avidyā) upon which depends the apparent separability of subject and object, of self and not-self, a mystical state of liberation, or mokṣa, is attained. The Hindu philosophy of Yoga incorporates perhaps the most complete and rigorous discipline ever designed to transcend the sense of personal identity and to clear the way for an experience of union with the divine Self. Buddhism denies the existence of a deity, but admits the existence of an absolute reality, the purported experience of which is called Nirvāṇa. The supreme reality is the mahāśūnya, the great void or emptiness. The mahāśūnya is precisely what is claimed to be experienced in the highest Buddhist attainment of Nirvāṇa. Vaiṣṇavism is one of the major traditions within the broader Vedic, or Hindu spiritual culture. It is exclusively a religion of bhakti and the tradition is known for the loving devotion to Viṣṇu.

**Mysticism in the Vaisnava Cult**

The Ālvārs were the twelve Vaiṣṇava saints of South India who lived between the 6th and 9th centuries A.D. The term ‘Ālvār’ means ‘one who is immersed’ and because these Saints were immersed in their love towards Viṣṇu they were called the ‘Ālvārs’. Tirumaṅgai Ālvār was the last of the Ālvārs. Though a robber, cheat and murderer at the beginning, Tirumaṅgai Ālvār later turned out to be a mystic saint after he had a vision of Lord Viṣṇu with His Consort, goddess Lakṣmi and was initiated into the Narāyaṇa Mantra by the Lord Himself.
Christian Mysticism

Christianity is also a mystical religion from the beginning. For Christians, the ultimate goal, or ultimate reality is being one with God or finding a place with God and being accepted into heaven. Christian Mysticism is Christ centered. It is the mysticism of the love of God; Christ Himself endorses this: “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him”.⁶ According to Christian Mysticism love is the essence of God’s nature. The love of God for man is more than man’s love for God and that is why God sent His Son to redeem mankind. The early Christians had inherited from the teachings of Jesus Christ, a firm faith in personally experiencing the presence of God. “I and the Father are one.”⁷ It is a unity in duality, by which he can say, “I am the Father and the Father is in me.”⁸ It is the experience of the Absolute in personal relationship, and that would seem to be the distinctive character of the Christian experience of God.

In the history of Christian mysticism and in the development of mystical theology Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) has a place of primary importance. Being a great mystic as well as a great theologian, he was the leader of Christendom during the first half of the 12th Century in so many aspects of the life of that time. His Sermons on the “Song of Songs” deal with love mysticism, especially Bridal Mysticism. The Song of Songs, also known as ‘The Song of Solomon’, is basically a love-song in the Old Testament, which has long held a privileged place in the mystical theology and monastic tradition of the Church. Erotically charged, it has a

⁶ John 14:21
⁷ John 10:30
⁸ John 14:10
literal as well as an allegorical meaning and has been interpreted in different ways. The central theme of Bernard’s Sermons on the *Song of Songs* is the intimate love between the Bride and the Bridegroom; between the soul and Christ.

**Research Objective**

The term ‘Mysticism’ is commonly applied to a variety of religious experiences, but in the context of the experience of divinity by the Āḻvārs, the term bears a different connotation. The definition given to it such as ‘seeking of union with the cosmic ground’ and the quest of the soul or Ātman for the immediate or the intuitive knowledge of God’ do not seem to convey the correct meaning. Even though the mysticism of other religious mystics share some common characteristics, the mysticism of the Āḻvārs is of a distinctive type and differs from it. The objective of this project is:

1. To trace the correct meaning and the uniqueness of Āḻvār Mysticism with special reference to Tirumaṅgaī Āḻvār.
2. A Study of Āḻvār poetry, namely, the *Nalayira-Divyaprabandham*, focusing on Tirumaṅgaī Āḻvār.
4. A critical and comparative analysis of the mysticism of the two faith traditions, namely, Hinduism and Christianity focusing on Tirumangai Āḻvār and Bernard of Clairvaux.
5. Study of the doctrines of key mystics and how they envisage the concept of union with the Deity.
Scope and Relevance

The scope of the topic is very extensive. The essence of mysticism is a deepening experiential love for God which allows for a greater and more effective love of ones neighbor. Looked at from this perspective, mysticism is as necessary - and as possible - today as it has been in the past. It is true that many people today have been overtaken by a largely utilitarian and pragmatic approach to life. This makes it more difficult for them to appreciate the loving generosity of spirit that is essential to trying to live a mystical, or we can say contemplative, life. Hence the need for this research study.

