

REVIVAL OF MYSTICISM AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IN RELIGION

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1. Introduction

Mysticism defies all definitions. This is mainly because it is not rational by nature. It is knowing God, the Ultimate Reality, by 'touch' rather than by thought. Though the expression 'touching God' may sound idiotic and contradictory, the mystics are fond of using expressions such as 'to touch God', 'to taste and see that the Lord is good' (Ps. 34:8). Here touching and tasting would primarily mean 'to experience'. If God is God, the Ultimate Reality, the really Real (*pāramārtikasatya*),¹ He awfully transcends all the powers and faculties of knowledge. Hence, knowing God who is by nature the Infinite and the Immortal one, by senses or mind, which are totally plunged into structures of limitation, is as foolish as trying to pour out the waters of a sea into a child's playing pot. Though this audacity is obviously meaningless, mystics sometimes try to do this, or are led by the Spirit to try this, and prefer to remain baffled and tight-lipped, in silent admiration and salient wonder, even though they understand very little. But during these auspicious moments they do embrace more, experience more and desire to speak less and do more. Thus, mysticism is not a matter of crude obscurantism or fanaticism, over assertion of the thinking self, but a melting of the inner consciousness to be fused with the Divine, about which, St. Teresa of Avila says: "This prayer is a sleep of the faculties."²

It is rather an experience of wonder, unending amazement, held deep in one's own heart than in mind, at times suffused with utter darkness of

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¹Sankaracharya, *Vedanta Sutra Bhashya*, I.i.4, 1.iii.1, in George Thibaut, trans. *Sacred Books of the East*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, Vol. 34, 38, 1890, 1896.

²*Complete Works of St. Theresa of Avila*, Vol. I, *The Book of Her Life*, Carmel International Publishing House, Trivandrum: 2001, 108-109.

suffering, yet, other times enlightened by the radiant rays of that One who is by nature light. Mysticism is not at all a religion of uncertainty much less of anonymity, but a certain touch of the Divine, who is all in all, but for the mystic his/her beloved Lord as an abiding presence and guiding star. It is an experience of love and intimacy, faith and surrender, a becoming process of fusion or interpenetration of two consciousnesses, the Divine and human. The mystics, therefore, know more by becoming than by learning, by doing rather than preaching, by one's own heart rather than the mind. Whether the soul remains in suspense or supplication, silence or utterance, for the mystic, all is prayer and the sum and substance of this prayer-life is an attitude of self-surrender to the Beloved whom the soul has opted as her own.

Do we see the signs of mysticism in the world of today? Do we see at least the vestiges of such mystical theology emerging and beginning to live in our contemporary world? I think there are many positive signs to think so. Before we come to see the re-emergence of contemporary trends of mysticism, let us briefly see some of the mystical traditions, India and the world at large have already gone through, on the threshold of which this re-emergence is made possible.

2. The Ancient Roots of Mysticism in India

2.1. The Vedic Mysticism of the *Ekam Sat*

The Vedic people were mystics by nature. They had many gods, among whom many were nature gods, the elements for example. Thus, we have the Sun God (*Sūryabhagavan*), the fire-god (*Agnidevah*), the water-goddess (*Jaladevata*), the goddess earth (*Bhoomidevi*), the air-god (*Vayudevah*), and the heaven-god (Indra), the god of upper region. All the elements are naturally the best symbols of the Holy Spirit abiding in us and Jesus makes reference to them as the symbols of the Holy Spirit. For example, "The water I give..." (Jn. 4:14); "I am the bread of life" (Jn. 6:35), a reference to earth: "I came to put fire on earth" (Lk. 12:49); and finally he breathes (air) and says 'receive my spirit' (Jn. 20:22). Our ancestors felt this close presence of God in nature, and called the symbols as gods, i.e., divine by nature. They are the architects of eco-spirituality. They saw gods where we fail to see gods. What is meant was: "learn to see the divine presence in nature whose architect is directly God, and not human hands." They were mystics by nature. In spite of those numerous gods, they had the power to transcend all of them and the vision to say:

The One Being (*ekam sat*), the wise call by many names.³ Regarding the elements they said:

The earth is like honey to all beings, and all beings are honey for this earth. The shining, immortal person who is in this earth and with reference to one's self, this shining immortal person who is in the body, he, indeed is just the Self. This is immortal, this is Brahman, this is all.⁴

Whatever be the deficiencies in their thinking, they saw the fingertips of God being imprinted on all beings on the earth and the order (*Rta*) and harmony which He has placed in nature. Indeed, the One Being formed them all.

2.2. The Upanishadic Mysticism of the Abiding Atman

The one *Sat* which alone was in the beginning was later seen as the One abiding in human hearts. God is now called the *Atman*, the innermost Self within. The enlightening conversation between the sage Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi is a brilliant example for this vivid shift of accent from the transcendent One to the Immanent One, guiding us from within:

It is not for love of a husband that a husband is loved, but rather for the love of the atman (the Self). Nor is it for love of a wife that a wife is loved, but rather for the love of the atman... Then O Maitreyi, it is the atman that should be seen, listened to, thought about and deeply meditated upon. It is only by seeing, hearing, thinking about and deeply meditating upon the Atman that all this is known.⁵

The supreme Self abides within us as our inner controller and the ultimate self is to be experienced and realized:

Realizing through self-contemplation the primal God, difficult to be seen, deeply hidden, set in the cave of the heart, dwelling in the deep, the wise leave behind both pain and pleasure (*Katha Up.* I.2.12).

