

## MYSTICISM AND MYSTICISM

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

PROFESSOR ZAEHNER'S new book<sup>1</sup> is most timely, and—to anybody with any interest in the subject, from whatever point of view—quite absorbing. It is also a pioneer work, for although the study of 'comparative mysticism' is not totally new, the little that has hitherto been written about it has been mainly from an *a priori* standpoint with little regard for the actual records. Moreover, such writing has often been based on assumptions, or wishful thinkings, of very doubtful validity. At one extreme is the assumption that all 'mystical experiences' are essentially identical, whether they be of Christians, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, Wordsworthian Romantics, drug-takers or schizophrenics. At the other, that only Catholics (or Hindus, or Moslems, or the clinically sane, etc.) have authentic mystical experiences, and that all the rest are frauds, delusions, or at best purely natural phenomena from which any intervention of God's grace must at all costs be excluded. The outstanding merit of Professor Zaehner's book is its rigorous empiricism, its careful scrutiny and comparison of the plain facts, which can only be the testimonies of the mystics themselves, or those who have been called such. Even as a collection of texts, and apart from his own thoughtful comments, hypotheses and deductions, this is a most valuable book.

The author fairly warns his readers that he is a Roman Catholic of eleven years' standing, and that, notwithstanding his efforts at scientific objectivity, this fact may prejudice his own viewpoint. It is certain that his faith has given him certain criteria of evaluation and a framework of reference and comparison for his material. He shows that 'mystics' so diverse as Ruysbroeck, Proust (who 'had an intimate knowledge of Catholic theology and Catholic practice') and the violently apostate Rimbaud also had these criteria, with remarkable, and remarkably different, results. But we do not think it can be fairly said that Professor Zaehner's

<sup>1</sup> *Mysticism Sacred and Profane. An Inquiry into some Varieties of Preternatural Experience*, by R. C. Zaehner, Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford (Oxford: Clarendon Press; 42s.).

faith has unfairly influenced either his selection or his presentation of the facts. We shall presently observe that he is not without prejudices in his interpretations (who could be?), but these seem to be psychological or philosophical rather than theological or denominational.

He tells us that his work has been mainly prompted by Aldous Huxley's experiences with mescaline, and by the odd claims Huxley has made for them and the indiscriminate recommendations he has made as a result of them. Readers of BLACKFRIARS are already acquainted with the Professor's views on this subject.<sup>2</sup> It might be thought that Mr Huxley's aberrations hardly merit so serious and monumental a work as this present book. We doubt if they are such a menace to true religion and social order as the Professor fears, for it can now be taken as proved beyond doubt that Huxley was quite wrong in supposing that 'the majority of the few who have taken mescaline' have experiences akin to his own, still less have found them to encourage similar conclusions. Professor Zaehner brings forward in his appendices some interesting evidence for this, drawn from his own experiences and those of Mrs Rosalind Heywood and Mr Raymond Mortimer. His book was doubtless written too soon to add the confirmations of Mr R. H. Ward's *A Drug-Taker's Notes*<sup>3</sup> but he could have found plenty more in the report of the Atlantic City 'Round Table' on the subject.<sup>4</sup>

Altogether more serious than Mr Huxley's claims for pills as a substitute for faith and works as a means to enter the kingdom of Heaven, is the widespread belief that, as Professor Arberry has put it, 'It has become a platitude to observe that mysticism is essentially one and the same, whatever the religion professed by the individual mystic' (p. xi). To this the neo-vedantists and their associates add that the various religious forms and beliefs are so many more or less satisfactory disguises for one *philosophia perennis*, 'metaphysic' or universal mysticism, and that all of them are to be discarded when this reality which they symbolize (and also distort) has been realized. This belief, popularized with some variations by the swamis and the '-osophists', by Huxley, Heard, Watts, Guénon, Schuon and many others, is seductive;

<sup>2</sup> 'The Menace of Mescaline', BLACKFRIARS, July, 1954, pp. 310 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Published by Gollancz, 1957.

