

MYSTICISM AS DOCTRINE AND EXPERIENCE

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When writing about mysticism, it is still necessary first to explain what one means by that expression. Some years ago Rufus M. Jones complained that "mysticism in common speech usage is a word of very uncertain connotation".¹ That this is still the case is well illustrated by the entry in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* which defines the term by deriving it from the word "mystic" as noun, thus: "one who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity, or who believes in spiritual apprehension of truth beyond the understanding, whence -ism m. (often derog.)." The trouble is that the word "mystic" has also an adjectival meaning, to quote again from the Dictionary, "spiritually allegorical, occult, esoteric; of hidden meaning, mysterious, mysterious and awe-inspiring". The derivative noun "mysticism" apparently acquired some overtones, particularly from the area of occult sciences, and hence its "uncertain connotation".

This difficulty with the word "mysticism", though perhaps not peculiar to English, is nevertheless not present in all languages. German for instance has two expressions: "der Mystizismus", which refers to occult pursuits of all kinds, including those responsible for the Oxford Dictionary's bracketed designation, and "die Mystik", which is reserved for man's *bona fide* experiences of the divine or the ultimate reality, or at least for experiences genuinely believed, by those who have had them, to have penetrated into that dimension.

Why English has not produced a less ambiguous term for genuine mystical pursuits is not easy to see, especially as England is not lacking in authentic mystical tradition. As R. Otto once remarked when invited to lecture on mysticism in this country, "for a foreigner to come to tell an English audience about mysticism was 'to bring owls to Athens'" (meaning "coals to Newcastle").² Be that as it may, it will remain for some time obligatory for every historian of religion dealing with the subject to attempt to contribute to the clarification of the term.

Mystical writings are probably as old as writing itself, but writings on mysticism are an innovation of this century, so the subject is young. It developed in the wake of the pioneering Gifford lectures on "The Varieties of Religious Experience" given by William James in Edinburgh, 1901-2. It is therefore not surprising that a general consensus on the scope, methods and interpretation of research into mysticism has not yet emerged. However, this is equally true of the study of religion as a

whole and since it has not prevented the history of religion or comparative religion from establishing itself as a respectable academic discipline, it is clear that the study of mysticism has a bright future despite inherent difficulties.

If we try to explain what mysticism is, we are immediately faced with the fact that even within its genuine province, the word has been used in more than one sense. First it designates what is described as a direct experience of communion or union with the divine or ultimate reality or at least with what is believed to be its dimension beyond the world of sense perception and rational reflection. Second it is frequently understood as a theological or metaphysical doctrine, perhaps built around the experiences of a mystic either by himself or others or both. Of these two components, experience is primary while mystical doctrines, both philosophical and theological, in so far as they can be distinguished from descriptive accounts of mystical experience, are derivative. The third constituent of mysticism is the mystical path, a certain way of life with incorporated spiritual training in contemplation, designed to lead in stages to the realisation of the mystical goal. The mystical path may be based purely on a teacher's experience and described as such. More often, however, it is coupled with, or at least described in terms of, a metaphysical or religious doctrine.

The proportion in which the experiential and doctrinal components are mixed in mystical writings varies and sometimes it is not easy to disentangle them. Mystical writers in the past could not be expected to point out the difference, since it is only as a result of the modern psychological approach that the two components are now recognised. W. James did not himself deal theoretically with this problem, but in his lecture on mysticism he was clearly interested only in mystical experience as such and passed over the doctrinal elements contained in the materials, which he quoted, without comment. The distinction was very clearly formulated for religious studies by R.M. Jones, who would have liked to restrict the usage of the term mysticism to the "historic doctrine of the relationship and potential union of the human soul with Ultimate Reality and to use the term 'mystical experience' for direct intercourse with God".³ And yet this very statement of his is an illustration of the difficulty of distinguishing the two components consistently. To say that mystical experience is direct intercourse with God is already tantamount to imposing a theistic interpretation on it. It is no wonder then that even present writers on mysticism, if committed to a particular doctrine, fail to make the distinction and tend to produce classifications of mysticism based on preconceived ideas and incorporating value judgments derived from personal belief.

The case in point is R.H. Zaehner. A Roman Catholic, he regarded "genuine theistic mysticism" as the highest attainment.⁴ Two other types, "monistic mysticism" and "pan-en-henic" or "nature mysticism" (the two last ones standing for the more usual term "pantheistic mysticism") are at best stages on the way⁵ if not aberrations of the mind. In fact he suggested that monistic experience was the isolation of the individual spirit from the psychophysical body which is man's mortal part and since that would also mean isolation from God, it would be a state of sin.⁶ The pan-en-henic experience he further explained as the reversion of the individual soul to a state of original innocence (akin to Jung's collective unconscious) and as such neither good nor evil. It would not produce substantial change in man, but enhance only the good or bad qualities which he already had.⁷ Zaehner was courteous enough to admit of "genuine theistic mysticism" even in Protestant Christianity and also in Islam and Hinduism. Ramanuja's theism particularly appealed to him as being in agreement with Catholic mystical tradition. But he further said that only Christians believed in the highest mystical achievement called the Beatific Vision in which even matter in the shape of the body will share in the general deification, and God will be "all in all" (I Cor. XI, 28). Here he was entirely wrong, forgetting or being unaware of the Mahayana goal of universal liberation "down to the last blade of grass" and of the Hindu expectation of universal salvation under Kalki, the future saviour. These teachings found philosophical expression in Aurobindo's work, which formulates the goal as the spiritualisation of the entire universe.⁸ Although few may be inclined to say with F. Staal that Zaehner's contribution is an unhappy medley of dogmatism and emotionalism,⁹ the inherent bias in his work seriously limited, if not entirely destroyed, its value and usefulness for the general study of mysticism.