Search into this atman needs constant effort, undying spirit of austerity (*tapas*) and sacrifice. Therefore, the same *Upanishad* continues:

The one who has not turned away from wickedness, who has no peace, who is not concentrated, whose mind is restless – he cannot realize the atman, who is known by wisdom (*Katha Up.* II.24).

³*Rg Veda*, X.164.46

⁴*Brahadaranyaka Upanishad*, II.5.1.

⁵*Brah. Up.* II.4.4-5.

This upanishadic search for depth was later continued by the sage Patanjali, the author of the *Yogasutra*, in which he deals with the steps of meditation, as *ashtangayoga*.⁶

2.3. The Agamic Mysticism of *Bhakti* traditions

The word *agama* means what has ‘come’ (*agam*) to us, namely what has been handed over to us by tradition. *Agamas* are very important post-vedic texts, mostly sectarian and devotional. There are three sets of *agama* texts, representing three important sects. They are in the name of three popular gods or goddess, such as, Vishnu, Shiva and *Sakti*. Though the Sanskrit word *agama* is a common term applicable to all the three sects, each particular sect has its own distinguished titles for their devotional literature. The *agama* literature, probably commencing from the fifth century CE could be seen as a positive response by inspired saints who wanted to promote and live a life of *Bhakti*. The Upanishadic search for the Absolute about whom the only valid testimony is “*neti, neti*” (not this, not this),⁷ and the arid philosophy of Buddhism and its all embracing *sunya* (void), the people of India once again turned to the visible gods with name and form, with rituals, recitals and hymns. This is the inner force of the *agama* dynamics and the content of their literature. The net result was the rise of many important temples in the name of their gods all over India.

A sea of devotional mystical literature, hymns and *bhajans* were readily accepted by the believing people of India. These *bhakti* traditions and their chantings were very much appealing to the common people who remained absorbed in their union with the personal gods or goddesses, are still very much alive in the country.

2.4. The *Philokhalia* Mysticism of the Eastern Churches

The *agamic* tradition more or less coincides with the time of Desert Fathers’ writings, which were later summarized and printed in Russia under the title *Philokhalia*, love for goodness, a tradition which continued from the fourth to fourteenth century of the first Millennium. During this period certain forms of oriental mysticism was developed, of which the so-called ‘prayer of the heart’ or Hesychiast tradition of prayer and meditation became very famous, especially because of the book, *The Way of the Pilgrim*. This is taken from the *Philokhalia* writings and presented in the form of the search of a pilgrim to learn how to pray always. An ‘elder’

⁶See V. F. Vineeth, *Yoga of Spirituality*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000.

⁷*Brhadaranyka Upanishad* IV.5.15.

(equivalent to a *guru*), whom the pilgrim eventually meets, teaches him “the prayer of the heart” using a *mantra* taken from the Gospel of Jesus, namely, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” The pilgrim was later told by the elder, that he has to synchronize his heart beat with the recital of the *mantra* he has chosen. Hence the name ‘the prayer of the heart’! The word ‘*hesychia*’ is also worth noting, because it means serenity or tranquillity, a natural result of true meditation or meditative recital of the *mantra*. It is now relevant to remember how Patanjali, when he presented the eight steps of meditation, named the last or the eighth step *Samadhi*, equanimity, very similar to serenity or *hesychia*.⁸

3. Trends in Western Mysticism

The western church, after producing several martyrs dying for Christ during the first three centuries of Christianity in the Roman Empire, has produced many famous saints who gave solid base for and produced inspirational literature on Christian mysticism. The early authors and champions of mysticism in the western church were St. Augustine (CE 354-430), St. Benedict (d.ca.547) and St. Bernard of Clairvaux (CE 1090-1153). St. Benedict is known as the Father of Mysticism and Contemplative Prayer in the church, especially because the Benedictine order he founded became a powerful movement and institution for the spread of mystical prayer in the church all over the world. This was followed by St. Dominic (1170-1221), the founder of Dominican order (1216), and especially by Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), a mystic and theologian of high repute. Later, St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of Jesuit Order gave a new thrust to mysticism, combining it with the timely action of defending the Christian faith.

In the Middle Ages, the West produced great mystic saints like Francis of Assisi and Claire who inaugurated a distinct form of life in utter poverty, perfectly relying only on God in profound faith, which is the inner core of contemplative prayer and mysticism. At the beginning of the modern era, the West again produced great saints who were champions of mystical theology, such as St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), St. Teresa of

⁸Recently, Cherian Eapen, the president of Roy International Children’s Foundation (RIC) has published all the five volumes of *Philokhalia*, both in English and Malayalam in an excellent printing and binding. These volumes, each one about thousand pages were sent freely to many ashrams, monasteries and convents which foster contemplative prayer life. See Cherian Eapen, *Philokhalia*, Vol. I-V, Kottayam: DC Books, 2006-2009.

