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# Mysticism in World Religions - 1995

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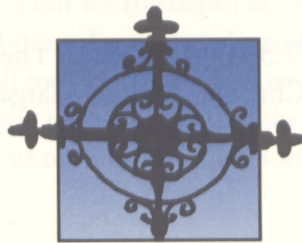
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# The Santa Clara Lectures



## “Mysticism in World Religions”

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of Religious Studies, Santa Clara University

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In 1994, through the generosity of the Bannan Foundation, the Department of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University inaugurated the Santa Clara Lectures. The series is bringing to campus leading scholars in Christian theology, offering the University community and the general public an ongoing exposure to debate on the most significant issues of our times. Santa Clara University will publish these lectures and distribute them throughout the United States and internationally.

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## MYSTICISM IN THE WORLD RELIGIONS

by Denise Lardner Carmody

### Introduction

It's a pleasure to be here tonight, participating in this first year's cycle of our lecture series. I have chosen my topic, "Mysticism in the World Religions," to remind us all of two things. First, the world over, billions of human beings have sought the meaning of their lives through major religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, Judaism and Christianity and Islam. We American Christians remain crippled in our estimates of both human variety and the graces of God if we do not know at least the rudiments of what these traditions have done for those who have adhered to them. Second, among all the adherents of the world religions, the mystics, those who appear to experience ultimate reality most directly, stand out for the depth of their penetration of the holy ground of the world and the ardor of their love of what is most fully real. In the course of reflecting all too briefly on these two propositions, I hope to draw us all into a consoling contemplation of the beautiful ways that God works constantly to lead us out of the shadows into her own ineffable light.

### I. Eastern Chapters

Many of you know the basic story of Gautama, the Buddha, who lived in the fifth century before the common era (perhaps 448-368). As legend tells it, Gautama was a prince, enjoying a gilded life in a palace, with a beautiful wife and a little son, until, around age 29, he ventured into the world sufficiently to encounter sickness, old age, and death. Profoundly shocked, he felt obliged to come to grips with so miserable a human condition, so he left his princely life and apprenticed himself to various holy men, looking for enlightenment. Neither their teachings nor their ascetical practices brought him what he sought. He only won his battle, gained the awakening that made him the Buddha, the one who knows, by sitting under a pipal tree and vowing not to leave until he had conquered the problem of suffering.

The moment of victory came when, having postulated that all life is suffering, Gautama realized that the cause of suffering is desire. It is because we want so much that we are frustrated so constantly. If we stop desire, we can gain freedom. The way to stop desire is to follow the noble eightfold path of right views, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Analyzed, the path of the Buddha, the Dharma or Teaching that he developed to express his



experience of awakening, amounts to program of wisdom, morality, and meditation. Negatively, this program focuses on removing suffering by removing desire. Positively, it focuses on deepening the disciple's sense that reality itself is intrinsically perfect. We need only deal with either things or other people without desire, not grasping for advantage, to avoid either causing pain to others or receiving pain from them.

After his experience of awakening, the Buddha became a great teacher, known for his serene compassion. He impressed his contemporaries as living in a profound peace, on the far, transcendent side of *samsara*, the realm of bondage to karma, to the moral law of cause and effect. In the realm of *samsara*, people move through an endless, miserable cycle of birth and death, rebirth and further death. The Buddha had broken with *samsara* and entered the realm of *nirvana*, where this cycle turned no more. Nirvana is existence without conditions, the state of the candle when the flame of desire has burned out. Nirvana is reality apart from ignorance, ultimacy unmarred by dependence, contingency, flaw of any sort. To experience such ultimacy directly marks a person as a mystic, one lost and found in the depths of being, the issuance of reality from the Ground that is the constant primary moment giving us a world.

Such a way of putting things is characteristic of Indian thought, which we ought to remember is one of the progenitors of Indo-European languages, worldviews, cultures. Indian Buddhists, Greek philosophers, and Celtic poets all have been beguiled by the wonder that there should be something rather than nothing, by apparently abstract but actually most concrete words such as being, existence, reality, intelligibility, mind, and spirit. This strand of world culture takes reason to be convertible with being. For something to exist is for it to be congenial to intelligence, sprung from the mind of a maker or first cause that has a word, a logos, a ratio fashioning things in order, making them so that they make sense.

The Buddha thinks that the world makes complete sense, though not to people trapped in *samsara*, enslaved to their desires, ignorant of *nirvana*. For those who have gotten free of *samsara*, everything is exactly itself, nothing more and nothing less, and this exactitude ought to please any of us immensely.

