

ECSTASY - OR WHAT?

By SIMON TUGWELL

ALL OUR knowledge is based upon experience, declared Swami Vivekananda at the beginning of his introduction to Raja-Yoga,¹ and proceeded to argue that religious knowledge too is empirical, and should be approached, as such, experimentally. 'Just as you would take up any other science, exactly in the same manner you should take up this science for study'. 'What right has a man to say he has a soul if he does not feel it, or that there is a God if he does not see him? If there is a God, we must see him, if there is a soul, we must perceive it; otherwise it is better not to believe'.

It is easy for the christian theologian to protest that, except for one of St Athanasius's wilder remarks about exorcism ('Go and try it for yourself and see the power of the name of Christ' being the gist of it),² his whole tradition maintains that belief is the indispensable pre-condition of any true religious experience. It is easy too to point out that Vivekananda was being rather less than honest, in that his spiritual empiricism has behind it a whole context of presuppositions so deeply embodied in indian culture as a whole that the individual can take them for granted, without perhaps having to bring them to consciousness. A westerner, without such presuppositions, would be likely to get very different results from adopting the same empiricism.³

Nevertheless, in the world of his day, characterized as it was by a great belief in 'science', already breaking through the strict materialism of the victorian era, but still touched by a certain romanticism about experience, about what can be felt in one's pulse, such as Keats insisted on, the pronouncements of men like Vivekananda found a very ready hearing. Men were all too eager to turn from the unsatisfying creeds and dogmas of their ancestral religion, in search of something more evidently real. And we are still the children of that generation. In spite of the reaction against science, and even against empiricism, 'experience' is still something sacrosanct. And

¹ Vivekananda, Swami: *Raja-Yoga* (Calcutta, 1960).

² *De Incarnatione*, 48.

³ Cf Younger, Paul: *Introduction to Indian Religious Thought* (London, 1972).

at least part of the appeal of some of the modern religious movements is their promise of religious experience; Guru Maharaj Ji and the Jesus Movement have at least that much in common, and many of their recruits come from an earlier variation on the same theme: the psychedelic movement with its chemical ecstasies.

The trouble is that experience can be very deceptive. Or rather, we can be very deceived as to just what we have experienced, and even as to what we are experiencing.

Some years ago, research was carried out into people who claimed to be quite unable to sleep. Studied carefully, in ideal conditions, they were found to sleep normally right through the night, and then assert, on waking, that they had not slept a wink. There are certainly people who do suffer from genuine insomnia; but it is interesting that it can be adopted, and apparently is commonly adopted, as a pose, deceiving even the would-be insomniac.⁴

One can make a similar observation without much difficulty in connection with people's alleged enjoyments. At times the contrast between their profession of delight and the boredom written all over their faces is all too evident. I do not mean those situations where courtesy dictates a certain pretence of pleasure, but those social events, for instance, or cultural events, which people feel obliged to enjoy, not because anyone will be offended if they don't, but because their whole world would come tumbling down if once they admitted that, perhaps, cocktail parties are a bore, or that the Beatles are really much more fun than Bach.

It is not conscious dishonesty that is involved. That would be a relatively straightforward disorder. It is something much worse: that we can actually deceive ourselves, can have pseudo-experience. Or, put another way, we censor our awareness of what is happening to us, and of our own feelings, so that we only consciously register those elements that we approve of. And let us be clear at the outset that this is something we all do in varying degrees, so that any stone-throwing is out of the question. Inevitably, everyone reading this, will, if he feels sympathetic at all to what I am saying, mentally exempt himself. And that is just another way of achieving the same result of censored self-awareness. We are all in the same boat, so let us laugh together at our folly, and try to help each other to make the best of it. After all, it is this curiously complex and

⁴ Oswald, Ian: *Sleep* (London, 1966), p 127.

devious humanity that God himself has undertaken to save. So we need not be afraid or over-cautious.

