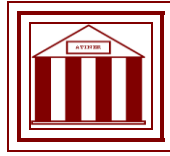


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**Portrayal of the Dionysiac Cult
in the Bacchae**

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Portrayal of the Dionysiac Cult in the Bacchae

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Abstract

In his last play *Bacchae*, Euripides raises some very important and fundamental questions regarding the nature of a true Deity, and the genuine purpose of a religion or a cult. The play also explores the psychology of mass violence, and hysterical and frenzied behaviour of a mob possessed by religious zealotry. Euripides also shows how dangerous zealotry is. Mindless violence perpetrated in the name of religions and gods has ruined and devastated countless lives; innumerable innocent people have been killed mercilessly across the world in the name of races, religions and cults, and this process is still going on, hence the play is very relevant even today.

Euripides never hesitated in condemning cruelty and violence wrecked in the name of a religion. He exposed fake and useless religious rites, rituals, customs and practices. (e.g. *Iphigenia at Tauris*, *Hippolytus*, *Women of Troy*, *Hecabe*.) Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, Dionysus and other Greek gods never showed mercy and compassion. They ruthlessly destroyed and ruined all those who had refused to surrender. Their nature was vengeful. Such immoral and unethical behaviour of the Greek gods made some Greeks of the Fifth Century B.C. skeptical of them; and one of the major themes in the plays of Euripides is religious skepticism, which in my opinion is clearly reflected in the *Bacchae* too, which is full of gruesome violence, ferocity and savagery.

Euripides abhorred violence and brutality because along with many other Athenians he witnessed it in plenty during the Peloponnesian war. Vengeance, ruthlessness, utter selfishness, inhumanity and irrationalism replaced love, compassion, mercy, and wisdom. (E.g. in 416 B.C. Athenians butchered all the male Melians and sold women and children into slavery simply because the citizens of Melos did not accept Athenian sovereignty. They wanted to retain their freedom. Thucydides describes this horrible event in his *The History of the Peloponnesian War Book Five*.) Many outrageous crimes were committed by the Athenians during the war. Extreme selfishness and horrors of war during the twenty seven years long Peloponnesian war, and a series of barbarous crimes committed during the war made deep and lasting impressions on the psyche of many prominent Greeks of the Fifth Century B.C. and Euripides was one of them. Many innocent, brave, and honest Athenians were ostracised for no reason, and democracy became a plaything for shrewd and crafty politicians. Intellectual freedom and freedom of speech were in danger. Such events made some Athenians like Socrates and Plato skeptical about democracy, prevailing religious practices, and the present day social order. Almost every play of Euripides shows zeit-geist of the Fifth Century life.

In my view *The Bacchae*, presents before us the cruelest face of violence; and these acts of extreme barbarity are committed in the name of a cult. Our contemporary world too, is torn by violence, fanaticism, racism, dogmas, communal and sectarian violence, and terrorism. Religious and racial bigotry still exists. The important questions are: Does religion teach hatred? Does it recommend brutality and bloodshed? Does it liberate the spirit from the fetters of ignorance or does it condition the mind? Should religion preach fanaticism? Is there a place for vengeance and barbarity in a religion? Is religious zealotry desirable? What is the true purpose of a religion: Is it to destroy and devastate lives or to bring peace, love, bliss and happiness? What is the relationship between man and God? Are human beings mere slaves? Can humans not raise questions and doubts? Are they not free to practice the religion or faith of their choice? Must they always accept a new cult or a god without any doubt? Is skepticism sin? In the *Bacchae* Euripides raises all these questions. He was a staunch advocate of intellectual freedom. But there is little or no place for it in the cult worship which demands absolute obedience.

The present paper focuses on Dionysiac cult and Dionysus. In my opinion, Euripides neither glorifies nor condemns Dionysus. But he certainly raises some very important, serious and disturbing issues pertaining to the cult worship and the nature of god; and it is up to his readers and spectators to judge the merits or demerits of the cult. My main object is to present my observations regarding Dionysiac cult, the mind set of the worshippers, and religion in general. In my view the play is certainly not the piece of poet's recantation.

Keywords: Skepticism, Vengeance, Cult.

