

Mysticism and the Baha'i Faith

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Introduction

Mysticism, viewed from a general perspective, is a reaction against the shallowness

of a decadent civilization. It usually culminates when religion is at its lowest, and

thus appears superior by comparison. People with an intense desire for spirituality,

when civilization appears on the verge of collapse, are attracted toward a philosophy

of escape and are repelled by the seeming flaws of the established religion.

Whereas prophetic religion affirms personality, mysticism denies it. The former believes in life, values history and tries to realize ideals and goals. The latter,

however, escapes from the world, rejects the natural life and disregards history.

The notion of God in mysticism is radically different from that of the prophetic

religion. To the mystic, the idea of God is solely based upon one's experience of

ecstasy. He may be non-personal, beyond all values or a loving personal God; however,

He always remains static and outside of history. The God of mysticism is not a revelation in history. He reveals Himself to every human being who is ready to apprehend Him.

The following paper is an attempt to explain some of the fundamental

Bahá'í mystical notions. Furthermore, there will be a comparison of

some mystical issues as viewed by a majority of mystics and as are stated in the

Bahá'í Scriptures.

The Realm of the Divine Essence

The transcendental nature of the Divine Essence is greatly emphasized in the Bahá'í Writings. He is beyond man's comprehension and imaginative power. In other words, man can never hope to understand the Divine Essence through his intelligence nor through his feelings and inner experiences. In the following passage Bahá'u'lláh (the prophet- founder of the Bahá'í Faith) establishes the absolute transcendence of God :

The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished amongst men, the highest praise which the human tongue or pen can render are all the product of man's finite mind and are conditioned by its limitations.

....From time immemorial He hath been veiled in the ineffable sanctity of His exalted Self, and will everlastingly continue to be wrapped in the impenetrable mystery of His unknowable Essence...(Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, 1973, p. 62).

The Bahá'í conception of God envisions a Being Who is independent of His creation yet is cognitive, caring and concerned for His creation and its progress.

He created the world yet is completely separate from it, in the same manner that the painter is separate from his painting. In other words, He does not dwell in man. Man is not a portion of God nor can he ever hope to become united with His Essence.

Here lies one of the major differences between mysticism as viewed by most mystics and the Bahá'í Faith. The ultimate goal of the mystic is to attain the presence of the Absolute, and to become one with Him. This idea is well expressed in the words of the fourteenth century mystic Henry Suso:

He forgets himself, he is no longer conscious of his selfhood; he disappears and loses himself in God, and becomes one spirit with Him, as a drop of water which is drowned in a great quantity of wine. (Happold, 1990, p. 99).

The Bahá'í Faith emphatically rejects the idea that the finite man will ever be able to attain the presence of the Infinite or that a creature can merge with the Uncreated.

The Realm of the Prophets

For the mystic there are simply two planes of existence; the realm of God (the world of Divine Essence), and the realm of creation which includes man and the prophets. The Bahá'í Writings maintain that in addition to the two aforesaid realms, there is the world of the prophets which acts as a link between the world of God and the world of creation. In other words, God reveals Himself to man through His prophets. It is through Them that God's covenant with man is renewed in every dispensation (Schaefer, 1983).

Bahá'u'lláh said:

The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Beauty hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court. As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving-kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self. Whoso recognizeth them hath recognized God....(Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, p. 49).

As perfect reflections of the qualities of the Creator, the prophets dramatize God's image through Their words and laws. Just as the unfiltered light of the sun dazzles the eye so much that it must turn away from it, man can not look directly into the light of God. In other words, God can only be comprehended when reflected in the mirror of the prophets.

In order to explain the relationship between the different Manifestations of God (a Bahá'í term for the prophets), and that of each prophet and God, Bahá'u'lláh offers an analogy. In this analogy, God is compared to the sun as He is the absolute source of spiritual life in the universe in the same manner that the material sun is the source of all physical life on earth. The Divine virtues are the rays of this sun and each Manifestation is like a perfect mirror.

If there are several mirrors and they are all turned toward the same sun, that sun is reflected in each mirror. However, the individual mirrors are different and each has its own form which is distinct from any other mirror. In the same manner, each

Messenger is a distinct individual yet the Divine attributes which are reflected in each are the same. These Manifestations of God have a unique station, and no matter

how far man may spiritually advance he can never reach the station of prophethood.

In the Bahá'í Writings we read: "However far the disciples might progress, they can never become Christ." (Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 271). It is not a difference in degree, but in kind (typology) which

distinguishes Prophets from the rest of mankind. The Manifestations of God are not

simply great philosophers, thinkers, or mystics with extensive spiritual knowledge.

