Chapter 1

Introduction:

The Syncretic Mystical Phenomenon
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1. Syncretism

1.1. Origin

The word ‘syncretism’ is derived from modern Latin ‘syncretismus,’ a transliteration of Greek ‘synkretismos,’ meaning “Cretan federation” [syn + Krē-, Krēs Cretan]. The first known use of the word occurs in Plutarch’s (1st century A.D.) essay on “Fraternal Love” in his Moralia (490 ab) - probably based on sugkretos. Ionian form of sugkratos, meaning “mixed together” - to indicate a “federation of Cretan cities” for mutual defense. He cites the example of the Cretans, who compromised and reconciled their differences and came together in alliance when faced with external dangers. And that is their so-called ‘Syncretism.’ Syn·cre·tist is a noun or adjective, and syn·cre·tis·tic is an adjective.

Erasmus probably coined the modern usage of the Latin word in his Adagia (“Adages” [27]) published in 1517-18, to designate the coherence of dissenters in spite of their differences in theological opinions. On 22 April 1519, in a letter to Melanchthon, Erasmus specifically adduced the Cretans of Plutarch as an example of his adage, “Concord is a mighty rampart.” Erasmus’s Adagia (“Adages” [27]) and Epistolae (3.539) are based on Plutarch’s explanation, which was transmitted to the modern period.

The first application of the term to the religious context probably occurred in an anonymous review (of an edition of Minucius Felix) that appeared in Frazer’s Magazine
for Town and Country (London, 1853, vol. 47, p. 294). After this, it appeared rather frequently in the science of religion and historical theology of the second half of the nineteenth century. Hermann Usener (Gotternamen, 1896; 1928, pp. 337-340) used it as ‘mishmash of religions’ (Religionsmischerei). In German, Mischerei (mishmash), unlike Mischung (mixture or blending), has negative overtones. In fact, Usener regarded the phenomenon of syncretism as an unprincipled abandonment of the faith of the Fathers (i.e. ancestors) even though it was at the same time a necessary transitional stage in the history of religions. Later on, the word came to be used mostly without negative overtones. However, it continued to be applied in all sorts of ways.

1.2. Definition

Once defined as a “mismash of religions” syncretism has been referred to as a meaningless, derogatory and essentialistic term which should be banned from the fields of religio-historical research. Theoretically and descriptively, the religio-cultural mixtures of late modernity are referred to in terms of hybridisation, creolisation and mongrelisation, but rarely as syncretism.

Webster’s third edition gives two definitions. The first one defines syncretism as “a combination, reconciliation, or coalescence of varying, often mutually opposed beliefs, principles, or practices, typically marked by internal inconsistencies.” The second definition goes thus: “the merging into one of two or more differently inflected forms.” That is, the resulting identity between two or more inflected forms of a word.

“Syncretism” as I see it, is the combination of different (often contradictory) forms of belief or practice. It may involve the merger and analogizing of several
originally discrete traditions, especially in theology and mythology of religion, thus asserting an underlying unity and allowing for an exclusive approach to other faiths. In brief, it is the fusion of two or more originally different inflectional forms which gives rise to the amalgam of a third one. Syncretism occurs commonly in expressions of arts and culture (eclecticism), politics (syncretic politics) as well as in literature (syncretic literature).

1.3. Historical Evolution

Originally the Greek word 'synkretismos' was used to indicate a "federation of Cretan cities." However, by a strange etymological and semantic development, it is now employed in the religious context to designate the fusion of different divinities or doctrines, religious cults, traditions and practices. The fusion has a popular political or religio-philosophical foundation. When two polytheistic societies were brought into close proximity by peaceful intercourse or conquest, there emerged a practice of equating the gods of one society with those of the other. Furthermore, under the influence of religio-philosophical thinking, there arose a tendency to merge the gods of either society into a new and more cosmopolitan synthesis, which paved the way to universality, culminating in monotheism.

The ascendency of Marduk and Ashur in Mesopotamia can be explained in terms of the political ascendency of Babylon and Assyria respectively. No doubt, it was the Assyrian pressure that introduced the worship of Ashur into the Judaic cult in the Temple of Jerusalem under Manasseh. In Egypt, the supremacy of Thebes led to the fusion of the cult of Amon at Thebes and of Ra at Heliopolis into the imperial cult of Amon-Ra.
Among the Greeks, Apollo and Dionysius were originally foreign divinities who were incorporated into Greek religion and who were destined to play central roles in official as well as popular cult. The Romans adopted the important divinities from the Etruscans, especially Greek divinities, among whom Apollo and Dionysius are the popular ones. Furthermore, under Greek influence they transformed their old numina into anthropomorphic divinities to whom they assigned the attributes of the Olympian pantheon.

However, it was in the Hellenistic and Imperial Ages that syncretism bloomed fully and reached the climax of its development in Greco-Roman antiquity. For national unity and integration, the first Ptolemies promoted and nurtured the development of the syncretistic cult of Serapis and Isis. This Hellenized cult, in which Isis was dominant, spread throughout the ancient Greco-Roman world, wherein Isis was worshipped more and more as a universal divinity, identified with numerous other goddesses. She is addressed, “Thou of a thousand names.” In the famous syncretic inscription by Antiochus I of Commagene (69-68 B.C.E.) at Nemrad-Dagh, Greek, Egyptian and Persian divinities are combined, which obviously reflect the syncretistic religion of the ruler. Plutarch and Apuleius give baffling examples of the syncretistic practices of the Imperial Age. Plutarch says that various religions of humankind all worship the same God under various names.

On the political side, we need to note that the paganism which Emperor Julian tried to revive and promote was syncretistic in nature. Moreover, the institutional features too were borrowed from Christianity. The Orphic and Hermetic literature bears testimony
to religious syncretism, which is evident from *Orphic* in its praising of Isis: “there is only one hymn... only one mystery, for there is finally, only one god in all things.”¹

The philosophico-religious tendency towards syncretism and universality is marked in Gnosticism, Neo-Pythagoreanism and Neo-Platonism as well. Lambichus, in particular, gave ancient paganism a kind of systematic theology and made wide use of allegory in the elaboration of his religious syncretism. Later, this was formally developed into a syncretistic religion.

1.4. A Brief History of Application

1.4.1. Socio-political Roles

Overt syncretism in folk belief may show cultural acceptance of an alien or previous tradition, but the “other” cult may survive or infiltrate without authorized syncretism. For example, some Conversos,² a sort of cult for martyr-victims of the Spanish Inquisition, incorporated elements of Catholicism while resisting it.

Some religious movements have embraced overt syncretism, such as, the case of melding Shinto beliefs into Buddhism or the amalgamation of Germanic and Celtic pagan views into Christianity during its spread into Gaul, the British Isles, Germany, and Scandinavia. Indian influences are seen in the practice of Shi’a Islam in Trinidad. Others have strongly rejected it as devaluing and compromising precious and genuine

¹ Orphic Frg. 239 (Krn).
² A *converso* (*conversvs* in Latin), meaning “converted, turned around” and its feminine form *conversa* was a Jew or Muslim who converted to Catholicism in Spain or Portugal, particularly during the 14ᵗʰ and 15ᵗʰ centuries, or one of their descendants.
distinctions. The examples of this include post-Exile Second Temple Judaism, Islam, and most of Protestant Christianity.

Syncretism tends to facilitate coexistence and unity between otherwise different cultures and worldviews (intercultural competence), a factor that has recommended it to rulers of multi-ethnic realms. On the contrary, the rejection of syncretism, usually in the name of piety and orthodoxy, may help to generate, bolster or authenticate a sense of uncompromised cultural unity in a well-defined minority or majority.

1.4.2. Religious Syncretism

Religious syncretism exhibits blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions. This can occur for many reasons, and the latter scenario happens quite commonly in areas where multiple religious traditions exist in proximity, and function actively in the culture; or when a culture is conquered, and the conquerors bring their religious beliefs with them, but do not succeed in entirely eradicating the old beliefs, especially practices.

Religions may have syncretic elements to their beliefs or history, but adherents of so-labelled systems often frown on applying the label, especially adherents who belong to ‘revealed’ religious systems, such as the Abrahmic religions, or any system that exhibits

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3 The time following the Babylonian exile of Israel (587-539 B.C.E.). The period began with the conquering of Babylon by the Persians and King Cyrus's toleration of diverse religions, which led to the restoration of the Jewish community in Palestine.

4 Abrahamic religions (also Abrahamism) are the monotheistic faiths emphasizing and tracing their common origin to Abraham or recognizing a spiritual tradition identified with him. They are one of the three major divisions in comparative religion, along with Indian religions (Dharmic) and East Asian
an exclusivist approach. Such adherents sometimes see syncretism as a betrayal of their pure truth. By this reasoning, adding an incompatible belief corrupts the original religion, rendering it no longer true. Indeed, critics of a specific syncretistic trend may sometimes use the word ‘syncretism’ as a disparaging epithet, as a charge implying that those who seek to incorporate a new view, belief, or practice into a religious system actually distort the original faith. Non-exclusivist systems of belief, on the other hand, may feel quite free to incorporate other traditions into their own. Others state that the term syncretism is an elusive one and so it can be applied to refer to substitution or modification of the central elements of Christianity or Islam, beliefs or practices introduced from somewhere else. The consequences under this definition, according to Keith Fernando, are a fatal compromise of the religions integrity.

In modern secular society, religious innovators sometimes create new religions syncretically as a mechanism to reduce inter-religious tension and enmity, often with the effect of offending the original religions in question. Such religions, however, do maintain some appeal to a less exclusivist audience.

1.4.3. Syncretism in Ancient Greece

Classical Athens was exclusivistic in matters of religion. The Decree of Diopithes made the introduction of and belief in foreign gods a criminal offence and only the Greeks were allowed to worship in Athenian temples and celebrate festivals, as foreigners were considered impure. Syncretism functioned as a feature of Hellenistic religions (*Taoic*). The three major Abrahamic religions are, in chronological order of founding, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
Ancient Greek religion although only outside of Greece. Overall, Hellenistic culture in the age that followed Alexander the Great itself showed syncretist features, essentially blending of Mesopotamian, Persian, Anatolian, Egyptian (and eventually Etruscan-Roman) elements within an Hellenic formula. The Egyptian god Amun, developed as the Hellenized Zeus Ammon after Alexander the Great went into the desert to seek out Amun’s oracle at Siwa.

Such identifications are derived from *interpretatio graeca*\(^5\), the Hellenic habit of identifying gods of disparate mythologies with their own. When the proto-Greeks (peoples whose language would evolve into Greek proper) first arrived in the Aegean and on the mainland of modern-day Greece early in the second millennium B.C.E., they found localized nymphs and divinities already connected with every important feature of the landscape, such as, mountain, cave, grove and spring - all had their own locally venerated deity. The countless epithets of the Olympian gods reflect their syncretic identification with these various figures. One defines *Zeus Molossos* (worshipped only at Dodona) as “the god identical to Zeus as worshipped by the Molossians at Dodona.” Much of the apparently arbitrary and trivial mythic fables result from later mythographers’ attempts to explain these obscure cults.

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\(^5\) *Interpretatio graeca* (Latin, “Greek translation” or “interpretation by means of Greek [models]”) is a discourse in which ancient Greek religious concepts and practices, deities, and myths are used to interpret or attempt to understand the mythology and religion of other cultures. It is a comparative methodology that looks for equivalencies and shared characteristics. The phrase may describe Greek efforts to explain others’ beliefs and myths, as when Herodotus describes Egyptian religion in terms of perceived Greek analogues, or when Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Plutarch document Roman cults, temples and practices under the names of equivalent Greek deities. *Interpretatio graeca* may also describe non-Greeks’ interpretation of their own belief systems by comparison or assimilation with Greek models, as when Romans adapt Greek myths and iconography under the names of their own gods.
1.4.4. Syncretism in Judaism

In *Moses and Monotheism* Sigmund Freud made a case for Judaism arising out of the pre-existing monotheism that was briefly imposed upon Egypt during the rule of Akhenaten *Aten,* the disk of the Sun in ancient Egyptian mythology, and originally an aspect of Ra, was chosen as the sole deity for Akhenaten’s new religion. The ‘Code of Hammurabi’ is also cited as a likely starting point for the Jewish Ten Commandments. Hammurabi was from the Mesopotamian culture that revered Marduk, among others.

Judaism fought lengthy battles against syncretist tendencies. Here, it is apt to note the case of the golden calf and the railing of prophets against temple prostitution, witchcraft and local fertility cults, as described in the Tanakh. On the other hand, some scholars hold that Judaism refined its concept of monotheism and adopted features, such as, its eschatology, angelology and demonology through contacts with Zoroastrianism.

In spite of the Jewish halakhic prohibitions on polytheism, idolatry, and associated practices (*avodahzarah*), several combinations of Judaism with other religions have sprung up, such as, Jewish Buddhism, Nazarenism, Judeo-Paganism, Messianic Judaism, Jewish Mormonism, and others like Judeo-Christianity. Until relatively recently, China had a Jewish community which had adopted some Confucian practices.

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6 Aten (also Aton, Egyptian ḫn) is the disk of the Sun in ancient Egyptian mythology, and originally an aspect of Ra. The deified Aten is the focus of the monolatristic, henotheistic, or monotheistic religion of Atenism established by Amenhotep IV, who later took the name Akhenaten in worship and recognition of Aten. In his poem "Great Hymn to the Aten," Akhenaten praises Aten as the creator, and giver of life. Some scholars have speculated that Psalm 104 may have been influenced by this hymn.

7 Tanak is a term used among Jews for the Hebrew Bible - the Old Testament. The Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts: (1) Torah or Pentateuch, i.e. Law (2) *Nebim* or Prophets, and (3) Kethubim or Writings, generally termed Hagiographa.
Several of the Jewish Messiah claimants (such as Jacob Frank) and the Sabbateans mixed Cabalistic Judaism with Christianity and Islam.

