

MYSTICAL WORLDS

Spiritual, Social and Secular

AMITA VALMIKI

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In the evolutionary process man has been affected by many things, but not as much of intensity as religion. The banner of religion has been unfurled from the time of making of human civilization; and it has continued till date. The impact of religion and the power it has been exerting since time immemorial can never be underestimated. In this book, the author has examined the contribution made by major World Religions. Similarly, right from the time of the inception of religion, theistic mysticism has played a pivotal role and has been a unique feature of religion as well as human society. So, this research work is a methodology to understand religion and mysticism (emphasizing on theistic mysticism) and ultimately summing it up in justifying it.

The path of devotion (bhakti-marga) that is an intrinsic aspect of theistic mysticism has made undoubtedly a unique contribution for positive developments in human society. So bhakti by itself has been a wonderful, fascinating, ecstatic, interesting, beautiful, moral, inspiring and uplifting. In this book, the importance of the path of knowledge (jnana-marga) and the path of action (karma-marga) in comparison to the path of devotion (bhakti-marga) has been evaluated.

Besides, a parallel has been drawn between Kabir's mysticism to existentialism and the theistic existentialism of Soren Kierkegaard. A critical analysis of mysticism and bhakti-marga is also stated. But the revolutionary feature of mystics all over the world can make us foresee mysticism as the most desirable religious form in present and in future times. Hence, this book is a journey into "mystical worlds" that are spiritual, social and secular.

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In the evolutionary process man has been

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Dedicated to my parents
Bachubhai and Nandakunwar Dodiya
and my nephew
Soumitra Dodiya

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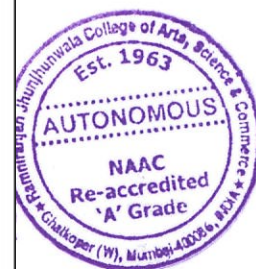
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Foreword

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I am extremely elated to write the foreword for this book. Dr. Amita Valmiki has been engaged in teaching Philosophy for many decades. She has a great passion towards mysticism and spiritual philosophy. To find meaning of life in philosophical discourses has been her forte.

Mysticism is also close to my heart. We believe that there is something divine, mystical, magical, marvellous and unexplainable in the universe that is listening, responding and connecting to each of us. Friedrich Nietzsche says, "Mystical explanations are thought to be deep; the truth is that they are not even shallow." Mystical power has a whole different flavor to it. It's much wilder at times, poignant sometime and fascinating most of the time. It involves more of the emotions and passions of human mind and soul.

This book is her thesis in published form. Her chapters on the themes like human being, religion, society and mysticism are well-analyzed and assimilated. Studies on religion are equally enthralling to any serious seeker in philosophy. Her engagement with theistic existentialist like Soren Kierkegaard is very intriguing. The impact of religion and the power it has been exercising since time immemorial can never be fathomed. In her attempt to study both religion and mysticism she has stated in brief the contributions made by major world religions. She finds it evident that mystical aspect of religion in fact is the root of all religious expansions leading to meaningful discourses. She opines that theistic mysticism

has played a pivotal role and has been a unique feature of religions and of human society. Today, we may find a different story altogether. As Colton Lacon says so aptly, "Men will wrangle for religion, write for it, fight for it, die for it; anything but live for it." Very few look at religion as love of god, as good life and as a scaffolding support.

It is observed that a mystic lives from his first-hand experience. It is direct, personal, intuitive and divine. It also implies that mystical experiences do not necessarily give new ideas to the mind; rather, they transform what one believes into what one knows, translating abstract concepts, such as divine love, into vivid, personal, realities. Hence understanding the lives and works of mystics is very important, Valmiki observes, "The path of devotion (bhakti-marga) that is an intrinsic aspect of theistic mysticism has made undoubtedly a unique contribution for positive developments in human society. So bhakti seems to be non-dubious as it is based completely on the principle of simplicity." Theistic mysticism or just mysticism has been accepted by almost all religions of the world. The works of the mystics in the form of poems, songs and verses are fascinating to one and all. Mystics all over the world have moved and worked directly or indirectly towards a healthy and peaceful society. This book has also involved in the critical analysis of bhakti in its traditional sense with mysticism. Today, we find the revolutionary nature of mystics seen in their compositions enhance a very promising and desirable religious form to mankind for tomorrow. It shall be secular and spiritual.

This book shall certainly be a great source of inspiration to students, research scholars and seekers of wisdom. I am sure it shall bring joy and delight to every reader. Just as a candle cannot burn sans fire, we humans cannot live without a spiritual life.