Research Methodology

1. The Historical Method

The Historical method of Research has been used in tracing the origin and development of Śrīvaśīnavism and the historical background, dates and chronological order of the Ālvārs. The different stages of the development of Śrīvaśīnavism have been briefly enumerated in order to show that the Vaiśīnava religion was there in all its completeness in the time of Rāmānuja. Similarly, the same Method is used to trace the origin and various stages of Mysticism in Christianity. The dates and chronology of the Ālvārs (though controversial) have been presented in this research project to make it clear that the Ālvārs were born long before Sri Rāmānuja and they had already established a theology that was very successful for all practical purposes which also had a tremendous influence on Sri Rāmānuja in formulating the Viśiṣṭādvaita or Sri Vaiśīnava Philosophy.
2. The Comparative Method:

The comparative study focuses on the two mysticisms of the two faith religions, namely, Hinduism and Christianity. Effort has been made to bring about the similarities and differences in the two traditions. It also focuses on the doctrines of key mystics and their similarities and differences.

3. The Phenomenological Method

Phenomenology, at its most basic level, is a study of phenomena—of reality as it appears to us and as we experience it. Phenomenology’s famous slogan is ‘back to the things themselves’, seeing things as they really appear to us by suspending any concern about what they might be in themselves. The Phenomenological Method has been used to bring about the full implications of the Āḷvār poems which are otherwise difficult to understand.

4. The Philosophical Method

The Philosophical Method is used to explain the philosophical doctrines of both Hinduism and Christianity. Mysticism is the experiential part of philosophy; it is the knowledge of the Ultimate Truth discussed in the philosophical texts and as such this method is accepted.

The Research method is primarily literature review. In order to make a comparative study of The Hindu Mysticism and the Christian Mysticism with special reference to the Bridal Mysticism of the Tamil mystic Saints Tirumaṅgai Āḷvār and the French Abbot Saint Bernard of Clairvaux the following materials are considered for study.
Literature Review

Primary Source: The Ālvārs

The original text of the Nālāyira Divyaprabandham (40000 Thousand Divine Collect) written in classical Tamil, focusing on the works of Tirumaṅgai Ālvār has been used elaborately. The various topics in the prabandham are not presented in a systematic way with supporting arguments like in a philosophical treatise. These are hidden and scattered here and there in the poems. In order to gauge the inner meanings of the relevant hymns original text and commentaries have been taken for study.

2. Sanskrit texts of the Veda and Upaniṣads, Rāmānuja’s Śri Bhāṣya and other Sanskrit texts are taken into consideration.

Secondary Source

1. Authentic and scholarly commentaries on the prabandham by traditional and contemporary acāryas in the maṇipravāla
2. Translations of some of the hymns by Western and Indian scholars into the English language.
3. Books written in English by modern scholars on the Ālvārs and their works.
4. Other sources include the Internet

Scheme of Chapterisation

The Thesis consists of three chapters based on literature review as well as the comparative study conducted by the researcher.

1. The first Chapter is on Hindu Mysticism which is classified by Dasgupta into five categories, namely, the Vedic, Upaniṣadic, Yogic,
Buddhist and Devotional Mysticisms. Sacrificial mysticism has no mysticism in it and for that reason it is irrelevant to our study. So instead of Sacrificial Mysticism, Vedic Mysticism has been included in this study as one of the categories of Hindu Mysticism. Due to the vastness of the topic Yagic Mysticism which is one of the categories of Hindu Mysticism has not been taken for study.

2. The Second Chapter deals with Christian Mysticism in general and the mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux in particular.

3. The Third Chapter is a comparative study of Hindu and Christian mysticisms focusing on the Bridal Mysticism of Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār and Bernard of Clairvaux.

**Summary of Chapters**

**Chapter 1**

Chapter I explores Mysticism as the basis of all religions. Even as early as the primordial stages of religion and primitive cultures, we find the innate tendency of the human being to communicate with the supreme Force, get closer to it, transcend the limits of body and unite with a divinity. In Hinduism, the quest for the first Principle, the Cause and Substance of being, makes its first appearance some 3000 years ago, in some of the text of the Vedas, such as the hymns of Creation. The pre-creation state is described in the Nāṣadiya Sūkta. During the period of the Brāhmaṇas, emphasis was placed on the importance of sacrifice out of which sprang the word Brahman, which denoted the sacred power present in sacrifice and later came to be associated with the Absolute.

