

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

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MYSTICISM is a phenomenon that is rapidly sweeping the world during the second half of this twentieth century. It takes many forms which should convince us of a basic hunger in all men for an intimate union with the Divine.

In all human beings there exists a propensity towards mysticism. Man has within himself an inner drive towards union with the Supreme Reality. If we call that Reality God, we are saying that all other finite beings must ultimately fail to satisfy man's thirst for deeper, more intense interpenetration with God.

All of us have enjoyed perhaps moments of ecstatic human love, a gasp of awe at some breath-taking natural beauty, a lifting of ourselves out of our habitual mode of perceiving the real world around us and an entering into a world of seemingly greater simplification while listening to transcendent music. Still, no matter how common the experience is among us humans, mysticism is one of the most misunderstood words in our human vocabulary.

A college student, freaked out by dropping 'acid', talks about his 'mystical experience'. The business man, who sits assiduously each morning and evening for fifteen minute periods of transcendental meditation, talks to his friends of his mystical union with the unknown. Some protestant fundamentalists link mysticism with occultism and will have nothing to do with it. A catholic nun sits in the lotus position and gets on her 'level' to meet her healing Saviour. Hippies live in communes scattered all over the United States or even migrate to India, the motherland of mystics, to 'experience the inner world'.

Following W. T. Stace, Martin Marty defines mysticism as 'the apprehension of an ultimate non-sensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to whom neither the sense nor the reason can penetrate'.¹ Evelyn Underhill gives us a rather broad, all-embracing definition:

¹ Marty, M.: 'The Persistence of the Mystical', in *The Persistence of Religion*, vol 1, no 9 (New York, 1974).

Mysticism is the expression of the innate yearning of the human spirit towards total harmony with the transcendental order, whatever may be the theological formula in which this order is expressed. This yearning with the great mystics gradually takes possession of the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their whole life and attains its climax in that experience called mystic union, whether it be with the God of Christianity, the World Soul of pantheism or the Absolute of philosophy. This desire for union and straining towards it in as much as they are vital and real (not purely speculative) constitute the real subject of mysticism. Through this, the human consciousness reaches its further and richest development.²

Intrinsic to an authentic mysticism is the accent on the conscious awareness of a subject brought progressively into a more intense assimilating union with God. In a mystical experience one moves beyond any cartesian duality of subject and object in order to experience God as the very inner force within us and all around us, supporting all being in his mighty, transcendent creativity. The hindu mystic meets the christian mystic when both meet God's all-pervading presence, ever present in its unchanging unity. For such a mystic experiencing the Absolute there can be no time or place in which God is not present. Because of God's fulness the *Isha Upanishad* sings of the All-in-All that is so deeply within man, and still outside of man, that nowhere can man not discover God:

Plenitude everywhere, Plenitude there, Plenitude here.

From Plenitude comes forth Plenitude, and everywhere, one with itself, there remains Plenitude.³

No human being can know this awesome Plenitude of Being through the shadow realities of intellectual concepts; for the living God cannot be forced into such objective categories. It is in dying to human 'knowledge about' that God begins to be experienced with 'knowledge of'. The *Isha* and *Kena Upanishads* exhort man to transcend all objective human knowledge, as well as sheer ignorance, in order truly to know God:

He is not known by him who knows him,

Not understood by him who understands.

He alone contemplates him who has ceased to contemplate him.

² Underhill, E.: *The School of Charity and the Mystery of Sacrifice* (New York, 1956), p 235.

³ *The Isha Upanishad*, cited by Swami Abhishiktananda, in *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point, Within the Cave of the Heart* (Bandra-Bombay, 1969), p 65.

In all knowledge as though by intuition the wise man finds him.
 It is in him alone, the Atman, that each one is strong.
 It is in knowing him alone that one becomes immortal.
 A great loss it is, in truth, for him who does not attain him here below.⁴

We are all acquainted with William James's four characteristics of the mystical experience: its *ineffability*; its *noetic* quality, bringing new insight and understanding in a global sense with great clarity; its *transiency* which refuses to be captured in a permanent state of lengthy endurance; its *passivity* or letting go and yielding to the Supreme Absolute.⁵ Andrew Greeley has pointed out that most human beings have had at one time or other some mystical experience.⁶ Most of our mystical experiences when we reflect back upon them have happened very simply and suddenly. Because through education and other pre-conditionings, we set up 'filter' systems to allow us to concentrate on a given problem, and thus the more global experience of oneness with the cosmos and the inner dynamism of the Absolute permeating all things is cut out from our habitual consciousness.

