

**booklets**

**UNICITY OF GOD,  
MULTIPLICITY OF MYSTICISMS**



147

**José I. González Faus, sj**



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«One and the same Spirit and a multiplicity of gifts.» (1Cor 12,4)

«The foundation on which rests a self liberated from its ego is the God who needs human beings and cannot be conceived as a fate-bound idol that makes and unmakes arbitrarily. This collaboration between God and the person freed from ego is a fundamental certainty of all mysticism.» [In the words of Dag Hammarskjöld]: «I am the receptacle, the drink is divine, and God is the one who thirsts.» (Dorothee SÖLLE, *Mystik und Widerstand*, p. 286)

«Many will come from the east and the west and share the banquet with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.» (Mt 8,11)

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# INTRODUCTION

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The title of this booklet speaks expressly of mysticisms or spiritual experiences. At times I have shown reserve about the expression «dialogue of religions». Religions should coexist and collaborate in the liberation and fulfillment of human beings. Nevertheless, the concept of religion is enormously complicated due to its connection with theological, sociological, psychological, philosophical, or juridical elements. Moreover, its application to Christianity is for me very questionable and in any case very derivative.

## Religions and mysticisms

If in spite of this difficulty we make the effort to seek a common ground for all religions by referring to an ultimate, unconditioned, determining Reality that might serve as a key to all the reality we know about (J. Hick), then we must inevitably categorize and thematize that Reality as «Power», since that is the key and the source of everything. As a result, that Power becomes linked with the power which dominates humankind, and the various religions pursue the goal of being ways to appropriate or manage that power. Such a goal gives rise to ways of thinking and proceeding which, while perhaps being very religious, are

quite contrary to the Christian Gospels and often deserve to be called superstitious.

If, on the other hand, we attempt to categorize that ultimate Reality as «Mystery» rather than «Power», then human history seems to affirm that it is possible to experience that Mystery as something *immediate*, but *non-thematic*<sup>1</sup>. Such an experience has always been called «mysticism». Both these words (mystery and mysticism) come from the Greek verb *myô*, which means «to be in silence or have one's eyes closed», thus conveying the non-thematic or non-objective nature of such an experience.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, no matter how true such immediate contact with Mystery (or God, to use the more usual language) may be, it will always be a question of a God who is contextualized, skewed, and limited by the one who has the experience: Saint Augustine long ago compared it to a child on a beach who wants to pour the whole ocean into the little hole she's dug. It is precisely those limitations that disfigure mystical experiences whenever they are structured into truths (or theological systems) and "religions" (or systems of worship and community). Such structuring is inevitable, since we human beings are communal by nature thanks to language. And because spiritual experiences are not just individual but shared, they have been sources of great creativity in the religious history of humanity.

### **Universal experiences, particular languages**

If we now prescind from that further structuring into "religions", we are left with the fact that religious experience is simultaneously both verified and falsified by its inevitable limitation. (I say this referring to authentic experiences and discounting the countless false spiritual experiences which are actually hallucinations or projections camouflaged by a person's ego).<sup>3</sup> Abishiktananda, the French Benedictine pioneer of the contemporary interreligious movement, wrote with great lucidity in his diary: «If the Spirit is the presence and the action of God and the Lord in me, it is by nature ungraspable. To grasp it by thought I would need to give it a

name, objectivize it, and separate it from myself. But if I separate it from myself, ...my relation with God fades away».<sup>4</sup>

These words clearly affirm, on the one hand, the *universal presence* of the Spirit of God beyond "religious frontiers" and, on the other, the *inexpressibility* of that presence (even though it must be expressed!), given the partial nature of all experience of the Spirit, both in its reality and in its formulation. For that reason it is both appropriate and mutually enriching for different mysticisms to meet and engage one another. But such meeting and engagement cannot be merely a dialogue of concepts (as sublime as these may appear to each tradition); it must involve a careful mystagogy that trustingly introduces into each seminal experience –and likewise generates from each experience– a respectful effort to understand, compare, and learn.

### **Our objective**

In this booklet we attempt to draw close to the basic spiritual experience (or "mysticism") that has given birth to various religions (not all of them, due to the author's limitations) in order to try to fill out the different experiences and resituate them by putting them in contact with one another. I am aware that this is a very difficult task, for it requires that we prescind from many theological or cultural elements that appear to be central to different religious currents. It is especially difficult because the task of identifying each

spiritual experience should be the work not of one person but of many persons. We are seeking to identify accurately an experience which is in itself non-thematic, as we have said, but which also seeks to be thematized in order to be communicated and shared. Ratzinger has correctly insisted that a religion is inseparable from its culture, even though it is not identified with the culture. In this work, as we attempt to draw close to the primal mystical experience of the different religions for the purpose of viewing the experience in another cultural and anthropological context, we will also try to approach that always impossible separation of religion and culture in order to facilitate the encounter of the diverse experiences. My aim is to bring out what each of these mysticisms says about itself, not what we would like them to say in order to reach a simple solution to the problem of the diversity of religions. But I do this without ignoring the fact that I am Christian and that I therefore know the Christian experience best. Such knowledge can perhaps unconsciously condition my efforts to be objective. It will therefore be necessary for this booklet to be complemented

with further work, thus initiating the dialogue of experiences that it advocates.

One final observation: when (from my Christian perspective) I speak of «spiritual experience» as a synonym of mysticism, I am not referring simply to an experience of the non-material, but to an experience given by the Holy Spirit of God whose action, according to Christian texts, is universal since it has been «poured out on all flesh».

With this, then, we have sufficiently delimited our proposal: to observe closely the diverse spiritual experiences (and only to them) which are like the «mother cells» of the different religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We do this in order to see how they can (or should!) be purified and complemented by their contact with each other to the extent that they simply present themselves, by their very nature, as testimonies or offerings. To start off, it seems to me that it is possible to divide the experiences into two large groups, coinciding with the geographical terms East and West: thus we have «mysticisms of faith» and «mysticisms of being».



# FIRST PART: MYSTICISMS OF BEING

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As an experience of God, Hinduism posits one of the most radical affirmations of union with divinity that has been found in human history.

## 1. HINDUISM

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### 1.1. The experience

#### 1.1.1. Characteristic traits

##### *Non-duality*

As an experience of God, Hinduism posits one of the most radical affirmations of union with divinity that has been found in human history. It is usually characterized by the word *ad-vaita* (non-duality), which the West has always tended to understand in monistic or pantheistic terms. In Indian tradition, however, the term has two interpretations, one more monistic and the other more dualistic.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the word *advaita* does not necessarily mean identity but only «non-duality». And at least in the inevitably babbling language of mysticism, speaking of

non-duality does not necessarily mean speaking of identity. I remember a former professor who, when speaking to us about Christian mysticism, would persistently repeat: «We are not two, but neither are we one».

##### *Inaccessibility*

Apart from any discussion about monism or dualism, however, what is decisive for Hindu experience is that «non-duality» is affirmed through a very radical awareness of God's complete transcendence and inaccessibility: *Neti, neti* («it is not that, it is not that») is the insistent refrain of the Upanishads, reminding us of the well-known phrase of Augustine: «If you under-

stand, then it is not God». Similar to these expressions is this statement from the Kena Upanishad: «That One can never become an object of knowledge...; those who think they know him do not really know him».

