

OTHER BOOKS
BY WILLIGIS JÄGER

Contemplation
A Christian Path

The Way to Contemplation
Encountering God Today

SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF LIFE

Essays and
Reflections
on the
Mystical
Experience

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CHAPTER 5

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM AND THE EASTERN ESOTERIC PATHS

In recent years astrophysics has made enormous progress and has broken through to discoveries that give us humans and our earth reasons for feeling very modest. We are, beyond a doubt, not the center of the universe, as we have so long believed. Our earth is a speck of dust on the edge of this universe; its home address is on a relatively small Milky Way, of which there are millions, most of them far larger than ours. In all probability the universe began unthinkable billions of years ago with a Big Bang and has been expanding ever since, at nearly the speed of light. We hear of pulsating quasars and black holes, and scientists suspect that after an unimaginably long period of time, this universe will again contract. By then our sun will long since have gone cold, and life on earth will have been extinguished.

We are also in the process of investigating the microcosm. We can split the atom and conjure up frightful consequences, like annihilating life on spaceship earth. Although we have found other subatomic particles such as quarks, we can't specify their exact location or their velocity. In fact, we can't even draw the line between matter and energy since they alternately appear as particles of matter or as waves of energy. True, we continue to experiment and to calculate, but we no longer rightly know what we're experimenting with.

Given all this, we have to steer clear of the notion that the world might be organized according to rational points of view. It is obviously organized in a nonrational manner, and its inner structure has nothing to do with intellectual considerations. In other words, it has dimensions that are not rationally graspable. I recall the theory of superstrings, which defines the world ten-dimensionally, that is, with nine spatial dimensions plus time. Other physicists demand as many as twenty-six dimensions.¹

So here we are; we live at a tiny point in this cosmos between quarks and black holes. Both the microcosm and macrocosm overwhelm our imaginative capacity. Yet, we insist on assigning great importance to the human race. We claim to know with far too much certainty who God is.

Rational consciousness is only one form of consciousness alongside the others. It views the universe in its own peculiar, limited fashion. Thus we can perceive only four dimensions. Evidently the rest can be grasped only with different forms of consciousness. Reality is something altogether different from what this highly limited rational faculty can disclose to us.

Theology speaks of God only on the level of rationality. Even what we call revelation is verbalized on this four-dimensional level. But science has already moved beyond all traditional mathematical statements about the universe. Doesn't theology, too, have to transcend its rational declarations about God? Why such anxious defensiveness in churches? As always, institutions are afraid of mysticism.

Mystics have always known that there were other dimensions. The ego, they say, has to be transcended to arrive at experience. In the language of mysticism this means that the ego has to die. Mysticism could no more find names for the experience of other dimensions than science could because mystics cannot capture experience in a language based on rational thinking. Nowadays, science recognizes in Eastern esoteric systems a certain relationship to its own "limit experiences."

The Eastern religions have both a theology and a practice that leads to experience. The theology is very complex and subtle; the practice is generally known as "tantra." Tantra comes from Sanskrit and means "weave." One doesn't talk about tantra; one has to do it. In *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, Zukav explains that "Buddhist philosophy can be intellectualized; tantra cannot. Buddhist philosophy is a function of the rational mind; tantra transcends rationality. The most profound thinkers

of Indian civilization realized that words and concepts could take them only so far. Beyond this point lay the actual exercise of a practice, the experience of which was ineffable. This did not prevent them from progressively refining the practice into an extremely effective and sophisticated set of techniques, but it did prevent them from being able to describe the experience which these techniques produce."² An important function of Eastern religions consists in giving mind the possibility of escaping the limitations of symbolism. In this view everything is a symbol, not just words and concepts but people and things as well. Beyond the frontiers of symbolism lies pure awareness, the experience of the "thusness" of reality.

Although the Eastern religions have symbols, they use them to escape the limitations of symbols. Religions always have to make use of symbols, that is, words, rites, myths, and sacraments. But they are only the finger that points to the moon. As Christians, we must once again recognize that religion is based on experience as much as on words. The Eastern religions show us this very clearly.

