

# Mysticism\*

by William Stoddart

Except by those who reject it or are ignorant of it entirely, it is generally understood that mysticism claims to be concerned with “Ultimate Reality.” The relationship in question is mostly taken to be of an “experiential” kind, and the phrase “mystical experience” is often used—the assumed object of the experience being, precisely, “Ultimate Reality,” which is allegedly transcendent and hidden in regard to our ordinary senses. This mystical experience is held to be “incommunicable” and, particularly when doubt is cast on the alleged object of the experience, it is often said to be, in a pejorative sense, purely subjective.

Nevertheless, it would generally be admitted that, as well as “mystical experience,” there is, also “mystical doctrine.” There is thus at least something that can be communicated (for this is what doctrine means), and at the same time something that is “objective,” for whatever can be transmitted must needs be objective, even should the object in question prove to be illusory. The subjective as such cannot be transmitted<sup>1</sup>, but its object can—at least in conceptual terms. To say: “I have experienced some-

---

\* This is a revised version of an article which first appeared in *The Unanimous Tradition*, a limited edition edited by Ranjit Fernando and published by The Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, Colombo, in 1991. *The Unanimous Tradition* is a compendium containing contributions from several leading traditionalist authors, including Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt.

1. In modern subjectivism, what is expressed is only a subject that is already relative, namely the passionate, sentimental and imaginative ego; in order to express itself, it necessarily makes use of objective elements which it chooses arbitrarily, while separating itself arrogantly and foolishly from objective reality. The “purely subjective,” in the modern world, can only announce its presence by gasps and howls, and this is the very definition of modern “avant-garde” poetry.

thing indescribable and incommunicable” is already a description and a communication. As such it can be considered objectively by a third party and, depending on the adequacy of the description, the sensitivity of the hearer and the reality of the object, it can even stir within him a responsive chord. This means that in favorable circumstances it can, to a greater or lesser degree, stimulate in the hearer a similar intuition or “experience.”

The assumed object of both “mystical experience” and “mystical doctrine” is Ultimate Reality. Mystical doctrine may call this the One, the Absolute, the Infinite, the Supreme Self, the Supreme Being, or some other name, and mystical experience is deemed to be union therewith, to whatever degree and in whatever mode. With this end in view, one also speaks of the “mystical way” or the “mystical path.” This is the process of “unification” with the One, the Supreme Self, or the Supreme Being—all of these being names given to Ultimate Reality.

From all of this, it clearly emerges that mysticism or mystical experience has two poles, namely mystical doctrine and the mystical way or path. Thus in mysticism, as in other spheres, it is a question of doctrine and method, or theory and practice. These twin elements of mysticism will be examined in detail in the course of this essay. The validity and justifiability of mysticism, let it be said right away, depend on the validity and justifiability of its object. If this be a reality, the experience is valid and, in the manner described, capable of being communicated to, and evoked in, a third party.

\* \* \*

As is often done, I have spoken of mysticism in a manner that might give the impression that mysticism is an independent entity capable of existing in a vacuum. Such an impression would be false, however, since in practice mysticism only makes its appearance within the framework of one or other of the revealed religions. Indeed it would be true to say that mysticism constitutes the inward or spiritual dimension of every religion. Mysticism is esoterism, while the outward religious framework is the respective exoterism. The exoterism is for all, but the corresponding esoterism is only for those who feel a call thereto. Esoterism, unlike exoterism, cannot be imposed. It is strictly a matter of vocation.

It has been said that “all paths lead to the same summit.” In this sym-

bol, the variety of religions is represented by the multiplicity of starting-points around the circumferential base of a cone or mountain. The radial, upward, pathways are the mystical paths. The oneness of mysticism is a reality only at the point that is the summit. The pathways are many, but their goal is one. As they approach this goal, the various pathways more and more resemble one another, but only at the Summit do they coincide. Until then, in spite of resemblances and analogies, they remain separate, and indeed each path is imbued with a distinctive perfume or color—Islamic mysticism is clearly not Christian mysticism—but at the Summit these various colors are (still speaking symbolically) reintegrated into the uncolored Light. Islamic mysticism and Christian mysticism are one only in God.

It is this point of “uncolored Light,” where the different religions come together, that is the basis of the *philosophia perennis* or *religio perennis*. This is the supra-formal, divine truth which is the source of each religion, and which each religion incorporates. The heart of each exoterism is its corresponding esoterism, and the heart of each esoterism is the *religio perennis*—or esoterism in the pure state.