Therefore, that totally inaccessible Being (*Brahman*, «further above me than what is most distant») is also said to be what is most profound within us (most profoundly me than my own most intimate self). And that unity is what is expressed in the mantra, *atman-brahman*,<sup>6</sup> or even better, in the phrase, *tat tvam asi* (That thou art). *Atman* designates the deepest dimension of the human being, a concept never translated well into our Latin languages.<sup>7</sup> And from that deepest dimension, almost inaccessible to our conscious selves, there is affirmed our (near) identity with the supremely transcendent God, as we read in the Kayvalya Upanishad (16): «This supreme Brahman, universal atman, great abode of whatever exists, most subtle of all subtle things, eternal: in truth it is you yourself because ‘That thou art’». This is not simply a philosophical or metaphysical statement that derives from an experience of wonder at the relation between identity and movement (as was the case with the pre-Socratics). Rather, we are dealing here with an authentic experience “of God”: mysticism.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Spirit*

We make this very important clarification: if we attempt to understand this Hindu non-duality using the categories of western Christianity, we might think that Christianity also speaks of «the

image and likeness of God» as the most profound existential trait of the human person. But as biblical as such language may be, there is more to be said: for the Hindus it is a question of *God himself*, as is shown by the Kayvalya Upanishad text we just cited. In our Christian language, therefore, the *atman* would be the person in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. Many years ago, drawing on the intuitive sense that characterized him, the man who would later be Cardinal Daniélou wrote the following about the theology of the future in a world no longer dominated by the West: «It is affirmed, for example, that the Indian notion of *atman* (a richer term than the Greek *pneuma*) is perhaps better suited to give us a theology of the Holy Spirit»<sup>9</sup>.

The only true reality, therefore, is in my depths. Everything else, what is external to me, is as unreal as a dream; it is not liberating. «The atman is found in all beings, and all beings are found in It; when It is seen, then identity with the supreme Brahman is achieved; there is no other way» (*Kayvala Upanishad* 10). Consequently, «whoever glimpses all being in the atman and the atman in all beings is never separated from It» (*Isha Upanishad* 6).

#### *1.1.2. Accessories*

If I have succeeded in suggesting what seems to me to be the fundamental experience of Hinduism, I would now like to add a couple of comments:

a) That experience was later spelled out and systematized in countless “theologies”, mythologies, or practices,

and also in a conceptualization that speaks of the unreality of everything “real” and insists that “reality” is as false as what we perceive to be real when we are dreaming. Such a conceptualization also speaks of *dharma* (truth), of *karma* (a concept similar to the Latin *ordo* of the scholastics), and of reincarnation. We can prescind from all that here and perhaps have recourse to a maxim of Wittgenstein as a way of putting these ideas in western language: «not how the world is, but that the world is: that is what is mystical». In this way we might catch a glimpse of that trinity that I have mentioned in other works: «*sat, cit ananda*»: being, consciousness of being, and enjoyment of being. That is everything in reality.

b) Besides, that experience of Hinduism is universal; it is accessible to everyone through careful pedagogy. That is why Hinduism has had the reputation of being the most tolerant religion, at least before the vile connection of religion and nationalism gave it its present inquisitorial and persecutory demeanor. Long before Rahner spoke of anonymous Christianity the Bhagavad Gita (IX) seemed to be suggesting a kind of anonymous Hinduism, such as when the god Krishna tells the protagonist: «Those also who follow other gods and venerate them with profound faith are in reality honoring me alone, although not in the correct form».

## 1.2. Limits of experience

However true the experience of the divine quality of humans may be, Hinduism draws from it a debatable conse-

quence, the devaluing of all reality: things are nothing more than appearances (*maya*), such as when you see a rope moving and mistakenly think it is a snake. In this view, history is only a kind of dream (*samsara*), no matter how real it may seem to us (just as what we dream about seems very real to us in our sleep).

There is no doubt that when we have a profound experience of union with Being everything else becomes unreal. Christian experience has also spoken about the «difference between the temporal and the eternal»; it has claimed that «life is a dream» and that history is only a «great theater» where the important thing is not what role you play but how well you play it.<sup>10</sup>

But that generalizing consequence forgets that in reality there also exist millions of persons (*atman*) in whom God dwells. By devaluing reality so broadly, there is the risk of devaluing the suffering of others in a limited world and in a society that produces victims. Hindu mysticism seems to prescind from or disregard that suffering, or it conceptualizes it as punishment for some fault. In this way it becomes possible to arrive at an individualist vision that accepts the caste system and assigns people to pariah status<sup>11</sup> as punishment for evil done in an earlier life. This raises questions about the concept of reincarnation, which originally had a negative sense of punishment or of new opportunity in more difficult conditions. Curiously, our western society, due to its unacknowledged fear of death, has recovered the concept by giving it a positive sense.

## 2. BUDDHISM

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### 2.1. The experience: suffering and compassion

The preceding exposition takes us easily to Buddhism, which is considered to be a “heresy” of Hinduism. It arose precisely from the experience of compassion in the face of human suffering. It is debatable whether Buddhism should be called a religion since it can be thought of as atheistic: it can affirm or not affirm (that is, prescind from) the reality of God.<sup>12</sup> In any case, we treat it here as proof that mystical experience can exist even in those who do not believe in God<sup>13</sup> and that the Spirit of God «poured out on all flesh» can therefore attempt to lead each free person by ways other than our own.<sup>14</sup>

Buddhism is better described as a profound anthropological experience, but one that reaches so deep a dimension of reality that it becomes genuine mystical experience: moved by compassion (*karuna*), Buddha renounces nirvana in order to help those who are suffering. Such great solidarity is intrinsically theophanic,<sup>15</sup> even when it does not seek to be such, because it arises from a triple negation that is intrinsic to every experience of God: negation of the ego (not of the person!), negation of private property, and negation of force (because God is universal love). The Buddhist (whether atheist or not we do not know) who immolates himself suicidally or who demonstrates against the Burmese dictatorship may make visible for

Christians the words of Jesus in Saint Matthew: «You did it to me».

I am not an expert in this area, and there is not space here to register written proofs. The Buddha’s famous sermon of Benares with its «noble truths» is quite well-known: human beings suffer due to passions that are blind and powerful, but there exists a long road which leads out of this suffering by freeing people of desire and giving them “illumination”. To describe that road the Buddha drew on the Hindu teaching about the unreality of the real and the absurdity of our passions which seek only to «capture winds»<sup>16</sup>. However, Buddhism ends up speaking about the *an-atman*, which we might understand as the negation of the ego, and thus highlights by its negative language the aspect of Buddhism that is reacting against Hinduism.

Prescinding from this wisdom that is already well known, I prefer to concentrate on less familiar aspect of Buddhism that goes beyond the sphere of wisdom: «The soul of the Buddha is mercy. It is the spirit of love that saves human beings by every means; it is the mercy that suffers and becomes sick along with humans... That spirit of mercy of the Buddha is born of contact with people, and from that contact is born faith in people»<sup>17</sup>. I have said this aspect goes beyond the sphere of wisdom, but we should not forget that, in order to reach this point, Buddhism offers a key word that the West fails to

grasp or grasps only superficially: mindfulness. Mindfulness is not just observing the external functioning of things: it is a gaze that is capable of penetrating to what exists in the depths of the sea of life, well below the fluctuating waves on its surface. Buddhism is an experience of what human beings are capable of if they stop turning their eyes and their ears away from the deepest dimension of reality.

## 2.2. Limits of the experience

Consequently I am not happy with the affirmation of those who reduce Buddhism to wisdom and characterize Christianity as love. I believe that wisdom and love are present in both traditions, although it might be said that in Buddhism it is wisdom that leads toward love while in Christianity it is love that teaches wisdom.

As we did before, we must add that Buddhism has also had a need to organize itself as community, even though its doctrine avoids all speculation and

seeks to express itself in parables. Moreover, due to the great demands of its practices, Buddhism speaks of a wider way and a narrower one (Mahayana and Hinayana), which might find their parallels in the Catholic distinction between precepts and counsels. But that is not our interest right now.