Nowadays one finds more articles on mysticism in journals of science and transpersonal psychology than in journals of Christian spirituality. In the last two hundred years mysticism has emigrated from the Christian churches. This may be one reason why so many people today are dissatisfied with their church. In fact, the new scientific findings are seldom reflected in our ideas and discourse about God. The Christian religion is still too bound up in the Cartesian and Newtonian world picture. Only mysticism, evidently, will bear scrutiny from a contemporary standpoint. Mysticism has always moved beyond the four-dimensional perspective so as to get a more comprehensive view of the Ultimate Reality.

When the Bible was written, humans saw themselves as the center of creation, and the universe revolved around the earth. People believed in a God who had formed and carefully guided all things and who sought out for himself a people for whom he was present in a special way, with whom he made a covenant, to whom he gave laws. From time to time, this God grew angry with this nomadic tribe (for they were no more than that), and then again he was kind to it. Admittedly, even back then this God appeared to be incomprehensible, but he was basically a superbeing, a patriarch who oversaw and directed everything. This notion still plays the decisive role in Christianity, even though in the face

of our knowledge of the cosmos it's hard to accept such a patriarchal ruler. In fact, it strikes us almost as an insult to speak of God this way, against the background of the immeasurable expanses of the universe.

In contrast to the Eastern religions, the mystical element is underdeveloped in the West. In fact, it is under suspicion—especially when it borrows from the East—and is often tarred with the same brush as the pseudomystical tendencies of the age. This will surely change some day. Zukav argues that should Böhm's physics or a similar approach become the main thrust of this science, the findings of the East and the West might merge in an extraordinary harmony: "Do not be surprised if physics curricula in the twenty-first century include classes and lectures in meditation."³

The authors of the following reports describe the revolution in their piety:

The deeper conflict in me is the breaking away from a tradition that has left its imprint on all of us, not in the conscious practice of Church tradition, no, on a much deeper, unconscious layer. And strangely enough only now does it come to my mind how greatly this Christianity was alienated in a thousand variations and still resonates as a basic motif in our thought and culture. If the image of the Father God that Jesus Christ gave us is now disintegrating, it's hard to find one's way in a completely new reality. Jesus gave people this image because they already bore it within themselves....But our time can no longer endure the restrictions this imposes.

A few days ago I was reading something by an Eastern Orthodox priest about contemplation: "...when you look at God, you see nothing, and that is precisely the point: When you're looking at nothing, then there is no knowledge or experience. In fact there you have what God is, God is nothingness." And immediately thereafter I saw Nothingness. It was the unfenced reality, the reality with no wheels, confined to no track; and all my attachment had disappeared in this seeing.... The more ego-consciousness falls away, the more one finds oneself in this inner reality, in this Nothingness. It was as if the past and the future had ceased to exist. I couldn't even manage to remember myself. There was only the freedom of seeing, of hearing, and of doing.

A priest

For some time now I have been in inner conflict with my Church; overnight the nest has become too cramped. So, although nobody around me noticed, I secretly "emigrated." I left behind the external fabric of forms and structures, but still I would like to lead people to a place where in a homey religious environment they can discover and experience the foundation of their life as a precious treasure.

Religion is something other than what the Church "stages." When I question what brought about my retreat from the usual structures—especially from the whole area of the liturgy—I can't explain my behavior rationally or psychologically....A powerful longing to spiritualize my religious experience no doubt shapes my attitude of flight as far as the liturgy goes: flight from ceremonies, rites, gestures, words, images, decorations, signs, in which the religious person expresses himself or herself....

God, who burst into my life as such a powerful reality, would like to fill up the depths of my soul. This is like a core transformation in which becoming one takes place, and I can only observe this process of becoming one, of fusion in the present, and let it happen without translating it symbolically. I myself don't understand the way I have changed; perhaps it's only a transitional phase. And it hurts me that I can't celebrate with you (her fellow Catholics) as I used to. The form for doing that has yet to be born.

