

they sleep in the sleep of peace. The gentleness of Fauré's *Requiem* seems closer to the spirit of the *Memento* than do the majesty and terror of Verdi's *Dies Irae* for all its stupendous beauty; and Newman's poem too, and Elgar's music, strike at the end the same note:

'Softly and gently, dearly-ransomed soul,
 In my most loving arms I now enfold thee
 And o'er the penal waters, as they roll,
 I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee. . . .
 Angels, to whom the willing task is given
 Shall tend and nurse, and lull thee, as thou liest:
 And Masses on the earth, and prayers in heaven,
 Shall aid thee at the throne of the Most Highest.
 Farewell, but not for ever, brother dear,
 Be brave and patient on thy bed of sorrow;
 Swiftly shall pass thy night of trial here,
 And I will come and wake thee on the morrow.'



MYSTICISMS

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THE Church is like a noble house and estate, and we are welcome to the run of it—to wander through the apartments, explore the galleries and secret courts, go roof-climbing, sample the cellars, walk in the garden, exclaim at the vistas, inspect the stables, swim in the lake, take our ease, and contemplate the domain stretching to the distance, over the hills and far away. *Non est hic aliud nisi domus Dei et porta caeli.* And it is our home. Of course we know that in a sense, but in fact are we not inclined to think of it as National Trust and behave like respectful trippers? The motor-coaches crunch on the gravel and we follow the guide inside, stare at some of the treasures, buy our postcards and then have tea.

That is a parable, not an allegory, certainly not meant to scold but only to suggest how much is missed if our religious life

remains at the stage where our minds consult the guide-book and our wills dutifully respond with the appropriate appreciation. For we are invited to settle in, and furthermore to feel that we have settled in. True, what matters above all is that we should cleave to God through faith, hope and charity, not that we should undergo their emotional resonances. What St Thomas calls the *redundantia* of grace from the higher to the lower powers is not essential, and great will be the reward of those who loyally, as we say, practise their religion, despite the fact that for some reason or another, whether of outward circumstances or temperamental humour or trial sent from heaven, they cannot screw themselves to feel genial or enter into the spirit of the party or reckon themselves to be devout. They are good, but just not so free and easy as perhaps they might be.¹ Let them not worry, but remind themselves with St Paul, *I am not conscious to myself of anything, yet am I not hereby justified; but he the judgeth me is the Lord.*²

All the same we are not naked minds and wills, nor just the subjects of duties. *Thou has clothed me with skin and flesh, and hast fenced me about with bones and sinews.*³ Nor are we merely the rational animals studied by the moralists, who rightly concentrate on our human acts, that is on our deliberate and responsible doing of right or wrong.⁴ These occupy only a middle area between the regions of infra-rational nature from which we are drawn and of supra-rational grace to which we are bidden. We belong to both, by birth to the first and by baptism to the second; neither however can be adequately explicated by a system of rational concepts or be adequately desired or enjoyed by a series of choices.⁵ It follows that each of us is a potential mystic. *My heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.*⁶

Unfortunately mysticism has become rather a *chichi* term associated sometimes with the heroic and sometimes with the morbid, with an élite of adventurers beyond the bounds of workaday life or with the depressed classes of victims of the

1 *Summa Theologica*. 1a-2ae. iii, 3; iv, 2, 6; v, 3; xxiv, 3; lvi, 4; lix, 1, 2, 3, 5; lxvi, 4; lxxvii, 1; cxii, 5; 2a-2ae. xxviii, 2, 4.

2 1 Cor. iv, 4.

3 Job x, 11.

4 1a-2ae. i, 1; xviii, 2, 3, 4.

5 1a. lxxxiii, 4; 1a-2ae. lxviii, 1; 2a-2ae. ii, 3.