1.4.5. Syncretism in the Roman Religions

The Romans, identifying themselves as common heirs to a very similar civilization, identified Greek deities with similar figures in the Etruscan-Roman tradition, though without usually copying cultic practices. Syncretic gods of the Hellenistic period found also wide favour in Rome. For example, Serapis, Isis and Mithras. Cybele, who was worshipped in Rome essentially represented a syncretic East Mediterranean goddess. The Romans imported the Greek god Dionysus into Rome, where he merged with the Latin mead god Liber, and converted the Anatolian Sabazios into the Roman Sabazius.

Furthermore, there is a varied degree of correspondence. Perhaps Jupiter makes a better match for Zeus than the rural huntress Diana does for Artemis. Ares does not quite match Mars. The Romans physically imported the Anatolian goddess Cybele into Rome from her Anatolian cult-centre Pessinos in the form of her original aniconic archaic stone idol. They identified her as *Magna Mater* (i.e. The Great Mother) and gave her a matronly, iconic image developed in Hellenistic Pergamum.

Likewise, when the Romans encountered Celts and Germanic peoples, they mingled these peoples’ gods with their own, creating Sulis Minerva, Apollo Sucellos (Apollo the Good Smiter) and Mars Thingsus (Mars of the war-assembly), among many others. In the Germania, the Roman historian Tacitus speaks of Germanic worshippers of Hercules and Mercury. Most modern scholars tentatively identify Hercules as Thor and Mercury as Odin.
1.4.6. Syncretism in Christianity

Interestingly, syncretism did not play its role when Christianity was split into Eastern and Western rites during the Great Schism. However, it became involved with the rifts of the Protestant Reformation, with Desiderius Erasmus’ readings of Plutarch. Even earlier, syncretism was a fundamental aspect of the efforts of Neo-Platonists, such as Marsilio Ficino to reform the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1615, David Pareus of Heidelberg urged Christians to a ‘pious syncretism’ in opposing the Antichrist. But few 17th century Protestants discussed the compromises that might effect conciliation with the Catholic Church. But they were meted with opposition from both the groups.

Catholicism in Central and South America has integrated a plethora of elements from indigenous and slave cultures in those areas. Similarly, many African initiated Churches have an integration of Protestant and traditional African beliefs. In Asia, the revolutionary movements of Taiping (19th century China) and God’s Army (Karen in the 1990s) have blended Christianity and traditional beliefs. The Catholic Church allows some symbols and traditions to be carried over from older belief systems, so long as they are remade to fit into a Christian worldview. Syncretism of other religions with Catholicism, such as, Vodun or Santeria is condemned by the Church.

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8 The East West Schism, also known as the Great Schism, is the medieval division of the state church of the Roman Empire into Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) branches, which later came to be known as the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, respectively.

9 An antichrist, in Christian theology, is a leader who fulfils Biblical prophecies concerning an adversary of Christ, while resembling him in a deceptive manner.

10 Vodun (also known as Voudou, Voodoo, SeviLwa) or Santeria is commonly called Voodoo. The name was derived from the god Vodun of the West African Yoruba people who lived in 18th and 19th century Dahomey. Its roots may go back 6,000 years in Africa. That country occupied parts of today’s
One can contrast Christian syncretism with contextualization or inculturation - the practice of making Christianity relevant to a culture. Contextualization does not address the doctrine but affects a change in the styles or expression of worship. Although Christians often took their European music (e.g. Gregorian music) and building styles (e.g. gothic) into Churches in other parts of the world, in a contextualization approach, they would build churches, sing songs, and pray in a local ethnic style (e.g. Bhajans, Keertans, etc.). Some Jesuit missionaries adapted local systems and images to teach Christianity, as did the Portuguese in China. For example, Robert de Nobili adapting to Tamil Brahmin culture. Moreover, Christianity has adopted some Indian religious systems into its fold. For instance, Indian meditation, Christian yoga, Christian Zen, Christian Vipasana, etc.

In this view, syncretism implies compromising the message of Christianity by merging it with not just a culture, but another religion, common examples being animism or ancestral worship. The Latter Day Saint Movement\(^1\) can be framed as a syncretic outgrowth of main-line Christianity.

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Togo, Benin and Nigeria. Slaves brought their religion with them when they were forcibly shipped to Haiti and other islands in the West Indies.

\(^1\) The Latter Day Saint Movement (also called the LDS Movement or LDS restorationist movement) is the collection of independent church groups that trace their origins to a Christian primitivist movement founded by Joseph Smith in the late 1820s. The vast majority of the believers are Mormons belonging to "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints" (LDS Church), and their predominant theology is Mormonism. A minority of Latter Day Saint adherents, such as members of the Community of Christ, believe in traditional Protestant theology, and have distanced themselves from the distinctive doctrines of Mormonism. Other breakaway groups include the Remnant Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints which support lineal succession of leadership of Joseph Smith's descendants; and the more controversial Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, who defend the practice of polygamy.
A number of historical native American religious movements have incorporated Christian-European influence, like 'the Native American Church,' 'the Ghost Dance,' and 'the religion of Handsome Lake.' Unitarian Universalism is a standing example of a modern syncretic religion. It traces its roots to Universalist and Unitarian Christian congregations. However, modern Unitarian Universalism freely incorporates elements from other religious and non-religious traditions as well, so that it no longer identifies as 'Christian.'

1.4.7. Syncretism in Islam

The mystical tradition in Islam, popularly known as Sufism, is very much syncretic in nature, not only in its origins, but also in its beliefs, since it espouses the concepts of Wahdat-al-Wujud and Wahdat-al-Shuhud, which are, to a great extent, synonymous to pantheism and pan-entheism and sometimes Monism, although the traditional Islamic belief system rejects them and stresses on strict monotheism called Tawhid.

Universal Sufism\textsuperscript{12} seeks the unity of all people and religions. Universal Sufis strive to realize and spread the knowledge of Unity, the religion of Love and Wisdom, so that the biases and prejudices of faiths and beliefs of themselves may fall away and the human heart overflow with love, thus all hatred caused by distinctions and differences be rooted out.

\textsuperscript{12} Universal Sufism is a universalist spiritual movement founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan while travelling throughout the West between 1910 and 1926, based on unity of all people and religions, and the presence of spiritual guidance in all people, places and things. Hazrat Inayat Khan was himself an initiate of the Chisti, Naqshbandi, Suhrawardi, and Qadiri Sufi orders, and was instructed to bring Sufism to the West by his own teacher, Hazrat Shaykh al-Mashaykh Muhammad Abu Hashim Madani.
1.4.8. Syncretism in Indian Religions

By their very nature, Indian religions are syncretic. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism in ancient India have made many adaptations over the millennia, assimilating elements of various diverse religious traditions and they do so even to this day. For instance, Yoga Vasistha. Sikhism is a syncretic monotheistic religion consisting of the Hindu concepts of reincarnation and the Islamic concept of monotheism. Theosophy and the theosophy-based ‘Ascended Master Teachings’ are syncretic religions that combine deities primarily from Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism into an elaborate Spiritual Hierarchy.

The Mughal emperor Akbar, who wanted to consolidate the diverse religious communities in his empire, propounded Din-i-Ilahi (i.e. Religion of Allah or God) - a syncretic religion intended to merge the best elements of the religions of his empire.

1.4.9. Syncretism in Barghawata

The Barghawata kingdom followed a syncretic religion inspired by Islam (influenced by Judaism) with elements of Sunni, Shi’ite and Kharijite Islam, mixed with astrological and heathen traditions. They have their own Qur’an in the Berber language comprising 80 surahs under the leadership of the second ruler of the dynasty Salihibn Tarif, who had taken part in the Maysara uprising. He proclaimed
himself a prophet. He also claimed to be the final Mahdi,\textsuperscript{13} and that Isa (Jesus) would be his companion and pray behind him on the day of the Last Judgement.

1.4.10. Syncretism in Bahai Religion

The Baha’is follow Baha’u’llah, a prophet whom they consider a successor to Mohammed, Jesus, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster and Abraham. This acceptance of other religious founders has encouraged some to regard the Baha’i religion as a syncretic faith. However, Baha’is and the Baha’i writings explicitly reject this view. Baha’is consider Baha’u’llah’s revelation an independent, though related, revelation from God. Its relationship to previous dispensations is seen as analogous to the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. They regard beliefs held in common as evidence of truth, progressively revealed by God throughout human history, and culminating in (at present) the Baha’i revelation. Baha’is have their own sacred scripture, interpretations, laws and practices that, for Baha’is, supersede those of other faiths.

1.4.11. Syncretism Caribbean Religions and cultures

The process of syncretism in the Caribbean region often forms a part of cultural creolization. (The technical term ‘Creole’ may apply to anyone born and raised in the region, regardless of ethnicity). The shared histories of the Caribbean islands include long periods of European Imperialism (mainly by Spain, France, and the United Kingdom) and

\textsuperscript{13} In Islamic eschatology, Mahdi (Guided One) is the prophesied redeemer of Islam who will rule for seven, nine or nineteen years (according to various interpretations) before the Day of Judgement (yawm al-qiyamah literally, the Day of Resurrection) and will rid the world of wrongdoing, injustice and tyranny. In Shi’a Islam, the belief in the Mahdi is a ‘central religious idea’ and closely related as the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, whose return from occultation is deemed analogous with the coming of the Mahdi. In Sunni traditions, there are several hadith referring to the Mahdi.
the importation of African slaves (primarily from Central and Western Africa). The influences of each of the above interacted in varying degrees on the islands, producing the fabric of society that exists today in the Caribbean. The Rastafari movement, founded in Jamaica, syncretises vigorously, mixing elements from the Bible, Marcus Garvey’s Pan Africanism Movement, Hinduism and Caribbean culture. Another highly syncretic religion of the area, vodou, combines elements of Western African, native Caribbean and Christian (especially Roman Catholic) beliefs.

1.4.12. Other Modern Syncretic Religious Movements

Druze integrated elements of Ismaili Islam with Gnosticism and Platonism. In Vietnam, Caodaism blends elements of Buddhism, Catholicism and Kardecism. Several new Japanese religions (such as ‘Konkokyo’ and ‘Seicho-No-Ie’) are syncretistic in nature. The Nigerian religion Chrislam is a combination of Christian and Islamic doctrines. Thelema is a mixture of many different schools of belief and practice, including Hermeticism, Eastern Mysticism, Yoga, 19th century libertarian philosophies (e.g. Nietzsche), occultism, and the Kabbalah, as well as ancient Egyptian and Greek

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14 The Druze are a monotheistic religious community, found primarily in Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan, emerged during the 11th century from Isma’ili Islam, a school of Shi’a Islam. Druze beliefs incorporate several elements from Abrahamic religions, Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism and other philosophies. The Druze call themselves Ahl al-Tawhid, i.e. the People of Monotheism, or al-Muwahhidun, i.e. the Unitarians.

15 Thelema is the English transliteration of the Koine Greek meaning ‘will.’ It is a spiritual philosophy (referred to by some as a religion) that was developed by the early 20th century British writer and magician, Aleister Crowley. By his account, a non-corporeal or praeterhuman being that called itself Aiwass contacted him and dictated a text known as The Book of the Law or Liber AL vel Legis, which outlined the principles of Thelema. The Thelemic pantheon includes a number of deities, focusing primarily on a trinity of deities adapted from ancient Egyptian religion, who are the three speakers of The Book of the Law: Nuit, Hadit and Ra-Hoor-Khuit.

16 Hermeticism or the Western Hermetic Tradition is a set of philosophical and religious beliefs based primarily upon the pseudepigraphical writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. These beliefs have heavily influenced the Western esoteric tradition and were considered greatly important during both the Renaissance and the Reformation.
religion. Examples of strongly syncretic Romantic and modern movements with some religious elements include mysticism, occultism, theosophy, modern strology, Neo-Paganism, and the New Age movement.

In China, most of the population follows syncretist religions combining Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism and elements of Confucianism. Out of all Chinese believers, approximately 85.7% adhere to Chinese traditional religion, as many profess to be both Mahayana Buddhist and Taoist at the same time. Many of the pagodas in China are dedicated to both Buddhist and Taoist deities.

In Reunion, the Malbars combine elements of Hinduism and Christianity. In 1954, Sun Myung Moon founded the Unification Church in South Korea, whose teachings are based on the Bible, but include new interpretations not found in mainstream Judaism and Christianity, and incorporate Asian traditions.

Meivazhi (Tamil) is a syncretic monotheistic minority religion based in Tamil Nadu. Its focus is spiritual enlightenment and the conquering of death. Meivazhi preaches the ‘Oneness of essence’ message of all the previous major scriptures - particularly Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity - allowing membership regardless of creed. Meivazhi’s disciples are thousands of people belonging once to 69 different castes of different religions being united as one family of Meivazhi Religion.

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17 Reunion is a syncretic sect - Christianity (principally Catholicism) and Hinduism - in Malabar, Kerala in India.
The new syncretic religions in the world are, Vodou or Santeria, which analogize various Yoruba and other African deities to the Roman Catholic saints. Some sects of Candomble have also incorporated Native American deities, and Umbanda combined African deities with Kardecist spiritualism. Hoodoo is a similarly derived form of folk magic practiced by some African American communities in the Southern United States. Other traditions of syncretic folk religion in North America include Louisiana Voodoo as well as Pennsylvania Dutch Pow-wow, in which practitioners profess to invoke power through the Christian God. According to Carsten Colpe, “No religious revolution... is possible without paying the price of syncretism.”

1.4.13. Syncretism in English Literature

Syncretism is deeply inherent in English literature. For, it has assimilated into its corpus various elements prevalent in other cultures, philosophies and literatures, such as Greek philosophical elements like Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, Pythagoreanism, Epicureanism, Gnosticism, Stoicism, pantheism, pan-entheism, humanism, etc.; Eastern philosophy like Karma, Carvaka, Advaita, Dvaita, Visistadvaita, Syadvada, Anekantavada, etc.; theosophies like Greek Religions, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Roman Religions, Christianity, Islam, Indian Religions, Braghawata, Bahai, Caribbean Religions, Marxism, mysticism, et al. All these and many other elements are reflected in English literature, which speaks of its syncretic character.