What I would like to point out instead is that the Buddhist experience seems to be concerned only with the suffering that human beings cause themselves through their blind desire. That is what Gautama perceived in his personal history of a privileged social position. But that experience of personal pain needs to be completed by the immense suffering that human passion causes in other people in the form of murder, slavery, humiliation, and impoverishment. There is the suffering which everyone experiences, but there is also the pain which human beings have caused one another since the beginning of history (Cain and Abel) and which deserves to be the privileged object of human mercy.

## 3. APPENDIX: TAOISM

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No I do not know enough about Taoism to expound on it, but I don't want to omit it because it includes many of the "sapiential" elements or experiences that are so typical of Eastern religions and that may have been passed over in my exposition thus far.

It is worth noting that *Tao te Ching*, the title of the famous work by Lao Tse, means literally «book (*Ching*) of virtue (*te*) and the *Tao*». This last word is untranslatable but seems to allude to the ultimate source from which virtue flows: Wisdom, Strength, Goodness of

being... Therefore, even though the word is untranslatable, it would not be inexact to say that the Tao may be a way of alluding to God, who is not named because he is not known. One of the definitions given to Tao which coincides with the interpretation made here is this: «the creative totality manifested in the Unity which is hidden in diversity». We can therefore understand that when the New Testament was first translated into Chinese, the beginning of the fourth gospel read thus: «In the beginning was the Tao». This version was rejected by Rome, unthinkingly fearful that allusion was being made to an impersonal God. Such a fear was unfounded in my opinion because the experience of the Tao exists beyond the personal or the impersonal.

Apart from that, I already said that I am not sure that it is correct to speak properly of mystical experience in Taoism. It is possible, however, to speak of a sapiential experience of Mystery (and not only of human beings). The Bible offers us, along with the historical and prophetic books, a series of reflections that are simply “human wisdom” (or God’s wisdom in the form of human wisdom). Biblical wisdom reveals a certain “unfolding” of the one true Yahweh by speaking of the Wisdom that arises from him, “lives” alongside him, and works with him.

This is an element that we should not let pass: what Lao Tse called «virtue» may arise from a call or a mission (as we will later see in Judaism), but it can also arise from something as human (and elastic) as the search for

wisdom. Elsewhere I have commented on how Bartolomé de las Casas was not converted to his prophetic stance by hearing the fiery sermons of A. de Montesinos but by reading a phrase from the sapiential books of the Bible (he was perhaps prepared by a earlier process which started with the preaching of the Dominicans in Hispaniola).

In this context, some phrases from Lao Tse stand out: «The sea becomes the king of all the rivers because it is lower than they are. Therefore, the wise man governs the people by making his discourse plain and by directing them from behind» (66). Also: «there is no greater defect than greed» (46 –this consideration seems to be echoed in two or three texts of the New Testament). Or this extraordinary statement: «The greatest virtue is not virtuous; that is why it is virtue» (38).

The question arises whether such resplendent formulations provide human beings with the strength they need to put them into practice. The Tao itself warns that «my words are easy to understand but very difficult to practice» (70): for «if heaven and earth exist eternally, is it not because they do not live for themselves?» (7).

Whether or not Taoism deserves the name mysticism, it seems undeniable that in this type of refrain contains a kind of wisdom that derives not “from books” but from a profound understanding of what is richest in human nature. This is what E. Leclerc, speaking of Francis of Assisi, has called «a poor man’s wisdom». I would therefore like to conclude this appendix with a quote from the gentle Franciscan tra-

dition, one that is fundamental for our devastated contemporary world: «There is nothing in the world softer and weaker than water, but there is also nothing like water for eroding what is hard and strong! And nothing can replace it. That the weak overcomes the strong and the soft overcomes the hard is something everybody knows about, but nobody practice» (78).

Perhaps the “mysticism” of the Tao will help us to become convinced of

something that we find so difficult to believe on the basis of our superficial experience: that goodness and the practice of virtue are what is most in conformity with our nature, even though they sometimes seem difficult for us. We might also realize that those popular maxims such as «everything good is either fattening or sinful» are fine little jokes for a while, but that they are actually impertinences that do not go beyond the surface of things.



## SECOND PART: MYSTICISMS OF FAITH

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Perhaps what is most typical of Jewish mysticism as compared with that of earlier religions is *an experience of confidence in that Mystery*, but even here the Mystery does not make its identity known or «reveal its Name», but affirms simply, «I am» (or «will be»: Ex 3,14).

### 1. JUDAISM

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#### 1.1. The experience

##### 1.1.1. *The faith*

We cite only a few references:

a) Jewish prayer (the psalms) are replete with expressions of confidence: Jews dare to say to the Mystery «my refuge, my fortress, my God, I trust in you» (90,2), and this Ultimate Mystery is invoked as «my fortress, my strong rock» and as «my light and my salvation». This is a Mystery in whom one can trust, even when the fig trees do not bear fruit, when the fields yield no grains, or when there are no cattle in the stable... (cf. Habakkuk 3).

b) That confidence is the founding experience that inspires Abraham to undertake the adventure of leaving his native place and all his family in pursuit of a promise that he discerns only dimly but understands to be worthy of faith (Gen 12ff.). That confidence is so strong that of itself it makes of Abraham a righteous man (Rom 4); it constitutes him the father and the model of all believers. And as a result the Mystery even becomes known as the «God of Abraham» (Gen 26,24; Ex 3,6; Mt 22,32).

It is easy to perceive the radical novelty of this experience as compared

to what we have seen in the mysticisms of the East, for it presupposes a more loving relationship: the closeness of the Mystery is not based only on its presence in my spirit, but on its absolute reliability: «taste and see how sweet is the Lord; happy are those who take refuge in him!» (Ps 34,8).

Often the unconscious intuitions of a language transmit something of the mind and the heart of a people, and this seem to be the case with the Hebrew *'mn*, which means both «believe» and «subsist». That double meaning of the word indicates how the Jewish people understood the meaning of confidence in God, and it also helps us to understand what Jesus meant when he declared that it was impossible to serve both God and money (*Mammon*, a word derived from the same root *'mn*).

This new relation to the Mystery, as compared to Hindu mysticism, becomes more pronounced in the way the Jews express their consciousness of the total dependence on God that characterizes all creatures. And this dependence results not only from their being created but from human sinfulness. Indeed, the trust in God turns out to be all the more extraordinary because it is joined with a consciousness, so typical of Jewish faith, of our own misery and unworthiness before God.

### 1.1.2. «Word»

In the second place, that confidence is founded on the fact that the Mystery “speaks”, another great novelty of Judaism as compared to the eastern mysticisms. But the Mystery does not speak

to teach or even to make itself known, but to call: to ask the people to trust in a promise which the Mystery makes. The unsuspected trustworthiness of the Mystery does not come from any rational deduction of Israel but from a word that the Mystery has spoken: «I have seen the oppression of my people, and I am coming down to free them»<sup>18</sup>.

From that “speaking” of the Mystery there arises another unexpected novelty. We have noted that, just as in the East, the Mystery does not give its Name, even though it speaks. The Hindu formula, *neti, neti*, which we saw already, remains true of the Mystery in Jewish tradition. Nevertheless, the Mystery reveals itself as a God of the victims, of the oppressed, of those who are suffering and defenseless, of those who have no one to help them, such as widows, orphans, and foreigners. The first word uttered by the Mystery makes this known: «I have heard the cry of my people».

## 1.2. Its development

From these two features arises a series of reflections, consequences, invitations, and also calls to attention.