A woman

There are far more mystics in our time than people generally suppose.

Mystical experience has always and everywhere transcended narrow dogmatic thinking, even though it was often forced into the confines of traditional concepts and symbols. Ever since gnosticism was banished from Christianity, mysticism has surfaced in peripheral movements such as alchemy and astrology, but also in theosophy, the *philosophia perennis*, and in parts of psychology (above all Jungian and transpersonal psychology).

People who have been exposed to deeply moving religious experiences often look for help from professional therapists, not least of all because they have gotten so little understanding from the Church's representatives. There is an international organization called the Spiritual Emergency Network which links a variety of people, most notably psychologists, therapists, and social workers. This organization supplies the addresses of persons to whom you can turn if you're having problems

dealing with a transpersonal experience. The crisis such individuals go through is expressed in the following account by a young woman:

At my first Communion I had a profound experience. On that day I experienced with my whole being what I had hitherto believed, namely that God *is*. And God wasn't just in me. He was in all the men and women around me, and he was everywhere. He was the center of all things. This experience was so powerful that I had to share it, but when I turned to my spiritual adviser, he told me "You've imagined something; you've been fantasizing." This answer shocked me, because the depth of the experience made it impossible for me to label it imagination or fantasy.

I carried it around inside me until about the age of eighteen, and then I began to look for explanations. Since I had searched in vain in the Christian Church, I went to the theosophists. Among them I discovered that this experience, which still shapes my life, was an authentic mystical event. In theosophy I also learned about paths that can lead to such an experience. I am still thankful today that I found trusting people who understand me.

Integrating our religious experiences into the fabric of our lives is crucial to self-understanding. If we fail to do that, we can easily slip into neurosis because our experiences give us an entirely new and persuasive understanding of reality, an understanding of reality that contradicts the convictions of the world around us and hence is extremely difficult for our ego to maintain amid everyday life.

Religious experience lets people enjoy more and more independence. This is especially striking with women. As far as I can see, women come to religious consciousness much earlier and more frequently than men. I would say that the feminine qualities of the person—letting oneself go, giving oneself, opening and accepting oneself—play an especially important role here. Easterners find this easier to do than Westerners, and thus mystical experience has always been acknowledged in the East as a central concern. Today many women are discovering this feminine legacy which opens the way to mysticism. This makes men feel anxious. Thus a number of women have pointed out to me that the lack of understanding on the part of a male-run Church caused them to leave that institution. The development of femininity, which is basic to any continuation of the mystical tradition in the West and in Western Christianity, would be the best response to the religious longing of our Western contempo-

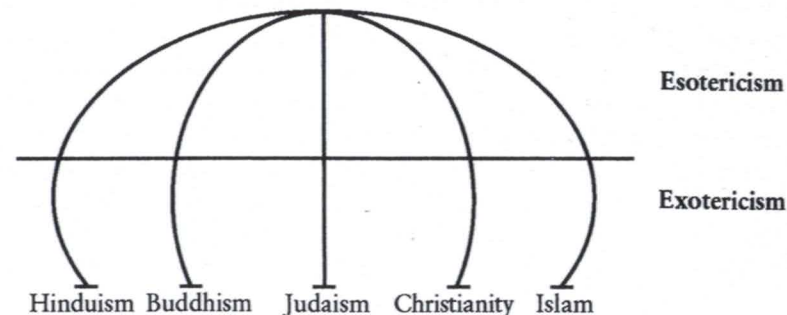
raries. In this era, with our tremendous possibilities for communications, we have the opportunity to learn from the East and thereby reanimate our mystical tradition. The very survival of the Church and society may perhaps be at stake.

ESOTERICISM AND EXOTERICISM IN THE WORLD RELIGIONS

I no longer believe that the crucial difference between religions is the boundary separating individual faiths, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism (to mention only those with the largest following). Rather it is the difference between esoteric and exoteric spirituality. So as to avoid misunderstanding, I must briefly explain what these terms mean.