It is not a static exactitude. Reality moves as though dancing to a cosmic music, flowing along a cosmic stream. Without desire, in great detachment, not even having a self to call its own, the Buddhist spirit can move along in harmony, never missing a beat or making a false step. The Mahayana Buddhists, guided by the profound philosophers who studied the

Prajnaparamita, the Wisdom that has gone beyond all debts to karma and *samsara*, came to the conclusion that all beings are empty—a statement implying great flexibility and freedom. If all beings are empty, to what can we actually cling? Our clinging, our desire, is completely useless, illusory. We lose nothing in losing it. We gain everything—wisdom, moral maturity, enlightened meditation—by stopping desire, letting emptiness be our midmost name.

In China, where the Dharma of the Buddha eventually made a profound impression, one of the pre-Buddhist axial figures analogous to Gautama was Lao Tzu, the legendary fourth century BCE Taoist sage credited with the mystical text bearing his name (and also called the *Tao Te Ching*). Lao Tzu is more poetic than Gautama, less clear, less ontological, more impressed by the unthinking grace of nature, the Way (*Tao*) moving the 10,000 things of creation. The Way is not something that we can understand, discuss, claim to have brought under our control, either physical or mental. We move to its rhythms more than it moves to ours. We flow along its grain, or we move painfully, against the way things actually are. Lao Tzu says that the Tao is more like the female than the male—subtle, unassertive, fluid. It is more like water than rock, an infant than an adult. An infant dominates a household by its needs. Water wears away rock, steadily, humbly, patiently. The Way is like an uncarved block of wood or jade, possessed of all its potential, not yet reduced by having been set into form. It is more like the space that gives a house its value than the walls and roof that enclose the space.

Lost in contemplations, appreciations such as these, Lao Tzu passes through moments of exhilaration, but also through times of loneliness and sadness. All other people seem bright, sure, definite. He alone seems dull, dark, confused. The force of the Tao, the wind of the Way, has beguiled him, but also taken him apart from the madding crowd. He has become eccentric, absorbed with primary wonders, barely articulable foundations, to which most people pay no attention. Why is there something rather than nothing? Whence do the 10,000 things issue? The Great Clod, as Chuang Tzu, another profound early Taoist used to call natural creation, moves with utter indifference to human wishes. It gives us birth just as it wishes and at death it passes us on to the worms. We are foolish to kick against this goad. Wisdom above all is agreeing to what is, accepting necessities. While we are, we are necessary, and the world around us as well. When we end, what do we care what goes on after us? If when we were, we were well, our end can be a celebration. That ought to be enough.



Perhaps this brief dip into the legacies of two famous Eastern mystical sages, the Buddha and Lao Tzu, will suggest some of the astringent realism that has shaped the great cultures of India and China. Certainly, the passionate Hindu religionists known as *bhaktas*, devotees of personal gods such as Krishna and Shiva, the Mahadevi and Kali, give the lie to any characterization of Eastern mystical wisdom as completely impersonal or free of passion. In addition, all the great Eastern traditions, as all the great traditions of the West, have tolerated a peasant culture rife with shamanism, divination, rituals often verging on magical efforts to control the ultimate powers of creation, bend divinity to human desire. Nonetheless, archetypal figures such as the Buddha and Lao Tzu remind us how absorbing many Asians have found nature and the mind to be. Serene, uncaring, nature has often exhibited a freedom, a simplicity, that Zen Buddhists and Shintoists envied. Taoist artists have tried to do their calligraphy as nature might, without a reflective mind, as an expression of an alert spirit wholer than the mind, more integral and round than reason.

The intuition driving much of such effort has been that human fulfillment comes from a harmony, an integrity, flowing into the core of the personality from the creative sources of material nature, indeed of all reality. Only the person in touch with ultimacy, open to the Buddhature or Tao, can hope to ripen to full maturity, wisdom, holiness. There are no shortcuts to wisdom in Eastern mysticism. There is no valid lazy person's guide to enlightenment. Those who speak facilely of the Tao do not know it. The Tao is graceful, subtle, but not facile. Enlightenment comes when it chooses, but seldom does it come to those who do not meditate for years, have not schooled themselves through faithful observance of *sila*, the five fundamental Buddhist ethical precepts: not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to be unchaste, not to take intoxicants. For buddhahood, enlightenment, life shaped by nirvana, one must think correctly, act correctly, and move regularly to the foundations of being through a collectedness, a one-pointedness of mind that only meditation can create. Wisdom, morality, and meditation compose a reasonable threefold regime, supporting one another like the legs of a tripod. But each discipline encloses a profound challenge, opens a spiritual corridor whose end never comes in sight.

