

MYSTICISM: AN ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

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The following arguments will be put forth in this article:

1. That the meanings held by a person cannot be phenomenologically separated from the psychological "experience" of that person. This contradicts the view of many interpreters of mysticism. 2. There are several *different* kinds of mystical experiences, not merely in emotional states, but particularly in the meaning dimension. 3. Mysticism as an experience is therefore not tied to any particular philosophy or cosmology, such as Gnosticism, Neo-platonism, or the so-called "Perennial Philosophy." 4. A very important distinction amid these varieties is that between mysticism which is epistemologically esoteric and that which is confirming in nature.

There are two areas of study in mysticism. One is the phenomenon, commonly called "the mystical experience." The other is philosophical, that is, an ideology or interpretation of reality in which mystical or esoteric doctrines are of central importance: "mystical philosophy." Both of these may be called "mysticism." They are not necessarily combined. There have been many mystics who did not subscribe to a mystical cosmology. There are adherents of mystical philosophies who have not had a mystical experience. There are others who have both. What needs to be emphasized is that there are several philosophical orientations which are not at all mystical philosophies which nevertheless accept and affirm certain types of mystical experience.

The word "mysticism" is used in such a variety of ways that it is necessary to state that the meaning intended here does not

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refer to weird or spooky phenomena. Some mystics have reported experiences which were indeed bizarre, but that aspect is not what marks an experience as mystical, at least not in the classical sense. As Walter Stace put it:

Mysticism is not the same as what is commonly called the "occult" -- whatever that may mean. Nor has it anything to do with spiritualism, or ghosts, or table turning. Nor does it include what are commonly called parapsychological phenomena such as telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance, precognition.¹

Confusion abounds because in some other circles that is precisely what is meant by mysticism. They have every right to use the word in that way, but it is not the subject before us. If you see a bookstore advertising "mystical books" chances are you will find only books on the occult or parapsychology. It is not uncommon for a student to sign up for a course on mysticism and be deeply disappointed to discover that it has nothing at all to do with astrology, alchemy, UFOs, or levitation. This is not to say that the study of esoteric philosophies is illegitimate, only that it is a different subject from that of the great classics in mysticism.

This is not a new problem. One of the amusing stories in *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* tells how Friar Bernard, convinced that Francis "hath great grace from God," thought there must be some secret method. He invited Francis to be his house guest. At bedtime, Francis feigned sleep "to conceal his holiness." Bernard did the same, snoring loudly, whereupon Francis got out of bed, knelt down and prayed. His prayer consisted simply of repeating "my God, my God." Nothing else. The secret was not in the words or ritual but in the devotion.

¹ *The Teachings of the Mystics* (N.Y.: New American Library, 1960), 10. The same distinction is to be found in most all standard writings. Cf. e.g. W. R. Inge, *Mysticism in Religion* (Chicago, 1948), 154; D. C. Butler, *Western Mysticism* (London, 1922), 3f.; Georgia Harkness, *Mysticism: its Meaning and Message* (Nashville, 1973), 18ff.; Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (London, 1914), 70-94; R. S. Ellwood, Jr., *Mysticism and Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, 1980), xi-41; Andrew Greeley, *Ecstasy: A Way of Knowing* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

Likewise in *The Practice of the Presence of God* of Brother Lawrence some apparently thought the holy man was keeping his method secret and were impatient with the simplicity of his teaching. So Lawrence wrote concerning a woman who sought his counsel: "She seems to me full of good will, but she would go faster than grace. One does not become holy all at once."²

I. DEFINITION OF THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

*The Mystical experience is the direct, unmediated awareness of the divine or its functional equivalent, as that is understood by the person having the experience.*³

By direct and unmediated is meant that it is not knowledge about something but experience of. In this respect it is like the experience of hunger. We do not experience hunger as our stomach telling us about its need -- although that is what is happening --, we are simply aware of our hunger. There are many sense impressions, such as sharp pain, which we experience as though there were no transmissional mechanism. We are entirely unaware of the message which has travelled through the nervous system to the brain. We do not say "my brain is translating an electromagnetic agitation as the sensation of pain." We say, "my hand hurts." The mystic experiences the divine (or the void or enlightenment) as though there were no intermediary factors:

2 *Op. cit.*, Ninth Letter. It is in his letters that it appears that Brother Lawrence is replying to objections to the simplicity of his teaching.

3 There is nothing unique about this definition. It does attempt to avoid planting in the definition any particular theory about mysticism, as in Underhill, "the science of union with the Absolute"; Ellwood, "encounter with ultimate divine reality in a direct nonrational way"; Stace, "apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One..."; Gary Gutting, "direct awareness of the presence of God" (*Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, Notre Dame, 1982); W. H. Auden, "the direct encounter of a human soul with God" (in Anne Fremantle, *The Protestant Mystics*, N.Y., 1965, 31). It will be noted that my definition is however basically consonant with those. "Awareness" may take the form of encounter, union, communion, absorption, or intermingling.

directly and without intervening modes of transmission.⁴ The mystic often reports the experience as coming from within the self.

It is non-derivative in the sense that the validity of the experience is not established by reference to some other reality or truth. It is self-validating, at least at the time. Thus it is different from inductive or deductive reasoning where we conclude from evidence or data and are more or less aware of the process by which we came to a conclusion. We do not experience pain as a conclusion to which we have come, but as an immediate fact. The mystical experience is like that in this character of immediacy.

