


Bernard McGinn (2005)

Mysticism [First Edition]. No definition could be both meaningful and sufficiently comprehensive to include all experiences that, at some point or other, have been described as “mystical.” In 1899 Dean W. R. Inge listed twenty-five definitions. Since then the study of world religions has considerably expanded, and new, allegedly mystical cults have sprung up everywhere. The etymological lineage of the term provides little assistance in formulating an unambiguous definition. In the Greek mystery cults, muein (“to remain silent”) probably referred to the secrecy of the initiation rites. But later, especially in Neoplatonic theory, the “mystical” silence came to mean wordless contemplation. Even this “contemplation” does not coincide with our own usage of that term, since theoria denotes speculative knowledge as well as what we call contemplation.

Nor does the early Christian term mustikos correspond to our present understanding, since it referred to the spiritual meaning that Christians, in the light of revelation, detected under the original, literal meaning of the scriptures. Eventually the idea of a meaning hidden underneath surface appearances was extended to all spiritual reality (the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, even nature itself as expressive of God’s majesty). Yet the strictly private character that we so readily associate with the term mystical was never part of it.

Sometime between the fourth and the fifth centuries, the Christian meaning began to absorb the Greek connotations of silence and secrecy. For Dionysius the Areopagite, the influential Syrian (?) theologian, mystical theory consisted of the spiritual awareness of the ineffable Absolute beyond the theology of divine names. Still, even for him, mystical insight belonged essentially to the Christian community, not to private speculation or subjective experience. Contrary to this objective, communal meaning, Western Christianity, mostly under Augustine’s impact, eventually came to understand the mystical as related to a subjective state of mind. Thus Jean de Gerson, the fifteenth-century chancellor of the Sorbonne, described mystical theology as “experimental knowledge of God through the embrace of unitive love.” Here we witness the formulation of the modern usage of a state of consciousness that surpasses ordinary experience through the union with a transcendent reality.

Characteristics. With such a wide range of meanings, it is not surprising that commentators disagree about the characteristics of the mystical experience. Those mentioned in William James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience rank among the most commonly accepted. Ineffability emphasizes the private, or at least incommunicable, quality of the experience. Mystics have, of course, written quite openly and often abundantly about their experience. But, by their own testimony, words can never capture their full meaning. This raises a delicate problem of interpretation to which we shall return. Secondly, James mentions the noetic quality of the experience. To be sure, mystical insight hardly ever augments theoretical knowledge. Nevertheless its insight suffuses a person’s knowledge with a unique, all-encompassing sense of integration that definitely belongs to the noetic order. This point deserves emphasis against those who assert that mysticism is the same everywhere and that only the postmystical interpretation accounts for the difference. Distinctions begin with the noetic qualities of the experiences themselves. The passivity of the mystical experience may well be its most distinctive characteristic. Its gratuitous, undeserved nature stands out, however much the privileged subject may have applied himself to ascetic exercises or meditative techniques. Once the higher power takes possession, all voluntary preparation appears to lose its efficacy. Transiency, a more controversial characteristic, has, I think justifiably, been challenged, for great mystics have remained for prolonged periods in enhanced states of consciousness. Intermittent intensive experiences figured therein as moments of a more comprehensive
surpassing awareness. Perhaps we should speak of the rhythmic, rather than the transient, quality of mystical life.

To James’s four characteristics we may add a fifth: integration. Expanded beyond its ordinary limits, the mystical consciousness somehow succeeds in overcoming previously existing opposition in its integration with a higher reality. This, however, should not be interpreted to mean that all restrictions cease to exist. Some of them clearly maintain a sense of transcendence within the union. This is precisely what gives them their distinctly religious character.

**IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE.** That a “common factor” underlies the most diverse spiritual theologies has been asserted with great emphasis by such writers as René Guénon, Aldous Huxley, Frithjof Schuon, and Alan Watts. Some assumption of identity also seems to direct the thought of several Indian philosophers. In the West at least, the theory rests on the general principle that only subsequent interpretations distinguish one mysticism from another. Each mystic unquestionably tends to interpret his experience in the light of the theological or philosophical universe to which he belongs. Moreover, the nature of his spiritual quest usually shapes the experience. But to conclude therefrom that the interpretation remains extrinsic is to deny the experience a specific, ideal content of its own and to reduce it to mere sensation. Experience itself is distinctly cognitive and intentionally unique. As Gershom Scholem once pointed out, there is no mysticism-in-general; there are only particular mystical systems and individuals, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and so forth.

The specific quality of the experience in mystical individuals or schools does not, of course, exclude a kind of family resemblance in this variety. A denial of similarity has induced traditional interpretations to study mystical schools exclusively from the perspective of their own theological principles. Thus, for example, R. C. Zaehner’s controversial *Mysticism* (1957) ranks mystical schools according to their proximity to orthodox Christian love mysticism. Alternatively, the assumption of a genuine similarity of experiences enables us to consider a variety of phenomena under some general categories without reducing them to simple identity. Such a general discussion would include nonreligious as well as religious mysticism, even though basic differences separate them. The present essay focuses only on religious mysticism. But a few words must be said about so-called nature mysticism, a term unrelated to the distinction, current in Roman Catholic theology, between “natural” (or acquired) and “supernatural” (or infused) mysticism. Nature mysticism refers to the kind of intense experience whereby the subject feels himself merging with the cosmic totality. Now, a mystical experience of the cosmos may also be religious. But in the religious experience a sense of transcendence persists throughout the experience of cosmic union either with regard to nature as a whole or to its underlying principle. Some descriptions of romantic writers (John F. Cooper, William Wordsworth, Jean Paul) seem to express such a mystical awareness of nature. We also find traces of it in Turner and in the nineteenth-century painters of the Hudson River school. The artist most remembered for his mystical descriptions of nature may well be Richard Jeffries. In his case the distinction between the religious and the nonreligious is particularly hard to maintain. In other cases any religious equation of cosmic-mystical experiences with what John of the Cross or the Bhagavadgītā expressed would be clearly inappropriate. Nevertheless, to deny any resemblance between the intense, unifying experience of nature and that of a transcendent presence would be absurd.

At this point the problem of narcotically induced states presents itself. Must we dismiss them as not mystical or at least as not religiously mystical because of their chemical origin? Such a simplistic categorization would be a blatant instance of the “genetic” fallacy. Instead of describing the phenomenon itself, we would then be satisfied to evaluate it according to its presumed origin. Of course, any mental state introduced without spiritual preparation is unlikely to foster spiritual development, and, if habitual, the reliance on chemical means may permanently obstruct growth. But however beneficial or detrimental this eventual impact upon personality may be, there can be no doubt that in a religious context chemicals may induce states of undeniably religious-mystical character. Thus the ritual consumption of peyote cactus buttons, dating back to pre-Columbian times, has undoubtedly played a significant role in the religious awareness of native Americans and has since the end of the nineteenth century been instrumental in remythologizing the cult.

Similarly, experiences resulting from pathological psychic conditions (e.g., manic depression, hysteria) should not per se be excluded from the mystical. Nor should these or drug-induced states be considered separately from “nature” or religious mysticism. On the latter alone we shall concentrate. The typology here presented considers only the mystical aspect of various religions: it claims neither adequacy in the general area of religion nor completeness in the classification of mystical religion.

**Mysticism of the Self.** Mysticism belongs to the core of all religion. Those religions that had a historical founder all started with a powerful personal experience of immediate contact. But all religions, regardless of their origin, retain their vitality only as long as their members continue to believe in a transcendent reality with which they can in some way communicate by direct experience. The significance of such an experience, though present in all religion, varies in importance. Christianity, especially in its reformed churches, attaches less significance to the element of experience than other faiths do. In Vedantic and Sāmkhya Hinduism, on the contrary, religion itself coincides with the kind of insight that can come only from mystical experience. Their particular concept of redemption consists in a liberation from change and from the vicissitudes of birth and death. Their craving for a state of changeless permanence aims not at some sort of unending protraction of the present life but rather at the
extinction of all desire in this life. Hindu spirituality in all its forms displays an uncommonly strong awareness of the sorrowful quality of the human condition. Apart from this common temper and an acceptance of the authority of the Vedas, Hinduism presents such a variety of religious doctrines and practices that a single name hardly applies. Still, a similar, inward-directed mystical tendency warrants discussion under a single title.

The original Vedic religion with its emphasis on sacrifice and rite appears rather remote from what we usually associate with the term mysticism. Yet two elements in its development strongly influenced the later, more obviously mystical direction. First, forms of meditation became at some point acceptable substitutes for the performance of the actual sacrifice and were held to yield equally desirable benefits. Though such forms of concentration had little in common with what we understand today by contemplation, they nevertheless initiated an interiorization that Hinduism would pursue further than any other religion (Dāsagupta, 1972, p. 19). Second, the term brahman, which originally referred to the sacred power present in ritual and sacrifice, gradually came to mean a single, abstractly conceived Absolute. The search for a primal unity is already obvious in some Vedic texts (e.g., the Creation Song, which speaks of “that one thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature”). The subordination of the gods (“The gods are later than this world’s production,” Rigveda 10.129) may have favored the drive toward unity. Polytheism, though abundantly present, had remained spiritually so undeveloped that it did not obstruct the road toward spiritual unity.

