

JPJRS 18/2 ISSN 0972-33315. July 2015: 155-181

## Dharma of Jesus: Exploring Its Philosophical Foundations

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4282270

Stable URL: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4282270>

George Karuvelil, SJ

*Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune*

**Abstract:** This is an essay in fundamental theology, an attempt to communicate the foundational experience of Christian faith in an intelligible manner to all, including atheists. Beginning with a brief reference to the past attempts to do this task, it is seen that those who start with universal experiences find the specific character of Christian faith problematic and those who start with the Christian experience (the Christ event) make it inaccessible to non-Christians. The author sets out to bridge this gap with the category of “person-mysticism” for which a longer discussion of well known “nature mysticism” paves the way.

**Keywords:** nature mysticism; natural mysticism; person-mysticism; immanence-transcendence; “wholly other”; Jesus Christ.

### 1. Introduction

Coming from the root *dhr* (‘to hold’, ‘to support’), dharma was understood as that which upholds, i.e., the foundations. By the Buddhist period, it comes to mean doctrinal foundations<sup>1</sup> For our purpose, dharma refers to the foundations of Christian faith. Pope Benedict spelt out this foundation clearly when he said, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”<sup>2</sup> Further we want to explore this foundational encounter philosophically. Philosophy, in its original sense, is not a set of ideas, but a way of life,<sup>3</sup> a sort of guide map for living in a given world.<sup>4</sup> The word ‘given’ is important because phenomenologically, the world inhabited by the ancient Greeks or the medieval Europeans is not the same as the modern world or the contemporary world of ours. Therefore, if philosophy is understood as a way life, then

philosophy is bound to change as the world changes; only then will it be able to offer guidance to life.

Friedrich Schleiermacher was the first to realize that such a change was required in presenting Christian faith to the modern world. In keeping with the anthropocentrism of modernity, therefore, Schleiermacher took the experiential turn. Since he sought to address those intellectual elites of his time who were sceptical of Christian faith<sup>5</sup> it is better termed as fundamental theology than theology.<sup>6</sup> Schleiermacher's experiential turn, however, has been subjected to severe criticism, Karl Barth even calling it a betrayal of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Catholic thinkers, led by Karl Rahner also took the experiential turn<sup>8</sup> via mysticism.<sup>9</sup> But against a dominantly introvertive view of mysticism, he gave it a "transcendental" twist, according to which every concrete, limited, thematic experience (like perceiving a pen) involves an implicit, unthematic awareness of the unlimited divine mystery as the horizon or the ground of experience.<sup>10</sup> However, Rahner was not oblivious to the fact that this philosophical foundation of his fundamental theology is in the "most radical tension"<sup>11</sup> with the foundation of his systematic theology, i.e., the person of Jesus Christ.

The basic problem with the experiential turn is that the more universal, philosophical starting point does not do justice to the specific character of the Christian experience in Jesus Christ. If, on the other hand, one begins with the Christian revelation, as in traditional theology, then it remains inaccessible to its "cultured despisers" of religion, those disillusioned with Christian faith. This is the dilemma of Christian fundamental theology in the contemporary world: if it begins with the experience in Jesus Christ, it is not able to reach out to the non-Christians and if it begins with something more universal, it seems to bypass the Christian experience. One could call it the tension between the

identity of the experience and its accessibility to non-Christians, including non-believers. Similar tension can be seen in the scholarly study of mysticism, with the “universal core” of Walter Stace<sup>12</sup> and the “experiences-are-different” approach of Steven Katz.<sup>13</sup>

Situated in this context, the present article advocates an approach to mysticism that seeks to ease, if not resolve, the tension between identity of Christian experience and its accessibility to non-Christians. While endorsing Rahner’s concern to maintain the universal accessibility of mysticism, I find his transcendental analysis of ordinary experience problematic. Therefore, I begin with a class of experiences that is acknowledged as mystical, but also universal, since they are relatively independent of prior beliefs and practices. This is nature mysticism. I go on to provide an alternative interpretation of nature mysticism to the one provided by Stace. In the process, it is seen that much of what Christians mean when they talk about God can be understood in terms of nature mysticism. Then I expand the notion of universally accessible nature mysticism into “natural mysticism”, an important variety of which is dubbed as “person-mysticism”. This helps to provide a preliminary account of the Christian experience in Jesus Christ that is both universally accessible and faithful to the specifically Christian experience. This approach to fundamental theology, however, needs to be complimented by a third requirement of any experiential approach, namely, empirical adequacy.<sup>14</sup> It should also be clear that as an exercise in fundamental theology that seeks to reach out to non-Christians and unbelievers is bound to lack the rich details of Christian faith. If Rahner called his lengthy book on fundamental theology a “first level of reflection”,<sup>15</sup> this small article must be considered a preliminary to a first level reflection!