---

10 RV X. 129
The theme of the quest for a supreme unifying truth, for the reality underlying existence, is exemplified in the question posed by the seeker in the Upaniṣad: “Through which the unheard of becomes heard, the unthought of becomes thought of, the unknown becomes known?”\(^{11}\) The chief features of the Upaniṣad mysticism are the earnest and sincere quest for spiritual illumination, the rapturous delight and force that characterize the utterance of the sages when they speak of the realization of this ineffable experience, the ultimate and absolute truth and reality, and the immortality of all mortal things. To know Brahman is to know all; in knowing Brahman, one achieves a transcendent consciousness that comprehends, in some measure, the unity of the universe and the deep connection between the soul and Brahman.

Next, during the period of the Purāṇas and Itihāsas, the Absolute came to be personified as Viṣṇu in Vaiṣṇavism, Śiva in Śaivism and Śakti in Śaktism, replacing the Vedic Nature god Indra. Rituals and sacrifices of Vedic Brāhmanism gave place to temple worship of gods in the form of icons. During and after the Bhakti Movement of the 6th Century, bhakti and self surrender to the Personal God became the mode of worship. Bhakti Mysticism was the practical side of Philosophy satisfying those who wanted to have it as a way of life whereas the mysticism of the Upaniṣads was only an expression of the philosophical reflections of the ancient seers. Ranade considers Bhakti Mysticism as “the outcome of a heart full of piety and devotion, a consciousness of sin and misery, and finally, a desire to assimilate oneself practically to the Divine.”\(^{12}\)

In Indian philosophy, philosophy and religion are not treated as different from each other as is done in the West. They complement each other. As

\(^{11}\) Ch Up VI.3
\(^{12}\) Ranade R.D. Mysticism in India, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1933, p.1
for example, the Viśiṣṭādvaita Philosophy represents the theoretical and systematic study of the nature of Reality, whereas the Viśiṣṭādvaita religion covers a practical way of life which will lead to the realization of the Ultimate Reality. In fact, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Śrīvaiṣṇavism are but two sides of the same coin. “Historically”, says Srinivasachari, “the two have grown together, as two facets of one and the same school of thought, from ancient past.” Śrīvaiṣṇavism is not a mere cult but a philosophy of religion and its theological doctrines are founded on sound philosophical theories enunciated on the Upaniṣads.

In Śrīvaiṣṇavism Brahman is the highest reality, omnipotent, omniscient, but this Brahman is at the same time full of compassion or love. Maxmuller says, “This is a new and very important feature in Ramanuja’s Brahman as compared with the icy self-sufficiency ascribed to Ramanuja by Śaṅkara. Even more important and more humanising is the recognition that souls as individuals possess reality, that cit and acit, what perceives and what does not perceive, soul and matter, forming as it were, the body of Brahman, are in fact modes (prakāra) of Brahman.”

The god-intoxicated twelve Vaiṣṇava Saints of South India popularly known as Āḻvārs who lived between 6th and 9th centuries A.D. represent a significant phase of Vaiṣṇava Philosophy and Religion which provided a solid foundation for the development of the Viśiṣṭādvaita Philosophy at the hands of Rāmānuja and his successors. The Āḻvārs who were born long before Rāmānuja taught the same Vedānta Philosophy and Vaiṣṇava religion that was already prevalent through the medium of Tamil laguage which was then the principal language of South India and understood

---

13 Srinivasachari S.M., Vaiṣṇavism, Its Philosophy, Theology and Religious Discipline, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1994, Intro, p.XXIX.
14 Max Muller K.M., The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy, Longmans Green And Co, London and Bombay, 1899, p. 245
widely by the common folk. With the *bhakti* movement gaining greater momentum, the common people were greatly attracted by the devotional songs as these had an emotional appeal to them. The Āḷvārs have bequeathed a rich heritage for the posterity in the form of four thousand devotional Tamil hymns collectively known as *Nālāyira-Divyaprabandham*, replete with philosophical and theological teachings. The esoteric doctrines of Vaiṣṇavism have drawn material both from the Sanskrit Vedānta works and Tamil *Prabandhams*, also known as the Tāmili Veda. The hymns of the Āḷvārs codified in the *Nālāyira Divyaprabandham* are exemplars of devotional mysticism. They manifest vividly their mystic experience of God and provide us a deep insight into an important aspect of *bhakti* as a loving relation between the human soul and God. Their importance can be appreciated from the fact that the *Prabandham* has been accorded the status of scriptural authority on a par with the Vedas (hence the name *Udbhaya Vedānta* for the Viśiṣṭādvita system which is based on both these scriptural sources).