6 Ps. lxxxiii, 2.

abnormal. In fact mystics may be either or neither or both, for, to anticipate for a moment, holiness is for the sick and healthy-minded alike. *Bring in hither the poor and the maimed, and the halt and the blind.* In the end it was the wedding-garment that counted.⁷

Etymologically a mystical experience implies an encounter when the eyes or lips are closed. It is extended to indicate any spiritual contact with a reality which can neither be portrayed or signified by images or ideas nor be talked about as though it lay in the grasp of our commonsense and reason. It deals with a mystery, and presumably an important one. But when we say that a mystery should be left as a mystery it does not mean to say that we should leave it alone. We could not even if we would. We cannot—to adapt William James—prematurely close our account with reality. The most dry-as-dust rationalist is advised not to remain suspended for long between the good earth and the better heaven, for while he does his discourse is without humour and without hope.

See then how plumb ordinary is the condition of responding to the reality that extends below and above the points of what we call our clear sensations and rational awareness, our distinct emotions and definite options. How extraordinarily flat and unseaworthy would be a surface vessel imagined without draft or top-hammer at all. The psychologists, then, are not being wanton when they insist on the importance of the unconscious below the levels of consciousness, nor are the prophets just quaint when they proclaim what is above. As naval constructors have gone on to build submarines and aircraft carriers, so mystics are those who, not content inside the petty limits of the rational self, seek an enlarged experience either by plunging to depths too dark for analysis or by mounting to where the light is too bright.

We may note at once that the spatial and temporal analogies, of below and above and before and after the reason, should not be pressed, as though, superior to the brutes but inferior to the angels, we were too worthy for one and too unworthy for the other. Extremes tend to meet, and in our life of companionship with God what we think are our reasons can sometimes be more of a hindrance than our instincts are. *Thou hast beset me behind and before. Whither shall I go from thy spirit, or whither shall I flee*

⁷ Luke xiv, 21; Matt. xxii, 12.

from thy presence? If I climb into heaven, thou art there; if I go down to hell, behold thou art there also.⁸

Mysticism is a conglomerate term including quite disparate activities some of which are valuable only in a Pickwickian sense. It is like an artichoke which has to be peeled off leaf by leaf. Here we cannot take all, so a few must suffice. Let us then distinguish, in the approved scholastic manner, between mode and object; and then among objects between God and creatures; and finally among creatures between the collectivity, the demons, and yourself.

The concepts of reasoned consciousness and the choices of deliberate will are somehow in abeyance during a mystical experience. The subject is not aware that his ordinary self is thinking about something or is responsible for what is happening. Whatever the antecedent circumstances or the surround, the activity is not cogitative and not controlled. Frenzied or tranquil, lurid or luminous, describe it you will, it works differently from transactions when men are being intelligent, generous and useful—or the reverse—according to their station in life. So much for the *mode* of mysticism.

Now comes the more important question. What does it reach or hold, in other words, what is its content or form or *objectum*? Drinking is one mode of activity, but after all cocoa and claret provide for quite dissimilar human situations. Similarly all mystical experiences may share the same mode of activity, but there is a deal of difference between sinking yourself in Nature, consorting with spirits, resting in the bigger self behind your little ego, and being lifted up by God to himself. Because we escape from our individual earthbound existence it does not follow that we find an identical refuge. Because an experience can be obtained, whether by drugs, discipline, spells, or grace, which transcends the particularity and separateness of sensation and reasoned thought it does not follow that it is always in the same boat. Because both leave the surface a submarine and a naval aircraft are not equivalent.

Nevertheless the common factor of release from the humdrum ego has caused many writers on the subject to hold as a platitude that all mystical experiences are variations on one theme and amount to the same thing in the end. This, a genteel form of the

⁸ Ps. cccxviii, 4, 7.

non-denominational fallacy that it is irrelevant what religion you belong to so long as you are sincere, does not bear the examination of an expert in the field of comparative mysticism.⁹ The differences strike deeper than literary expression, nor is it only that, when recollected, mystical experiences are toned and rationalized by diverse theologies or no theology at all, or that their after-effects take diverging courses.