In all the religions, the goal of mysticism is God, who may also be given such names as the One, the Absolute, the Infinite, the Supreme Self, the Supreme Being<sup>2</sup>. In sapiential or “theosophic” mysticism, the goal is said to be the Truth, conceived as a living Reality capable of being experienced. Mysticism thus has three components: the doctrine concerning God or Ultimate Reality (“mystical doctrine”), “oneness” with God or Ultimate Reality (“mystical experience”), and the movement that leads from the former to the latter (“the mystical path”). In other words: the doctrine of Unity, the experience of Union, and the path of Unification.

Mystical doctrine is one and the same as metaphysics or mystical theology. Mystical experience, when present in a total or at least sufficient degree, is salvation or liberation. And the purpose of the mystical path is “spiritual realization,” i.e., the progression from outward to inward, from belief to vision, or (in scholastic terms) from Potency to Act.

---

2. This also includes the “non-theistic” religion of Buddhism, since here too Ultimate Reality, variously referred to in different contexts as *Dharma* (“Law”), *Ātmā* (“Self”), *Nirvāna* (“Extinction”) or *Bodhi* (“Knowledge”), is seen as transcendent and absolute.

Many people are familiar with the three fundamental modes of spiritual realization proclaimed by Hinduism: *karma-marga* (the “Way of Action”), *bhakti-marga* (the “Way of Love”), and *jñāna-marga* (the “Way of Knowledge”). These correspond to the three degrees or dimensions of Sufism: *makhbâfa* (“Fear”), *mababba* (“Love”), and *ma’rifâ* (“Knowledge” or “Gnosis”)<sup>3</sup>.

Strictly speaking, it is only *bhakti* and *jñāna* (i.e. *mababba* and *ma’rifâ*) that constitute mysticism: mysticism is either a way of Love, a way of Knowledge, or a combination of both. One will recall the occasion in the life of Christ when he was received in the house of the sisters Martha and Mary. What has come to be known in Christianity as the “Way of Martha” is paralleled by the Hindu *karma-marga*, the way of religious observance and good works. The contemplative or mystical way, on the other hand, is the “Way of Mary,” which comprises two modes, namely, *bhakti-marga* (the “Way of Love”) and *jñāna-marga* (the “Way of Knowledge”). *Karma* as such is purely exoteric, but it is important to stress that there is always a karmic component within both *bhakti* and *jñāna*. The Way of Love and the Way of Knowledge both necessarily contain an element of Fear or conformity. Likewise, the Way of Knowledge invariably contains within it the reality of Love. As for the Way of Love, which is composed of faith and devotion, it contains an indirect element of *jñāna* in the form of dogmatic and speculative theology. This element lies in the intellectual speculation as such, not in its object, the latter being limited by definition<sup>4</sup>, failing which it would not be a question of *bhakti*, but of *jñāna*. In spite of the presence in each Way of elements of the two others, the three Ways *karma*, *bhakti* and *jñāna* (or *makhbâfa*, *mababba* and *ma’rifâ*) represent three specific and easily distinguishable modes of religious aspiration.

As for the question as to which of these paths a given devotee adheres to,

3. This word is used purely etymologically, and does not hark back to the current, in the early history of Christianity, known as “gnosticism.” “Gnosis,” from the Greek, is the only adequate English rendering for the Sanskrit *jñāna* (with which in fact it is cognate) and the Arabic *ma’rifâ*.
4. In the “Way of Love” (*bhakti* or *mababba*), God is envisaged at the level of “Being” (which has as consequence that the Lord and the worshiper always remain distinct). In the Way of Knowledge (*jñāna* or *ma’rifâ*), on the other hand, God is envisaged at the level of “Beyond-Being” or “Essence.”

it is overwhelmingly a matter of temperament and vocation. It is a case where the Way chooses the individual and not the individual the Way.