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2. Mysticism

2.1. Origin

The word ‘mysticism’ has the etymological link to the Greek verbs *muo*, *myomyeo*, *mysterion*, meaning to shut eyes or mouth, to close the lips for silence and secrecy, initiate into the mystery or mysteries - words connoting absorption, esotericism, and faith in relation to the supernatural. The term came into vogue in the context of the ancient mystery religions. In the Greek mystery cults (*muein* i.e. to remain silent) referred to the secrecy of the initiation rites. For, given its nature, in Greek mystery cults, the initiates were bound by certain oath of secrecy. However, with the passage of time, especially in Neo-Platonic theory, the ‘mystical silence’ came to mean silent contemplation (*contemplationes silentia*). Even this ‘contemplation’ does not coincide with our own usage of the term, since *theoria* denotes speculative knowledge as well as what we call contemplation. Nor does the early Christian term *mustikos* correspond to our present understanding, since it referred to the spiritual meaning in the light of revelation. Eventually, the idea of a meaning hidden underneath surface appearances was extended to the whole gamut of spiritual reality (e.g. sacraments or *samskaras* means exterior sign of interior grace). Yet the present meaning that we so readily associate with the term ‘mystical’ was never part of it.

In today’s pan-religious world, ‘mystical’ refers to the experience in which the creature or believer comes to an intimate union with the divine. That is, during the mystical union, the mystic, goes beyond one’s corporeal or sensual or empirical self through trance and gets immersed in the ‘divine’ or the ‘greater Self’ or ‘the supernatural.’ In such a state of trance, the mystic is beyond verbal or linguistic
expression. For, verbal language is far too limited to express and communicate all that the human experiences, especially the transcendental experiences. All the more, the mystic communicates one’s mystical experiences through a variety of medium, which often times are literary in nature, such as, sama’, song, dance of the whirling dervishes in Islam; wenta, mondo, koan in Buddhism; speaking in tongues in Christianity, etc.

In brief, mysticism is the knowledge of, and especially the personal experience of, states of consciousness, or levels of being, or aspects of reality, beyond normal human perception, including experience of and even communion with a supreme being.

2.2. Definition

The theory that a knowledge of God or the Ultimate Reality is attainable through the use of some human faculty that transcends intellect and does not use ordinary human perception or logical processes. Mysticism takes different forms and does not yield itself readily to definition. Each mystical experience is unique and by its very nature ineffable; yet there seem to be characteristics common to all mystical experiences that make its definition, although difficult, possible. One of the main challenges in the study of mysticism is to keep its definition flexible without losing basic specificity. An interdisciplinary search as this offers the exciting prospect of a trans-historical, trans-disciplinary, trans-religious and trans-cultural approach to defining mysticism and describing mystical experience. For, no one definition can comprehensively incorporate all experiences that, at some point or other, have been described as ‘mystical.’ All the more, they do give us a partial picture by which we can apprehend the meaning. The etymological lineage of the term provides little assistance in formulating a
A comprehensive and ambiguous definition. In 1899 Dean W.R. Inge listed twenty-five definitions and ever since the study of world religions has considerably expanded, and new mystical cults across religions have sprung up, thus extending its meaning and space.

At a more general level, but still unsatisfactory from a religious point of view, is the opinion that mysticism is vague and unpractical. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, which gives several definitions of mysticism, notes that ‘from the hostile point of view, mysticism implies self-delusion or dreamy confusion of thought; hence the term is often applied to any religious belief to which these evil qualities are imputed.’ Therefore, some old writers referred to the ‘trash’ or ‘poison’ of mysticism and others spoke of its vagueness or crude specifications. Recently a writer on mystical experience said that ‘seen very broadly, mysticism is a name for our infinite appetites. Less broadly it is the assurance that these appetites can be satisfied.’ It may also be an attitude towards ‘reality,’ or even a name for ‘the paranoid darkness in which unbalanced people stumble so confidently.’

Webster’s third edition gives three definitions. The first one defines mysticism as “the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality.” Here, the word ‘mysticism’ has an honourable pedigree and still retains something of its ancient meaning. Keeping aside ‘mystical union,’ which begs the question, we are left with ‘the experience of direct communion with ultimate reality.’ Of course, religion, without communion with ultimate reality or the supernatural, would be nothing but merely a natural or human construction, which would amount to mere ideology, or a dry sociocultural ritual, or an illusion. In the above definition ‘mysticism’ denotes the origin of

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religion, the founding moment that is usually called ‘revelation.’ What is it that drives a mystic, if not the experience of direct communion with ultimate reality? ‘Mysticism’ in this sense indicates the ultimate end of religion.

A doctrine of its own is a quintessence to any living religion worth its name. Moreover, the doctrine must emerge from and lead to mystical experience. Hence Webster’s gives the second definition of mysticism as, “a doctrine that asserts the possibility of attaining an intuitive knowledge of spiritual truths through meditation.” In fact, contemplation and meditation are a key, rather a means to attain mystical experience.

Today, a number of people, especially in the intellectual cum academic circle, grasp ‘mysticism’ in terms of the third of Webster’s definitions. That is, “vague speculation, belief without foundation.” Mysticism commonly signifies mystification, madness, or mindless mush. Here, we have to agree with Bertrand Russell, whose famous book, Mysticism and Logic says: You cannot be a mystic and a rational person at one and the same time. Furthermore, the enlightened position of the modern intellectual is often that of Freud: religion is a neurosis or a delusion. If you are religious, you are in fact mad.

Gerson defines mysticism as “knowledge of God by experience, arrived at through the embrace of unifying love.”

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To view mysticism from the mystics’ optic, some of them define it as ‘an attitude to life,’ others ‘a state of soul,’ yet others ‘a relationship to God.’ To conjoin all their views into one, “mysticism is 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.”

A general definition arrived at by the mystical scholars is “an individual, emotional sense of identification with no specific expressible content in which language points beyond itself to an experience of something that can be indicated only in paradoxes and that transcends all empirical content as ultimate reality.”

A basic, pragmatic definition might be as follows: Mystical experience is a state of consciousness different from that of everyday life, which has a significant transformative effect on the subject; such transformation is understood by the subject not only as positive, but as coming into contact with a deeper truth or reality, with being, or with a divine essence that may be within or beyond the self. Mysticism, in turn, as the post-facto or external interpretation of such states, seeks symbolic, historical, political, and scientific tools in order to validate, to guide, put also at times to discredit, the subjective experience of the mystic.

Drawing on the thought of Henry James, this definition seeks to acknowledge the inherent tension between subjective experience or personal faith, and the historical, cultural, or philosophical discourses that both shape and question that faith. This is not to downplay these discourses, nor to discount the subjective, but rather to open a space for communication. James himself was drawing on yet criticizing a late 19th century attempt

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to understand mysticism syncretically, as the common experiential basis for different world religions and also for a modern secular religion. Expanding upon his claim that there are varieties of religious experience - similar, yet far from identical in their social, ethical, and spiritual implications - my idea of this brief search is not a synthesis, not a single definition of mysticism, but rather a productive dialogue between different interpretations.

“Mysticism,” as I understand it, “is the innermost experience of the being in communion with the Being.” In mystical language, ‘Being’ (also called ‘ultimate reality’) is the source of ‘being.’ In this sense, the word does not imply ‘vague speculation’ or ‘belief without foundation’ unless one takes shelter under the position, which is quite common in modern times, that there is no such thing as ‘Being’ or ‘ultimate reality.’ If that is one’s strand, then the quest to be in communion with a non-existent entity is certainly amorphous and meaningless.

So, unless we take shelter under the wings of atheism or agnosticism, we have to come to understand that religion in any meaningful sense of the term has something ‘mystical’ about it. Of course, the experience of communion with the ‘Being’ or ultimate reality forms the very edifice of religion, and the quest for such communion has always inspired and inspired the mystics, ever since the dawn of religion, and continues to do so even to this day.

2.3. Mystical Experience

The adjective ‘mystical’ refers to the supernatural or spiritual, as opposed to the natural or material. ‘Mystical experience’ is an infused, passive experience of the
supernatural in the natural human soul. It is 'infused,' because of its supernatural source, which distinguishes it from an awareness of the divine produced by purely human effort or through ascetical means. It is 'passive,' because the experience is the result of supernatural operation, and during the experience the human soul is more receptive than active. In brief, it is a direct communion with the supernatural through knowledge and grace, leading to wisdom.

Mysticism forms the core of all religion. All those religions, which have had historical founders had been started with a powerful mystical experience of the immediate contact with the supernatural, which, like a spark enflamed others - a fire that enkindles other fires. For example, Tao, Confucius, Buddha, Mahaveera, Abraham, Jesus, Mohammed, Bahaullah, and so on. However, all religions can retain their vitality only as long as their followers carry on this original spark and pass on this direct experience of the transcendental. The significance of such an experience, though present in all religions, varies in importance.

2.3.1. Mystical Union

Mystical union (In Latin unio mystica) is an ecstatic or transcendental experience resulting in a perfect union of the natural human soul with the supernatural divine. In mystical union, ecstasy is a death (in the metaphorical sense) that brings new life (in the spiritual or supernatural sense). In trance, the soul ascends to the supernatural through constant self-denial, purging the old corporeal self, thus resulting in the resurrection of the new self. All religions incorporate this mystical aspect. For instance, Ahm Brahmasmi (in Sanskrit means “I am Brahman”) or Tattvamasi (in Sanskrit means “Thou art That”)
in Sankaracharya’s Advaita or non-dualism: Unitissima (in Latin meaning “in most complete union” or mystical marriage, wherein the believer says “I am Christ”) in Christianity and so on. Speaking on similar lines, W. Hilton’s (ca. 1343-96) principal work in Latin, Scala Perfectionis, i.e. Stages of Perfection says that by contemplation, self-denial and renunciation of the world, one can have the infused experience of the supernatural culminating in mystical union.

This is not a mere metaphysical theory, but a mystical path to liberation. It requires ascetical training and mental discipline to overcome the desires, oppositions and limitations of body. Brhadaranyaka Upanisad 4.3.22 describes mystical union as “a man, when in the embrace of a beloved wife, knows nothing within or without, so this person, when in the embrace of the intelligent Soul, knows nothing within or without.”

2.3.2. Mystical State

Mystical state is an ecstatic or a state of trance, in which the human soul lives habitually, although not constantly, in the presence of the supernatural divine as a continuing effect of mystical union. Mystics opine that the union of the human soul with the divine is initiated through a strong interior quest for the supernatural, gifted through sanctifying grace and perfected to a mystical degree by metaphysical knowledge. As Augustine says, “Our hearts are made for Thee O’ Lord, and they are restless until they rest in Thee.” (The Confessions of St Augustine, Book 1, Chapter 1). It is further stated that, as opposed to the ascetical state, the mystical state is characterized by the passivity or receptivity of the soul, wherein the soul is acted upon than acting.
For those mystics to whom mystical act is similar to or identical with infused contemplation, the essential mystical state operates on infused knowledge. On the other hand, those mystics to whom mystical act is due to the operations of divine gifts hold that mystical state consists in the predominance of divine gifts over infused knowledge. Furthermore, those mystics who consider that infused contemplation, mystical act, or the operation of divine gifts do not fall within the scope of mystical life consider that the mystical state is an extraordinary state of grace. There are some other mystics, who teach that infused contemplation, divine gifts, the mystical act and mystical state are not only the normal perfection of the life of grace, but that all mystics should strive for them. For those who deny the mystical state as the normal perfection of the life of grace and the infused virtues, there are two distinct perfections available to the mystics: ascetical perfection and mystical perfection, though the latter is rare and extraordinary. Those who consider the divine gifts to be the perfection of the infused virtues teach that there is but one path to the one mystical perfection and it passes from the ascetical to the mystical phase. Hence the mystical state is the goal of all mystics. All the more, there is no unanimity among mystics regarding mystical state and its operations.

2.3.3. Mystical Theology

The knowledge, which is the fruit of mystical experience, has the same object as both natural and systematic theology, i.e. God or the divine or the supernatural. Whereas in theodicy the knowledge of God or of the divine or of the supernatural is achieved through normal reasoning, and in systematic theology, the same is achieved by applying reasoning to revelation. Here the knowledge is more direct and less cerebral.
It is quite hazardous to verbalize mystical experiences into systematic theological theories. Each mystical system has an interpretation of its own based on its religious cum theological background, which is an essential part of the experience. However, these interpretations cannot be transferred into the kind of logically coherent systems, which we usually call theology. For, a mystical system is less concerned about logical consistency and sharply defined theological concepts than about adequate translations of the actual experience per se. This is particularly true in a tradition wherein the mystical element constitutes most of the core of the religion itself. It is more of a practical-devotion than speculative-metaphysical attitude.

2.3.4. Mystical Knowledge

Mystical knowledge is the experiential knowledge of the supernatural obtained through spiritual ecstasies, which, according to mystics, is superior to that acquired through natural process or reason. It is an experiential knowledge arising from mystical marriage or mystical union, which is an intense, inter-subjective relationship between the natural (human) and the supernatural (divine). As it is distinct from acquired knowledge, mystical union is intuitive and passive. For, given the natural-corporeal status, the person is unable to produce or prolong the experience, since it is transcendental in nature. Similarly, mystical knowledge, resultant of mystical union, is far beyond the intelligible world or the world of logic and reason. Hence, it can be described only apophatically, by way of successive negations (neti, neti, i.e. neither this nor that). Thomas Aquinas considers mystical union to be a supreme species of intellectual intuition of the divine
essence. According to him, it is knowledge by connaturality - an extraordinary wisdom compared to the ordinary one.

Gradually, the distinction was drawn between practical mystical knowledge (result of infused contemplation) and speculative mystical knowledge (scientific study of mysticism). Speculative mystical knowledge envelops the entire science of the spiritual life. Mystical knowledge is generally considered to be at the higher levels because of its supernatural source, and, according to mystics, one can possess it only through transcendental experience. Hence mystical knowledge is knowledge by experience and not by reason.