## 2. Nature Mysticism: Experience and Analyses

The phenomenon of nature mysticism is well known. William James noted long ago that certain aspects of nature have this peculiar ability to induce mystical moods in us.<sup>16</sup> Stace called it “extrovertive” mysticism and Zaehner called it “panenhenic” mysticism, each with a different connotation. The significance of this kind of experience for fundamental theology is that it “may occur to anyone whatever his religious faith or lack of it and whatever moral, immoral or amoral life he may be leading at the time.”<sup>17</sup> Even Richard Dawkins acknowledges this kind of experience, although he goes on to claim boldly that it “has no connection with supernatural belief”.<sup>18</sup> Given that he comes with his own understanding of “supernatural”, we must leave aside his interpretation of the experience just as we must leave aside Stace’s interpretation that this kind of experience is only a half-baked mysticism.<sup>19</sup> Leaving such interpretations aside, let us focus on some narrations of experiences. A first, commonly quoted, narration from William Blake is to be commended for its brevity:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.

Another well known example is from Bede Griffiths:

One day during my last term at school I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed that I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all the year round and never

noticed it. As I walked on I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing I could not have been more surprised I came thus to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of angel...<sup>20</sup>

In the light of these narrations, let us consider Stace's interpretation of nature mysticism. For him, "the central characteristic in which *fully developed* mystical experiences agree, and which in the last analysis is definitive of them and serves to mark off from other kinds of experiences, is that they involve the apprehension of *an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things*, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate."<sup>21</sup> In order to understand this kind of experience, he suggests a thought experiment. He asks us to imagine shutting out all physical sensations (sight, hearing etc.) from one's consciousness. Then in a second step suppress all images from our minds, and finally, stop all thinking and reasoning. Thus, he says, we get rid of "all empirical content" and arrive at full-fledged mysticism, which is introvertive. In other words, from the fact that extrovertive mysticism involves the senses, he concludes that they have sensory or empirical content.

The next step in the argument is that since nature mysticism involves sensory content, it is only a “half way house” to mysticism proper, an “incomplete kind of experience which finds its completion and fulfilment in the introvertive kind of experience”.<sup>22</sup> This argument is explicit in the reason he gives for dissociating visions, voices and other parapsychological phenomena like telepathy and clairvoyance from mysticism.<sup>23</sup> He writes: “What mystics say is that a genuine mystical experience is nonsensuous. It is formless, shapeless, colorless, odorless, soundless. But a vision is a piece of visual imagery having color and shape. A voice is an auditory image. Visions and voices are sensuous experiences.”<sup>24</sup>

This has become the standard interpretation of nature mysticism; it has been so influential that even Paul Marshall, who is more sensitive to nature mysticism than Stace, follows him when he says that such experiences are “not experience of something completely beyond the natural world”.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, let us consider the viability of Stace’s interpretation. If we look at either of the examples above, there is absolutely no mention of Unity or oneness in them. How, then, does Stace arrive at his conclusion about the nature of fully developed mysticism? He does not claim to have any mystical experience of his own, but relies on the Upanishads, Mandukya Upanishad in particular, for his understanding.<sup>26</sup> Even when he is aware that many instances of extrovertive mysticism, including some instances quoted by him, lack this feature, Stace crudely explains away these counter instances (e.g., from R.M. Bucke, St. Teresa, and Jakob Boehme) rather than face the challenge to his Upanishadic bias.<sup>27</sup> Steven Payne has drawn our attention to this odd procedure adopted by Stace.<sup>28</sup>

Further, it is not difficult to show that Stace’s move from sensory involvement to sensory content is not tenable in extrovertive mysticism. When we see a flower, the content of

that experience a flower; when we see a tree the content of that experience is a tree. But the first thing to note about the experiences of Blake or Griffiths above is how different they are from ordinary sense experience. We must assume that this was not the first time that Blake saw a grain of sand and wild flower or Griffiths saw birds and trees. But the experiences they narrate are utterly different from seeing any of these. Blake sees a ‘world’ in a grain of sand, and a ‘heaven’ in a wild flower. Similarly, Griffith’s experience is so utterly different from ordinary sense experience that he speaks about the “shock of surprise” and the “feeling of awe” that came over him. This is a clear indication that they are not talking about sensory content.

The decisive reason for not following Stace’s view is that it would undermine his own argument for the non-sensuous character of introvertive mysticism. This is so because the meditational practices that are the doorway of introversion, begin by focussing on sensations of the body as in vipassana, or on breathing as in yoga, or on the heartbeat as in Jesus prayer.<sup>29</sup> The only difference seems to be that extrovertive experiences are dominated by the visual and auditory senses whereas the introvertive experiences are dominated by the tactile. Now if it be argued that because extrovertive mysticism involves the senses they have sensory content, should it not also be said of introvertive mysticism since they too involve an awareness of bodily sensations? But this would go against Stace’s claim that introvertive mysticism is absolutely devoid of sensory content.