Avila (1515-1582) and two centuries later St. Therese of Lissieux, known as Little Flower (1873-1897). All of them were Carmelites continuing the legacy of Mt. Carmel, beginning from 900 BCE. The mystical works of these saints are much in demand today.

3.1. Contemporary Appeal for Mysticism and Contemplative Prayer

3.1.1. A Shift of Accent from Rational to Contemplative Thinking

Contemporary appeal for mysticism has several negative and positive seeds at its background. The triumph of philosophy and science in the world made wonderful achievements. In the modern philosophy, there was a shift of accent from God to the humans and it placed human being at the centre of thinking. Even Heidegger, who is acclaimed to be a philosopher 'mystic', hardly speaks about God. But his profound thinking certainly has a 'mystical' appeal in the sense that he is seeing the invisible Being (*das Sein*) in all beings in the world (*das Seiendes*). The focus of his thinking is not what we see, but what we do not see. He also uses several symbols from the Gospel to describe this relationship between the humans and beings in the world; for example, the human being is the shepherd and the beings are the sheep and the humans build a house for being which is thinking, where the beings feel at home. It is a very secular philosophy reflecting the relationship between God and the humans. But we notice a different style of language, a definite shift from the abstract style of philosophy to a concrete philosophy of 'touch' and experience of being or the 'thing' in front of you, as related to you, speaking to you, as beckoning and calling your renewed attention and love that it may feel at home with you.⁹ This is what we call eco-spirituality, to create an *oikos*, house for us all, to dwell in harmony and rhythm. He was a lover of nature, preferred to live in the silence and serenity of black-forests in Bavaria, giving up invitations from universities of Berlin and other cities in Germany.

Mysticism has always fostered love for nature. Ashrams and ancient monasteries in Europe have always preferred a natural, eco-friendly and serene habitat for fixing up a place of their dwelling on earth, on high mountains or river-banks. Mysticism is very much related to nature and the 'green' garment with which our Mother Earth is dressed up. St. John of the Cross, a famous mystical theologian, wrote in his *Spiritual Canticle*:

O woods and thickets

⁹Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time), Tübingen, 1927, 10 Aufl, 1963.

Planted by the hand of my Beloved!
 O green meadow,
 Coated, bright, with flowers,
 Tell me, has He passed by you?¹⁰

John says in his commentary:

It is noteworthy that she (the soul) deliberately says “By the hand of my beloved.” Although God often acts through the hand of another – as through those of angels and men – he never created, nor does He carry on this work of creation by any other hand than his own. This reflection on creatures, this observing that they are things made by the very hand of God, her Beloved, strongly awakens the soul to love him.¹¹

And the nature responds:

Pouring out a thousand graces,
 He passed these groves in haste;
 And having looked at them,
 With His image alone,
 Clothed them in beauty.¹²

William Blake, a secular author of our times, writes on mysticism:

To see a world in a grain of sand
 And a heaven in a wild flower,
 Holy infinity in the palm of your hand
 And eternity in an hour.¹³

Though neither God nor religion is mentioned here, a believing person does see the finger prints of God in these lines. This reminds me of a text from *Bhagavad Gita* which says:

All this cosmos is pervaded
 By me in the form of the human;
 In me all beings must subsist
 Although in them I never rest.¹⁴

A renewed interest in the works and the world of mysticism is obviously visible in the contemporary world. I have already quoted from

¹⁰*The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Trivandrum: Carmel Publishing House, 1996, “The Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 4, 432.

¹¹*The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 433.

¹²*The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Stanza 5, 434.

¹³William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, l.1.

¹⁴*Bhagavad Gita*, IX:4.

the poem of St. John of the Cross. All his main works are commentaries that he wrote to his poems. A contemporary edition of the *Complete Works of John of the Cross*, running to 740 pages, published in 1964 in the USA (and its revised second edition in 1996), has to say in its Foreword:

*Interest in St. John of the Cross's writings was never greater than in our day; ... In every age the classics are translated anew, for our idiom is constantly evolving; but spiritual needs of men are always basically the same. In response of these needs, the vitality of the Saint's message will live on with that freshness of a true classic, reflecting the spiritual genius of the Little Seneca (John of the Cross).*¹⁵

Similarly, a new translation of the *Autobiography* of Little Flower (1873-1897), the world renowned *Story of a Soul*, newly published from London (1975) and republished all over the world several times, says in its introduction to the third edition:

The growth of ICS (Institute of Carmelite Studies) publications – indeed, its very existence – is due in no small part to the book you now hold in your hands. When the Institute of Carmelite Studies first decided in 1973 to re-publish the Kavanaugh-Rodrigues translation of St. John of the Cross then out of print, no one could have guessed the outcome. The success of that initial volume, however, revealed an audience eager for more Carmelite spirituality...¹⁶

The publisher, then, continues to say that how the *Story of a Soul* had rapid sales for 20 continuous years and became their best seller, far outstripping all other releases, and now used throughout the English speaking world. I personally bought a copy from Manila, Philippines, on the occasion of a spirituality forum (seminar) at the Institute of Spirituality Asia, founded in 2000, of which I was a member of the International Academic Advisory Board from its very inception. When I asked the price of the book the lady in charge told me 100 Pesos (i.e., around Rs. 100 or \$2). When I was going through it, she told me that there is 50% concession. To my question 'Why?', she said: "There was such a huge sale for every print; hence, the ICS publishers decided 50% concession for future sales." The point at issue is not this particular book. The interest in spiritual and mystical works has increased very much in the contemporary world. This shows an

¹⁵*Complete Works*, Foreword. Italics added.