Esotericism comes from the Greek *esoterós* which means "inside, within." Exotericism comes from *exoterós* which means "popular, comprehensible to the lay person." However, I am not using the word esotericism here in the sense of something accessible only to initiates, that is, people belonging to an esoteric group. Nor do I use the word exoteric to refer to noninitiates or outsiders. By esotericism I mean rather a spirituality that is oriented toward experience and that sees in this goal the meaning of religion. By exotericism I mean a spirituality that is based exclusively on scriptures, dogmas, ritual, or symbolism. Thus an esotericist is not a person with some sort of elitist consciousness but someone who has started off on the path to experience the Divine in himself or herself and in all things.

Thus the fundamental difference between religions consists not in their doctrines and rituals but between their esoteric or exoteric spirituality. The dividing line runs horizontally, not vertically. I would like to illustrate this with a diagram:



The Ultimate Reality, variously named by religions as the Absolute, Godhead, the Tao, Sunyata, Nirvana, defies every kind of naming or visualization through reason and the senses. The attempt to give it a name that everyone can accept is what divides the religions, and, as history shows, what has led to wars of religion, persecution, defamation, disparagement, and so forth. Today we have at least arrived—well, not completely—at the stage of dialogue. Religions are paths on which individuals should be led back to their origins, or what we call our deepest essence or the Divine within us and within everything that exists.

Experience is so deeply concealed in human existence that it resists every attempt at communicating it. This is why mystics are often criticized for being antirational and arrogantly “enlightened.” Even if this experience is spelled out somehow or other, exotericists have difficulty accepting it because it’s not intellectually graspable. Esotericists, by contrast, have no problems with religious formulas because the formulas aren’t posited as absolute. Thus over the course of history mysticism has had a two-sidedness: it can effectively support dogmas or it can undermine them. Eckhart’s writings make it clear that mysticism doesn’t have to be the enemy of subtle theological reflections. Nevertheless the esotericists in most religions have suffered harsh penalties from the dominant institutions of their day. Many were not just excommunicated but were thrown into prison and burned at the stake.

Exotericists are afraid of betraying the truth of their religious beliefs. Since their faith is lodged in an altogether special creedal statement, they find it difficult to accept that truth is to be found in other religions as well. That, of course, would relativize their own faith and lead them into great insecurity because their religious certainty is grounded precisely in the differences between their own and other religions. Tolerant individuals may well concede that truth may be found in other religions, but there can’t possibly be as much of it as in their own.

The truth common to all lies in the heart of every religion. But since this truth transcends any and all forms in which it appears, only a few people are fortunate enough to press forward to it. That is why religion is important. A religion can no more exist without forms of expression than a person can live without a body. Holy Scriptures, theology, and ritual are like the map that believers require to find their way to God. They need direction, encouragement, and companionship so as not to lose their way. Humans live in a world of symbols, images, and forms;

Why religion is important?

and these modes of expression are needed to communicate their religion to others. The foregoing remarks are not meant to impugn religion as such, but to invalidate a narrow, exclusively exoteric understanding of faith.

Religion may be compared to a glass window. It remains dark unless it’s lit from behind. The light itself is not visible, but in the window of religion it takes on a structure and becomes comprehensible to everyone. Although religion often tends to bind its followers to the structures of the window, the ultimate thing is not the window but the light that shines behind it. Only those who see the light of God behind all the structures can realize the meaning and goal of religion. The danger is that symbols and images of God will obscure rather than illuminate the reality they are supposed to shed light on.