From the opposite side of the spectrum we can take the example of Ben-Ami Scharfstein. Though not unsympathetic to mysticism, he apparently does not accept that it has any foundation in objective reality or possesses a dimension of being of its own. Right at the start of his book he says: "Seen very broadly, mysticism is a name for our infinite appetites — less broadly, it is the assurance that these appetites can be satisfied. Still less broadly, it is some particular attitude towards 'reality' and a view as to how someone or anyone can come into perfect contact with it. And mysticism is also, of course, a name for the paranoid darkness in which unbalanced people stumble so confidently."¹⁰ Here we can see how the ambiguity of the term mysticism receives a further twist, covering for Scharfstein also the area of mental aberration. He later elaborates on this theme and practically equates psychosis and the

“mystic state”. But all is not lost, because: “A mystic who remains intellectually alert, will accompany his emotional experience, as we may non-committally call it, by persistent reasoning.”¹¹ And, besides, psychosis is “involuntary and inescapable while the mystic state tends to be voluntary — given a suitable training it can be entered and left almost at will. The mystic does not suffer his internal ecstasy, infinity or truth, but creates it”.¹² This is not just agnosticism, but a denial of the possibility of any ontological basis for mystical experience. Like psychosis it is held to be only a subjective state of mind and if an objective base to it can be found, it will be physiological, in man’s nervous system. Scharfstein shares here the reductionist approach of some scientists to psychological facts of experience. Unlike Zaehner he does not exactly define his position, but even so he does not leave us in doubt when he says: “I myself dislike and prefer to explain away much of mysticism, but it is in some ways essential to us and it is too natively human ever to die”.¹³ I think we could describe his stance as evolutionary positivism and elaborate it thus: Emotional experiences have a certain realistic value, though not a basis in objective reality, in so far as they prove of assistance for the survival and evolution of the species. Thus the human emotion of love secures, better than mere instinct, procreation and the protracted care of offspring, enabling humans to develop higher intelligence on maturity. The emotional experience of oneness could in this way be interpreted as a future further stage of evolution which would replace strife, a one-time stimulant of evolution which has become too destructive, if mystical experience were to become an achievement of a substantial part of mankind or at least of a large elite which could command the respect of the rest.

Though this view incorporates a preconceived positivistic bias, it does have a worthwhile implication, for if the line of thought sketched above expresses correctly the logic of the positivistic approach, then scientific and wider academic research interest must sooner or later include mysticism not only as a phenomenon or an object of study, but also as a method of research. In other words the researcher studying mysticism would adopt some kind of mystical practice. This approach is advocated by Staal who says: “The study of mysticism, to the extent that it has so far been undertaken, resembles the sketching of a territory that is never visited and only described from heresy.”¹⁴ “If mysticism is to be studied seriously, it should not merely be studied indirectly and from without, but also directly and from within.” Without this provision it would be “like a blind man studying vision”.¹⁵ I have expressed a similar view with respect to Yoga when advocating for it, in the context of the modern world, the status of a “new field of inquiry both in scientific

laboratories and in the laboratory of the human mind”, the latter implying “the experimenter’s use and application of the Yoga method on a personal basis, not only by the study of its results on other subjects”.¹⁶

All modern writers on mysticism include within its range traditions belonging to different times and parts of the world. But its concept has been formed in the context of European civilisation which has its roots in ancient Greece, drew substantially from Judaic tradition and was basically Christian before it underwent the process of secularisation. It is therefore inevitable that in a paper like this one turns also to history.