¹⁶*The Story of a Soul*, Washington DC, 2002, ix.

awakened interest in mysticism and spirituality in depth, than in the paraphernalia of external worship forms.

4. Characteristics of a New Awakening in Spirituality and Mysticism

4.1. A Renewed Interest in Meditation and Silent Prayer

Meditation has become a new face of spirituality to our contemporary world. Meditation is nothing new to India or to the other parts of the world. But a revival of meditation culture is new. Several gurus with their own versions of meditation have come to the fore in recent days, some of them with large following. Thus, transcendental meditation of Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, Vipasana, Zen meditation and several types of awareness meditation (Buddhist in origin) became very popular all over the world.

Thousands of people from the West kept and they still keep coming to the East, especially to India, a country which has given many well renowned *gurus* to the world; many *gurus* also go to other countries to guide their devotees into a meditative culture. These people come to the East, visit their *gurus*, not for any academic degree or purely material advantage. Though I do not deny some tourist interest in many of them, there are equally many earnest seekers among them, desiring to go deeper into spirituality and refinement of inner consciousness. Obviously, this interest in spirituality, though not through the path and practices of traditional religious lifestyles, is a sign of the revival of religion in the contemporary world.

Since the world has become a huge globalized market, and everything in this world, including water, plants and birds in the air, are looked upon as commodities for sale, our attitude towards our mother earth became very sterile, devoid of affectionate love and full of greedy eyes looking for exploitation. This greed has destroyed the earth and its surroundings by massive structures of industrialization, polluting the earth, water and atmosphere. This is not the way Lord Buddha, who was awakened sitting under a tree which came to be known as the *bodhi-vrksha*, the tree of wisdom or awakening, looked at nature. Jesus Christ looks at the world and everything in it as the symbols of the divine and asks to move from the outer layers of our existence to the innermost layer within us, where we can find and experience the Holy Spirit or the inner Self, the one who is symbolized by all these things we watch in the outer layers of our body and its world. Thus, he said: “I am the vine and you are the branches; whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me” (Jn. 15:5). He also invited the attention of

his disciples to the birds in the air and the wild flowers in the field to see how God protects them. Similarly, he said your father in heaven will take care of you (Mt. 6:25-30). You cannot move from the outer layers, where all are symbols, to the innermost layer of personal profound experience, without meditative thinking, cutting across the layers one by one, till you reach the innermost chamber where the Lord abides as the innermost agent (Atman: inner Self) of all your actions.¹⁷ The new spirit of meditation is an antithesis of the globalization of the world into a market place of bitter bargaining, where everything is looked upon as lucrative commodity, and not as symbols of the divine.

4.2. The Sudden Emergence of a *Mantra*-Culture

Once I was invited to Germany to give a talk to the German theological association, on “perspectives for creating an Indian Christology.” This was also a sign that how German theologians, most of them being professors in theological faculties in the German speaking parts of Europe, are interested in new theological perspectives coming from India. Making use of this occasion, I visited my friends in a Christian meditation centre in England; it was a movement started by John Main the Benedictine monk and is now continued by one of his first associates Lawrence Freeman. I was asked to celebrate Holy Mass the next day morning. They told me that after communion, all of us will remain in silence for 15 minutes, reciting the *mantra*: “*maran aata*” (“Our Lord comes”) in our heart. “*Maran aata*” is the official *mantra* of this meditation movement, which has several centres in different cities, especially in the West. The word *mantra* is now being used all over the world. *Mantra* is a Sanskrit word derived from the first syllables of the two words: *mananam* (pondering) and *trananam* (salvation). These first syllables *man+tra* (*mantra*) together mean a word or versicle, the meditation of which will bring salvation to you. Therefore, those who want to practise meditation select or coin a *mantra* and use it for meditation, mainly to keep one’s own attention steady on the point. The *mantra* can also be given by a *guru* to his disciple. The *gurus* of Transcendental Meditation founded by Maharshi Mahesh Yogi used to give a *mantra*, without any specific meaning. But the general Hindu tradition is to use a meaningful word, or a small prayer attached to one’s own favourite God or goddess. In the *Philokhalia* tradition of the Desert

¹⁷See *Taittiriya Upanishad*, III.1.1.2-3.6.1, where a journey to the interior depth is well described in detail through five layers of consciousness.