It is necessary to include "functional equivalent," because many mystics do not regard the reality or condition of which they have direct awareness as being God or the divine, but as some ultimate truth, principle, nothingness, void, light, darkness, enlightenment or reality. Now the divine means, at least in part, the supreme or most important thing for human existence. For many people the term "God" would be better, but it must also be recognized that for many others some other term would be used to designate what they regard as the basis for comprehending the meaning of various aspects of life, lending depth, insight, and correct understanding. A functional equivalent for divine in such instances would be awareness of whatever is believed to be supreme or the most important type of awareness and understanding available to human beings.

Admittedly it is not always possible to draw the line between mysticism and some instances of hallucination or psycho-

4 Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (N.Y.: Oxford, 1983) argues that there are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. "All experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways." He is, I believe, entirely correct. That observation becomes much to the point later in this paper. My use of *direct* or *unmediated* is intended to say that the mystic experiences the object as unmediated -- or as though it were unmediated --, much as we experience pain, i.e. quite unaware of the transmission process or equipment.

tic episodes or chemically induced experiences. In many cases, these things probably have been intermingled. The point of the definition has to do not with techniques, but whether the experience is understood as a direct awareness of the divine or some functional equivalent. No claim is being made at this stage of our analysis for the validity or invalidity of such experiences, rather to note that there are such experiences, that they have great variety, and to differentiate the mystical ones from other extraordinary experiences with unusually vivid attributes.

A couple of examples may be clarifying. A man of my acquaintance received a message from God in 1968, 2 p.m. He noticed a billboard outside his hotel window in Louisville, Kentucky, which listed the advertiser's street number as 666. The powerful realization came to him that he was the Beast of the Rapture in the Apocalypse. After a few years he had another such powerful experience and then still another in which God announced to him that he was to be King of the World. I cannot doubt the sincerity of his belief, because in response to my question he told me that he has not been able to convince a single person that his message is true, yet for more than twenty years he has devoted his life to promotion of his message. I was unable to detect the slightest indication from him that he experienced anything resembling awareness of being directly in the presence of God. It was a message from God, and thus not mysticism in the classical sense.

Another man heard a voice in September of 1938 which proclaimed that bullets would rain from heaven and that Old Glory would be drenched in blood in 1941. The end was near. I have a certain admiration for him because he told me some time later that I would be one of the few saved, having drawn my name out a hat. That contrasts with what other apocalypticists have told me would be my fate. There again there was no indication of anything resembling being directly in the presence of God. However, this man might illustrate the fact that a person's being psychotic or neurotic does not necessarily invalidate his or her

truth claims. My guess is that prior to Pearl Harbor this man's confused perception of the direction of world events was more acute than that of many sane people.⁵ But if I correctly understood him, his experience was not a mystical one.

II. THE ORDINARINESS OF THE PATTERN OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

The variety and diversity of mystical experiences in terms of their characteristics and interpretations has been alluded to. That diversity becomes important when we turn to interpretive claims. At this juncture, however, I call attention to an underlying sequence of stages in the experience. We are speaking here of the pattern of the experience, not its content.

This experience is often written about as something utterly unique. On the contrary, I submit that the basic pattern is about as commonplace as could be. The pattern has these stages:

1. First of all there is a condition of dissatisfaction: need, desire, perplexity, anxiety, or severe tension. I know of no exception. It ranges from the puzzlement of Gautama, despair of Elijah, or desire of Teresa to the discouraged restlessness of Wesley, intellectual searching of Schweitzer, or cosmic longing of al-Ghazali. St. John of the Cross calls this a dryness, the night of the senses, "when we find no comfort in the things of God, and none also in created things." ("The Passive Night of the Spirit")

2. The next stage is that of struggle, frustration, intensification of need. There are disciplines to be followed, but this is done without gratification or hopeful signs of progress. For St. John of the Cross this dark night of the spirit is "not night and darkness only, but pain and torment also to the soul." Devotees, he says, "continue their meditating and reasoning. The result is that they are filled with desolation and aridity...the greater their endeavor, the smaller their progress." Many do not get beyond this stage because they are working at it, when what they need is to stop striving and become

⁵ He published this before Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941.

passively receptive. This is a stage of intensification.

3. Next comes a stage of progress, a process which seems to be leading to the goal or simply enjoyed for its own sake. The despair and frustration have dropped away because striving or caring about that has been let go. Patanjali calls this renunciation in Râja Yoga. Eckhart calls it detachment. It is rather like what athletes call getting their "second wind." Whether eastern or western mysticism, there is this shutting off of life's usual forms of consciousness, concerns, and attention. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, for example, it is described as being "unperturbed by anything...indifferent to honour and insult, heat and cold, pleasure and pain...free from attachment." (Ch. 12, "The Yoga of Devotion")

