

MYSTICISM

A Guide for the Perplexed

Paul Oliver



**MYSTICISM:
A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED**

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a world which is apparently characterized by instability, uncertainty and risk. We have begun to recognize the vulnerability of the planet on which we exist, whether from climate change or from the limited energy resources remaining. Threats of violence appear to pervade society, and our great institutions are no longer invulnerable. At such times, people search for certainty, and perhaps naturally look for the solace of religion. Yet perhaps paradoxically, the mainstream religions of the world do not appear to have the attraction which they once did, and indeed are in some cases finding it difficult to attract members.

There are many possible reasons for this. The contemporary world is certainly characterized by the transmission of knowledge and ideas on an unprecedented scale, largely facilitated by the internet. The result of this is that people around the world are exposed to a far greater variety of ideas than during any previous historical era. The material attractions of a secular society compete with the appeal of the spiritual life. Within the world of religion, people are exposed to many different sects and cults, and new religious movements. They can in a sense, pick and choose from a supermarket of spiritual ideas. They no longer, as in previous times, have the restricted choice of the religion of their family, cultural group or nation.

This diversity of ideas to which we all have access is clearly a good thing in many ways, but the globalization of the distribution of knowledge has led to the globalization of the distribution of choice. In religious terms, even the tiniest and newest of religious movements can ensure that its ideas reach potential members via the internet. Such a situation probably explains the enormous growth in new

religious movements, and the consequent challenge to the established religions. However, this very growth in new religions and new religious groupings provides also at the same time, a source of uncertainty. In a world of so many different faiths, people ask themselves whether all these faiths are equally good. They ask themselves whether one group, or perhaps more than one, have a greater degree of truth than the rest. Is the one to which they belong better than the others? A world in which there are so many different groups is a world which is still fragmented and uncertain. The remedy for a world which is fragmenting more and more, and showing more and more signs of diversity, is not yet more fragmentation. It is, by contrast, a feeling of unity or unification. This is very often what people are looking for.

In times of uncertainty, the possibility of union and unity, is perhaps more reassuring than ideas of diversity and difference. It may be that people are trying to find confidence and reassurance in the idea that they are linked to the rest of humanity, and that they are linked to the rest of the natural world on the planet. This idea of connection and linkage is central to mysticism. Moreover, people are seeking a sense of direction in the universe. There is little reassurance in the idea that the universe is a sequence of completely random and uncoordinated events. There is considerable reassurance in the idea that there is a spiritual force behind the universe; that when an event takes place in the natural world, another event follows which either supports or balances the initial event. In other words, there is the notion of order and rationality in the universe. It is true that there are unpleasant natural events such as earthquakes, forest fires or floods, which cause great damage. Generally however, nature is resourceful and adaptable, and takes a relatively short time to make amends for the destruction.

In fact it is inaccurate in a sense, to call these events 'unpleasant' because they have no intrinsic intent or purpose. An earthquake does not set out to be malevolent, and to cause as much damage as possible. It is of course, a completely rational event resulting from stress and imbalance in the earth's crust. Once the disequilibrium has to some extent balanced itself, there is a return to greater stability and equilibrium. It is reassuring that when an event happens in the universe, a sequence of events respond to help return to a form of balance and stability. The idea that there is a controlling force behind the universe, even a spiritual force, is a mystical idea.

For many of us, the idea that we are part of something greater, which is also a part of us in return, is a reassuring idea. It provides a sense of purpose and significance in life. Such a mystical idea has been with us for a long time in various forms and in various traditions. Yet there is a timelessness about such ideas. They appeal to human beings in all ages, including our contemporary computer-based, globalized society. This book explores these ideas in both historical periods and in the modern world, and tries to show their practical relevance in day-to-day life.

The first part of the book examines the concept of mysticism, and the extent to which it is possible to provide a definition of the phenomenon. It explores related concepts such as pantheism and non-dualism, and then moves on to discuss the methods used by mystics to extend further the boundaries of their own spiritual understanding and experience. These methods range from meditation in its various forms to the use of yoga, martial arts or dance. Finally, this first part looks at the lifestyle of mystics, and explores the different ways in which mystics choose to lead their lives, and interrelate with the rest of humanity. Traditionally many mystics have adopted a wandering, ascetic lifestyle, but some have practised their religious disciplines within conventional society.

