

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: NATHAN SÖDERBLOM AND SADHU SUNDAR SINGH

Eric J. Sharpe

In the Preface to the 1930 edition of her book *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill began by noting with some satisfaction that since its first appearance in 1911, the study of mysticism had been almost completely transformed. "From being regarded, whether critically or favourably, as a byway of religion, it [mysticism] is now more and more generally accepted by theologians, philosophers and psychologists, as representing in its intensive form the essential religious experience of man."¹ In retrospect it may seem odd that if mysticism actually *does* represent "the essential religious experience of man", the discovery of its importance should have been so curiously delayed. Precisely why it should have been discovered *at this time* would also seem to be a subject worth investigating. What was there in the intellectual and spiritual atmosphere of the first third of this century which stimulated the extraordinary growth of mysticism as an object of study — a growth which can be verified very easily with the help of standard bibliographies?

Let us first of all look for a moment at the word "mysticism" itself. This is one of those words which we tend to assume must have a fairly definite meaning, for no better or worse reason than that it exists, and that a good many people use it. Of course we may also speak of "mysticism properly so called", guarding ourselves in the process against possible aberrations. But again the assumption is that there is an *essential* mysticism, in its nature self-evident and beyond question. To Evelyn Underhill, for instance, mysticism meant ". . . the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order"; the word was to be shunned as an excuse for "dilute transcendentalism, vapid symbolism" and other spiritual disorders.² A few years earlier, William James had attempted to avoid undue controversy by not defining the word, but instead identifying "ineffability", "noetic quality" (the quality of self-authenticating knowledge), "transiency" and "passivity" as a "mystical group" of states for consciousness.³ While in a recent and widely-read popular study, Sidney Spencer is content simply to say that "what is characteristic of the mystics is the claim which they make to an immediate contact with the Transcendent".⁴ Mysticism may therefore presumably be taken to be the sum total of such claims, in relation to the experiences to which they give rise (or perhaps vice versa). In every case, we are left with a host of

unanswered questions — questions with which the otherwise extensive recent literature on mysticism attempts to grapple in only a piecemeal fashion.⁵

One question which appears to have been neither asked nor answered concerns the extraordinary vogue of the word “mysticism” itself, quite apart from any religious or other phenomena to which it might be taken to refer. This is a matter for the historian of ideas, rather than for the theologian or the phenomenologist, and it is as a historian of ideas that I shall attempt to tackle it. I believe that the study of the use of the word during the first three decades of the present century shows that this term virtually took on an independent life of its own, that its area of reference became progressively more indistinct, and that its use tells us rather more about the state of mind of those who used it than about any phenomena which it might be taken to describe. This paper may then be taken as a preliminary skirmish, which may or may not prove to be the prelude to a major passage of arms.

First of all, it is necessary to remind ourselves that, like many other “ism” words, “mysticism” came into English from German, but that it does not translate one German word, but two: *Mystizismus* and *Mystik*. The first is pejorative, the second defines a legitimate area of theological inquiry.

In its original sense, the word *Mystizismus* was used by religious rationalists to describe anything which they considered emotional, indistinct or dangerous around the borders of revealed, and therefore rational, religion.⁶ It is still so used. The 1971 *Brockhaus* defines *Mystizismus* as “an intuitive-irrational spiritual attitude” (*Geisteshaltung*) which attempts to pass beyond that which is open to rational proof.⁷ *Mystik*, on the other hand, is that form of piety which seeks the *Unio mystica*, the essential unity of the human Self with the divine Reality; it is in this latter (and positive) sense that the Christian (or at least the Catholic) world had for centuries been able to speak of “mystical theology” as the highest point of human spiritual attainment.⁸ In the former sense of the word, one can never (or at least not in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) quite escape the sense of superiority on the part of those writers who use it, whether in German or in English. Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* does not list “mysticism” at all. John Wesley referred in 1763 to the “poison of Mysticism”;⁹ and in 1825 Coleridge castigated mysticism as “the grounding of any theory or belief on accidents and anomalies of individual sensations or fancies, and the use of peculiar terms invented or perverted from their ordinary significations, for the purpose of expressing these idiosyncracies. . .”¹⁰ In these and similar cases, the derivation is clearly from *Mystizismus*. The word

“mystical” was used in comparable ways, not far removed from “mysterious”, to mean that which was enigmatic and perhaps even disreputable. In *Waverley*, Sir Walter Scott describes Colonel Gardiner’s “sudden conversion from doubt, if not infidelity, to a serious and even enthusiastic turn of mind”, involving a “supernatural communication”, as a “singular and mystical circumstance”.¹¹