The ultimate source of our censoring our own awareness is not far to seek. It is, in fact, closely related to the very root of sin in us. 'Your heart was proud because of your beauty, you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendour'.⁵ Not content to receive ourselves as a gift from God, we try to possess ourselves as if we were somehow independent of him. That is why we have to be reminded: 'it is he who made us, and not we ourselves'.⁶ Original sin consists in man trying to be his own creator. This is expressed dramatically in the tale of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. The story is quite explicit that what is at stake is a divine prerogative: the serpent tempts Eve with the promise, 'You will become like gods', and God himself endorses this. And if we remember that, in God, knowledge is a creative force — things exist because he knows them, not the other way about — we can see at once the significance of the tree of knowledge. What man is trying to wrest from God's hand is not information, not even wisdom, but *creative* knowledge; instead of receiving himself from God's creative act, he wishes to create himself for himself. And ever since, all men have been troubled and diseased by this urge to self-creation, this need to pose, to be a stage hero, this desire for an identity that can be possessed. Man wants to be able to say 'I know who and what I am'. And the tragedy of it is that man is, actually, intended to know who he is. Man, alone amongst fleshly creatures, is meant to share God's prerogative of creative knowledge.

Already in the book of Genesis we find a hint of this, when Adam is called upon to name the animals. And Adam is meant to know his own name too, only he is meant first of all to receive his name from God: to hear first, then to speak it. And he was not prepared to wait, so mankind has never yet had the full experience of being named by God. There have been a few individuals whose names have been given or changed by God, chiefly, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ. But for most of us, it is impossible to say more than 'we do not know what we shall be, but we know we shall be like him'. We look forward to a day when we too shall be named.⁷ That is why, amongst the nations of the world, we find so many myths of creation expressed in terms of a great struggle, a struggle against a beast of chaos: creation *is* a struggle, and the struggle is not yet over. God is

⁵ Ezek 28, 17.

⁶ Ps 99, 3 (Vulgate).

⁷ 1 Jn 3, 2; cf Apoc 2, 17.

wrestling with our 'home-made' being, our false, self-inflicted identities, our world, whose lord and god is the devil, the father of lies, struggling with the monstrous web of deceit which has been built up by sin, struggling to win us back to himself, our true creator, so that his creation can once more be revealed, ennobled yet more with the splendour of redemption, the incredible intimacy of incarnation. And there is man, poor little man, in the middle of it all. Tormented by 'immense nostalgias and a discontent that cannot be assuaged . . . carrying in the depth of his heart a mysterious need' (Paul VI in his Christmas message last year), man knows, deep down, that his attempt to escape from God's order is a dismal failure, incapable of bringing him bliss, that bliss he cannot help but want. So he feels trapped, 'shut up in prose', longing to escape. And he easily surmises, not too inaccurately, that his problem comes in large part from his own assumed identity.

The *Cloud of Unknowing* talks of a state in which man feels himself to be nothing but a lump of sin. And there is a state in which man does not find it difficult to surrender at least something of himself, because he feels himself to be an unbearable burden to himself. This is not, of course, what the *Cloud of Unknowing* was referring to; a true sense of sin does not make a man primarily conscious of himself as a burden to himself, but rather makes him aware of being loved and forgiven, a burden to God rather than to himself. But there is a similarity.

Of course, the romantics knew very well that 'identity' was their problem. To quote Emily Dickinson, always one of the most articulate and analytical, if not always the most poetical:

Me from Myself — to banish —
 Had I Art —
 Invincible my Fortress
 Unto all Heart —
 But since Myself — assault Me —
 How have I peace
 Except by subjugating
 Consciousness?

Now this sounds, at first, very like the message of the gospel. Our Lord tells us that we must lose ourselves, in order to find ourselves, that we must die in order to live. There is a true 'ecstasy', a getting outside oneself, involved in any relationship with God.

But yet God does not come to relieve us of ourselves, but to give

us ourselves. He offers, certainly, to relieve us of our false selves: but not to lead us into some selfless condition. Here we touch on one of the essential dividing lines, it seems to me, between a true spirituality, expressing the re-creation of man in Christ, and a false spirituality, which is simply a reaction against the awfulness of everything in this fallen world. I am not saying that it is at all easy for us, in any given case, to identify exactly which side of the fence we or anyone else is on; nor am I saying that frustration with life can never be the beginning of conversion and a factor in spiritual growth. Only we need to be aware that two contradictory motives can lead to apparently very similar results: on the one side, the desire to be rid of ourselves, the desire for death; on the other, the desire to be ourselves, whatever God intends that to mean, the desire for life.