<sup>4</sup> *Proceedings of the Round Table on LSD and Mescaline in Experimental Psychiatry*, May 12, 1955. ed. Louis Cholden, M.D. (Grune and Stratton).

and, to the extent that it projects the wish for one holy and catholic church seeking the unity of one only God, it is not contemptible. But it must be said that Professor Zachner's book is its complete refutation, at least in the naïve form in which it is commonly proposed: for he shows this agreeable theory to be manifestly belied by the facts. Whatever the 'transcendental unity of religions', it is certainly transcendental and not empirical; and the same must now be said of mysticisms themselves. For there is mysticism and mysticism. The Spalding Professor does not of course deny the possibility of some ultimate synthesis and correlation of their diversities; on the contrary he offers many suggestions in that direction. Still less does he deny the unity of God, which whether consciously or unconsciously sought, and though sometimes even deliberately rejected, may still be regarded as the real goal of all mystics. But he does very rightly hold that 'The function of the student of comparative religion must be to analyse the facts and point out the differences; only then will he be in a position to see whether or not it is possible to discern sufficient common ground between the different manifestations to justify him in attempting to discover whether a divine plan is discernible'. (p. 198.)

The author's exposition is nothing if not logical and orderly. He finds three main types of experiences which have been called 'mystical': 'the pan-en-henic where all creaturely existence is experienced as one and one as all; the state of pure isolation of what we may now call soul or spirit from all that is other than itself; and thirdly the simultaneous loss of the purely human personality, the "ego", and the absorption of the uncreate spirit, the "self", into the essence of God, in whom both the individual personality and the whole objective world are or seem to be entirely obliterated.' The order and the description is reminiscent (though the author seems unaware of the fact) of the 'made trinities' of St Augustine and St Thomas: the imperfect identity of Knower, Known and Loved achieved in knowledge of the external world; the more perfect one in the soul's knowledge and love of itself; the highest achieved only in the knowledge and love of God.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See St Augustine's *De Trinitate*, St Thomas's *Summa*, I, 87, 93, and the classical treatment by A. Gardeil, O.P., *La structure de l'âme et l'expérience mystique*.

Within each group there are important variations. The first type is not necessarily religious at all; and for this reason the author rightly rejects the epithet of 'pantheistic' and has coined that of 'pan-en-henic'.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Richard Jefferies's *The Story of my Heart*, it was vigorously atheistic (though it may be questioned, as of most atheists, whether Jefferies denied God or certain, possibly quite false, conceptions about God). When the ego becomes overwhelmed and 'inflated' by this type of experience, whether temporarily by drugs, more constantly and uncontrollably by psychosis, or of set purpose as by Rimbaud and some fakirs, it is indistinguishable from madness. But such an experience can also become a setting for psychological, but still non-religious, integration, as it did for Proust—the chapter on Proust and Rimbaud is perhaps the most brilliant and illuminating. The author interestingly, but more problematically, equates this type of blissful experience with that of Paradise and Limbo: it is, at its best, human perception untainted by personal sin and prior to the differentiation of the conscious ego.

But each of the three groups spill over into one another. For there is no 'self' or 'soul' which is knowable until it emerges as the subject set over against the 'other' object. This second type of experience, that of absorption in the subject, finds its purest expression in the Hindu Samkhya, in which the subject (*purusha*) seeks isolation from the whole world of objects (*prakriti*) and yet depends on *prakriti* for its self-recognition. This *purusha* seems to be akin to the *mens* of Augustine and Aquinas. The *Samkhya* certainly seems to be Godless, for (as also in the *Yoga Aphorisms* of Patañjali) a god-image (*Ishvara*) only appears in it as a means to liberation, afterwards to be discarded.

But it is when he comes to deal with the Eastern techniques and doctrines that we notice more acutely the limitations of what we feel to be the author's psycho-philosophical viewpoint. For all his evident understanding of, and sympathy for, the mystics, his own robust common-sense, and eminently masculine 'healthy-mindedness', keep breaking in. A Jungian would probably characterize his writing as that of a fine thinking-sensation type; and it is just this which gives it its outstanding qualities of keen analysis and logical consistency. But these very qualities can be a

<sup>6</sup> He also calls it 'natural', not as distinct from supernatural, but because experiences of this type are directly concerned with the phenomena of external nature.