Before about the 1850’s, the word “mysticism” as the equivalent of *Mystik* was seldom heard in the English language. It was virtually the sole prerogative of Roman Catholics to use it at all. One might say that the concept of “mystical theology” was first brought seriously to the attention of the English-speaking world in 1856, with the publication of Robert Alfred Vaughan’s strange but influential book *Hours with the Mystics*. Evelyn Underhill disliked this book, calling it “supercilious and unworthy”,¹² and even the author’s son confessed, referring to the artificial dialogue form in which it was cast, that “The notion of gentlemen discussing the Mystics, over their wine and walnuts, or in the garden with the ladies in the twilight of a summer evening, has had to encounter the sneers of some harsh critics . . .”¹³ Nevertheless Vaughan’s book brought the subject out into the open. In 1879 the same son, Wycliffe Vaughan recorded that “Mysticism, though a favourite study of the author, was not then, and can scarcely be said to be now, a popular subject.”¹⁴ Nor was it Vaughan’s intention that it should be. Despite his evident interest in the subject, he was a Free Churchman, and saw the study as mainly an experience in religious pathology, “more or less a mistake”.¹⁵ He attempted to determine “that narrow line between the genuine ardour of the Christian and the overwrought fervours of the mystical devotee. . .”¹⁶ in much the same way that Ronald Knox, a century or so later, was to write enthusiastically about “Enthusiasm”, while leaving his readers in no doubt that in the last resort, the enthusiasts were to be more pitied than imitated.¹⁷ Mysticism, says Vaughan, “. . . speaks, as in a dream, of the third heaven, and of celestial experience, and revelations fitter for angels than for men. Its stammering utterance, confused with excess of rapture, labouring with emotions too huge or abstractions too subtle for words, becomes utterly unintelligible. Then it is misrepresented. . .”¹⁸

Misrepresented it certainly was — a result to which Vaughan’s book may well have contributed. The trouble was perhaps that as the nineteenth century progressed, “mysticism” gradually gained currency as a catch-all term to cover anything and everything which clearly did not sort under ecclesiastical orthodoxy, provided that it involved unusual states of mind and body.¹⁹ Small wonder that by the turn of the century, Hannah Whitall Smith (the wife of Robert Pearsall Smith, and both of them unsectarian preachers of the “Higher Life” movement) felt com-

pelled to write: "I would place at the entrance into the pathway of mysticism this danger signal: Beware of impressions, beware of emotions, beware of physical thrills, beware of voices, beware of everything, in short, that is not according to the strict Bible standard and your own highest reason."²⁰ Interestingly enough, Mrs. Smith had been a Quaker, and recorded that it was as a Quaker that she became "exceedingly inclined towards mysticism", though on moving from New England to Chicago she had to leave all her mystical friends behind, "because Chicago did not seem to me a place that could breed mystics".²¹ The Quaker connection with the "classical" mystics of the Christian tradition was powerfully represented in the work of Rufus Jones — though that is a side of the question which I am unable to pursue further on this occasion.

But by this stage, the clear German distinction between mysticism (*Mystik*) as the furthest point of spiritual experience and mysticism (*Mystizismus*) as a self-indulgent expression of religious pathology and make-believe, had been practically lost sight of. To the English-speaking world, it was *all* "mysticism", and all rather remote (at least by the everyday standards of moralistic mainstream Christianity); while the incomparable W.S. Gilbert summed it up in the first act of *Patience* (1881):

"And everyone will say
As you walk your mystic way,
If this young man expresses himself in terms too deep for me,
Why, what a very singularly deep young man this deep young
man must be."

The turning-point in the debate, as far as the English-speaking world was concerned, came in 1899, with the publication of W.R. Inge's Bampton Lectures on *Christian Mysticism*. Inge as a Christian Platonist was concerned to exhibit an unbroken chain of Christian religious experience from St. Paul and St. John down to the Cambridge Platonists and Bishop B.F. Westcott. He believed that he was expounding "Mysticism based on a foundation of reason".²² Of mystical experiences Inge had had none, but he was prepared nevertheless to expound mysticism in terms of what he could understand: "But in truth [he wrote] the typical mystical experience is just prayer. Anyone who has really prayed, and felt that his prayers are heard, knows what mysticism means."²³ Vaughan's book Inge thought irreverent; but in English, at that time, there was nothing else. Retrospectively, therefore, he was able to record that "My book was well-timed, for the public was ready to realize the importance of the study".²⁴

For some decades past, thanks to the impact of Darwinism on the one hand and to the historical movement in Protestant Christian theology

(associated above all with the name of Albrecht Ritschl), the dominant trend in Western religious thought had been almost obsessively rational and historical. All the talk had been of evolution, development, progress and of God revealed in the process of history, while a further consequence had been the belief that the living springs of religious thought must always be traced back to their remote sources if they are to be fully understood. Not far below the surface was the assumption that religion is universal only to the extent that it is altogether rational — rational, that is, after the manner of the Deists. In the 1880s and 1890s, however, a reaction had begun to set in, with the rediscovery of the non-rational and spontaneous in the area of religious experience. From Kant and Hegel, the emphasis shifted to Hume and especially Schleiermacher, who had identified the core of religion as consisting, not in rational reflection, but in a state of mind, a feeling of absolute dependence. Anthropologists and psychologists and students of comparative religion added their evidence to the debate; while around its fringes, sometimes taken seriously, sometimes not, were the assorted ranks of the spiritualists, Theosophists, folklorists, occultists and psychical researchers — all of whom insisted that rational reflection was a very poor instrument indeed with which to plumb the depths of man's religiosity, and that in the last resort, "experience" must decide the issue. And what was mysticism, if not religious experience in its most intensive form?