2.3.5. Mystical Trends

The mystical approach does not come naturally to anyone schooled in a monotheistic creed. It is, on the other hand, the very stuff and substance of the religions that have grown up in India. The mystics by nature are tolerant beings, who see truth in all religions which for them appear as the outward manifestation of a single, inexpressible truth.

It can be maintained that the strictly monotheistic religions do not naturally lend themselves to mysticism. Christianity is the exception because it introduces into a monotheistic system an idea that is wholly foreign to it, namely, Trinity, i.e. the Godhead is comprised of three divine persons - Father, Son (Jesus Christ) and Holy Spirit. Such an idea is as repulsive to the strict monotheism of Islam as it is to that of the Jews. Judaism, on its side, never developed a mystical tradition comparable to that of the other great religions because it held that union with a transcendental God who manifests Himself in
history could not be possible to a finite creature. However, as in Islam and Christianity, Judaism has mystical schools like Kabbalah, Merkabah, Hasidism, etc.

If we cast a quick glance over the history of humankind it becomes clear that there are mystical elements which give life and vitality to all religions worthy of the name. Some people argue that mystical experience is all fundamentally one and the same, while others argue for a variety of experiences.

2.3.6. Mystical Language

How can we express the inexpressible? The question prompts us to make a mystical turn. In fact, it is hard to imagine studying mysticism without looking at language, which of course, is the medium of expression. The mystical experience per se is beyond verbal and linguistic comprehension. Just as it transcends the mystic, so it transcends the human conceptual language as well. On the other hand, studies of language should look at mysticism as something where language breaks down and ceases to function according to the normal rules governing it. Yet, the need to express that mystical state and communicate it to others needs the medium of language, and hence we have mystical literature.

At the outset, we are faced with the productive tension between mystical experience, its expression in language, and its transformation into cultural artefacts and institutions. Hence, the questions which haunt for answers at this juncture are: What is personal experience, and in particular, mystical awakening (which mystics claim to possess), in a world shaped by the senses, culture, milieu, and expressed through conceptual language? Furthermore, according to the logic of experimental verifiability, what problem do we encounter in defining knowledge (in this case that of mystical experience), less as an objective or positive statement and more as an emergence, a dynamic field, a system that contains its own undoing (creatively aprotic, or shot through with ineffability, as mysticism most often is)? Can we bring together the biological brain and the symbolizing mind (as recent cognitive studies of mystical experience do) in a new understanding of consciousness and memory? Finally, what is the relationship between the recent return of the religious in our culture (to what extent is it mystical?), and centuries of intellectual thought that has been at once fascinated by and sceptical of mystical experience?

Epistemologically, language is the medium of communication of one’s thoughts, feelings or yearnings of the heart, ideas, experiences, et al. When the mystic is in union with the supernatural, he/she is in a mystical or an ecstatic or a state of trance, which is beyond human conceptual language. Moreover, human conceptual language is limited by nature. For, it cannot conceptualize and express everything that the human thinks, feels and experiences. All the more, when the human person wants to communicate this experience to others, which is mystical or otherwise, he/she has to communicate it via the
same limited human conceptual language, which is the only available vehicle of communication, and so, is the problem of communication in toto.

While human knowledge per se begins with the awareness of the sense organs, the intellect works to abstract from colours, shapes, sounds, feelings, scents and tastes produced by chemical and physical interaction between the object outside and the sense organ. By linking these abstract forms and ideas together with the reality outside, the human mind reasons, infers and makes judgements.

According to St Thomas Aquinas, in the state of innocence before the Fall of Adam (Genesis 3:1-24), there may have been a way of knowing that began with an immediate conceptual activity without previous sensation. St Ignatius of Loyola calls such a mystical experience, "consolation without previous cause." 22 According to mystics, only by innate transcendental grace can human beings attain such a form of intellection. For, having lost that preternatural endowment, and given one's natural status, human person is no longer capable of having that direct knowledge or experience of the divine, that, to be adequate, must be totally free from the distorting effects of imagery. The supernatural is pure spirit and cannot be described in language drawn from human sense-experience. All the more, according to mystics, in some cases and for special reasons the supernatural can always confer grace restoring a person temporarily to the state of perfection that humans enjoyed before the Fall.

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The above explanation appears to be a metaphysical theory to the naked eye. But it is a coherent explanation and a useful working hypothesis to explain the mystical phenomena we are grappling with. Furthermore, it helps to understand, why the mystic, after his mystical experience, is invariably incapable to describe and communicate his deep, innate experiences. Thus Augustine says, "Thy invisible things, understood by those that are made, I saw indeed but was unable to fix my gaze thereon. My weakness was beaten back and I was reduced to my ordinary experience" (Confessions 7.17). In the mystic's experience there is complete coordination of will and intellect directed towards the supernatural, which is the source and summit of the entire mystical activity. Hence it can be clearly seen why the effect of mystical contemplation is not primarily an illumination of the mind, but is chiefly a deepening of the whole personality, an enriching of character, and development of a higher virtue.

Thomas Gallus, a 13th century commentator has discovered a more profound and super-intellectual manner of arriving at mystical knowledge. According to him, the highest cognitive faculty is not the intellect, but there is one far excelling than this, which he calls in Latin *principalis affection*, which means 'the high point of the soul' that is rather conative than cognitive. Here sense-knowledge, imagination, and reasoning are all suspended. The mystic is drawn to the supernatural in a way in which a woman is drawn to her lover. Here, the verbal human language employed (e.g. by St John of the Cross, Sharafuddin Maneri, etc.) to describe what is essentially an experience is unique and essentially incommunicable. Hence, the mystic seeks the medium to express one's experiences, which, more often than not,
are literary in nature. For example, sama’: poetry, song, dance and other similar literary expressions.

2.3.7. Mystical Literature

Mysticism offers poetic descriptions of mystical union. From the 12th century onwards mystical union was also a theme in religious lyrics. For example, Pseudo-Bernard’s hymn Jesu dulcis memoria, popular in English as ‘Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee’, and the works by John of the Cross (1542-91) and Angelus Silesius (1624-77). Hagiography (Lives of Saints) and the literature of revelation tell of many ecstatic experiences of union from the 13th century onwards, especially in women’s mysticism. For example, Catherine of Siena (1347-80), Teresa of Avila (1515-82), etc.

Erotic mystical union experienced as kissing and embracing is usually accompanied by a feeling of both spiritual and bodily sweetness (Gertrude the Great [1256-1302], “the union which is sweetness, the sweetness which is union with Christ”). It may also involve somatic reactions. (e.g. Dorothy of Montau [1347-94], Bridget of Sweden [1303-73], who spoke of mystical pregnancies cum other experiences).

Coming to the Indian subcontinent, the Bhagavad-Gita (2nd century B.C.E.) is not a treatise of yogic practices, but a mystical poem culminating in a vision of the supernatural, perhaps the finest spiritual work to come from the East, is hard to classify by Western canons. It is a most scintillating theophany describing Krishna’s depiction of divine presence in the world (Ch. 11). The poem ends with the candid advice to seek the divine in the mundane way of piety. This advice was taken up by the bhakti movement in
whose laps bloomed some of the finest flowers of Hindu mysticism, which continues to nourish a plethora of Indian piety today.

Aspects of mysticism and the mystical experience are common in English literature. Down the corridors of English literary history mystical thought and mystical attitude are persistent and the English race has a marked tendency towards mysticism, which William James calls a ‘mystical germ,’ but mainly practical mysticism. Many people vaguely and intermittently experience this inner sensation or movements, especially during emotional exaltation, which are the first glimmerings of that mystical power, which is so finely developed and sustained with the mystics that it becomes their definite faculty of vision. We haven’t yet recognized the name for this faculty, which has been variously called as ‘transcendental feeling,’ ‘imagination,’ ‘mystic reason,’ ‘cosmic consciousness,’ ‘divine sagacity,’ ‘ecstasy,’ or ‘vision’ - all mean the same. No common name though, there is testimony of its existence, the testimony of the greatest teachers, philosophers, and poets, who describe in symbolic and mythical language:

That serene and blessed mood
In which ... the breath of this corporeal frame.
And even the motion of our human blood.
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy.
We see into the life of things. (Tintern Abbey).
Mysticism in literature is a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy, an attitude of mind founded upon an intuitive experience of unity, of oneness, of alikeness in all things, which leads to the further belief that all things are but forms or manifestations of the one divine life, and that these phenomena are fleeting and impermanent, although the causal spirit is immortal and enduring. If unity is at the root of things, man as a spark of the Divine does have some share in the nature of the Divine, who can know the Divine through this godlike part of his own nature, i.e. his soul or spirit. This is the attitude lying at the heart of mysticism, which Blake has crystallised thus:

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

The literary mystic bases his belief, not on logic, reason, or facts, but on feeling, on intuitive knowledge. As the intellect is to apprehend material things, the spirit is for the spiritual. The English writers share the full wave of mystical thought and experience that swept over Europe in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries with a plethora of after effects. Further, during the first half of the twentieth century, prevailing critical sentiments favoured clarity and precision, and numerous influential writers - including Irving Babbitt, T.E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis, and Ezra Pound - expressed doubt or suspicion when it came to the claims of mysticism. But there has been something of a reaction in the second half of the century, and many of the most important critics - including Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, Mircea Eliade, and Helen Vendler - have found
ways of judging and appreciating the mystical dimensions in William Blake, Emerson, Walt Whitman, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and others.

England has produced a body of mystical literature dealing with the inner life, purification, contemplation, and ecstatic union. Mystical music echoes through many pages of English literature like that of Spenser, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Blake, Browning, Emerson, Carlyle, Patmore, Richard Jefferies, John Bunyan, William Cowper, Francis Thompson, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and a host of other poet-seers, followed by the Cambridge Platonists like, John Norris, Henry More, John Smith, Benjamin Whichcote, Burke, Coleridge, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, Christina Rossetti, W. B. Yeats, and Evelyn Underhill, who have crystallized in immortal lines this illuminated vision of the world in their writings - mystical thought clothed in noble prose and poetry. Wordsworth is a poet, a seer, a mystic and a practical psychologist, whose inward eye was focussed to visions scarce dreamt of by men, and the key to understand him is a mystic one. For example, Wordsworth found the Divine and the mystical in 'Nature,' which is evident in his *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*. Further, *Aurora Leigh* of Mrs Browning, *Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore, and George Meredith’s *Fiona Macleod* are mystical to name a few. All Blake’s writings are deeply mystical in thought and symbolic in expression, to whom ‘Imagination’ was a mystical reality, which is reflected in his *Songs of Innocence*. Spenser’s *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie* describes mystical experiences. Both Shelley and Browning may be called love-mystics, to whom love is the solution to the mystery of life, a link between God and man. Shelley’s intense spirituality and his belief in a Soul of the Universe are reflected in his *Prometheus*, the most mystical of his
poems. Further, while *Adonais* depicts a sense of mystical unity in all things, the *Revolt of Islam* gives Shelley’s mystical mythology. Mrs Shelley aptly says, “It requires a mind as subtle and penetrating as Shelley’s own to understand the mystic meanings scattered throughout the poem.” Browning, a seer and pre-eminently a mystic sees unity under diversity at the centre of all existence, which permeates all his writings, such as *Rabbi ben Ezra, A Death in the Desert, The Ring and the Book, The Statue and the Bust*, and *Asolando*. In his exaltation of love, as in several other points, Browning much resembles the German mystic, Meister Eckhart. *Endymion* and *Hyperion* bring out Keats’ idea of mystical unity of various elements of the individual soul and his belief that change is not decay, but the law of growth and progress - a true mystical experience. Rossetti has a strong tinge of sensuousness, of earthiness in his nature. Patmore has a curious mixture of materialist and mystic - mystical fusion of his own personality with Spirit. Many of the metaphysical poets, such as John Donne, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Traherne, Richard Crashaw, and George Herbert are mystical in their thought. There are clear mystical elements in the works of the New England Transcendentalists, such as, Walt Whitman, I.B. Singer and T.S. Eliot. There are philosophical mystics, who present their convictions in a philosophic form appealing both to the intellect and the emotions. Donne, William Law, Burke, Coleridge, and Thomas Carlyle are predominantly intellectual, whose prose and poetical works are permeated by a mystical philosophy; while Traherne, Emily Bronte, and Tennyson clothe their thoughts to some extent in philosophical language. Donne’s *The Progress of the Soul, Undertaking, Ecstasy, Soul’s Joy*, and *Negative Love* are truly mystical poems, of which, *Negative Love* is derived from Pythagorean philosophy having a continual comparison of mental and spiritual, with physical
processes. Traherne’s *Meditations* forms a valuable piece of mystical literature, whose most interesting contribution to the psychology of mysticism is the account of his childhood *Vision Splendid*. While *The Prisoner* and *The Visionary* of Emily Bronte describe a similar experience, *The Philosopher* is the expression of spiritual vision - all three are the most perfect mystic poems in English. There is a great deal of Eastern philosophy and mysticism in Tennyson’s *The Ancient Sage* - a unity of all existence to the point of merging the personality into the universal. Richard Crashaw and Francis Thomson are devotional mystics. Francis Thompson sees the presence of the Divine (i.e. pan-entheism) in all things, and his ‘Divine intoxication’ is expressed in the mystical utterance of his Ode *The Hound of Heaven* - a picturesque narration of the old mystic idea of the Divine love chase. To crown it all, Gerard Manley Hopkins, the father of modern poetry, being a Jesuit himself, is a mystic par excellence, whose *God’s Grandeur, Easter Communion, Starlight Night, The Windhover*, and *Heaven-Haven* are mystical literary pieces.

