

# ECSTASY

By WILLIAM JOHNSTON

IN RECENT years psychology and neuro-physiology have shown considerable interest in 'altered states of consciousness', such as dreams, hypnotic trance, drug experience, mystical phenomena and the rest. And included in this fascinating, if baffling, study is a lively interest in the phenomenon known as ecstasy. Psycho-physiological research in this area is not directly religious. Rather does it stem from a growing fascination with the human mind, the study of which promises to be one of the leading preoccupations of the decades which lie ahead. Researchers in consciousness have directed their attention principally to yoga and zen and tibetan mysticism, feeling that they have here copious data and a wide field for research. Unfortunately, they frequently overlook, or are ignorant of, the long experience of the judaeo-christian tradition and the large body of doctrine accumulated in the West from its rich experience of prayer. Indeed, it is sometimes thought that christianity has no mysticism whatever. In this article, necessarily limited in scope, I would like to select a few leading ideas from the western experience – ideas which may show that christian ecstasy is still a meaningful phenomenon for contemporary man.

## *Early use of the word*

In the minds of many people, ecstasy is associated with trance. But this, in fact, is only one usage of the word. Derived from the greek *ekstasis*, literally 'a change of place', it is used in the Septuagint to translate the hebrew 'fear' or 'terror', as in the book of Genesis, where it is said that Isaac was seized with great fear and trembling.<sup>1</sup> It describes a terror that is partly numinous: 'All the men . . . were terrified. It was a very panic of God';<sup>2</sup> and the deep sleep sent upon Adam when God made woman from his side.

In the New Testament it is used to describe the amazement of those who saw the mighty works of Jesus,<sup>3</sup> as well as the awe of the disciples when they saw the empty tomb,<sup>4</sup> and the reaction of the crowd when Peter performed his first healing.<sup>5</sup> In general it seems

<sup>1</sup> Cf Gen 32, 33.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Sam 14, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Mk 5, 42; Lk 5, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Mk 16, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Acts 3, 10.

to mean that man is somehow shaken out of his ordinary way of thinking and enters into what modern scholars call an altered state of consciousness. It is the word employed for Peter's state when he falls asleep on the rooftop at Joppa and God speaks to him,<sup>6</sup> as well as Paul's experience when the Lord spoke to him as he prayed.<sup>7</sup>

Needless to say, the element of trance, too, was well known in the world in which the bible came to birth. From early times there were attempts to induce ecstasy with drugs and music and dancing. We read in the first book of Samuel about bands of prophets who would dance themselves into a frenzy, while giving vent to prophetic utterances. Saul himself joined such a group. But on the whole, jewish religion was sceptical of such experimentation. Attempts to induce ecstasy artificially were increasingly frowned upon. If ecstasy came, it was the gift of Yahweh, not something to be cultivated by man. And quite often the visitations of Yahweh, far from being delectable, were filled with pain and anguish, as in the case of Jeremiah. In general it can be said that the judaeo-christian tradition, from its very origins, has been wary of frenzies and trances.

As in the hebrew, so in the hellenistic world, the word *ekstasis* is used in a wide variety of meanings. Philo distinguishes four: 1) alienation 2) astonishment and fear 3) perfect rest, sleep, stupor 4) inspiration. Then there were bacchic rites associated with the god Dionysius, which aimed at producing wild frenzies under the name of ecstasy. Probably St Paul was referring to something like this when he writes to the corinthians, 'You remember that, when you were pagans, whenever you felt irresistibly drawn, it was towards dumb idols'.<sup>8</sup> Evidently for St Paul and the early Church, such frenzies were quite different from the charismatic experience of the holy Spirit. Plato speaks of ecstasy in his description of poetic inspiration (something of the god himself is speaking in the poet); and the idea that god is in man alternates with the idea of man in god. To both these ideas corresponds a third notion – that of the temporary separation of soul and body. For in the platonic mentality the body is always a hindrance to ecstasy.