In the Upaniṣads (eighth to fifth century BCE) the unifying and the spiritualizing tendencies eventually merged in the idea of an inner soul (ātmā), the Absolute at the heart of all reality to which only the mind has access.

The inner Soul of all things, the One Controller, Who makes his one form manifold— The wise who perceive Him as standing in oneself, They, and no others, have eternal happiness! (Kathā Upanisad 5.12)

This is not a metaphysical theory, but a mystical path to liberation. It requires ascetical training and mental discipline to overcome the desires, oppositions, and limitations of individual selfhood. “As a man, when in the embrace of a beloved wife, knows nothing within or without, so this person, when in the embrace of the intelligent Soul, knows nothing within or without” (Bṛhadārāṇyaka 4.3.22). Here lies the origin of the advaita (nondualist monism that would become dominant in classical Hinduism). The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad anticipates the later, radical expressions in its description of the highest state of consciousness as one beyond dreamless sleep. Above all, it equated the deeper self (ātmān) thus discovered with brahman itself. This deeper self tolerates no subject-object opposition. If taken literally, this state would eliminate consciousness itself and with it the very possibility of a “mystical” state. Yet such a total elimination of personal consciousness remains an asymptotic ideal never to be reached but to be approached ever more closely. The three aspects of brahman (sat-cit-ānanda) that even extreme monists distinguish include two that are clearly conscious. Even if any distinction beyond the One were to be a mere illusion, as in the extreme interpretation of māyā (originally, the created world itself) given by Śaṅkara (eighth century CE), it still remains an opposition to indiscriminate Unity. Metaphysical speculation in classical Hinduism may occasionally have surpassed its mystical tendency. But that there was a religious experience at the basis of this extreme monism cannot be doubted.

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

Of course, not all the Upaniṣads were radically monist in their expression (Śvetāvatāra is clearly not), nor was the Vedic theology the only mysticism of the self in India. The Śāṅkhya-Yoga mentioned in the above passage advocates a radical dualism. It recognizes two irreducible principles of reality: prakṛti, the material principle and source of energy, cause of both the material world and psychic experience, and puruṣa, discrete units of pure consciousness similar to the ātmān of the Upaniṣads. In contrast to cosmic intellect (mahat), ego-consciousness (ahānākāra), and mind (manā) as the source of perception and action, the multiplicity of individual puruṣas exists independently of the cosmic forces altogether. Yet puruṣa must be liberated from a confusion with prakṛti by means of concentrated effort. Śaṅkha thought, although it has no place for deity and is specifically atheistic, was assimilated into the age-old tradition of yoga, providing the practice with a soteriological and cosmological framework. This mystical self-isolation recognizes no absolute One (brahmān ātmān) beyond the individual spirit. Liberation here means the opposite of merging with a transcendent Self. In its pure form, Śāṅkhya-Yoga, far from leaning toward pantheist monism (as Vedic spirituality does), results in the most extreme individualism. If the idea of God appears at all, it is as that of one puruṣa next to all others, their model insofar as God is entirely free of cosmic contamination. But we must avoid tying the Yoga techniques to the later Śāṅkhya theology: they were practiced also in non-dualist or in the so-called qualified-dualistic (Vīsistādvaita) systems.

What are these qualified-dualistic systems that make up the third school of Hindu mysticism? It seems hazardous to ground them in theological theories. To be sure, each mystical system contains an interpretation as an essential part of the experience, but these interpretations cannot be simply transferred into the kind of logically coherent systems for
which we usually reserve the name *theology*. A mystical theology is less concerned about logical consistency and sharply defined concepts than about adequate translations of the actual experience. This is particularly the case in a tradition wherein the mystical element constitutes most of the core of the religion itself. Hence in describing such later writers as Râmânuja (eleventh century CE) as “qualified dualists,” we should be aware that we are referring more to a practical-devotional than a speculative-metaphysical attitude. Râmânuja may never have abandoned the metaphysical assumptions of the monist tradition in which he grew up. But finding absolute monism inadequate for the practice of spiritual life, he reaffirmed the traditional concept of a God endowed with personal attributes (*ātman*/*brahman*), instead of the attributeless absolute substance (*nirguṇa*/*brahman*). God thereby is not merely a model but also a redeemer who assists the soul on its path to liberation.

In thus qualifying the monist doctrine, Râmânuja was inspired by what the *Bhagavadgītā* (c. second century BCE) had assumed throughout. This mystical poem, perhaps the finest spiritual work to come from the East, is hard to classify by Western canons. The narrative assumes a clearly theistic position: the god Viṣṇu incarnated in Kṛṣṇa exhorts the hero Arjuna on the eve of battle with his stepbrother to take heart and fight. But the message he delivers ranges from traditional piety and observance of the ancient rites to the monism of the Vedānta, combined with the dualistic cosmology of Sāṅkhya-Yoga. The work is a synthesis in all respects. Not only does it unite the monist and theistic strands, but it also presents a method of combining the active with the contemplative life. It advises a mental discipline that enables a person to act with total detachment from the fruits of his deed. By itself, the active life (*karmaṇa*) weaves its own web of causes and effects, entailing an endless cycle of birth and death—the very essence of what a person seeks to be liberated from. Yet various kinds of yoga detach the mind from this natural determination, while still allowing a person to fulfill the obligations of his station in life. Through equanimity of emotions, holy indifference, and purity of heart, even the active person will come to detect the one presence of *brahman* in all things. The *Gītā* is not a manual of yogic practice. It is a mystical work that culminates in a vision of God. A most powerful theophany completes Kṛṣṇa’s description of God’s presence in the world (chap. 11). Still the poem concludes with the sobering advice to seek God in the ordinary way of piety rather than through self-concentration. The advice was given with the sobering advice to seek God in the ordinary way of piety rather than through self-concentration. The advice was

### The Mysticism of Emptiness: Buddhism

It seems difficult to conceive of two religious doctrines more different from one another than Hinduism, especially Sāṅkhya, and Buddhism. In one, we find a quest for an absolute self (*ātman, puruṣa*); in the other, the obliteration of the self (*anatman/anatta*—no soul). Yet upon closer inspection the two appear to have a great deal in common. Both are systems of salvation, rooted in a profoundly pessimistic attitude about the changing world of everyday existence, and they aim at a condition of changelessness that surpasses that existence. Moreover, their adherents mostly hope to attain this salvation through enlightenment prepared by moral discipline and mental concentration. In the more radical schools the quest for a unified state of mind leads to some form of practical monism and, in Indian Mahayana Buddhism no less than in “classical” Hinduism, a theoretical monism. Any kind of “grace”—which would introduce a new dualism—is thereby excluded. Even those parts of the tradition that deviate from these rigorous principles appear to have some common features. Amida Buddhism advocates a faith in the “saving Buddha” that strongly resembles *bhakti* Hinduism.

Meanwhile, the goal of enlightenment is conceived in very different ways. The Buddhist description both of the experience and of the path that leads to it is characterized by a spare simplicity as well as by a persistent reluctance to use any but negative predicates. For our purposes it is not necessary to enter into the basic tenets of the theory. Their development varies from the Hinayāna to the Mahāyāna doctrines. But even in the Theravada tradition, the Eightfold Path of virtue concludes with “right concentration,” which, in turn, must be obtained in eight successive forms of mental discipline (the *dhyāṇa*). Once again we are confronted with a faith that from its origins is headed in a mystical direction. The three negative terms—nonattainment, nonassertion, nonreliance—define a state of utmost emptiness by which Nāgārjuna’s Mādhyamika school (150 CE) described enlightenment. Emptiness appears, of course, also in Hinayāna schools, as the principal quality of *nirvāṇa*, the supreme enlightenment. But with the Mahāyāna schools the emphasis on emptiness, even in the preparatory stages, becomes particularly strong. *Nirvāṇa* itself thereby ceases to be an independent realm of being; it becomes a particular vision of the phenomenal world. Nonattainment consists in emptying the self of all personal qualities, desires, and thoughts, indeed of all that might be considered to comprise a “self.” For ultimate reality is unconditioned and void of all defining distinctions. If this concept is understood ontologically, there is no substantial soul; if understood epistemologically, there is no way of knowing reality as long as the notion of subject remains; if understood ethically, there is no expression of ultimate reality as long as one’s desires condition one’s existence. As the late Mahāyāna poet Sāntideva wrote:

The Stillness (*Nirvāṇa*) lies in surrender of all things, and my spirit longs for the Stillness; if I must surrender all, it is best to give it to fellow-creatures. I yield myself to all living creatures to deal with me as they choose; they may smite or revile me for ever, cover me with dust, play with my body, laugh and wanton; I have given them my body, why shall I care. Let them make me do whatever works bring them pleasure; but may mishap never befall any of them by reason of me. (quoted in Ananda Coomaraswamy’s *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, New York, 1964, p. 321)
Beyond wisdom, then, the Buddhist ideal requires compassion, an attitude rooted in the deep awareness that all beings are interconnected. It is this compassion that inspired the bodhisattva vocation in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

As Na-gārjuna defined it, nonassertion became the logical counterpart of the emptiness doctrine. The Madhyamika paradoxes reveal an intense awareness of the ineffable quality of ultimate truth. No expression is definitive, not even the Four Noble Truths on which Buddhism is founded. The entire Dharma itself, the doctrine, is no more than a dream, a vague echo. To be sure, the conception of an ineffable absolute is also present in Hinayāna Buddhism, as the following Udāna statement clearly asserts: “There is, monks, an unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded; and were it not, monks, for this unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, no escape could be shown here for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded” (Buddhist Texts through the Ages, ed. Edward Conze, Oxford, 1954, p. 95).