They are, by nature, a higher form of existence. They all represent the Perfect Man.

Regular men can not claim the station of the Perfect Man.

The Bahá'í Faith distinguishes between inspiration and revelation.

Revelation is believed to be the direct and infallible perception of God's creative

Word which is solely accessible to the Manifestations who, in turn, transmit it to

humanity. Inspiration, on the other hand, is the indirect and relative perception of

spiritual truth that is available to everybody. The Hebrew prophets are believed to be

ordinary men and women whose powers of inspiration have been developed and utilized by God. As for saints, reformers, philosophers, and founders of humanitarian

movements, they are considered to be, in many cases, inspired by God.

Nonetheless,

revelation only belongs to the Manifestations. It is revelation which, in the final

analysis, is the source of all human progress (Hatcher & Martin, 1984).

The Bahá'í Faith maintains that human beings have a dual nature: a physical body and an immortal soul. Nonetheless, the Manifestations of God, besides

these two natures possess a third one that is unique to Their station. This third

nature is the capacity to receive divine revelation and to infallibly transmit it to

mankind:

Know that the Holy Manifestations, though they have the degree of endless perfections, yet, speaking generally, have only three stations. The first

station is the physical: the second station is the human, which is that of the rational soul: the third is that of the divine appearance and the heavenly splendor.

The physical station is phenomenal: it is composed of elements, and necessarily everything that is composed is subject to decomposition. It is not possible that a composition should not be disintegrated.

The second is the station of the rational soul, which is the human reality. This also is phenomenal, and the Holy Manifestations share it with all mankind.....

The third station is that of the divine appearance and heavenly splendor; it is the Word of God, the Eternal Bounty, the Holy Spirit. It has neither beginning nor end, for these things are related to the world of contingencies and not to the divine world. For God the end is the same thing as the beginning...(Abdu'l- Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. 151-152).

The third station of the Manifestations — the Holy Spirit — is reflected in all the founders of the great religions of the world. Through such founders as Krishna, Abraham, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and Bahá'u'lláh, humanity achieves spiritual rebirth and the foundation of a new civilization is laid down. In the following passage the Bahá'í view of the function of the Holy Spirit on earth is clearly explained:

The Divine Reality may be likened to the sun and the Holy Spirit to the rays of the sun. As the rays of the sun bring the light and warmth of the sun to the earth, giving life to all created beings, so do the Manifestations (of God) bring the power of the Holy Spirit from the divine sun of Reality to give light and life to the souls of men.

Behold, there is an intermediary necessary between the sun and the earth; the sun does not descend to the earth, neither does the earth ascend to the sun. This contact is made by the rays of the sun which bring light and warmth and heat.

The Holy Spirit is the light from the Sun of Truth, bringing by its infinite power life and illumination to all mankind, flooding all souls with divine Radiance, conveying

the blessings of God's Mercy to the whole world. The earth, without the medium of the warmth and light of the rays of the sun, could receive no benefits from the sun.

Likewise, the Holy Spirit is the very cause of the life of man; without the Holy Spirit he would have no intellect; he would be unable to acquire his scientific knowledge by which his great influence over the rest of the creation is gained. The illumination of the Holy Spirit gives to man the power of thought, and enables him to make discoveries by which he bends the laws of nature to his will (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. 58-59).

It is The Holy Spirit that, through the mediation of the Prophets of God, teaches spiritual virtues to man and enables him to attain eternal life. All these blessings are brought to man by the Holy Spirit; therefore we can understand that the Holy Spirit is the intermediary between the Creator and the created. The light and heat of the sun cause the earth to be fruitful, and create life in all things that grow, and the Holy Spirit quickens the souls of men.

The Realm of Creation

The Bahá'í Faith views the physical universe, including man, as a creation of God and not a manifestation of the Divine Essence. This Bahá'í belief is rejected by most mystics who put the world of creation in the same category as the world of the prophets. According to Bahá'u'lláh, the world of creation has always existed. The planet earth had a beginning and it will have an end. However, the universe is without a beginning and an end:

Therefore, as the Essence of Unity (that is the existence of God) is everlasting and eternal — that is to say, it has neither beginning nor end — it is certain that this world of existence, this endless universe, has neither beginning nor end.

Yes, it may be that one of the parts of the universe, one of the globes, for example, may come into existence or may be disintegrated, but the other endless globes are still existing; the universe would not be disordered nor destroyed (Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 180).