4. This leads to the stage of culmination: satisfaction, fulfillment, realization, gratification. In dramatic mysticism it is climactic, but in much mysticism it is simply a quiet tranquility, which is nevertheless a culminative fulfillment. For Jan van Ruysbroek this is "the coming of the bridegroom...received in new joy and new delight...And this is the operative meeting of the Father and the Son in which we are lovingly embraced through the Holy Ghost in eternal love." (*The Spiritual Espousals*, V and IX) For Suzuki it is "suchness," coming suddenly but quietly. For Georgia Harkness "Communion with God occurs in the inner life, and it can be deeply sustaining without being in any sense startling."⁶ For Martin Buber the "moment of meeting" transforms the world of It into one permeated with the world of Thou and one "receives not a specific 'content' but a Presence." (*I and Thou*, 109)

5. The final stage is that of pondering the whole experience and interpreting it in relation to one's total life-view. It may be with bewilderment or stark clarity, but in any case it is with pervasive meaning and coherence. This stage is generally omitted in the analysis of mysticism, but it is certainly an important part of the whole sequence. It is more than basking in

6 *Cit. sup.*, 21.

the afterglow; it is an interpretive perspective which retroactively permeates all phases of the experience. Although it occurs last in the temporal sequence, mystics typically write of it at the beginning and scattered here and there throughout. For the other stages cannot be properly understood apart from the meaning which emerges in retrospective comprehension. So it is with many of our most meaningful experiences. It is in the memory of our own experience that we resonate to such poignant lines as "Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not"; and "But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." Analysts and commentators may neglect this fifth stage, but mystics do not. The following examples perhaps provide at least an indication of the variety and importance of the meaning dimension which lends wholeness retrospectively to the entire sequence and prospectively for days to come.

Sri Aurobindo: Entering into that Consciousness, we may continue to dwell, like It, upon universal existence...In it we live as we lived before in the ego-sense, active, more and more with other minds, other lives, other bodies than the organism we call ourselves, producing effects not only on our own moral and mental being and on the subjective being of others, but even on the physical world and its events by means nearer to the divine than those possible to our egoistic capacity. (*The Life Divine*, ch. 3)

Suzuki: This abrupt experience of satori, then, opens up in one moment (*ekamuhurtena*) an altogether new vista, and the whole existence is appraised from quite a new angle of observation. (*Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 108)

Plotinus: such is the life of gods and of godlike and blessed men; a liberation from all earthly bonds, a life that takes no pleasure in earthly things, a flight of the alone to the Alone. (*Enneads*)

John Woolman: ...informed that this mass was human beings in as great misery as they could be, and live, and that I was mixed with them, and that henceforth I might not consider myself as a distinct or separate being. In this state I remained several hours. (*Journal*, ch. XII)

Apuleius: ...and so, with tonsured crown, I set about joyfully executing my duties in that most ancient society (which had been founded in the period of Sylla), not shading or hiding my baldness but freely exposing it wherever I went. (*The Golden Ass*, concluding words)

Jakob Boehme: Thou must know that this world in its innermost unfolds its properties and powers in union with the heaven aloft above us; and so there is one Heart, one Being, one Will, one God, all in all. (*Confessions*)

Amiel: To become divine then is the aim of life: then only can truth be said to be ours beyond the possibility of loss, because it is no longer outside us, nor even in us, but we are it, and it is we; we ourselves are a truth, a will, a work of God. (*Intimate Journal*)

Margaret Prescott Montague: For those glorified moments I was in love with every living thing before me -- the trees in the wind, the little birds flying, the nurses, the internes, the people who came and went. There was nothing that was alive that was not a miracle. Just to be alive was in itself a miracle. My very soul flowed out of me in a great joy. (*Twenty Minutes of Reality*)

Michael de Molinos: Keeping thyself in Nothingness, thou wilt bar the door against everything that is not God; thou wilt retire also from thine own self, and journey towards that internal Solitude where the Divine Bridegroom speaks in the heart of His Bride, teaching her high and divine Wisdom. Drown thyself in this Nothingness and there shalt thou find a holy Sanctuary against any Tempest whatsoever...Lastly, consider Nothing, desire Nothing, will Nothing, endeavor after Nothing, and then in every thing thy Soul will live reposed, with quiet and enjoyment. (*The Spiritual Guide*, Book 3)

It is not claimed that the sequential pattern is always rigidly adhered to, but that it is discernible. There are degrees of difference in emphasis and one stage may shade off into another. The fact that the pattern is ubiquitous and simply corresponds to that of virtually all deeply gratifying experience has misled students of mysticism into supposing that the underlying meaning of mysticism is universal and that all "true" mystics are attempting to say the same thing, doing so with varying degrees of adequacy.

It must also be noted that cultures differ in their acceptance of mysticism. In many cultures it is encouraged, or even required, as part of entering and belonging to the culture. That contrasts with the dominant strands of western Christianity and therefore it is not unusual for western scholars to impose their theological views on eastern and primitive manifestations.