“If the gods do evil they are not gods.” (**Euripides**)
“Non-injury (Non-violence) is the greatest religion.”
(**The Mahabharata**)

The main event of the play is the introduction of a new god and his cult in Thebes. Having successfully established his cult in Lydia, Phrygia and other Asian countries, Dionysus arrives in Thebes with the intention of founding his Dionysiac religion. He has another wish too: he wishes to punish all those who insulated his mother Semele by doubting her union with Zeus, and his (Dionysus’) divine origin. He arrives in Thebes with a mission and a firm resolve; and in order to accomplish his mission he has decided to create panic and fear among the Thebans. Intimidation and punishment are his weapons. E.R. Dodds writes:

*“Unlike most Greek tragedies **the Bacchae** is a play about an historical event –the introduction into Hellas of a new religion.”¹*

In order to take revenge, he has already driven the Theban women mad and frantic. He has robbed them of their vision, reason and intellect. (common characteristic of blind followers even today.) Pentheus is reluctant to accept this new and strange cult, alien to the Greeks. Thebans are not atheists, but some of them including the king, are skeptical about this new cult. In this regard Dodds observes:

“Dionysus’ opponents are no atheists (as lines 45-46 show); they merely refuse to recognize the new-comer’s claim to god head.”²

People do not generally accept a new god, alien rites and rituals immediately, so Pentheus too, is unwilling to accept Dionysiac cult. In my opinion, there is a place for disbelief, doubt and scepticism. Religion must not be thrust upon. But fear, intimidation, violence and coercion have been employed by the heads of the various cults and religions for centuries. Is this desirable? Moreover, among the Greek gods, Dionysus is junior. In this regard Herodotus observes:

“The Greeks regard Heracles, Dionysus, and Pan as the youngest of the gods. With the Egyptians, contrariwise, Pan is exceedingly ancient, and belongs to those whom they call “the eight gods,” who existed before the rest. Heracles is one of the gods of the second order, who are known as

¹ E. R. Dodds, Introduction, *The Bacchae* Second Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Reprinted 2009), xi.

² *Ibid.*, 95.

“the twelve” and Dionysus belongs to the gods of the third order whom the twelve produced.”³

Ancient Dionysiac Cult was the confluence of the Egyptian, the Arab, the Lydian, the Phrygian, and the Indian rites and rituals which were new and alien to the native Greeks of the antiquity. Dionysus was influenced by the Oriental customs, traditions, and religious rites because before entering into Hellas, he had spent considerable time in Lydia, Phrygia, Persia, and Arabia. His long stay in India must have made him thoroughly acquainted with the rites and religious practices of ancient India, many of which required animal sacrifices. There are many similarities between the Dionysiac cult and the religious practices of the Aryans of India. In this regard Thomas Bulfinch observes:

“The most famous part of his wonderings is his expedition to India, which is said to have lasted several years. Returning in triumph, he undertook to introduce his worship into Greece, but was opposed by some princes, who dreaded its introduction on account of the disorders and madness it brought with it.”⁴

Dionysus’ main purpose of visiting India was to learn religious practices prevalent in India.

“In Phrygia, Rhea cured him and taught him religious rites. Then he spent years in India, refining his philosophical resources, and bringing his secrets of wine making to many places in Asia. When he returned, satyrs, maenads, and nymphs followed him, and festivals of dance, song, wine, and ecstatic transcendence were celebrated to honor him. But his very knowledge of wine, the esoteric and mysterious rites frightened the more temperate who dreaded the possibility of madness that art and ecstasy might bring with it.”⁵

Arrian throws ample light on Dionysus’ stay in India in his **Indica**.

“Dionysus’ expedition is amply evidenced by the city of Nysa, as well as the mountain called Meros and the ivy which grows on it, the practice adopted by the Indians of marching out for battle to the sound of drums and cymbals, and their clothing which is dapple like that of Dionysian devotees.”⁶

³ Herodotus, *The Histories* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1997), 200-201.

⁴ Thomas Bulfinch, *The Golden Age of Myth & Legend* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Reference, 1993), 199.

⁵ *The Complete Poems of Sappho*, Glossary. Trans. Wills Branstone (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), 188-89.

⁶ Arrian, *The Anabasis and the Indica* Trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 232-33.