The Āḷvārs claim no merit for themselves. Their sole concern was the one Ultimate Reality (*paratattva*), beyond time and space, whom they called Viṣṇu. They threw themselves upon the mercy of Viṣṇu. For them, self-surrender was the way to salvation. They worshipped not by means of sacrifice or meditation, but by devotion and service, given without thought of return. They believed that one is saved not through one’s own efforts, but by the Lord’s grace. Constant remembrance of God and calling upon his name will attract that grace. They sought to enjoy His presence after death, and in life to experience His divine beauty spread throughout the world. In the penultimate verse of the *Tiruppāvai*, Āndāl asks not for *mokṣa*, final liberation, but entanglement within life after life, continuous service to Him for seven lives to come.
The mysticism of the Āḻvārs is of a distinctive type and it differs from that of other mystics, whether Indian or Western, though they may all share some common characteristics. The Āḻvārs gifted with divine knowledge not only possessed a mental attitude of total dedication to God but also displayed it in every mode in their thought, word and deed. Nammāḻvār, a born yogi, portraying the mystic in him as a maiden in distress due to separation from her Lord (bridal mysticism), describes how everything appeared as Kṛṣṇa: the food she ate, the water she drank and the betel-leaf she chewed.\textsuperscript{15} One of the most endearing emotions of devotional mysticism is the mystic visualising the Lord as a small child and himself as the parent. Periyāḻvār excelled in this. He adored baby Kṛṣṇa and composed a range of hymns: from the birth of Kṛṣṇa to the different stages of His growth, and His frolics. The Āḻvār says, “I have placed you inside me and I have placed myself within you.”\textsuperscript{16} In this sense the mysticism of the Āḻvārs has been qualified as theistic and it differs from other types of mysticism such as nature mysticism, spiritual (soul) mysticism, religious mysticism, identity mysticism or transcendental mysticism. Through their hymns the Āḻvārs express a special type of divine experience of joy whenever they have visions of God and anguish whenever they feel separation from Him. These expressions of joy and sorrow contain mystical element in the form of an irrepressible longing not merely for a direct vision of God but also for an uninterrupted divine service. The mere temporary vision of God obtained by grace or meditation would not satisfy the Āḻvārs. Even though the Āḻvārs visually see God in the form of an arca (icon) they restlessly continue their search for a vision of God in His full glory. Hence mysticism with reference to the Āḻvārs is defined by Srinivasachari as, “the spiritual quest of an

\textsuperscript{15} TIM VI.7.1
\textsuperscript{16} Peri TM V.4.5
individual for a direct and comprehensive vision of God culminating in an eternal, uninterrupted divine service.”

Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār, the last of the twelve Āḻvārs, was not a born yogi like Nammāḻvār. We gather from his own prabandham that in his younger days he was an ordinary individual indulging in sensual pleasures. But after he was initiated into spiritual life he became a mystic saint. The traditional account of his biography and the opening decad of the Peria Tirumoli tell us that he had the vision of the Divine Couple in the guise of newly wedded couple, who imparted to him the Nārāyaṇa mantra containing the quintessence of the Vedānta. This acquisition of spiritual knowledge by the grace of God marks the beginning of mysticism for Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār. The Āḻvār takes on the role of a nayakī (consort of God) and pours out his devotional love to God, who is the nāyaka, with the craving for communion, followed with the agony during the period of separation and the joyous experience during the period of communion. Fervent appeals to God to win his sympathy and grace are made directly to God by the nāyakī. When the nāyakī does not get a positive response from the nayaka she becomes dejected and depressed. Driven to desperation due to the non-fulfilment of the cherished objective the Āḻvār takes the drastic step of censuring the lover by exposing him in public with the hope of reunion with him. It was a common practice among the ancient Tamils to adopt this step known as madal (riding on a palmyra stem as a horse in the open streets) by the aggrieved lover. Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār exhibits his deep love for God by adopting this practice for the purpose of winning His sympathy for communion with Him.