Eastern Orthodoxy has a rich heritage and appreciation of mysticism, different from and far less dramatic, say, than Spanish Catholicism or the Low Countries. It seems probable that where mysticism is encouraged and institutionalized there will be less of the explosive variety in stage four, whereas the pressure-cooker syndrome will be more likely where there is suspicion of mysticism. It is interesting to find St. Teresa evidently embarrassed by being enraptured in public. (In many societies that would have been honored.) She says, "once it happened during a sermon," which invites interesting speculation. "I besought the Lord earnestly not to grant me any more favours which had visible and exterior signs." ("Rapture," ch. 20)

The pattern of mystical experience is found in all deeply satisfying experiences: hunger leading to satisfaction, artistic imagination leading to completed expression, sexual longing leading to fulfilled love, scientific puzzlement leading to integrated solution. It is the pattern of problem solving, significant drama, eating, music, sound education, and some would say raising children. It is life in its pattern of the realization of meaning. It is as ordinary, commonplace, and as normal as anything could be. It is only in the nature of its fulfillment and meaning that mysticism is different. In fact, nothing marks the mystical experience off from the occult, magical and abnormal more clearly than its congruence with hunger, sex, problem solving, birthing, and artistic creating. Magic is a shortcut route to realization; the occult, a birthing without pregnancy and travail.

Some Freudians interpret the mystical experience as sublimated libidinal satisfaction, based on the mistaken notion that the stages in sexual gratification if not unique do provide the *necessary key* to unlock understanding of other forms of cultural behavior. But hunger is also universal with intensified appetite ("appetite is the best sauce"), delicious anticipation, the enjoyment of eating, and the afterglow of satisfaction and memory. Furthermore, processes of deep gratification often

include more than one dimension of appetite and appreciative fulfillment. A beautiful meal may include other needs and satisfactions, such as music, ambience, courtship, ego gratification, friendship. Thus, it may well be the case that mystical realization has included aspects of sublimated sex -- it would be strange if it were not so -- or social alienation and needs or life disappointments, and compensate in its culminating joy. An excellent evening at the theatre may compensate for the day's frustrations on the job. There is nothing discrediting about that. It is only the reductionist argument that falls apart: that all mystical experiences are to be explained as disguised sexual satisfaction -- or the expansionist claim of some mystics that their experience proves all other facts, phenomena, concerns, and joys to be meaningless.

Nor is it surprising that mystics have so often resorted to the language of love, hunger, or beauty to describe their experience. Those are the forms of discourse which connote depth and intensity. Indeed, we commonly say of any marvelous experience that it was "beautiful," since the process I have been describing is preeminently that of appropriating aesthetic value. As John Dewey put it:

That which distinguishes an experience as esthetic is conversion of resistance and tensions, of excitations that in themselves are temptations to diversion, into a movement toward an inclusive and fulfilling close.⁷

Far from being unique, the basic pattern of mystical experience is utterly commonplace. It is particular and differentiable not because it arises out of needs or culminates in gratification, but by virtue of its interpretation, meaning, and effect.

III. THE INTERPRETIVE DIMENSION

It is only in analysis that sensations can be separated from thought. In actual experience sensations and feelings are

⁷ *Art as Experience* (NY: Minton, Balch, 1934), 56.

permeated with understanding, habit, valuation, and patterns of relationship. These thought factors operate unconsciously most of the time, fortunately. Especially in times of strong emotion the thought dimension may be pushed out of explicit awareness. Thus, it will be said of extraordinary action in a crisis, "I was acting automatically; I didn't think about what I was doing at all." But thought at another level was powerfully active. We experience situations not only with our sensations but also with our interpretive equipment or very selfhood. Eyes are what we see with and our psyche is what we experience with, including ideas, modes of understanding, values, conditioned responses, convictions, and ways of relating items. Even under hypnosis such factors are not entirely absent, as numerous experiments have demonstrated. As John Hick puts it:

It is a familiar philosophical tenet, and one which may perhaps today be taken as granted, that all conscious experience of the physical world contains an element of interpretation... "Interpretation" here is of course an unconscious and habitual process.⁸

So it is that although the basic pattern of the sequence is substantially the same in diverse cultures, the content, characterization, and claims of mystics are extremely varied, often contradictory. A few examples will illustrate this. St. John of the Cross insisted that the soul "must pass through and leave behind all the steps of these meditations." Patanjali however taught fifteen steps in Râja Yoga in which meditation is essential or as the Bhagavad-Gita has it, "without meditation where is peace?" This is not merely an east west difference; contemplation and meditation are the core of much western Christian mysticism. In the *Theologica Germanica* the path is love and the culmination is in one who "loveth all things in One as One and All, and One in All as All in One." But for Michael de Molinos "when the soul is filled with God, and conceives a hatred for all

⁸ *Faith and Knowledge*, chap. 5 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966). I am indebted to the first three essays in Katz, *cit. sup.*, for detailed discussion of this and related topics.

worldly things, then she is quiet and satisfied only with Divine Love." And Anker-Larson rejected the "God is all" summation: "God is not or God is all -- the one, as the other, is proof of the helplessness of human powers of expression." (*With the Door Open*) John Tauler asserted: "All creatures are absolutely nothing. I do not say that they are small or anything else, but that they are absolutely nothing." But Montague said of her illumination: "I knew that every man, woman, bird and tree, and every living thing before me was extravagantly beautiful and extravagantly important."