Historically speaking, Christian mysticism has been characterized in the main by the “Way of Love,” whereas Hindu mysticism and Islamic mysticism comprise both the “Way of Love” and the “Way of Knowledge.” The language of the “Way of Love” has a remarkably similar ring in whichever mysticism it crops up, but the more jñānic formulations of Hinduism and the more “gnostic” formulations of Sufism tend to strike a foreign note in the ears of those who are familiar only with Christian, or at any rate bhaktic, forms of spirituality.<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

The goal of religion, in all its varieties, is salvation. What, then, is the difference between exoterism and esoterism? Exoterism is formalistic, but faith and devotion can give it depth. Esoterism is “deep”—supra-formal—by definition, and is the apanage only of those with the relevant vocation. Here, forms are transcended, in that they are seen as symbolic expressions of the essence. In esoterism too, faith is essential, but here it has the meaning of sincerity and total commitment—effort towards “realization.” Metaphysically, the difference between exoterism and esoterism (between formalism and sapiential mysticism) lies in how the final Goal is envisaged: in exoterism (and in *bhaktic* esoterism), God is envisaged at the level of “Being” (the Creator and the Judge): no matter how deep, how sublime, the exoterist’s fervor, Lord and worshiper always remain distinct. In *jñānic* esoterism, on the other hand, God is envisaged at the level of “Beyond-Being” (the Divine Essence). At this level, it is perceived that Lord and worshiper (the latter known to be created in the image of the former) share a common essence, and this opens up the possibility of ultimate Divine Union.

\* \* \*

Reference was made earlier to “subjective” and “objective,” and it may be useful to indicate precisely whence these two concepts derive. The

---

5. Those who, by way of exception, have manifested the “Way of Knowledge” in Christianity include such great figures as Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, Albertus Magnus and Angelus Silesius. It is precisely the works of *jñānins* such as these that have tended to cause ripples in the generally *bhaktic* climate of Christianity.

most direct key in this regard is the Hindu appellation for the Divinity: *Sat-Chit-Ânanda*. This expression is usually translated as “Being-Consciousness-Bliss.” This is accurate, and enables one to see that “Being” is the Divine Object (God Transcendent or Ultimate Reality), “Consciousness” is the Divine Subject (God Immanent or the Supreme Self), while “Bliss”—the harmonious coming-together of the two—is Divine Union. The most fundamental translation therefore of *Sat-Chit-Ânanda* is “Object-Subject-Union.” This is the model, or origin, of all possible objects and subjects, and of the longing of the latter for the former<sup>6</sup>.

This trinitarian aspect of the Divinity is universal, and is found in all religions. In Christianity it is the central dogma: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The analogy between the Christian Trinity and “Being-Consciousness-Bliss” can be seen from certain doctrinal expositions of the Greek Fathers and also from St. Augustine’s designation of the Christian Trinity as “Being-Wisdom-Life.” In Islam, although it is above all the religion of strict monotheism, certain Sufi formulations evoke the selfsame trinitarian aspect of the Divinity. Reference will be made later to the question of spiritual realization, but in Sufism this is essentially mediated by the invocation (*dhikr*) of the Name of God. In this connection it is said that God is not only That which is invoked (*Madhkûr*), but also That within us which invokes (*Dhâkir*), and even the invocation itself, since, in the last analysis, this is none other than the internal Act (*Dhikr*) of God<sup>7</sup>. We thus have the ternary *Madhkûr-Dhâkir-Dhikr* (“Invoked-Invoker-Invocation”), which is yet another form of the basic ternary “Object-Subject-Union.” This cardinal relationship is the very essence of the theory and practice of mysticism, for this “Union” *in divinis* is the prefiguration of and pattern for the union of man with God<sup>8</sup>. Hindu, Christian and Sufi doctrine coincide in elucidating just why this is so.

---

6. *Sat-Chit-Ânanda* may also be interpreted as “Known-Knower-Knowledge” or “Beloved-Lover-Love.”

7. That this Divine Act should pass through man is the mystery of salvation.

8. It will easily be seen that it is also the prefiguration of every other union under the sun, for example, conjugal union.

One of the most significant characteristics of mystical doctrine stemming from several of the great religions—and made explicit, for example, in the treatises of *jñānic* or gnostic mystics such as Shankara, Eckhart and Ibn ‘Arabî—is the distinction made, within God Himself, between God and the Godhead, between “Being” and “Essence,” or between “Being” and “Beyond-Being”<sup>9</sup>. In ordinary theological doctrine, the fundamental distinction is between God and man, or between the Uncreated and the created. Mystical or esoteric doctrine, on the other hand, makes a distinction within each of these two terms. Thus, within the Uncreated (viewed as “Essence” or “Beyond-Being”), there is already a *prefiguration* of creation, and this is God as “Being.” “Beyond-Being” is the principle of “Being,” and God as Being (the immediate Creator of the world) is the principle of existence or creation.

