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Mysticism and the Mystical
Consciousness Illustrated
From the Great Religions

By

Joseph Politella

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Joseph Politella

Professor of Philosophy

"Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."

I John 3:2-3 RSV

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Foreword

The material in this essay has been brought together to lay the foundation for a larger work concerned with the mysticism of the major world religions. It is a study of the detailed steps by which the inward life unfolds. Its purpose is to show in what way the approach to the spiritual life and union with the Highest Being which is the avowed object of the great religions is grounded in laws which can be discovered and experimented with, and except for the distinct hues cast upon them by the mystics and religious brought up in different cultural traditions, show the same milestones and chart the same territory. In some cases, there is direct and literary connection between the mystics of the east and the west; most often what is to be marvelled at is the "geographical" uniformity of the path they travel and the course they chart, where there has been no connection either in time or in space. It is perhaps striking evidence of the truth so often found in the various scriptures, that the ways to God are many, but the goal is one. "In whatever way men approach me," says the Lord in the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita*, "in that way I love them."

The author desires to acknowledge gratefully, the help of the chairman and the members of the research committee and their aid in making possible the publication of this essay.

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master of the science of Yoga, speaks of "unsound intellection" and the "prediction carried on through words and thoughts" as being hindrances to union with the Self.¹⁰

The Sufis say that the gnostics differ in the degree of the gnosis to which they attain, since the Gnosis is a shoreless sea whose depths cannot be fathomed. Al-Ghazali observes that God is obscured by Seventy Thousand Veils of Light and Darkness, and these veils vary according to the different natures of those veiled from the One Reality. It follows, understandably, that the purpose of the mystic is to set the soul free from its fetters, to polish the mirror, and "so to remove the veils between the soul and God that it may be able to return to its true home."¹¹ Thus does al-Ghazali pray for one of his disciples: "May God decree for you the search for the highest bliss; may He prepare for you the ascent to the highest height; may He anoint your inward vision with the light of Reality; may He empty your inmost self from all save His own Presence."¹² In the body man's vision is obscured and he follows false lights. St. Paul observed that here we see through a glass darkly, but when we have pure vision, we shall see directly and face to face.

How does it happen that man's vision of God is obscured and distorted and veiled? That it is unclear is not only the contention of the Sufi mystics and the Hindu sages, but also of the great Christian saints. By way of trying to make clear the relation of the spiritual consciousness and what an earlier generation spoke of as the "psychic" consciousness, one may fall back on one of the short treatises attributed to Shankaracharya, the South Indian sage, entitled *Vaphya Sudha* or "Definition of One's Own Self."¹³ The treatise refers to the three worlds in which man's activity is carried out as "the ordinary world," "the looking glass world," and "the transcendent world." In the last, man's being and activity are one with the Eternal. The analogy brings to mind St. Paul's division of man into *body*, *soul* and *spirit*, and his description of the consciousness from the terrestrial through the psychical to the spiritual as he explained it in the fifteenth chapter of the first letter to his disciples at Corinth.

The body is sown perishable, it rises imperishable it is sown in weakness, it rises in power; it is sown an animal body (*soma psychikon*), it is raised a spiritual body It is not the spiritual that comes first, but the animal (*to psychikon*), then the spiritual. The first man is a man of earth, of dust; the second man is from heaven. What the man of dust is, that also are those who are of dust; and what the heavenly One is, that also are those who are heavenly. As we have worn the likeness of the man of dust, let us also wear the likeness of the heavenly One.

I Cor. 15:42-49, Weymouth's translation

¹⁰ *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, The Book of the Spiritual Man, translated by Charles Johnston, Bk. I, 8, 9. London, John M. Watkins, 1954.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 149-50.

¹³ See, for example "The Century of Verses", 53 and 60 in *Select Works of Sri Sankaracharya*, trans. by S. Venkataramanan. Madras, G. A. Natesan and Co., n.d.

is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest screens, lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.²²

Between the visions of the greater saints and the apocalypses of the seers on the one hand, and the visitations to the psychics on the other, there are distinct lines of demarcation. Generally speaking, the psychic all too often is enmeshed in a conscious state of his own creation, where he superimposes his own notions on what he sees. The true mystic it is said, sees things more truly as they are. The higher the degree of his attainment, the greater the penetration of his powers and insight. He withdraws himself from the world of matter so that he might see things from a transcendent point of view. His views of things are like those that would come to a two-dimensional creature suddenly raised to a three-dimensional view of things.²³ The eleventh book of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, for example, has been regarded by commentators as the record of a Transfiguration. Here Arjuna, as if "in the spirit" or an attenuated state of consciousness wherein he is lifted out of himself beholds "the gods in Thy body, O divine One! and all the hosts of diverse beings; Brahma the Creator seated on the lotus throne, and all the Seers and Serpents of wisdom." "I was in the spirit" is a frequent phrase in the apocalypses both of Ezekiel and St. John the Divine. In an ecstatic state, St. Paul speaks of having been "caught up into paradise and heard unspeakable words." (II Cor. 12:4) The stability of the mystic, or, more accurately, the degree to which he has mastered the ever-shifting mind-stuff, determines the purity of his vision and the integrity of his experience with those things which transcend the normal consciousness.

²² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, N. Y. Longmans, Green and Co., 1903, p. 388.

²³ See the very suggestive illustrations in Ch. III of P. D. Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum*, "A Key to the Enigmas of the World". N. Y., Alfred A. Knopf, 2nd ed. 1925.

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