The origin of mysticism has to be sought in the mystery cults of prehistoric Greece which survived well into the historic period and penetrated later into Rome. Since they were secret, not much is known about them. But in general one can say that some kind of mystical experience was evoked by rites of initiation into the mysteries and on special occasions various ecstasy-inducing techniques were used such as sacred movements and dances, recitations and enigmatic utterances. There were also enactments of sacred events (“mystery plays”). The application of these techniques was often preceded by periods of fasting and chastity. There are also reports of individuals who achieved “union with the deity” and the god, it was believed, spoke through them, giving prophecies.¹⁷

Besides the component of mystical experience and the methods of bringing it about, the mysteries already had their doctrinal element also. Since a fair deal is known about the mystery doctrines, they may not have been as secret as the rites, if they were secret at all. While the initiatory rites and ecstasy-inducing techniques probably relied also on the effect of novelty, surprise and awe, the teachings provided the motivation for joining the mystery movement, for under-going purifications and perhaps for adopting, temporarily or permanently, a stringent discipline in life. The teachings of mysteries can be described as ethical, eschatological and soteriological.¹⁸ In the atmosphere of life’s uncertainties in those rough times and in the face of the gloomy prospects, in the then current Greek religion, of a shadowy Hades after death, the outlook of rich rewards in the afterlife, a favourable lot in future lives on earth and the possibility of final rebirth into immortality represented highly desirable achievements, attracting mentally alert candidates and furthering their experience of ecstasy during the sacred rites.

The exact state of elaboration of the mystery doctrines is not known, but they influenced philosophers, some of whom were initiated and incorporated mystery doctrines into their teachings. As philosophy was not yet a purely academic discipline they also lived it practically, sometimes together with their disciples in monastic communities. Two

presocratics have to be mentioned in this context. Pythagoras, who left Samos for Crotona in southern Italy in 530 B.C., was described by B. Russell as a combination of Einstein and Mrs. Eddy. He was probably initiated into Orphic mysteries and it may be worth mentioning that it was suggested that he had come from India, his name being explained as a hellenisation of the Sanskrit *pitā gurus* (= father teacher).¹⁹ He was the contemporary of the Buddha and one of his utterances, "There are men and gods and beings like Pythagoras",²⁰ is reminiscent of several passages in the Buddha's discourses. In one of them (Majjhima Nikāya 4, 36) when a priest who saw unusual signs about him asked if he was a god, a man, a ghost etc., he answered each time in the negative. To the direct question who, then, was he, he retorted he was a Buddha (=an Enlightened One). Pythagoras taught metempsychosis as did the Orphics as well as the Buddha and other Indian teachers. The soul fared well or badly in the cycle of lives alternating between the underworld and this world according to its moral merits and state of purity. Eventually salvation could be won by bringing about complete harmony in the purified soul by means of philosophical contemplation in which the perception of harmony in music, in the cosmos and in mathematical relations played an important part. Like the Buddha and other Indian *gurus* Pythagoras founded a community of followers abiding by regulations designed to facilitate a pure and contemplative life.

Empedocles of Agrigentum (cca 483-423), also an Orphic initiate, apparently knew the teachings of Pythagoras. He regarded himself as a fallen god who had had to go through various incarnations to regain the divine status. He accomplished this in his last life. His reported death in the fiery Etna, though more spectacular, would be in keeping with the taste of contemporary Indian saints, and particularly those of Jain persuasion, for death in flames on reaching enlightenment and seeing their life's task accomplished (though some preferred starving to death). Empedocles does not seem to have added anything substantially new to what we know of Orphic and Pythagorean teachings, but he still makes an impressive figure. Plato drew from all three mentioned sources.

Although we do not know whether Plato (427-347) was a practising mystic, there was enough mysticism in his philosophy for it to become the basis of mediaeval mystical doctrine. To what degree Socrates (469-399) contributed to it is a long-standing problem, but he may himself have been a practising mystic. He was known to enter into states of deep contemplation, lasting even for hours, in which he completely ceased to communicate with his environment. Plato might have followed his teacher's example, though he would have done it less conspicuously.

The basis of the mystical doctrine which Plato provided was his vision of a hierarchically ordered spiritual universe. The one ultimate reality was the idea of good and below it, proceeding from the one to the many, are the other subordinates ideas or forms, forces and laws of the ideal world of which the phenomenal world of passing things and events is only a shadowy reflection. Finding it difficult to express his system in precise terms, Plato often resorted to poetical myths. And although his philosophy has endured for centuries with many works written in its spirit or trying to explain it, it is still poetry which even today is best able to convey to us the mystic flavour of Plato's philosophy, like Shelley's famous verse:

The One remains, the many change and pass;
The light of heaven abides, earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass
Stains the white radiance of eternity . . .²¹

Plato's idea of the good as the absolute to which men's souls would aspire and make cognitive approaches in contemplation did not prove sufficiently evocative emotionally for the purpose of mysticism as practice. After all, the mystery cults had always centred their rites and teachings around a god-figure. But Olympic god-figures were becoming outdated and mystery religions needed a more philosophical concept of god. This was provided, paradoxically if not ironically, by Aristotle (384-322), for whom God was a necessary deduction in his process of reasoning. Viewing the world as real, he saw it as consisting of a hierarchy of actual substances which required a "prime mover" to set and keep the world going. But being pure form, God does not do the moving himself; he is the object of desire of lower substances which move to achieve perfection since God is perfection itself. Psychologically God seems to be something like pure mind and contemplates his own perfection, which may also mean the perfection of all things.²² Since "there is something divine in man", man also has the capacity for contemplation and can rise to the supreme act of vision (*theoria*) akin to God's, if he so chooses, for he is free and may determine his own direction in life.²³ It is clear that Aristotle's *theoria* is far from what we mean by theory today and it is difficult to imagine that he developed his ideas about God purely by reasoning. I think that some measure of mystical practice of contemplation must be assumed in his life. On the other hand, he supplied all the rational arguments for the acceptance of the necessity of God for many people throughout the centuries till the present day and influenced in the same way also the mystical doctrine which enabled mysticism to flourish under dogmatic religious systems. Both Christianity and Islam made use of this opportunity.