Dr. Uma Maheshwari Shankar

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Preface


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“I searched for God for years and years and I could not find him. Then I dropped the whole idea and I became still and loving. Now I know the way it is not in formalities, but in an informal friendliness with the existence.”

(Kabir, *The Times of India*, April 11, 2000)

Kabir epitomizes ‘religion’ in the aforementioned quote. One does not become religious by objectifying deities or through rituals. Religion is a mystical path. Swami Vivekānanda, ‘the man with vision for Universal Religion’ (*What Religion Is: In the Words of Swami Vivekānanda*, Swami Vidyatmananda, ed., 1978) explains that each soul has a capacity to be divine; but to reach that state one has to control one’s inner and outer nature. And there are various ways to reach this state, by prayer or worship or yoga or by philosophy. One finds one’s comfort zone, acts and becomes free. Hence, any kind of institutionalized form within religion is but secondary.

Perhaps I would define religion in the same manner as stated above. Religion is not a personal property belonging to a group of individuals or a private institution run by trustees. It is an intangible element, even like air that does not ‘belong’ to any one group or individual, but is vital for survival. Therefore, if I were asked to define religion, I will claim that it is as natural a process as other basic necessities, such as food, clothing and shelter. It is a basic human instinct to

'believe', believe in something that is subtle, intangible, existential, in the feeling of 'ONENESS' with the whole of the universe. It is the most beautiful, elegant, graceful and aesthetic way of expressing awe, reverence and respect to that 'ONE' being that the body, mind and soul aspire to attain. Therefore, everything dissolves into that ONENESS that is so secular in nature. Prayer, worship, rituals, ceremonies, art and architecture are nothing but creative expressions of human beings to show their love for the ultimate. This cannot be the dividing force, but a unifying activity with a touch of variety, as expressed in different religions of the world.

From time immemorial, people have tried to define religion; some of them literal, others social; some have tried from metaphysical point of view, others with philosophical discourse, and some others in a spiritual way. They have tried in their own way that is absolutely precise from the angle they have opted for. In a very broad general sense religion may be defined as the bringing together of God and the human being. Literally, therefore, religion comes from the words – 're' and 'ligare' – which means "to bring together". Hence, it is a binding together of the finite with the infinite. Religion is concerned with experiences regarded as of meaningful supreme and a devotional stance towards the power that sustains such meaning. A religious person believes in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent 'Being'. She or he also believes in a personal God who can be appealed to through prayers. Since the vistas of religion are so wide, it is a very challenging effort to provide a real definition of religion. According to *Oxford Junior Encyclopedia* (Vol. I, 1960), "Religion is a very difficult term to define because it covers such variety of customs, beliefs and ideas, that no single definition would explain all of them."

In the course of civilization we have various primitive religions, magical and occult practices, and quite developed religions of the world such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

From the context of the history of religion, everything related to religion is important; it may be a myth, mythology, rites or rituals, it makes the divine manifest in a manner that is sacred and of the highest philosophical truth.

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In the same way, as I have attempted before to explain religion that it is something very basic to human existence, Mircea Eliade also shares the same spirit, as it seems from the preface of his book *A History of Religious Ideas* (London, 1979). He says, "It is difficult to imagine how the human mind could function without the conviction that there is something irreducibly real in the world; and it is impossible to imagine how consciousness could appear with conferring a meaning on man's impulses and experiences. Consciousness of a real and meaningful world is intimately connected with the discovery of the sacred. Through experience of the sacred, the human mind has perceived the difference between what reveals itself as being real, powerful, rich and meaningful and what lacks these qualities, that is, the chaotic and dangerous flux of things, their fortuitous and senseless appearances and disappearances."

There is indeed lot of reflection being done on 'What is religion?' Well, the popular belief is that religion is the path, a spiritual path that guides us to attain the transcendental level or *pārmārthika satta*. It is, therefore, a pragmatic path. The 'teleological' aspect is very much related to the pragmatic aspect of religion. Religion brings people together by some common sacred practices and rituals. Religion therefore sets the teleos of life in a most profound manner; it teaches human beings how to live life and pursue goals in life. Even the Latin word '*religio*' means something done with over-anxious or scrupulous attention to detail, i.e., the way in which people performed sacrifices in those early days – this meaning is deduced from rational thinking with keeping in mind 'may be'. Religion, therefore, involves belief system, rituals, practices involving prayer, worship, sacrifices etc. It deals with ceremonies, which also include totemism and inhibitions of various kinds. It may involve irrational practices at length. But religions of the world were the first step in providing some solution to the spiritual problems of existence in this universe. For instance, to solve the mystery of physical and metaphysical world, they not only provide rational explanation to human existence, but also understand the philosophy of eschatology, soteriology etc. Religion also involves a lovely side, lovely because that is not only 'creative' but also entertaining, e.g., creation of sculptures, temples, music, paintings, frescoes, symbols, 'thankas', literature etc. So religion

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helps to find one's purpose in life, and also motivates one to find answers to mysterious queries of life and death.