But at times of great relaxation, we can recapture the sense of amazement to see the inner beauty and unity in a given, simple plant, a human face, a piece of music. At such moments we become transfixed beyond our habitual knowledge of things to accept them as they are. Caryll Houselander was rapt in ecstasy in a subway in London, seeing Christ suddenly in the faces of all the passengers. The Zen Buddhist monk might find it in a grain of rice. Such experiences admit of great degrees of intensity and can apply to the aesthetic, moral and religious fields of experience.

In such experiences of a religious nature there is usually a medium that leads one into a deeper, more unified perception of being one with the Absolute Being. These signs can be religious actions, certain thoughts, spiritual attitudes or feelings. But the distinguishing feature of the mystical experience, which differs from the religious experience, is the element of a direct perception of a present reality, the Absolute, without the means of a sign or medium. It is an immediacy of union through no words or gestures or helps for centring one's focus of attention away from dispersion to unity. In a mystical

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 56.

⁵ James, William: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1958), pp 292-93.

⁶ Greeley Andrew: *Ecstasy, a Way of Knowing* (New Jersey, 1974), pp 139-42.

experience man has the sense of entering into a direct, immediate experience of God without effort, without discourse, ideas, thoughts or any other agent in between.

Main characteristics of the mystical experience

Claire Myers Owens lists six basic characteristics of the mystical experience.⁷ Perhaps by listing these we can tie up what is common to all authentic mystical experiences and then present the view of christian mystical experience.

1. *Imperceptivity.* The accent is placed upon the withdrawal during the mystical experience from sensory stimuli. This results from a deep abstraction or concentration on the total experience that sweeps the consciousness of the person to a new level of awareness.

2. *Renunciation.* Entering into the transcendence of a higher world of inner beauty and harmony, the mystic experiences a new reverence for life and is ready to give up lesser values, especially in the line of selfishness, to become a servant of life in others. On this point we can distinguish between a true mysticism and a state of habitual schizophrenia. The schizoid may withdraw and renounce many things, but there will be lacking the openness towards others in true self-surrendering love and service. The mystical experience is a highly individualized and disciplined state of life and attitudes that result from mystical experiences. It involves an orderly journey into the depths of the self with no short cuts in its attempt to reach greater consciousness of self and its ultimate source.

For this reason Underhill stresses that in the mystical experience, when it is authentic, there is a motion between levels of reality that results in the perfecting of an entire new self by surrendering itself away from all selfish concern. This is effected by an awakening of the self to consciousness of the Divine Reality. The realization of the self and its separateness from the Absolute highlights the imperfections of the self, and a process of purgation is undergone.⁸

3. *Ineffability.* Hurlled beyond the discursive into a new realm of meaning and understanding, the mystic stands in a state of awe and impotence before such a blinding, ineffable experience. Jacob Boehme can only stammer like a child; while St John of the Cross could write:

⁷ Owens, Claire Myers: *Awakening to the Good* (New York, 1971), pp 51ff.

⁸ Underhill, E.: *Mysticism* (New York, 1957), pp 176-265.

The brighter and purer is the supernatural and divine light, the more it darkens the soul, and the less bright and pure is it, the less dark it is to the soul. Yet this may well be understood if we consider what has been proved . . . namely, that the brighter and the more manifest in themselves are supernatural things, the darker are they to our understanding.⁹

4. *Noesis*. We have already described the more global type of knowledge that is apprehended beyond any mediation of man's discursive process. Such meta-rational knowledge is a gift given to the mystic without involving his reasoning powers. Jan Ruysbroeck, the Flemish fourteenth century mystic, writes in his *Mirror of Eternal Salvation*: 'Above the reason in the depths of the intelligence, the simple eye of the contemplative soul is always open. It contemplates and gazes at the light, the Word with pure gaze, enlightened by the Light itself, eye against eye, mirror against mirror, image against image'.¹⁰