## II. Western Chapters

Just as many of you know the basic story of Gautama, many of you know the basic story of Muhammad (570-632 CE). For Islam, Muhammad is the seal (*Rasul*) of the prophets, the consummation of the line of revealers that

began with Abraham and reached high points with Moses and Jesus. Around age 40 Muhammad felt compelled to take himself into the desert at night, seeking God and guidance in solitude. Wrapped in his mantle in a desert cave, he began to receive revelations that initially terrified him. In the most crucial early one, a glorious being who later turned out to be the angel Gabriel communicated the demand of the one God that Muhammad begin to recite to his fellow Arabs the will that God was composing for them.

The Koran is the collection of the recitals that God, Allah, gave to the Prophet over the course of about 20 years. The prophecy of Muhammad created Islam, the community of those who submit to the Koranic message and Allah. The 1 billion Muslims in today's world, and the nearly 15 centuries of Islamic cultural influence, testify to the power of Koranic revelation.

Islam imposes on believers five principal obligations. First, they are to recite the creed regularly. It is quintessentially concise: "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is God's Prophet." Second, they are to pray five times a day, facing Mecca. Third, they are to fast during the lunar month of Ramadan. Fourth, they are to give alms for the relief of the poor. And, fifth, they are to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during their lifetime. This is a marvelous program: simple, practical, demanding. It reflects the experience of Muhammad as the head of the House of Islam for many years, first in Medina and then in Mecca. The lofty poetry of the Koran, itself for Muslims a primary proof that Allah gave the recitals to Muhammad directly, comes down to earth in the five pillars of requisite practice. The last four—daily communal prayer, fasting, giving of alms, and making the pilgrimage—reknit the body of Muslim faithful again and again. The first pillar, the creed, beckons now as a straight doorway into our topic of mysticism.

The religion of pre-Muslim Arabia was largely polytheistic. The soleness of the God whom Muhammad preached implied a profound change, a religious revolution. Indeed, much of the original opposition to Muhammad at Mecca, much of the reason that he moved to Medina, came from Arabs unwilling to give up the old polytheism. But Muhammad was unbending. The overwhelming note in the experiences that came to him during the desert night was that there is no god but God. All other divinities, numinous forces, powers of nature or the spiritual realms are but idols, proximate realities that we worship on peril of perverting our souls. The true God, the sole ultimacy, is the Lord of the Worlds, the single Creator. He made human beings from a clot of blood. He abides no partakers in his



divinity, shares it with none. Yet, he is compassionate and merciful. Though far beyond all creatures in power, dignity, holiness, he stays near as the pulse at our throats. The word he gives is for our human prospering. He wants to be a liberator, not a tyrant.

Muhammad is intoxicated with the splendor, the sheer fullness of reality, that Allah discloses himself to possess, to be. The scenarios of Judgment, separation of the wicked from the good, that Allah sketches for the Prophet, promising that the Day of Doom already dawns on the horizon, reenforce the holiness he enjoys as Lord of the Worlds. Those who do not accept his will in faith, will not submit to his order for society and creation alike, will go down into the Fire. Those who obey, submit, act as creatures ought, will go to the Garden, where there are lovely streams, palm trees giving delightful shade.

The Sufis, who led the way in developing a Muslim piety bent on resisting worldliness and gaining mystical intimacy with Allah, made the Koran the wellspring of their piety. The sole God blazing from the center of the Koran, making the Koran his eternal Word, became their complete treasure. The ardor for God of the great 13th century Persian Sufi Rumi took the form of brilliant poetic commentaries on the Koran. Along with the eighth century Mesopotamian female saint Rabi'a, who also approached God as her lover, Rumi shows that Muslims have submitted to Allah more than just their minds. Though the so-called "sober Sufis" have been leery of ecstatic mystical ventures, again and again those submitting themselves wholeheartedly to the Koran and the *Sharia*, the Law developed from the Koran, have become enamored of their Lord, slaves less to his monarchical commands than to his divine goodness.

The divine goodness that has solicited the love of many Western mystics runs parallel to the holy being that has solicited the enlightenment of many Eastern mystics. With many qualifications, we can say that the Westerners have responded to an ultimate reality more personal than that which has predominated in the East. Nonetheless, Allah, the Tao, and the Buddha's Nirvana have all beckoned as the complete fulfillment for which the human being has been set, the comprehensive grounding of the world, the mysterious explanation of reality as a whole, that wisdom seeks.

Lest I imply that the mystical ventures of the world religions are things of the past, no longer a force in Islam or Buddhism or Judaism today, let me turn briefly to a contemporary religious scholar greatly interested in mysticism. Arthur Green, former president of the Reconstructionist Seminary in Philadelphia and now a professor at Brandeis University outside Boston,

has steeped himself in the Hasidic tradition, finding there much nourishment for a present-day life of profound Jewish faith.