### 1.2.1. The temptation

The experience of absolute trustworthiness undergoes the crisis typical of all human relations: the confidence is often betrayed and inevitably gives rise to doubt. Job wonders whether God is at fault, while the prophets of Israel never tire of repeating that it is the people who are at fault! These experiences

are partial and one-sided, and they are both very present in the psalms. Thus Jewish mysticism vacillates between conversion and fear of trusting.

### 1.2.2. *The pain of history*

But here another contrast with Hindu mysticism emerges: the human situation is not simply appearance, illusion, or falsehood; it is above all suffering, exploitation, and injustice. Accordingly, Israel will grow in the conviction that God is a God of victims and that humans are beings in need of forgiveness. Hindus would never have intoned such chants as the *Miserere* or the *De Profundis*, nor would they have had prophets like Amos or Isaiah. In contrast, confession of sin marks the whole narration that Israel makes of its history. The lovable agnostic M. Vázquez Montalbán once commented that Israel was the only people that told its history not to glorify itself but to demonstrate its unworthiness<sup>19</sup> (and at the same time, I would add, to show its trust in Yahweh despite its unworthiness). No other nation has told its history in this way: not the Catalonians, not the Basques, not the Spaniards, not the French, not the Americans, not even the ancient Roman empire which included Israel –in Jewish history even the golden age of David and Solomon is narrated as a time of glorious splendor riddled with sin<sup>20</sup>.

### 1.2.3. *Finding value in history*

There thus arises another new feature of Jewish mysticism: its trust not in a transcendent beyond but in the here-

and-now. In this way the material reality and the history that are devalued in Hinduism gained new value in Judaism, not for themselves but because God has valued them despite their nothingness and their deceitfulness and has given them to humans.<sup>21</sup> The ultimate intention of eastern mystical experience may perhaps be best expressed by saying that it is not a question of devaluing external reality; rather, our relationship with external reality needs to be corrected so that it is no longer possessive or violent, for the world and history become false for us when we confront them violently or possessively.

Thus the mystical experience of Judaism is an experience of historical liberation. In fact, the formula already cited, «I have heard the cry of my people, and I am coming down to free them» (Ex 3,7), constitutes the first account of that experience (considering it in chronological, not logical, order).

Allow me to add two quick notes on this fundamental text of Judaism: a) Moses hears that voice in a geographical context where the cry of those suffering is least audible: in the impressive setting of Sinai with its pink granites blocks surrounded by desert. And b) we can see here a certain parallelism with Buddhist compassion, but now the compassion is directed toward the suffering created by historical oppression, not that arising from one's blind desires. Both these characteristics are quite persistently present in the mystical experience of the prophets and in their radical conviction that human oppression is totally contrary to divine justice (*tsedakah*).

#### 1.2.4. *Personalization*

This trust in the “word” of the Unnamable Mystery implies another novelty with respect to the East: Jewish mysticism deals with a particular experience, one that makes no pretension of being universalizable, as does the Hindu *advaita*. This obscure starting place will later give rise to the concept of the dignity of the “person”, which is the principal legacy of Judeo-Christianity to humankind. What is more important now, however, is to point out that this “individuation” of mystical experience was not for the faithful Jew a “privilege” but a mission and a duty: «Go to my people and tell them....». Likewise, the ultimate mission of the chosen people was to «be a light» for others. Here is where we begin to glimpse the risks inherent in the Jewish experience.

### 1.3. Limits or dangers

#### 1.3.1. *The temptation*

Even though such an experience can become a strange source of incredible freedom, it is very difficult for people to accept, and it can even degenerate into an intolerable abuse of trust. Israel (and the Church in its wake) have been profoundly unfaithful and disloyal in their acceptance of this experience, and as a result they have deformed many concepts of Judaism (such as being chosen by God), or like Peter they «are not on the side of God but of men» (Mt 16,33). As John of the Cross intuited, the problem is that «your own image and the image of God exist within you side by side»<sup>22</sup>. That is why, when God

chose a particular people to be a «light for the nations», this people perversely conceived the election as a privilege that would make them «superior to the nations» or would give them leave to dominate other nations.

It is precisely for that reason that Jewish mysticism gave rise to those prophetic figures that are so typical of the Hebrew Bible (and found almost nowhere else). In the prophets the mystical depths become transformed into literary genius (as occurred also in John of the Cross). The whole of their message is reducible to a constant denunciation of the idolatry of security, whether national security sought in alliances with the empires of the time or personal security sought in wealth. Such idolatry of security does away with Israel’s trust in its God.

#### 1.3.2. *«Light of the nations»*

For all these reasons the importance of Judaism in the history of humankind will never be sufficiently recognized. Despite their many sins, the incredible influence of this tiny people upon the human race is extraordinary, and in a way it seems to have fulfilled (although obliquely) the promise of Yahweh that it would be a light for the nations. That is why there is all the more reason to lament the terrible betrayal of that experience in the modern state of Israel which, by submitting to the same idolatry of security that the prophets denounced, have trodden underfoot the best of Judaism and have thereby become the greatest anti-Semites of our time. Today there is an urgent need to

cry out that the God of Israel –the God of Jonah, of Jeremiah, of Ruth– is on the side of the Palestinians and earnestly desires them to have their own worthy nation. Today, if Verdi were to compose a new *Nabucco*, it would be in today’s Israel, where faithful Jews would let «their thoughts fly toward the lost homeland» and where they would see «their harps hung not on the willows of Babylon», but on the new wall of shame and the invasive settlements. To call such criticism “anti-Semitic” is to practice the same hypocrisy as is practiced in the Catholic Church when those who want the Church to be founded on the Gospels and the faith of Peter, instead of the power of the Vatican, are accused of not loving the Church.

### 1.3.3. *Infidelity*

The dangers that arise from this type of mysticism have already been seen in our description. All of them seem to converge in the temptation to isolate one of the two poles of the dialectic that constitutes the mysticism so that it becomes grotesquely deformed. The danger of excessive anthropomorphism was felt by Israel itself, which tried to compensate for it by the commandment prohibiting images (a commandment that the Church as an heir of Israel should consider seriously today). We have already spoken of the temptation of trying to “use” God (thus abusing personal trust in him). This attempt to

make use of God leads to the temptation to take justice into one’s own hands in order to carry out «God’s justice», thus making simple human vengeance appear to be the justice of God. In this regard, it is interesting to consider what the Bhagavad Gita says with regard to war. In the Hindu poem the king at first feels certain qualms about going to war and causing violent death. Shiva, however, calms his conscience (arguing the illusory nature of reality) and tells him that such is his task and that the important thing is to fulfill his role with right intention. For its part, Israel is situated both below and above this form of Hindu resignation. It is situated below insofar as it experiences the temptation of holy war (which the Church will also inherit), and it is situated above insofar as it is interiorly aware that Yahweh is a God who «makes wars cease to the ends of the earth, who breaks the bow and shatters the spear, who burns the chariots with fire» (Ps 46,9). God’s project for this world is turning swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks so that nation shall not lift up sword against nation and no more shall they learn about war (Is 2,4).<sup>23</sup> Hindu resignation in the face of the real is more static, while Jewish trust is more dynamic, but also more dangerous.

It should be said that all these dangers are also present in the mysticism of Christianity, Israel’s spiritual heir. This will be the subject of our next chapter.

## 2. CHRISTIANITY

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I will highlight three traits that describe the spiritual experience that gives rise to Christianity: it is a mysticism of love that reaches a «horizontal *advaita*» (pardon the expression, which I will explain forthwith); it is a mysticism of freedom; and it is a mysticism of the «dark night». These three traits arise from what was experienced by (and around) Jesus of Nazareth. We will later meet them again with the names of Absolute, Promise, and Curse.