---

17 Smivasachari S.M, The Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Āḻvārs, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1997, p.152
In the case of Nammāḻvār the climax of his mystic experience with the attainment of the parama-bhakti, is the highest stage of bhakti which leads to the realization of the comprehensive, direct, eternal communion with God. The concluding decad of Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār’s Peria Tirumoli does not imply parama-bhakti. Instead, he presents a graphic description of the unbearable suffering of the human soul caught up in the cycle of births and deaths. The Āḻvār appeals to God ardently to shower his grace on him and protect and grant liberation from the bondage and give him an opportunity to render eternal service in the paramapada.

Chapter 2

Chapter II explores Chrisian Mysticism as a way of life that involves the perfect fulfilment of loving God, neighbour, all God’s creation and oneself. The Christian mystic awakens to, is purified and illuminated by, and is eventually united with God of love.

Christian Mysticism can be found in the solidly mystical spirituality of the Old Testament, which finds its fulfilment in Jesus’ trinitarian mystical consciousness that reached its high point in his salvific death and resurrection. Belief in a single omnipotent God also evolved among the ancient Jews, as reflected in the texts that came to form the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament. The Book of Genesis includes the important teaching that the human being is created in the image of God. According to traditional theology, man was made in the image and likeness of God. But that image has been tarnished and distorted, but not destroyed by sin. The Old Testament presents human beings not only as the climax of God’s work of creation but also made in the divine image and manifesting God’s rule on earth:
“Then God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image; after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female.”\(^\text{18}\)

God gave dignity and power over the rest of creation to Adam and humanity. But man disobeyed God and became a Fallen creature. The Incarnation should be regarded as the consequence of man’s disobedience to God. God who is Charity, out of immeasurable love and compassion for humanity became incarnate and came down to the earth in the form of Jesus Christ, the Savior and suffered in the flesh so that He might touch the hearts of sensible creatures by means of the touching sight of a God dead on the cross for the redemption of humanity.

The goal and achievement of Christ-mysticism had been formulated in the words of the New Testament. In the Christian Scriptures of the New Testament the mystics found important sources in the writings of John and Paul. The message about God’s loving concern with humanity manifested through sending his only Son into the world allowed for a new form of relationship with God. “We are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”\(^\text{19}\)

**Stages of Mystical Life**

According to Evelyn Downhill the total transmutation of a mystic is not

\(^{18}\text{Book of Genesis I : 26,27}\)

\(^{19}\text{1 John 3.2}\)
sudden but gradual. She mentions five stages which the mystics have to pass through before they get united with God. These stages are:

1. The awakening of the self
2. The purgation and purification of the soul
3. The illumination of the self and the
4. The dark night of the soul and
5. The intuitive life of union.\(^{20}\)

The Christian mystics under God’s initiative fall in love with God - at times abruptly, at times gradually. Through God’s special activity they realize that God is in love with them. The awareness of God’s burning love at the root of their being causes the mystics an immense longing and makes them restless until they are united to God. This is ‘awakening of the self.’ Awakened by God to holiness, the mystics start feeling guilty over their own sinfulness and vileness. Past sins torture them in a purifying way. This holy love purifies them by removing all traces of disorder and sin. This is ‘purgation and purification of the soul.’ The mystics also feel that they are far away from the Creator. They consider themselves as lowly creatures and also wonder why they are not simply annihilated in the presence of the all-powerful and all-consuming God. At this stage the mystics love God to a certain extent, but their quest is more self-seeking than God-seeking. They taste something of God’s goodness and love, but their own consciousness of sinfulness, creaturehood and separation from God predominates. They start doing penance and prayer to purify themselves and atone for their past sins. After getting purged of sensuality and self-love they grow in virtue and are better able to turn inward, forget the self, find interior stillness and commune with God. A joyful feeling of be-