Therefore, rather than talk about the sensory character of nature mysticism, Rudolf Otto’s expression “wholly other” best fits this kind of experiences. By “wholly other” Otto meant “that which is beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar...”<sup>30</sup>, “something which has no place in our [ordinary] scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one, and

which at the same time arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind.”<sup>31</sup>

That these experiences have a “wholly other” character does not mean that senses are not involved in nature mysticism: Blake does see the sand and the flower. But the content of his present experience is something other than the sand and the flower. Griffiths’ experience involves the birds and the trees, but it is as if he experiences them for the first time. How else to explain the awe and the shock of surprise he experienced? Therefore, rather than conclude from sensory involvement to sensory content, we must say that nature mysticism has a twofold character: nature is involved, but something “more” than nature is experienced. As Moustakas puts it, it is as if the natural world of the senses (sensory content) is a covering for the real content that is experienced. Let us consider his narration.

Many times I have found courage and strength and beauty through loneliness, in an experience with nature. One day I was feeling deeply depressed by the severe criticisms a colleague had received – a person who was living his life in an honest and truthful sense. . . . Nothing was real. . .

After the children had gone to bed, I decided to go for a walk. The night was dark, filled with black clouds. Large white flakes of snow fell on and around me. Inside, a surging restlessness replaced my benumbed state. . . . Suddenly without understanding in any way, I experienced a transcendental beauty in the white darkness. It was difficult to walk on the glazed, iced surface. . . . Immediately I felt a chill but at the same time I felt the ice being warmed as my fingers touched it. It was a moment of communion, an experience of knowing and understanding, and a



feeling of complete solace. If felt my inward heaviness lifting, and discovered a new capacity for... facing conflicts which existed around and in me. ... We need only reach out in natural covering to come face to face with creation.<sup>32</sup>

It is the non-sensory character of the experience that gives him an extra-ordinary sense of having come “face to face with creation”. In the light of these considerations, it seems better to say this kind of experiences take place *in and through nature* but not experiences of nature. Nature is the locus, but not the content or the “object” of experience. The object of experience is something “more” than nature. It is this “more” that gives them their mystical character. It provides to these experiences what William James described as the “noetic quality”. In other words, these are not experienced merely as states of feeling but also of knowing. Moustakas speaks explicitly of “knowing and understanding”. Later on we will have to take up the issue of an appropriate word for this experienced reality. But let us remain with analysis of experience for now.

The last example explicitly brings out a third characteristic feature of this kind of experiences: an extremely positive valuation of the experience. In some cases this positive valuation is due to a negative situation that is overcome as in the case of Moustakas whose inward heaviness disappears and a feeling of communion and solace, a sense of fresh energy and enthusiasm replace the heaviness. But in other cases, as with the experience of Griffiths, there is no prior negative state involved. Even then the valuation of the experience is similarly positive. Just as an overwhelmed Moustakas exults that nature is only a cover for a deeper reality, so too, Griffiths’ experience leads him to say: “We only begin to wake to reality when we realize that the material

world, the world of space and time, as it appears to our senses, is nothing but a sign and a symbol of a mystery which infinitely transcends it.”<sup>33</sup>

Closely related to the positive appraisal of the experience is its existential impact on life. The above narration of Moustakas’ experience begins by acknowledging the many times he found courage and strength in his experience with nature. This kind of impact is also clearly seen in the case of Griffiths. His experience in nature as a schoolboy had such a profound and lasting impact on his life that he began to rise early in the morning to hear the birds singing, stay up late in the night to watch the stars, and go for walks in the countryside. The Carmodys, in their study of mysticism, consider this to be typical of all mysticism and not only of nature mysticism. According to them mysticism “was extraordinary precisely because it revealed the structures, the depths, the potential of everyday, ordinary events that people normally missed. People went through their routines fairly dully. They did not experience eating, drinking, working or having sex as dazzling revelations of the full meaning of life, of the transcendent depths holding all that is in being.”<sup>34</sup>

### **3. What is experienced? Is it God?**

We have noted the twofold character of nature mysticism by drawing the distinction between the *locus* of experience (nature) and the *object* or the content of experience. What more can these experiences tell us about the object of experience than that they are wholly other than the objects of sensory experiences, and that they are positively valued? Can words like supernatural, the Transcendent, God, etc. be used for it? Let us begin with the first question.