Fathers, the *mantra* suggested for meditation is: “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” which was the prayer of the blind men whom Jesus had healed (Mt. 9:27). There are other Christian *mantras* used by saints, such as “My God my all,” of St. Francis of Assisi, and the phrase “for the greater glory of God” (*ad majorem Dei Gloriam*), used by St. Ignatius. Use of *mantra* is a great help for concentration and silencing the mind to prepare it for contemplative prayer. St. Teresa of Avila also suggests the idea of a spontaneous *mantra* which comes from our heart during meditation; the same prayer is repeated as long as the practitioner of the meditation is happy with it.¹⁸ For Christians the greatest *mantra* is the holy name of Jesus.

4.3. Greater Openness to Other Religions and Interest in Dialogue

The contemporary era of ours shows extreme tendencies of religious fundamentalism and religionless secularism. Both of them are extreme positions and, therefore, not ultimately acceptable. But they are only aberrations and do not mark the real trend of our time. We are now living in a time of mutual respect, understanding of other religions and inter-religious dialogue. This is another face of religious consciousness in the contemporary world.

Dialogue in Asia and Africa is now entering a new phase with the newly awakened awareness of ecclesiastical and political consciousness. This is certainly a welcome sign and may be the right time in divine providence for the blooming of Asian/African theologies in the universal Church. The western world’s interest in the eastern religions is now especially manifest as millions of young people are turning to the East for a deeper religious experience. Freed from the spirit of colonial domination these seekers go in search of deeper experience, and though a legitimate margin be left for juvenile enthusiasm and superficiality, the movement as a whole marks a genuine interest in the spiritual wealth of eastern religions. Therefore, more and more *gurus* from the East are now welcome to the West and the flow of western seekers to the East continues. In this converging situation of many factors such as the emergence of political freedom and new self-awareness and the worldwide interest in eastern religions, dialogue has become a central theme both in the theological thinking and the practical life of the believers of the Asian Churches. Living among the believers of other faiths, Asia and Africa are really the

¹⁸St. Theresa of Avila, *Complete Works*, Vol. II: *The Way of Perfection*, Ch. 26.

right place for interfaith dialogue. It is interesting to note that the Vatican has set a special commission for dialogue with other faiths and the bishops' conferences in each country in Asia and Africa are in general promoting the movement of dialogue in the Church.¹⁹

In this light, we look at also the Centre for the Study of World Religions opened at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (DVK) in 1971 and its official journal is *The Journal of Dharma* (1975) you are now holding in your hand. Western universities also have showed this openness to understand and appreciate the spiritual wealth of non-Christian religions opening new centres or faculties for the study of world religions. Thus, now we have The Centre for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) at Harvard University, established in Santa Barbara, USA in the year 1960 and the Department of Religious Studies in Lancaster University, England in 1960s. The students from this faculty of Lancaster University visit DVK every year for a course of one month duration acknowledged by the university as a credit course, which includes lectures as well as visiting various centres or monasteries of different religions. Along with these academic pursuits in centres of learning in India and abroad, we also see a surge in spiritual search and interest in prayer in our times. This makes the Indian ashrams a visiting place for people from other parts of the world.

5. Contemporary World in Search of the Inner Core of Religion

Real religion cannot be purely rational, much less too sentimental, but a matter of 'touching' God, experiencing God, in his unparalleled immensity, yet enticingly inviting proximity, which is transcendent and tangible, at the same time, the greatest of the great and yet the smallest of the small, just like a tiny glowing spot in your own heart. You cannot escape it; it is always beckoning, yet not imposing because it does not force; all powerful, yet waiting for your consent and response. Therefore, it is a free movement to which I give in, I am drawn to, and in course of time, into which I delve deep, abandoning everything else, as the sole satisfaction of my soul.

Yes, religion, at its inner core, is this astonishing, accompanying experience, which resets me top to bottom, changes my entire range of values and volitions in life and consequently my entire lifestyle. This is

¹⁹V. F. Vineeth, "Identity and Universality in Religion: The Quest for Personal Identity in the Religious Tradition and Universal Mission of Jesus," *Third Millennium*, X (2007) 1, 43-62.

what happened in St. Paul, St. Francis of Assisi, and Mother Theresa of Calcutta. All of them were touched by God or God touched them.

Real religion is a living movement, rather than a static structure with a stereotyped form of rituals, celebrations, and so on. Though all these are necessary for a joyful and communal expression of a living religion, one thing that has come out crystal clear is that the modern world wants to pray. After a march of rationalism, abstract idealism, and religionless atheism, people in the world loudly say that they want religion and that too a religion with a depth dimension, interiority, experience and a natural expression of the same. Thus, the present world witnesses the emergence of new prayer centres and the increasing number of people attending regular programmes of these centres shows that people want to pray. In certain countries, we witness an upward surge of charismatic style of praying, where people in thousands come regularly to take part in these prayers. Naturally, these centres have to engage large number of people and, therefore, the form of prayer will be adapted to their need as well. One reason of continued talks or prayers in these centres is the need of the common people present and it is well taken care of.