Having affirmed a likeness of creatures to God, St. John of the Cross emphasized the essential difference: "there is no essential similarity between them and God. On the contrary, the distance between their being and His Divine Being is infinite." How different is St. Catherine of Genoa's claim: "My Me is God, nor do I recognize any other Me, except God Himself. My Being is God, not by simple participation but by a true transformation of my Being." Or take Husayn ibn Mansur's exclamation: "I am God. I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I." Or R. Tsunashima: "I became God."⁹

Some scholars have held that "true" mysticism must issue in active ethical behavior. For Schweitzer mysticism was ethical living and "union with the Infinite" occurs "by ethical action." For many, perhaps most, mystics the reverse is the case. For Plotinus the mystical vision has "passed beyond even the choir of the virtues." For Lin Yutang "The ultimate mysticism of the universe is the rhythm of life which annihilates all things, or as Chuangtse put it in his famous essay, 'the levelling of all things.'" Again, if tempted to view that contrast as merely

⁹ To appreciate the fantastic diversity of meaning given to mysticism by mystics the classic essay by Seth Pringle-Pattison, "Mysticism," is unsurpassed. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., 1911, vol. 19. This essay will not be found in subsequent editions. I have taken a number of these quotations from D. C. Macintosh, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge* (NY: Harper, 1940), chap. 2, although my interpretation is quite different from Macintosh's.

eastern and western differences, consider these Christian statements: "Evil is nohow, nowhere, no thing. God sees evil as good." (Dionysius the Areopagite) "Evil is merely a negation and lies entirely outside the knowledge of God...For God evil is not. It has meaning only in the sphere of time." (Scotus Erigena) Angela of Foligno explains it differently:

Since God hath left me I am remained as contented as an angel; for I love toads and serpents, and even fools and demons, and nothing that I see them do, even sins committed against others, can displease me, inasmuch as I believe that God doth justly permit and desire that it should be done.

Julian of Norwich seems to have had a similar view, concluding: "I saw no sin." Again, "The devil is good in so far as he hath Being. In this sense nothing is evil, or not good." (*Theologia Germanica*) "There is no sense of sin in cosmic consciousness." (R. M. Burke) "Hell itself would have appeared to me to be nothing but love and consolation." (St. Catherine of Genoa)

The point here is not to deny that there are characteristic differences between east and west. It is simply to point out that the dissolution of ethical distinctions in the mystical state is to be found also in reports of western religion and culture. Thus the identification of mysticism with ethics, as claimed by many writers, does not hold up. That, however, does not contradict the observation that some mystics -- like Schweitzer and Gandhi, John Woolman and Rufus Jones -- have found ethics to be the path of mysticism. It is not surprising that the mystic state dissolves ethics when it takes the form of being engulfed totally in union with God or the Absolute where all distinctions are wiped out. For ethical thought is necessarily bound to distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust. If in "real union" as St. Teresa says, "the soul neither understands nor knows anything, for all the faculties are lost and absorbed," or as Madame Guyon says, "having lost all separateness, self-possession and distinction," it would not be possible to have any ethical judgment in that state. Returning to normal consciousness, many mystics -- but by no

means all -- are in fact energized for moral action. Ramakrishna's interpretation, by way of contrast, would be uncharacteristic of classical Christian or Jewish mysticism, but I suspect that it might be found more often in western esoteric or cultic mysticism. He wrote:

He who has attained to such realization goes beyond good and evil, above virtue and vice, and realizes that the divine will is working everywhere...Says God, "I am the snake that biteth and the charmer that healeth; I am the judge that condemneth and the executioner that whippeth." God tells the thief to go and steal, and at the same time warns the householder against the thief.¹⁰

What stands out is that the meaning dimension of the experience was clearly important to these people. Without that ingredient the consumatory event would merely have been a state of extreme excitation or serenity, no different in character from any other state of powerful orgasmic nature or resolution of abject terror, rage, love, chemical disorientation. Furthermore their interpretations differ significantly from being in the presence of the divine or in communion, to being in union, in identity with, or absorbed by the divine. It is not merely that mystics utilize the symbols of their culture: Buddhists in terms of Buddhist vocabulary and enlightenment, Hindus in terms of Brahma and nirvana or other Hindu terms, Christians in terms of Christ, God, the Trinity, or salvation. That is an obvious triviality. What is noteworthy -- and contrary to so much of the literature about mysticism -- is that there are these differences of interpretation and meaning within a given religion's history. Those who strongly desire to believe that all "valid" mysticism is essentially the same therefore dismiss the interpretive dimension, focussing on the "experience." So Stace:

It has seemed to me important to emphasize the value of mystical experiences themselves rather than the interpretive theories and philosophies which have been built upon them...

¹⁰ He held that this state, *Samadhi*, could be reached through Christian and Islamic paths as well as Vedanta Hinduism. *The Memoirs of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta, 1939).

[The mystic's] theories are not sacrosanct, but his experience is."¹¹

As for theorizing developed later for apologetic purposes, Stace has a point, but he overlooks the aspect of meaning -- unconscious but actively present -- in all significant experience and particularly in life's supreme, transforming, or powerfully informing events. It is a strange line of reasoning which dismisses this ideational, valuational character which pervades the mystical process in order subsequently to claim that all valid mystics are basically making the same claim in terms of the meaning of the experience.

IV. THE PROBLEM OF INEFFABILITY

William James listed ineffability as one of the four characteristics of mysticism and later in the essay says, "This incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism." He is quite correct about that as being a characteristic attribute. A problem arises in view of the fact that mystics have nevertheless communicated at length and in detail about their experiences. This paradox can be resolved, I believe, by reflecting on the fact that ineffability accompanies many experiences in varying degrees, which all the same can be described, related, and explained -- but not adequately. The reason is simple enough: there is no adequate way to convey to another the *experienced qualities* of any deeply moving event.