Yet the Mahāyāna schools drew more radical conclusions. For the Madhyamika nirvāṇa consists mostly of sets of contradictories, both of which are negated. To Na-gārjuna, nirvāṇa is logical “nonsense” to which the principle of contradiction does not apply. One may read this as a program of extreme skeptical philosophy. It is, in fact, a powerful assertion of transcendence in which all distinctions vanish. For the Madhyamika masters, nirvāṇa lies beyond the total peace experience: it has become the Absolute in itself, the undivided Oneness of the ultimate reality. No longer separated from conditioned existence, the Mahāyāna nirvāṇa becomes indistinguishable from the samsaric realm of phenomenal (and therefore illusory) reality. The Buddhist negation, far more radical than a mere declaration of absence, leaves no common space wherein the Absolute could be compared with any positive qualities. It attempts the logically impossible, namely, to overcome the very interconnectedness of all dependent being and, since all that exists is dependent, of existence itself. Nothing remains here but the road to total silence. Salvation comes through wisdom, but clearly the wisdom here is the opposite of cognitive—it consists in mystical silence.

The ways to emptiness vary. Mental training by the confrontation of paradoxes has been mentioned. Other ways, especially Yogācāra Buddhism, emphasize the attainment of “pure thought.” This consists not in thinking about something but rather in the insight that thought is not in any object but in a subject free of all objects. Yogācāra pursues the basic truth of emptiness in a practical rather than a logical-metaphysical way.

Of particular importance here is Chan (Jpn., Zen) Buddhism, a doctrine imported into China by the Indian Bodhidharma that later spread to Japan. Most consistent of all in its pursuit of emptiness, it rejected all dependence (non-reliance), including the one based on the Buddha’s own words. Indeed, the very desire for enlightenment must be abandoned, according to the famous Zen master Dōgen. The name Chan, or Zen, derived from dhyāna (Pali jhāna), indicates the importance of mental concentration. But Zen also requires a systematic surpassing of reason. At an early stage in his training the disciple is given a kōan, a paradoxical statement that baffles reason and for which he must find a “higher” sense. Once the mind has become cleared of the ordinary apparatus of conscious thought, unconscious elements emerge from its subliminal depths. Zen masters refer to this stage of hallucinations as makyo—the demonic universe—and advise the student not to dwell on any extraordinary experiences. Their advice agrees with the attitude recommended by Christian spiritual directors to mystics passing through the so-called “illumination” stage with regard to visions and voices. All this prepares a state of unification in which the mind gradually sheds the patterns of oppositional consciousness present in desire, fear, prejudice, or even objective conceptualization. C. G. Jung once suggestively described it as “a breakthrough by a consciousness limited to the ego-form, into the non-ego-like self.” In the experience of total unity the self becomes reduced to a state of pure perceptiveness. This occurs in the final stage, satori, enlightenment itself, often referred to as kenshō, the ability to see the essence of things. We might perhaps translate it as “suchness” or “ultimate reality” (the Sanskrit term tathatā, used for the one reality that constitutes the entire universe, coincides in Mahāyāna Buddhism with nirvāṇa itself).

Most typical of that final state of emptiness as Zen Buddhists conceive of it is that it results not in a withdrawal from the real but in an enhanced ability to see the real as it is and to act in it unhampered by passion and attachment. Thus emptiness creates a new worldliness. Can such a state be called mystical? Not if one reserves the term for a direct contact with an Absolute that can be described by positive attributes. But such a restriction is not warranted. Any form of religious mysticism claims a direct contact with the Absolute. How it defines this Absolute depends on its particular outlook. Judaism and Christianity are religions of the word; Buddhism is a religion of silence that renounces all ways of naming the Absolute. Even to demand the presence of grace as a specific expression of a divine benevolence is to deny Buddhism the right to conceive of the Absolute as lying beyond any form of expression. Meanwhile, the function of what Christians call “grace” does not remain unfulfilled, as appears in the attitude of thanksgiving that shapes the Buddhist monk’s life as much as that of his Western counterpart. In thanking the nameless source of all goodness, the Buddhist professes the presence of a benevolent Absolute.

Of course, here as in other cases the outsider is unable to decide to what extent religion blossoms into actual mystical experience. What counts is the possibility it presents of an intense, direct contact with the Absolute, and the methodic way that a particular religion offers for realizing this encounter. Not every form of Zen may be called mystical or even religious, any more than the practice of yoga in Hindu culture or, for that matter, the study of Neoplatonic theory.
MYSTICISM OF THE IMAGE: EASTERN AND EARLY WESTERN CHRISTIANITY. Unlike some other religions, Christianity has never equated its ideal of holiness with the attainment of mystical states. Nor did it encourage seeking such states for their own sake. Nevertheless, a mystical impulse undeniably propelled it in its origin and determined much of its later development. The synoptic Gospels present Jesus as dwelling in the continuous, intimate presence of God. His public life begins with a prayer and a vision: “While Jesus after his baptism was at prayer, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape like a dove” (Lk. 3:21–22). It ends with a prayer of total abandonment: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk. 23:46). Jesus initiates all important public acts with a prayer. He often withdraws from the crowd for long periods of solitary prayer. He interprets his entire existence through its reference to God, whom he calls Father. To himself he applies Isaiah’s messianic words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” The same Spirit he promises to those who pray in his name.

The mystical quality of Jesus’ life is most clearly stated in the Fourth Gospel. Some of the words attributed to him may have originated in theological reflection rather than in his own expression. But they thereby witness all the more powerfully to the mystical impulse he was able to transmit to his followers. Biblical speculations on the Word of God are reinterpreted as expressions of God’s personal revelation in an incarnated divine Logos. The intimate union between the Father and the Word is, through the Holy Spirit, granted to all true believers. Indeed, the presence of the Spirit entitles them to the same love with which God loves his Son. In John’s gospel the two principal currents of Christian mysticism have their source: the theology of the divine image that calls the Christian to conformity, and the theology that presents the intimacy with God as a relation of universal love.

The letters of Paul develop the idea of life in the Spirit. “We all reflect as in a mirror the splendor of the Lord; thus we are transfigured into his likeness, from splendor to splendor: such is the influence of the Lord who is Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). The Spirit’s principal gift, in the understanding of Paul, consists in gnōsis, that insight into the “mystery of Christ” that enables the believer to understand the scriptures in a deeper, “revealed” sense. This insight into the hidden meaning of the scriptures led to the Alexandrian interpretation of the term mystical discussed earlier. Yet the practice long preceded the term. The entire Letter to the Hebrews consists of an allegorical reading of the Yom Kippur sacrifice as foreshadowing Christ’s definitive sacrifice on the cross.

The tenor of early Christian mysticism was determined by the New Testament and by trends in Hellenistic Judaism (especially Philo Judaeus’s scriptural theology and the late Judaic meaning of gnōsis). A third factor, usually referred to as Neoplatonism, must be added. Yet that movement, though influential in the development of Christian spirituality, may be too restricted an account of its beginnings; Origen (and, to some extent, even Clement) had already developed a mystical theology of the image before Plotinus. It might be more accurate, then, to look to the entire philosophically Platonic, religiously syncretic, and generally Gnostic culture of Alexandria at the end of the second century. In that climate Ammonius Saccas himself, Origen’s and Plotinus’s common master, grew up and taught. But soon Plotinus’s philosophy was to provide much of the ideological apparatus for a Christian theology of the image. Though Plotinus’s thought leaves no doubts about its Platonic origins, it was profoundly affected by such religious influences as the mystery religions, Gnosticism, Philo’s Judaism, and that syncretism of Hellenistic currents and older Egyptian traditions that is usually referred to as Hermetism. Plotinus’s philosophy as exposed in his nine treatises (the Enneads) is often presented as an emanational process that originates in an undetermined Absolute (the One), becomes intelligible in a realm of mind (the nous), and arrives at its final hypostasis in a world soul (the psychê) shared by all individual souls. Such a presentation misses Plotinus’s central insight and the source of its mystical fertility, namely, the immanence of the One in all the lower hypostases. The mystical-intellectual process for him consists in a return to that ever-present One, beyond the vision of the intelligible forms. A crucial role in this process is played by the notion of image, so important in early Christian mysticism. For Plotinus each emanation reflects the previous one as an image. Even the world, though steeped in opaque matter that allows no further emanations, reflects the soul and the mind. Clearly, in this context being an image is more than being an external copy. It implies that each sphere of reality refers in its very essence to a higher one. As such, the image presents, rather than represents. Man alone is able to read his world and his own soul as an appeal to turn inward to mind and, beyond mind, to the One. By a process of asceticism and contemplation, he may overcome the dispersion of time and of all that separates him from the total simplicity (the One) of his inner core. The Plotinian union with the One has been called ecstatic, but the term in-static might be more appropriate for describing a movement of inwardization and simplification. Plotinus’s spiritual theology strikes us as decidedly cool: no sensuous feeling, no “visions,” and no emotion. Yet more than any other master (outside the scriptures) did this last of the great pagan philosophers influence subsequent Christian mysticism.

