

Book Review

MYSTICISM IN WORLD RELIGION
By Sidney Spencer. (Allen and Unwin, 35s.)

Review By J. C. Cooper

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The Rev. Sidney Spencer is well known as one of the leading ministers and writers in the Unitarian Church. This latest work of his on Mysticism is not only eminently readable for the layman, but is written in a scholarly manner; is well documented, and has an excellent bibliography. The book shows a total lack of bias, with a sympathetic understanding of the traditions of the East and every aspect of mysticism in the West.

For the Author "it is evident from the study of primitive religion that in the very nature of the religious consciousness there is an inherent tendency to mysticism." He sees the fundamental function of religion as "intuitive apprehension" of a God who, in varied aspects, is at one and the same time transcendent and identified with the world in which He dwells. "Beneath the forms of religious ceremony and observance... there lies the awareness of the Transcendent, which moves men's hearts with awe," and "it is when men pass from dim awareness to the certainty which comes from immediate contact that mysticism arises."

The history of mysticism is traced from its earliest manifestations in the Eastern religions, where it holds a central place, in Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Taoism, through the Greek mysteries and the Hermetic movement, to Plotinus and to Philo, who synthesised Hellenistic and Jewish mysticism, on to Christianity, with its off-shoot in Gnosticism, the heretical movements and Protestantism. Islamic mysticism is concerned largely with Sufism and at the conclusion of this section the author, in the final chapters, deals with a survey of general tendencies and with mysticism and the moral life.

Discussing the oft-debated question as to whether the Old Testament shows understanding of the mystic experience, Mr. Spencer maintains that although it does not hold the central position, as in Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, the ecstasy of the prophets, "their receptivity, their passivity in face of the divine... engulfed by the divine" is tantamount to mystical illumination. He quotes Hocking as saying that the prophet is "the mystic in action." For the rest, Jewish mysticism is to be found in Merkabah mysticism, the Books of Enoch and the Sefer Yetsirah.

In Christianity, the history of the mystic movement is traced through the New Testament in its Pauline and Johannine interpretations, to that of the Eastern Church and the Neo-Platonist Dionysos, who teaches the fundamental truth of all mysticism, be it Indian, Chinese, Hellenistic, Christian or Islamic, that God is beyond mere mind-knowledge, that there can be no adequate expression of His infinite mystery, that He is the Nameless, the Ineffable.

The life of prayer is greatly stressed in the Eastern Church. "In prayer, Dionysos says, we draw near to "the primal goodness" which in its "all-embracing infinitude is never absent from us." The monks of Mount Athos devoted themselves entirely to a life of prayer in the method known as "Hesychasm"; a waiting on the Presence in the inner stillness and a constant repetition of the "Jesus prayer."

A strong influence in both Eastern and Western Catholic mysticism has been that of the Neo-Platonists, with a direct transmission of this influence through St. Augustine who came to Christianity via Platonism, attaining to the mystic vision before his conversion to Christianity. Indeed, his account of the mystic experience is an example of the essential universality of that experience. His arriving, in a flash, "at That which Is" could be the language of any Far Eastern, Eastern or Western mystic tradition.

More peculiar to Christian mysticism is the Spiritual Marriage, in which the soul is in a "theopathic" state, or wholly God-possessed, a state which is not the same as identification with God, or the Divine, in ecstasy. The soul here retains its self-awareness; it is transformed. "All her movements become divine, and though they are God's, they are just as much the soul's."

The author also treats of heretical and Protestant mysticism and passes on to Islamic mystics in Sufism with their great stress on the necessity for active endeavour and the essential experience of life in God and the "illumination of the heart with the pure radiance of knowledge" which breaks down and transcends the barrier between subject and object, man and God.

In the concluding chapters there is a survey of the main tendencies in mysticism and its relationship to Pantheism, nature and reality, the nature of evil, the moral life and orthodoxy.

Perhaps the best summing up of the meaning of mysticism is that of Plotinus: "the negative theology of positive transcendence."