### *Ecstasy as a technical term*

As a technical term with the connotation of 'rapture', the word ecstasy seems to have entered christianity with Tertullian. For him it was *excessus sensus et amentiae instar*: as if to say that the soul stands

<sup>6</sup> Cf Acts 10, 10; 11, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Acts 22, 17.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor 12, 2.

out of itself in a way that resembles madness.<sup>9</sup> With St Bernard (though the great saint of Clairvaux rarely uses the word at all), ecstasy begins to acquire the meaning it subsequently took on in spiritual theology: a state in which the corporeal senses cease to exercise their function. Ecstasy is 'the sleep of the senses'; and when it is complete, it takes a man out of his internal senses also – *abductio interioris sensus*. In this way, ecstasy comes to have a precise meaning for St Teresa of Avila.

From the beginning of the present century, attempts were made to classify and codify the various stages of mystical prayer by theologians like Auguste Poulain (1836–1919), Joseph de Guibert (1877–1942), Adolphe Tanquerey (1854–1932), and Garrigou Lagrange (1855–1938). Most religions with a highly developed mystical life try to delineate the various inner stages or states of consciousness through which one passes on the path to the divine or to nirvana. Such classifications are particularly conspicuous in yoga and in tantric buddhism. Christian theologians did something similar. For them, ecstasy was the third stage in the mystical ascent – following upon the prayer of quiet and the prayer of union. Here is how ecstasy is described by Tanquerey:

- 1) At first, a more or less pronounced state of *insensibility* sets in, together with a slowing down of the physical life, of breathing, and as a consequence, of the natural body-heat: 'One feels that natural warmth wanes, and that the body gradually cools, but with a gentleness and delight that are unspeakable'.
- 2) A sort of *immobility* ensues which causes the body to preserve the attitude in which it was when seized by the ecstasy; the eyes remain fixed upon some invisible object.
- 3) This condition, which should naturally weaken the body, rather imparts to it new energies. True, at the moment of returning consciousness one feels a certain sense of fatigue, but this is followed by a recrudescence of vigour.
- 4) At times, the suspension of the senses is *complete*; at others it remains *incomplete* and permits a narration of the revelations received, as can be seen in the life of St Catherine of Siena.<sup>10</sup>

Tanquerey then goes on to delineate three phases of ecstasy which he calls *simple ecstasy* (this 'is a sort of *fainting spell* which comes gently and produces a sense of hurt at once painful and delightful'); *rapture* (this 'takes hold of the soul with an impetuosity and a violence that are irresistible'); and *flight of the spirit*, which is so impetuous

<sup>9</sup> *A Treatise on the Soul*, Chapter XLIV.

<sup>10</sup> Tanquerey, Adolphe: *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* (2nd ed Tournai, 1932), pp 684–7.

that 'it seems to sever the soul from the body, and resistance appears impossible'. In all these descriptions Tanqueray is greatly, but not exclusively, influenced by St Teresa.

### *Significance of ecstasy*

To understand Tanqueray's 'insensibility' and 'immobility', it should be recalled that even the first stage of mystical prayer (the prayer of quiet) is accompanied by a certain ligature, a certain difficulty in response to external stimuli and in the recitation of vocal prayer. It is this ligature that develops in intensity, resulting in the ecstatic suspension of the external senses and the rupture with the outside world. For Tanqueray, the physical phenomenon of the suspension of the external senses is not in itself of great significance. It is important, however, because it is 'the outcome of absorption in God'. What really matters is the divine action, together with the interior faith and love of the contemplative. Yet Tanqueray does not belittle the physiological phenomena. They are symptoms of something profound. 'Ecstatic union is therefore more perfect than the two preceding ones, since it comprises, over and above the elements peculiar to the former, this suspension of the activity of the external senses'.

Other theologians, however, were much less enthusiastic about the physiological phenomena. Eminent among these was Joseph de Guibert, who maintained that the suspension of the external senses was no more than a consequence arising from human weakness. People who are physically and psychologically strong undergo no ligature, no ecstasy in the physical sense, no loss of control. The fact that they manifest no 'insensibility' and 'immobility' does not mean that they are stronger in body or that they are not of the ecstatic personality type. De Guibert, then, did not include ecstasy in the necessary stages on the way to divine union. It might or might not be present — that would depend on circumstances.

### *Light from other religions*

While it is impossible in this short article to enter into the complex question of ecstasy in eastern religions, I would like to select a couple of points which throw light on the significance of ecstasy that we are now discussing.