5. *Ecstasy*. The meaning of this is a movement out of one's habitual stasis or stance before oneself and the world around one. The walls of self-containment come crumbling down, and the mystic is child-like in his open, joyful running towards life in all its manifestations. There is an illumination of the self through detachment from the things of sense. Underhill describes this process as a purification of the spirit, which is effected by the killing of the human instincts for personal happiness. Now the mystic desires nothing and is totally removed from worldly needs.¹¹

6. *Fusion*. The *advaita* experience of non-duality is the basic element of the mystical experience which admits of great intensity. The subject loses awareness of his own separateness as well as the objectivity of the Otherness of the Absolute. The knower and the known become as one as the mystic seems to merge with the 'other'. Such unity brings with it deep serenity, order, beauty and harmony that remain with the mystic, supporting him at each moment even amidst great trials.

St Symeon the New Theologian (1022) describes this paradox of union in terms of light and darkness:

⁹ St John of the Cross: *Dark Night of the Soul*, II, VIII, 1.

¹⁰ Ruysbroeck, Jan.: *Mirror of Eternal Salvation* (London, 1946), p 73.

¹¹ Underhill, E.: *Mysticism*, pp 198ff.

I remained seated in the middle of the darkness,
but while I was there surrounded by darkness,
You appeared as light, illuminating me completely from your total
light.

And I became light in the night, I who was found in the midst of
darkness.

Neither the darkness extinguished your light completely,
nor did the light dissipate the visible darkness,
but they were together, yet completely separated,
without confusion, far from each other, surely, but not at all mixed,
except in the same spot where they filled everything, so it seems to me.
Likewise I am in the light, yet I am found in the middle of the
darkness.

So I am in the darkness, yet still I am in the middle of the light.

And I say, who will help me in the middle of my darkness
to find a light which the darkness cannot receive?

For how can darkness receive within itself a light?

And without being dissipated by the light, it still remains in the
middle of the light . . .

By the divine adoption I see that I have become god.¹²

A christian mysticism

In authentic christian mystical experiences there are two important constitutive elements. The first is the transcendent, totally 'Other' that we call God. Our christian faith brings us to a knowledge given by revelation in holy scripture and through christian tradition, of God as the Source from whom all other forms of existence flow and to whom all beings return in a hunger and thirst towards greater union. God as transcendent is *other* than we are, incomprehensible, unpossessable, unchanging, eternal in his perfections, completely holy and independent of all outside forces. He is the fire from which all sparks come, an abyss of infinity, separating himself from the created world.

Yet, as A. Gardeil insists: 'The mystical experience is an immediate and experimental perception of God substantially present in the just soul as object of its knowledge and love'.¹³ The transcendent God is also the immanent God 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17, 28). He is not an object outside us.

¹² St Symeon the New Theologian: *Hymns of Divine Love*, tr. George A. Maloney (New Jersey, 1975), Hymn 25, pp 136-37.

¹³ Gardeil, Ambroise: *La Structure de l'ame et l'expérience mystique*, as cited in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, 4 (Paris, 1961), col. 2009.

He is an encompassing energy that permeates each cell of our being. In St Augustine's words, 'He is more intimate to me than I to myself'.

It is christian mysticism that combines the non-duality immanence of the far eastern religions with the transcendence of a God as being external to the subject and revealing himself through the medium of prophets, as found predominantly in such prophetic religions as Judaism and Islam. Such new knowledge and wisdom come to the christian mystic as a gift of faith, hope and love infused into the individual by God's Holy Spirit. There is no other way of truly knowing God for the Christian, except that God touches the individual with his light, so that he sees as did the prophets of old. When God touches man with his light, he then knows that God knows him. He who sees God knows that God sees him. And he knows that he knows God.

The indwelling presence of the Trinity as light within the Christian permeates his whole being and integrates the body, soul and spirit levels into a whole human being, consumed by love for God. One sees his light everywhere, adores him in great humility, surrenders oneself in total service. He is instructed by God in the things of God. Above all, he knows at each moment what is the will of God for him. Christian mysticism relates the individual to the historical perspective and the world community into which he is inserted in time and space. In his increased love and humility he strives for fidelity to cooperate each moment with the divine will. 'Then you will be able to know the will of God – what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect' (Rom 12, 2).