---

ing united with God sets in and gradually the living flame of God is experienced as illumination. This is ‘illuminatio of the self.’ This expands the mystics’ consciousness and this loving Knowledge enables the mystics to see God in all things and all things in God. But still the feeling of separation remains. They may be betrothed to God but they are not yet married. God communicates himself to the mystics’ spirit, soul, emotions and body. God’s mystical self-communication has its dark side also. During this ‘dark night of the soul’ the mystics go into deep depression, dejection and even near despair. They have an acute sense of sin. God’s absence tortures them and feeling of utter helplessness and isolation take over. Mystics speak of this phase as a spiritual death almost like going down to hell alive. The ‘unitive life’ is the last stage of mystical ascent. The mystic becomes as closely united to God through God’s love as God is united to his own being by nature. Mystically married to God the mystic becomes God by participation. Nonetheless this union remains differentiated, that is, God and the mystic become one while remaining distinctly two. The mystic person does not dissolve into God. After the mystical marriage the mystic seeks only God’s will and honour and desires to serve God totally. Nothing can touch the freedom and peace of the mystic. The one thing that separates the mystic from the beatific vision is this life itself. Transformed by love, the mystic becomes creative, totally self-giving and concerned about others.

The Christian concept of unio mystica first appeared, possibly as far back as the fourth century; its sources are in the New Testament. In the Pauline as well as in the Johannine writings life in Christ consists in a dynamic union with God, both with Christ as God’s divine self-expression and with the Father in and through Christ.
Examples of ten Christian Mystics have been presented in this project. These Mystics present different means by which one can know God either through the divine self-revelation to be found in the Scriptures and in Christian theology or through the direct revelation of the divine to the individual. These examples are produced to illustrate particular aspects of their mysticism.

St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was a French abbot, who belonged to the Cistercian Order.\textsuperscript{21} He became, much against his will, a monk at the age of 24. Though it was to satisfy his mother’s wish that he became a monk, later on he turned out to be the prime builder of reforming the Cistercian Order and infusing into its spirituality his own dynamic vision. St Bernard has several works to his credit among which the two, \textit{On Loving God} and \textit{The Sermons on the Song of Songs}, deal with love mysticism, especially Bridal Mysticism. Over a period of 18 years he composed 86 sermons, which allegorically interpret the \textit{Song of Songs}. For St Bernard, love was the sole object of the Scriptures. His theology is the notion that love created us out of love to share love itself and redeemed us after we had sinned. The \textit{Song of Songs}, also known as \textit{The Song of Solomon}, basically is a love song in the Old Testament, which has long held a privileged place in the mystical theology and monastic tradition of the Church. Erotically charged, it has a literal as well as an allegorical meaning and has been interpreted in different ways. The central theme of Bernard’s Sermons on the \textit{Song of Songs} is the intimate love between the Bride and the Bridegroom; between the soul and Christ.

\textsuperscript{21} Encyclopaedia Britannica gives the meaning of ‘Cistercian’ as, “Cistercian, byname White Monk, or Bernardine, member of a Roman Catholic monastic order that was founded in 1098 and named after the original establishment at Cliteaux (Latin: Cistercium), a locality in Burgundy, near Dijon.” www.britannica.com
According to Bernard, we are the distorted images of God. The long-winding road back to God is about recovering our likeness to God. Humility is the starting point to the path leading back to God and love is the point of destination. To the question why and in what way God should be loved St Bernard gives the answer, “The cause of loving God is God Himself”, and the measure He deserves to be loved, “is without measure.”  

22 That we love God springs naturally from our gratitude towards God who loved us first, and bestowed on us every imaginable gift – the air we breathe, the sights we see, food we eat and the very dignity that we possess as human beings. The inborn desire to love God comes from God and ends in God.

According to Bernard, complete and perfect marriage consists in the exchange of love. “It is nothing other than love, holy and chaste. This love utterly serene and true, mutual and deep joins two beings, not in one flesh but in one spirit with him.”  

23 The Word accepts the soul as his bride and two become one in spirit, while remaining distinctly two. The mystic person does not dissolve into God. Love makes the soul equal to God or like God, but not God Himself.

**Chapter 3**

Chapter III presents a comparative study of Hindu and Christian Mysticism. Christian mysticism differs from some kinds of Hindu mysticism, while it is akin to other kinds. The classical Upanishadic mysticism is complete harmony and union with the divine. This is the mysticism of 'absorption into the Deity'. The Yoga type of mystic who

---


23 *Sermon 83.6*
tries to realize the eternal nature of his own soul by his own efforts, and
the Upaniṣadic type who seeks identity with the ground of all things but
not with a personal God, have no parallel in the Bible, and little enough in
any of the Christian traditions. Then there is the Theistic mysticism which
is absolute love and union with a personal God, who is the source of all
things and the object of devotion. The only kind of mysticism that can
claim a basis in the Bible and be characteristic of Christianity is the
theistic type.