Mysticism furthermore profited from the vacuity of Aristotle's idea of God in a far superior way. It enabled advanced mystics to transcend the all too concrete, even human features of the Christian God and allowed them even in the climate of a strict theistic religion to point beyond the limiting idea of a personal God through the method which became known as *via negativa*. God is beyond the concrete and beyond the finite; any characteristic ascribed to him would be a limitation; he is not this and he is not that.

A further contribution to mystical teachings came from Stoicism in its concept of an immanent Spirit present both in the world as its soul and in man as a seed of God in his soul, but it was Neoplatonism which became the real foundation of mysticism. Starting as a metaphysical teaching, it became eventually a kind of magic religion, trying to rival Christianity. It failed as religion, but won as philosophy, though translated into Christian terms.²⁴ The creator of the Neoplatonic system, Plotinus (203-270 A.D.) is reported to have travelled far into the East "to familiarise himself with Indian Wisdom".²⁵ The name of his teacher, Ammonios Sakkas, sounds like a deliberate reversal of the name *Sakyamuni* (the Sakya sage) under which the Buddha was known in India, particularly since the rise of Mahāyāna. In his teaching we again meet Plato's hierarchical structure of being, but it is expressed in a more systematic and conceptually more accurate way, as is to be expected in post-Aristotelian times. At the top is the One or Above-Being, at the bottom matter or non-being. Both are unthinkable, undeterminable, formless, without quality and quantity, but the One is perfect and dynamic, while matter is deficient and passive. Being is a flow from Above-Being to non-being through three descending stages. The first, that of the Spirit, is the intelligible world of pure forms, Ideas or archetypes of things. The second is the stage of the soul — the world soul and individual souls. The third is the stage of nature, which receives life from the world soul, and of beings in the world of nature which receive life from individual souls. As in all metaphysical teachings, the reason for the process of emanation from Above-Being to non-being, the One to the many, remains obscure, despite abounding explanations. But reasons for the ascent to be desired are clear. The soul can sometimes look upward, and seeing the world of spirit realises its condition as an imprisonment in the body and even becomes ashamed of the body. Since the One, frequently also called God by Plotinus, is the centre of the soul, it is possible to find one's way to it in ecstatic unification. According to Porphyry Plotinus experienced this state four times during his life. Before his death he said to a friend he would try to achieve it for ever.

Although Plotinus was occupied all his life in teaching and writing

down his philosophy, it was not for him an end in itself, but the way to the One. Philosophical speculation was prompted and inspired by the One and was therefore the starting point of the journey to it. The starting point of the speculation itself is not arbitrary, but is determined, as Jaspers put it when writing about Plotinus, "by the experience of our reality". In the course of speculative thinking based on our experience a process of transcending is initiated, and thought approaches what can be called contemplation of the archetypal or the spiritual. Eventually the mind arrives at contemplation of the One and recognises it as its origin and this fills it with joy.²⁶ In this interpretation we can see how the process of formulating a doctrine initiates the mystical path and how the practical steps on, and the completion of, the mystical path in turn inform the doctrine. Doctrine and experiences go hand in hand and since the experience transcends the world of nature and mere speculation, the concepts used for the doctrinal formulations become more and more vacuous and the highest is called by the entirely non-descriptive term the One.

Besides its links to Plato and Aristotle, the mystical system of Plotinus has clear and congenial parallels only in India where the idea of the One beyond being and non-being, from which emanate becoming and further stages of manifested reality by virtue of its inner dynamism, was first expressed in a rgvedic hymn (10, 129) before 1000 B.C.²⁷ The hierarchical structure of the existential planes of the spiritual and material universe appears in different elaborations both in Hindu and Buddhist systems and the One again reappears as the only truly existing reality called *Brahman* in Hindu Vedāntism and Voidness in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Its experience reached in contemplation is described as the unity of being, knowing and bliss by the former and as enlightenment by the latter.

With Plotinus all that philosophy could do for mysticism had been done, but most people need religion to start them off and Neoplatonism tried to meet this need, though incongruously and unsuccessfully. But there was one great successor of Plotinus, namely Proclus (410-485), important for the transmission of the system to Christianity in a modified form. He described the emanation process from the One to lower planes as proceeding in triads. As in Plotinus, the human soul in Proclus' view always has the choice open to it of withdrawing into its inner sanctuary to find God, who is immanent to it though transcendent to the world. He describes this experience as one of divine enthusiasm and in the Socratic or Platonic way as a kind of divine madness. Proclus directly influenced pseudo-Dionysios Areopagita (cca 500 A.D.), the father of Christian mysticism.