¹¹ Stace, *op. cit.*, 28; see also his *Mysticism and Philosophy* (NY: 1960). Cf. W. P. Alston, ed., *Faith and Philosophy* and "Religious Experience and Religious Belief," *Nous*, Vol. 16 (1982); Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*; Louis Pojman, "A Critique of Gutting's Argument from Religious Experience" in L. J. Pojman, ed., *Philosophy of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1987); Ninian Smart, *The Philosophy of Religion* (N.Y.: Oxford, 1970); Robert S. Elwood, *cit. sup.*; Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, rev. ed. (NY: Harper and Row, 1975) and *Logic and Transcendence* (NY: Harper and Row, 1975). A superb account of the characteristic difference between east and west is found in Mrs. Moore's experience in the Marabar cave in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Chap. 12.

Even where there are names for a given quality -- terror, love, serenity, abhorrence, grief, tenderness -- to name the quality and describe it communicates but does not convey the experienced quality to another. This may be why lovers often talk nonsense: descriptive verbalization of what they feel seems to trivialize the depth of that feeling. This may account for why it is that much art and music criticism is either boring or arcane: there is simply no way to convey the experience of seeing or hearing beauty to another who was not there. In this respect the mystical experience is not at all unusual, except perhaps in degree. As with all powerful or deeply significant experiences, even when one has explained and described it well, there is the frustration of feeling that the real substance of it has not been conveyed, so we find ourselves saying "words fail me; it's indescribable; I can't tell you." As St. Teresa put it, "I should never be satisfied with endeavoring to make them understand."

When the awareness is that of being engulfed in the All where all distinctions dissolve, the difficulty posed by discursive language is compounded and plainly can be alluded to only negatively, what it is not, or paradoxically as in St. Bonaventura's celebrated (and incomprehensible) statement: "God's center is everywhere, and his circumference nowhere."

There is yet another difficulty with making ineffability the hallmark of mysticism: not all mystics make this claim; some are quite explicit. For example, Comenius, who must be counted among the greatest minds of any age, described the experience of his "Christ mysticism" in detail in *The Labyrinth of the World*, as this brief quotation indicates:

And having said these words, He embraced me, and kissed me kindly. There came forth from Him a most delightful odour, and I was seized by such unspeakable delight that tears flowed from my eyes... [He said further,] "I have brought thee to thy own self. I have led thee into thyself. For here have I chosen my palace and my dwelling."¹²

¹² *Op. cit.*, translated by Matthew Spinka, 1942. Cf. Spinka's biography of 1943.

It is tempting to use the two-fold nature of the brain to explain mysticism.¹³ Many have done so, often with exaggerated and unsupportable claims. It is certainly possible that some such experiences are an intense and exclusive awareness by the right hemisphere, but from what I have read of experimentation in that field it would not seem at all adequate to explain most religious mysticism. To put it crudely, if one resorts to brain physiology for an explanation, the reports of celebrated mystics seem to be much more like an over-load of the left hemisphere. Rather than a deepening of appreciative and relational perceptions, it is through emptying the mind or by way of bafflement that the breakthrough comes about.

With some misgivings I will offer a hypothesis, which is purely speculative and fanciful. It is the function of the corpus collosum, which connects the two hemispheres, not only to communicate as it were between the two halves, but also to diminish the activity of the half which is not being used primarily at a given time. As in a conversation where each person must be fairly silent when the other is speaking, so the two halves of the brain must take turns with the corpus collosum acting as a kind of moderator to prevent confusion. An insight in the *Theologia Germanica* suggests something very like the popular theory that mysticism is simply exclusive awareness by the right hemisphere:

The soul has two eyes; the right eye beholds eternity, and the left eye time. Both cannot perform their work at once. If the soul would see into eternity the left eye must be closed.¹⁴

My theory supposes that it may be possible under unusual circumstances for both hemispheres to become simultaneously

13 E.g., R. E. Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (NY: Penguin, 1972), 153 ff. For a critique of superficial and irresponsible use of the current knowledge of left-brain/right-brain research see Howard Gardner, "What We Know (and Don't Know) About the Two Halves of the Brain," *Harvard Magazine*, March-April, 1978, 24 ff.

14 *Op. cit.*, transl. Susanna Winkworth (NY: Macmillan, 1893).

active for a brief time. After all, reality (*omnitudo realitatis*) has two simultaneous aspects: the old problem of the one and the many. On the one hand it has a pervasive unity or oneness, as Whitehead said, "In so far as there are internal relations, everything must depend upon everything else."¹⁵ Normally we think of ourselves as independent self-contained entities with a world around us, but in fact we know upon reflection that we are cells in the stream of existence, interdependent and interacting with a reality that is not all that external to us: physically, biologically, mentally, culturally. Lewis Thomas has explicated this on the biological level: "we are components in a dense, fantastically complicated system of life, we are enmeshed in the interliving."¹⁶ Awareness of this is always an aspect of mysticism, as Tillich observed: "The Augustinian tradition can rightly be called mystical, if mysticism is defined as the experience of the identity of subject and object in relation to Being itself."¹⁷

On the other hand, there is the particularizing, individualizing, concrete aspect of reality. Even in metaphysical systems which view phenomena as *maya* recognition is given to the experienced actuality of diversity and specifiably distinct things, perceptions, and events as appearance. In other lifeviews it is celebrated as in W. H. Auden's phrase, "the happy eachness of all things." In Zen, it is suchness. In Kierkegaard, "Faith is precisely this paradox, that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal." In Whitehead's philosophy God as the Principle of Concretion is the particularizing character of reality by virtue of which concrete, particular, identifiable entities can be. Amid all such diverse views, as well as from common sense, reality is characterized by manifold diversity and particularity. This rock is not that rock; I am not you. My

15 *Science and the Modern World* (NY: Macmillan, 1926), 235.