The first is that while the phenomena of suspension of the exterior senses, immobility and the rest are well known in yoga and in tantric buddhism, such things are practically unknown in Zen. And

the reasons for this are not hard to discover. The whole methodology of Zen is calculated to keep the one who is meditating in control of his external senses and in contact with the surrounding world: everything possible is done to impede trance. The eyes are kept slightly open (this is a point that is insisted upon rather strictly); and the *zazen* or 'sitting in meditation' is usually performed in a group and in common. During the meditation periods, a monk walks around the hall ready with a stick (known as a *kyosaku*) to beat unmercifully anyone who might show signs of losing himself in anything like trance. In this way, one is forced to remain in contact with sensible reality. Indeed, one way of practising Zen is to listen to every sound as though one were hearing it for the first time. Moreover, it is interesting to recall that recent neuro-physiological studies in Tokyo have pointed out the great difference between Zen and yoga in this regard.<sup>11</sup> Researchers have shown that zen masters reacted to the flashing of a light or the sound of a gong or to being pierced with a needle, whereas the yogis reacted to none of these things. This is because the zen masters were in possession of their external senses, whereas the yogis were in a trance. However, the point I wish to make is this: the fact that there is no suspension of the senses in Zen, where religious experience is indisputably very deep and where loss of self is insisted upon very radically, would seem to support the thesis of de Guibert, that ecstasy as a physical phenomenon is not very important or significant. One can have profound mystical experience without passing through the ecstatic immobility described by Tanqueray.

A second point of interest is that states of consciousness resembling that described by Tanqueray, and I speak here only of the physical symptoms, can be produced at will by yogis and other eastern devotees who are willing to submit themselves to ascetical practices and training. As is well known, there are yogis who can walk bare-foot on red-hot coals, pierce their bodies with skewers without drawing blood, have themselves buried alive and so on. Admittedly, their psychological and physiological states are not exactly the same as those of the christian ecstatic; but there is enough resemblance to let us draw the conclusion that such states can be induced. This again leads us to the conclusion that they are not of primary religious significance. Moreover, it lets us see that just as there can be true and false mysticism, so there can be true and false ecstasy.

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<sup>11</sup> See Tamlo Hirai, *The Psycho-physiology of Zen* (Tokyo, 1974).

Not false in the literal sense (no experience can really be false), but false in that it is of little religious value and may even be a perversion. Clearly, then, what really matters is the underlying spiritual state which gives rise to such physical phenomena.

### *Ecstasy and death*

Recent studies in psychology have led to the conclusion that some people undergo experience resembling ecstasy at the moment of death. Studies on sudden death (gathered from people who came to the very brink of death but did not die: people, for example, who fell from mountain tops into deep and saving snow) have revealed that in a great number of cases these people have, in a flash, been overcome with the most extraordinarily joyful experiences, the descriptions of which resemble the accounts of the mystics. At times their whole life has passed momentarily before them; but this has only been the prelude to a transcendental experience of mystical bliss.<sup>12</sup>

It is very probable that this ecstasy prior to death has causes somewhat similar to those of St Teresa and other ecstasies. In both cases there is a very great deprivation, a great detachment from the things of earth, joined to an uprising of faith and hope. 'Hope springs eternal in the human breast', writes the poet; and one can understand how, in the case of dying persons faced with inevitable extinction, faith and hope (perhaps faith and hope that have been latent until now) might rise up with tremendous force, causing something like ecstasy. In other words, ecstasy would be caused by a powerful rising of spirit.