Funny, asked the child—do you mean funny queer or funny smile? We mean the last, for there is nothing odd about the perennial quest for happiness beyond reason. We are speaking about the high road of mysticism, not the by-ways of the occult where dwell the sorcerers and the practitioners of magic both black and white. Preternatural phenomena, about which Fr Herbert Thurston wrote so well, have little to tell us about the going of man to his eventual home. Superstitious when sham and often dangerous when genuine, their cultivation is an attempt to break out of the providential order established in our lives into another world, a world which is still that of creatures. Better the devil we know, than the devil we don't.¹⁰

Professor Zaehner discovers three main groups of mystical experience. They are not, of course, stock types which allow of no variation, nor are they exclusive. Distinct headings for his orderly study, they are justified by his examination of the facts.

⁹ *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*. An Inquiry into some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience. By R. C. Zaehner, Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford. (Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press; 42s.)

This book, which prompts this article, is heartily recommended to all who seriously reflect on the life of prayer, and to the librarians of religious communities. The author's own informed convictions of the truth of orthodox Catholic principles do not dispose him to the grinding of axes. Perhaps he betrays some temper against Mr Aldous Huxley, concludes too easily that Master Eckhart was an intermittent monist and that the condemned propositions reproduced his teachings, and is too roughly Western about some Eastern techniques and doctrines. These are but minor corrugations.

It will, I think, prove a fresher to those who may ruefully confess that they are growing rather bored with minor classics belonging to the conventional genre of spiritual reading. Their eyes will be opened and their hearts warmed to truths reinforced from traditions outside Christendom. They will find nothing to emulsify their assent to the dogmatic teaching of the Church. They will appreciate the cautious use of Jungian psychology to illustrate the aptness of the Christian mysteries. Passing the mescaline palace of Mr Aldous Huxley, the patiently and exquisitely contrived foundations left by Proust and the heroic perversion eventually rejected by Rimbaud, they will come to the temples of India and to the Muslim world which derives both from Christianity and Hinduism and is stressed between them. At the end they will see again their own house of which we spoke at the beginning of this article. Their own—and everybody's.

¹⁰ 1a. cxiv, 4; cxv, 5; 2a-3ae. clxxi, 5, 6; clxxviii, 2.

Let us call them, briefly and too bluntly, absorption in Nature, isolation in yourself, and communion with God.

The first is not necessarily religious at all, hence the epithet 'pantheistic' is not applicable. It may be a phase in the life of a lucky believer, indeed such happy moments are commoner and humbler in real life than when they are written up in purple passages. It may also go with indifference to God, or with denial or defiance. To say that it is a transmarginal awareness when the sense of one's separateness from things is swept away is putting it badly. The passages from the poets, Wordsworth for instance, customarily cited are probably only threshold impressions of what is enjoyed by nature-mystics and 'enthusiasts', and which sometimes can be like the manic pole of what we now call a manic-depressive psychosis, the 'expansion' set off by the sick 'contraction'.¹¹

Drunkenness is a commonplace in mystical terminology, and this stage of mystical experience can be induced by drugs. The author's own experience was that mescaline led him into a universe of farce, and he is rightly suspicious of all artificial paradises, certainly as 'religion surrogates'. Then again, a case of the classical connection between asceticism and mysticism, it may be the result of intense discipline; this may be an effort of integration—and so Proust was rewarded with an intimation of immortality in a *petite madeleine* dipped in tea—or of taking the calculated risks of an excursion into madness. Finally it may be a visitation such as happened to Aristotle's fortunate man, taken by St Thomas as the natural paradigm to inspiration by the Gifts of the Holy Ghost.¹²

The second type of experience, in so far as it goes with a cosmic monism, consists in withdrawing into yourself. What is sought is the complete isolation of the self from all objects: there is the All, outside is illusion, no claim to union with God is advanced. If he appears then it is only as a provisional instrument of liberation. You may sing hymns, but when you have found true contemplation then you no longer have need of them. The condition has been described by M. Gardet as 'en-stasy' rather than ecstasy; it is like a deep dreamless sleep. All is indistinction and the human

¹¹ The treatise on the emotions has much to say in this connection, 1a-2ae. xxii-xlvi. Note xxxiii, 1 on *dilatatio*.