The metaphysical or philosophical concern and explanation for the existence of religion is that it tries to address the haunting issues of life, death, rebirth or survival after death, ethics and bliss. So, if you ask a question as to what does it mean to be religious? The answer in a broad sense would be that it tries to exemplify existence. From the very beginning of civilization, human beings have been searching for truths operating in this universe. Religion is the primeval attempt to provide solution to these puzzling questions. In fact, the sciences or for that matter any discipline of research initially, was been religious in nature.

Obviously, from whatever reflection we have had on religion, there is lot of difficulty in defining something that is so natural a procedure as religion. So 'natural' like our basic human natural procedures and necessities – say breathing, eating, surviving and food, clothing and shelter respectively, religion too is a matter of natural human instinct. Even if one claims to be quite irreligious or atheist, one is definitely prepared to accept something that is very mystical; may be not religion as it seems formally or ritual wise, ceremonially, but the spark, the 'Light' within – this cannot be denied. Therefore, it is very much a matter of personal experience, and defining religion is therefore subjective matter. According to Max Weber (1965), if at all we intend to define religion, the attempt must be done in the conclusion of our research, not in the beginning.

It was a basic question that was haunting me for a long time as to 'what is religion?' and 'what role does mysticism (or bhakti or the path of devotion) play in human life?' My quest to answer these questions led to the research that opened up new avenues and new realms of truths in religion that contributed immensely to the spiritual development of human beings. So, the whole of this research work is a methodology to understand religion and mysticism (emphasizing on theistic mysticism) and ultimately summing it by up justifying it.

In the evolutionary process man has been affected by many things, but not as intensely religion. The banner of religion has been unfurled from the time of the evolution of human civilization, and

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continues till date. The impact of religion and the power it has been exerting since time immemorial can never be underestimated. I have made a humble effort to state in brief the contribution made by major world religions. In the course of my research it was evident that the mystical aspect of religion in fact is the root of all religious developments. Right from the time of the inception of religion, theistic mysticism has played a pivotal role and has been a unique feature of religions and of human society.

The path of devotion (bhakti-marga) that is an intrinsic aspect of theistic mysticism, has undoubtedly made a unique contribution for positive developments in human society. So bhakti seems to be non-dubious as it is based completely on the principle of 'simplicity'. Bhakti is acceptable to all – irrespective of class, caste, gender, race and religious distinctions with its open and broad paradigm, Bhakti is a unique approach, distinguishing it from other religion of the world. Bhakti, as other paths – the path of knowledge (jnana-marga) and the path of action (karma-marga) – does have its fanaticism at certain points, leaving apart this ignorant and ajñānam aspect of the devotees, bhakti by itself has been wonderful, fascinating, ecstatic, interesting, beautiful, moral and ultimately spiritually elevating.

I have also made a humble effort to evaluate the importance of the path of knowledge (jnana-marga) and the path of action (karma-marga) in comparison to the path of devotion (bhakti-marga). For further evaluation I have referred to Bhakti Sutras of Narada and Sandilya Sutram and Gurudev Ranade's elucidation of mysticism.

This further led me to introspect as a student of Philosophy of Religion, that can there be a parallel drawn between mysticism, say for example Sant Kabir's mysticism to existentialism, such as the theistic existentialism of Soren Kierkegaard. There are points of differences but there are striking similarities. Kierkegaard's main interest in philosophy was not theoretical but practical. Therefore, he is a spiritual or existential pragmatist, whose emphasis is more on the will, than intellect. The same parallel is found among the theistic mystics.

Theistic mysticism, in fact, is the most desired religious form in present context. I have made an earnest effort to show that

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mysticism has been accepted by almost all major religions of the world. The mystics have contributed immensely towards making a healthy society. It has been pointed out that 'the path of devotion' has significance for environmental issues, for uplifting the position of women in society and bringing about social reformation. So, the emphasis is on mysticism as a prerequisite for religion, needed in contemporary times.

A critical analysis of mysticism and bhakti-marga is also explored. But the revolutionary feature of mystics all over the world can make us foresee mysticism as the most desirable religious form in future. Thus, it has been shown that religion is related to human beings and society. It carries the spiritual element ultimately needed as a final teleos for human existence; the social metamorphosis for betterment of human life; and finally the egalitarian approach to build a secular society. Hence, this book is a journey into "mystical worlds" that are spiritual, social and secular.

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