There is a striking similarity between Siva, an Indian god, and Dionysus. Siva was a pre-Vedic god. The people of Indus Valley civilisation which was destroyed around 1500 B.C. worshipped Siva. Here the important issue is: were Siva and Dionysus contemporary? Did Dionysus learn mystic rites, tantra vidya, and frenzied dance (Siva's tandav) from Siva? Was he one of the disciples of Siva? Well, the answers to these questions require another research paper. Siva destroyed and devastated his father-in-law Daksha's Yagna (sacrifice) in order to establish his supremacy. Siva's followers killed Daksha along with his soldiers, because Daksha had refused to accept Siva as a god. He invited neither Siva nor his daughter (Siva's wife) nor paid any honour to him. In order to teach Daksha a lesson Siva's worshippers destroyed him utterly. Siva wanted others to worship him as a god, and like Dionysus he did not hesitate to unleash the reign of terror. (This story is narrated in **The Siva Puran**, chapters: 27-43) Phallus worship is another common characteristic of both the cults. Above account has been given to establish the fact that the Oriental customs, traditions, religious and orgiastic rites, and rituals profoundly influenced Dionysus.

In Euripides' play Pentheus, refuses to accept this imported and an alien god and his cult. Although the Greeks borrowed many of the names of their gods from the Egyptians, they had their own distinct way of worshipping their gods. In my view, here in the play the clash is between the Greek and the Oriental mindset and beliefs. It is because of this conflict of civilizations that Pentheus is reluctant to accept a new cult. The process of integration of alien or foreign civilization is a time taking process. Here the conflict is between belief and reason. Complete surrender to a king or a priest is an Oriental custom, not Hellenic. In Asia authority of kings and priests was accepted without any doubt in the past. In fact, to raise doubt was considered a heresy. (Even today the mind set of the majority of Asians is not truly and fully democratic. Dissent, criticism, and rational and pragmatic approach to life are not tolerated by many, especially religious and political leaders.) Scepticism was, and is considered a sin. In India, the liberal and rational traditions propagated in **the Upanisads, and the Bhagavad Gita** were systematically decimated and destroyed by priests, shamans, and kings in order to rule and run their religious businesses; there was no place for doubt, dissent and reason. Kings, priests, shamans and heads of different cults never allowed people to raise questions regarding their cults and beliefs, and those who raised doubts were branded as heretics and punished. (Europe too, experienced this type of vicious religious environment during 15th 16th and 17th centuries.) Rationalism was supplanted by superstitions and dogmas. Even today it is not possible to criticize bogus religious practices without provoking wrath of fanatics, and the so-called custodians of religions and customs.

But such was not the case with the Greeks who were more rational; and their mindset was more liberal. In the 5th and the 4th centuries B.C. and even before that time reason, intellect, and logic governed their lives. Freedom was essential for them. In this regard H.D.F.Kitto observes:

“Now we must turn to another feature of the Greek mind, its firm belief in Reason.

--- --- ---

The Greek never doubted for a moment that the universe is not capricious: it obeys Law and is therefore capable of explanation. Even in pre-philosophical Homer we find this idea, for behind the gods (though sometimes identified with them) is a shadowy power that Homer called Ananke, Necessity, an Order of things which even gods cannot infringe. Greek Tragedy is built on the faith that in human affairs it is Law that reigns, not chance.”⁷

The Greek gods are neither omnipotent, nor omniscient, nor immanent, because there is a power superior to the gods. Kitto writes:

“Even though some of the powers may seem to be lawless and at times manifestly in conflict with each other, nevertheless there is a regular rhythm in the universe which they may strain but never break. In other words, there is a power which is more powerful than the gods; the gods are not omnipotent. This shadowy power was called Ananke, ‘What has to be,’ or Moira, ‘the sharer-out.’ This conception of a universal and impersonal power contains the germ both of religion and science.”⁸

The plays of Euripides reflect this aspect.

It is little wonder that Pentheus refuses to welcome a sectarian god. Dionysus is a very shrewd schemer. He knows it well that it is necessary to establish his cult among his own people. If the people of his native land refuse to accept him as a god, other Greeks too, will surely reject him. At the time of his entry in Thebes, other Olympian gods have been well established. So, it is little bit difficult to convince people about his new religion, therefore he decides to unleash a reign of terror and panic among the Thebans. Before his arrival in Thebes, he ruined and destroyed Lycourgos, the king of Edonians because he had declined to accept Dionysus and his cult; and expelled him. Dionysus took revenge by driving Lycourgos mad, and in his madness he killed his own son. Dionysus then asked Edonians to kill Lycourgos; and they obeyed him. (Book III, **the Library of Greek Mythology** by Apollodorus.) Is such cruelty desirable? Apollodorus writes:

“Having shown the Thebans that he was a god, he went to Argos, and there again, when they failed to honour him, he drove the women mad, and

⁷ H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 176.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

they carried their unweaned children into the mountain and feasted on their flesh.”⁹