The second part of the book explores the significance of mysticism within the main world religions and traditions. It examines the particularities of individual mystical approaches while at the same time providing comparisons between different traditions. Within each faith, case studies of celebrated mystics are provided, exploring their lives and teachings.

In the final part, there is an attempt to analyse the nature of the mystical goal. It is extremely difficult to define, describe or otherwise understand the spiritual goal to which mystics aspire. By its very nature this is a subjective experience, and according to many mystics, difficult, if not impossible, to describe in mere words. Nevertheless, an attempt is made through the imperfect medium of the written word, to say as much as we can about this ultimate mystical goal. There is finally a contrast between orthodox religious traditions in the world, and the nature of mystical discipline and experience.

Mysticism is one of the least understood aspects of spiritual experience. It is, in a sense, hidden from the regular religious practitioner – a sometimes mysterious and strange aspect of the religious life. Nevertheless, it has never failed to attract people through the

centuries – those who had an unquenchable desire to push back as far as they could, the boundaries of the life of the spirit. If this book can illuminate all but briefly, some aspects of this spiritual search, then it will have achieved a purpose.

PART I

WHAT IS MYSTICISM?

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CHAPTER 1

THE CONCEPT OF MYSTICISM

SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the nature of mysticism and explores the main features of mystical experience. It analyses the concept of mysticism, and the extent to which it is difficult to define the term in a precise way. The chapter examines the connection between mysticism and such ideas as monism and pantheism. Finally, the chapter provides you with a concise summary of the key features of the mystical experience, and the way in which these relate to more traditional forms of religious practice.

INTRODUCTION

The main religious traditions of the world all share something in common. Since their inception they have developed patterns of religious activity which are relatively constant, and with which the majority of adherents comply. These forms of activity might include prayer, chanting, reading from scriptures or the practice of rituals. These are all mechanisms by which the members of the faith can try to achieve the goal of that faith. Generally speaking these practices also have a normative function – that is, they prescribe the kinds of activities which are expected of members, and which also help to define the membership of the religion. Clearly, religious practice varies from religion to religion, but there is usually a defined range of activity which is perceived as acceptable.

Mysticism, however, tends to step outside these normative boundaries. Those who might be described as mystics tend to seek a more direct and personalized religious experience, which is perhaps not as constrained as the orthodox tradition. In the case of theistic traditions,

they may try to gain a direct subjective experience of God, or perhaps a sense of merging or unification with the Divine. In non-theistic traditions mystics may conceive of their spirituality rather differently. They may think of themselves as being in close communion with a spiritual or creative force which pervades the universe.

It is not easy to construct a short, precise definition of mysticism. A similar problem exists with trying to define the concept 'religion'. As you try to produce a definition with sufficient generality to include all the main world faiths, you realize your definition is so wide that it includes many other ideas as well. An alternative to trying to write a definition of mysticism, is to examine some of the ideas associated with the concept. In this way we begin to appreciate something of the range of the term. Ninian Smart, for example, wrote of a 'direct access to the divine' (1999: 209), and in doing so indicated one of the central elements in mysticism, that of an immediate and closely personal contact with God.

Although mystics may be a member of an orthodox religious tradition, and participate in the accepted practices, they typically do more besides. They develop spiritual strategies which help them in achieving this direct apprehension, in a way which, it is assumed, more traditional practitioners find difficult. The immediacy of this direct contact with God may be evident in a variety of ways, but it is generally agreed that one of the enduring aspects of the mystical experience is that it is very difficult to describe 'using normal vocabulary' (Cole, 2004: 51).

Everyday language is perfectly suitable for describing many aspects of the religious life. We can describe the appearance of a cathedral, a mosque or a temple using normal language, and equally we can write about what we observe of a religious ritual. The reason for this is that these are empirical objects which we can understand using our senses of sight, hearing and touch. If however, we seek to describe a person's intimate contact with the Divine, then to some extent we are moving outside the empirical realm. The person themselves may find it difficult to select appropriate terms to describe a very complex feeling, and we may equally find it difficult to understand, as we may not have had an analogous experience. The function of normal, empirical language breaks down because we are moving into what we might term a highly subjective, or perhaps phenomenological realm.