handicap in understanding what many of the mystics are saying. For usually their own perceptions are precisely not matter-of-fact sense-perceptions (in the Jungian sense), but their very opposite, *intuitive* perceptions—in Jung's sense of perceptions of possibilities and relationships by way of the unconscious. This leads them to make affirmations of identity which to normal sense-perceptions are (and seemingly among the Zen Buddhists are precisely designed to be) sheer nonsense. When the Zen Master says that the Dharma-Body is the hedge at the end of the garden, or that the Buddha is toilet paper, he is not talking about the sense-datum as such, but precisely shocking the disciple out of his common-sense and his self-identification with his sensing ego, while at the same time saying something very positive about the 'sacrament of the present moment'. Attachment to the empirical ego of common sense, reason and sensation can lead to injustice: it seems hardly fair to charge Mr Huxley with 'absurd arrogance' for claims he makes, however absurdly, not for himself, but for a 'not-self'.

It leads, we suspect, to a questionable interpretation of Shankara and the non-dualists. It would be foolhardy of this writer to dispute with the Spalding Professor the meaning of extremely difficult Sanscrit texts, and even to begin to do so might demand more space of the editor, and more patience of the reader, than he could reasonably claim. But something must be wrong with an interpretation which persistently presses Shankara's teaching into the alien western category of 'monism', and then argues that it is inconsistent with monism. It is just not the same thing to say 'all things are really and equally one' (monism) and to say 'there is One without a second' (non-duality or *advaita*). This latter all theists must echo, in the sense that 'One is One and all Alone, and evermore must be so', and that that One is not Number One in a series: for there is, in the same sense, no other. Shankara does not deny that illusions are illusions; and most theists must agree that not only does nothing exist in the sense that God exists, but also that our perceptions of other equally independent entities as if they existed apart from the One—and especially our perceptions of the empirical ego, which (as in practice they usually do) suppose that 'I am the doer', independent of the Divine activity—are indeed illusions. And, whatever the language used, surely *only* theists can make such assertions? For while in the

Samkhya there are indeed a plurality of *purushas* (and 'this question is the most puzzling in the Samkhya doctrine'<sup>7</sup>—as is the parallel idea of the plurality of separated souls for Catholic theologians), the undifferentiated One or *atman* is the goal of Vedanta, and it is difficult to see how it can be other than what we call God.<sup>8</sup> Shankara seems to be at some pains to deny that 'Thou art That' (*atman*) is to be understood in a monistic sense: 'it is the identity of their implied, not literal, meanings which is inculcated, for they are of contradictory attributes to each other—like the sun and a glow-worm, the ocean and a well. . . .'<sup>9</sup>

There are, says St Thomas, many ways to and from the perfect unity of God; and he adds that, 'such is the feebleness of our understanding, we are unable to know perfectly even these ways themselves'.<sup>10</sup> An ancient tradition, among both pagans and Christians, tells of three main ways: the way of negation (God is not anything else, and nothing else is as he is); the way of causality (whatever is, in whatever way it is, depends on him, and apart from him is not); and the way of transcendence (he contains all that is, and he the Unknown can be named only, but *eminenter*, by the names of creatures which image him and are the refracted embodiment of his own perfections and of his thought). These ways are not contradictory, but on the contrary are mutually complementary. There could not be in the mind of Ramakrishna any such contradiction, as there is in Professor Zaehner's, between his negation of duality and his ecstatic delight in his Mother Kali; and it was just because she was the Lord's *Maya* and *Lila* (his make-believe and disinterested play) that he found her such tremendous fun. (The Biblical Creator also finds his creatures *good*, not useful, and his Wisdom too 'is *playing* before him at all times; *playing* in the world'.)<sup>11</sup> No more could there be such a contradiction in the mind of St John of the Cross between his imageless dark night of sense and intellect and his delight in the Mother of God or the rich imagery of his *Living Flame*. Nor (to mention another contradiction alleged by the author) could most Christian mystics, who in the

7 S. Dasgupta, *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion*, p. 26.

8 It seems disingenuous to say that 'it makes no difference' whether we render Shankara's *atman* as 'self' or 'Self' because 'in Sanscrit there are no capital letters'. The fact is surely that in Sanscrit there is no lower-case, but *only* capital letters?