There are some basic doctrinal differences between Hinduism and
Christianity with regard to the soul's relationship with God. In the whole
Judeo-Christian tradition, God is regarded as the 'wholly Other'; He is
the self-existent creator whereas all other beings (including human souls)
are created things. Mystical experience may bring God and the soul closer
together but they can never become one because of the difference in their
nature. On the contrary, in Hinduism all schools of Vedānta hold that God
is the Supreme Self and that the individual selves, which are self-existent
and of the same nature as God, are only reflections or parts of Him.
Mystical experience is only the realization of this integral relationship
between God and souls.

We find striking similarities also in the mysticism and the different stages
of the mystical growth of these two religions. Throughout its history
Hinduism has been distinguished in its mystical leanings. Similarly
Christianity is also a mystical religion from the beginning. In both, love
and devotion directed towards a personal God is the dominant feature.

Bridal Mysticism falls under the category of 'love Mysticism', forming
one of its modes which emphasizes love as a means of experiencing and
uniting with God. It provides the human model of the relationship
between man and woman, lover and beloved and bride and bridegroom. According to Vaiśṇava Theology, the individual soul is dependent on God in the relationship of master and servant (śeṣi-śeṣa). The soul exists for the pleasure of God and its final goal is to get united with Him. On the basis of this, the Āḻvārs, especially Nammāḻvār, Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār and Āṇḍāl, as individual souls (jīvātmans) exhibit their utter dependability, unshakable faith and strong conviction that God alone is the most enjoyable person. These characteristics cannot be personified more aptly and efficiently than as a consort of God. That is why these Āḻvārs chose to assume the role of a nāyakī to the Supreme Lord as nāyaka and pour out their heart through mystic songs, praising the glory of God. Another reason for the imposition of strī-bhāva (feminine role) on themselves by the mystics is due to the conviction that God alone is Puruṣottama and all the others are female. All jīvātmans are paratantras, that is, not independent. Because of this reason, the Āḻvārs when they think themselves as the Lord’s dāsas, the strī-bhāva comes to them.

In Christianity, there is a rich tradition of bridal mysticism. It uses nuptial and erotic imagery to describe the soul’s relation with God. There are many scriptural passages that describe the relationship between Israel and God or Church and Christ along this line. The Fathers of the Church continued this tradition through their writings. Origen’s Commentary on the Song of Songs is a clear example of this trend. This unusual piece of biblical literature is a narrative of the most sacred of human events, the love between two persons. It is primarily a human love song, though it is also described allegorically as God’s relationship with his people. The central theme of St Bernard’s Sermons on the Song of Songs itself is the intimate love between the Bride and the Bridegroom, between the soul and Christ. Bernard expresses his own mystical experience towards the
end of his commentary. Bernard says, the Word, when it invaded his soul, could not be perceived by his senses. But his heart suddenly became alive and its most secret faults got exposed. “When the Word left”, says Bernard, “all these spiritual powers became weak and faint and began to grow old as though you had removed the fire from under a boiling pot.” The life of the soul’s life seems to have disappeared.

After a close study of the mysticism of the Tamil Vaišnava saint Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār and the French Christian saint Bernard of Clairvaux one can find striking similarities between them. To begin with, Hinduism and Christianity, which both these saints belonged to, have been mystical religions from the very beginning and a way of life too. For the Āḻvār it was bhakti and for Bernard, it was love towards God, which was the fundamental principle and the only means to get united with God. Both believed in the incarnation of God. For the Āḻvār, Lord Viṣṇu took different incarnations from time to time to punish the wicked and protect the meek and the humble. For Bernard the invisible God assumed flesh because God wanted to recapture the affection of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually raise them to a spiritual love. Thus he strongly suggested praying with a sacred image of the God-man, like Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār who felt the presence of God in the icon.