The *hasidim* are the "pious," Jews who, even at the time of Jesus, stood out for their diligence in following the Torah, the instruction given by God, first through Moses and then through later prophets, priests, and rabbis. Modern Hasidism carries special debts to the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), who led a religious revival in Eastern Europe that featured keeping the Torah, seeking the Lord, with great joy. The divine sparks spread through creation that the medieval Kabbalists loved became for the modern Hasidim reasons to think that, despite all the sufferings imposed on them by anti-Semitic Christians, their Lord invited them to dance with the Torah joyously, welcome each Sabbath as God's bride.

Asking whether the Mosaic experience of God that opens the formative, biblical creation of the covenant and Torah on Sinai continues to be relevant today, Green offers a variant of the Christian scholastic argument that what *is* certainly *may be* (*ab esse ad posse valet illatio*). Since the revelation at Sinai where God gave the chosen people their special covenant did occur, it must be possible for it to occur, perhaps at any time that God chooses. In Green's own words:

"Out of Sinai comes Y-H-W-H, the reality and the word. Sinai offers Y-H-W-H as the singular divine presence that pervades all the world and reaches beyond it in ways we human beings are not given to fully understand. This reality, Sinai tells us, is accessible to human beings at the greatest moments of their lives. The same ecstatic presence that filled the hearts of Israel as they walked proudly out of Egypt, the same presence that was to so fill the Tent of Meeting that no person was able to enter it, could be found in human life, both for individuals and for the nation, again and again in the future. *Shyeh Asher Shyeh*, 'I shall be that I shall be,' is interpreted by the rabbis to mean 'I shall be with you again as I was with you then.' The manifestation of Y-H-W-H that happened in Israel's minds and hearts at Sinai is an assurance that such manifestation does not happen then alone. Revelation reveals the *possibility* of revelation, not just that once, but whenever the human heart and mind are open to it."<sup>1</sup>

The Lord of the Mosaic revelation, the source of the Torah given at Sinai and developed by the rabbis into Talmudic Judaism, is sole, One, much like Allah. He is hidden, never giving human beings his name, never coming under their control. Yet he is with his people, faithful to his word, at work in his world constantly, keeping it going. For no reason other than his own goodness, he has loved Israel, and given gifts to the nations. No human



prosperity is stable without reference to him, obedience to his singular Lordship. He is holy, determining that all the ordinances of the Torah ought to make his people holy, as worthy of intimate sharing with him as they can become. The sacrifices of his priests during the biblical period arose from this imperative to become holy. The cult of the Temple, the beauty of the Psalms, even the sober reflections of the Wisdom literature sprang from a many-sided effort to live with the Lord responsibly, worthily.

Many Jewish mystics have loved the Torah of their Lord so profoundly that they could barely distinguish their study from their prayer. The Talmudic text often became a dynamic presence of the Lord, a living body through which the divine intelligence and will could continue to reveal the secrets of heaven. The alphabet of the Hebrew carrying the Torah could assume mystical valences, becoming an esoteric code. The *Song of Songs* could become a cipher for the intimate bonds between Israel and its Lord, bride and husband.

Then the 613 commandments of the Torah loomed as privileges more than burdens. Then the Sabbath, the day of rest, became a foretaste of heaven. The world of mystical Judaism bubbled with wonderful symbols, stories, pledges of the goodness of being Jewish. At their best the Hasidic rabbis formed communities that could endure much oppression without losing their zest for life, their firm belief that, as Genesis had said, God saw that what he had made, his creation, was good.

### III. Lessons for Ourselves

Mysticism is not academic. Whatever the value of studying the adherents of the world religions who seem to have experienced ultimate reality, true divinity, most directly, the question remains, "So what?" What is our imperative to go and do likewise? And what should those of us whose tradition is Christian, and is as rich as any other in mystical saints, think of the wealth of holiness that our brief Eastern and Western chapters have hinted has flourished outside of Christianity, sometimes among people who have never heard of Christ? These will be our final questions.