THE MEANING OF EASTERN ESOTERICISM FOR WESTERN MYSTICISM

Zen helped me to understand an important part of our Christian spirituality that has been lost in the traditional teaching about prayer—namely the mystical element. Christianity usually teaches oral and meditative prayer, a certain moral behavior, and social commitment. But this isn’t much more than the grammar school of a religion, and so many Christians remain stuck in an infantile state. When they grow up, they drop the childish forms without having learned a grown-up form of prayer. That is how things are in almost all religions. In Buddhism and Hinduism, too, most believers never get past a very simple form. Thus, as I see it, all religions are only on the way toward outgrowing a childish notion of the self and growing into an adult understanding.

I make a distinction between spirituality and religion. Spirituality teaches a path into experience and deals with what is experienced. Religion, by contrast, is instruction that has evolved into dogmatic theology. These dogmas do, in fact, derive from experience, but they have been absolutized, and only a few believers understand them in an experiential fashion. In esotericism there is instruction but no dogma. “Dogma” here relates to traveling a path to come to one’s own experience.

These thoughts might give rise to the misunderstanding that esotericism could subsist all by itself. Not so. Religion needs the two pillars of esotericism and exotericism, otherwise it can easily fail to reach its goal. Esotericists, too, have found the way to mystical experience by

means of religion. They will never reject religion, but they clearly recognize the one-sidedness that every formulation brings with it. Humans are creatures of mind-and-body, and so they need religion as a profession of faith and they need language as a means of expressing themselves. But true religion attempts to lead its adherents beyond itself to the experience of the Divine.

The Christian religion is my home, even though I cannot identify myself with everything tradition has made of it. We have received a great legacy, and few of us would have made it to the path of contemplation if Christianity had not put us on the right track. I myself feel responsible for this legacy and would like to bring back into the light some of its features that I think have been submerged.

ESOTERICISM AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Esotericism is not primarily concerned with elevating the mind to a level of experience on which it forgets all its earthly ties. Rather it aims to bring about a sharp-eyed vision that lays aside all egocentricity and allows us to grasp the world in its "thusness." That alone will lead to the comprehensive love that makes human life possible to begin with.

There is an old mandala, known in both the East and the West, that clearly and pointedly expresses the standpoint of the mystic: two overlapping circles. Christians call this a mandorla. In Romanesque art, Jesus Christ is represented by these two circles, just as Sakyamuni Buddha is in Buddhist art. The mandorla is no doubt older than both religions. It designates the supernatural and the natural, the Divine and the human, mind and matter. In the area where the two circles overlap sits the "God-man." Here is where both aspects of reality coincide and become one.

The mandorla designates the union of apparent opposites, the *coniunctio oppositorum*, or, as Nicholas of Cusa would say, the *coincidentia oppositorum*. This is the bipolar unity of which the mystics speak. Our ego-consciousness divides reality into subject and object, whereas our true self experiences unity and harmony. In the mandorla both aspects coincide. Nicholas of Cusa writes: "I have found the place where one can find Thee undisguised. It is surrounded by the coincidence of opposites. This is the wall of Paradise in which Thou dwellest. Its gate is guarded by the highest spirit of reason (*spiritus altissimus rationis*). Unless one overcomes it, the entrance will not open.

On the other side of the walls of the coincidence of opposites one can see Thee, on this side never."⁴

Thus esotericism does not mean exiting from the world. On the contrary, it sees the world and reality as they are, not as our reason and senses deceptively present them. The process of human maturation consists in making these two circles more and more congruent. Esotericism and exotericism belong together. Even in the Gospel according to John there are passages that say as much, for example when Jesus tells his disciples, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9). Some apocryphal texts speak even more clearly about this unity: "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male may not be male nor the female,...then you will enter the Kingdom"⁵ (*Gospel of Thomas*, v. 22).

Ultimately esotericism is concerned with a new experiencing and grasping of reality. The true esoteric paths don't lead out of this world, but into the heart of the moment, into life. The point is to feel not contempt for the world, but an entirely new form of love for it. And with that we come to the essence of mysticism in both the East and the West: religion is life, and life is religion. When I experience the fact that my rising in the morning and putting on my slippers is a profoundly religious act, then I have recognized what religion is. But this is simply not possible without deep experience. In the Eucharist we solemnly proclaim that this is not just bread (in other words, not just form) but the essence of divinity appearing in this form. In the Eucharist we solemnly proclaim that nothing exists that is not God, which means that we actually ought to experience even our breakfast as one more way the Divine expresses itself. It is a sacred action to live one's life here and now. In the final analysis, the sacrament of the moment is nothing else but "living in the will of God." That is the way to happiness.