A definitive feature of the “more” that is experienced in nature is that it is not anything in space and time. The singing

birds and hawthorn trees and the white snow are in space and time; they are objects of ordinary experience. What is experienced in nature mysticism is something new, something that is not in space and time. It is such a defining feature of nature mysticism that Zaehner does not hesitate to say that “nature mysticism means to transcend space and time”.<sup>35</sup> Any number of experiences can be pointed out to illustrate this point. The following narration he takes from Carl Jung shows the inapplicability of space. The experience is attributed to Karl Joel:

I lay on the seashore, the shining waters glittering in my dreamy eyes; at a great distance fluttered the soft breeze; throbbing shimmering, stirring, lulling to sleep comes the wave beat to the shore –or to the ear? I know not. Distance and nearness become blurred into one; without and within glide into each other... Yes, without and within are one. Glistening and foaming, flowing and fanning and roaring, the entire symphony of the stimuli experienced sounds in one tone...<sup>36</sup>

Dr. Bucke’s experience, as narrated by William James, gives a clear indication of the transcendence of space and time.

I had spent the evening in a great city, with two friends... We parted at midnight. I had a long drive in a hansom to my lodging. My mind... was calm and peaceful... All at once, without warning of any kind, I found myself wrapped in a flame-colored cloud. For an instant I thought of fire... the next I knew that the fire was within myself... Among other things, I did not merely come to believe, but I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence... The vision lasted a few seconds and was gone; but the memory of it and the sense of the reality of

what it taught has remained during the quarter of a century which has since elapsed....<sup>37</sup>

This narration brings another characteristic feature of the object of experience: a sense of living presence. And he is not making the obvious point that things like trees or birds being alive, but that the whole natural world is alive. In these moments of experience, even those things we normally consider as non-living (such as stones) are experienced as alive. Richard Jefferies, another nature mystic, narrates his experience where he could feel the earth speaking to him.<sup>38</sup> He goes on to say that “It is not a force in the sense of electricity, nor a deity as god... [but] something more subtle than electricity...”<sup>39</sup>.

But we also need to note the danger of talking about “living presence”. The danger is that those who do not have the experience can easily misunderstand it as the more ordinary space-time presence we are familiar with. This is seen in Wayne Proudfoot. Basing himself on some examples found in William James, like the feeling of an unseen “presence” in a dark room or of someone standing behind me, Proudfoot draws the conclusion that the sense of presence is “a hunch, a thought, an opinion, and it has the epistemic status of a hypothesis...” which may be confirmed or disconfirmed when “I look over my shoulder or turn on the lights.”<sup>40</sup> The spatio-temporal character of Proudfoot’s understanding of “presence” is unmistakable here. This is understandable because the presences that we know in the natural world are those that involve space and time. It is understandable, but there is nothing mystical about such unseen presence.

Can we use the word “supernatural” for this reality? As a reality that is experienced in nature but an experience of something more than nature, it seems entirely appropriate to do so. But why, then, does Dawkins who acknowledges nature mysticism,

go on to say that it “has no connection with supernatural belief”? It has to do with his definitions. He defines a naturalist as “somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles. . . .”<sup>41</sup> His objection to the supernatural, then, is an objection to a dualistic understanding that divides up the world into natural and supernatural, body and soul. This is confirmed by his definition of “natural” a few lines earlier as the belief that there is “only one kind of stuff in the universe and it is physical.” That he should think of the supernatural in dualistic terms is not surprising when we consider Winston King’s claim that the Western view of religion involves a “thorough going separation”<sup>42</sup> of the natural and the supernatural, with not a little help from deistic ideas.<sup>43</sup> Dawkins is right in resisting this idea of the supernatural inasmuch as nature mysticism offers no support for such dualism. Here the more than natural cannot be experienced except in and through the natural.

Similar considerations apply to “transcendence”. Modern understanding of transcendence is in terms of God’s relation to the world where God stands somewhere outside the world. Peter Berger’s view is typical. For him, transcendence means that God “stands outside the cosmos, which is his creation but which he confronts and does not permeate. . . .”<sup>44</sup> Understood this way, transcendence and immanence are mutually exclusive categories where the more the transcendence, the less the immanence.<sup>45</sup> This view of transcendence is more deistic than theistic because in the theistic view God is both transcendent and immanent. In any case, this view of transcendence as a doctrine about God’s relation to the world can hardly be an appropriate starting point for a fundamental theology that is addressed to those who do not believe in God. A more appropriate starting point would be

to begin with the experience and explain the concept of God by providing an alternative understanding of immanence and transcendence.

If words like “presence”, “supernatural”, and “transcendence” are prone to misunderstanding in this manner, how else are we to understand this reality? Our analysis of nature mysticism provides an alternative way of understanding the natural and the supernatural, transcendence and immanence. The analysis in terms of the twofold character of experience makes it impossible to separate the “more” than natural reality from the natural where the former is experienced in and through the latter. While the two are distinct, they cannot be separated in experience; separate the one from the other and it will no longer be an experience of nature mysticism. Let us call the “object” of experience as some kind of “trans-natural” reality.