The first attempt at a systematic theology of the mystical life in Christ was written by Plotinus’s fellow Alexandrian and disciple, Origen. In his Twenty-seventh Homily on Numbers Origen compares spiritual life to the Jews’ exodus through the desert of Egypt. Having withdrawn from the pagan idols of vice, the soul crosses the Red Sea in a new baptism of conversion. She passes next through the bitter waters of temptation and the distorted visions of utopia until, fully purified and illuminated, she reaches Terah, the place of union with God. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Origen initiated a long tradition of mystical interpretations that see in the erotic biblical poem just such a divine union. His commentary also presents the first developed theology...
of the image: the soul is an image of God because she houses the primal image of God that is the divine Word. Even as that word is an image of the Father through its presence to him, the soul is an image through the word’s presence in her, that is, through her (at least partial) identity with it. The entire mystical process thus comes to consist in a conversion to the image, that is, to ever greater identity with the indwelling Word. The emphasis on the ontological character of the image of God in man (as opposed to the external copy) persists throughout the entire Christian tradition and holds the secret of its amazing mystical power.

The privileged place of love distinguishes Origen’s theology from Neoplatonic philosophy. This emphasis on love becomes even more pronounced in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, the fourth-century Cappadocian bishop. Under Neoplatonic influence Gregory describes the mystical life as a process of gnōsis initiated by a divine eros, which results in the fulfillment of the soul’s natural desire for union with the God of whom she bears the image. Though akin to God from the beginning, the soul’s mystical ascent is a slow and painful process that ends in a dark unknowing—the mystical night of love.

This theology of darkness, or “negative theology,” would be developed to its extreme limits by a mysterious, Greek-writing Syrian of the sixth century who presented himself as the Dionysius whom Paul converted on the Areopagus. His enormous (though in the West not immediate) impact steered the theology of the image in a wholly new direction. Neoplatonic as no Christian theologian had ever dared to be, he identified God with the nameless One. Even the divine relations of the Trinity were ultimate only in the order of manifestation. Beyond all names and even beyond being itself lies the dark reality of a divine superessence. The mystical ascent moves toward that nameless unity. Throughout this thoroughgoing negation, Dionysius preserves the core of the image theology, for precisely the primordial union of the soul with God serves as the moving principle of the mystical ascent. Through constant negation the soul overcomes the created world, which prevents the mind from reaching its ultimate destiny. Yet Dionysius’s Mystical Theology is ecstatic rather than introspective in its concept: the soul can achieve her vocation of union with God only by losing herself in the recesses of the divine superessence. In this respect it differs from the Western mysticism that it so deeply influenced.

Augustine (354–430), the towering figure who stands at the beginning of all Western theology (also, and especially, spiritual theology), described the divine image rather in psychological terms. God remains present to the soul as both origin and supreme goal. She is attracted by him and bears his image. But, unlike its definition by the Greek Fathers, that image remains for Augustine mostly the external effect of a divine cause. Augustine’s treatise On the Trinity abounds with speculations on the soul’s similarity to the Trinity, such as her constituting one mind out of the three faculties of intellect, will, and memory. They would amount to no more than superficial analogies were it not that God’s presence in that same inner realm invites the soul to turn inward and convert the static resemblance into an ecstatic union. “Now this Trinity of the mind is God’s image, not because the mind resembles, understands and loves itself [the superficial analogy], but because it has the power also to remember, understand and love its Maker” (On the Trinity 14.12.15). In actualizing the divine potential of its external resemblance, in allowing it to be directed to its archetype, the soul is gradually united with God. While the Greeks assert the initial identity, Augustine starts from a creator-creature analogy, which the divine attraction and man’s following of it transform into an identity.

Unfortunately, this rich theology of identity remained largely unexplored by Augustine’s spiritual followers until, in the twelfth century, the Cistercians and the Benedictines of Saint Victor Abbey combined it with the mystical theology of the Greeks. This fertile synthesis of Augustinian psychology with Greek spiritual ontology culminated in the two movements of Rhineland mysticism and Flemish spirituality. We shall here consider only their chief representatives: Eckhart and Ruusbroec.

Johannes Eckhart, possibly the most powerful mystical theologian of the Christian Middle Ages, synthesized the Greek and Augustinian theories of the image with a daring negative theology in one grandiose system. His mystical vision became the basis of an entire theology and, indeed, of a metaphysics of being. He was a subtle dialectician in his systematic Latin works and a paradoxical preacher in his vernacular sermons, so that his spiritual identity remains even today a subject of controversy. Few have succeeded in harmonizing the two parts of his prodigious output. Yet they do belong together. For Eckhart’s endeavor was precisely to present the mystical union not as a privilege of the few but as the very vocation and ultimate realization of humanity. The mystical theory of the divine image holds the key to his theological ontology.

God is Being, and being in the strict sense is only God. With this bold principle, Eckhart reinterprets a Thomist tradition that “analogously” attributed being to God and finite existence. For Eckhart, the creature qua creatura creature does not exist. Whatever being it possesses is not its own, but remains God’s property. Both its limited essence (what determines it as this being rather than that) and its contingent existence (that it happens to be) are no more than the negative limits of its capacity to receive God’s own being. “Every creature,” Eckhart wrote, “radically and positively possesses Being, life and wisdom from and in God, and not in itself.” Hence, God is totally immanent in the creature as its very being, while totally transcending it as the only being. By this presence God is totally like the creature; yet, lacking any of its determinations, he is totally unlike it. On these productive antinomies Eckhart builds his densely rich concept of image. The entire content of the createurally image of God consists...
in the divine presence, while the fact that the creature’s limitation reduces this identity to a likeness (hence including difference) accounts for the image’s total directedness toward the divine exemplar: “Every image has two properties. One is that it takes its Being immediately from that of which it is the image. . . . The second property of the image is to be observed in the image’s likeness. And here especially note two things; an image is, firstly, not of itself and (secondly) not for itself” (Meister Eckhart, trans. Maurice O. Walshe, London, 1979, vol. 1, pp. 124–125).

Since the finite subject conveys nothing positive to the image but rather obscures it by its limitations, only God’s unlimited self-expression in his eternal Word (the Son) is his perfect image. The quality of the creature’s image depends on the presence of that divine image in it, or, more correctly, on the degree of its own immanence in that archetype. The mind—specifically the spiritual mind—fully actualizes that immanence. Eckhart appears to join earlier (Greek) theologians who had defined the image through the presence of God’s Word in the soul. But he gives it a more radical turn by declaring that divine Word the soul’s very being. Rather than presence, Eckhart speaks of identity. Of course, as a creature the soul totally differs from the divine image. But its created nature contains God’s own, uncreated being. In that being the soul coincides with God. “There is something in the soul that is so near akin to God that it is one and not united [to him]. . . . If man were wholly thus, he would be wholly uncreated and uncreatable” (ibid., vol. 2, p. 85).

The soul’s being is generated in an eternal now with (indeed, within) the divine Word: “The Father bears his Son in eternity like himself. ‘The Word was with God, and God was the Word’ (Jn 1:1): the same in the same nature. I say more: He has borne him in my soul. Not only is she with him and he equally with her, but he is in her: the Father in eternity, and no differently” (ibid., p. 135). The mystical process then consists in a person’s becoming conscious of his divine being. But this is far more than a cognitive process. It demands that utmost poverty and total detachment whereby he gives up his entire created existence “as he was when he was not [that is, before his birth]” (ibid., p. 271). Indeed, the spiritual soul no longer prepares a “place” for God, for “God is himself the place where He works.” Only through that ultimate detachment, that waylessness in which there are neither names nor methods, does the soul come to resemble the image that she was in God “and between which and God there was no distinction before God created.”