As the mystic is led progressively into the inner meaning of reality, he is not led away from the created world; rather he is led into reverence and worship of God as present everywhere within the created world. The flowers, the trees, birds, animals, the beauties of each new season, the sun, moon, stars, the mountains, lakes, oceans; the whole world reveals to the christian mystic the loving presence of God, concerned to give himself, of love, in his so many gifts.

For the christian mystic creation is a continuing activity. Whatever is, is a point of meeting God the Doer, the almighty Force energizing the universe. Above all, man finds within himself a special share in the divine energies because of his power to know God personally and to love and surrender himself to him. The mystic surrenders his energies to those of God. A new communion of love is reached as man seeks to 'do' with God according to God's plan. Man's impulsiveness now changes to utter receptivity in his

desire to cooperate with the energies (graces) of God at work at every moment in each event.

All is grace

The world therefore is constantly bathed in the grace of the divine energies. All is gift. All is grace. God does not simply create in a deistic fashion and let the world develop 'naturally' by itself. God is continually involved and calls out to meet man as his co-worker. For the christian mystic, the profane exists only in the mind of those who fail to see the presence of the sacred in each atom, in each event of each moment. In such a mystical vision the biblical accents on the transcendent and the immanent God are maintained in a workable antinomy. Through the doctrine of the uncreated energies God is seen as intimately related to his universe and still he is the God of christian faith, the Trinity as perfect and complete in itself.

For the Christian, in the words of Teilhard de Chardin, love unites as it differentiates. In every mysticism the experience of the Absolute becomes more unified, less diffused. The separation is of the false ego. The union takes place between the true 'I' and its being in the Other who is ultimate and has no second. But the Spirit of Jesus makes it possible for the Christian to become aware of himself, not as a subject adoring a divine object, but as the 'I', aware of itself as a child, a son of God, a divinized being participating, as St Peter says, in the divine Nature (2 Pt 1, 4), but not losing its human nature, not becoming God by its nature, but nonetheless truly deified by God's loving presence within.

The christian mystics have been fond of describing this assimilation into God by the analogy of iron and fire and other such examples wherein the two become one; yet in that very oneness the uniqueness of the one loved is obtained in a new identity. In the christian vision it is God's love that highlights the individual and calls him into newer relationships of love and therefore of heightened identity as loved personally by God in Christ Jesus.

The christian mystical experience is best symbolized in the Eucharist, which allows the Christian to enter into a oneness with the Trinity. The Logos incarnated points to the Father and he points from the Father to us. 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (Jn 14, 10). Where the Father and Son are, there also is the Holy Spirit. The Son speaks to the Christian of the Father. The Holy Spirit loves the Father and the Son within us and with us.

As the christian mystic goes out to live this cosmic liturgy, God's Logos continues to speak to him of the Father's great love in every material creature that he meets. The sense-world of matter is no longer an obstacle for the christian's union with God: it becomes now the sacred meeting place through man's cooperative activity with God to grow into greater union with the Ultimate. For such christian mystics, the sign of true authenticity in their mystical experiences is in their ability to go out and love others as God has loved them. The christian contemplative sees himself as a person loved by God wholly, and in this grace he discovers himself more centred upon God, more one with God, and yet more one with all other beings. Such a person has been freed from the loneliness of sin and insecurity to step out in true christian love, to let the trinitarian love flow through him outwardly to each person he meets. True mystical experience is a continued movement in love towards union that calls to a movement towards even greater union.

Some dangers

The late Ronald Knox has warned against two dangers within christian mysticism. One he calls evangelical enthusiasm which places undue attention upon man's fallen state and sees that Jesus Christ has 'done it all'. Such a tendency neglects all elements in Christianity of history and ecclesial tradition, including a sacramental emphasis. The other is mystical enthusiasm, which tends towards a quietism that ignores grace and man's cooperation through asceticism by concentrating on the God within.¹⁴

There are other dangers that arise when Christians enter into a deeper interiority with the indwelling God. As the contemplative silences his own activities in prayer and turns off his discursive activity, he begins a journey inwardly through layers of psychic experiences. Repressed material that has been drowned for years in the unconscious can rise threateningly to disturb the contemplative. Flashes and lights, psychic powers of telepathy, communing with the dead can come forth. Strong sexual fantasies and physical feelings can arise, tempting the person in prayer to move over to see the strange faces of the demonic that flash on and off, now light, now darkness. What is reality, what is hallucination before the beckoning visions of enticing forms that whirl over the screen of our conscious-

¹⁴ Knox, Ronald: *Enthusiasm* (London, New York, 1961), p 581.

ness? Strange and familiar voices give their messages with impelling realism. Again, what is real, what is false? Scylla and Charybdis come close and one could capsize. Does one withdraw or push deeper?