¹² T. Gilby. *Poetic Experience*. An Introduction to Thomist Aesthetic. (London, New York, 1934.) 1a-2ae. lxviii, 1.

soul itself comes to be identified with the ground of all being.

The third type, found in Christian, Muslim and some Indian teaching, has quite another emphasis. Though it may border on pantheism to one side, it does not seek to dwell in blissful emptiness but to find God who is loved for himself, God who also reveals himself in so many forms. Here there is a new note, of tenderness for little things, not from weakness but from strength. The world is seen as God's and who are we to scorn what he has created? Thus Ramakrishna: 'I say "Narayana in the form of an honest man, Narayana in the form of a swindler, Narayana in the form of a villain, Narayana in the form of a lewd person". Now the problem is how I can entertain all. I wish to feed everyone. Therefore I keep one at a time with me and entertain him.'

And entertain him. 'Here', says Professor Zaehner, 'we meet with something not met with hitherto in all our wearisome pilgrimage through "nature mysticism", "reversion to the unconscious", "positive and negative inflation", "individuation", "integration", and all the rest. We meet with simple human goodness, a quality that none of our ecstasies . . . have notably exhibited¹³.' This seems to be confined to theist mystics when they are speaking at the top of their form; others are virtuous and cherishing but not, as it were, *ex professo* when they are inculcating consummate perfection. *God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him*¹⁴. This however is not doctrine for the far away. *For I was an hungered and you gave me meat, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came unto me*¹⁵.

The Church has always been vigilant about incomplete and false mysticisms. The Blessed Jan van Rousbroek knew nothing of Jungians or Sufis or Yogins or Vedantins; he lived in the fourteenth century, yet he is still right on the mark. He writes of men who 'remain in mere passivity without the performance of any work directed up towards God or down towards men. They have advanced beyond all exercises and virtues. I hope that few such will be found, but such as are, they are the evillest and most harmful men alive, and it is hard for them to be converted.'

¹³ *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*, p. 132.

¹⁴ I John iv, 16.

¹⁵ Matt. xxv, 35-6.

From Islam comes the same message. 'There is a doctrine', warns Junyayd, 'proclaimed by those who teach *the falling away of works*. A fornicator or a thief is better off than people who talk like that.' Ghazali declares 'there is no doubt at all that such persons should be killed even though there may be a difference of opinion about their eternal punishment in hell'.

The *Cloud of Unknowing* tells us that the devil hath his contemplatives as God hath his, and St Thomas speaks of the diabolic sin of substituting yourself for God¹⁶. *How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how are thou cut down to the ground. For thou hast said in thy heart, I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the most High*¹⁷. Let the contemplative remember the warning of the room empty, swept and garnished¹⁸. Charity is the heart of holiness, not an emptying yourself of all images, not a strange knowledge beyond the ways of men¹⁹. *Though I speak with the tongue of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or tinkling cymbal*²⁰. It is an understatement.

If we find God it is all his doing. You cannot delight in God, says Qushayri, before God delights in you. Could there be a better summary of the teaching of St Augustine and St Thomas on grace? God's love above all, but that extinguishes nothing except sin. Does it not rather load us with creaturely burdens? How well one can sympathize with the contemplative's sigh, 'God is fine, but it's a pity he's mixed up with religion.' There speaks love and humour and acceptance. And a sense of proportion. For *religio* after all is concerned with apparatus and worship. It is not like the theological virtue of charity which goes directly to God himself²¹. By all means let us forget ourselves, for we are indeed our worst enemy and preoccupation with the self is the source of all unhappiness, so long as we remember that it is not in extinction that God is found. He is not in sleeping or in watching, reflected an anonymous English mystic, not in fasting or in feasting, but betwixt.

¹⁶ 1a. lxiii, 3.

¹⁷ Isa. xiv, 12, 14.

¹⁸ Matt. xii, 44. Luke xi, 25.

¹⁹ 2a-2ac. clxxxiv, 1.

²⁰ I Cor. xiii, 1.

²¹ 2a-2ac. lxxxix, 5. xxv, 7. xxv, 1. 1a-2ac. lxv, 4.