As for the human species on earth, the Bahá'ís uphold that man has always existed somewhere in the universe. He has gradually evolved, passing from lower to higher forms until it attained the present mature human form. The evolution of man on earth has been likened to the development of an embryo within a womb which, at first, appears to be a tadpole but later assumes various other forms of life. However, although the human species may have once resembled other species, man has always been a distinct creation of God — In fact the only creation of God capable of knowing and worshipping Him:

...the embryo passes through different states and traverses numerous degrees... until the signs of reason and maturity appear. And in the same way, man's existence on this earth, from the beginning until it reaches this state, form and condition, necessarily lasts a long time, and goes through many degrees...

But from the beginning of man's existence he is a distinct species. In the same way, the embryo of man in the womb of the mother was at first in a strange form; then this body passes from shape to shape, from state to state, from form to form, until it appears in utmost beauty and perfection. But even when in the womb of the mother and in this strange form, entirely different from his present form and figure, he is the embryo of the superior species, and not of the animal; his species and essence undergo no change (Some Answered Questions, 183-4).

Thus, even though man has evolved from a lower form or shape but, from the beginning he was potentially a human being not an animal. He has always been endowed with the unique gifts of mind and soul which make him the highest creation of God on earth.

Man's Soul

The Bahá'í Faith, like most other world religions, teaches the doctrine of the immortality of the human soul. Nonetheless, the belief in the pre-existence of man's soul, upheld by the majority of the mystics is repudiated in the Bahá'í writings. A large number of mystics maintain that, prior to its

association with the body on earth, man's soul exists with God in an undifferentiated form. Such belief would, of course, be tantamount to man sharing in the Divine Essence, an idea which would negate God's Singleness and Uniqueness. Hence, Bahá'u'lláh taught that man's soul comes into being at the moment of conception and continues to exist after the death of the body.

Man's soul is the seat of his self, personality, and consciousness. The development of the soul and its capacities are the prime purpose of man's earthly existence. This development is possible only through the knowledge and love of God and reflection of divine virtues which are latent in man's soul. Bahá'u'lláh explained that the evolution of man's soul is always toward God and away from the physical world. However, contrary to the common mystical view, man can never become one and united with the Essence of the Absolute.

Bahá'í writings consider physical existence as the embryonic preparation for an eternal and spiritual life that follows the death of the body. A human being spends nine months in the womb preparing for entry into the physical world. During this period, the fetus develops eyes, ears, limbs and other physical means necessary for its life on earth. In the same manner, this terrestrial world is similar to a womb for entry into the spiritual worlds. Here each individual has the opportunity to acquire the spiritual as well as the intellectual tools necessary for its spiritual existence in the worlds to come. The main difference, nonetheless, is that whereas physical evolution in the mother's womb is involuntary, the intellectual and spiritual growth of man here on earth depends only upon conscious individual effort (Hatcher & Martin).

Know thou that all men have been created in the nature made by God, the Guardian, the Self-Subsisting. Unto each one hath been prescribed a pre-ordained measure, as decreed in God's mighty and guarded Tablets. All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, p. 149).

The Role of Prayer and Meditation

The Bahá'í Faith, like most world religions, is essentially mystic in character. Bahá'ís believe that without mystical feeling which draws man close to God, any religion will degenerate into an organization devoid of spiritual life. As it is through prayer and meditation that the individual is able to build and maintain a spiritual relationship with his Creator.

The most effective prayer, however, are the ones that have been revealed by the Manifestations of God. In the Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh we read:

I render Thee thanks, O Thou Who hast lighted Thy fire within my soul, and cast the beams of Thy light into my heart, that Thou hast taught Thy servants how to make mention of Thee, and revealed unto them the ways whereby they can supplicate Thee, through Thy most holy and exalted tongue, and Thy most august and precious speech (Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, p. 320).

Furthermore, meditation is strongly advised in the Bahá'í Writings.

Nonetheless,

there are no set forms of meditation. In fact, the manner of meditation is left entirely to the individual. The significance of meditation is emphasized in the following passage:

Through the faculty of meditation man attains to eternal life; through it he receives the breath of the Holy Spirit — the bestowal of the Spirit is given in reflection and meditation. The spirit of man is itself informed and strengthened during meditation; through it affairs of which man knew nothing are unfolded before his view. Through it he receives Divine inspiration, through it he receives heavenly food... (Abdu'l- Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 175).