16 *The Medusa and the Snail* (NY: Bantam, 1980), 12, a view expressed throughout his writings.

17 "Two Types of Philosophy of Religion," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, May, 1946, 3 ff.

favorite explanation of the mystic's experience is Richard Rolle of Hampole's, "taken into marvelous mirth."¹⁸

We can understand that both of these perspectives are true, but generally we cannot be aware of both at the same time. We switch back and forth in these perspectives and combine them in a broader understanding, but not in an immediate awareness. By and large the interrelated oneness is associated with the right brain, the particularizing with the left. But supposing that due to unusual discipline or chemistry both sides operated simultaneously with intensity: that would produce an awareness that was truly in tune with the way things are -- it would also be utterly mind-boggling. Because that is not the way the human mind normally works the awareness would be ineffable, its description unutterable. Whether the corpus collosum could operate in this way, giving free rein to both hemispheres at the same time, may be far-fetched and in fact impossible for all I know. However, in some types of mysticism it does seem that some form of simultaneous awareness occurs which is not our usual mode of consciousness.

I find Willa Appel's comment perceptive here:

Both messianic visions and fairy tales occupy that peculiar mythical space at the edge of the psyche and speak a language that is neither exclusively internal monologue nor external discourse, but both simultaneously.¹⁹

This is akin to Erik Erikson's analysis of experiences in which the child in us and the adult we are, normally kept separate, coincide and harmonize in a freeing and joyous experience. It may also explain in part why many mystics (e.g. Eckhart and van Ruysbroek) speak of it as "the Eternal Now." In any case an unusual simultaneity is involved and may bring together other diversities than the one and many, as Stace suggests:

¹⁸ See Underhill, *cit. sup.* On multifariousness see Douglas Fox, *Meditation and Reality* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 68, 93.

¹⁹ *Cults in America* (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), 35, ital. added. Her summary of experimental research is highly informative as is Douglas Fox's in *Meditation and Reality*.

Another aspect of the paradox is that this pure consciousness is simultaneously both positive and negative, something and nothing, a fullness and an emptiness.²⁰

Despite the frequent emphasis on oneness, there are passages which deal with multifariousness as in Boehme's words: "In this light my spirit saw through all things and into all creatures and I recognized God in grass and plants."

V. ESOTERIC MYSTICISM AND CONFIRMATORY MYSTICISM

By esoteric mysticism I mean those types which claim to receive information or truth which is not accessible by any other route. The mystic receives privileged knowledge, which may or may not come in the form of language or a message, but is claimed to be of a higher order than any other knowledge. It may deal with secret information and right policy in relation to current events, as characterized St. Catherine and later Baha'u'llah. Or it may deal in detail with the geography and management of heaven, as in the writings of Swedenborg.²¹ Or it may give sanction to a messianic program like that of Thomas Münzer in the sixteenth century or Isaac Bullard who in the nineteenth century led followers through Vermont, New York, Ohio, and Missouri proclaiming free love, communism, and dirt, "often boasting that he hadn't washed in seven years."

By confirmatory mysticism I mean those types which make no claim of esoteric truth, knowledge or information. The mystical experience instead confirms what has been known or believed. Or it brings together things which have already been known in a way that yields new understanding or insight or enrichment. It is not an informational revelation, but may well be revelatory of new comprehension and conviction. "As a rule," William James remarked, "mystical states merely add a supersensuous meaning to the ordinary data of consciousness." M. P. Montague provides an

²⁰ *The Teachings of the Mystics*, 13.

²¹ Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*, one of his many volumes e.g., runs to 426 pages. Baha'u'llah also wrote many volumes of definitive revelations for the benefit of rulers.

explicit statement of this:

I saw no new thing but I saw all the usual things in a new miraculous light -- in what I believe is their true light. I saw for the first time how wildly beautiful and joyous, beyond any words of mine to describe, is the whole of life...For those fleeting moments I did indeed and in truth love my neighbor as myself.²²

Confirming experiences are less sensational than occult or secret informational ones, but they are not therefore less profound or religiously meaningful. Luther was not unacquainted with the Letter to the Romans when it came home to him what the word meant for him, and it was assuredly an undramatic experience compared with St. Catherine's remarkable wedding with Jesus in heaven or Mohammed's journey from Jerusalem to heaven on horse-back. John Wesley's heart being strangely warmed at Aldersgate contained no new thought at all and certainly no cosmic transportation, merely that something dawned on him as personally applying to him, really, which his mother Susanna had probably told him a hundred times.