The voices of the English mystical poets and writers form but one note in a mighty chorus of witnesses whose testimony it is impossible for any thoughtful person to ignore. It is evident that there is a plethora of syncretic mystical literature emanated from the wellsprings of English poet-seers. By surveying the works of so heterodox a group of writers we have realized that mysticism refers to a wide spectrum of experience and is a means of perceiving reality or absolute truth in many different forms and in many different patterns of religious belief.
2.4. Mystics

Mystics are those spiritual persons represented in almost every culture throughout history who have had a direct, intuitive and affective experience of the Absolute. The mystic is empowered by and possesses of some higher consciousness wherein there is no subject-object polarity. The mystic and the Absolute that he/she experiences fuse into an undivided unity. The human soul is bathed into and vitalized with a new energy; gets access to spiritual treasures and insight into pure truth; and finally it’s filled with joy and bliss (in Sanskrit Sat-Cit-Ananda) - which is the goal of mystical life-with the ultimate end in mind, life after life (mukti, nirvana, kaivalya, et al).

Mystics are not stationary beings but are evolving and growing, and so is mystical literature, which is the resultant fruit of their mystical experience. Even a mystic’s own individual experience is not univocal but changes over the years as their experience deepens, just as a person’s relationship to a loved one matures with time and life’s varied experiences which either encourage growth or stultify it.

Each mystic belongs to a particular religion and, indeed, a living expression of that religion at a local level. Hence there are not only varieties of spiritual cum mystical background in different religions but also variations in mystical schools within a particular religion itself. This says that a mystic’s thinking about spiritual matters is very much conditioned by his own particular, specific religious milieu. Similarly, his whole psychic outlook is likewise conditioned. For instance, Christian mystics have visions of Jesus Christ, but not of Mohammed and vice versa.
A mystic’s personal conceptualization of mystical experience will have either a predominantly monotheistic or pantheistic bent which in turn helps shape the mystic’s perception and understanding of the experience per se. Each person has his or her own particular nature and this plays a vitally determining role in all life’s experiences, mystical ones included.

In the strict sense of the term, there cannot be mystics among the Buddhists since they do not acknowledge an Absolute somewhere out ‘there.’ All the more, Kshanikavada, i.e. theory of momentariness, which says that the human person is an amalgam of five Kandhas (in Pali) or Skandhas (in Sanskrit) - the faculties or functions or aspects that constitute a human person. They are, rupa (form or matter), vedana (sensation or feelings), samjna (perception, conception, appreciation, cognition or discrimination), sankhara (mental formations, impulses, volition or compositional factors), and vinnana (consciousness or discernment), which itself is innately mystical. Mystics are held in high esteem in Taoism (Ref Lao Tzu), Christianity (Ref. Mysticism cum Desert Fathers), Islam (Ref. Sufism), Hinduism (Ref. Eastern Mysticism), where the determined quest for a union with the Ultimate Reality has readily lent itself to mysticism.

In the mystical literary annals, the mystic narrates not only about the process of ecstatic experiences, but also about their products. For instance, the poetry which resulted from their ecstatic states and how they were transformed by them. The mystic is civilization’s shaman, who inherits the shaman’s ecstasy, which further confers on him the distinctive access to certain aspects of life and reality. As in the shamanistic cultures shamans specialize in ecstasy, in civilizations, mystics are distinct persons who are
blessed with the unique faculty to enter into the realm of the mind which transforms not only themselves, but also those around them.

To realize the universality of mystical ecstasy in human civilizations, we need to turn our gaze towards mystical treasures, and unravel the pearls which the mystics have left in world literature. All civilized literature does record some mystic’s experiences or teachings, though many civilizations have shunned, and have gone to the extent of persecuting their mystics unmercifully. On the other hand, often times than not, mystics tend to rip through the fabric of conventional forms of action and understanding, putting themselves at odds with their society’s established mores, which seek to preserve, protect and defend ordinary position and prestige against extraordinary inspiration and insight.

Mystics make poor soldiers, miserable administrators, and impossible ecclesiastics. Most mystics may not choose to be so, but rather seem to be having an excess of sensitivity which instantly distinguishes them from their fellow human beings. While most humans view reality with ordinary eyes, the mystics’ extraordinary vision enables them to see other dimensions of reality. For example, burning bushes or contact with an ancestor who died years ago and so on. The mystics also walk to different drummers little understood by the hoi polloi. The mystics of a civilization are its spiritual geniuses. Just as a sizable number out of the millions of masses excel in mathematics or art or music or language skills, several will have extremely deep feelings with intense internal longings or spontaneous mystical visions which interiorly torment them until they come to integrate these into their mortal lives, despite the lack of understanding by others. Like shamans, mystics during mystical experiences journey to ‘other worlds,’ see miraculous things which others fail to notice. Their voices, which others label as fantasy...
or denigrate them as psychic utterances and respond to longings which others may feel, but do so less intensely, and thus do not seek to fulfill. Mystics frequent what William Blake called the ‘desolate market’, where, deprived of the usual human comforts, they experience inner calling which leads them fathoms deeper into the human psyche than most people are ever capable of journeying.

2.5. Characteristics of Mysticism

Mysticism has some formal characteristic elements, especially the intense desire for union with, and integration into, a higher reality (or the Ultimate Reality) by direct contact with the supernatural. This union embraces the whole person (body, soul and spirit) where time seems to be suspended in eternity in the super-consciousness that removes the distinction between the natural human and the supernatural divine. We thus have the logic of the concurrence or coincidence of opposites (in Latin coincidentium oppositorum) which gives rise to intellectual enlightenment and is communicated through literary forms. This enlightenment gives insight into the metaphysical, which otherwise is far beyond and inaccessible to the human grasp. Yet another way of communicating this experience is through dialectical use of negation (neti, neti, i.e. neither this nor that) as a higher form of affirmation that finds a parallel in the denial of the finite self in order to attain infinite life through mystical path.

Given the uniqueness and variety of mystical experiences with its wide range of meanings, prompted the commentators to disagree with the characteristics of mysticism. All the more, W.T. Stace finds in all mystical experiences five common characteristics:
1. A sense of objectivity
2. A sense of peace or blessedness
3. A feeling of holiness, sacredness, or divinity
4. A paradoxical quality, and
5. Ineffability

Furthermore, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James, which ranks as the most commonly accepted work, gives four characteristics. They are ineffability, noetic quality, passivity and transiency. Still, there are other characteristics like integration, ‘All-in-one-and-one-in-all’ or a consciousness of the oneness of everything, and a sense of timelessness.

2.5.1. Ineffability

Ineffability stresses the personal incommunicable quality of the mystical experience. There is a plethora of literature written by the mystics about their experiences. However, by their own testimony, words can never capture fully or grasp their experiences totally. This ‘incommunicado in toto’ gives rise to the problem of interpretation.

2.5.2. Noetic Quality

Noetic quality of the mystical experience states that mystical insight hardly ever augments theoretical knowledge. Nevertheless its insight suffuses a person’s knowledge with a unique, all-encompassing sense of integration that belongs to the noetic order. This characteristic of mysticism needs emphasis against those who assert that ‘mysticism is
one and same everywhere,’ and that only the post-mystical interpretation accounts for the difference. This explains that distinctions spring out with the noetic qualities of the experiences themselves.

### 2.5.3. Passivity

One of the eminent and most distinctive characteristics of the mystical experience is passivity. Whatever ways and means the mystic may deploy, such as, ascetic exercises or meditative techniques, but ultimately it’s the gratuitousness of the supernatural that takes precedence, without it, the whole exercise is futile. Once the supernatural or the higher power takes possession of the mystic, all preceding activities lose their efficacy.

### 2.5.4. Transiency

However intense and deeply rooted the mystical experience may be, it isn’t permanent and so transient by nature. For, it appears (initiation), confers grace (climax), and then disappears (anticlimax) as if in thin air. In the first stage, the mystic is consciously aware of his getting into trance. But then, during the second stage, i.e. conferring of grace, the supernatural takes possession of the mystic, wherein more often than not, the mystic is not aware of one’s status - physical or psycho-spiritual. It is here at this stage that the mystic truly becomes mystical and the mystical experience reaches its climax, i.e. ‘high point of the soul’, wherein the mystic feels to communicate one’s mystical experiences to others by means of literary forms, which gives rise to mystical literature. Once the mystical experience reaches its acme, gradually it starts fading and finally reaches the saturation point.
Some mystics have challenged Transiency or the transient characteristic of mystical experience. According to them, there have been great mystics who have remained for prolonged periods in enhanced states of consciousness or ecstasy. Intermittent intensive experiences have figured therein as moments of a more comprehensive surpassing awareness, which are rhythmic in nature. I feel, we can call such ecstatic experiences *rhythmic*, rather than transient.

### 2.5.5. Integration

To William James’s above mentioned four characteristics, we may add a fifth one, which embodies the totality of mystical experiences and that is, integration. When the mystic is absorbed in or integrated with the higher reality, the mystical consciousness overcomes the previously existing doubts and differences. However, this should not be (mis)interpreted to mean that all pre-existing doubts and differences cease to exist. Some of them at least do not stay put at that level, but have transcendence within the union, which gives them their distinctly religio-literary character.

### 2.5.6. All-in-one-and-one-in-all or a consciousness of the oneness of everything

A general attribute of many a mystical state is the ‘consciousness of the oneness of everything’, wherein the mystic experiences unity in the whole of creation, as ‘All-in-one-and-one-in-all.’ In pan-entheistic mysticism, the divine is experienced in everything and likewise everything in the divine. St Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* terms this mystical experience as ‘contemplation to obtain love’ and describes it as ‘seeing God in all things and all things in God.’

46
In ancient Chinese philosophy the creation of the phenomenal universe was described as an emanation from Tao - the primal meaning, the undivided unity and causality behind everything - by the pulling asunder the polar opposites. According to this philosophical thought, out of Tao sprang the principles of phenomenal reality, the two poles of yang (light) and yin (darkness), which are present in the universe. In fact, we cannot conceive of light except as the opposite of darkness, of above except as the opposite of below, of before except as the opposite of after, of good except as the opposite of evil. Our cognition and perception is greatly conditioned by these polar opposites. Yet though yang and yin emanate from the Undivided Unity, they are active only in the realm of phenomena and not noumena.

Yes, the human person is caught up in this realm of polar opposites, and as a sentient being, is conscious of a division in one’s self. Hence, the deepest desire is to break through the polar opposites in order to retrace the Primal Meaning, so that the human person may once again be restored to the Undivided Unity, which one had lost. Therefore, Nicholas of Cusa had rightly said, “The divine is to be found, beyond the coincidence of contradictions.” However, there is no escape from duality through sense perception. For, sense perception is conditioned by the polar opposites, not through discursive thought, which is bound by the same dualism. In mystical experience the dilemma of duality is resolved. For, to the mystic is given that unifying vision of the One-in-the-all-and-the-all-in-the-One.
2.5.7. A Sense of Timelessness

A further feature of mystical experience is 'a sense of timelessness.' The concept of time is a paradox, an enigma, which has puzzled humans ever since they were born into it, more so, when they started thinking about it. Does it exist independently or is it a mere perception, i.e. with the way we, as creatures of a phenomenal world, perceive reality?

As the perception of the modern physicist has expanded, he/she has been compelled to abandon the idea of three-dimensional space passing simultaneously, moment by moment, through time. Instead he/she finds impelled to think in terms of a four-dimensional universe, in which time is the fourth dimension. The universe in itself is timeless and so it simply is. It is nothing but a multiplicity of points which further begin to form stretches of time among themselves when the human mind provides a reference system.

Furthermore, all our experiences fall into a time-series which always has a past, a present, and a future. A moment ago, the present moment was in the future; in another moment, it would be in the past. In this series, the relationship between events is constantly changing. There is yet another series, that of 'earlier than,' 'later than,' in which the relationship between events remains constant. For example, the time I rose this morning.

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23 Three-dimensional space is a geometric 3-parameters model of the physical universe (without considering time) in which we exist. These three dimensions are commonly called length, width, and depth (or height), although any three directions can be chosen, provided that they do not lie in the same plane. In physics and mathematics, a sequence of n numbers can be understood as a location in n-dimensional space. When n = 3, the set of all such locations is called 3-dimensional Euclidean space. It is commonly represented by the symbol \( \mathbb{R}^3 \). This space is only one example of a great variety of spaces in three dimensions called 3-manifolds.
morning will always remain earlier than the time I shall go to bed tonight. Normal sense experience falls into these two series.

There are other profound and significant experiences, in which we cannot adequately describe relationships in terms of past, present, and future. We can find it in Dr C.G. Jung’s concept of the ‘self’ an idea not dissimilar to that of the ‘spark.’

To grasp the meaning of ‘self’ according to Jung, it is necessary to know about his psychology. One of the quintessential elements in it is his theory of the ‘archetypes of the collective unconscious.’ These archetypes are not innate inherited images, but dispositions to form certain symbols and images. They cannot be known of themselves nor can they be encountered directly, but only through their manifestations in these symbols or images. Jung calls them ‘the organs of the pre-rational psyche’ and explains that as our physical organs are the result of a long process of bodily development, so the archetypes are the outcome of the whole inner experience of the human race. They are centres of energy, of immense power, and the symbols through which they are manifested enshrine the deepest spiritual wisdom of humankind.

By ‘self’ Jung does not mean in the usual sense of the term. For, it has affinities with the self of Hindu religious psychology. Jung defines the term as ‘the archetypal image that leads out of polarity to the union of both partial systems - through a common mid-point.’ Hence, it contains the idea of something which leads to synthesis, wholeness, the coming together of those polar-opposites present in the phenomenal world. Since, according to Jung, the ‘self’ itself is an archetype, it cannot be known directly, but only through symbols, which are the manifestations of its archetypal energy.
Jung calls the ‘self’ with different expressions. Sometimes he calls it as ‘the whole,’ sometimes ‘the periphery,’ and at other times ‘the centre of the psyche.’ No doubt, it is described in psychological terms, that faculty or organ of the psyche which the mystics call the spark, apex, centre, or ground of the soul. It is that in the personality through the symbols which the human person has contact with the divine. Indeed, Jung once wrote:

The soul must possess some possibility of contact with God, that is something which corresponds to the divine essence; otherwise no association could possibly have taken place. The corresponding quality described in psychological terms is the archetype of the divine image.