But before this, mystical tendencies of early Christianity, informed

also by the Judaic tradition which in turn drew at that time from Hellenistic sources, developed into what came to be known as mystical theology. This term originally meant "direct, secret and incommunicable knowledge of God received in contemplation, as opposed to 'natural theology', the knowledge of God obtained through creatures, and 'dogmatic theology', the knowledge of God by revelation".²⁸ We can, I think, understand mystical theology as mystical experience developed in the context and therefore interpreted in the light of dogmatic theology based on faith in theistic revelation. Theism can therefore be regarded as its doctrinal admixture.

Judaic mysticism goes back to the experiences of the prophets who claimed direct communion with God. Psalms and other books of the Old Testament are full of mystical allusions. However, by the time of Christ its stream seems to have dried up and the mystical philosophy of Philo of Alexandria (cca 20 B.C. — 50 A.D.) used Platonic inspiration to interpret Old Testamental mystical experience and to explain philosophically the process of creation. In it *Logos* is the mediator between God and man. *Logos* is the divine power of creation, the idea of ideas, the paradigm and the archetype. Having a double nature, *Logos* dwells in all single ideas of the ideal world, which is in fact the mind of God who thinks those ideas, as well as in the single things of the perceived world. Although an infinite power of an infinite God, *Logos* is also a person, an archangel, the firstborn son of God and his agent in the world, acting as helper, advocate and intercessor of men. Man is capable of contemplation when leading a quiet "theoretical" life. Then he can obtain an inner revelation in mystical ecstasy which is higher than Biblical revelation. In it human consciousness is darkened and even obliterated by the experience of the proximity of God or even union with him. Philo influenced the developing Christianity and its theology as well as mysticism. He was also, in a way, a predecessor of Plotinus.

Like the prophets of Israel, Christ can be seen as a mystic who expressed his experience of union with the ultimate reality in terms of his unity with God as father. The experience of the presence of God appears to have been a frequent phenomenon in the gatherings of early Christians and it can be classified as mystical, though it was apparently the charismatic influence of the person of Christ which prompted it rather than a doctrine and special method, prayer being the only preparation for it. St. Paul's conversion accompanied by a vision of light is another instance of spontaneous mystical experience under the charismatic influence of Christ's personality. But as the master became more remote in time, his charisma gradually lost its immediacy and the time came when the Christian doctrine started taking over and getting

more elaborate. With it started also the mystical doctrine and with it more definite forms of contemplation were now needed to bring about the mystical experience. Some individuals with a strong mystical sense followed a solitary ascetic path and founded the tradition of desert hermits.

The forming of mystical theology or the Christian path of mystical experience crystallised in the atmosphere of neoplatonic religion and gnostic teachings, but was firmly rooted in the Christian religion whose foundation was faith. The idea of gnosis (= knowledge) was developed in conscious contradistinction to the phenomenon of strong religious faith (pistis). This distinction was not clearly seen before and is even today frequently obscured: believers often insist on having knowledge through faith. Gnosis was understood as real knowledge like that gained by the senses, but on a suprasensory level and concerning suprasensory matters. It was also higher than knowledge gained by mere reflection or inference, though reflection was used to formulate gnostic teachings based on suprasensory cognition. Christian mystical theology accepted much of what was current in gnosticism, but insisted on its foundation on the faith in Christ as a starting point, its aim being Christ experience as the culmination of the mystic path. The path was one of withdrawal from the world, self-conquest and contemplation as defined by Clement of Alexandria (cca 150-215), the oldest known writer on mystical theology. The conquest of oneself is a way of negation and abstraction of all that is material and personal and first it leads one into inner darkness — this image is an echo from Philo and it was again used by pseudo-Dionisios and reappeared centuries later in St. John of the Cross as the dark night of the soul. The experience of darkness, as Clement explains, is in fact a plunging into the “vastness of Christ” and through it gaining knowledge of God, not as he is, but as he is not. So God cannot be known, not even in contemplation, during this life, but his image is sealed on the soul by the Son.²⁹ Despite neoplatonic language and gnostic reasoning, faith remained the pivot of Clement’s approach. Like other patristic authors, he is not regarded as a mystic, but rather as a writer on mystical theology.³⁰ Origen (cca 185-254), however, was known to be dedicated to contemplation and asceticism and seems to speak from experience of rising to “one mystical and unspeakable vision” and communion with God. He was also credited with spiritual gifts like prophecy and other byproducts of mystical practice. The third century then saw a great flowering of centemplative communities in the wake of St. Anthony of Egypt, a great ecstatic.