Farther than Eckhart the mysticism of the image could not go. Yet the identity that he so powerfully affirmed excluded any positive consideration of difference. Must the creature’s difference remain without any spiritual significance? Was this no more than the circle of nothingness drawn around God’s own being? Were even the trinitarian distinctions in God destined to be surpassed in a permanent rest in nameless unity? These were the questions that confronted later mystics of the Rhineland and the Low Countries. No one answered them with more balance and deeper insight than Jan van Ruusbroec (1293–1381), a Brussels parish priest and later a hermit in the wooded solitude of Groenendael. Unlike Eckhart’s theology, Ruusbroec’s majestic summa of Christian life in the spirit did not conclude in a darkness beyond distinction. For Ruusbroec also the soul must move into God’s nameless unity. But this divine desert is not a terminal resting ground. God’s own being, as the mystery of the Trinity discloses, is dynamic, never at rest nor permanently withdrawn into its own darkness. Its silence is pregnant with God’s revelatory Word. And so the contemplative, after having reached the divine silence, moves into God’s self-revelation in the image of the Son and, with the Son, out into the otherness of creation. For Ruusbroec also, God dwells in darkness. But “in this darkness there shines and is born an incomprehensible light, which is the Son of God, in whom we behold eternal life; and in this light one becomes seeing” (Spiritual Espousals 3.1). Ruusbroec postulated no unity beyond the Trinity. The One is the Father—that is, a fertile unity, a silence that must speak, a darkness that yields light. Through its union with God the soul partakes in the movements within God. Once arrived in the empty desert of the Godhead, she is carried by the divine dynamism and moves with the Father into his divine image and into the multiplicity of creation. At that point the creatures appear both in their divine foundation within the image and also in their divinely constituted otherness. Not only their divine core but also their limited creaturehood are to be respected and cherished. Unlike Eckhart, Ruusbroec included in his mysticism of the image a mysticism of creation. Finitude itself, however different, is never separate from the divine image. Thus his theory of contemplation culminates in the ideal of the “common life,” a rhythmic balance between withdrawing into interior life and flowing out into charitable practice.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages the mysticism of the image receded in favor of the more personal but also more private mysticism of love. Yet the theology of the image never died. It survived in the theological theories of uncreated grace (e.g., Lessius, De la Taille, Rahner), in patristic studies (Petravius, de Regnon), and in Cistercian spirituality. Today it enjoys a genuine revival, as the success of Thomas Merton’s work witnesses.

**Mysticism of Love: Modern Christian Mysticism and Sufism.** All Western religions have produced mystics of love. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have known each its own kind of spiritual eros. In singling out love as characteristic of some movements in particular, I restrict the term to those in which personal love of God dominated—namely, Sufism and the spiritual movements that gradually came to prevail in Western Christendom since the late Middle Ages. Chronologically, Sufism precedes Christian love mysticism. Yet I shall discuss the latter first in order to maintain the continuity with the earlier type of Christian spirituality.

**Christianity.** Some time during the twelfth century, Christian piety underwent a basic change: its approach to
God became more human and affective. Love had, of course, always been an essential ingredient. But now it became the whole thing. At first it appeared in conjunction with the newly recovered trinitarian mysticism. The same Cistercians who reintroduced the Greek theology of the image to the West also initiated love mysticism. Thus in William of Saint-Thierry’s influential works, the two currents of contemplation and affection, of image-identity and love-likeness appear simultaneously, occasionally in the same sentence. “When the object of thought is God and the will reaches the stage at which it becomes love, the Holy Spirit at once infuses Himself by way of love. . . . The understanding of the one thinking becomes the contemplation of one loving” (Golden Epistle 249–250). The duality persisted for centuries. Ruusbroec brought both trends to a powerful synthesis in his Spiritual Marriage, a work that incorporates Greek trinitarian mysticism in the scheme of a treatise on spiritual love by subordinating the more extrinsic assimilation through love to the more intrinsic inhabitation of God in the soul.

The emphasis on love is part of a more general tendency to involve the entire personality in the religious act. The new spiritual humanism (partly influenced by the Spanish Islamic culture) would revive interest in the psychological theory of Augustine and pay an unprecedented spiritual attention to the created world. The first great name to emerge was Bernard of Clairvaux. No Christian mystic has ever surpassed “the mellifluous doctor,” as he is called, in the eloquent praise of spiritual love. Still, in many ways he remained a transitional figure: his Christocentric love is directed at the divine person of the Word, rather than at the human nature of the Christ, focus of later medieval spirituality. But the tradition he established clearly differs from that of image mysticism. In a famous sermon on the Song of Songs, he defines the unity of the spirit with God as resulting rather “from a concurrence of wills than from a union of essences.” Here likeness firmly replaces image-identity. Does it mean that Bernard accepts only an external union with God? Not really, for in his treatise On Loving God he describes the highest degree of love as the condition of a drop of water disappearing in a quantity of wine. Experience itself becomes transformed. “To love yourself as if you no longer existed, to cease completely to experience yourself, to reduce yourself to nothing, is not a human sentiment but a divine experience” (10.27). Nevertheless, the transient quality of ecstatic love, its submission to the psychic rhythm of the soul, its affinity with human eros, all herald the advent of a different type of spirituality.

The humanization of man’s relation to God transforms man’s attitude toward a creation in which God now comes to be more intimately present. An interpersonal, and hence more creaturely, relation to God is ready to accept each creature on its own terms and for its own sake. In this respect its attitude differs essentially from the image mysticism that holds the creature worthy of spiritual love only in its divine core, where it remains rooted in God. The love mystic also cherishes its finite, imperfect being, which, resulting from a divine act of creation, is endowed with a sacred quality of its own. The mystery of the divine incarnation here attains a more universal level of meaning, as if Christians suddenly understood how much the creation must matter to a God who himself has become flesh. The new awareness gave rise to the powerful humanism that since the thirteenth century has characterized Western Christendom. Francis of Assisi taught his contemporaries to regard nature with a different eye and to love the deformed and the sick as much as the hale and the sound. His attitude found a uniquely poetic expression in the Canticle of Brother Sun and in Jacopone da Todi’s lyricism. But the discovery of God’s presence in creation was capable of systematic treatment, as one of Francis’s followers, Bonaventure, demonstrated in The Journey of the Mind to God. By now the Christocentric orientation of the new spirituality had moved to Christ’s humanity—the perfect creature so intimately united to God that loving could never detach the soul from loving God himself. Soon that humanity came to fulfill an essential mediating function in spiritual life. Teresa of Ávila would accuse herself of having neglected this link with the divine in her early years.

As the incarnational consciousness spread to all creation, divine transcendence ceased to imply a negation of the created world. Thenceforth God’s presence has been found within rather than beyond creation. Precisely this immanentization of the divine accounts for the earthly quality of Christian love mysticism and for its followers’ deep involvement with human cares and worldly concerns. Catherine of Siena, Ignatius of Loyola, and Teresa of Ávila, among many others, led extremely active lives and deeply influenced the culture of their age. This orientation toward the creature created new spiritual problems. For it requires uncommon virtue not to become attached to a creature one loves for its own sake. By no coincidence did most love mystics become “saints,” that is, persons who, by heroic virtue, learned to love without possessiveness. All mysticism demands mental purity. But for those whose love of God passes through creation, the purifying process proves especially exacting. Besides renouncing the superfluous, an essential condition of spiritual growth, mystics so deeply involved with creation have to move against the grain of their natural inclination in order to establish the precarious balance of love and detachment. What al-Ghazālī writes about Sūfī mortification is a task for all love mystics: “The uprooting from the soul of all violent passions, the extirpation from it of vicious desires and evil qualities so that the heart may become detached from all that is not God.” But when the mystical state proper begins, spiritual men and women tend to stop or reduce this active mortification.

Significantly, John of the Cross, one of the most articulate mystics of love, describes the entire spiritual process as an increasing purification, a “night” that starts with the senses, spreads to the understanding, and concludes in the total darkness of union with God. Most mystics would, per-
haps more appropriately, refer to the second and third stages as illumination and union. But they equally emphasize the increased need for detachment. Followers of this tradition tend to equate the beginning of the mystical life with a state of passive prayer that excludes the ability to meditate. John of the Cross distinguishes the night of the senses, common to all who enter the mystical life, from the “horrible and awful” passive purgation of the spirit in the advanced. Not all agree with this description, but all stress the need for total passivity with respect to the divine operation. An entire school has taken what Teresa of Ávila calls the prayer of “quiet” to be the goal of spiritual life itself. As practiced by Miguel de Molinos (1628–1696) and Jeanne Guyon (1648–1717), this controversial concept drew upon itself a number of official condemnations. The debate began with the question whether the spiritual person should remain passive with regard to temptations, especially carnal temptations. The quietist attitude, the adversaries claimed, led to gross immorality—as in the case of Molinos. But the discussion then moved toward the more central issue of whether quiet is acquired or infused. The quietists failed to make adequate distinctions and thereby appeared to present mystical graces available to all, while allowing the pious to neglect the pursuit of common virtue and the practice of good works. Finally, with the French bishop Fénelon, both pupil and director of Jeanne Guyon, the dispute turned to the problem of “pure love”: only the love that loves God exclusively because of himself is worthy of a spiritual person. Once the mystic has attained this state of pure love, he or she abandons the methodic pursuit of virtue and, eventually, all control over the spiritual process. None of the charges against the quietists was ever fully substantiated. Yet the entire controversy reveals how sensitive the issue of active or passive quiet had become. The question whether the “higher states of prayer” are available to all could hardly have been raised in an earlier, less psychological age.