But there are people, both religious and lay, who want to pray in silence, look for a calm or serene atmosphere, to spend some days with God in silence, personal spiritual conferences, meditations, and so on. Today, especially in the West, I have found Benedictine Abbeys offering this service to those around them. I have visited a couple of Benedictine Abbeys in Europe and the USA, and was very much impressed by the silent atmosphere still reigning on their campuses, and the lay participants in the prayer programmes of the monks in the abbeys. People know very well the scheduled time of prayer in the abbey, i.e., the prayer of the hours, and I found a few cars, say 5 or 6 coming exactly just before that prayer time. Each car may have 2 or 3 persons at the most. This means only around 10 to 15 people. Certainly there are some others in the chapel. In these places we do not have large crowds as in the charismatic groups. But there takes place ongoing meditative prayer. The people gladly participate in these prayers led by the monks, all of whom are in their religious habits. They also distribute the text of the prayer to the people. The Benedictine recital of breviary is something like a meditative recital of versicles in certain rhythm and melody, like the devotional chanting of mantras or *bhajans*.

What Benedictines do in the world is done in India by the ashrams. India has an ancient tradition of ashram spirituality, where a culture of

silence, serenity, meditation and occasional prayer programmes are maintained. This is very much true of the ancient Hindu ashrams. In the world famous novels, such as *Sakuntalam* and *Swapnavasavadatta*, we see how kings, princes and people of high secular ranks visited ashrams, and even stayed there a couple of days as a gesture of their love, esteem and appreciation of the ashram and reverence to the meditative monks in the ashrams. Those noble men and women of secular hierarchy thought that ashrams, though far away in the forests, are lasting assets of their kingdom, emanating peace waves which will eventually embrace all people. The ashram spirituality and the culture of meditation are now also very much alive in the Hindu India. Though not in the name of ashram, the interest and practice of meditation is well mentioned in other oriental countries such as, Sri Lanka, China, Japan and Singapore.

Recently, the all India Catholic ashrams had their biannual meet and seminar of 2009 in Vidyavanam Ashram where the author of this article lives and there were more than 65 participants from different Catholic ashrams all over India, a few of them were those who do not have their own ashrams, but members of other religious congregations, very much interested in the ashram movement in the church.

We also see great prayer movements very much appealing to the people taking shape and marching ahead in the West in our own time. To mention a few of them: the Taize movement, an international and interdenominational movement founded in France in 1940 by Roger Schutez, the then prior of a newly founded Protestant monastery. France also produced another centre of prayer, *The Beatitudes*, attracting several people from all over Europe and from other countries as well. Recently, a young nun, originally from India, came to Vidyavanam Ashram from France to get some training in Indian-Christian meditation. She told me that the communities in the centre called *The Beatitudes* request her to teach them meditation, mainly because she is a nun from India and also very fluent in French. People abroad think that the Indian priests and nuns know ways of meditation very well. Thousands of Hindus gather in the Catholic ashram in Kashi (Banaras) called *Matrdham* for prayer meetings on every Saturday and spend hours listening to the Word of God and praising the Lord in hymns and *bhajans*.

A few years ago, an American friend of mine took me to a Benedictine Abbey, Gethsemane by name, in the state of Kentucky in the USA. Seeing my interest in what is happening there, my friend who took

me to the abbey asked for two rooms for both of us that I can have a better understanding of the life in the abbey. The answer was that there are many rooms (more than 100) for guests, but not a single one is free. This is a place of complete silence.

All these are happening in front of us, and we cannot deny that there is a renewed interest in the world for contemplative prayer. These prayer forms need not be called ‘mysticism’ as such. But the sign is clear that the world wants to pray in serenity and peace, which would lead them perhaps to a more silent and contemplative prayer. A sign of this is that the man who founded the *Taize* movement in France has already left this centre, not because he is not happy with it, but it is grown well enough and self-standing so much so that he felt that the time has come for him to retire to greater silence. (This is what I was told by recent visitors from France to the Vidyavanam Ashram).

6. The Alluring and Agonizing Aspects of Mystical Experience

What makes mysticism so alluring and agonizing at the same time? This is really a mystery to be known by experience. It seems to me that in the inner core of mysticism and contemplative prayer, three strange and almost impossible combinations takes place. They are 1) the fusion of time and transcendence, 2) the union of finite and the Infinite and 3) the combination of light and darkness. All these take place at the same time.

6.1. The Fusion of Time and Transcendence

Human life is temporal. We are born in time, live in time and die in time. The ever agonizing duration of temporality is the happy or unhappy lot of every human being. Time is a mode of duration, a process of becoming, moment by moment, an agony of realizing oneself through the continued chain of single moments. This is the unconditional mode of human existence; to be in time, to move in time, to realize oneself in time. This is relishable or enjoyable until the Divine, the Holy, the most Transcendent is awakened in the human person, placed on earth, where every bit of being moves moment by moment, dragging the body, senses and even mind to the haven of the awakened consciousness, felt and experienced in the inner depth or heart of the same person. This drop of the Divine, which is by nature consciousness, an innermost awareness of itself, named ‘soul’ or atman (the inner self), participates in the nature, vision and the very reality of God, because the soul is rooted in God’s own image and likeness, which is pure, unbounded all-knowing consciousness. When the Divine is

awakened in the inner depth of soul, the embodied soul feels the agony of separation from God, because it is in the body and body-bound mind, senses and the world. It is in time, the fragmented units of momentary duration and process of becoming and realizing are drawn to the mind, senses and finally to the all receiving and consuming earth. Therefore, the mystic says in her heart (hence the use of first person).