Mention has also to be made of St. Augustin (354-430) who is often elevated for his strongly personal mystical passages. But strong faith in

scriptural revelation coupled with the extreme theological dogmatism of his main works always prevail so that his mystical experience does not appear to have risen above emotional ecstasy. He formulated the dogma "No salvation outside the Church" and was the father of the predestination doctrine.

The real beginning of the Christian mystical tradition is with pseudo-Dionisios Areopagita (cca 500). He was probably a convert to Christianity who assumed the name of another famous convert, St. Paul's successor as bishop of Athens. His work shows that he had been educated in late neoplatonic philosophy as presented by Proclus. In his system God is immanent (in all things) as well as transcendent (apart from all things) and is of the nature of Trinity and reveals and manifests himself through the heavenly hierarchy composed of three triads of Great Intelligences for which he used biblical names, starting with Seraphim and ending with angels, thus presenting to Christendom the neoplatonic spiritual cosmos of Proclus in the new terminology in which it was taken up centuries later by St. Thomas of Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*. But higher than this assertive theology is, for Dionisios, the philosophical knowledge of God from the order of the universe and through the process of abstracting the notion of perfection from all the perfections of nature and attributing it to God. Higher still is the philosophical process of analysis by negation whereby God is understood conceptually as beyond concepts: "He is all in all things and nothing in none; and he is known through all things and through none of them to none" (*De div. nom.* VII,3) are his almost Zen style statements. But the highest and the only real knowledge of God is through union in mystical vision. One ascends to it on the mystical ladder through a darkness which is brighter than light: "The super-unknown, the super-luminous and loftiest height, wherein the simple and absolute and unchangeable mysteries are cloaked in the super-lucent darkness of hidden mystic silence, which super-shines most super-brightly in the blackest night, and, in the altogether intangible and unseen, super-fills the eyeless understandings with super-beautiful brightness". (*Myst. Theol.* I.)

The subtle distinction made by Dionisios between the analytical understanding of the mystical goal and its direct experience is the most neglected instance of an early recognition of the difference between mysticism as doctrine (however refined and philosophically analytical) and mysticism as experience. Many mediaeval and modern authors have blurred it. Ziehlner ignored it, possibly because it was denied by some dogmatic theologians, for whom analytical understanding by negation is directly followed by faith, which is mystical enough in itself, while full

knowledge of God, as we saw in Clement, is possible only after death. As to the mystic way, Dionisios gave the following advice which also explains again, in different terms, the highest knowledge: “. . . in thy intent practice of the mystical contemplations, leave behind both thy senses and thy intellectual operations, and all things known by sense and intellect, and all things which are not and which are, and set thyself, as far as may be, to unite thyself in unknowing with him who is above all being and knowledge, for by being purely free and absolute, out of self and of all things, thou shalt be led up to the ray of the divine darkness, stripped of all and loosed from all”.

Few have matched and hardly anybody has surpassed pseudo-Dionisios. His works were translated into Latin in the 9th century by John Scotus Erigena, himself a great mystic, but one of the greatest was Master Eckhart (1260-1327) who described his mystical experiences as transcending any theological ideas of God and Trinity, beyond which is Godhead and higher still one faces nothingness. Summoned by the pope John XII he died on the way to Avignon. The pope then condemned a number of propositions in his writing as heretical and others as rash and suspect, saying of him that he had wished to know more than he should. The dogmatic theology which had been systematised by St. Thomas of Aquinas ruled supreme by then and although mystical theology was not suppressed, any deviation in it from the accepted terminology and imagery became dangerous. Great mystics hardly ever abandoned the view that mystical contemplation led to direct knowledge superior to dogmatic theological understanding, but some became more cautious, using carefully chosen Christian imagery and biblical terminology in a figurative sense. A good example is St. John of the Cross. Others, like Master Molinos, suffered at the hands of the Inquisition.

This situation created a whole new problem with regard to mystical language. One has now to admit that an author's description of his mystical experience may be free from doctrinal bias even if he uses the terminology of dogmatic theology and biblical imagery so that careful interpretation or “translation” into uncommitted language becomes necessary. On the other hand, the author may be a believer in the literal meaning of the Church's teaching in which case his account of mystical experience is not descriptive, but interprets it in the light of the doctrine, perhaps without realising it. And he may, as a result of his belief in a dogma, stop short of the final mystical realisation. Two examples may illustrate it. The whole mystical tradition points to the final step as unification with the goal. The mystical path which was gradually elaborated until it appeared formulated in three stages, starts with *via purgativa* which means purification of the heart, reflected in conduct,

and of the mind, which is freed from the shackles of the sensory world, proceeds through *via illuminativa*, an act of inner cognition even though often described as occurring through a "cloud of unknowing", and culminates in *via unitiva*, the final cognitive-cum-ontic, subject- and objectless experience of oneness with the ultimate. Eckhart says: "When I attain this blessedness of union, then all things are in me and in God, and where I am there is God, and where God is, there am I".³¹ St. John of the Cross could not use such open language and resorted to erotic biblical imagery from the Song of songs:

Oh night that was my guide!
 Oh darkness dearer than the morning's pride,
 Oh night that joined the lover
 To the beloved bride
 Transfiguring them each into the other.³²

The inevitable conclusion is that one gets to know God by becoming God.