Is this not the most horrible act inspired by Bacchus? Can we expect such behaviour from a god? Such horrible aspects of his personality are revealed by Euripides in his **Bacchae**. Dionysus knows it well that terror, fear, intimidation and threats are means to control and dictate people; and he employs the same in Thebes. Dictators, tyrants, despots and heads of religions and cults have always used the same strategy. In the **Bacchae**, Dionysus performs many miracles. Rites, miracles, and ritual like necromancy are integral part of many cults, and purposes of such practices are manifold: to create more worshippers by creating fear among people, to keep them under control, and to rob them of their reason, logic, and intellect, and to create confusion. The same tactics are employed by Dionysus in the **Bacchae**.

Pentheus’ skepticism makes Dionysus angry. He wants complete surrender. He calls Pentheus ‘fighter against gods.’ (p. 193) This is a very common allegation used by shamans and priests against all those who raise doubts. Sceptics have always been labelled as heretics and atheists. Worshippers of Dionysus abuse Pentheus. This act reflects the mentality and mind set of blind followers who do not tolerate liberal practices. In the 21st century the same mind set exists in many societies. Religious zealotry has remained one most serious problems faced by the human race since the inception of religions, cults, and sects. Bacchants in the play behave like fanatics, and they abuse the king of Thebes.

*“Justice, now be revealed! Now let your sword
Thrust – through and through- to sever the throat
Of the godless, lawless, shameless son of Echion,
Who sprang from the womb of Earth!*

(p. 228)

Raising questions and doubts are sinful acts according to these Lydian worshippers of Dionysus. According to them Dionysiac cult must be accepted; Bacchus must be worshipped and honoured. Doubt about his divinity is a sin, and deserves punishment. This is what all the Vedic (Indra, Mitra, Agni, Varun etc.) Olympian, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian gods demand. No questions, no doubts, no scepticism. They must be worshipped blindly. But is this desirable? Orthodoxy has no place in a true religion. The spirit of tolerance and compassion pervades the scriptures like **The Gita**, and the **Upanisads**. There is a difference between a true devotee and a blind and fanatic worshipper. We must recognize the difference between faith and superstitious beliefs.

Dionysus behaves like tyrants who are interested in absolute power, and in order to achieve and retain it, they do not hesitate to perpetrate the heinous crimes, and the crimes against the entire humanity. But these types of horrible

⁹ Apollodoros, *The Library of Greek Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 103.

and inhuman acts we do not expect from a god. Is the purpose of rites and rituals to create panic, and confusion? Dionysus punishes Pentheus and his mother in the most horrible and the cruelest manner. Commenting on the death of Pentheus, Peter Burian observes:

*“Pentheus’ death is also a prime tragic example of the ‘perverted sacrifice’ that constitutes a prominent tragic theme. He is identified by his killers as an animal and explicitly described as a sacrificial victim (1246), adorned for the sacrifice, led in procession, and slaughtered in a sequence that reproduces the stages of animal sacrifice, with his mother as priestess (1141) making the kill. The overt Dionysiac content of this sacrifice accounts for its detail and emphasis, but the representation of killing as sacrifice is repeated tragic trope- in every case connected with the deformation and perversion of ritual practice.”*¹⁰

Thus Pentheus becomes victim of religious bigotry, which is very dangerous for society. Here, the important question is: Is there any place for religious bigotry in a liberal society? Most of the cult followers are fanatics and bigots, and the same is the case with menads. As for Pentheus, he is not free from vices. He too, behaves like a ruthless tyrant; he too becomes absolutely irrational, and rash in his behaviour and conduct. His mindless anger and desire for vengeance make him blind and rob him of his reason, and wisdom. He threatens Teiresias with dire consequences. He fails to observe restraint. According to the Greek tragic poets, wisdom, self - control, pity, justice, forbearance, humility and compassion are very important virtues which can save a person from misery, wretchedness, and pain; while excessive pride, arrogance, anger, cruelty, lack of restraint and wisdom invite death, destruction, and misery.

Pentheus pays heavy price with his life because he fails to exercise restraint; and his mother and aunts too suffer heavily for their lack of self-control. Unruly passions must be reined in by the intellect. Unrestrained and unchecked passions invite tragic consequences. Irrational emotional outburst is always dangerous. Paroxysm of hatred invites doom. Chorus sings:

“Though blessed gods dwell in the distant skies,
They watch the ways of men.
To know much is not to be wise.
Pride more than mortal hastens life to its end;
And they who in pride pretend
Beyond man’s limit, will lose what lay
Close to their hand and sure.”