Within creation—itself relative—there is also a distinction to be made, for within creation there is a *reflection* of the Uncreated (the Absolute) in the form of Truth and Virtue, Symbol and Sacrament, Prophet or Redeemer. Once again mystical doctrine renders explicit the reality of mystical union, for it is by uniting himself with the “created” Symbol or Sacrament (for example, in truth, in beauty, in virtue, in the Eucharist, or in the Invocation of a Divine Name), that the mystic realizes his union with (or reintegration into) the uncreated Divinity. Only through the sacramental perfecting of the created, can one reach the Uncreated. This is what is meant in Christianity by “the imitation of Christ,” or in Islam by the observance of the *Sunna*.

This exposition is taken from the writings of Frithjof Schuon<sup>10</sup>, who has explained how “Being” (the *prefiguration* of the relative in the Absolute) is the uncreated Logos, whereas the *reflection* of the Absolute in the relative (namely: truth, beauty, virtue, Prophet, Savior) is the created Logos. Without this “bridge” (the Logos with its created and uncreated aspects), no contact whatsoever between created and Uncreated, between man and God, would be possible<sup>11</sup>: the gulf between the two

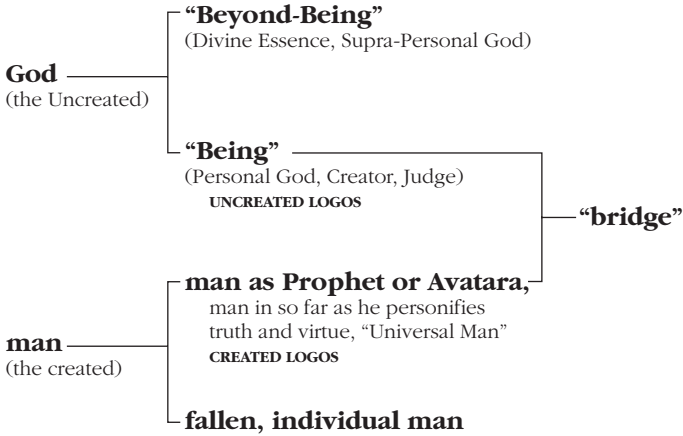
9. The same distinction is also made by St. Gregory Palamas in his doctrine of the Divine Essence and the Divine Energies.

10. See especially *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Perennial Books, London, 1980).

11. The error of deism is precisely that it has no concept of the role of the Logos and envisages no such bridge.

would be unbridgeable. This would be “dualism,” not “Non-Dualism” (or *Advaita*, to use the term from Shankaran metaphysics), and the very opposite of mysticism.

The doctrine of the Logos, and its cardinal relevance to the mystical path, can be summarized in diagrammatic form as follows:



Within each religion, the Founder is the personification of the Logos, and his role as such is always made explicit. Christ said: “No man cometh to the Father but by me.” The Prophet Mohammed said: “He that hath seen me, hath seen God.” The Buddha said: “He who sees the *Dharma* sees me, and he who sees me sees the *Dharma*.” Mystical union is realized only through the Logos.

This brings us directly to the three classical “stages” (*maqâmât* in Arabic) recognized by all mysticisms:

- I. Purification (or purgation),
- II. Perfection (or Illumination), and
- III. Union.

The second stage, “Perfection,” corresponds precisely to the aspirant’s assimilation to the created Logos. In Christianity, this takes the form of the “imitation of Christ” and in Islam, the observance—inward and symbolically total—of the “Wont of the Prophet” (*Sunna*). Prayers such



as the “Hail Mary” (*Ave Maria*) in Catholicism and the “Blessing on the Prophet” (*salât ‘alâ ‘n-Nabî*) in Islam, which contain the names of the created Logos (*Jesus* and *Muhammad* respectively), are instrumental to the end in view.