The other example is from St. Gregory the Great (540-604): "The soul beholds something beneath His brightness. . . not that which God is, but that which is under him. . . Light cannot be seen as it is. If the mind could not see it at all, it would not even see that it is afar off; and if it perceived it perfectly, it would not see it as though through darkness. Therefore, because it is not altogether seen, nor again altogether unseen, it is rightly said that it is 'seen from afar'." (Morals on Job XXXI, 101)³³ The passage seems authentic enough to reveal a mystic, but St. Gregory had papal responsibilities for the multitudes of believers in theological dogmas and he already held the dogma which ruled out the possibility of seeing God in this life. The question now is: did the pope interpret the mystic's highest experience in the light of the dogma or did the doctrinal stricture held by the pope impede the mystic's progress to the final stage of *via unitiva*? The quoted passage does look like a description of *via illuminativa*. This raises a further important question for the comparative study of mysticism, namely that of the stages of mystical experience and their identification in different mystical authors within one tradition as well as between different traditions.³⁴

The richness of the stream of European mysticism continued for several centuries, also in Protestant Christianity and, of course, from early times it has been abundant in Eastern Christendom. It seems to have subsided in more recent times, but it has by no means dried up. Accounts of mystical experience in our time are being collected and some remarkable reports have also come out of Eastern Europe, particularly from Soviet labour camps.³⁵ Material for research will probably never be

in short supply. But what general conclusions can we draw from this examination?

First, I think, it is clear that there is nothing specifically European and Christian about mysticism as such. Its beginnings in the twilight of Greek history may point to its even older origin in Indo-European antiquity, which would explain the developed Āryan mysticism in the Vedas and traces of mysticism can no doubt also be studied in other less documented areas of Indo-European tradition. The same can be said about the Semitic group from which the Judaic tradition contributed substantially to the European one and still continues to bear fruits. Mutual influence can be seen at different times and can be assumed to have been stronger than the historical evidence for it, particularly between Hellenistic and Oriental, and here chiefly Indian, traditions. Christian mysticism is therefore a direct outcome of a merger between the Judaic and Hellenistic streams, with a rivulet coming from India, and enlivened by the mystical dimension in Christ's mission and in the early Christian communities. European mysticism only illustrates the universality of mysticism as experience.

Second we can see that despite doctrinal and terminological differences there is a common core to mystical experiences, although room is left for a variety of accompanying phenomena, such as concrete visions or unusual powers, hardly touched upon in this paper. The common core appears to be the experience of union or oneness with the ultimate reality which is beyond any conceptual grasp and is therefore called by a conceptually vacuous expression or by the religious expression God, suggesting the idea of an infinite person incorporating all perfections. Some doctrinal and terminological differences are also caused by misjudging the stages of attainment and their different demarcation and assessment. In addition there are problems connected with the types of language used and the reasons, conscious or otherwise, for using a particular type of language.

Third there appears to be a remarkable degree of agreement over the general outlines of the mystic way, while concrete techniques for entering the state of contemplation may be variegated.

If all these factors are taken into account, it seems to me that an identity of purpose and of final realisation in the developed mystical traditions of the world can be assumed. One important point still to be considered is that of the ontological contents or otherwise of the ultimate mystical experience. I think that there are two pitfalls here which a historian of religion should avoid. The first is that of creating another mystical doctrine, which nowadays would probably mean adopting and perhaps modifying an existing one. As a good example we can point to

the work of W.F. Stace. Using the combined methods of comparative religion and philosophical analysis, he put forth a version of pantheism as the metaphysical doctrine best suited to describe the ontological basis of mystical experience.³⁶ As such it may have its merits while at the same time being open to various criticisms,³⁷ but it has no chance of being adopted by a majority let alone all of those concerned with research into mysticism because, as a definite theory, it may limit in certain ways the approach to research. The second pitfall would consist of accepting a theory from another field of learning, such as science, which would have an even more detrimental effect. (The social sciences have suffered from this mistake.) What I have in mind is scientific positivism, which uses reductionist methods of interpretation. It would make mystical experience into an epiphenomenon of human emotional life which in turn is derived from the biology of the nervous system and it would be denied any possibility of objective reference. This is Scharfstein's position, referred to earlier. There are rival theories in the sciences also, and further reduction brings biological forces down to the level of physical forces to which alone is ascribed true reality. (This picture of a mechanistic universe frightens even some scientists back into adopting, sometimes only privately, a traditional religious faith.)

