

# Mysticism

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I. Mysticism is not a religion, but a particular approach to religion or way of assimilating and cultivating religious consciousness and/or spiritual practice. For this reason, mysticism is a phenomenon found *within* most of the religious traditions of the world. For example, there are Christian and Muslim mystics, even though the institutional manifestations of Christianity and Islam have tended towards a different interpretation of their faith tradition.

## II. Three Basic Characteristics of Mysticism

A. *Mysticism emphasizes the oneness, unity, and, sometimes, even identity between things, especially between God, the world, and the self.* To this extent, it aims at dissolving various kinds of dualities and bringing such dissolution into consciousness. More precisely, it places great emphasis on how our individual consciousness, grounded in attachments and influences of self objects, is or can be united to something greater than it.

R.C. Zaehner has described mysticism as “the realization of a union or unity with or in [or of] something that is enormously, if not intuitively, greater than the empirical self.” (*Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, p. 5).

B. *Mysticism also emphasizes the experiential nature of the knowledge of God (or ultimate reality), as opposed to arriving at knowledge of God by way of the brute data of sense experience, a process of reasoning, or even faith in sacred scriptures.* These other sources are ancillary at best; they may accompany the knowledge of God, but they are insufficient to generate it. Since the reality to be known is one, it must be known through a process that transmits a sense of unity into consciousness. Raw sense data, reasoning, and Scripture often suggest dualities of various sorts, but these must be transcended to know that which is one, especially for the individual to come into a knowledge of his or her own unified relationship with this transcendent reality.

1. When the subject’s inner gaze into his or her own consciousness is the occasion for the emergence of the awareness of God and a person feels united to God as a reality within his or her own consciousness, the mystical experience is called introvertive.

2. When the subject’s outer gaze into the world is the occasion for the emergence of this awareness of God and a person feels united to God as a reality exterior to consciousness, typically in nature, the mystical experience is called extrovertive.

However, it is possible for a person to experience both kinds of mystical consciousness.

C. Inclusivism or Pluralism: *With their emphasis on the oneness of God and the world, mystics are non-sectarian in their approach to religion, even if they are personally adherents of a particular religious tradition.* They tend to see other faith traditions, not as competitors, but as equally valid or efficacious paths for spiritual attainment. In the words of the Sufi mystic Rumi: "The lamps are many, but the light is one." Mystics nonetheless often maintain that one must follow a particular path, the tradition that is best suited for oneself (best suited to one's own dispositions and personality characteristics), while recognizing that other traditions may be best for others.

### III. Monistic and Theistic Mysticism

A. Monistic Mysticism: Mystical experiences, of either the introvertive or extrovertive type, that involve (i) a unity with ultimate reality experienced without any qualities and hence not as a personal being and (ii) a unity that involves a total merging into or identification with God and so the dissolution of one's individuality.

B. Theistic Mysticism: Mystical experiences, of either the introvertive or extrovertive type, that involve (i) a unity with ultimate reality experienced with various qualities, especially of personhood (i.e., a personal God) and (ii) a unity that involves a union short of absolute merging and dissolution of one's individuality.

Roughly, whenever one feels union with a personal God, the experience is theistic; if one experiences a merging into a quality-less, all-pervading force of some sort, the experience is most likely monistic.