The earth, the mother earth, whom I loved very much and eagerly longed to identify myself with, is not my everlasting abode; I am ‘called’, may be also ‘raised up’ in spite of my heavily loaded tie up with this beautiful and lovely earth and what she offers. Now, I feel the stirrings of transcendence within me, beckoning me to rise up higher and higher to an unseen light, where time ceases to be and eternity begins. But this is only a call, at times a spark; but I am still left in this world of time. How can I hold both time and transcendence in one grip? I find it difficult. But my heart intensely longs for it. I am nowhere. I want to transcend time and temporality, and live in eternity where I am not yet in. Hence I cry: “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24).

Time brought before me the threat of death. The time of my earthly existence would be terminated. However, my present payer is “Come Lord, I long to be with you; because of your continuous call, my soul flies, but comes back to this mortal, agonizing body and mind. It is painful to combine time and eternity in a single moment; yet I long to do it, and cannot be without it; hence I cry, tears flow from my eyes and I remain here on this earth counting the days of your coming to replant me from time to eternity. I find it too difficult to combine time and eternity in a single fragmented moment of my existence, but my heart longs for it. Is this what people call ‘mysticism’, to be held in time, but ever remain beyond time, remembering your ravishing embrace with which you blessed me before?”

6.2. The Union of the Finite and the Infinite

Finitude is an all embracing reality which we experience every day and everywhere. Everything is finite. Limitation is weaved into the inner structure of any being I see, I touch, I use and depend on. But all these are not dependable at all. Not only they cease to exist tomorrow, as long as they are in time, but the very existence they possess is limited. The Infinite is not there. They all die and disintegrate, and return to the same earth from which they came. Therefore, the great philosopher Sankaracharya

called all beings *maya*,²⁰ a combination of *sat* and *a-sat* (being and non-being). What is the meaning of possessing them? They all will disintegrate tomorrow. Be ready to leave them all. Then, what does come about? Instead of falling into despair, the mystic says: “My God is my all.” In this vast world of innumerable finite bits of existence, none of which is ultimately reliable, the wise abandon everything and turn to the single source of all and say ‘God alone suffices!’ As the *Upanishad* says, “In the beginning all this was being only, one and non-dual” (*Sadeva agra asit, ekam eva advidiyam*).²¹ Indeed, the mystic says: I will embrace that *sat*, which alone is real, which alone is really Real, which alone is the Immortal and Imperishable, which alone encompasses everything, and holds everything together in one single undivided existence. Let us call it ‘God’, the beginning, the middle and the end of our human existence, and it is by nature consciousness, or the Word which was in the beginning from whom everything came.

In the fullness of time, when the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, He said: “No one can be a slave of two masters (i.e., of God who is the Infinite One and creatures which are finite), he will hate one and love the other; he will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Mt. 6:24). The mystic, therefore, rightly chooses God and leaves all finite things behind and keeps himself or herself free to pursue the path of the Infinite.

The agony of the mystic is, though the soul freely gives up everything, it has to continue its existence in their midst, and even using and employing them every day. So, to have them as if not having them, since they all are finite, and to focus the attention totally on that One, who has now come down as the Beloved Lord, is the living tension that the soul undergoes. In course of time, this tension loses its strength; the soul slowly succeeds to combine both and begins and even enjoys seeing all finite beings as the symbols of that Infinite One. The creatures are now seen as the messengers of God whom her beloved has sent to her, sharing to them a measure of his own beauty and blessedness. The English word ‘hate’ does not mean literally hate, but does mean that no creature can obstruct me in my way to the Supreme Lord. The soul ever keeps itself free of all binding attachments to any of them. The soul very well remembers what

²⁰Sankaracharya, *Vedanta Sutra*, I.IV.3; see also V. F. Vineeth, *The Asian Vision of God*, Bangalore: Vidyavanam Publications, 2004, 131.

²¹*Chandogya Upanishad*, VI.II.I.

St. Theresa of Avila, the great mystic theologian of the Church has pointed out: contemplative prayer is possible only under two conditions, that is, perfect detachment from everything and utter humility in all what one does. This is because it is entirely a gift of God for which we can only prepare ourselves with detachments and humility.²²

So, the soul sees a semblance of the loving face of her Beloved in all creatures, takes care of them lovingly, yet keeps herself always free for her Lord, who alone is her Beloved, the Immortal, the Imperishable One. Mysticism begins when the soul sees the Invisible in the visible, the Infinite in the finite and the Immortal in the mortal.