The “illumination” that normally follows the period of purification should not be thought of as a succession of new insights. John of the Cross refers to it as a darkness of the understanding caused by the excessive light of faith (Ascent of Mount Carmel 3.3.1). Still, the light is often reflected in unusual cognitive states—hallucinatory perceptions, intensively imagined visions or voices, nonrepresentational intuitions—which in unpredictable ways testify to the profound transformation the mind undergoes in the higher stages of mysticism. They are often hard to interpret, and spiritual masters have traditionally adopted a cautious attitude toward them. Yet we should not place them all on an equal footing. John of the Cross distinguishes concrete visions (either sensational or imaginary) from so-called spiritual apprehensions. While he dismisses the former as a breeding ground of moral illusions, among the latter he finds the most direct expressions of God’s experienced presence. John equates such “intellectual” (nonrepresentational) visions (ibid., 2.24) with revelations of God’s being “in the naked understanding” of the soul that has attained the state of union—for they are themselves that union” (ibid., 2.26)—and with the spiritual “feelings” that emerge “in the substance of the soul” (ibid., 2.32). In such states illumination has in fact turned into union.

It is in terms of union that Teresa of Ávila discusses the matter in her Interior Mansions (Fifth and Sixth Mansions). What characterizes this final stage of love mysticism—whether defined in cognitive or in affective terms—is its permanence. Hence Teresa refers to it as a “marriage.” Here the distinction between the “likeness” of love mysticism and the “identity” of image mysticism ceases to exist—even in the terminology. In the highest love union, intentional intermediacy yields to substantial presence. The trend from likeness to unity appears even more clearly in Sūfī mysticism.

Sufism. With its stern emphasis on law and orthodoxy, Islam hardly seems to present a fertile soil for intensive personal experience of the love of God. Yet Islam assumes the entire social system, sharī‘ab (the way), into a privileged communal relation with God. Moreover, the Qur‘ān states that, next to the ordinary believers who serve their creator according to the precepts of the law, there are some to whom God communicates his essential mystery inwardly in peace of the soul and friendship with God (Qur‘ān 17:27). Here the Prophet allows for the possibility of a realm of personal religion. The possibility was soon actualized and eventually flowered into unparalleled mystical beauty. Even the unique authority of the Qur‘ān has in an indirect way contributed to Islam’s mystical wealth, for precisely because it remains the supreme norm of its interpretation, pious readers may find in it whatever meaning divinely inspired insight (istinbāt) privately reveals to them. Only when personal interpretation openly clashes with established doctrine (especially its rigorous monotheism) could religious authorities interfere. Thus, paradoxically, Islam, the “religion of the book,” allows greater freedom of interpretation than religions that place less emphasis on the written word. Though early Muslim mysticism stayed in close connection with the Islamic community, conflicts arose. Already at the time of Hasan al-Âsri (d. 728), the patriarch of Islamic mysticism, Sunnī traditionalists objected to his attempt to go beyond the letter of law and doctrine. Thus began the opposition between “internal” and “external” religion that, from the tenth century on, led to increasingly severe confrontations. Nevertheless, a deep personal piety remained an essential element of the Islam that substantially contributed to rendering it a world religion.

Most Islamic mysticism could be characterized as love mysticism. Many texts show an amazing similarity in spirit and even expression with later Christian mysticism. Certain passages in the poetry of Râbi‘ah al-‘Adawiyyah (d. 801) appear to throw a bridge across the centuries to Teresa of Ávila, while John of the Cross’s Dark Night echoes some of Shaykh al-Junayd’s poems. The similarity becomes somewhat intelligible through the established influence of Syrian monasticism (especially the hesychastic movement) upon the early
Şūfīs, and the strong Muslim impact upon Spanish culture as a whole and upon its mystics in particular. The resemblance has often tempted Western scholars to interpret Şūfī writings by means of Christian concepts. Yet the difference is substantial and appears with increasing clarity in some later Şūfī developments toward monism. Here love no longer represents the highest union with God but is merely a way station on the road to a more total identity. Still, early Şūfīs adopted models of asceticism that had closer ties with the spirituality of the Desert Fathers than with the worldly luxury of the expanding Muslim empire. Even the wool dress (ṣIFF) from which they probably derived their name may well have had a Christian symbolic meaning. At any rate, the passive asceticism of the early Şūfīs stood in sharp contrast with the outgoing, active attitude of the Prophet’s early followers. Not until the eighth century, however, did the emphasis shift from an asceticism inspired by a fear of judgment to a mysticism of love for which fasting and poverty served as means to a higher end.

The most attractive figure in this early love mysticism is certainly the former slave Râbi’ah. To her one owes some of the purest mystical love poetry of all time, such as her famous prayer at night: “Oh, my Lord, the stars are shining and the eyes of men are closed, and kings have shut their doors, and every lover is alone with his beloved, and here am I alone with Thee” (Margaret Smith, Râbi’ a the Mystic, Cambridge, 1928, p. 22). Her “pure” love, even as the love of later mystics possessing that quality, accepts the logic of all living. In a famous line from one of her poems: “If I worship Thee from fear of hell, burn me in hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of paradise, exclude me from paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then do not withhold from me Thine eternal loveliness.” Only repentance inspired by sorrow for having offended the Beloved is worthy of the spiritual person. For all its erotic exuberance, this and similar love mysticism remained doctrinally “sober.” It developed elaborate schemes of the stages (maqāmāt) of the love of God. Eventually it used Neoplatonic categories, which strengthened it theoretically but may have favored its later development toward monism.

In Shaykh al-Junayd (d. 910), Şūfī mystical theology reached full maturity as well as a systematic unity. Though this religious leader went far in adopting Plotinus’s theory, his orthodoxy was never questioned. Louis Massignon, the famous student of Islamic mysticism, describes al-Junayd as “clever, prudent and timid, conscious of the danger of heterodoxy which is peculiar to mysticism,” and as a wise spiritual director “who suspends his judgment and defers the question so long as experience does not seem to him decisive and crucial” (Massignon, 1954, p. 275). Still, his theory of emanation from a preexistence in God to a separate existence in time daringly reinterpretated the creation doctrine. In Kitâb al-Fânâ he writes, “He annihilated me [in my divine preexistence] in creating me even as, in the beginning, He created me [in my separate existence in time] when I was not,” and “He was the source of their existence, encompassing them, calling them to witness when still their eternal life was utterly negated, a state in which they were from all pre-eternity” (Zaehner, 1957, pp. 165–166).

By following this principle of emanation to its ultimate consequences al-Junayd’s disciple, al-Hallâj, ended up with the allegedly monist theory for which he was executed in the year 922. With al-Hallâj begins a wholly new phase in Şūfī mysticism that continued to use the language of love, but frequently in a more symbolic sense than had the earlier Şūfîs. Meanwhile it remains very doubtful whether al-Hallâj, despite his strong expressions, ever considered himself fully identical with God. His claim of divinization refers to a passive, transient state—not to a permanent self-deification. Such ecstatic exclamations as “I am the Truth,” by no means unique to him, express a temporary, divinely granted awareness of identity with God. He probably remained a love mystic always longing for a union that was only occasionally attained, as in the following oft-quoted verses: “Between me and Thee lingers an ‘it is I’ that torments me. Ah, of Thy grace, take this ‘I’ from between us.” Even the supreme expression of union still indicates a remnant of duality. “I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I. We are two Spirits dwelling in one body” (Nicholson, 1939, p. 218). Elsewhere al-Hallâj firmly upholds God’s transcendence with respect to his creation, as in the words quoted by al-Qushayrî: “He has bound the whole to contingency, for transcendence is His own. . . . He remains far from the states of his creation, in Him there is no mingling with His creation, His act permits of no amendment, He is withdrawn from them by His transcendence as they are withdrawn from Him in their contingency” (Louis Massignon, La passion d’al Hoseyn-ibn-Mansûr al Hallâj, Paris, 1922, p. 638).

After al-Hallâj, Şūfī piety reached a temporary truce with orthodox learning in al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111), the greatest of the theologians. A learned teacher of law and doctrine, he abandoned his chair to spend eleven years as a wandering Şūfî, and at the end of his life retired to a Şūfî monastery. Bypassing the antinomian trends that emerged after al-Hallâj, he returned to a more traditional attempt to emphasize experience over the letter of the law. With Ibn al-‘Arabî (d. 1240) the dependence on Neoplatonism (especially the so-called Theology of Aristotle) and, with it, the movement toward monism became more pronounced than ever. He provided the link between Western classical culture and Eastern Islamic mysticism that culminated in Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî. Şūfî mysticism, however much inclined toward monism, never abandoned the language and imagery of love. Ibn al-‘Arabî, with al-Ghazâlî the most philosophical of all Muslim mystics, never ceases to integrate his Neoplatonic vision with the Qur’ân’s dualistic doctrine of man’s relation to God. Still one may doubt whether he did more than adapt the terminology of traditional Şūfî love mysticism to his own kind of monism. The Absolute for him is an indistinct One that, overcome by the desire to be known, projects itself through creative imagination into apparent
otherness. In this projection the relation of the One to the created world, specifically to man, determines that of the Absolute to the differentiated idea of God, the intellectual pole as opposed to the cosmic pole of finite being. All that the creature is, is divine, yet God always exceeds creation. Through man’s mediation the dependent, created world returns to its primordial unity. As the image of God, man imposes that image upon the cosmos and reflects it back to its original. In fulfilling this mediating task he approaches the (Gnostic?) archetype of the Perfect Man, the ideal link that restores the broken oneness. Only the Muslim saint realizes the model in its fullness.