(p. 204)

¹⁰ Peter Burian, “Tragedy adapted for stages and screens: the Renaissance to the present,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 193.

True heroism and fortitude lie in controlling unworthy passions and emotions. Self-restraint is a virtue of prime importance. It is very easy to inflict punishment, to destroy and devastate. But a person or a god who is above hatred, vengeance, anger and arrogance is a true mystic and a yogi. In the play neither Dionysus nor Pentheus exhibit generosity and tolerance. Pentheus is arrogant and swells with pride, and Bacchus is full of hatred and interested in vengeance. Pentheus deserves punishment, but the manner in which he is killed and punished by Dionysus is surely deplorable. Dionysus chooses his mother and aunts to punish him. Killing of a son by her own hands is the most horrible and painful thing for a mother. Pentheus' dismemberment by Agaue and her sisters is the most brutal, shocking, and uncivilized act inspired by Dionysus. He becomes ruthless and savage in pursuit of vengeance. He is a god, and yet he does not show a trace of pity, forbearance, forgiveness and compassion. By punishing the king in the cruelest manner he wants to set a precedent among the Thebans and other Greeks. People must yield or perish. This is not new for cult gods. Commenting on Euripides' presentation of gods Philip Vellacott writes:

*“But whereas in Sophocles the gods in some degree under human thoughts and actions and on occasion take a hand in their affairs, so that reverence for them is proper attitude of humans, Euripides presents the gods rather as symbols of amoral cosmic or social forces, blind and often destructive in their operation; powers which man can apprehend if not explain, but which are themselves incapable of understanding the spiritual qualities of man or the values by which they live. Gods are both the beauty and the peril of life, the peremptory conditions of living, the facts of the world as it is. Men and women must accept both the benefits and the cruelties of the world, must, ‘endure the gift of a god’, Piety is acknowledgement of fact. In Euripides’ plays kindness, sympathy, and self-knowledge are more important than reverence. The reverence Aphrodite demands from us is recognition that she is a part of our nature. The cause of disaster is more often deficient humanity than want of respect for powers who do not respect the spirit of man; this is true even in **The Bacchae**. --- --- --- Sophocles treated Athena and Apollo with respect; Euripides treated Olympians – though Zeus is usually an exception – ironically.”¹¹*

In my opinion a god or a person cannot be religious unless he is compassionate, kind and sympathetic. Spiritual enlightenment brings bliss and ineffable joy, not madness and frenzy. Cult worship is something different from true enlightenment. Paul Cartledge writes:

¹¹ Philip Vellacott, Introduction, *Alcestis and Other Plays* (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 9-10.

“--- while in his Bacchae the two faces of Dionysus – creative euphoria and lethal retribution – confront each other: no single right answer is offered or advocated.”¹²

Dionysus may be grossly misunderstood deity, but his ferocity, savagery and thirst for vengeance is certainly deplorable. Like other Greek gods, he too, is a slave to his wretched passions over which he has no control. In *The Bacchae* Euripides presents this darker aspect of Bacchus. Dionysus’ desire to destroy his aunts, maternal grandfather, and his cousin makes him absolutely blind, savage and cruel. C.M. Bowra comments:

“When the gods treat the men in this way, it is natural to ask if they are just. The same question occurred in Euripides, who more than once puts Apollo in the wrong and makes even real powers like Aphrodite and Dionysus destructive and heartless. There is undeniably a kind of tragedy in which man fights a futile battle against merciless superhuman powers who seek his destruction. It has its own grandeur and is the only kind of tragedy possible in an age which has ceased to believe that gods are beneficent or rational.”¹³

In the play, even after the horrible act of killing Pentheus, he shows no trace of pity. His dialogue with Cadmus reveals his true character.

Cadmus: Have mercy on us, Dionysus. We have sinned.

Dionysus: You know too late. You did not know me when you should.

Cadmus: **We acknowledge this; but your revenge is merciless.**

Dionysus: And rightly; I am a god, and you insulted me.

Cadmus: **Gods should not be like mortals in vindictiveness.**

Dionysus: All this my father Zeus ordained from the beginning.”