Here is where the Church has stressed the great help of having a spiritual director who, versed in the traditional teachings of the Church in regard to mystical experiences and the modern teachings of psychology, can encourage those they direct in a strong faith vision to avoid any false subjectivism. St John of the Cross gives us very sound advice in this matter:

And it must be known that although all these things may happen to the bodily senses in the way of God, we must never rely upon them or accept them, but must fly from them, without trying to ascertain whether they be good or evil; for the more completely exterior and corporeal they are, the less certainly they are of God . . . So he that esteems such things errs greatly and exposes himself to great peril of being deceived; in any case he will have within himself a complete impediment to the attainment of spirituality.¹⁵

Knowing that such mystical experiences can arise from the direct intervention from God, but can also come from our own inner, unconscious projections as well as from the demonic spiritual world, a good spiritual guide will direct such a person of deep prayer away from any inordinate desire to 'possess' or collect mystical experiences as such. Such an attachment to the psychic phenomena that accompany deeper prayer can spell the ruin of a budding mystic and true member of the Church. Such spiritual sensuality can only lead to a sick self-centring that dehumanizes and prevents the flow of God's love towards others.

Still, such ineffable experiences can happen as gifts from God. Again, St John of the Cross gives us solid advice as how to handle such phenomena:

If such experience be of God, it produces its effect upon the spirit at the very moment when it appears or is felt, without giving the soul time or opportunity to deliberate whether it will accept or reject it. For, even as God gives these things supernaturally, without effort on the part of the soul, and independent of its capacity, God produces in it the effect that he desires by means of such things; . . . it is as if fire were applied to a person's naked body; it would matter little whether or not he wished to be burned; the fire would of necessity accomplish its work.¹⁶

¹⁵ St John of the Cross: *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, XI, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Walter Hilton, the great fourteenth century english mystic, gives a similar manner of discerning whether mystical experiences are from God. He writes:

... But if it so be that manner of feeling makes you more devout, more fervent in prayer and though it be so that it astonish you in the beginning, yet afterwards it turns and quickens your heart to more desire of virtues, increases your love to God and neighbour, makes you more humble in your own eyes, by these tokens you may know if it is of God, wrought by the presence and working of a good angel.¹⁷

Mystical experiences lead to a loving community

Karl Rahner, has insisted that only those who experience God will continue to grow as human and hence truly religious people. 'The devout christian of the future will either be a "mystic", one who has "experienced" something or he will cease to be anything at all'.¹⁸

The true test of authentic prayer and hence of true mysticism can never be measured by psychic phenomena, but rather in our surrendering love and submission to God's will. If we are touching God and he is communicating himself to us, with or without any psychic phenomena accompanying our prayer, this will be measured by the true thermometer of increasing love of God: Are we daily growing in greater love for and humility towards our neighbours? Without words or images or ideas or sentiments to measure our prayer-progress, we can rely only on our life-relationships. The community in which we live and which we serve must be the place for discerning our growth in prayer.

Beloved, let us love one another because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten of God and has knowledge of God, for God is love (1 Jn 4, 7).

All authentic mystical experiences must be measured, not by psychological phenomena, but ultimately by the love and serving humility that we show towards those around us. If this is the true index of christian mystical experience, we can see that all Christians and all men are called by God to such experiences that lead us to greater love and humility. For of such are the Kingdom of Heaven.

¹⁷ Hilton, Walter: *Scale of Perfection*, cited by B. Williamson: *Supernatural Mysticism* (St Louis, 1921), p 146.

¹⁸ Rahner, Karl: *Theological Investigations*, VII (New York, 1971), p 15.