6.3. The Combination of Light and Darkness

The third fusion of two contrasts that the soul experiences is the fusion of light and darkness at the same time. There are different levels or layers in human understanding: at least three of them are clear, which can be compared to three eyes: the physical, the mental and the spiritual. The physical eyes with which we see material things in this world, the mental eye with which we grasp ideas which we slowly develop or distil from the data which our physical eyes bring to us, and the spiritual or the third eye, which is God's very consciousness abiding within us, and which Christians call the Holy Spirit. St. Ephrem, the great theologian from the East, calls it "the luminous eye." Each eye opens to us its own distinctive world of experience. The problem is that the food of the one eye is not the food of the other eye. The physical eye is never satisfied by seeing; but wants to see and relish more and more until it gets tired; but the mind wants to retire from the physical world and to think. Idea or understanding, which is light to the mind and intellect, is darkness to the senses and when the mind leaves the senses to process the data that the very senses have brought, the senses feel betrayed by the mind to whom senses bring everything. The thinking mind leaves the senses behind or takes a break from them, to process the sense data, and create ideas. For the thinking mind idea is a greater value than engaging the food of the senses all the time. The mind with the help of the soul, characterized by intellect and will, two essential ingredients of what we call consciousness, develops universal and eternal ideas which last beyond the fluctuating moments of time. Thus, the soul begins to get a taste of what is eternal and universal, which is the true nature of God in himself. But the real mystical experience

²²*Complete Works of St. Theresa of Avila, Vol. 1.*

is not at the mind level. *Mysticism begins when the mind is silenced* and God begins to communicate to the soul not through the medium of the mind but directly to the soul with a totally different, hitherto unknown language or light. This light is called a ‘dark light’, because this is not according to the logical thinking of the mind, but according to the divine light the Lord or the Holy Spirit abiding in the soul imparts to it. Since this light is far more transcending the light of reason with which mind, and together with it, or the intellect has worked so far, the new light touches the soul as darkness, because the mind and intellect are deprived of their usual food, and left all alone. Until it comes in tune with this new ray of light, touching it as ‘darkness’, because it exceeds her natural capacity of calculative understanding, the soul feels afraid to give up the former light of reason, for something not yet known fully well. This is the dark night about which St. John of the Cross speaks so beautifully and elaborately. He also calls this dark night the night of purification because in order to receive this new light, directly from God, the soul must be thoroughly purified from all its inordinate affections, attachments, however silly or simple they are. It actually works as ‘night’ to the soul, where the ‘usual light’, light of reason and argumentative thinking function no more. But, in the insurmountable depth of this darkness, the soul is not misguided; always she sees a little glittering ray of light, lit up from her own heart, where she believes that her Beloved Lord abides, guides her through the path of darkness. *The Dark Night of the Soul*, written by St. John of the Cross, is not just dark night, but also is the preamble of the coming dawn of light. Thus, the soul somehow manages to combine the agony of darkness with the sure hope of light buried in the depth of her own heart, which leads her on and on, under the loving care of her Beloved, who never abandons her, of which the soul is absolutely certain.

This dark night is the night of faith, which is a much superior light than that of reason, although not totally against reason, it transcends the human logic of reason in the light of faith. Ultimately, it is faith that matters in our spiritual journey. Dark night is the night of faith, but faith is an abundance of light which the soul understands, though the mind finds it difficult to accept it as it may not be in tune with its human logic. This should not make us feel that mind is bad. Mind is a faculty of truth. Mind is only a processor and as such is faithful to the data presented and processed. But the mind’s logic is not always Gospel values. The soul, once awakened, surrenders itself totally to the Gospel values, the values of

her Beloved Lord. Finally, it is faith that guides the soul. The initial dark light, the light of faith, eventually becomes the supreme light and reason slowly gets subordinated to faith. The soul loves reason very sincerely, appreciates its logical way of thinking, but also trains the mind according to the values of her Beloved Lord and establishes harmony in the soul, in the mind and also in the senses. Faith is not an isolated ray of superior light, but is inner awakening which is inevitably linked and united with the unfailing trust and unconditional loving surrendering to the Lord and operates as three in one, just like God also operates always as three in one.

7. Conclusion

As I mentioned earlier, the books of John of the cross and other similar works, such as the *Cloud of the Unknowing*, a work of an unknown author from the Middle Ages, the *Philokhalia*, *the Way of the Pilgrim*, and several other books of mystical lore, are some of the best sellers in the world today, of course, in the world of spiritual books. I do not compare them with secular novels. This is a sure sign that there is an awakening of mysticism and contemplative prayer in our contemporary world.

The revival of religion today certainly has a dimension of mysticism along with other types of charismatic or inter-religious approaches. In this bizarre world of religious revivalism – interspersed with religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, even to the extent of *Jihadi* type of terrorist acts – it is our duty to establish the true, serene, peace-emanating way; religions should mould us, guide us and provide ways and means to establish a humanity in unity of heart, because when God really touches our heart, whether it be through light or darkness, in the modes of time or transcendence, love and peace must be the net result. If the soul, in its journey to its own inner depth or to the height of divine transcendence, really touches God, love and peace should emanate from that person, because God is love, and His first and lasting gift is peace.