W. T. Stace, in his philosophical search for a ‘universal core’ of mystical expression, noted seven characteristics common to all. He chose seven representative experiences - two Roman Catholic, one Protestant, one ancient classical, one modern Hindu, and two American agnostic - and from their statements he selected central themes and set out in seven propositions:

1. There is a unifying vision, in which the One is perceived by the senses in and through many objects, so that ‘All is One.’
2. The One is apprehended as an inner life, or presence in all things, so that ‘nothing is really dead.’
3. This brings a sense of reality, which is objective and true.
4. There is a feeling of satisfaction, joy and bliss.
5. There is a feeling of holy and sacred, which is the specifically religious element of the experience.

6. There is a feeling that it is paradoxical.

7. There is a feeling that it is inexpressible in words.24

Here, Stace suggests that the quintessence of mysticism is the One, a kind of pantheism, or more strictly monism (the belief that there exists only one universal being).

2.6. Types of Mysticism

There are two broad types of mysticism: Transcendental Mysticism and Immanent Mysticism.

2.6.1. Transcendental Mysticism

In Transcendental Mysticism, God or the Ultimate Reality is seen as transcendent, outside the human soul, and union with Him is achieved through a series of steps or stages called mystical stages. For example, Sufism has nine mystical stages, such as, Mumin (Believer), Abid (Worshipper), Zahid (Recluse), Arif (Know/ Acquaintance), Walli (Saint), Nabi (Prophet), Rasul (Prophet who is sent), Ulu- l-Azam (Dispenser), and Khatam (Seal).

2.6.2. Immanent Mysticism

In Immanent Mysticism God is immanent, dwelling within the soul and to be discovered by penetrating deeper into the self.

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2.7. Mystical Process

The terminology of mysticism, since it is forced to be figurative, is often difficult and obscure. Dionysius (A.D. 500), a Syrian monk, in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies* has expounded three stages of mystical progress by which human nature is divinized - a conventional mystical process on the path of God. These are purgation, illumination and union. The soul undergoes a purification (purgative way), which leads to a sense of illumination in the love of God (illuminative way), and after a period the soul enters into a union with God (unitive way), and progresses into a final ecstatic state of perfect knowledge of God (spiritual marriage). During some period of this process, there comes a time of alienation and loss in which the soul cannot find God at all, which is called the ‘dark night of the soul.’ These three stages of mystical progress which appear in the teachings of many later mystics were already taught by Plotinus as the ‘three stages of perfection.’

2.8. Identity and difference between Mystical Schools

Mysticism is not one but many. Similarly, all mystics do not have one self-same mystical experience throughout rather each mystic has a unique and distinct mystical experience compared to others, which are shaped by one’s religio-cultural background. All the more, scholars such as, Rene Guenon, Aldous Huxley, Frithj of Schuon and Allan Watts have emphasized a common thread running through many a diverse mystical literature. For, they have unveiled certain identical similarities guiding the thought pattern of several occidental, especially Indian mystics. Whereas, in the oriental world, the general precept is that only subsequent interpretations distinguish one mysticism or
mystical school from another. Each mystic tries to verbalize and interpret one’s mystical experience in the light of the theosophical universe in which he/she was born and was nurtured. For, the language available to the mystic and the one he/she is familiar with is the familial world to which he/she belongs. This in turn gives rise to the mushrooming of a number of schools and sub-schools. For example, Sufi schools such as Chistiya, Qubraviyya, Yasawiyya, Suhrawardiya, and so on.

Furthermore, the nature and intensity of one’s spiritual quest is that that forms and shapes the experience. But to conclude therefrom that the interpretation is only an extrinsic exercise is to reduce the experience to mere sensation, which, according to mystical scholars, is a fallacy. Experience in itself is distinctly cognitive and intentionally unique. Gershom Scholem says that there is no mysticism-in-general; there are only particular mystical systems, such as, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim and so forth. The pan-specific quality of the experience in mystical individuals or schools has some kind of familial resemblance, though at times, it incorporates syncretic elements. A denial of similarity has prompted traditional interpretations to study mystical schools exclusively from the perspective of their own theological principles. For example, R.C. Zaehner’s controversial *Mysticism* (1957) ranks mystical schools according to their proximity to orthodox Christian love mysticism. Similarly, the authentic similarity of experiences enables us to speculate a variety of phenomena under some generic categories without reducing them to simple identity. Such a categorization would include non-religious as well as religious mysticism, even though basic differences separate them.
At this juncture, it is trite to make a reference to ‘nature mysticism,’ drawing up distinction between ‘natural’ (or acquired) and ‘supernatural’ (or infused) mysticism. Nature mysticism refers to the kind of intense experience, in which the mystic feels merged with and absorbed into the cosmic universe, wherein the mystic loses one’s individual identity to the cosmic one. Such a-cosmic mystical experience could be religious or a-religious. All the more, in the religious mystical experience the mystic experiences transcendence (trans + ascendance), which continues to remain throughout the cosmic union either with the nature itself or to its underlying principle. The romantic writers like John F. Cooper, William Wordsworth, Jean Paul, express such a mystical awareness of nature. For instance, Tinton Abbey, The Solitary Reaper, Daffodils, etc.

Mysticism is considered to be more than an esoteric and unusual religious perception, and a recent study of ‘inglorious Wordsworths’ has discovered that there are transcendental experiences in childhood and adolescence among many people even in industrial societies. We also find traces of mysticism in Turner and in the 19th century painter of the Hudson River School, Richard Jeffries. In the case of the latter, the line of separation between the religious and the non-religious is so thin, that it is difficult to maintain any distinction. Whereas, in other cases any religious equation of cosmic-mystical experiences with what John of the Cross, Jalaluddin Rumi and Sharafuddin Maneri express would be inappropriate. Nevertheless, it is absurd to deny any resemblance between the intense, unifying experience of nature and that of a transcendent presence.

Yet another enigmatic point and debatable issue is that of narcotically induced states (e.g. Psychedelic drugs). Can we just sweep them under the carpet or do away with them as not mystical, or at least as not religiously mystical because of their chemical
origin? Such a blatant and simplistic categorization would lead to genetic fallacy. That is, instead of dealing with the phenomenon itself, evaluating it according to its presumed origin. Of course, any induced mental state, without fastidious spiritual focus is unlikely to foster and advance any spiritual growth. Furthermore, if it is habitual, the reliance on chemical means may permanently obstruct intended growth, thus reducing the subject to the status of an addict. All the more, however beneficial or detrimental this eventual impact upon personality may be, in a religious aura chemicals may induce states of undeniably mystical character. Experiments have led to a search for physical and spiritual exultation through drugs, sex, music and trance, in attempts to discover higher levels of consciousness. For instance, ritual consumption of peyote cactus buttons in pre-Columbian times, consumption of alcoholic drinks (*madya*) in the Indian mystical trends, use of narcotics in the Sufi tradition, *Kundalini Yoga* in the Indian mystical tradition, Sufi song and music, dance of the whirling dervishes, etc. Aldous Huxley took the drug mescaline in a famous series of experiments and used religious language to describe his experiences, but his explanation was simply that of oneness. He said that by contemplating the legs of a chair he actually became them, ‘not merely gazing at those bamboo legs but actually being them.’

He also spoke of his experience as the Beatific Vision, in both Christian and Indian terms, but since he did not describe this in any clear way or indicate its content his language may have been exaggerated, as with some nature mystics, though not all, there was an expression of unity without any clear content.

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Some mystics go one step further still saying that certain experiences consequential of some pathological psychic conditions, e.g. manic depression, hysteria (within the mystical arena only), are very much a part of the mystical corpus (in Latin corpus mystica) and hence cannot per se be excluded from the mystical; nor should these or drug-induced states be considered separately from nature or religious mysticism. The typology discussed here encompasses only the mystical aspect of various religious traditions. It claims neither adequacy in the area of religion in general nor absoluteness in the classification of mystical religion in particular.

2.9. Scientific Study of Mysticism

According to the science of mysticism, physiologically, psychologically and epistemologically (i.e. from the viewpoint of the theory of perception), like similar other states of consciousness differing from ordinary commonplace experience, mysticism emanates from the right side of the brain, which cannot express itself in words by its very nature. What the self actually experiences is the unity of the empirical self in the ‘stream of consciousness.’

Here it is pertinent to distinguish between the two mental states - mysticism and schizophrenia. In mysticism, the experience of unity of the empirical self, which is strengthened from within, results into having control over one’s mental faculties vis-à-vis the inner world, is lacking in the case of schizophrenia. Thus, mysticism is a spiritual spark of the primal lifeline of the divided human nature - corporal and spiritual, or body and soul - which erupts through the spatio-temporal limits of one’s own personality in order to achieve unity, which may be attained also through the sex drive (Kundalini Yoga
in the Indian tradition) or through intoxication (*madya* or alcohol in the Indian tradition and narcotics in the Sufi tradition) and so on, as the case may be.

The obvious question arising at this moment is the ‘content’ of the mystical experience. What is that ‘thing’ that stimulates the mystic to get into the mystical state? What is the corpus of its contents? The content of the mystical experience is wholly metaphysical (in Greek *meta* means beyond and ‘physical’ means related to matter) in nature. The content of mysticism in itself is ‘self-transcendence’ or going beyond one’s physical self or being ‘inspirited’ in order to have the supernatural experience.

To have this transcendental experience, the mystic deploys some spiritual stimuli. The outcome of the transcendental experience may be happy, satanic, revealing, or psychotic. This is judged by the spirit of the mystical search, which shapes the experience itself and by the interpretations, which enable us to perceive what the senses receive in different ways (L. Wittgenstein’s ‘seeing as’). All mystical ‘sense impressions’ might be the same. All the more, they differ in their conscious perceptions. During the experience itself the mystical experience is ineffable. But later the two different modes of consciousness - sensual and psycho-spiritual - can be compared and contrasted in order to establish that the experience is transcendental. Classified as ‘phases of the mystical life’ (ref. Evelyn Underhill) are the vision of unity, inner vision, ecstasy, surrender, immediacy to God or oneness with him, and mysticism of the infinite or of the personal life.
2.10. A Brief History of Mysticism

2.10.1. Native Cultures of America and of Northern and Central Asia

Mystical practices were prevalent among the tribal clans of America and of northern and central Asia through their initiation rites, animistic religious practices and traditions, etc. Furthermore, with the attainment of sexual maturity, followed by the rites of purification, the Indians of the prairies and plateaus were to spend a few days alone fasting in search for visions in order to attain mastery over oneself, which is a usual custom even to this day among some tribes. In shamanism\(^\text{26}\) there is a unique practice in which the person undergoes a mystical death and the ensuing ecstatic flight of the soul, with the breaking through of levels in the centre of the world, is an early and basic form of mystical union.

2.10.2. Indus Culture

As already discussed above, in transcendence the mystic goes beyond ‘one’s self’ (i.e. ecstatic). Besides this, we also have evidences among the peasants of the Indus culture (Hinduism) another archaic form of mystical experience, Yoga (in Sanskrit \textit{yuj} meaning union) in which the person goes into oneself and becomes united with his own ‘self’ or being (i.e. enstasy). Similar to ecstasy and enstasy is the producing of a kind of inner heat by rhythmic breathing and often times the use of drugs with a view to escaping from the spatio-temporal reality by attaining the desired unconditioned state. The theistic yoga tradition, as opposed to the non-theistic one namely \textit{carvakas}, encompasses not only

\(^{26}\) Shamanism is a religion in some Asian countries based on the belief that the world is controlled and governed by good and evil spirits, and that these spirits can be directed by people with special powers.
a process that addresses only the will and individual forces of the ascetic but also devotion to the supernatural Being.

2.10.3. Hinduism

In Hinduism, mysticism was evolved with the sacrifice and grew into maturity with the Vedic treatises. The two essential elements of the sacrifice are, the syllable Om, which is central here, and the word Brahman, which shapes the sacred verses. The Upanishads enumerate the experience of immanence and transcendence, and the ecstatic experience of the two converging in an absolute oneness that expresses itself in a negative theology (*neti, neti,* means ‘neither this nor that’), i.e. affirmation through negation.

On a monistic philosophical sphere (Monism) this state is absolute truth, beyond which one cannot proceed. In the impersonal mysticism of identity, the union of the individual soul (atman) with the universal principle (Brahman) removes all duality, as in the doctrine of non-dualism (Sankara’s Advaita), wherein the yogi or mystic in ecstasy bursts out from the depths of his being with the words *Aham Brahmasmi* means “I am the Brahman” which is further enumerated by the Advaitic school as *Tatvamasi* means “Thou art that.” Hence, the statement by the non-dualistic school of philosophy is, *Brahma Satya, Jagatmitiya*, meaning in comparison with the Brahman world is *maya* or nothing or nonexistent.

*Samkhya*, another school of Hindu philosophy, has no room for deity, and hence it is known to be ‘atheistic.’ Gradually, this school of thought was assimilated into the age-old Yoga tradition, thus became *Samkhya-Yoga*, which was a combination of *Samkhya*
thought with *Yogic* practice with a soteriological and cosmological framework. The mystical self-isolation of *Samkhya-Yoga* doesn’t acknowledge the absolute beyond the individual spirit, thus liberation (from *Karmic* actions, i.e. freedom from the cycle of birth and death) is the opposite of being absorbed in a transcendental self. Hence, in its pure form, *Samkhya-Yoga* far from leaning towards pantheist monism (as *Vedantic* mysticism does), results in extreme individualism. If at all the idea of God surfaces, it is that of one *purusha*, the absolutely free of cosmic contamination. Here, we need to tread on a delicate ground and take care not to compound the *Yoga* techniques with the later *Sankhya* philosophy. No doubt, they were practiced in non-dualist or in the so-called qualified dualistic (*Visistadvaita*) systems as well.

Furthermore, for the *Bhagavad-Gita* the mystical state is only a beginning. It is followed by loving surrender (*bhakti*) to the deity and a selfless fulfilment of duty.