Perhaps we can expand our Lord's words a little: just as we must die in order to live, so we must first live before we can die. The greek christian tradition expresses this schematically, by saying that the first stage of spiritual growth is to take possession of ourselves; the second is to lose possession of ourselves. Jacob did not give in to God without a struggle; in fact, he even appeared to defeat God in that awesome wrestling match at the ford Jabbok. When our Lord tells us to take up our cross day by day, it is not too far from the mark to interpret this as meaning that we must take up the burden of life day by day.

Man has a need both to assert himself and to yield, he is a being both active and passive. In an unfallen condition, there would be no contradiction between these two: his activity would flow from his passivity, his self-assertion would be his freedom in co-operating with God's creative and sovereign act. But in fallen man, these two aspects of his being are torn apart, and both of them thereby wounded and soured. If we would appreciate realistically the various religious movements of our day, it seems to me important to realize the very powerful forces that can arise from this fact. There are people who have learned all too well to be passive, and are now reacting against this, hearing a true call from our redeemer to wake from their sleep, but hearing it in a way which does justice only to their active side, so that they leave behind that yielding which is so vital for a christian. Others, by contrast, sick of asserting themselves, longing to be rid of their itching ego, surrender gladly to the appeal 'Let go, and let God', with an attitude characterized by some in terms of the desire to get back to the safety and warmth of the womb.

Now it is, unfortunately, all too plain how well these two contradictory movements can serve each other. There is an ecstasy of power, and an ecstasy of surrender. All that is needed is for those who want to surrender to yield themselves to those who desire the power, and everyone is happy.

Now all these factors are well known to the Lord, and he can use them all. Often it is precisely our wrong motives that bring us to the place he wants. But all the same, if we are to be wise and prudent, in the way our Lord requires, without false anxiety, we should seek whatever insight we can find into the human elements involved in our situation. And it is surely evident that one characteristic of a great many religious movements of our day, in marked contrast even to the drug mysticism of a few years ago, is a pattern of strong leadership, and far-reaching surrender on the part of the disciples and followers. A degree of fundamentalism has been noticed which is quite staggering. Every word that falls from the guru's lips is treasured with a respect no pope would dare to demand. Every action is controlled by the guru's dictates, to a degree no abbot, or even abbess, would be allowed to get away with.

An important study made recently into north american protestant neo-pentecostalism reveals that dependence on the 'leader' of the various groups appears to be a major factor in their formation.⁸ It is curious to notice that, in every case which the investigators found of people giving up speaking in tongues, having previously practised it, it turned out that they had had a quarrel with the leader of their group! Kildahl, who directed the investigation, concludes that leaning on the group, and in particular, leaning on the leader, is a dominant psychological motive, and that the apparently religious phenomenon of speaking in tongues is closely related to this very ordinary human need.

I think it is significant in this connection that the plot of *The Cross and the Switchblade*⁹ should have come to be so central to much of the modern religious scene. The move from heroin to religion, whether christian or oriental, is now a major modern topic. I hope I am not being unduly cynical in suggesting that there is often a common denominator between the heroin and the religion, which one might describe as a somewhat 'narcotic' approach to life. What people are after is a drastic simplification of life, so that pain can be excluded,

⁸ Kildahl, John, P.: *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* (London, 1972).

⁹ Wilkerson, David: *The Cross and the Switchblade* (London, 1967).

including prominently the pain of having to make decisions, and the even more intolerable pain of having to live with issues that refuse to come out into the open for us to decide about them, having to live with unanswered, even unidentified, questions.

This is a significantly different critique from that commonly directed against psychedelic mysticism, and still heard in connection with more recent religious movements. The quest, I think, is now not essentially a quest for instant ecstasy, but for that much more insidious kind of ecstasy which goes with the complete cessation of problems, an ecstasy which we are right to look forward to,¹⁰ but which we can only have in this life by evading half the issues, by surrendering our passivity, our self-assertiveness, our exploring and unsettled self, our unstereotyped self. It entails a drastic censoring of experience, with the serious risk of the falsification of vital evidence.