Not only may the mystic have difficulty in finding appropriate language to convey such spiritual experiences, but people in general may

have difficulty in understanding the personal priorities of the mystic. In mysticism, there tends to be less emphasis on the practical matters of everyday life, and a concern with achieving a comprehension of the universe on a different plane. To gain this understanding, mystics may have a sense of surrendering themselves to God, or submitting themselves to a universal spiritual force. They attempt to achieve what Underhill (1999: 10) terms 'a total self-donation'.

In the world of everyday experience we tend to try to control the empirical world. Although we sense that the physical world is always changing, and is ultimately moving towards fragmentation and dissipation, we nevertheless struggle endlessly to limit that change and fragmentation. We know intellectually that the world is impermanent, but we strive to give our world the appearance of permanence. No amount of washing and polishing our cars will stop the onset of rust! Our wonderful new car is ultimately destined to be crushed and melted down! Now even if a mystic possessed a new car, he or she would not be concerned with its preservation. Mystics would not measure their lives through success or failure in preserving material possessions; rather they would evaluate their existence in terms of the spiritual plane. They would hope to gain an understanding and sense of union with a spiritual entity, and in seeking to achieve this would give of themselves wholeheartedly to that spiritual force.

Mysticism is also a term which is not used exclusively in a religious sense. People may refer to a 'mystical experience' when thinking of an event in the secular realm. For example, standing on a cliff top on a summer's day, staring out at the sea, may produce in us feelings of peace and tranquillity, and of a sense of oneness with the world. We may have similar experiences when walking in a beautiful natural setting, or perhaps when listening to music. Of course it depends on how we define 'religion', whether or not such experiences are included within our idea of religious experience. Parrinder (1995: 4) writes of 'transcendental experiences' in this context. There are occasions, often when we least expect them, when we feel transported out of the ordinary, into a rather special state, one no doubt which is difficult to define, but nevertheless very real and meaningful.

It is perhaps understandable that individuals who have such experiences, whether in the religious or secular spheres, wish to find a way to repeat them. Such experiences may be so meaningful that to leave their occurrence to serendipity may seem rather unsatisfactory. The obvious solution is to embark on a programme of spiritual or mystical

training under the tuition of an experienced guide or *guru*, and this has indeed been part of the lives of mystics through the ages. Sheldrake (2007: 44) notes that in the early years of a developing monasticism in Egypt, it was the normal practice for a religious aspirant to live near to an older and more experienced spiritual teacher.

The function of the spiritual guide has traditionally been viewed as very important in mysticism. Within the communities of *sadhus* or wandering ascetics in India, it is typical for a young man in his early teens or younger, to be adopted as a disciple to an experienced teacher, and to serve a long term as a spiritual apprentice. Over a period of a number of years the disciple will receive tuition in meditation, Hindu scriptures and yogic practices, eventually becoming sufficiently experienced to take on his own disciples. There is a sense in which there is a spiritual lineage or succession, with mystical knowledge passing on through the generations. An analogous example might be found in Zen Buddhism, where monks receive tuition in *zazen* or meditation practice in a very disciplined environment. The head of the monastery passes on the tuition to the monks or nuns, who in turn pass it on to the next generation. It is considered by many practitioners that such a lineage may reasonably be viewed as stretching back to the Buddha himself.

Once we start to compare mystical practice or experience within different religious cultures, the question almost inevitably arises whether there is a kind of common core of experience throughout all religions. Such an idea would suggest that all mystics, from whichever tradition, share some experiences and ways of looking at the world, which at the same time, both unite them and distinguish them from more orthodox devotees of the world's faiths. Such a universalism (see Chryssides and Geaves, 2007: 361) of mystical experience might suggest a way of linking all world faiths, and of uniting certain spiritual practitioners.

Such an attempt would however be predicated upon establishing a precise definition of mysticism as a category. It would be necessary to separate clearly mystics from more traditional practitioners, and to find a means of delineating their differing spiritual experiences. Furthermore, it would be necessary to control for the effects of cultural factors which appear to engender a particular type of experience within one faith but not in another. The diversity of mystical experience suggests that this would be no easy task.