Our analysis in terms of the locus and the object of experience enables us to see that transcendence refers to this trans-natural reality that is experienced whereas immanence refers to the locus where “more” than natural is experienced. This agrees with the original meaning the Latin word *transcendere*, which literally means to cross the boundary. If we reflect on what provides boundaries to natural objects (trees, birds, etc.), we would see that those boundaries result from being in space and time. Given that our ordinary way of identifying and distinguishing one entity from another is in terms of space and time, the religious significance of transcendence consists in putting a check on this way of thinking. It tells us that we cannot draw the boundaries of the object of mystical experience in the same way as we draw boundaries to other things. This is what makes it an experience of the “wholly other” than the ordinary. Thus, if immanence refers to the fact that this kind of experience takes place within the boundaries of the natural, the ordinary, and the familiar world,

transcendence points to the fact that such experience is not an experience of the natural, familiar world. The natural world is merely the locus in and through which the more than natural is experienced.

While the natural world as the locus of experiencing the supernatural and the transcendent is correct as far as it goes, it still does not help us to conceptually articulate this reality, especially in the light of the fact that words like “presence”, “supernatural”, and “transcendence” are prone to misunderstanding. How else are we to conceive this reality? Contemporary writers give us some hints in this regard. A first hint is to see it as a further dimension of all reality than the spatio-temporal dimensions. Thus Hick says that it is the fifth dimension;<sup>46</sup> if so, this reality is not one more entity along with other entities. Two analogies help us to conceptualize this dimension. One is a mobius strip.<sup>47</sup> Speciality of this clever contrivance is that not only are its inside and outside inseparable, as it should be, but also that any part of its inside can become outside and vice versa. So too, the natural and the supernatural; the latter can be accessed from anywhere in the natural world. The second analogy is that of a hologram. A surprising feature of holographic images, unlike ordinary images, is that if a holographic image is cut into pieces, each piece will give a view of the entire image in every detail, though with less sharpness. Similarly, it is suggested that the reality experienced in nature mysticism is something that is present in every bit of the natural world and not something that is present in any particular location to the exclusion of others.

Finally, before moving to the Christian experience proper, we must ask the question: Can this reality be considered “God” as understood in the theistic tradition? The answer is a qualified ‘yes’. Many of the features that are used to talk about God are already present in our description of the “object” of nature

mysticism. We have seen that this reality is both immanent and transcendent, which is a traditional theistic claim. It is not pantheistic (“sexed up atheism”) as Dawkins claims,<sup>48</sup> because pantheists identify the world with God whereas we noted that the locus of experience cannot be identified with the experienced reality. Theists understand God as a person. Given that “person” is a category that has evolved in the Christian milieu, it is not proper at this point to get into the complexities and disputes of that concept now. But something akin to the concept of person is already acknowledged in speaking of this reality as a living presence. This has ecumenical benefits as *cit* (consciousness) is one of the three attributes of Brahman in the Hindu traditions, along with *sat* (being or presence) and *ananda* (bliss). The theistic connotation of this reality is further strengthened by the finding that experience of this reality leaves a positive impact on the experiencer as it comes close to the theistic assertion that God is good. We can find its Indian counterpart is the assertion that Brahman is *ananda*.

God as one (monotheism) can be derived from the observation that this reality is beyond space and time; many of the Omni-attributes of God (Omnipresence, Omniscience etc.) can also be derived from the same. But a small article is hardly the place to argue for any of these. An important description of a theistic God that cannot be directly related to nature mysticism is that of God as creator. But if the doctrine of creation is understood not in terms of the origins of the world but in terms of the asymmetrical dependence of the world on God,<sup>49</sup> then, it would be possible to relate it to nature mysticism. Again, I must let that go.

More than these doctrinal issues, the most stubborn hindrance to theism comes from misunderstanding those paired



words ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural,’ ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence’ in the manner mentioned. ‘Supernatural’ and ‘Transcendent’, then, becomes one more being or entity alongside other space-time entities, except that it is beyond the world of space and time. Unfortunately, even well known philosophers of religion are not exempt from sliding into such ways of speaking. Thus, in spite of Hick’s recognition of spiritual reality as the fifth dimension of all reality, he also tends to speak of God in terms of “an unlimited personal being, so that *in addition* to all the millions of embodied human consciousness there is at least *one further consciousness* which is not embodied...”<sup>50</sup> Similarly Franckenberry says, “For classical theism, the God-question in an age of science is the question of whether, *in addition* to everything else that exists, there also exists an entity...”<sup>51</sup> My treatment of nature mysticism, by providing an alternative to these views, not only helps us to avoid these mistakes but also provides us with a minimal understanding of God that is identifiable (“wholly other” etc.) as well as accessible to Christians and non-Christians, theists and atheists. Having done that, we must now turn to the Christian experience proper. For the purpose, I shall introduce another category: “natural mysticism”.

