

Reviews

MYSTICISM, a study and an anthology, by F. C. Happold; Penguin Books, 6s.

The publication in paperbacks of mystical writings or, in this case, a study of mysticism is a welcome sign. For it proves that many, like Mr Happold, are not satisfied with the positivist claim that science is our sole source of certain knowledge about reality and are ready to heed the testimony, fundamentally unanimous, of those intuitions of the spirit of which mystical intuition is the most penetrating and profound.

Many Catholics may be disposed to question the need, even the value, of such experience. Does not our faith, they may say, rest not on such experience but on the revealed doctrines taught by the Church? I would commend to them two considerations. As Fr Augustine Baker pointed out in his *Secretum*, these doctrines were themselves the special intuitions of truth, 'contemplations' he calls them, of our Lord primarily, secondarily of his apostles. Moreover I myself at any rate (and I believe there are many others), could not even begin to consider the claim of any creed to be divinely revealed, unless I were first convinced (a) that God exists, (b) that man, despite his utter physical insignificance in the universe discovered by astronomy, on which Mr Happold rightly insists, can in fact enter into a personal communion with God. And the second of these propositions can be established only by the testimony of mystics all over the world that they have in fact experienced such communion.

That is to say this present study of mysticism, based on wide knowledge of the relevant literature, illustrated and supported by the evidence collected in the anthology should be profitable to us all, even those of another religious allegiance to the author's.

Though Mr Happold accepts partial revelations of truth in the non-Christian religions, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism—and why should he not? is not all truth about God his revelation to man?—he does not reduce all religions to one common denominator. On the contrary he regards Christianity as the most complete revelation of God to man. If his view of the relativity and inadequacy of doctrinal formulations are apparently modernistic, one may ask how far it in fact diverges from the distinction now being made by many Catholic thinkers and even finding some support in Pope John's address to the Council, between the substance of a dogma and its statement in the language of a particular intellectual milieu.

Where Mr Happold is least satisfactory is in his inability to decide between the Hindu explanation of the supreme unitive experience, that it is the discovery that the soul's true self is identical with the divine reality, Brahman, and the Christian mystics' denial that the human spirit is or can become God. For the difficulty remains that Christian mystics of undoubted orthodoxy, among them

St John of the Cross, report an experience of apparent identity with God. 'Each of the two natures, human and divine, *seems* to be God' is Mr Happold's quotation from *The Spiritual Canticle* (p. 99). One might conclude that the Christian mystic does in fact experience identity with God and denies it only out of obedience to the Church. It is not therefore surprising if Mr Happold is perplexed and seems at once to question and to affirm identity. 'The Divine ground is of the same or like nature as man's true self.' (p. 20). It should however be pointed out that, even as reported experience, actual identity is impossible. If the human subject wholly ceased to exist, and only God remained, he could not report *his* experience of that identity. On the other hand we should not dismiss this so widely attested identity experience as illusory. The *Cloud of Unknowing* suggests an answer to the difficulty which should satisfy Mr Happold. Though the created spirit is not and cannot become God, its self-consciousness can be, and in these identity experiences is replaced by God-consciousness communicated to it. This explanation is supported by a passage which in his anthology Mr Happold quotes from St John of the Cross (*The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza ii). 'Though the substance of the soul . . . is not the substance of God', 'the understanding of the soul is now the understanding of God; and its will the will of God and its memory is the memory of God': in short its consciousness is not self-consciousness but God-consciousness. The non-dualist Hindu—and not all Hindu philosophers are non-dualist—mistakenly concludes that the self of which the subject is no longer conscious does not exist and the godhead of which alone he is conscious is his own and only true self.

Apart from this fundamental indecision, Mr Happold's account of mystical experience is on the whole satisfactory, lucid and well balanced, though like most writers today he dismisses such phenomena as visions and auditions too casually. Though at best peripheral and by-products they played a large part in the experience of so great a mystic as St Teresa. Are they not sometimes divine illuminations mediated by images drawn from the subject's subconscious?

When all is said, however, the difficulty must remain that precisely because the object of mystical experience, indeed of religious faith, of its nature exceeds concepts, human language, essentially conceptual, must be at best inadequate and ambiguous. Theology therefore and mystical theology above all cannot be scientific, as the positive sciences are scientific. For example: the Christian should not say that the self is of the *same* nature as God. But of like nature? Surely not in the sense of the semi-Arian homoiousios. For the unlikeness between creator and creature must always exceed any likeness. In the sense however of that image and *likeness* in which God created man? No wonder that the mystics' language is so often paradox and verbal contradiction.

An anthology must largely be determined by personal preference. Mr Happold's however should commend itself to all students of mysticism. Though he includes excerpts from the Upanishads and the Gita, Plato and Plotinus and the Sufis, the majority are taken from Christian mystics, with a certain preference

for the English mystics whose manner has a particular appeal to Englishmen. The substance of St Teresa's account of the degrees of prayer from her autobiography is given and a complete translation of Ps.-Denys's epoch-making little treatise *Mystical Theology*. Denys's Neoplatonic derivation however is primarily from Proclus rather than Plotinus and his teaching is in the direct tradition of St Gregory of Nyssa, who is not even mentioned by Mr Happold. There is in fact nothing I would have dispensed with except the gnosticising 'Hymn of the Robe of Glory', which contributes very little by its meaning and is a clumsy composition.

The excerpts are introduced by a few 'case-history' experiences of contemporaries which owed nothing to the Christian mystical tradition and conclude with the witness of Richard Jefferies, witness of particular weight because it contradicted the scepticism of his unilluminated reason. I cannot however agree that he 'never attained to a state of mystical prayer as Catholic writers will define it'. In an appendix to my study of St John of the Cross I have argued that his experience as recorded in *The Story of my Heart* was in fact in its supreme moments a supernatural intuition of God's existence and presence. Though Mr Happold rightly approves of the reconciliation in the *Bhagavad Gita* of mystical contemplation and action, he fails to notice, what Christopher Dawson has pointed out, that the particular action approved by Krishna is morally questionable, the slaughter of enemies in battle.

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UNITY MAN'S TOMORROW, by Roger Schutz, Prior of Taizé; Faith Press, 7s. 6d.

This book is chiefly a work of prophecy, prophecy in its stricter sense, a work of warning and scourging. It begins with a brief glance at the state of Christianity today (the book is so short that all its glances are brief), divided, bitter, uncertain and nostalgic, but containing at least the seeds of hope for unity. It goes on to remark that in the new technological civilizations that are developing about us the only hope for Christianity is to present a united front 'that the world may believe', and that in order to achieve this state of affairs we have to undergo a conversion in our attitude towards one another. It is clear that all this is very true, and the manner in which it is said in this book is pleasingly simple and direct. There are no theological arguments, neither is the book merely a pious exhortation, but it does indeed contain a sting.

The author is not a Roman Catholic and, with commendable charity, he points to the desire of some Protestants to wreck the Catholic church by tearing away as many Christians as possible from their religious allegiance, regardless of the damage that can be done by the risk 'of taking them out of a sociological situation where the grace of God could reach them freely and run the risk of taking them out of the place where a true faith in the line of continuity