\* \* \*

As we have seen, mysticism includes both mystical doctrine and mystical experience. Mystical experience is the inward and unitive “realization” of the doctrine. This is the domain of spiritual method. In Hinduism spiritual method is represented by *yoga*—not the physical exercises derived from *batba-yoga* now widely experimented with in the West, but *raja-yoga*, the “royal art” of contemplation and union. If, in Hinduism, the *veda* (knowledge) is the *scientia sacra*, then *yoga* (union) is the corresponding *ars sacra* or *operatio sacra*. Here the saying of the Medieval French architect Jean Mignot applies with fullest force: *ars sine scientiâ nihil*. One cannot meaningfully or effectively practice anything, if one does not know what one is doing. Above all, one cannot practice a spiritual method except on the basis of previously comprehended spiritual doctrine which is both the motivation and the paradigm for the spiritual work to be undertaken. If doctrine without method is hypocrisy or sterility, then method without doctrine means going astray, and sometimes dangerously. This makes clear why doctrine must be “orthodox”—that is, in essential conformity with the subtle contours of truth. Here it must be noted that pseudo-doctrine, born of nothing more than human invention, is one of the most powerful causes of going astray.

These points have to be stressed, because in the present age many of those attracted by mysticism are eager at all costs for “experience”—without caring to ask themselves: experience of what—and without the safeguards either of conforming to the discipline of a religious tradition or of receiving permission and guidance from a spiritual authority. It is precisely this illegitimate wresting of method from doctrine that is harmful. The more real and effective the spiritual method appropriated, the more dangerous it can be for the appropriator. There are many recorded cases of psychological and spiritual damage resulting from the unauthorized use (i.e., the profanation) of religious rites and sacraments.

In the past, it was the opposite fault that was most likely: to know the truth, but—through weakness, passion, or pride—to fail to put it into practice; in other words, it was a question of hypocrisy, and not the

heresy—most commonly in the shape of a “false sincerity”—characteristic of modern times. How typical of the age we live in that, here as elsewhere, it stands on its head! The new shortcoming is infinitely worse than the earlier one. It is forgotten that every “quest” inevitably has an object and, whether one cares to recall it or not, the object of a mystical or spiritual quest is Ultimate Reality or God. With such an object one cannot trifle with impunity.

*Yoga* is the way or method of union with God, through a dedicated concentration on Him. A particularly direct form of this is (in Hindu terms) *japa-yoga*, which involves the enduring invocation of a *mantra* (a Divine Name or a formula containing a Divine Name). *Mutatis mutandis*, this spiritual method plays a central role in all mysticisms. In Mahayāna Buddhism, for example, it occurs in the form of the Tibetan *Mani* and the Japanese *Nembutsu*. In Islam, nothing is more enjoined on the spiritual aspirant than *dhikr Allāb*, the “remembrance of God” through the invocation of His Name. In Hesychasm (the mysticism of Eastern Christianity), invocation of the Divine Name takes the form of the “Prayer of Jesus,” a practice vividly described in *The Way of a Russian Pilgrim*<sup>12</sup>. The analogous method in Western Christianity is the cult of the Holy Name. This flourished in the Middle Ages, and was also preached with poignancy and single-mindedness in the fifteenth century by St. Bernardino of Siena: “Everything that God has created for the salvation of the world is hidden in the Name of Jesus.” The practice was revived, in the form of the invocation *Jesu-Maria*, in the revelations made to Sister Consolata, an Italian Capuchin nun, in the earlier part of this century.<sup>13</sup>

This method of concentrating on a revealed Divine Name indicates clearly that mysticism is the very opposite of giving free rein to man’s unregenerate subjectivity. In fact, it is the exposing of his unregenerate subjectivity to the normative and transforming influence of the revealed Object, the Sacrament or Symbol of the religion in question. It was in

---

12. *The Way of a Pilgrim*, S.P.C.K., London, 1954.

13. *Jesus appeals to the world*, Alba House (Society of St. Paul), Staten Island NY 10314, 1971.

14. This synthesis of the dual aspect of realization or method is taken from the writings of Frithjof Schuon. See especially *Eye of the Heart* (World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, Indiana, 1997), chapter “Microcosm and Symbol.”

this respect that St. Paul could say: “Not I, but Christ in me.” At the same time, and even more esoterically, it is the exposing of our paltry egoism, seen in turn as an “object,” to the withering and yet quickening influence of the divine Subject, the immanent Self.<sup>14</sup> This possibility is envisaged in Islam in the *hadîth qudsî* (a “Divine saying” from the mouth of the Prophet): “I (God) am the hearing whereby he (the slave) heareth.”<sup>15</sup> The vehicle of both processes is the Invocation of a Divine Name (which is both Subject and Object), within a strictly traditional and orthodox framework, and with the authorization of an authentic spiritual master. In this domain, there is no room for curiosity and experiment.