### 2.1. A loving mysticism

What in Judaism we called the trustworthiness of the Mystery culminates in Christianity as an incredible love relationship with the Mystery. In the earliest testimonies of Christianity, Paul sings of a faith in the Mystery which, through Christ, «loved me and gave himself for me» (cf. Gal 2,20). John reformulates the same notion by writing that God is Love, God loved us first, and all who love are born of God (1 Jn 4,7-21). Both Paul and John agree that we have known that love of God only because God «sent his Son as the Savior of the world» (1 Jn 4, 14). But it is important to stress that that love does not eliminate the basic unknowability of the Mystery: «No one has ever seen God» (1 Jn 4,12). God remains ultimately unknowable despite the close connection between the words «love» and «know» in the Hebrew language and the Bible more generally.<sup>24</sup>

Intimate union with God does not lead one to “see God” better but to have God’s eyes and God’s ears to see and hear the world. Accordingly, the Christian spiritual experience always uses threefold language: it knows that God is «for us» (Rom 8,31), it knows that God is «with us» (Emmanuel: Mt 1,23), and it knows that God is «in us» (Rom 5,1). From this experience will unfold the later trinitarian doctrine, which as doctrine does not concern us now but is still reflected in three styles of language: a spousal mysticism, a mysticism of the freedom of the children of God, and a prophetic mysticism of fraternity. Let us look at them quickly.

#### 2.1.1. A spousal relation

Later Christian mysticism will be bold enough to speak of a spousal or conjugal relation with the Mystery. John of the Cross in his splendid poems is the best known example of this audacity. Before him, however, Saint Bernard (in his commentary on the Song of Songs) had spoken of Jesus as the kiss on the lips that God gives humanity; he explains that when two persons kiss on the lips, there is no distinction between the one giving and the one receiving: there are not two kisses but only one kiss, given and received completely and simultaneously by both persons. And before Bernard the Fathers of the Church had no fear about designating Jesus as the “womb” of the body of humanity: the place where the seed of

God enters and where the new person, the child of God, emerges.

### 2.1.2. *A mysticism of the children of God*

Secondly, for Christianity it is the same Spirit of God (the *atman* of the human being) who recognizes and responds to that love by teaching us «to pray to God as we ought to» (Rom 8,26) or to address the Mystery with the affectionate name of *Abba* (Gal 4,6). Likewise, John states that we know God «by the Spirit which was given to us» (1 Jn 3,24; 4,13). For Christianity, the inseparable unity or non-duality applies first (and solely) to the human person of Jesus, but for us who are incorporated into Jesus Christ (by the Spirit) it is experienced as the unity between our love of God and our love of Jesus Christ in our sisters and brothers (above all in those who are hungry, suffering, and needy: Mt 25,21ff). That is what I meant before by «horizontal *advaita*».

### 2.1.3. *A mysticism of fraternity*

The surprising result of this is that the conjugal relation with God, far from marginalizing other human beings from our love of God, necessarily includes them. The Johannine writings reaffirm the refusal of the historical Jesus to separate love of God from love of neighbor (Mk 12,21ff.), declaring emphatically that only those who love their neighbor can claim that they love God, and that those who say they love God and do not love their neighbor do not really know God and are simply liars (1 Jn 4,8.20).

## 2.2. Liberating mysticism

[N.B. As a Christian, I feel obliged to lengthen this chapter, something I felt less inclined to do in the other cases considering my ignorance about traditions different from my own.]

### 2.2.1. *The worth of being human*

If we now attempt to describe the nature of the spiritual experience that makes a person Christian, we can use as a connecting theme the first part of the letter to the Romans, which is less a systematic theology than an explanation of Paul's own spiritual experience. We do this in five points.

a) Humanity has gone astray from its origins and is on the road toward self-destruction. We human beings, therefore, are evil or corrupted.

b) God, however, has decided not to do away with human beings but to regenerate them: God's forgiving power goes so far as to transform the evil we have done into a non-deed. In Spanish there is a play in words that conveys this: what we call *infecto* («infected») in the sense of despicable or harmful is transformed by God into *in-fecto* («never made», cf. Latin *non factum*). That is to say, what never should have existed is made by God not to exist, and that is the ultimate meaning of the word forgiveness.

c) God acts this way, giving himself to us completely in the life of Jesus, a life «handed over to death because of our sin, but raised up for our justification»<sup>25</sup>.

d) Starting from there, human beings are carried into a realm which is no

longer one of obligation but of responding to gratuitous love (that is why we will not sin, Paul explains, even if we are in a realm of no obligation).

e) That response to gratuitous love will be slow and laborious, but by means of it human beings will be gradually transfigured, and they will moved toward it by the force of the Spirit.<sup>26</sup> Most important, though, are not the difficulties or the incoherencies of the journey but its splendid goal: «the manifestation of the freedom of the children of God» (Rom 8,21).

This short exposition requires one final clarification: by its very nature love must be believed: it implies a basic element of trust that is indispensable. Moreover, all the love of God that we have just described must be believed. Believing in Jesus Christ actually means believing in that incredible love more than in metaphysical formulas, for these can have validity only insofar as they help us believe in that love. So true is this that the eternal human problem regarding one's "justification" or worth is resolved only by such faith in love: it is precisely such faith that is counted as a person's justification (Rom 3,1.22.23)

This is something of a summary of the first half of the letter to the Romans, and it is also the spiritual experience by which every true Christian lives. In light of this we can also perceive the great difficulty of Christian faith, which is in total continuity with the difficulty of Jewish faith.

### 2.2.2. *Mysticism and freedom*

Perhaps the foregoing exposition (if I have done it well) allows us to under-

stand that this experience of loving relationship with the Mystery is a source of incredible freedom: the Johannine writings state succinctly that love «drives out all fear» (1 Jn 4,18). Paul declares in more solemn fashion that to help us relate to the Mystery we have not received a spirit of servitude that makes us fall back in fear, but an *atman* of sons and daughters and heirs. The first apostles seemed to have exercised such freedom in their defiance of the religious authorities when they simply replied that their first duty was to obey God rather than human beings (Acts 4,19;5,29).

It is therefore easy to understand why the great Christian mystics were persons of unusual freedom where were often under suspicion and problematic for the institution, which was able to recognize their greatness only after they were dead.

### 2.3. **Mysticism of the dark night**

As we said in regard to the trustworthiness of the Mystery in Judaism, in Christian experience also the love of God "becomes hidden" at both the personal and the socio-historical level. The subject of the experience is heard to cry out: «Where have you hidden, / Beloved, so as to leave me groaning? ... I ran after you, and you were gone». This disappearance of the Beloved is intensely painful: the wound may be said to be "tender", but in fact it affects the believer's most vulnerable zone: «the deepest center of my soul»<sup>27</sup>. God appears to be «giving the gift and hiding his hand», as a Spanish saying

has it: he lets himself be clearly seen, only to conceal himself later. Abraham goes forth hoping in a promise that seems unattainable; the people escape from slavery only to search for their freedom in a desert; and Jesus himself, who dared to call God *Abba*, is found crying out «My God, why have you forsaken me?» It is understandable, then, that the language of the dark night should appear in Christian mysticism.

The dark night can extend from Job to Auschwitz. It can be clumsily explained as a test or as ascetical preparation, but in reality it is much more; it has a very basic rationale. It expresses both God's *absolute Transcendence* even in his total surrender and the *dimension of faith* which the fullness of love brings about ("justifying" humans). The dark night succeeds in leaping, like Jesus, from abandonment by God to abandonment into the hands of the Father (from «My God, why have you forsaken me?» to «Father, into your hands I place my spirit»). That dimension also was expressed by the Carmelite mystic both admirably and simply: «How well I know the Fount which gushes and flows ... even though it is night!».