All of this appears far removed from Islamic love mysticism and even from monothelism. But the same Ibn al’Arabī also wrote a collection of sensual love poetry to which he later added a mystical interpretation. Even his “monist” Bezels of Wisdom concludes with a dithyramb on spiritualized sexual love as providing access to the perfect love of God. It states that in woman, man most perfectly contemplates God. “The greatest union is that between man and woman, corresponding as it does to the turning of God toward the one He has created in His own image, to make him His vice regent, so that He might behold Himself in him. . . . If he [man] knew the truth, he would know Whom it is he is enjoying and Who it is Who is the enjoyer; then he would be perfected” (The Bezels of Wisdom, in The Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. John Farina, New York, 1980, pp. 275–276). However thorough Ibn al’Arabī’s doctrinal monism may have been, it never prevented him from attributing to love a primarily role in the practical process of reunification with God. His readers, both inside and outside Islam, have always emphasized this dualism of mystical praxis. This explains his impact both on Spanish Catholic (Ramon Lull, John of the Cross) and on Persian Sufī mystics.

In the refined mystical poetry that constitutes the glory of Persian Sufism, the same drift toward monism is frequently expressed in erotic language. Here the undisputed master is Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273). He himself was influenced by others (such as Shamsi Tabrīzī, and Ibn al’Arabī’s disciple in Konya, al-Qunawī, and especially his strange mentor, al-Tabrīzī), yet sang, with a voice uniquely his own, of the longing for the Beloved.

I am not the kingdom of Iraqain, nor of the country of Khorasan, I am not of this world, nor of the next, nor of Paradise, nor of hell. My place is the Placeless, my trace is the Traceless; ’Tis neither body nor soul, for I belong to the soul of the Beloved. I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one: One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call. He is the first, He is the last, He is the outward, He is the inward. (Dīwān Shamsi Tabrīzī, trans. R. A. Nicholson, Cambridge, 1898, p. 125)

Persian poets after Rūmī expressed a similar synthesis of monist reality and erotic longing, none with more force and evocative power than ’Abd al-Rahmān Ḥāfiz (d. 1492):

Beware! Say not, “He is All Beautiful, And we His lovers? Thou art but the glass, And He the face confronting it, which casts Its image on the mirror. He alone is manifest, and thou in truth art hid, Pure Love, like Beauty, coming but from Him, Reveals itself in thee.” (E. G. Brown, A Year amongst the Persians, Cambridge, 1926, p. 138)

Yet most important for the later mystical life of Islam in Iran were the flourishing Sufī orders of dervishes (one of them founded by Rūmī himself). As they spread, mystical life reached all layers of the population, and the search for mystical trance reached unprecedented proportions. After the fifteenth century, Persian mysticism produced no more great writers. Generally speaking, the trend of the past three centuries in Islam has been more toward communal piety and law than toward personal devotion. Yet in our own day we witness a revival of Sufī movements.

**ESCHATOLOGICAL MYSTICISM: JEWISH MYSTICS.** The section headings in this article do not capture the full meaning of the content. At best they approximate a definition of a dominant trend in a particular, more or less unified mystical school. In the case of Jewish mysticism the description may not even serve this minimal purpose: Judaism has produced forms of mysticism so unlike any other and so variant among themselves that no common characteristic marks them all. At most we can say that they “commune” with one another, not that they share an identical spirit. Gershom Scholem wisely embedded this irreducible diversity, reflective of a spiritual Diaspora, in the very title of his authoritative work *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941). The closest he comes to a general characteristic is the point at which he draws attention to the persistent presence of eschatological traits in Jewish mysticism: “This eschatological nature of mystical knowledge becomes of paramount importance in the writings of many Jewish mystics, from the anonymous authors of the early He-khaloth tracts to Rabbi Naham of Buzlav” (p. 20). The eschatological element most clearly appears in the earliest trend: the often Gnostically influenced mythical speculation on Ezekiel’s vision of the throne-chariot, the *merkavah*. Mysticism around this theme began in the first centuries of the common era. It consisted of an attempt to ascend to the divine throne beyond the various intermediate spheres (the *heikhalot*). Except for its biblical starting point (first developed in the Ethiopic *Apocalypse of Enoch*), the impact of Gnostic *pleroma* mythology dominates this spiritual “throne world.” But also the typically Hellenistic connection of mysticism and magic appears to have been strong. *Merkavah* mysticism declined after the seventh century, but enjoyed a steady revival in Italy in the ninth and tenth centuries, which, in turn, may have influenced medieval German Hasidism.

Whereas *merkavah* mysticism had been esoteric, Hasidism (from *hassid*, “pious one”) began in the twelfth century as a popular movement closely connected with the *halakhah* (law). The early development has been fixed in the *Sefer Hasidim* (Book of the Pious), which contains the spiritual
testaments of the prolific Yehudah the Pious and of two other early writers. The eschatological element, present from the beginning, gradually became more pronounced. Yet various other elements appear as well, among them an almost monastic emphasis on the religious virtues of simplicity, humility, and indifference. While *merkavah* mysticism attained its goal by contemplation, Hasidim did so primarily by prayer and spiritual practice. To pure transcendence it opposes the intensive awareness of an omnipresent creator accessible to the *Hasid* even in his daily activities. Finally, while *merkavah* mysticism displays Gnostic traits, Hasidic “theology” shows a resemblance to Neoplatonism even in its Greek Christian development. God’s glory (kavod) is distinct from God’s being as a first manifestation of his presence (shekhinah), which mediates between this hidden essence and the fully manifest creation. The Hasidim indulged in elaborate speculation about the inner and outer glory of God, and about the kingdom of his created yet hidden presence.

These daring speculations seldom developed into a coherent theology. In that respect they differed from the spiritual movement that, from the fourteenth century on, would largely replace it—Qabbalah. It originated in thirteenth-century Spain as a highly esoteric doctrine, one that its followers were reluctant to divulge. After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain (1492), however, it developed into a theology of exile that spread to large segments of the Jewish world. More speculative than ecstatic (though methods for ecstasy were not absent), it was deeply influenced by Gnostic theologies. Its masterwork, the *Zohar*, by its daring adoption of Gnostic cosmogonies surpassed in this respect even *merkavah* mysticism. In addition, it absorbed the Neoplatonic currents that had swept through the Arabic and Jewish culture of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Spain. Considering the hazardous nature of its thought, its relation to normative tradition and official authority remained, on the whole, remarkably peaceful, if not always amiable. Indeed, the branch that produced the most daring speculation found its expression mostly in traditional rabbinical commentaries on the sacred text. Another trend of Qabbalah, culminating in Avraham ben Shemu’el Abulafia (1240–after 1291), is more prophetic. It combines in a highly original way philosophical theory—much of it derived from Maimonides (Mosheh ben Maimon, 1135/8–1204)—with mystical speculations on the divine names. Abulafia left his native Saragossa early in life to travel all over the Near East and to settle down in Sicily, where he wrote most of his many works. They all aim at assisting the soul to untie the “knots” that bind it to this world of multiplicity and to allow it to return to its original unity (surprisingly named after Aristotle’s Agent Intellect). This union may be attained through contemplation of a sufficiently abstract object, such as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Any combination of letters results in word figures that in some way refer to the sacred tetragrammation of the divine name, *YHVH*. In meditating upon them—somewhat as the yogin uses a mantra—consciousness moves to a higher state of unity that releases man’s prophetic faculty.

Wholly different is the theophysical mysticism that resulted in that unsurpassed masterpiece of mystical speculation, the *Zohar* (Book of Splendor). Its origin remains mysterious, because the anonymous author has carefully covered his tracks (even to the point of writing in Aramaic rather than Hebrew) and attributed his work to earlier authorities. Yet internal criticism suggests that it was written in Spain in the last third of the thirteenth century, probably by one author. The writer, familiar with the philosophies of Maimonides and of Neoplatonism, has, above all, undergone the influence of unknown Gnostic sources. Synthesizing all qabbalistic writings of the century, he attempts to stem the rationalist trend by giving traditional Judaism a hidden mystical interpretation. Thus this highly esoteric work was, in fact, written for the enlightened Jewish intelligentsia of late-fourteenth-century Spain. Central in the *Zohar* doctrine is the theology of the *sefirot*, the ten “regions” into which the divine emanation extends itself. Importantly, the divine *pleroma* of these *sefirot* does not emanate from God: it remains *within* God as his manifest being, in contrast to the “hidden God.” Gershom Scholem writes: “The point to keep in mind is that the *sefirot* are not secondary or intermediary spheres which interpose between God and the universe . . . not steps of a ladder between God and the world, but various planes in the manifestation of the Divinity which proceed from and succeed each other” (Scholem, 1961, pp. 208–209). Here also language fulfills a crucial function: the *sefirot*, the creative names God gives himself, anticipate the faculty of speech in man. The ultimate manifestation consists of God’s simple, immanent presence in the entire creation, the *shekhinah*. In becoming aware of this divine presence, man comes to understand his own deeper self.