\* \* \*

In the mysticisms of several religions, the soul’s quest for God is symbolized in terms of the mutual longing of the lover and the beloved. St. John of the Cross, for example, makes use of this symbolism in his mystical poetry, from which the following verses are quoted:

*Oh noche que guiaste  
Oh noche amable más que el alborada:  
Oh noche que juntaste  
Amado con amada  
Amada en el Amado transformada!*

O night that led’st me thus!  
O night more winsome than the rising sun!  
O night that madest us,  
Lover and lov’d as one,  
Lover transformed in lov’d, love’s journey done!<sup>16</sup>

*Descubre tu presencia,  
Y máteme tu vista y hermosura;  
Mira que la dolencia*

---

15. A similar thought is echoed in the words of St. Theresa of Ávila: “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which is to look out Christ’s compassion on the world; yours are the feet on which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.”

16. Translated by Professor E. Allison Peers

*De amor que no se cura  
Sino con la presencia y la figura.*

Reveal your presence clearly  
And kill me with the beauty you discover,  
For pains acquired so dearly  
From love, cannot recover  
Save only through the presence of the lover.<sup>17</sup>

As a child of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, St. John of the Cross sought to convey his “subjective” experiences rather than objective doctrine, as the mystics of a few centuries earlier had done. And yet he never wavered from the Divine Object of all mystical striving. At the practical level, in an instruction for aspirants, he said, for example: “All goodness is a loan from God.” The soul’s subjectivity is uncertain; only the objective reality, that comes from beyond it, is absolutely certain.

\* \* \*

Mysticism was earlier defined as the inward or spiritual dimension contained within every religion—each religion being understood as a separate and specific Divine Revelation. Religion comprises a “periphery” and a “center,” in other words, an exoterism and an esoterism. The exoterism is the providential expression or vehicle of the esoterism within it, and the esoterism is the supra-formal essence of the corresponding exoterism. This is why mysticism or esoterism—erroneously regarded by some as “unorthodox”—can in no way subvert the religious formalism of which it is the sap.

On the other hand, “essence” so far transcends “form,” that inevitably it sometimes “breaks” it. Conflicts have at times occurred between the purest mysticism and the respective exoteric authority; the cases of Meister Eckhart in medieval Christendom and Al-Hallāj in Islam—the one leading to condemnation and the other to martyrdom—provide striking examples. Nevertheless Eckhart enunciated this shattering of forms in a positive way when he said: “If thou wouldst reach the kernel, thou must break the shell.” It is hardly necessary to add that such a “tran-

---

17. Translated by Roy Campbell

scending” of forms is at the very antipodes of heresy, which is a crude violation of the forms of a religion at their own level. Forms can be transcended only “from above” (or “from within”). To violate—or even simply to neglect—forms “from below” (or “from without”) is the very opposite of transcending them. Outwardly man must observe traditional forms as perfectly as possible. This is required for the aspirant’s assimilation to the created Logos, as has been explained above. Man can only offer to God—and so transcend—what he has perfected.

Mysticism is the reality of man’s love for God and man’s union with God. It is a hymn to Subjectivity, a hymn to Objectivity, a hymn to Joy or Union—these three Divine Hypostases being one. It has been stressed how, contrary to certain appearances and contrary to a commonly heard opinion, mysticism is always a flowering within an orthodox framework. But, since mysticism transcends forms “from above” (or “from within”), mysticism knows no bounds. Its essence is one with the Absolute and the Infinite. Let us therefore give the last word to Jalâl ad-Dîn Rûmî, one of the greatest mystics of Islam and one of the greatest mystical poets of all time:

“I am neither Christian nor Jew nor Parsi nor Moslem. I am neither of the East nor of the West, neither of the land nor of the sea... I have put aside duality and have seen that the two worlds are one. I seek the One, I know the One, I see the One, I invoke the One. He is the First, He is the Last, He is the Outward, He is the Inward.”

This essay was first published in Volume 2 (1998) of the journal, Sacred Web ([www.sacredweb.com](http://www.sacredweb.com)), and is reproduced here with the kind permission of Sacred Web Publishing.

The Matheson Trust