#### 4. Natural Mysticism

Since the term “natural” has varied meanings, let me clarify its meaning in the present context. In the present context it means innate and spontaneous, as opposed to the cultural and the cultivated. Nature mysticism is natural in this sense, whereas introvertive mysticism is cultivated. The difference between nature mysticism and natural mysticism is in the locus of experience. Natural mysticism shares all the characteristic features of nature mysticism, except that it occurs not in nature (understood as environment) but in other *loci* such as the events of life or

interpersonal relationships. For the sake of convenience I shall label them event-mysticism and person-mysticism, two overlapping but not identical categories. Although these have not received the scholarly attention they deserve, there are enough hints of such experiences happening to people. By event mysticism I mean something like what Ian Ramsay described as “cosmic disclosure”. He writes:

it may happen that when we are faced with some major problem as to vocation, or emigration, or the suffering of an aged relative, or marriage, there occurs a complex set of circumstances, too complex and too diversified to be the result of any one man’s design, which helps us to resolve the problem as well for those around us as for ourselves. . . . A sense of kinship with nature strikes us; the Universe is reliable after all.<sup>52</sup>

Leaving further considerations of event-mysticism aside, let us turn to person-mysticism, the most important kind of experience for understanding Christian faith. The locus of experience in person-mysticism is another human person. Consider the following narration:

It was late one night back when I was in high school and we had stayed out way beyond when we should have been home, and all we were doing –I swear– was talking. We got into things neither one of us had ever spoken out loud to anyone else, and I know for fact that there were things we talked about that I had not even thought about before. I know my heart was pumping fast, too, and by the time we came to the end of it –more of an arrival than a destination– we were both exhausted, but knew we had been

somewhere special together. I remember the stars that night, the moon, the feel of the air—everything around us was alive and deeply meaningful. It sounds profoundly silly to say these words, but that is how it was. And I'll never forget it because I've spent so much of my life since then trying to get there again. Trying to find that special place where true communication happens.<sup>53</sup>

This narration of an intimate conversation of Goodall Jr. with his twin brother comes closest to illustrating what I mean by person-mysticism. Here the locus of experience is not nature but an inter-personal relation but it has all the characteristics typical of nature mysticism. It has that “wholly other” character in as much as it is unlike his ordinary dealings with his brother. It has a twofold character to the extent the conversation involved a person with whom he has ordinary dealings, but on this particular occasion there is the realization that “we had been somewhere special together”. It had such a positive impact that he wants to “get there again”. In spite of the spatial metaphor involved, the transcendence of space is clearly indicated in qualifying that space as “special”.

Since person-mysticism has not received any scholarly attention,<sup>54</sup> it is not easy to find many such narrations. But narrations of telepathic communications are abundant. Its possibility has even been demonstrated by an international team of scientists. Armed with latest computer technology and advances in neuroscience, their experiment demonstrated that non-sensory communication is indeed possible between people separated by 4600 miles in two different continents.<sup>55</sup>

There are three reasons that prompt me to consider telepathy in the context of person-mysticism. First, telepathy and other paranormal phenomena are often closely associated with mysticism. Second, they exhibit the same transcending of space

(though not time) that Zaehner considered the defining feature of nature mysticism. But the reason that makes telepathy instances of *person*-mysticism is the third one: it involves deep inter-personal bonds. Guy Playfair, the author of *Twin Telepathy* points out that telepathy tends to work best when it is needed and when sender and receiver are strongly bonded, as with mothers and babies, dogs and their owners, and those with the strongest bond of all - twins."<sup>56</sup> There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that any deep bond of love, including close friendships, can have telepathic impact.<sup>57</sup>

Love as the likely trigger of telepathy forms the basis of what Hick has called "crisis apparitions".<sup>58</sup> He illustrates: An Englishman travelling in India dies in a road accident. His wife in England gets an apparition of the husband, suggesting his death. The actual elements of the apparition suggesting death could vary: it may be that he appears still and dead-like, or he may speak of his death in the apparition, or a coffin might be seen in the background, etc. Hick goes on to explain that the death of her beloved husband has a telepathic impact on her unconscious mind; this information is presented to her consciousness in the form of the apparition, using her memory and her imagination. In this kind of experiences the elements suggesting death are hallucinatory because no physical body is present where she sees one, but the message communicated is true. Therefore, he calls them "veridical hallucinations".

Talk of telepathy, however, should not divert our attention from the main point, which is person-mysticism: the idea that another human person can become the locus an experience that exhibits the characteristic features we find in nature mysticism. If such experiences are triggered by love, telepathy is no more than its by product.

## 5. The Foundational Christian Experience

Our treatment of nature mysticism and its extension to natural mysticism, especially the idea of person-mysticism brings us to the threshold of understanding the Christ event, the foundational experience of Christian faith. It can be understood as an instance of person-mysticism experienced in the human person of Jesus. He is a human person like any other, but a particular person in whom the disciples experienced something more. They expressed this experience variously as Jesus being the Christ, the anointed one, the son of God, and so on.