The room for manoeuvre between these two pitfalls is very small and the task of working out an acceptable position which would be a methodological help is a formidable one. I would like to formulate a few suggestions, outlining the general direction in which a solution could be sought:

1. There is an ontological basis to mystical experience which is also, in various symbolical disguises, the object of religious faith as well as of philosophical quest.
2. Mystical experience is a suprasensory and supraintellectual, i.e. intuitive, apprehension of that ontological reality and it proceeds in stages of approximation, culminating in cognitive experience of being ontologically united with it.
3. Conceptual descriptions of the ultimate mystical experience are inadequate and provide only partial impressions of its ontological basis, never a global view. When informed by an analytical approach, they are without contents, suggesting voidness or nothingness, while psychologically the experience has fullness of contents describable in terms of being, knowledge or intelligence and bliss.
4. The dimension of the ultimate reality is beyond the world of external objects and its counterpart, man's sensory apparatus with its coordinating intellect, and is therefore transcendent, while the experience of union with it is reached through the process of inner cognition which

gives it the characteristic of immanence.

5. Metaphysical descriptions of the ultimate reality, when informed by an analytical approach, ascribe to it the character of impersonality; when guided by the psychological contents of the ultimate experience of fullness, they suggest a superstructural unit not dissimilar, though vastly superior, to the human personality; in religious terms it becomes the infinite personality of God. The ultimate ontological dimension may therefore unite dichotomies which on the level of intellectual understanding remain contradictory.³⁸

6. Since the practical mystical paths as developed by different traditions show a remarkable structural unity, experimental application of mystical techniques should be possible, especially where a high degree of doctrinal neutrality has been achieved as in some forms of Indian Yoga. It is therefore desirable to include this approach along with current methods of research into mysticism.

Notes

1. Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics (ERE), vol. 9, p.84.
2. See the Introduction to the English edition of Rudolf Otto: *The Idea of the Holy*, Penguin, 1959, p.11.
3. ERE, vol. 9, pp.84-85.
4. R.C. Zaehner: *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, Oxford, repr. 1967 (first 1957), pp.184 & 204.
5. *Ibid.*, p.168.
6. *Ibid.*, p.206.
7. *Ibid.*, p.104.
8. Cf. Karel Werner: *Yoga and Indian Philosophy*, Delhi, 1977, pp.89-91.
9. F. Staal: *Exploring Mysticism*, Penguin, 1975, p.75.
10. Ben-Ami Scharfstein: *Mystical Experience*, Oxford, 1973, p.1.
11. *Ibid.*, p.26.
12. *Ibid.*, p.160.
13. *Ibid.*, p.169.
14. Staal, op. cit., p.18.
15. *Ibid.*, p.125
16. Werner, op. cit., p.178.
17. Cf. Johannes Leipoldt: *Von den Mysterien zur Kirche*, Leipzig 1961, pp.5-50. For the nature of the "mystery plays" cf. K.H.E. de Jong: *Das antike Mysterienwesen*, Leiden 1919 (2nd ed.) and *De Apuleio Isiacorum mysteriorum teste*, Leiden 1901. For the wider context cf. John Pollard: *Seers, Shrines and Sirens*, London 1965.
18. Cf. M. Hadas and M. Smith: *Heroes and Gods*, New York, 1965, p.38 and S. Angus: *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity*, London, 1925, pp.50-67.

19. Hadas and Smith, op. cit., p.42.
20. B. Russel: *History of Western Philosophy*, London, 1946, p.51.
21. R.S. Brumbaugh: *The Philosophers of Greece*, London, 1966, p.158.
22. Cf. *ibid.*, p.195.
23. Cf. Rufus M. Jones: *Studies in Mystical Religion*, London, 1919, p.68.
24. Cf. *ibid.*, p.79.
25. Cf. K. Jaspers: *The Great Philosophers*, London, 1966 (German 1957), p.38. (Volume two, *The Original Thinkers.*)
26. Cf. Jaspers, op. cit., chapter on Plotinus.
27. Cf. Karel Werner: *Symbolism in the Vedas and its Conceptualisation*, Numen, vol. XXIV (1977), fasc. 3, pp. 223-240.
28. J. Chapman in ERE, vol. 9, p.90.
29. *Ibid.*, p.91.
30. Cf. R.M. Jones, *Studies*, p.83.
31. *Ibid.*, p.233.
32. St. John of the Cross: *Poems*, with a translation by Roy Campbell, Penguin, repr. 1968, p.27. The translation is misleading to a degree, because it suggests complete identity of the soul and God on an equal level. The original, however, is more cautious:
 Oh noche, que juntaste
 Amado con amada,
 Amada en el Amado transformada!
33. ERE, p.94.
34. Cf. Peter G. Moore: *Recent Studies of Mysticism*, Religion, vol. 3 (1973), part 2, pp.146-156. See pp.153-154.
35. See *Mystical Experiences of the Labor Camps* by Mihajlo Mihajlov in *Kontinent 2, The Alternative Voice of Russia and Eastern Europe*, London, 1978, pp.103-131.
36. W.T. Stace: *Mysticism and Philosophy*, London, 1961, pp.240-250.
37. Cf. Moore, *Recent Studies*, pp.149-150.
38. Cf. Werner, *Symbolism in the Vedas*, pp.229-230.