It is also argued that there are some specific religious or mystical experiences (Flood, 1999: 171–2) which are so much a part of a particular religious tradition, that it would be difficult to conceive of them in any other context. It may be, for example, that the practice and experience of repeating the name of God within the Sikh religion, while possessing some features of a similar practice in other faiths, is sufficiently distinct that we must consider it to all intents and purposes as a unique experience. The specific history, scriptural and theological context of Sikhism, it could be argued, creates such a particular cultural setting, that the repetition of God's name in that settings becomes a particularly Sikh experience.

MYSTICISM AND SPIRITUALITY

Mysticism as a concept also overlaps other religious concepts such as spirituality. It can be argued that the latter term is gradually being used more and more in settings which are not connected specifically with a particular religion (see Geaves, 2006: 98). One might extend this argument to mysticism also. It may be becoming legitimate to use the term mysticism to apply to experiences other than a sense of union with a divine being or with a form of universal spiritual force. The increasingly frequent use of meditation techniques and of yoga in secular settings, further emphasizes the rather fluid and evolving nature of contemporary religious experience.

The broadening use of the term mysticism does make it more and more difficult to distinguish a 'mystical' experience from the experiences of the larger membership of world faiths. It could be problematic to consider the mystical experience as being in some way 'special' or at a higher level of experience to the religious perceptions of others. To do so could be considered as a form of condescension, and the grounds for making this assumption might appear less than clear. Much here depends upon the way in which we define the boundaries of mysticism and of mystical experience. Furthermore there is the important question of whether it is possible to affirm the validity of mystical experience, and if so, in what way might we establish criteria for such an affirmation.

Our evidence of mystical experience depends very much upon personal, subjective accounts. People describe their experiences, often inevitably using language with which it is somewhat difficult to

represent the intensity or profundity of the experience. There is much less evidence of mystical experience, from observers watching others having such experience. How then might we go about the task of attaching some validity to the experience?

On the one hand, we might compare the account of the mystical experience with accounts by other mystics. Finding points of similarity may point to a degree of validity. On the other hand, there is no reason why someone should not be replicating, either consciously or unconsciously, elements of previous accounts. A further possible criterion noted by Alston (2005: 216) is whether the person demonstrates such features of personality and behaviour which might be consonant with having mystical experiences. Such characteristics might include a sense of calmness and equanimity, or the exuding of a deeply religious approach to life. Again a person may exhibit these personality features entirely independently of having mystical experiences, and they would not constitute a positive affirmation. In short, it is difficult to establish the authenticity of mystical experience, although the kind of criteria suggested above do indicate degrees of validity.

The mystical experience has traditionally been associated with the general practice of withdrawing from the world. It has been felt by many mystics that living in the everyday world was not conducive to gaining spiritual insights, and to achieving their particular goal as a mystic. Some withdrew into monasteries, others adopted a solitary, wandering lifestyle, while others lived in caves, forests or the desert. Linked also to the idea of withdrawal from the world, was the adoption of an ascetic lifestyle. Mystics would perhaps typically only retain the barest of material possessions, and would consume only the minimum nourishment necessary to sustain life. The Jains of India are particularly noted for their ascetic traditions, and the historical Buddha famously adopted ascetic practices in an early attempt to reach an enlightened state.

One of the justifications for a lifestyle of withdrawal from the world lies in the apparently paradoxical idea of non-attachment to God or to any other object of mystical contemplation. It is an element in all the religions originating in the Indian subcontinent, and to perhaps a lesser extent in others, that the individual who aspires to true spirituality should eschew a sense of desire for things. 'Desire' may include certainly a wish to possess material possessions, but also, perhaps even more strongly, a desire to achieve a particular

spiritual goal. The very act of wanting to gain or achieve something actually makes it infinitely more difficult to do so. This general principle appears to have been adopted by many mystical traditions.

The Zen Buddhist, for example, who wants to attain *satori* or enlightenment very badly, and whose entire meditation practice is controlled by a kind of spiritual obsession to achieve enlightenment, will simply not be in an appropriate psychological state to make progress. The mental state to cultivate is one of 'letting go', or abandonment of desires, to free the mind to make progress. In other words, by letting go of a wish for something, we attain it; by relinquishing our need for something, we gain it. There is an apparent paradox here, but upon reflection the principle of abandoning desires begins to make perfect sense.