The starting-point of Sankara and the *Samkhya-Yoga* is the experience of the immortality of the soul; and immortality in this case does not mean the infinite prolongation of human life in time: that is *Samsara* which the Hindus regard rather as a living death: it is death-in-life, not life-in-death. It means rather an unconditioned and absolutely static condition which knows nothing of time and space and upon which death has no hold; and because it is not only pure Being, but also pure consciousness and pure bliss, it must be analogous to life. (Zaehner, 1962, p.74).

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27 Two principles of reality: *prakriti*, the material principle and source of energy, cause of both the material world and psychic experience; and *purusha*, pure consciousness similar to the *atman* of the *Upanisads*.  

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2.10.4. Chinese Mysticism

Chinese mysticism evolved separately from oracles and ancient Chinese teaching which affirmed that the highest goal of human beings was the quest for union with the Tao - the Ultimate Reality, the source of all natural phenomena, the cosmic order that comprehends all things and so on. Furthermore, the true Tao mysticism, lined to Lao-tzu (6th century C.E.) as the author of the Tao-te Ching (Classic of the way of power), finds in Tao the ultimate ground of being, the absolute, the godhead, etc. According to Tao mysticism, the mystic can have illumination in and through nature (i.e. nature mysticism). Similarly, drugs (i.e. use of alcohol and narcotics), alchemy and magical incantations also are used as aid towards having mystical experiences. For humans, Tao is the exemplar par excellence and they can have identification with it through innumerable means and the best is through the mystical path.

We can trace a syncretic flow from the Chinese mysticism to Christianity and Islam. For, there are parallels between the Chinese, Christian and Islamic religions. In the words of Lao Tzu: “Only he who is free from earthly passions can apprehend the spiritual essence of Tao.” This ‘path, process and product’ of mysticism is running through a number of mystical schools across religions. For instance, ascetic practices employed in Christianity and Islam in order to have mystical experiences, cum the slogans ‘world is evil, flesh is bad, so go away from the world’. so on and so forth.

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Furthermore, in *Tao* mysticism, the initial purgative or purificatory phase is followed by a stage where the attainment of virtue is not through self-conscious effort but through a connatural state. In the final stage, the mystic turns to be the vehicle of *Tao*, wherein he/she rises above the corporeal cum material limitations, and thus surpasses the laws of physical universe. In early Chinese mysticism there is little sense of religion as understood today, i.e. no sense of a personal relationship with God, which mysticism usually calls for. The goal of *Tao* mystical path is the absorption into some pantheistic being. It is hardly surprising that over the years Taoism was amalgamated with Buddhism (today it is called “Chinese Buddhism”) - a true syncretic element of mysticism.

In Confucianism, family unity mediates mysticism with its syncretic effects on society. This communitarian living together may have influenced into the formation of mystical communities, such as Chistiya, Quadariyya, Suhrawardiya, etc., and further still into the formation of mystical communes like that of Osho Rajaneesh’s commune and so on.

**2.10.5. Buddhism**

In spite of its atheistic cum sceptical philosophy on soul, Buddhism has something similar to mystical unity in the sequential trance states that led the Buddha to *nirvana* by way of *Samadhi*, which is a state of rest. This is somewhat similar to the Judeo-Hellenistic ‘Hades’, meaning a place in the underworld where the spirits of the dead are in a still state. *Nirvana* is a timeless state, which is not composite but an enlightened one (the Buddha).
In Mahayana Buddhism, the sublimely supreme mystical state is the experience of 'emptiness.' The *mandala* (i.e. reflection of the cosmos) meditation aims at union with the Buddha, who is identified with the universe (cf. nature meditation), resulting in total mutual integration, in which the mystic breaks through the cycle of birth and death, and partakes in Buddha's transcendent body of teaching. In Amida Buddhism, this state of enlightenment and illumination (*Bodhi*) embodies a supreme paragon of sympathy, wherein, the mystic, who is called *Buddha Amitabha*, at the seventh stage in the sequence of ten, puts a break to one's liberation (*nirvana*), in order to help all creatures attain *nirvana*.

Both the above forms are employed in Japanese Zen Buddhism (the Sanskrit word *Dhyan* meaning meditation, became *Chan* in Chinese Buddhism, which in turn became *Zen* in Japanese Buddhism), in which supreme inwardness, which other religionists call soul, is ignorant about absolute reality. Furthermore, it even rejects the common goal of all 'enstatic' trends, namely, the stage from plurality to absolute unity. Zen relies on the unexpected and violent irruption of something new, which is not resultant of or effected by the prior states, but a sudden, free flow of powerful feelings and emotions like the 'stream of consciousness.' An aid to this practice is *koan* or paradox, wherein the mystic is spot tested to prove one's mystical experiences cum enlightenment. This takes place in illumination (*satori*), which is the mystical grasp over 'to see things as they are or things in themselves' ('noumenon' in western philosophy) and not 'as they appear to be' ('phenomenon' in western philosophy).
2.10.6. Greek Mysticism

As per the classical origins of Greek Mysticism, it was an initiate of a mystery religion. The Eleusinian Mysteries were annual initiation ceremonies in the cults of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone, held in secret at Eleusis (near Athens) in ancient Greece. The mysteries began in about 1600 B.C.E. in the Mycenaean period and continued for 2000 years becoming a major festival during the Hellenic era, and later spreading to Rome.

In the Greek Mystery Religions, the Dionysius cult embodied orgiastic rites, which were used to initiate the presence of god or gods in his intoxicated adherents (cf. Madya or alcohol in Hinduism and narcotics in Sufism). This cult was coextensive to Orphism in the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition (i.e. Hellenistic Roman Religion), which Plotinus (c. 204/5-70) evolved into a mysticism that instilled immense influence on the three Semitic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The starting point of this mystical ideology is that, the One, which is immanent in all the hypostases emanating (deriving) from it and which exists in a positive transcendence can be expressed only in negations (cf. neti neti, means 'neither this nor that' in Indian mysticism). The mystical process includes contemplation on the One, which is both immanent and transcendent. Hence the idea of God in the Semitic religions - God is both immanent and transcendent.

According to the Hellenistic school of mystical philosophy, the One does not reveal itself. For, it is active as a creative force (cf. Sakti in Eastern Mysticism) in supra-personal love. Only Eros is part of the human personality, which, when the One comes in
contact with the human spirit becomes one with it. It is at this point that the human has
one’s being in the One (enthousiasmus), and ecstasy (i.e. going outside of ourselves)
becomes stasis - a state in which the divine and the human centres envelop each other.
Here, the self does not become oblivious but is elevated to a supreme level, which brings
about a metamorphosis: for, it is taken possession by the One. Humans persistently strain
to attain this through ascetic striving for ecstatic union. Along with the desired inward
union, contrary to a purely monistic explication, the essential uniqueness of the supra-
empirical basis is maintained. The imaginary cum reflective faculty of the finite, by
which one can ascend to the One, preserves and maintains this uniqueness.

Here we may mention the influence of Hinduism and pan-Indian ideas on Greek
tradition through Pythagoras, and thereby on Plato and Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonic
influence on the Christian tradition through Plotinus and Proclus, above all on Pseudo-
Dionysius, who was the primary mystical authority for the medieval, is undeniable.
Hence, we can trace how syncretism travels from one tradition to another having its
shadow cast upon them. Here we may say that there is hardly anything new under the
sun, but seen through new lenses, of course, with a novel vision. Moreover, there is no
one ‘pure’ or ‘perfect’ tradition - religious or otherwise - but a number of them are
borrowed and adapted as per the community needs, human situations and geographic
conditions.

2.10.7. Gnosis Mysticism

‘Gnosis’ is the Greek noun for knowledge (in the nominative case). In the context
of the English language and literature, gnosis refers to knowledge within the spheres of
Christian mysticism, mystery religions and Gnosticism, where it signifies ‘spiritual knowledge’ in the sense of mystical enlightenment. In Gnosis, mysticism views the elect in individual soul as identical with the power behind the all. As per Gnosis mysticism, the complete union of all terrestrial spiritual powers with those in the spiritual firmament will come only in the future, i.e. life after life. Here, theistic mysticism is a monistic mysticism where the spirit is isolated and the Gnostic has the nature of total divinity and everything cosmic is nothing but a futile obstacle. Christian mysticism escapes such views as it perceives the world more in Greco-Jewish fashion.

2.10.8. Jewish Mysticism

Judaism, Christianity and Gnosis have descending theology, wherein the transcendent comes to the humans, and mystical knowledge has eschatological features. Judaism emphasizes eternal distance between the creature and the Creator. In spite of the Greek influences and the personalizing of redemption by allegory, part of ecstasy even in Philo (d. 45-50 C.E.) is that the human is absorbed in the divine in ecstasy, but then returns after possession. The closest Judaic term to mystical union is devekut\(^2\) (i.e. holding, clinging), wherein the ecstatic features are manifested only when human will is identified with the divine will, amidst worldly reality.

Judaism embodies Gnosis elements - a syncretic mystical feature. The early Merkabah mysticism (also spelt as Merkavah, popularly known as Chariot mysticism) is

\(^2\)Devekut or deveikuth or deveikus (Modern Hebrew word meaning ‘dedication’, traditionally ‘clinging on’ to God) is a Jewish concept referring to closeness to God. It may also refer to a deep, trance-like meditative state attained during Jewish prayer, Torah study or performing the 613 mitzvot (The commandments). It is particularly associated with the Jewish mystical tradition.
a Jewish mystical school centered on visions, such as, found in Ezekiel, chapter 1\(^{30}\) (Ezekiel appears in the Jewish prophetic literature of the Old Testament) or in the Hekhalot (Palaces) literature with stories of ascent to the heavenly places. The main corpus of the Merkabah literature was composed in Israel in the period 200-700 C.E., although even later references to the Chariot tradition can also be traced in the literature of Chassidei Ashkenaz\(^{31}\) in the Middle Ages. A major text in this tradition is the Ma'aseh Merkabah or Works of the Chariot.

Ezekiel’s vision of the throne chariot of God, comprises of striving through contemplation to overcome intervening spheres, thus to attain pure transcendence. On the contrary, Hasidism\(^{32}\) was a popular movement that stressed prayer and spiritual practice based on Halakhah\(^{13}\) law. It taught that the first manifestation of the Shekinah\(^{34}\) (divine presence) mediates between his hidden essence and his fully manifest creation. The accompanying esoteric teaching of the cabala\(^{35}\) is close to Neo-Platonic and Gnostic speculation. After Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1492 C.E., this teaching became very


\(^{31}\) The Chassidei Ashkenaz (German Pietists) were a Jewish movement in the German Rhineland in the 12\(^{th}\) and 13\(^{th}\) centuries. They are to be distinguished from Hasidism.

\(^{32}\) In Sephardi Hebrew, in Ashkenazi Hebrew and Yiddish, Hasidism means 'piety' literally 'loving kindness.'

\(^{33}\) The word Halakhah comes from the Torah, the rabbis, and custom, meaning a set of Jewish rules and practices, which affects every aspect of life, adding religious significance to everyday activities.

\(^{34}\) The word shekinah or shechinah or shekina or schechinah is a grammatically feminine Hebrew word that means the dwelling or the settling, and is used to denote the dwelling or settling divine presence of God, especially in the Temple in Jerusalem.

\(^{35}\) The English Qabalah or Kabbalah refers to several different systems of mysticism related to Hermatic Qabalah that interpret the letter of the English alphabet via their supposed numerological significance. The antiquarian spelling ‘Qabalah’ is more common in this context, but the Modern Hebrew spelling ‘Kabbalah’ is also found.
much eschatological. It saw in the mystical return to original creation an anticipation of the Messianic Age.\textsuperscript{36}

Ever since the time of Daniel\textsuperscript{37} (605-530 B.C.E.) the term\textit{mysterion} was also used to denote a celestially controlled eschatological secret, whose revelation by an angel as mystagogue (i.e. a teacher or profounder of mystical doctrines) is the uniform theme of Jewish apocalyptic literature.

\subsection*{2.10.9. Christian Mysticism}

The Christian\textit{mysterion} is a secret revelation disclosed only to faith. However, unlike all esotericism it is to be proclaimed to all people. On one hand, Christianity substantially followed Hellenistic Judaism, especially in its initial stages, by displaying the mysteries of the ‘Logos’\textsuperscript{38} (or Word) to people of Greek culture; but on the other, the apologists contested alleging that the mystery religions are ‘devilish imitations’ of the Christian credo. Further, they equated mass (i.e. Eucharist) with the cultic meal of the mystery religions, especially the Dionysiac-Orphic theophagy,\textsuperscript{39} with the sole difference, that, like baptism, it did not embody a portrayal of natural events. Similarly, the story of Christian initiation does not refer back to a timeless mythical past, but to substantive

\textsuperscript{36} Messianic Age is a theological term prevalent among Jews referring to the future time of universal peace and brotherhood on the earth, without crime, war and poverty. The word ‘messianic’ is derived from the \textit{Yemot Ha Mashiac} meaning ‘the days of the Messiah.’ Messiah comes from a Hebrew word meaning 'The Anointed One.'

\textsuperscript{37} Daniel was the protagonist of the Biblical Book of Daniel, represented as a Jew in the Babylonian exile who was skilled in the interpretation of dreams and was miraculously preserved in the lions’ den. Paul J. Achtemeier ed., \textit{Harper's Bible Dictionary}: Harper and Row Publishers, San Francisco, 1985, p. 204.

\textsuperscript{38} ‘Logos’ is from the Greek term usually translated as ‘word’ (especially Word of God). Ibid., p. 572.

\textsuperscript{39} ‘Theophagy’ is a word of Ancient Greek origin that means ‘the feeding on a god.’ It is derived from the word ‘Theos’ means ‘god’ and the suffix ‘phagy’ means ‘to feed on.’ In fertility rituals, the harvested grain may itself be the reborn god of vegetation. This practice has origins in ancient religions: Dionysius and many examples may be documented in \textit{The Golden Bough} by Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941).
historical event, envisioning the eschatological new creation - 'a new heaven and a new earth' as in the Biblical Book of Revelation.