BREAKING DOWN PREJUDICES

Esotericism aims to provide a clear-sightedness that sets aside all egocentricity and enables us to grasp the world in its "thusness," but also to relativize it. The East often calls "emptiness" or "the void" what European languages would most readily translate as "the Numinous" or "the

Absolute." Eckhart would use the word *godhead*. Ultimately, things have no independent or lasting substance. They are pure phenomenal forms that cannot appear outside of the Divine, that is, outside of the void. When the East says, "All things are empty," it doesn't mean that things don't exist, but that they are nothing but phenomenal forms. Things have no existence on their own. Thus the void makes form possible to begin with and simultaneously links all forms together.

Everything that has been said thus far could be easily confused with monism, pantheism, quietism, animism, gnosticism or—to mention more recent intellectual trends—anthroposophy, theosophy, and Christian Science. But that would be true only if I were trying to interpret mystical experience from a rational standpoint—a level on which it is simply incomprehensible. Mystical spirituality is mature piety that can emerge from any religion. Everything is ontologically one with God. There is no domain of life or experience that could be excepted from this rule. Every school of mysticism tells us this, insofar as it is allowed uncensored freedom of speech.

We also have to emancipate mysticism from all superpious religiosity, indeed from what we Christians call the gift of prophecy or visions. That doesn't mean that something like this couldn't happen to mystics and might not be important for the individual and even for the group. But a mystical experience can also be something quite banal—and nonetheless completely fulfill a person. It doesn't absolutely have to be expressed in religious language. Its primordial language in the West is the love song. Followers of Zen know that a mystical experience can occur in the bath or on the toilet, while having sex or chopping wood. The Divine reveals itself in everything and whenever we receive the gift of being able to let go.

A further objection is that in esotericism the understanding of God remains at the mercy of individual subjectivity. There are criteria for genuine experience, however, though naturally these, too, are grounded in personal experience and thus can't be nailed down rationally. This renders esotericists powerless to come up with "proof." And that is why mysticism will always come off the worse until a larger portion of humanity is blessed with such experiences. The number of people who have had a transpersonal experience is on the rise. Unfortunately, many of them have to set up their tents outside the organized Church because they are rejected inside it.

Another prejudice involves the idea that contemplation is self-redemption. The fact is, neither Zen nor the higher forms of yoga nor the Christian practice of contemplation have anything to do with self-redemption. Redemption is always there, but it is not something people achieve. Humans can only prepare themselves to experience it. They can only try to clear away the layers that separate them from it. As for the relation between divine grace and human effort, Eckhart says: "It is one moment: the being ready and the pouring out. When nature (that is, humans and their efforts) has done its utmost, then God gives grace. At the same point in time that the (human) spirit is ready, God enters it without delay or hesitation."⁶

I think it's important to take a new look at ideas that over the course of history we have branded as heretical. In the future, real religious dialogue will be conducted on the level of experience, not on the level of theology. One can only hope that Christian churches will recognize the signs of the times and not oppose the new religious awakening. Perhaps they can rediscover in their own tradition the very things that people today are yearning for so passionately.

C.G. Jung reduced the whole problem to a very simple common denominator. For him mysticism was not a matter of faith but of experience. He writes: "Religious experience is absolute, it can't be discussed. One can only say that one has never had such an experience. Then one's opponent will say, 'Sorry, but I *have*,' thereby ending the discussion. It doesn't matter what the world thinks about religious experience: the person who has it possesses the great treasure of a thing that has become for him a source of life, meaning, and beauty and that has given the world and the human race a new brightness."⁷

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