Creation takes place *within* God as a transition from the divine *Nothing*, the mathematical point frequently identified with God’s Wisdom (the *hokhmah* of Proverbs). Even evil proceeds from a negative principle in God himself that has become isolated from the rest of the divine organism. Man’s reaction consists in restoring creation to its original union within God.

The idea of an immanent creation was taken one step further by some sixteenth-century mystics of Safad in Palestine, exiled from Spain after the expulsion decree. The new Diaspora gave Qabbalah a distinctly messianic, eschatological aspect that had been less prominent in the *Zohar*. Thus the mystical return to the aboriginal creation now came to be seen as anticipating the messianic era. According to Isaac Luria (1534–1572), the most important mystic of the school, creation originates through a process of self-emptying whereby God withdraws from a mystical space within himself in order to establish the possibility for a reality other than his own omnipresent being. The concept of *tsimtsum* (withdrawal) allows Luria to distinguish the world of creation from the emanations that occur *within* God’s own being and to prevent creation from collapsing into a pantheistic oneness.
The Gnostic idea of the primordial man, adam qadmon, which models God’s manifest being on the human organism, provides a transition between the sphere of the sefiroth and the created world, while, at the same time, explaining the origin of evil. The light of the divine being is refracted through this supreme emanation. The first six sefiroth receive and reflect the divine light radiated by adam qadmon. But the lower six are not powerful enough to retain the light, and it “shatters the vessels” (shevirat ha-kalim). Here evil begins to exist as a separate entity. Through the breaking of the vessels, the forces of evil that were mixed with the divine light become segregated from the good. This purgative event, good in itself, would have allowed the total elimination of evil in the final reintegration of the last sefiarah. But Adam’s fall, once again, reintroduced chaos into the cosmos. The Diaspora symbolizes this general disarray in which the shekhinah itself is sent into exile.

Luria’s mystical theory culminates in his idea of redemption, a redemption, mystically conceived, that coincides with the messianic era. Through prayer, spiritual man plays an active role in restoring the original order of the universe. Mystical piety will recall the shekhinah back to the spiritual plêrōma and prepare the world for the messianic coming. The powerful concept of tikkuq (reintegration) conveyed meaning to the bitter experience of the exile. Yet, combined with messianic expectations, it also created a tense and potentially explosive sense of anticipation. Luria’s mystical theology therefore prepared the terrain for the pseudomessiah and the antinomian movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus the unstable Shabbatei Tsevi (1625–1676) was able (largely through the efforts of his “prophet,” Natan of Gaza) to render himself accepted as the Messiah and even to retain many of his followers when he himself apostatized to Islam. Was this not part of the Messiah’s vocation in a world that had exiled him to the realm of darkness? Large groups of Shabbateans apostatized publicly while secretly preserving their messianic faith—thus repeating voluntarily what Marrano Jews had been compelled to do involuntarily. The exile among the infidels initiated the condition for the final separation of good and evil of the messianic era. At the same time, antinomian behavior inaugurated a reign in which the restrictions of the Law would be abolished and the primordial state of freedom restored.

Qabbalah was not to end in this state of general disintegration. A new Hasidism on the rise in eighteenth-century Poland incorporated much of its mystical piety while rejecting its messianic excesses. It was neither esoteric nor elitist. More emotional than intellectual, it appears more as a revivalist movement than as a theological school. Yet its nonsystematic character has not prevented it from occasionally attaining speculative peaks. It honored the charismatic leader more than the learned rabbi, even though most of its leaders were rabbis and all endeavored to remain within rabbinical orthodoxy. The new Hasidism began with two inspired men: the Besht (Yisra’el ben Eli’ezer, 1700–1760) and his disciple, Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhirich. They, like all their major followers, distinguished themselves more by the striking gesture, the memorable story, than by interpretation of the Torah. It is hard to evaluate the precise “mystical” significance of so popular a movement. Yet the intensive religious experience of its greatest writers leaves no doubt. Here particularly we should restrain ourselves from imposing too narrow limits on the term mystical. Hasidism may be more practical and certainly more social than earlier spiritual movements, but its emphasis upon a joyful spirit and moral living derives from a mystical source.

Jewish mysticism shows an unparalleled variety of forms ranging from deep speculation to purely emotional experience. It consistently appeals to scriptural authority, yet no mystical movement ever strayed further from theological orthodoxy than late messianic Qabbalah. And still for all the variety of its forms and of the external influences to which it was exposed, Jewish mysticism unquestionably possesses a powerful unity of its own. In it the word dominates, and the often tragic experience of the present lives in constant expectation of the future.

SEE ALSO Aesthetics, article on Philosophical Aesthetics; Attention; Consciousness, States of; Esotericism; Psychedelic Drugs; Religious Experience.

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LOUIS DUPRÉ (1987)

MYSTICISM [FURTHER CONSIDER-
ATIONS]. The term mysticism, like the term religion it-
self, is a problematic but indispensable one. Identifying a
broad spectrum of ideas, experiences, and practices across a
diversity of cultures and traditions, it is a generic term rather
than the name for any particular doctrine or mode of life.
The application of appropriate epithets yields terminology
for specific categories of mysticism (theistic mysticism, na-
ture mysticism, and eschatological mysticism) and for dis-
tinct cultural or doctrinal traditions (e.g., Hindu mysticism,
bhakti mysticism, Jewish mysticism, merkavah mysticism).
The term mysticism is also a modern one, serving the pur-
pose of comparative study and theoretical analysis, drawing
into a single arena ideas and practices otherwise isolated
within their own local names and histories.

Inevitably, however, the term remains colored if not hampered by the complexity of its own history: by its origi-
nal Greek etymology (meaning “silence, secrecy, initiation,
 ineffability”), by the early Christian use of the word mystical
to describe the deeper significance of Scripture and liturgy,
by the later Christian definition of mystical theology as loving
union with God by grace, and by popular uses of mysticism
as a label for anything nebulous, esoteric, occult, or supernat-
ural. Although mysticism is now firmly entrenched within the
vocabulary of the modern study of religions, its usage overlaps and to some extent competes with its employment in
specifically theological contexts. Christian or at least theis-
tic mysticism continues to be given prominence even in studies treating the subject at a more generic or theoretical
level (e.g., in much philosophy of religion). Given its persist-
tently Christian associations and the fact that the term has
no real counterpart in other traditions, it is not surprising
that the suitability of mysticism as a neutral, global term has
been questioned by some scholars. Others, more radically,
have challenged the authenticity of the concept itself, view-
ing it as a product of post-Enlightenment universalism.

SCOPE AND DEFINITION OF THE TERM MYSTICISM. Louis
Dupré, in his survey of mysticism in world religions in this
encyclopedia, acknowledges the difficulty of any overall defi-
nition of mysticism, but some sort of definition must be pos-
sible if one is to accept the category of the mystical as coher-
ent and illuminating. By way of a broad definition, one can
say that the term mysticism relates to traditions affirming di-
rect knowledge of or communion with the source or ground
of ultimate reality, as variously experienced in visionary, ec-
static, contemplative, or unitive states of consciousness and
as diversely embodied in doctrines and practices expressing
a unitary and compassionate view of the cosmos and human
existence. The profound transcendental experiences that em-
power mystics and inform their ideas and actions are typical-
ly characterized by paradox: they are personal yet self-
transcending, noetic while in some sense ineffable, striven
after but also recognized as independent of human effort.

To move from a general to a more specific definition is
either to defer to this or that doctrinal interpretation or
historical tradition or to engage creatively in some religiously
or metaphorically inspired synthesis or syncretism. The for-
mer move tends to obscure cross-cultural insights in the in-
terests of protecting the coherence of a particular cultural or
theological tradition; the latter tends to overlook the con-
crete embodiment within a given culture characteristic of
even the most universalistic mysticism. Both moves, though
legitimate, lie beyond the agenda of a strictly scientific study
of religion. Alternatively, one might allow a definition to be-
come so qualified or all-embracing that mysticism becomes
virtually synonymous with spirituality (a much vaguer term
than mysticism) or even with a selective history of religion
in general.

There is no advantage in conflating mysticism, even in its
broadest definition, with other types of or currents within
religion, such as prophecy, theurgy, divination, mediumship,
shamanism, spirit possession, occultism, spiritualism, or
charismatic enthusiasm. It is possible to affirm mysticism as
a distinctive strand within religion while not denying its
multiple connections with other forms of practice and expe-
rience. Nor does the distinctive nature of mystical states
mean that their investigation should be segregated from that
of other traditions of extraordinary experience. In this con-
nection the category of “altered states of consciousness” is a
useful one within which to locate mystical states, whether for
the sake of making connections or for drawing contrasts. The
continuities of the mystical with such varied categories as the
aesthetic, the psychic, or the pathological are certainly closer
than has been acknowledged in the past. Two areas where
mysticism has both illuminated and been illuminated by jux-
taposition with other phenomena are shamanism and the
near-death experience.