Different religious and mystical traditions seem to have interpreted this principle in rather different ways, but the fundamental idea is at the basis of practices such as fasting or managing on the bare minimum of food to maintain reasonable health and vigour. While this idea of renouncing material pleasures such as delicious food is common in many mystical traditions, it also contains its own paradox. The mystic can become attached to the very principle of non-attachment! In other words, the mystic can become so obsessed with the principle of managing without food, that this becomes an end in itself. The mystic forgets that the fasting is simply a strategy towards a higher goal. Finally, some writers (Charlesworth, 2002: 166) have noted the apparent contradiction, that those who would have a close experience of God, should in fact, not become attached to this idea. In this way they are more likely to achieve it.

Not all religions or traditions have however advocated an ascetic approach to the mystical quest. The Sikh religion has always advocated that Sikhs should live an active role as part of society, as well as maintaining a spiritual approach to life. The two were not viewed as incompatible. The key principles of the faith were to be employed to help the individual live a moral and religious life, in the midst of the usual tensions and pressures of normal life. As Sikhism can ultimately be considered as a mystical religion, this can be thought of as a recommendation to live a mystical existence in the everyday world. This is much the same position as adopted by the theologian Teilhard de Chardin (see King, 1980: 212).

Mystical experience may be classified into experiences which are on the one hand external to the person, and on the other hand, those

that are within the mind, and are independent of sensory experience. An example of the former might be if someone were hiking in the mountains and developed feeling of awe or even ecstasy, when confronted with the magnitude of the mountains and the breadth of the scenery. This might be conceptualized as feelings about God, or simply about the magnificence of nature. However, whatever the specific nature of the experiences, they are initiated by external stimuli, and hence this type of mystical experience is often termed extrovertive mysticism.

However, there are arguably types of mystical feeling which are perhaps independent of empirical experience. These might be said to include experiences during meditational practice, in which a feeling of bliss arises. Such a feeling is not caused to arise by a specific stimulus, and hence might be referred to as introvertive mysticism. The existence of *a priori* experiences, or those which are said to occur before and independent of empirical events is a problematic assertion, but at least this division does provide a way of thinking about mystical experience.

We have thus explored some of the different facets of mysticism, without attempting a precise definition. We will however return at the end of this chapter to the task of providing a rather more concise statement of the phenomenon. In the meantime, perhaps we can explore some related terminology, which again sheds some light on mysticism.

MONISM, PANTHEISM AND PANENTHEISM

There are a variety of interrelated terms which are used in religious studies, and which overlap to some extent with the idea of mysticism. Perhaps the most general term is 'monism'. This is the assertion or belief that the entire universe is interconnected in such a way that it is fundamentally impossible to distinguish the parts. In other words, the most accurate way to think of the universe is that it is basically a single entity. On one level this assertion seems to defy common sense, since people are all slightly different, and then again there are many different species of other animals and plants. Monism, however, is not considering this superficial differentiation of the universe, but the concept is rather suggesting that this diversity is linked together by a single spiritual force or entity, such that the universe is

fundamentally unified. We may think of this spiritual force as God if we wish, but it may alternatively simply be a spiritual link which is not identified with a deity.

If we conceive of monism as referring to a single God, then that God will exist both externally to us in some transcendent realm, and also within us as an imminent deity. The fundamental characteristic of God, however, will be the idea of unity. If a mystic then, thinks of the universe in this way, then the task is to realize and understand this sense of unity in a fundamental, experiential way. Mystics need to fully comprehend that they are part of God, and God is part of them. They need to appreciate this, not in an abstract, intellectual manner, but to try to experience this on an emotional level. In this way they will truly understand the concept, rather than simply being taught it in an intellectual way.

A concept which is related to monism is that of pantheism. As the name suggests, this concept involves the idea that God is present throughout the universe. Perhaps more than that the concept also implies that God is part of everything in the universe, and everything is an element in God. We might go even further, and say that it is not possible to differentiate between God and the rest of the universe. If one subscribes to the view of pantheism, then one is logically also a monist. However, it is possible to be an advocate of monism while not accepting pantheism, simply because the monist does not need necessarily to subscribe to the concept of a God.