Further, the Bahá'í scriptures maintain that although an individual may make considerable spiritual progress by meditating upon the rather nebulous All

or One, the most effective results are obtained when the mirror of the spirit is

turned toward the manifestation of God. He is believed to be the source of man's

spiritual life on earth. Therefore, if one meditates upon the prophets' creative Word

or their Divine attributes, his progress would be much swifter than if he meditates

on the elusive Infinite. In addition to a large corpus of prayers,

Bahá'u'lláh has revealed many meditations in which He praises God,

proclaims his devotion to the Divine Will, and prays for steadfastness of himself and his followers:

The power of Thy might beareth me witness. O my Well-Beloved! Every limb of my body, methinks, is endowed with a tongue that glorifieth Thee and magnifieth Thy name. Armed with the power of Thy love, the hatred which moveth them that are against Thee can never alarm me; and with Thy praise on my lips, the rulings of Thy decree can in no wise fill me with sorrow. Fortify, therefore, Thy love within my breast, and suffer me to face the assaults which all the peoples of the earth may launch against me. I swear by Thee! Every hair of my head proclaimeth:

"But for the adversities that befall me in Thy path, how could I ever taste the divine sweetness of Thy tenderness and love?"

Send down, therefore, O my Lord, upon me and upon them that love me, that which will cause us to become steadfast in Thy Faith. Enable them, then, to become the Hands of Thy Cause amongst Thy servants, that they may scatter abroad Thy signs, and show forth Thy sovereignty. There is no God but Thee, Who art powerful to do whatsoever Thou willest. Thou art, in truth, the All Glorious, the All-Praised (Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, 214-215).

The Path to God

Although there is no consensus among the mystics in regards to the nature and number of various stages in the path to God, most agree on the four stages of conversion, purgation, illumination, and union.

Conversion

To many, a mystic must undergo some type of experience which would lead to an expansion of normal consciousness and perception. In other words, he must experience some kind of conversion. The term conversion, here is defined as the awakening of a reality that exists within an individual human being of which he is not fully cognizant. Such an experience may be either gradual and imperceptible or sudden and violent. The classic example of sudden conversion is that of St. Paul on the road to Damascus.

According to the Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul, a former fanatical Jew who was dedicated to the persecution of the Christians, was on his way to Damascus to

bring
them in chains to Jerusalem. As he was approaching Damascus, a sudden light
flashed
around him from the sky, and he fell to the ground. Then he heard a voice
calling him,
Saul (Paul) , Saul! Why do you persecute me? Blinded by the light, he went to
Damascus where later on he declared his faith in Christ (Happold, 1970). To the
Bahá'ís, true conversion or spiritual rebirth takes place when the individual
realizes
the Messenger of God as the source of his spiritual life and the creator of
moral and
ethical values. This kind of spiritual conversion is not based on any psychic
experience. It involves both the mind and the heart.

Purgation

When the mystic is awakened to this higher self, he realizes his limitations
and the
obstacles that prevent his spiritual growth. He then resolves himself through
detachment or poverty. In extreme mysticism, the result is that the mystic
becomes
an important part of the whole who is completely devoid of all desires and
rights.

The stage of purgation has two major objectives. First, it involves complete
detachment from and renunciation of the things of senses, so that the divine
life may
be born in one's soul and thus union with God is attained. Second, it entails a
continuous cleansing of the perceptions and the soul so that the light of a new
reality may fully illuminate and transform the soul.

There is always a constant reiteration of the necessity of renunciation,
detachment,
and self-mortification in the writings of the great mystics. In the well-known
Conference of the Birds ,the Sufi mystic Farid al-din Attar writes:

The only provisions for the journey in the Path of Truth are total
renunciation and self-annihilation. Consume to ashes whasoever thou hast....I
can
think of no better fortune for a valiant man than this, that he loses himself
from
himself (Happold, 1970, p. 58).

The famous Christian mystic, John of the Cross maintains that those who seek
complete detachment must renounce all the pleasures of the senses, to choose
not
that which is easiest, but that which is most difficult. He sums up his views
in a
series of epigrams:

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything,

Desire to have pleasure in nothing.

In order to arrive at possessing everything,

Desire to possess nothing.

In order to arrive at being everything,

Desire to be nothing.

In order to arrive at knowing everything,

Desire to know nothing.

for

When the mind dwells upon anything,

Thou art ceasing to cast thyself upon the All.

For, in order to pass from the all to the All

Thou hast to deny thyself wholly in all (Happold,1970, p. 59).

In the Bahá'í Faith, however, the ultimate goal of man's spiritual growth is not to eradicate all aspirations but to make one's desires conform with the

teachings of the prophets. There must be a balance between one's inner and outer

lives. The Bahá'ís do not see any harm in things of the world as long as they do not allow possessions or desires to come between them and their Creator:

Should a man wish to adorn himself with the ornaments of the earth, to wear its apparels, or partake of the benefits it can bestow, no harm can befall him if he

alloweth nothing whatever to intervene between him and God, for God hath ordained

every good thing, whether created in the heavens or in the earth, for such of His

servants as truly believe in Him (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, p. 276).