Besides that, however, the night is also a consequence of the *global character of this reality of ours* which is so often opposed to love and which (interpreted from the Christ event) is simultaneously absolute, curse, and promise. It is the absolute of «you did it to me»; it is the curse of «if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, but not my will but yours be done»; and it is the promise of «I am the Resurrection and the Life» (perhaps the boldest,

most shocking words that have been written in any religious text).<sup>28</sup>

This final mystical root allows us to describe Christianity simply as "faith in Love" –in love which in this world of ours is always conquered and always unconquerable. This also allows us to admire the profound mystical intuition of two recent saints, both named Theresa, when the night of nothingness menaced their faith: if I cannot believe, then at least I can love...<sup>29</sup>

## 2.4. Consequences

### 2.4.1. *Mysticism of equality*

Authentic Christian mysticism thus makes explicit the theological and theophanic foundation that already existed in Buddhist compassion. A mysticism of equality –based on how God is revealed in Jesus– runs through the whole New Testament, much to the shame of some Christian churches. The New Testament also reveals that, if justice is God's biblical attribute, then the justice of the one who is merciful is God's impoverishment, as paradoxical as this may seem: «being rich he became poor for our sake, to *enrich us with his poverty*» (2 Cor 8,9). In a world opposed to love and consequently full of victims it is impossible to find God's love (or God) apart from the victims.<sup>30</sup> Thus we understand why true Christian mysticism is, to use Pedro Casaldàliga's expression, a «mysticism of liberation»<sup>31</sup>.

### 2.4.2. *Mysticism in conflict*

What we have explained thus far may remind us of the well-known statement

of K. Rahner which is now widely cited: «The Christian of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be a mystic (that is, a person who “has experienced” something) or he/she will not be Christian». I do not quote this now to commend interior experience but because this statement represents a very serious criticism of pre-Vatican II Christianity: it was merely sociological Christianity, without spiritual experience; it relied on the drawing force of mass movement but lacked deep roots in the person. That is why it has collapsed so readily in Europe over the last century. We can also see why the Church will always be problematic for Christians, apart from her best or her worst epochs: first, because the experience of love and freedom is essential to the mission, and without that experience there is no “evangelization” (which means: communication of good news!); second, because we human beings tend to falsify love more than any other reality; and finally (as a result of the aforesaid), because Christianity is intrinsically communitarian and every great community needs a minimum of institution.

## 2.5. Dangers and difficulties

If the foregoing description has appeared somewhat seductive to the reader, it would be good to recall the Latin refrain *corruptio optimi pessima*, which can help us to understand why Christian experience, once it becomes structured as religion, produces dangers greater than any others so far dealt with. It will also help us to understand why Christianity is in need of all the

other experiences to correct and complement it. And it will need them precisely (and paradoxically) to the extent that it considers itself the «full and definitive revelation of God». Christianity’s own experience of belief tells it that when God calls a people or makes himself known to a prophet –as happened with the prophet Jonah– he does so not for the benefit of the people or the prophet but because he is concerned about all those thousands of people who dwell «in Nineveh», so far from Jerusalem (cf. Jonah 4,11).

Once it becomes structured as “religion”, Christianity is sorely tempted to fall into anthropomorphism, precisely because of its convictions about the closeness and the humanity of God. Such convictions, when separated from the biblical experience, give birth to a thousand superstitions, pseudo-revelations, and idolatries which, in my modest opinion, ecclesiastical authority should do much more to contain.

To avoid such anthropomorphism, Christianity will need to have recourse to the Hindu experience of the inseparability of me as an individual from the Spirit of the Mystery present in the deepest part of my being. Christianity will also need the help of Judaism in order to recover in a new historical context the Jewish theme of prohibition of images: for it is one thing to declare the legitimacy of images precisely because God himself has assumed a human image (or as a pedagogical aid for an illiterate people), but it is something very different when images proliferate superstitiously in an image-laden culture like our own. And

along with the second commandment Christianity should also learn something of the awesome respect that Jews have in pronouncing the Name of God. The especially Christian teaching about God's nearness leads many Christians to speak of God as «one more thing» in this world, like the iPod or the brother-in-law or the dining-room table or the neighbor across the street. We thus run the risk of forgetting what Paul told the Athenians: «We ought not to think that the Deity is like... a representation by human art and imagination» (Acts 17, 29) and of losing the awe-inspiring respect with which every creature should approach the Unnamable Mystery.

Christian mysticism, precisely because it is an “open-eyed” mysticism turned toward historical reality, will also need to be mindful of the way in which the East relativizes the world and history (and the religious institution itself); at the same time it will respect the value that God grants world history

by recapitulating it in Christ. Even though the Christian community needs to establish institutions, it should remember the stern command «not to quench the Spirit» (1 Thes 5,19) lest the institution degenerate into something as contrary to Jesus as the letter that kills the Spirit. Finally, when the experience of God's incredible closeness is converted into a formula, there is the great danger that the formula will be deformed into what is today criticized as *God à la carte* (sometimes to suit the leaders and sometimes to suit the people). This temptation is frequent in modern-day Christianity and can be corrected by what we will say below about Islam.

All these very real dangers show the importance of the distinction between faith and religion that was proposed by K. Barth (although not very well spelled out by this great theologian) and taken up later in another context by D. Bonhoeffer.

### 3. ISLAM

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«In the name of Allah, the compassionate and merciful one. Blessed be Allah, Lord of the universe... Master of the day of judgment, you only do we serve, from you alone do we ask for assistance. Lead us by the right way». Thus begins the sacred text of Islam, the religion that more than any other, indeed

almost exclusively, deserves the title of «religion of the book».

#### 3.1. The experience

The spiritual experience contained in those phrases seems to me easy to explain. The word *Islam* is usually

translated as “submission”. Islam was born as a corrective to the popular, deformed Christianity that the Prophet knew and that he considered to be superstitious and idolatrous. The quoted text of the Quran highlights an attitude of immense respect: the Ultimate Mystery is compassionate and merciful, but those are only adjectives. The fundamental designation, the one that defines him above all his other names, is Lord of the universe, who alone is to be served and who alone can offer assistance: only God is God, and «there is no God by Allah».

The word “submission” does not sit well in our Western world which has so confused freedom with pride. Nevertheless, when applied to the Ultimate Mystery it means profound respect and indicates the only (or at least the first) attitude that human beings should adopt before the incomprehensible greatness of God. It is important, therefore, to understand the seriousness of the word, which seeks to safeguard God’s superiority over against Judaeo-Christian anthropomorphizing and corrects that notion of *God à la carte* that we spoke of before. Taking off one’s shoes when entering the mosque is one expression (debatable or outmoded if you will) of our nakedness and our submission before the Mystery. Even more clearly, “Islam” is the same word that Arabic-speaking Christians use to express what we call “surrender” to God. The word thus gains in dignity.