9 *Vivekachudamani* (tr. Madhavananda), 242 (p. 108).

10 *Contra Gentiles*, IV, Prologue.

11 *Proverbs*, 8. 30, 31.

*Veni Creator* pray that the Spirit may enlighten their senses, inflame their hearts, and strengthen their bodies, suppose that some physical euphoria and heightening of sensitivity were anything but complementary to their physical asceticism.

For not only do these different ways criss-cross and converge, the very journey to God is not all in the straight line of deductive logic from a single set of premisses. According to the pseudo-Denys<sup>12</sup> and St Thomas<sup>13</sup> (who here again only echo an older, and certainly non-Christian, tradition), there is not only the *motus rectus*, the direct approach, through creation from circumference to centre, but also the *motus obliquus*, crooked or spiral approaches of many shapes and varieties, and many comings and goings, between the One and the Many. This alone can account for the inevitably paradoxical character of the utterances of the mystics; and we run some risk of misunderstanding them completely if we push any one of them to its logical conclusions, or suppose that they are statements of some philosophical 'ism', or of a systematic description of the universe.

We pass to Professor Zachner's third type of mystics: those whom he will acknowledge to be undoubtedly and unquestionably theistic. He has to acknowledge that the statements of these theists are often as non-dualist as those of the vedantins. He could have quoted many more; and from Christian saints (e.g. St Catherine of Siena and St Catherine of Genoa) as well as from Moslem Sufis.

But it is true that there are undoubted differences among these theists of his selection from anything we meet, or could meet, in the Far East or elsewhere. In contrast to the affirmation that the mystic's goal is beyond good and evil, they emphasize that God is Good,<sup>14</sup> and that the mystic too should be good, and also humble, human and humane. For St Thomas, as for the Greeks, the Hindus and Buddhists, the human moral virtues are a necessary preliminary to contemplation,<sup>15</sup> but they are not only or primarily so, for it is by them, and not by his proficiency in contemplation, that the goodness of a man is to be assessed.<sup>16</sup> This is some-

<sup>12</sup> *On the Divine Names*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Summa*, II-II, 180, 6.

<sup>14</sup> But, though God is good—in various analogical senses which Jewish and Christian theologians discuss—he is indeed beyond the opposites, i.e. beyond good-and-evil, as theologians and mystics of all traditions must agree.

<sup>15</sup> *Summa*, II-II, 180, 2; 182, 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Summa*, I, 4, 5, etc.

thing which, it seems, the East would find unintelligible: for there, anything that we might call goodness or sanctity is what we would call contemplation or mystical union, and the measure of the one is the measure of the other. Mysticism itself is unquestioned and unquestionable.

But we should notice that all those whom Professor Zaehner recognizes as undoubtedly 'theist' are in fact also Christians or Moslems—regrettably he has nothing to say about Jewish mystics. They are then not only theists, but of the 'Peoples of the Book'. And we have to ask if these differences are due to their theism and their mysticism, or rather to the influence, direct, or indirect, of Biblical revelation. St Thomas has pointed out that 'Neither a Catholic nor a pagan knows the nature of God as it is in itself, but both know it only by the ways of causality, transcendence or negation'.<sup>17</sup> Both reach God only from effects, but by revelation we 'are shown more and better effects'.<sup>18</sup>

But it is just these 'more and better effects' shown in Biblical revelation which radically alter, not directly the mystical ways themselves, but the whole situation of mysticism and of the mystic. There is a sense in which all non-Biblical religion seems to be essentially, and indeed only, mystical: in the sense, that is, that its rites and beliefs foster ecstasy, withdrawal from the profane to the sacred, identification with nature or with the god, escape from the ego and from time and space and 'the terror of history'.<sup>19</sup> The Bible (and the Koran to the extent that it reflects the Bible) reverses all this. Man now is to find his true existence in the response of *faith* to the Word of God, in obedience to its moral precepts: the wall of partition between the sacred and the profane is broken down: space and time and the ego which lives in them are important, even religiously important, after all. God is revealed in the vicissitudes of human history no less than in nature and beyond history, and he is imaged no less in human behaviour than in the abstracted 'ground of the soul'. For Christians the progressive revelation is completed, not just in another *avatara* or theophany, but in One who is not only God

<sup>17</sup> *Summa*, I, 13, 10 ad 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Summa*, I, 12, 13, ad 1.