Pantheism is thus relevant to mysticism in the context of a mystic who is a member of a monotheistic faith. In that case the mystic may accept the proposition that the soul of the individual human being has within it an element of the Divine, and conversely the individual soul is also part of the Divine. The goal of the mystic then becomes the task of transforming this logical acceptance of a proposition into an experiential understanding. The pathway to that experience then relies upon the various strategies traditionally adopted by mystics, including prayer, contemplation and meditation.

A subtly different concept is that of panentheism. Like pantheism, it accepts the philosophical position that God is present in, and a part of the entire empirical universe. It does, however, attach rather more significance to God, in that the latter is viewed as greater and more important than the rest of the universe. God is perceived as certainly imminent, but also transcendent and all-powerful, and

embracing the entire universe. Such a concept of God will tend to suggest worship and devotional practices on the part of the mystic, who offers the individual soul to the greater transcendent deity.

A further term which is in fairly frequent use, and which is connected with Hindu philosophy, is non-dualism. This is the philosophy that a concept of the world as two polar opposites is largely a failure. A dualistic philosophy would be one which, for example, recognizes the classical distinction between subject and object. Hence, a human being (the subject) looks at a pine forest (the object). Now in much mystical thinking there is the notion that the subject and object are not really separate. If mystics were looking at and contemplating the same forest, they would tend to regard themselves and the forest as a unity. Most mystics, even within a range of religious traditions, have to some extent regarded the existence of the individual ego as being of rather spurious validity. The reason for this is that in an attempt to achieve a sense of spiritual unity, they try to eliminate all sense of desire for the world. In this way the individual is free, and can more easily seek a close connection and understanding with God or an all-embracing entity. Therefore any way of life or thinking which seeks to emphasize a sense of opposites or duality in the world is the very antithesis of non-dualism. The latter idea is the philosophical basis of a number of Hindu schools of thought, and has been very influential over the years, with mystics.

EXOTERICISM AND ESOTERICISM

The adjectives exoteric and esoteric are used both in the context of religion, but also in everyday discourse. The word esoteric is probably the commonest in everyday language, carrying the suggestion of an area of knowledge which is rather unusual, obscure and difficult to understand. Exoteric on the other hand is used to signify something which is straightforward, commonly understood and available to the generality of individuals.

In terms of religion, exoteric knowledge or practice is that which is widely understood, and probably is part of regular festivals or ritual. It would apply to aspects of religious life which are for example, part of everyday worship. Esoteric knowledge or practice, however, would generally not be widely practised or understood. It might be confined to a minority of say, monastics, or it might require specialist skills

to understand. It might for example, involve scriptures in an archaic language, expertise in which was limited to a few.

There are esoteric elements in all the major religions, and many of these are associated with mystical practice. There are also newer branches of religions or what might be termed new religious movements, which are largely esoteric, in the sense that there are relatively few members, and there is no particular attempt to spread the knowledge base of the group more widely. An example of a newer religious movement with strong mystical elements would be the Theosophical Society founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky. Its belief system could be described as monist, and it was much influenced by the Hindu religion. While never attaining a large membership, it has nevertheless been much discussed in spiritual and religious literature, and has retained a certain degree of influence in spiritually and mystically oriented circles.

It should be remembered of course that terms such as esoteric and exoteric do not necessarily reflect an element of reality in religious knowledge or experience. In employing such terms we are as human beings, trying to impose external categories on a subject about which it is usually very difficult to be precise. Such terms help us study and make sense of areas such as religion and mysticism, but we should not deceive ourselves, that they mirror reality in some way.

Much the same may be said of the concept 'mysticism' itself, and as Kripal (2006: 321–2) argues, mysticism is a relatively recent area of study. This is not to say that practices which we label as mystical have not been occurring in religions for many years. It is simply to remind ourselves that the act of grouping them together and regarding them as in some way related and interconnected is a more recent activity. Mysticism could be regarded, for example, as syncretistic. That is it draws together a number of different practices and beliefs from different faiths, and combines them under one heading. The scholarly activity of grouping activities and ideas together and giving them a name such as mysticism certainly makes the study of religion easier, but it is important that we are alert to the danger of reification. The latter is the act of apparently making something 'real' by, for example, applying a specialist term to it. Now this discussion is not intended to undermine the study of 'mysticism', but merely to pause and remind ourselves that it is an academic category created by human beings. What are 'real', are the many religious activities

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