At the origins of the experience (and contrary to what Westerners believe) submission is not enslavement by freedom. This was true above all in the first

centuries of Islam, when it existed alongside a Christian faith that preserved the definition of God as Love, so that Islam was understood as submission to Love. That understanding has been preserved in Sufi mysticism, which over the course of ten centuries has extended its reach from the Iberian peninsula to beyond the Middle East and which constitutes the greatest contribution of Islam to human history.<sup>32</sup>

I will cite here only some small pearls that give expression to that submission to Love. The master Rumi asks God: «Do not leave our hearing without Mystery even for an instant; do not take the face of the Beloved from our life». With tones that foreshadow the Spiritual Canticle of John of the Cross, Rumi sings: «Today I wander from door to door. Who has news of the Loved One I saw last night?». And the effect of this submission to Love is expressed in a question directed explicitly to the «Lord of Glory»: «How do we reach you?» To which the Lord responds: «Leave your self and come»<sup>33</sup>. That liberation from self figures as a transversal trait common to all mystical experience, whatever name is given to it. In accord with that is the incisive maxim of Ibn Arabi of Murcia (12-13 c.): «Sincerity is the tunic of one who aspires to be a Sufi». Such sincerity is radically opposed to the self-deceit on which we humans tend to build our lives. The Christian “harmonics” that resonate in the work of Ibn Arabi are quite discernible. There is not only his famous lament, «Those who are sick of Jesus will never know any cure» (though the translation is debated), but

also texts like this one, where mysticism becomes horizontal: «The Sufis do not return evil for evil. Everyone who seeks them finds them. Everyone who want to come to them does so. They never say to those who need them, ‘Come back later’. They never send a beggar away»<sup>34</sup>.

This precious harmony can be upset very easily. In fact, although the Mystery is described on almost every page of the Quran as «clement and merciful», the only name missing among the 99 names of God is precisely the one that the New Testament gives him: God is love. Islam’s unrelenting defense of God’s unity leads Muslims to believe that God always remains in his place and humans remain in theirs, both in this life and in the hereafter.

Thus we can understand both the limits and the dangers of this experience, which at the same time is an indispensable experience.

### 3.2. Dangers

We have shown that when love of God lacks a sense of submission it can be perverted into a kind of *God à la carte*.

We could perhaps evoke here a complementary human experience: when submission in human relations is devoid of love, it can result in what Hegel described as the «master-slave dialectic», a process which inverts the master-slave relationship so that the slave, through his submission, becomes the master of his owner.<sup>35</sup> When love of God lacks a sense of submission, there looms the danger of the Pharisaical attitude that Jesus denounced in the Judaism of his epoch: the presumption that one use God to one’s own advantage. We end up again with the same danger of a *God à la carte*, both when deference is eliminated from the dimension of love and when love is eliminated from the relation of respectful submission: there is the temptation to believe that we are the only faithful ones, the only just ones, authorized even to kill in order to defend God.

This danger certainly exists not only in Islam but in all the «mysticisms of faith» we have discussed, especially when they are structured into religious systems. Therefore, before closing this final chapter, let us add an appendix on violence.

## 4. APPENDIX. THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

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We can formulate the problem in this manner: if the mystical experience is intrinsically non-violent, how is it that religions have so often been violent?

To start off, it would be good to repeat that violence is not exclusive to the experience of faith. Rather, violence is intrinsic to being human, and it is so

not only because of the need for self-defense and survival in often brutal circumstances, but above all because of our rational dimension and our pursuit of the universality intrinsic to reason (even though reason, when acting lucidly, is able to perceive the evil of violence). Most of the violence imposed by some persons on others has been theoretically aimed at making them “enter into reason” or “accept the truth”.

This violent dynamic which is so much a part of our being human is what then makes use of religion (thus contradicting to the mystical experience) or some other global worldview to impose itself by force. In the case of religion, reason’s zeal to attain a “universal-aggressive” absolute may be reinforced by the pretension that the truth of reason is the very truth of God. But even without recourse to God, reason’s striving after universality, which is quite valid and necessary, clashes with the diversity of human beings (and ways of reasoning). As a consequence, people discover an excellent unconscious excuse for giving free rein to their violence in order to “defend God” or to “defend reason or science or the truth”.

In the case of religion, this process implicitly and flagrantly contradicts the

mystical experience: «There is no compulsion in religion. The right way is clearly distinct from error», says the Quran (2,256). I specifically cite here the Quran because among us it is Islam that is most often thought of as violent. What the Quran expresses there, however, is a teaching common to all religions.

In the case of unbelief there is also a contradiction between an initial attitude appealing to tolerance as a special virtue and the countless forms of subsequent violence that appear among those who think that way. Such violence occurs because our need for self-recognition is so great that diversity or any negation of our ideas tends to be experienced as a violation of our own need for security. This is especially true if the dissension proceeds from persons or agencies with authority.

The result is that all religions have a “criminal history” even though many benevolent believers will be surprised as they read this or will simply refuse to accept it. The different forms of atheism (despite being more recent and more modern) also have a notable criminal history even though many honest atheists will likewise be surprised as they read this or will simply refuse to accept it.

## CONCLUSION

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Interiority, Lucidity, History, Relation, Adoration: these five words may serve to sum up in simple fashion «what the Holy Spirit is saying to human communities». Probably each form of mystical experience will be able to find within its own depths something of what the others are saying, or else it will be able to learn from the others. In any case, one experience cannot negate another because that would be to divide the Spirit, which is unity in diversity.

We do well to evoke here the verdict of Pascal's intuitive genius: the heresies in Christian theologies were heretical not for what they affirmed but for what they denied, because they defended the parcel of truth they sought to protect by denying other truths or not leaving space for them. Theologically speaking, therefore, a heresy is not a lie or an error but an intolerant truth.

Accordingly, the “least bad” mystical experience (the only one we can aspire to when it is a question of God's immediacy) should be the one that is most holistic (kat-holika in the original Greek) and consequently the one that is most “crucified” in that impossible night of yearned for totality.

By making a slight correction in the titles given to the two parts of this

booklet we can now speak of mysticism of Being and mysticism of Love. We may then perhaps begin to perceive that the two mysticisms should not exclude one another but should be integrated as complementary to one another. The Hindu experience cannot be excluded from Christian mysticism: perhaps it should be the starting point of all authentic religious experience. But since one never reaches the bottom of the abyss of Mystery by entering into the nameless Brahman, that very experience will be transformed until it recovers the other elements we have described. For if “God is Love”, the experience of God implies a “No” to a world based on exteriority, degradation of history and human relations, and adoration of self. But this “No” goes far

beyond mere flight from that world: it becomes resistance to it because God continues to love that degraded, deformed world and desires that it change. Thus can we understand the simple conclusion of Dorothee Sölle: «mysticism is resistance»<sup>36</sup>.

Therefore, as we look back at the two sections of this booklet, we see that the Western mysticisms need to recover a sense of the inexpressibility of the nameless God in order to avoid falling into systemic idolatries. For their part, the Eastern mysticisms need to recover a sense of history and become “open-eyed” without thereby losing any of their authenticity but rather enriching it.

Something like this is precisely the task of a dialogue among experiences (not of dogmas or institutions) which this booklet proposes. In order to be all-inclusive, however, we should not conclude without alluding to what might be called the mysticism of the non-believer.

The non-believer also is capable of a profound spiritual experience which aims at new and unknown dimensions. We might speak of experiences of goodness, of love, or of beauty. Let us focus a while just on beauty, a popular topic nowadays. All of us human beings (whether believers or not) are capable of being transported before certain greater or lesser realities of our experience: flowing water, a child’s smile, the music of Mozart, the immensity of the sea on a coast not spoiled by human avarice, a forest of beeches on a mountainside, the simple splendor of a rose...

The mystical element in experiences of beauty derives from their “useless-

ness” or, expressed more plainly, from their message of gratuity (which may relate to what we said before about “gratuitous love”). I have often quoted the splendid verses of the mystic Angelus Silesius<sup>37</sup>: «The rose exists without any reason / it blossoms because it blossoms / it does not care about itself / nor does it ask whether anyone sees it». Here beauty becomes a gift because the giver (the rose) is freed of the typical demands of our egos.