<sup>19</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, chap. iv. and passim. Cf. G. R. Levy on the 'Revolution' of religion by the Hebrew prophets, *The Gate of Horn*, pp. 196 ff.



but also man, and who 'went about doing good'. And no man cometh to the Father except by him.<sup>20</sup>

So the very status of mysticism itself becomes problematical: so much so, that there have been Jewish and Protestant divines who have condemned all mysticism as infidelity and sin. The Catholic Church could never do so, for not only could she not resist the mysterious workings of the Spirit in her members, but just because her Lord is God as well as man, and because she herself is his body, she has always known that the mystic must have an honourable place in the variety of her own membership. Though not all her saints are notably mystical, or all her mystics (in the broadest sense) notably saintly, many of her notable saints are notable mystics. St Paul has his ecstasies, whether in or out of the body he knows not, but not in them is his glory.

It would, of course, have been outside Professor Zachner's scope to discuss the theology of mysticism, and its place within the Church. But he brings forward some valuable evidence of the manner in which the Christian mystics themselves regarded it. Particularly apposite and timely are his long quotations from Ruysbroeck's descriptions of true and false, or sinful, mystics. The latter 'attain rest by purely natural means . . . if they are able to empty themselves of sensual images. . . . It is in itself no sin, for it is in all men by nature, if they know how to make themselves empty.' But it is sin when, 'according to their way of thinking, they possess everything that they might pray or yearn for'. Their blissful rest is real enough, but they substitute their own bliss for God's: the penultimate for the Ultimate. Theirs is the truly satanic sin, for according to Aquinas precisely this satisfaction with his own perfection and bliss is Satan's own sin.<sup>21</sup> And just this self-satisfaction, with all it entails, makes them according to Ruysbroeck, 'the evillest and most harmful men that live' (p. 174).

<sup>20</sup> John 14. 6.

<sup>21</sup> St Thomas says that there is a right and a wrong way of seeking to be Godlike: God's way (God made man 'to be in his own likeness') and Satan's ('You shall be as God'). Satan himself 'desired to be like God the wrong way, for he desired as his ultimate aim that bliss which he could reach by the power of his own nature, turning his desire away from that supernatural bliss which comes from God's grace. Or [like Rimbaud!] he sought to attain by the powers of his own nature that ultimate goal of Godlikeness which in fact is given by grace, but to do so without God's help or in the measure of God's giving. . . . Either way, it comes to much the same thing, for either way he sought final bliss, which is God's alone, through his own strength.'—*Summa*, I, 63, 3.

But here too appearances can be deceptive; and we are not too sure that Professor Zaehner is right when he attributes this sin to the Vedantins, or that this is what they mean by *parama gatih*, 'the final state beyond which it is impossible to go'. For Christians, even the Beatific Vision does not mean that God is comprehended or the vision itself infinite, but progress is indeed halted and all desire stilled.

And Christian mystics, even in this world, know not only the *motus rectus* and the *motus obliquus*, but also the *motus circularis*: the uniform movement like that of the heavenly bodies, where each is content to keep its own orbit,<sup>22</sup> no matter how near or far it may be from the centre, and which seeks no good in its perpetual circulation. Although the 'I' is still in space and time,

. . . I know that time is always time  
 And place is always and only place  
 And what is actual is actual only for one time  
 And only for one place  
 I rejoice that things are as they are and  
 I renounce the blessed face. . . .<sup>23</sup>

This is the wisdom not only of the *satori* of Zen and the *samadhi* of yoga and of the Bodhisattva's renouncement of *nirvana*: it is also, or can be, genuinely theistic and Christian. Just because the 'I' is 'noughted', its desire even for progress is stilled in contentment that 'things are as they are'; its yearning even for union is lost in the bliss of the Unity. It is content with what is given, whatever it may be, because it can no longer care for its own contentment, and all that matters is the will of the Giver: that God should be God, and All in all.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the 'own dharma' of *Bhagaradgita*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*.