St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians said, "We speak wisdom among the perfect and we speak God's wisdom in a mystery" (1 Corinthians 2:6-7). Further, he wrote of his own mystical vision as being "caught up to the third heaven and hearing unspeakable words" (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). Christian writers like Clement and Origen were developing systems of thought using both Biblical and traditional Greek ideas and expressions. As a result, there was a profound development of Greek thought. This was in the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus and his followers. Plato has been regarded as the greatest of all philosophers, in due course being taken into both Christian and Islamic philosophy (cf. syncretism in Christianity and Islam), and his influence continues to remain to this day. However, Plotinus merged Platonic and other mystical ideas into a coherent whole, whose essays are among the classics of mysticism. Plotinus taught the union (enosis) of the soul with the divine one, which is the source of all existence. As Christian writers absorbed Neo-Platonic ideas, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, a Syrian monk (c. 500) played a crucial role by his short but potent writings. He used many technical terms of the mysteries and presented Christian teaching as a synthesis with Neo-Platonism.

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40 Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, also known as Pseudo-Denys, was a philosopher cum theologian of the late 5th to early 6th century, the author of The Corpus Areopagiticum (before 532). The author is identified as 'Dionysos' in the corpus, which later incorrectly came to be attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian convert of St Paul mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles 17:34. His surviving works include, Divine Names, Mystical Theology, Celestial Hierarchy, Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, and various epistles. His works are mystical and show strong Neo-Platonic influence.
Between fourth and fifth centuries, the Christian meaning for ‘mysticism’ began to assimilate the Greek connotations of silence and secrecy, which rested on Neo-Platonic conceptions. For Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, mystical theology comprises of spiritual awareness of the ineffable Absolute, which is beyond mundane spirituality. For him, mystical insight is an essential corpus of the Christian community, which is inaccessible to private speculation or subjective experience. Contrary to this communal meaning, Western Christianity, especially under Augustine’s influence, revisited the mystical as related to a subjective state of mind. Thus, Jean de Gerson (5th century chancellor of the Sorbonne) stated mystical theology as “experimental knowledge of God through the embrace of unitive love.”41 Here we have the formulation of the modern usage of the term as ‘a state of consciousness’ that surpasses ordinary experience through the union with a transcendent reality.

2.10.10. Islamic Mysticism (or Sufism)

The mystical dimension of Islam is popularly known as Sufism. Sufism or ‘tasawwuf’ (in Arabic) is defined by its adherents as the inner, mystical dimension of Islam. A practitioner of this tradition is generally known as a Sufi.

The fundamental aim of all Islamic mysticism across all schools is to return to the original experience of the covenant of God with humanity, in which, He was acknowledged as the Lord, much before human creation. Prophet Mohammed (c. 570-632 C.E.) is the receptacle for the word of God, acts as the way (tariqa), the first link in the chain of tradition (silsile), and his mystical ascent to the seventh heaven, finally

leading to the Divine Majesty miraj[^2] is a paradigmatic model of mystical ascent to every Sufi to have intuitive experiential knowledge of the divine (ma'rifah).

This mystical ascent of Prophet Mohammed has two references in the Qur'an (17:1, 60; 53:1-8). According to this legend, one night Archangel Gabriel came to Mohammed and took him in a flash to Jerusalem on burak[^3] wherein, at the spot of Masjid al-Aksa or the Dome of the Rock. Mohammed met all 1,24,000 prophets from Adam to Jesus and led them in prayer. Then, Gabriel took Mohammed on a guided tour through the celestial spheres - popularly known as the seven heavens - and in each sphere he met one of the prophets and various angels, followed by a tour to hell, ultimately ending it up in paradise. Finally, Gabriel could not take him further, and so Mohammed on his own ascended to the Divine Majesty to meet God. This is the vision of the mystical experience par excellence every Sufi yearns for.


[^3] This name, which is connected with bark, 'lightening' (on its etymology cf. Horn, Grundriss der neupersischen Etym., Strassburg 1893, p. 36 sq.) is applied by tradition to the fabulous animal which Prophet Mohammed mounted on the night of his ascension (miraj). It is a vision in the Qur'an (17:1, 60; 53:1-8) in which the prophet seemed to be borne from Masjid al-Haram, Mecca to Masjid al-Aksa, Jerusalem, and thence to heaven. The animal which carried him is neither described nor mentioned in the Qur'an; but the commentators say that on this night Mohammed was in the hidir of the Holy House, that is, in the precincts of the Ka'ba, and that the Archangel Gabriel brought Burak to him. H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers (ed.), Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam, E.J Brill, Leiden, Netherlands, 1974, p. 65.
2.11. The Spell of Mysticism on Mystery Plays, Miracle Plays, Mystery Religions

Mystery plays is a form of medieval drama hewn from biblical narratives (mysteries) based on the life of Christ that reached its climax in the 15th century. On the other hand, miracle plays are based on the life of saints. Furthermore, mystery religions are secret cults of the ancient Greco-Roman world which aimed at securing the salvation (of an individual after death) through an esoteric experience. It offered initiates an experience, unique and different than that of the official religions. Cultic formulas are used, and the eyes are closed (myo) with a view to experiencing what takes place in the dark. The participants enter into direct bodily and spiritual relations with certain deities. Individual initiation confers special privileges, promises, salvation, and guarantees happiness here and hereafter. The classical mysteries (Greek Religion) have broad Eastern influence with skepticism.

When the people were consecrated to the mysteries, processions, public sacrifices and musical presentations provided a setting. Here two points were pertinent and constitutive. The first and main focus was the contemplation of certain divine things, which granted a kind of entry into the divine world. The second focus was the way to this entry, namely, the observance of rites as preconditions. After a period of fasting, mortification and asceticism came purification by expiatory sacrifices. An oath was taken to keep silent about all that was seen and heard in the course of the ceremonies. The initiates then learned the esoteric meaning of the myth of the cult’s origin and received a revelation of the true point of the divine drama. Then strengthened by a ritual (cultic) meal, they received imitative integration into the cult.
No one knew the nature or content of the vision, but the initiates belonged to the circle of those who did know, and there was no greater offence than that of disclosing the mysteries to the uninitiated. Initiation expressed as a descent into the underworld, was a very dangerous moment, and woe to those who, unworthy, sought to move unguided through the rites to a knowledge of the mysteries of existence! In the night the initiates passed back through the natural emergence of life and ultimately to the realization that the light is, as it were, born from this emergence. It was through the performance of external cultic rites the hierophant or priest of the mysteries gave expression to the holy; the accompanying cultic formulas, that initiates came to an awareness of the deity and of a divine event. They thus gained confidence that in the future they could build on this knowledge of the divine and count on the benevolence of the deity.

Along with the function of initiation we find agrarian, sexual and mythical aspects that involved stimulating intoxicants, sexual prowess that begets the future, and sacred stories of divine examples of the overcoming of suffering. In every case ancient rites were performed that evoked a sense of the uniqueness of the event and thus dispelled uncertainty as to salvation. Initiation into the mysteries brought an irrevocable change of status. The holiness of initiates corresponded to the preceding purifications and stood in direct contrast to what was yet to be done in the initiation ritual.

The Greek word *mysteria* initially referred only to the ‘mysteries’ of Eleusis and signified a secret celebration or secret worship that was accessible only to initiates (*mustai*), who have had themselves initiated (*muein or telein*) into it. Other terms used for the celebration are *telete* and *orgia*. Latin writers either use the Greek word or translate it as *initia*. Originally, *mysteries* denoted a specific religious manifestation that is
essentially different in character from other official cultic functions. The mysteries are not open to everyone but require a special initiation. (But in Greek, musteria is applied to comparable rituals of initiation and thus acquires a general meaning.) When taken over by philosophy (especially Neo-Platonism and Neo-Pythagoreanism) and Christianity, the term increasingly loses its original concrete religious referent and acquires instead the sense of a revealed or mysterious divine wisdom (mysteriosophy) that is only available to or attainable by adepts.

The musteria or mysteria, as may be seen from the etymology of the word (from muein or telein, to keep the mouth or eyes shut) was a Greek rite that must be kept secret. This secret was to be revealed under the guidance of a hierophant (hierophantes, a revealer of sacred things). As per the nature of the cult itself, in order to preserve their own beliefs, those who were initiated into the mysteries bound themselves with oath never to reveal them. For instance, the worship of the fertility goddess with its sexual overtones, or due to the natural feeling of awe and reverence in the presence of what is deemed to be sacred and holy and the desire to exclude all hostile influences such as foreigners who might alienate the deity or even secure its favour to the detriment of the original worshipers and so on. Hence, our knowledge of the rites connected with the mysteries and the knowledge communicated in them is rather limited. What we do know comes from scenes represented in works of art, from casual references in pagan authors, and sometimes in the inaccurate or biased statements of early Christian writers.
According Theon of Smyrna (115-140 C.E.), there were four stages of this revelation:

1. A preliminary purification (*katharmos*).
2. A communication of secret knowledge (*teletesparadosis*).
3. A revelation of sacred objects (*epopteia*).
4. A crowning or garlanding of the mystic.

The purification could involve abstinence from food and the use of sex, various types of penance followed by a ritual bath.

The mystery religions undoubtedly provoked different responses in the initiates. Some may have found them simply a source of sensual excitation. Others may have regarded them as a kind of magical guarantee of salvation. Those of a philosophical mind must have been led by them to speculate about the immortality of the soul. Still others must have found a deep religious experience in them and a desire to be united with the divinity. Artists found in them an endless source of inspiration, as may be seen from the numerous reliefs, particularly on sarcophagi, portraying some theme taken from the mysteries.

### 3. The Syncretic Mystical Phenomenon

To recapitulate what we have already somewhat ascertained, the phrasal words ‘syncretic,’ (*syncretismus,* in Latin and *synkretismo* in Greek) means ‘a fusion of different divinities and doctrines’ or ‘a combination, reconciliation, or coalescence of varying, often mutually opposed beliefs, principles, or practices, typically marked by
internal inconsistencies'; and ‘mystical’ (‘mustes’ in Greek) means ‘an initiate,’ and
(‘muein’ in Greek) means ‘to close the eyes.’ “Mysticism is the innermost experience of
the being in communion with the Being.”

The word ‘phenomenon’ is derived from the Late Latin (1595-1605)
‘phaenomenon,’ drawn from the Greek root ‘phainomenon,’ means appearance, noun use
neuter of ‘phainomenos’ and present participle of ‘phainesthai’ means ‘to appear,’
passive of ‘phanein,’ means ‘to show’ or ‘to be seen.’ Thus phenomenon means an event,
circumstance or experience that is apparent to the senses which can be scientifically
described or appraised as an eclipse.

In the Kantian (Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher) philosophical concept,
phenomenon is a ‘thing-as-it-appears’ as distinguished from the ‘thing-in-itself’
independent of sense experience i.e. noumenon. According to Kant, phenomena are
present to us within a spatio-temporal framework and that since time and space are forms
of human sensibility, not aspects of independent reality, then phenomena, being
dependent on the senses, are not features of independent reality. In his Critique of Pure
Reason Kant maintained that scientific knowledge is concerned with the phenomenal
realm where natural laws of causality are in effect. When humans act freely as moral
agents, they function in the noumenal realm, but humans, as perceived by others, are
phenomena.

‘Syncretic mystical phenomenon’ symbolizes a paradox of mixed forms,
ideologies, divinities and doctrines that treats the topic with the optic of science,
theology, psychology, hagiography, and spiritual literature. To be true to the fact, by their
very nature, these ebb away interest, whether the humane, the macabre,\textsuperscript{44} or the occult, and may induce boredom even in the devout, who may try to read them dutifully. Mysticism deals with higher levels of experience and hence it is above those attainable by ordinary human processes of reasoning. The following may bring about clarity of thought with purity of intention.

First of all, we have to make the fundamental distinction between the supernatural, natural, and normal on one side, and the preternatural, miraculous, and unusual on the other. One may reach the heights of the latter without much noise and din or with no extraordinary manifestations to arrest the attention or to startle the onlooker (cf. E.C. Butler, \textit{Western Mysticism}, 1922). The syncretic mystical phenomena as such lie only on the fringes of the devout life. However, mystical-experience-in-itself is ingrained in the mystic and ontologically deep-rooted.

All the more, this can very well be seen as an abstract view. And at times, human life in the concrete is more fascinating. Hence, we are led to the second of the above categories. That is, in the human person there are so many forces, scarcely scratched by psychology, of imagination and emotion, of glory and misery, of comedy and tragedy, even of farce and melodrama, and all these are reflected in mystical life. The group psychology of a people, that also includes the people of a particular religion, region and period, contributes vogues, prejudices, attitudes, memories and ideals of all which helps to form a ‘syncretic culture of mysticism.’

\textsuperscript{44}‘Macabre’ in the original sense, dance of death in the Biblical Book of the Maccabees. It is based on the Latin name, ‘\textit{Machabaeorumchorea}’ (Dance of Maccabees). The seven tortured brothers, with their mother and Eleazar (2 Maccabees 6 and 7) were prominent figures on this hypothesis in the supposed dramatic dialogues.
Consequently, the norms of a flattish civic cum dogmatic theology cannot be deployed as a yardstick to judge the phenomena surrounding the mystical life. For some, to whom it has universal appeal, may admire it; whereas to others, it may look too bizarre, dry of spirit, dreary for words, and may turn to be mere unvisited period pieces. Hence, the phenomenal mystical dictum: "Read the signs of the time."

In view of these considerations galore, it can be confidently asserted that the whole topic of syncretic mysticism is a very wide and complex one, and this colours all discussion and writing about Sufism - as an Islamic mystical branch. This should be no reason for surprise granted the fact that it deals specifically with the most intimate relationship of the human person with the source of his being. Let me draw the curtains on this brief introductory search with the master's own syncretic mystical phenomenal touch:

I went to the Churches of the Christians and the Jews,
And every Christian and Jew found facing toward you:
In the hope of being united to You, I went to an idol temple,
And there the idols, too, were murmuring their love for You!\(^{45}\)

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