Not only in the matter of mystical doctrines, but also in the mystical ways and experiences Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār and St Bernard share many things in common. The Āḻvār chose to take the role of the nāyakī of the Lord as the best way to express his burning love to Lord Viṣṇu, the Bridegroom. Similarly Bernard also chose the Song of Songs in order to show the

\[24^{24} \text{Sermon, 74, 7}\]
loving, spiritual union between the soul as the bride and Jesus as the
divine Bridegroom. Bernard portrayed our relationship to God in terms of
bride and bridegroom and welcomed each believing soul to see itself as
Christ’s bride and receive the Lord’s tender touch. The Ālvār also follows
the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, which indicates Lord Viṣṇu as the bridegroom of
all the souls in the universe.

When the Ālvār as Parakālaṇāyakī and the soul as the bride in the Song
of Songs, through God’s līla or special activity, come to realize that God
is in love with them, then we must understand that the first stage of
mysticism, namely ‘bhakti’ or the ‘Awakening of the soul’ has set in.
Awakened by God to holiness they become very sensitive to their own
sinfulness and vileness. Past sins torture them in a purifying way. After
long hours of prayer, the bride of Tirumaṅgai Ālvār and Bernard gets
purified of sensuality and self-love, and gets mental perception of God.
This stage is known as para-bhakti or ‘Purgation’. They feel the distance
between themselves and their Lord. They grow in virtue and get the
ability to self-surrender. They turn inward and feel God permeating their
consciousness. This is the flaming love of God which is known as para-
jayāna or ‘Illumination’. This Illumination or parajñāna instils expansion
of consciousness and the loving knowledge to find God in everything and
all things in God. They get clear glimpses of God or the ‘Visit’ of the
Bridegroom and God’s self-communication takes hold of their entire
being. During the ‘glimpse’ or ‘Visit’, there is joy in communion, or
samślesa with the Bridegroom and anguish in separation or viśleṣa.

Whenever Tirumaṅgai Ālvār as Parakālaṇāyakī gets separated from her
Lord she feels like a fish out of water. The bride’s longing for the
Bridegroom in the Song of Songs is also intensified during the periods of
the Bridegroom’s absence. After each visit of the Bridegroom she asks
him to return. It is the violence of her love which conquers all reserve causing her to disregard soberness and propriety. She implores him to return and begs him to hasten, “to run swiftly like a doe or fawn.”\textsuperscript{25} Bernard’s explanation is that Jesus, the bridegroom, comes so that the soul, that is, the bride, will cling to him; he goes away so that the soul will call him back. He wants us to love him and takes certain steps to win our love. He gives himself so that we will enjoy his presence; he then leaves us so that we will long for it even more.

The last stage of Bridal mysticism is \textit{parama bhakti} or the Unitive Life. It is the climax of \textit{bhakti} leading to the direct, comprehensive, eternal communion with God. At this stage Tiruvaṅgai Āḻvār attains \textit{paramapada} or \textit{mokṣa} or liberation from bondage and gets a fuller and direct vision of God which is known in Vedānta as \textit{paripūrṇa Brahmānubhava}. He attains a status equal to that of Brahman (\textit{sayūjya}) enjoying Brahman along with his glory and doing eternal divine service. For Bernard the bride’s soul is mystically married to God and they become one, while remaining distinctly two. The Christian mystic is not satisfied with the mystic experience he had, but goes back to the mundane world to help other men redeem themselves.

**Further Scope for research**

Hindu-Christian dialogue is necessary: i) to overcome misconceptions entertained about each others' tradition; ii) to achieve a clearer understanding of the similarities and differences between the two traditions; iii) and to promote spiritual and moral goods in them.

\textsuperscript{25} Song 2.17, Sermon 73.1
Select Bibliography


Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St Bernard*, Published by Sheed & Ward, London, 1940


Hardy E.W , The Hagiography of Parakāla, The Indian Narrative, Perspectives and Patterns Ed; Christopher Shackle and Rupert Snell, Printed in Germany 1992


Jan Gonda, A History of Indian Literature, Vol.1, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1975


Max Muller K.M, The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy, Longmans Green And Co, London and Bombay, 1899


Ranade R.D, Mysticism in India, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1933


Srinivasachari, S.M: *Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Āḷvārs*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1997


Thomas Merton, *The Life of the Vows, Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, Edited by Patrick F. O’Connel, Cistercian Publications, Kentucky, 40051


William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience- a study in Human Nature*, Ed by Jim Manis, PSU-Hazleton PA18202 for the Electronic Classic Series