We must not draw too many conclusions from all this; we probably should not attempt, for instance, to pass judgment on any of the diverse religious movements we find around us, or perhaps find ourselves involved in. Such large judgments are very rarely ours to make. What is desirable is that we get a better, and more compassionate, understanding of the motley human emotions and motives that are likely to be involved in any attempt to lead any kind of religious life, newfangled or old. And I think a recent book, *The Uses of Disorder*,¹¹ by an american sociologist, can help us here. His field of study is big cities, but what he says is relevant to many other situations too. Drawing on a number of current psychological and sociological studies, he indicates a recurrent pattern of self-deception, by which groups of people manage to be firmly convinced that they have had and continue to have a particular experience of life, when in fact observation shows that this is simply not true. For instance, a particular white suburb with an exceptionally high divorce and crime rate, when faced with the arrival of a respectable black family in their midst, drive out the black family, on the grounds that they will threaten the peaceful, domestic, stable nature of the suburb. This was not dishonesty, it appears; the people involved really believed that their experience of living in the suburb was what they said it was. They experienced their own myth, rather than the flesh and blood actuality of their situation. Many other instances can be documented, and surely this is in fact the experience of all of us.

¹⁰ Cf Apoc 21, 4.

¹¹ Sennett, Richard: *The Uses of Disorder* (London, 1973).

Sennett explores the mechanism of this kind of self-deception with great perspicacity. He connects it with a frequently observed characteristic of adolescents, who, faced with a sudden new range of possibilities, and the objective freedom to explore them, but without the experience to guide and help them interpret and evaluate the various possibilities, adopt a stance, a pose, which by-passes the need for exploration, which gives them the feeling that they already know all the answers, without having to experience anything.

One response of young people to this newness and the sense of dislocation and painful disorder it entails is to try to explain the future totally, completely, all at once, in order to gain control over the outpouring of new life and new possibility . . . It assumes the lessons of experience without undergoing the actual experience itself. The jarring elements in one's social life can be purified out as unreal because they don't fit that articulated object, that self-consciously spelled-out set of beliefs, likes and dislikes, and abilities that one takes to be oneself.

Sennett suggests that this is, in its way, a quite useful feature in human development, provided that we do not get stuck in it. It is a proper quality of adolescence that people should be a bit puritanical about life, having very clearly defined ideas about who they are and what they are going to do. It can provide a real strength for coping with the problems of adolescence. The danger is that we never grow beyond it. And, according to Sennett, modern city planning is in many ways just adolescent puritanism writ large: a way of avoiding the messy contingencies of real life, a way of eliminating in advance all unpredictables, a way of creating our own world, instead of having to receive it.

Now it is surely a remarkable feature of the present religious scene, in contrast to that of a few years ago, that it is dominated by movements, and movements very sure of themselves, offering their devotees a total solution to the problems of life. A question that we must surely ask, is how far such movements embody or serve a need to purify out in advance all difficult or contradictory experience: to provide that false kind of security that fallen man takes to so readily, which rests comfortably on certain unchallengeable assumptions about the quality and experience of life being enjoyed, impervious to any contrary evidence, yet manifestly false to the eye of an outside beholder.

Sennett's book concludes with a plea for more disorder in our cities, for more chance for cities to evolve, as they used to, chaotically

and untidily, so that people will have to impinge upon one another once again in unstructured ways. And I think that this is the message also to the Church. Sennett, in connection with the phenomenon of 'puritanical' self-definition, remarks that many people 'do not want to wander; they want to be sure of what they are doing in advance of doing it'. In curiously similar terms, John of St Thomas warns us that 'there are many people who like always to act with complete security and certainty, and they are often held back from the motions of the holy Spirit, because their hearts are cramped'.¹² I think John of St Thomas would have agreed with Sennett that we must have the courage to be confused, to cope with situations we do not know in advance how to cope with. God's way is often not the way of giving answers to our questions: he rather comes and questions and disrupts our answers. It is a serious if odd responsibility of the Church at this time to resist the temptation to give too many answers. We must have the courage to keep open some painful questions. Not that all questions are open! God forbid! But a great many are, and the witness of true faith, in face of the religious movements of our day, will often be simply to keep crying out 'Don't stand still! Don't settle down! Don't get stuck!'. There is a surfeit of superficial clarity, achieved by facile distinctions and categories, and resulting in a horribly domesticated view of the spiritual life. God has never called his people out into well-lit spiritual suburbs; his invitation is always out into the desert, into the place where a man gets lost. Then he can be found by God, when he has lost himself. And this really does mean faith, that faith that lets God truly be God, underneath and within all our striving, all our yielding, all our seeing, all our blindness. And from that faith will come true joy, the joy that cannot be taken away, because its source, its cause for rejoicing, is simply, gloriously, and impregnably, that God is God.

¹² *Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, 1, 7.