This understanding of the Christian experience explains why Jesus the messenger of the Kingdom of God becomes the message. In encountering the human Jesus they encountered the divine. This applies not only to how they encountered him in his earthly life, but also to what happens to him at the end. The resurrection narratives, when read in the light of I Lick's "veridical hallucinations", seem so very illuminating of the trans-natural reality that is at the core of the Christian experience. This understanding of the Christian experience also explains why orthodox Christianity has always maintained that Jesus is both God and man, with the denial of either his humanity or his divinity considered heretical: it would amount to a denial of the twofold character of the experience.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the possibility of communicating the foundational Christian experience in a manner that is intelligible to those who are not Christians and who may not even consider themselves religious. Analysing nature mysticism that is not specific to any religious tradition (hence, universal), it is found that they enable Christians to provide a preliminary understanding of what they mean by "God". The same analysis

in terms of the locus and the object of experience helped us to speak about person-mysticism, to suggest that the Christian experience can be considered as an instance of person-mysticism, which is in perfect agreement with the Christian doctrine about Jesus Christ. I shall end with a cautionary note that this preliminary account needs to be complemented in many ways: besides the fact that it has said almost nothing about the resurrection of Jesus, it also remains to be shown as to how this account of person-mysticism can make room for the cultural and historical dimensions of experience.

### Notes:

1. Paul Horsch, "From Creation Myth to World Law: The Early History of Dharma," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32(1967, trans.2004), 438.
2. Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 2006), no.1.
3. Pierre Hadot and Arnold I. Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life : Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).
4. Mary Midgley, *Wisdom, Information and Wonder: What Knowledge Is For?* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989; reprint, 1995), 37.
5. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Addresses in Response to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1821; reprint, 1969); George Karuvelil, "Religious Experience: Reframing the Question," *Forum Philosophicum: International Journal for Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2011), 139-55.
6. For the difference between theology and fundamental theology, see, George Karuvelil, "To Whom Am I Speaking? Communication, Culture, and Fundamental Theology," *Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (2015), 675-97.

7. For a brief account, see, James E. Davison. "Can God Speak a Word to Man? Barth's Critique of Schleiermacher's Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37 no. 2 (1984), 189-211.
8. See, Mary E. Hines, *The Transformation of Dogma : An Introduction to Karl Rahner on Doctrine* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 3-5
9. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. David Moreland (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), vol. VII, 15.
10. George Vass, *A Theologian in Search of a Philosophy: Understanding Karl Rahner*, vol. 1 (London: Sheed and Ward, 1985); Hines, *The Transformation of Dogma : An Introduction to Karl Rahner on Doctrine* , 6.
11. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith : An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. Willliam C. Dych (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1987), 176.
12. Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London, Bombay: MacMillan, 1960); ———, *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York and Toronto: The New American Library, 1960).
13. Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22-72.
14. See, George Karuvelil, "Mysticism, Language and Truth," *Journal of Dharma* 35, no. 3 (2010), 259-75.
15. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith : An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* , xi-xii.
16. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience : A Study in Human Nature*, Centenary ed. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 305.
17. R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), xv. Stace called extrovertive mysticism "spontaneous" and introvertive mysticism is "acquired". Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* , 60.
18. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London, Toronto:

Bantam Press, 2006), 11.

19. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* , 17; ———, *Mysticism and Philosophy* , 132.
20. Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String* (London: The Harvill Press, 1954), 9.
21. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* , 15. Italics original; see also, ———, *Mysticism and Philosophy* , 66.
22. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* , 132.
23. For a contrary view, see, Jess Byron Hollenback, *Mysticism : Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, Hermeneutics, Studies in the History of Religions (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).
24. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* , 13; ———, *Mysticism and Philosophy* , 49.
25. Paul Marshall, *Mystical Encounters with the Natural World : Experiences and Explanations* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.
26. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* , 88.
27. Karuvelil, "Mysticism, Language and Truth," 263-67.
28. Steven Payne, "The Christian Character of Christian Mystical Experiences," *Religious Studies* 20, no. 3 (1984), 423.
29. *The Way of the Pilgrim and the Pilgrim Continues His Way*, trans. R.M. French (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1998), 90. I take the practice of Vipassana and Yoga to be common knowledge in India.
30. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: OUP, 1923; reprint, 1936), 26.
31. Ibid. , 29.
32. Clark E. Moustakas, *Lonliness*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1961, 52-53, cited in Louis Roy, *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 15.



