

## **Sects and Cults**

### **Mysticism and Christianity Compared**

Today's counter-culture is fascinated by Eastern mysticism. What is at the heart of mysticism? Its purpose is to strive for union with the divine. It is a desire for "immediacy" (an immediate knowledge). If you want to know God, you must concentrate solely on this desire and sink into yourself.. Mysticism's route to salvation is withdrawal from the world into the silence of the forests, into the inner chambers of the soul.

"Perfect master" Maharaj Ji's Divine Light cult promises "enlightenment" through meditation. In contemporary eastern-oriented cults in the West the emphasis is on consciousness exploration and the altering of the consciousness. Self-discovery, self help techniques, turn inward to achieve "self-realization", are advocated as new ways of perceiving reality.

One of North America's most popular paths to self-realization is Transcendental Meditation. "What McDonald's has done for the hamburger, TM has done for Eastern mysticism.... TM has made Eastern mysticism acceptable, fashionable, and desirable to the public by saturating the American consciousness." What is union with the divine? Does man become just a wave in the ocean of deity?

Mysticism always had its attraction. It can be found at any time and anywhere in the long history of mankind. It has something beautiful and valuable. In Christianity there is also an element of mysticism, though it differs sharply from the non-Christian mystical aims and practices. There is something in man that does not rest until he has found the unseen, the eternal, the infinite. The solace of silence, the emphasis on inner experience and the achieving of a detached tranquility are mighty appealing options in our noise-polluted, dangerous and restless world.

What is the watershed between Eastern mysticism and the Christian faith?

#### **1. God**

In Eastern mysticism, God is the unmovable rest, the eternal silence, and the impersonal one. Whenever Gautama Buddha was asked about God he always answered in terms of "resolute" or "roaring silence". "And why, monks, have I not declared it? Because it is not profitable..." A saying of Lao-Tse is: "Those who know do not speak. Those who speak do not know." Eastern mysticism rests in the thought of God indwelling man. Contact with God comes through the heart and spiritual seeing. But God cannot be known, as we understand knowing. He can only be experienced. The preparations for the journey of the soul to God are fasting, spiritual exercises and meditation. A God experience can be sought through religious dance, repetitious music and magic.

The Christian worships the God who takes the initiative, who plans, comforts, shows Himself in the beauty of creation, acts in history, works through man's conscience,

rebukes and makes promises. In Eastern mysticism there is no comfort, no help, no salvation, no hope, no ideals and no purpose. The God of the Christian faith is the God who made a covenant with Abraham and spoke to Moses in the desert. Above all He is the God who has spoken through His Son Jesus Christ.

## **2. Jesus Christ**

Without Jesus Christ there is no truth. Christianity denies that insight to truth is possible apart from Christ. He is the truth (John 14:6). No one can come to know God apart from our Lord and the full and perfect revelation that is in Him. Christ is also the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost. God reaches out for sinners. This is grace. As we read in Isaiah: "I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me." (65:1)

## **3. Guilt**

In Eastern mysticism man is reaching for God. He has the ability to break away from himself and to unite with the divine. But the Bible pictures man as a run-away from God, a rebel. There is great distance between God and man. This gap was symbolized by the curtain that hung between the holy and holy of holies in ancient Israel's temple. No one could just walk into the holy of holies. The curtain was not removed until Christ died on the cross. Fellowship with God comes through Christ and not through the paths outlined by eastern mysticism.

## **4. The Bible**

The Christian can know the will of God through the Bible. God has published His will and purposes. There is no need for secret mantras, "extra-revelation" or new insights. Knowledge about God and His will is not just for the initiated, the select members of a cult. The Word of the living God is available to all and is universally valid. No cult leader is needed to aid the reader.

## **5. Meditation**

Has meditation no place in the life of the Christian? It has. Silence, contemplation and periods of withdrawal are indispensable ingredients for a healthy spiritual life. Activism and the neglect of the emotional and experiential have impoverished, many Christians. But Christian meditation has a different focus.

In Eastern mysticism meditation is turned inward; in the Christian faith it is turned outward. It centres on Christ and His Word. The Psalmist (1:2 KJV) says that the blessed man "meditates" on "the law of the Lord" and does so "day and night", and not just at a designated hour.

In Philippians 4:8 the apostle Paul says that every Christian ought to think on the criteria of correct behaviour: "...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever

is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent and praiseworthy - think about such things." Moral duty, concern for the neighbour and God's word should be the outcome of meditation.

## 6. Escapism

In Eastern mysticism the meditative life leads to world flight. The love for Christianity compared the world is squashed. Life is for seeking the eternal and turning away from time. This philosophy of life doesn't encourage world involvement. Young people who are so enamoured by the spirituality of the East should spend some time in the villages and even in the large cities of India. So much of the poverty is not just caused by economic injustice, overpopulation or exploitation by the multinationals.

For centuries India's holy men have practiced a type of spirituality that has led to their withdrawal from the daily routine of life. Many have become parasites of the community, supported by the gifts of those who need help themselves.

A Welsh correspondent wrote about India's holy men: "No wonder that those who meditate feel peacefully simple and calm. Disregard the world about you and you have nothing to worry about. It is this self-abstraction which is the product of meditation that has landed India in its present state of semi-starvation. Five thousand years of meditation have never ploughed a field or built a house."

In his book *The Dust of Death* Os Guinness has a chapter on eastern mysticism entitled The East, No Exit. This is a masterful summary of the Christian view of what the East has to offer. Young people who turn to Eastern mysticism will come to a spiritual dead end.

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