Bernard Cooke's fine little book on Jesus, *God's Beloved*, makes the point that Jesus defined himself through a wholehearted connection to his Father.<sup>2</sup> His humanity reposed in his love of his Father. More primitively than any Christological definition, Jesus was the son of his Father. His bond with his Father gave him his identity, explained his mission, provided the power through which he died and rose. This union with God is bound to be the paradigm of Christian mysticism and holiness. The imperative that Chris-

tians receive to go and do as the mystical saints of the other world religions have done stems from how their Master and Lord himself lived. In the mysterious New Testament scenes of the baptism of Jesus by John and the Transfiguration where Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah, the divine Father calls Jesus his beloved. People are to listen to Jesus, take his words to heart, because they come from a unique intimacy with God. By the time that Christian theology has developed to the depth that we find in the Prologue of John's Gospel, the Word that Jesus conveyed has become inseparable from the eternal Word that took flesh in him through Mary. He has become the incarnation of the Word that has always been in the bosom of the Father. He has become wisdom in human garb, the fullest sacrament of the divine holiness that God has provided.

This means that Christians can make Jesus the icon of their mystical ventures after ultimate meaning and love. It means that human flesh can serve as the most revelatory focus in creation. In the history of Christian mysticism things have not always worked out this way. Jesus has not always been the linchpin. But on the terms of a high, Johannine and Chalcedonian Christology, Jesus could be. And even when Christian mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckart, and the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* have preferred a negative speech, a turn away from icons, symbols, anything imaginable, they have had to retain their confession that the Word incarnate was fully divine, like to the Father in all things except the relational difference that he was the begotten rather than the begetter. Otherwise, such mystics risked clashing with the simple Christian creed.

Usually, therefore, the infinity of the Christian God grounding the negative, apophatic mystics focused on the eternal Word, when it came to reconciling the Incarnation with the mystic's passion to live in darkness, by a pure faith. John of the Cross shows us this tendency, balancing a scholastic orthodoxy with a highly experiential, experimental theology of how God strips us of our reliances on creatures, in order to espouse us in spiritual marriage, transform us into living flames of love.

As Protestant Christians have reminded all with ears to hear, the New Testament does not demand that all believers set out on the mystical path, and lay life in the world is a fully holy vocation. For all that he withdraws into solitude to pray, the evangelical Christ is more prominently a self-spending servant of his needy fellow human beings. He works his healings, preaches his sermons, shares fellowship with sinners at table, and fights with the Pharisees because he sees his neighbors wandering like sheep without a shepherd. The Kingdom of God that the synoptic Christ proclaims up and



down the land is a time of liberation. The blind will see, lepers be cleansed, the poor hear good news, because the compassion of the Father, the justice of the Lord, will break open a new eon.

For Pauline Christianity, the axial event ushering in this new eon is the death and resurrection of Christ. The passover of Jesus from death to resurrection fulfills the passover of Israel from Egypt to the promised land. The risen Christ is a new Adam, the head of a race freshly formed. Where sin abounded, grace abounds the more. All this is wonderful, nearly too good to be believed. The 144,000 saints described in Revelation will not wear out heaven praising God for it. In the new Jerusalem, there is no Temple, because the lamb that was slain has become worthy of all honor and power and glory and might.

Now, if these symbols suggest some of the Christian equivalents to the mystical searches and findings of the non-Christian mystics, how ought Christians to think about the holiness that God seems to have given generously outside the formal borders of the Christian community? Can mystical experience, contemplative fulfillment, become a royal road to ecumenical mutuality, high regard of one another on all sides? I believe that Christians ought to take seriously the biblical assurance that God shows little partiality (Acts 10) and has not left divinity without witness anywhere. Christians must continue to believe that Jesus the Christ is the nonpareil revelation of the one God, because the sole incarnation of the eternal Word resident in the bosom of the Father. Still, this belief has its parallel in the convictions of Jews about their chosenness and the convictions of Muslims about the finality of the Koran. What is crucial is that Christians let the holiness of non-Christian saints and mystics make its proper impression—let themselves see how impressive many of the Hasidim and the Sufis, the Buddhist saints and the Taoist sages, actually have been.

Doing this, Christians may well come to appreciate how the Logos whom they revere as shining from the face of Christ has been the fecund source of all holiness, the one in whom all things in creation have held together, as Colossians 1:17 says. This could mean that no worthy human achievement need seem foreign to the gospel, the good news of how God calls us to fulfillment, no matter what sufferings lie across our path. It could mean that Christian mystical holiness is truly catholic, a direct experience of ultimate reality understood, enjoyed, according to the *whole* of the grand adventure through which God has been calling human beings to intimacy, from the moment that our first parents, those prehistoric peoples older than the Neanderthals, watched the dawn in awe and resolved to pay its myster-

ies worthy return. If any of this would occur, the mystics would clap their hands and feel that their labors had been more than worthwhile.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Word* (Norvale, NJ: Jacob Aronson, 1992), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> See Bernard Cooke, *God's Beloved* (New York: Trinity, 1991).