33. Griffiths, *The Golden String* , 161.
34. Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 15.
35. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* , 41.
36. C.G. Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1919), p. 198; cited in *Ibid.* , 38.
37. James (1958) 307.
38. Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart* (London: Duckworth, 1912), 3; cited in Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* , 46.
39. Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart* , 49-50. cited in Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* , 48.
40. Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985)163.
41. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* , 14. Italics original.
42. Winston L. King, "Religion", in *The Encyclopeida of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), vol. 12, 282.
43. Deism is a religious philosophy and movement of the 17th and 18th centuries found predominantly in England. One of its chief doctrines was the belief in a God who created the world but does not intervene in its functioning, either by way of revelation or miracles. See, William L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion : Eastern and Western Thought By* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1980); Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion : The Legacy of Deism* (London: Routledge, 1989), see specially chapter 8.
44. Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1973), 121.
45. See, William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY:

Westminster John Knox, 1996) pp. 6-7, 111-12, 128-45

46. John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004).
47. Diane Hennacy Powell, "Psi and Psychiatry: The Quest for a New Scientific Paradigm," in Sudhir Kakar and Jeffrey J. Kripal, eds., *Seriously Strange: Thinking Anew About Psychical Experiences* (New Delhi: Viking Penguin, 2012), 126-151.
48. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* 18.
49. See, for example, Chin-Tai Kim, "Transcendence and Immanence," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 3 (1987), 537-49.
50. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 173. Emphasis added.
51. Nancy Frankenberry, "Classical Theism, Panentheism, and Pantheism : On the Relation between God Construction and Gender Construction," *Zygon* 28, no. 1 (1993), 30.
52. Ian T. Ramsey, *Christian Empiricism*, Studies in Philosophy and Religion (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), 123.
53. H.L. Goodall Jr. and Peter M. Kellett, "Dialectical Tensions and Dialogical Moments as Pathways to Peak Experiences," in *Dialogue : Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies*, ed. Rob Anderson, Leslie A. Baxter, and Kenneth N. Cissna (Thousand Oaks, Calif.; London: Sage Publications, 2004), 160.
54. The only other mention of this idea I have come across is in John Caputo when he says, "We are all of us, each for the other, a possible locus of the divine, a potential launching point for transcendence." See, "Radical Hermeneutics and Religious Truth: The Case of Sheehan and Schillebeeckx," in Daniel Guerriere (ed.), *Phenomenology of the Truth Proper to Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 167-68.

55. See, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/scientists-prove-that-telepathic-communication-is-within-reach-180952868/?no-ist>.
56. Guy L. Playfair, *Twin Telepathy*, 3rd ed. (White Crow Books, 2012), 124.
57. Plenty of cases can be found in Playfair's book. See also, <http://psychics.co.uk/blog/telepathy-research>; <http://metaphysicalarticles.blogspot.in/2010/03/twin-telepathy-by-guy-lyon-playfair.html>. If this is true, wild speculations about the endless possibilities of scientifically exploiting telepathy are likely to disappoint. For such speculations see, the report in *Mail Online*. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2747131/Is-proof-humans-TELEPATHIC-powers-Two-men-4-600-miles-apart-send-messages-using-just-minds.html>. It is not without significance that the concerned scientists in the recent successful experiment (note 55 above) managed to communicate only “hola” (hello) and “ciao” or that a twenty-year long attempt by the US government to use telepathy for spying had to be wound up. see, Edwin C. May, “PsiSpy: Recollections from a Psychic Spying Programme,” in Kakar and Kripal, eds., *Seriously Strange: Thinking Anew About Psychical Experiences*, 87-125.
58. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 167.

**.... Continued from the back cover**

- 10/1 Religion and Development : Interdisciplinary Perspectives**
- 10/2 Inter-human Relationship in an Interdependent World**
- 11/1 The Vision of B. Upadhyaya**
- 11/2 Sin and Guilt**
- 12/1-2 The Relevance of St Paul: Indian Reading of His Letters**
- 13/1 Dimensions of Priesthood**
- 13/2 Aspects of Priesthood**
- 14/1 Life Varia 1**
- 14/2 Committed to the Church and the Country**
- 16/1 Spirituality and Social Work**
- 16/2 Tradition, Freedom & Development**
- 17/1 Faith, Reason and Wisdom**
- 17/2 Modernity and Religion**
- 18/1 Ethics of Human Life: Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives**

# *jnanadeepa*

Pune Journal of Religious Studies

## Previous Issues:

- 1/1 Our Commitment to a United India
- 1/2 Beyond the Colonial Past
- 2/1 Vision of a New Society
- 2/2 Contemporary Quest for Freedom & Liberation
- 3/1 Conversion: Interdisciplinary Perspectives
- 3/2 Formation of Religious Leaders
- 4/1 Peace: Interdisciplinary Perspectives
- 4/2 Models of Authority
- 5/1 Science, Religion and Postmodernism
- 5/2 Religion and Violence
- 6/1 Reconciliation: Socio-Political Dimension
- 6/2 Fundamentalisms in India Today
- 7/1 The Situation of Women
- 7/2 The Quest for a Meaningful Spirituality
- 8/1 Religion, Violence and New World Order
- 8/2 The Eucharist and Life
- 9/1 Ecological Concerns
- 9/2 Death: Scientific and Religious Perspectives

continued on the previous page ...