Returning to Teresa of Avila, we find her writing of ecstasy:

You realize . . . and indeed see that you are being carried away you know not where. For although this is delightful the weakness of our nature makes us afraid at first . . . often I would like to resist . . . especially in a public place.<sup>13</sup>

In her descriptions, Teresa emphasizes two aspects of ecstasy – joy and fear. One can understand the great joy. It is clear that a change of consciousness, the entrance into a new dimension of psychic life, the discovery of the true self, the existential realization of God's love: it is clear that all this will bring great joy. But the fear? This seems to stem from two sources. One is simply the embarrassment

<sup>12</sup> This is treated in more detail in the present writer's *Silent Music: The Science of Mysticism* (London, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> *The Life of St Teresa of Avila*, by herself, Chapter XX.

of acting strangely in the presence of other people. With Teresa, ecstasy did not just occur at time of formal prayer; it was likely to happen at any time. And this must have been a source of acute embarrassment. But the fear is not explained only by this. It came rather from the loss of control that accompanied the ecstatic experience. We know of the apprehension and fear that takes hold of people who are subject to experiences (even experiences of fainting or sickness) that they cannot control. And in some such way Teresa dreaded something that made her lose control of herself. This was a terrifying thing.

But ecstasy (and on this all the theologians agree) is a transient thing. It is a stage in the mystic path; and in the final stage there is no ecstasy. It is transient simply because the ecstatic learns to control it. At first he is taken by surprise, overwhelmed by the power of spirit that rises up within him. It is a peak-experience that may take him off his guard. But in the mystical life peaks become plateaux; the extraordinary experience becomes ordinary. And the mystic rises to a new level of integration and self-possession.

### *Conclusion*

I have tried to say that ecstasy is caused by the uprising of spirit: it is a sudden and abrupt moment in the process of the spiritualization of man. This moment may, or may not, result in the suspension of the exterior senses. This is a matter of little importance. But perhaps this notion of 'the spiritualization of man' calls for some further explanation.

With Teilhard de Chardin, it is possible to look on human growth or 'hominization' as a process in which matter is spiritualized. As man becomes older he should, ideally speaking, become more spiritual, not in the platonic sense of rejecting matter but in the sense that matter itself is spiritualized and man becomes more cosmic. This way of thinking is found in traditional hindu spirituality, according to which man becomes increasingly contemplative as he passes through the various stages of life – that of the student, the householder, the celibate recluse, the mystic. Man becomes increasingly contemplative as he moves towards God-consciousness. Again, a similar way of thinking is found in Jung, who believed that from the middle period of life (thirty-five to forty-five in our culture) men and women should increasingly devote themselves to contemplation and to interiority. Perhaps the pauline transition from 'flesh' to 'spirit' can be interpreted in a similar way. Man becomes more

and more spiritual and at the same time more and more open to, and influenced by, the holy Spirit.

Now I believe that ecstasy is one stage in this spiritualization of matter. It is a sudden and abrupt transition from flesh to spirit, occurring in personalities who are mystically inclined and who devote themselves to constant meditation. But this sudden experience is essentially of a piece with the gradual transition from flesh to spirit that takes place in the ordinary ageing process of other people who devote themselves to the things of the spirit. These latter, too, become cosmic as life goes on. They, too, lose control of their exterior sense in a slow, if less dramatic, process of detachment. They, too, enter into a new state of consciousness. But here the process is slow, whereas in the ecstatic it is swift.

Viewed in this way, ecstasy need not be considered an abnormal or extraordinary phenomenon. Yet it is significant and points to the spirituality of man.

Finally, one might ask about the theological significance of ecstasy.

For the spiritual theologians of the beginning of this century, ecstasy was a foretaste of the beatific vision. This latter, ultimate experience was not accessible to man in this life (though some theologians granted it to Moses and Elias and St Paul), since 'no man has even seen God'. But experiences like ecstasy were stages on the way. It is interesting to note the parallel here with buddhism. For the buddhist also, the ultimate experience of nirvana is not accessible to man in this life, and any enlightenment is no more than a foretaste of the final 'becoming a Buddha'. This has practical consequences, in that the buddhist can never believe that he has reached the goal or that he has arrived. However earthshaking his enlightenment experience, he is told (like St Paul) to keep running towards the goal that he will never here attain. Something similar can be said about christian contemplation. No experience in this life is ultimate, but every genuine experience is valuable in that it points to the goal.

If, however, we look on ecstasy as a stage in the spiritualization of matter (and this is the definition I have given), then I would prefer to speak of it as a foretaste of the resurrection rather than of the beatific vision. For the resurrection is the ultimate christian experience (just as nirvana is the ultimate buddhist experience), in which man becomes cosmic and adopts a new relationship to matter in Christ Jesus.