Accordingly, beauty takes on mystical dimensions when it is lived as gratuity (“without any reason”); it is neither property nor prey, which is how it tends to be viewed in the capitalist world, where beauty is possessed, exploited, contested, or sold. Perhaps it was in reaction to such an attitude that Simone Weil often spoke of beauty as «purity».

When beauty is thus understood, we can grasp the meaning of a statement which for some people today is almost theological: «Beauty will save the world». Perhaps it would be better to say that beauty is not by itself the salvation of the world, for attending to beauty alone is not enough if all the world’s suffering is forgotten. That is the immense danger of all present-day mysticisms.

Beauty alone will not save the world (just as God alone will not save it)<sup>38</sup>, but it announces that the world can be saved, and we humans must seek its salvation. In this way beauty’s message of gratuity becomes an invitation to respond, as always happens with gratuitous love. And that is why here also mysticism will be resistance.

# NOTES

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1. Non-thematic: refers to a “pure” experience without “form” or explicit content, before it is given any formulation, for formulation is always in terms of the culture and the context of the person who has the experience.
2. We will speak later of “open-eyed” mysticism. The allusion to closed eyes is not with reference to our present reality but to the indescribable or inconceivable nature of what is experienced.
3. It is precisely for this reason, at least in Catholic tradition, that mystical experience should be tested by references outside the subject in order to avoid the danger of grave self-deceit. The refusal to undertake such testing is usually seen as a sign of inauthentic experience.
4. ABISHIKTANANDA, *La montée au fond du coeur*, Paris 1986, p. 315. I call attention to the dialectic in the title: one does not descend, but rises, to the depths of one’s heart.
5. The Shankara tradition is more monistic, and the Ramanuja more dualistic. If we were to transpose the difference to Christian language, we might think of Meister Eckhart on one side and on the other the eloquent phrase of Augustine: «*intimior intimo meo et summior summo meo*».
6. The mantra, as it appears in the invocation of the Isha Upanishad, says more or less the following: «That One is Plenitude, this is plenitude. This plenitude is born of its Plenitude. All that exists is plenitude. *Om! Shanti, shanti, shanti, Om*» (*shanti* means peace). As can be seen, there is expressed here a certain “homeomorphic equivalence” with the “oceanic feeling” that some in the West call the basic religious experience.
7. In Spanish it is sometimes translated as *el Sí* or *el sí mismo*, following the model of the English word ‘self’.
8. Any reader familiar with the diary and the story of Etty Hillesum (who died in Auschwitz at age 29 and who, though previously not very religious, ended up finding God in the last year of her life) will see immediately how the God of whom Etty speaks seems to emerge from an experience of interiority very close to that of Hinduism.
9. «Unité et pluralité de la pensée chrétienne», in *Études*, 312 (1962), ps. 1-20.
10. See the comparison we will make at the end of chapter 2 between the Gita and the Jewish vision of war.
11. Many *dalits* (untouchables) today accuse even Gandhi of this.
12. «If anyone postpones the search for and the practice of Enlightenment until these problems are resolved, she will die before reaching Enlightenment». (*The teaching of Boudda*, edition of the Foundation for the Promotion of Buddhism, Tokyo 1986, p. 296).
13. Compare what Juan de Dios MARTÍN VELASCO insinuates about this in *La transmisión de la fe en la sociedad contemporánea*, Santander 2002, ps. 105 y 121.
14. That is why it is important that atheism not be excluded from what is today called inter-religious dialogue.
15. That is, referring to God and revealing God.
16. «The wisdom of understanding that this world is nothing but appearance that arises from laws of cause and effect where no immutable truth exists» (*The teaching of...*, p. 354).
17. *The teaching of...*, p. 28. We are told a little later that this mercy is eternal and has been operating from ever since.
18. As a consequence of this experience of God’s speaking, God will later be made to “speak” other things, such as the Decalogue or the norms of the community, even when these are often borrowed from other peoples.
19. From Vásquez’s presentation of the book of Kings which formed part of a never concluded project of Planeta publishers to edit the biblical books with commentaries on each one by a believer and a non-believer.
20. It might be instructive to compare, for example, the work *Ab urbe condita* of Livy (not to

- speak of Virgil's *Aeneid*) with the biblical books of Kings.
21. In this regard I have grown weary of citing the two precious verses that conclude a sonnet of Quevedo: «they will be ash, but ash with meaning / they will be dust, but dust in love».
  22. Noche I, 12,2; I, 12, 5. On this see also: T. RUSTER, *El Dios falsificado. Una nueva teología desde la ruptura entre cristianismo y religión*. Salamanca 2011, p. 239.
  23. It is quite monstrous to continue to translate *Yahweh Sabaoth* as «God of the armies», when it is actually a metaphor indicating a God of the multitudes. In ancient times the vision of an army was almost the only experience people had of a great multitude (see, for example, Ex 12,17: «the multitudes that I brought out of Egypt», which is sometimes wrongly translated as «the army I brought out...»). Fortunately the translations of the *Sanctus* in the mass now speak of the God «of the universe», and L. A. Schökel translates the term more vaguely as God «of hosts». But such is not the case with many liturgical readings.
  24. The Hebrew verb *yada*, of course, means «to know» and also designates the sexual act.
  25. It is impressive how the great Jewish writer F. ROSENZWEIG, without referring to Jesus Christ, manages in *La estrella de la redención* to discern this same truth in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*.
  26. Just as we say that Jesus Christ, who became flesh by work of the Spirit, handed himself over by the strength of the Spirit and rose to give us the Spirit.
  27. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Llama de amor viva*.
  28. I have developed this threefold characterization of reality further in chapter 15 of José Ignacio GONZÁLEZ FAUS, *La Humanidad Nueva. Ensayo de cristología*, Santander, Sal Terrae, chapter 15.
  29. For Thérèse of Lisieux I refer to the book of J. F. SIX, *Una luz en la noche* [A light in the night] (which I mentioned briefly in chapter 22 of my *Migajas cristianas*). For Mother Theresa see the collection of her writings edited by Brian KOLODIEJCHUK and titled *Ven, sé mi luz* [Come, be my light]. Interesting is the presence of the word “light” in both titles.
  30. This allows us to suspect that with Pseudo-Dionysius another God entered into Christianity and that, apart from the thousand secondary theologies that threaten to drown what is specifically Christian in Catholicism, Protestantism should not be seen only as “reductionist”, as Rome tends to see it; rather, it can be seen as above all a “concentration” of what is essential.
  31. See the last chapter of the magnificent book of: Dorothee SÖLLE, *Mystik und Widerstand* (Mysticism and Resistance), Hamburg, 1997.
  32. This raises the question of why Sufism is harshly persecuted at the present time in all Muslim countries where Islamic law is enforced.
  33. Abu Yazid Bistami was a 9<sup>th</sup> century mystic of Bistam about whom little is known except that he was persecuted by the official theologians and accused of pantheism.
  34. All the texts cited, along with much more information, can be found in the magnificent work of E. GALINDO, *La experiencia del fuego. Itinerario de los sufíes hacia Dios por los textos*, Navarra, Estella 1994.
  35. Besides Hegel’s detailed description in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this process was delineated years ago in J. Losey’s movie *The Servant*. It is also found in the old song of Cecilia about the tall lady who was «mistress of her master».
  36. Cited in the conclusion of the work in note 30.
  37. This famous 17<sup>th</sup> century mystic whose true name was Johann Scheffer was born in Breslau and converted from Protestantism to Catholicism. He chose to sign his poems with the pseudonym by which he is known today for reasons of humility (according to some) or to allude to his native region (according to others).
  38. Recall the saying of Saint Augustine: «The One who created you without you will not save you without you».



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