(p. 243)

Cadmus’ last observation is of prime importance. Here the most important questions raised by Euripides are: What is the difference between the Divine and daemonic nature? What is the difference between a god and a mortal man? Should gods be jealous, vindictive, and merciless? Dionysus fails to give satisfactory answer to Cadmus. His answer is evasive. He blames Zeus. His explanations are stereo type, and very common. Shamans, fanatics, and zealots always blame supreme power of fate in order to hide their cruelty. C.M. Bowra writes:

¹² Paul Cartledge, “Deep plays: theatre as process in Greek civic life”, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, 22.

¹³ C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1944), 375.

“In the Bacchants Dionysus has much right on his side, but he seems to assert himself too savagely, and his final speech is neither satisfying nor comforting.”¹⁴

The cruel vengeance of Dionysus is certainly disturbing. It compels us to ponder over the purpose and role of religions and cults in our society. Do we need gods and goddesses who behave like Fascists and Nazis? Mighty Dionysus is absolutely helpless before Hera who is responsible for the tragic death of Semele, and his madness. He is like most of the Pagan gods and goddesses: malicious, selfish, and ruthless.

It is abundantly clear from the above arguments that the play was not written to glorify Dionysus as suggested by Nietzsche.

“--- --- --- This is the message of a poet who has heroically resisted Dionysus throughout his whole life, only to end his career by glorifying his opponent and committing suicide like a man hurling himself from a tower in order to escape the terrible, unbearable dizziness of vertigo.”¹⁵

Euripides would never have revealed Dionysus’ ferocity, cunningness, and savagery had he wished to glorify him. In the play Dionysus is neither benevolent, nor generous. What he wants is appeasement. Are we willing to worship such a god today?

There is another important issue pertaining to Dionysiac cult and that is mystical ecstasy. Critics like H.D.F. Kitto and Nietzsche argue that Dionysus brought mystical ecstasy with him. According to Chorus the worshippers of Dionysus experience mystic joy and ecstasy. (Lines 64-167) For Bacchants he is a “god of joy”. Kitto observes:

“For Dionysus is more than the god of wine; in this play he is the god of ecstasy in religion (and the sender of panic), joy in nature, natural purity, happiness, beauty. He is not indeed the only source of these good things, but he is very important one.”¹⁶

I agree. But the question is: Does ecstasy bring with it pain, death, and misery? Mystical or spiritual ecstasy is the source of ineffable joy and bliss, it brings with it infinite love, peace and true happiness. Mystical experience purifies and illumines the self. Mystics, yogis, and true worshippers experience ecstasy which is different from the experience of the Bacchants. Mystics, after experiencing spiritual enlightenment, forget their own self and become part of the Divine. It is a unique experience which can be attained only after the purification of the self. Man must first get rid of his unworthy passions like

¹⁴ Ibid., 179.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Trans: Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 60.

¹⁶ H.D.F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London: Routledge Classics, 2012), 320.

envy, hatred, arrogance, fear, lust etc. before acquiring the blessed state. There is no place for vengeance and hatred in a mystical ecstasy. Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, Dante, William Blake, St. John of the Cross, Narsinh Mehta, Mirabai to name a few, attained bliss, and experienced mystic joy. Such divine experience liberates the spirit from the fetters of ignorance; it does not bind, or encourage killing. There is difference between madness, frenzied behaviour, and mystical joy. Mystical ecstasy is the harbinger of consciousness not ignorance.

In my view Dionysiac ecstasy is different from real mystical joy which is sacred and untainted. Beauty and joy do not encourage bestial instincts and barbarous acts; on the contrary they create soothing effects and bring serenity and bliss. Violence, cruelty, delirious behaviour and ignorance have no place in a genuine mystical experience. Having attained mystical bliss a person cannot even think of harming others. So, in my opinion it is improper to say that dionysiac frenzy is a mystical experience. Defining mysticism Evelyn Underhill observes:

“Mysticism then is not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. It has nothing in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge. On the one hand, it is not merely the power contemplating Eternity. On the other, it is not to be identified with any kind of religious queerness. It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man. Or, if you like it better-for this means exactly the same thing-it is the art of establishing his conscious relation with the Absolute.”¹⁷

Intense personal experience of the Truth or the Absolute is the prime characteristic of a mystic. In conclusion I would like to state that in the play of Euripides, Dionysus behaves just like a shaman who has nothing to do with spiritual enlightenment or realisation of the Absolute. We must remember that performance of rites and rituals is something different from realisation of the Truth and enlightenment. In the play Dionysiac ecstasy is the source of delusion and miscomprehension and hence it is not mystical.

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¹⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness*, 7th ed., (London, Methuen & Co. Ltd.), 81.

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