Illumination

Through the process of purgation one's spiritual reality becomes free from the self,

and thus ready to enter the stage of illumination. In this condition, the mystic's

intuitive powers are heightened. His power of perception is greatly enhanced and his

energy is vastly increased. He is more capable of understanding and dealing with the

accidents of life. It is in this stage that the mystic, having only experienced ecstasy\ rapture, claims to have come in direct contact with the Infinite.

This rapturous awareness of the Divine is often called “the practice of the Presence of God”. When, however, the mystics are asked to describe such an experience, a majority of them take refuge in ineffability, that is, it defies expression in terms which are fully intelligible to one who is devoid of such an experience.

To the Bahá'ís, the process of illumination itself is not peculiar to mysticism. They maintain that there is always a spiritual joy and calmness which comes to those who having lived by the precepts of the Manifestations of God, are influenced by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such an experience is accessible to everyone who wholeheartedly follows the Prophets, abides by Their ordinances and endeavors to manifest Their virtues (Shook, 1974).

Union

A majority of mystics distinguish between illumination and union. In the stage of illumination the individuality and personality appear to remain intact, whereas in the condition of union this is not the case. In the process of illumination the seeker is still to some degree a stranger. But in the state of union, to which only a few claim to have attained, the wayfarer is no longer a stranger. Here, he is a traveler who has returned to his home.

As the waves of the sea ultimately return to it, so the seeker is believed to return to the Absolute and become reunited with Him. This is the stage of union which basically implies some type of deification of humans. This idea is clearly expressed in the following passage from a well-known Hindu scripture called the Upanishads:

As the flowing rivers in the ocean
Disappear, quitting name and form,
So the knower, being liberated from name and form,
Goes into the heavenly Person, higher than the high
(Noss & Noss, 1994, p. 120).

This idea is in sharp contrast to the Bahá'í belief which defines true union with the

Divine as absolute obedience to God's ordinances as revealed by His prophets.

It is

through Them that the Will of God is revealed to man. Bahá'u'lláh notes:

By self-surrender and perpetual union with God is meant that men should merge their will wholly in the Will of God, and regard their desires as utter nothingness

beside His Purpose. Whatsoever the Creator commandeth His creatures to observe, the same must they diligently, and with the utmost joy and eagerness, arise and fulfill. They should in no wise allow their fancy to obscure their judgment, neither should they regard their own imaginings as the voice of the Eternal (Gleanings, P.337)

It is through the Manifestations of God that the Divine Will is revealed to humanity.

In the Valley of Unity (the fourth stage in His Seven Valleys) Bahá'u'lláh clearly

distinguishes between His concept of Unity and that of the mystic's. There He sets

forth three fundamental principles to which the mystic could never subscribe:

1) Man is not an incarnation of God.

2) Man can never know the Essence of God.

3) Man's knowledge of God comes through the Manifestations of God (Shook, 1974).

Conclusion

Even though the Bahá'ís acknowledge the positive contributions of the mystics of past and present and appreciate their endeavors along the path of spirituality, they disagree with them on such doctrines as reincarnation, pre-existence of man's soul, and union of the mystic's soul with the Absolute. They also

reject the notion that divine revelation can come to humanity through the mystic.

Bahá'ís maintain that, in mysticism, little consideration is given to the social order

since mysticism is regarded as an esoteric system appropriate for a few gifted individuals. The mystic is not capable of transmitting to others that which he experiences. When faced with the question concerning the nature of such an experience, his response is that you must also tread the mystical path as such a

condition is ineffable. But, in reality, this is only feasible for a few gifted individuals.

When, however, a seeker turns to the Manifestation or to the Divine Word, he does not

leave empty-handed. The early history of Christianity and Islam, for instance, indicate quite clearly that the Prophets of these religions had something to give to every class of society.

Furthermore, mysticism is not concerned with improving man's social life as civilization building and material progress is not a priority in the mystic's agenda. In other words, it is true that by turning inward a few gifted individuals have succeeded in improving their personal behavior; but it is equally true that mysticism offers no solution for the baffling social problems. For instance, the possibilities of any type of religious unity through mysticism are quite inconceivable. How can mysticism with its personal authority eliminate national, political or religious prejudice when it is devoid of a central figure to whom all classes of people may turn?

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