Perhaps the most frequent form is where the mystic has an experience that he or she takes to be a special message or revelation, but which is quite conformable to what has been taught and known -- perhaps resisted as in John Bunyan's case -- and confirmed and reenforced by subsequent experiences. Although personal and vivid, this is not at all esoteric, and would be exemplified by George Fox, Woolman, and Rufus Jones, as well as a number of medieval mystics and Jewish, Islamic, and oriental mystics. Contrary to what James suggested hypothetically about mysticism possibly being a vision of another realm or what Stace regards as being in touch with "some spiritual Infinite which transcends the temporal flux of things," the diversity of mystic claims, the contradictions among them, and the conformity with what they already believed or knew about removes any firm basis for taking informational mystical revelations as authoritative, including the person receiving such information. However,

22 "Twenty Minutes of Reality," *Atlantic Monthly*, May, 1916.

mysticism as confirming what has been believed, illuminating values which can be tested in life, and energizing commitments perceived with new depth and power is quite a different matter. In George Fox's words, "All things were new; and all the creation gave unto me another smell than before."²³

As different as Vedanta philosophy is, the climactic experience (samadhi) is not new information, but a deeper confirmation of what has been known intellectually all along, that Brahman is Atman. Thus it becomes moksha (liberation). There are different pathways -- Jnana Marga, Bhakti Marga, Bhakti Yoga -- and different levels of realization. This is not esoteric in the sense of being privileged revelation, and is in sharp contrast with those gurus who claim to have received a special revelation requiring exclusive devotion by their devotees.

In Zen we find even more clearly a confirming enlightenment rather than esoteric truth. It is not transport to another realm or absorption in the ocean of being, but affirms manifold particularity.

Salvation must be sought in the finite itself, there is nothing infinite apart from finite things; if you seek something transcendental, that will cut you off from this world of relativity, which is the same thing as the annihilation of yourself.²⁴

Norman Cousins had a similar view: "Man has tried to throw his arms around infinity and he has been left -- not with the universe in his arms but with a closed and empty circle."²⁵ So too Martin Buber: "Every real relation in the world rests on individuation, this is its joy."²⁶ The definitive statement, for me, of confirmatory mysticism is the teaching of Seigen Ishin:

Before one studies Zen, to him mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth

23 *Autobiography*, ed. Rufus Jones (Philadelphia: Ferris and Leach, 1919).

24 D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series*, Introduction. See W. P. Alston, ed., *Religious Belief and Philosophical Thought* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), 611.

25 *The Celebration of Life* (NY: Harper and Row, 1974), 79.

26 *I and Thou* (NY: Scribner's, 1958), 102.

of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains to him are not mountains and waters are not waters; but after this when he really attains to the abode of rest, mountains are once more mountains and waters are waters.²⁷

The most important distinction to be made about mysticism, I believe, is between that which is esoteric, purporting to be informational, and that which confirms knowledge and values open to examination and substantiation or revision by other modes of examination. Douglas Fox makes the point, agreeing with Roberto Assagioli: There is "the need for the critical expertise of linear thought to be applied to what holistic or intuitive experience accepts uncritically."²⁸ To that I would only add also the need for empirical evaluation in addition to intellectual critique on the same basis as any other truth claims or interpretive principles.

A concluding observation has to do with the widespread impression that mysticism is the *sine qua non* core of religion, that mystics possess a higher level of spirituality, or that there is some kind of spiritual lack of failure in those who have not had either some dramatic conversion or break-through mystical experience. This distortion can be very unfortunate not merely for the sense of failure which it cultivates, but also for obscuring of those mundane qualities of appreciation, devotion, and service which mature religion regards as central. That is nothing against wholesome mysticism, in fact, it is a point which some of the best interpreters of mysticism have made. One could not find more highly regarded Christian authorities than Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. Eckhart said that if one were in mystical ecstasy and knew of a poor person who needed help, that mystic ought to leave ecstasy to go and serve the poor as a higher calling. St. John of the cross for all his explication of mysticism denounced pursuit of it for its own sake as "spiritual gluttony," and asserted that the humble person who serves God may

²⁷ Suzuki, *cit. sup.*

²⁸ *Meditation and Reality*, 147.

very well be spiritually superior to any visionary.²⁹ Furthermore, the apostle Paul who evidently had some extraordinary experience of being carried into a higher realm (he was not sure which one) paid small attention to either that or his ability to speak in tongues as compared with love and service. Douglas Fox puts it this way:

Mysticism without grace is simply Titanism. A Titan may well be tranquil, feeling whole and one with the cosmos, but he or she is no more than a Titan nevertheless, possessed of a full measure of the vice of *hubris* even when that *hubris* is a pride so full and perfect that it appears as its very opposite, humility and selflessness.³⁰

Based upon an admittedly qualitative consideration, mature, life affirming religion is primarily an orientation of gratitude and an outlook of universality, without primary emphasis given to privileged claims of special and inaccessible truth for others or preoccupation with the intrinsic evil of those outsiders who do not share the esoteric and sacred truth.

²⁹ Stace, *cit. sup.*, 26 f.

³⁰ *Meditation and Reality*, 128.

Note: Although I use inclusive language in my own exposition, I do not consider it permissible to alter the wording of others in direct quotation or proper to apply such standards retroactively.

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