This is not to say that the demands of rational, "scientific" inquiry were set aside in the process, at least by those who thought their academic or ecclesiastical reputations were worth preserving. And that was where the trouble started. For practically none of those who, following Inge's example, began to write about mysticism, was prepared to make the dangerous claim actually to be a mystic. Most seem never actually to have met such a person. Evelyn Underhill's check-list of mystical writers includes no one more recent in time than William Blake, who had died in 1827 (the same year as Beethoven); most of her authorities belonged to much earlier times. Of other post-Inge writers, perhaps only Rufus Jones seems seriously to have considered mysticism as a living option, and even then in a curtailed range of expressions, from which voices, visions, trances, levitations and the rest had been carefully amputated. To be sure, James and other psychologists of religion were prepared to record a fuller range of mystical experiences (James indeed going so far as to spend some time on drug-induced "altered states of consciousness"),²⁵ and among the anthropologists, Andrew Lang devoted some time to the related area of extra-sensory perception. But the impression is unavoidable, that although *Mystik* and *Mystizismus* had been brought together under the common ter-

minological umbrella of “mysticism”, the non-rationality of *Mystizismus* still remained a stumbling-block to the Christian writer whose sole tool was his rationality. As William Blake had written in 1788, “He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only”.

It is no part of my present purpose to give a blow-by-blow account of the development of the literature on mysticism in the early years of this century. It may be irreverent, but in respect of the alacrity with which authors tumbled over one another to pronounce on the nature and meaning of mysticism, I am reminded of the words of the chieftain of the Gorbals Diehards, in John Buchan’s novel *Huntingtower*: “Govey Dick! but yon was a fecht! Me and Peter Paterson and Wee Jaikie started it, but it was the whole company afore the end”. What I propose to do instead is to examine an actual encounter between an outstanding writer on mysticism and a man already identified as a genuine and very much alive Christian mystic. The two were Archbishop Nathan Soderblom of Uppsala and the Sikh convert Sadhu Sundar Singh. The two met fact to face only once, briefly, in 1922. But since the ground was being prepared for some years prior to their meeting, and since neither man is especially well known today outside smallish groups of specialists, it will be necessary to sketch briefly a little of the personal history of each — Soderblom the theorist and Sundar Singh the practitioner.

Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931) was, I suppose we might want to say, one of the most charismatic figures in the history of Protestant thought this century, as well as being one of the most versatile.²⁶ His interests ranged far and wide through virtually all the interconnected mansions of the study and practice of religion, from Luther to Iran, from music to Catholic Modernism, from philosophy to psychology, from ecclesiastical statesmanship to mysticism. He was the friend and correspondent of anthropologists, prelates, playwrights, poets, painters, scholars and statesmen, musicians and men and women in the street and in the field. And yet somehow he contrived to hold all these interests together. In his student years he had been liberated from a narrow Evangelical pietism through the witness of Albrecht Ritschl; and yet he soon parted company with Ritschl, chiefly on the grounds that Ritschl had abruptly rejected all mysticism — *Mystik* as well as *Mystizismus* — as too individualistic, potentially non-moral, anti-social and anti-historical. As early as the 1890s Söderblom had, while expressing his appreciation of Ritschl’s rejection of *Schwärmerei* and “mystical superficiality”, made it clear that he believed Ritschl to have gone too far in his rejection of the “inward depths” (*innerlighet*) of religion in the interests of rational historicism.²⁷ This inwardness he wished to preserve at all costs, and in

numerous later publications he was to express his growing conviction, not that his own Protestantism was anti-mystical, but that it was "mystical" in a new and distinctive sense. More and more, Ritschl came to be discarded, and his seat among the prophets occupied by Schleiermacher, who had at least recognized the importance of immediate personal experience of God for the Christian life of faith — a point on which Ritschl appeared to be decidedly deficient. For "external (empirical) revelation" Ritschl had a keen eye; in respect of "inner revelation" he was for the most part regrettably blind: such was Söderblom's final judgment. But it was precisely this inner revelation which was, in Söderblom's view, the core of *all* religion, and which ought to be called "mysticism", even when unaccompanied by the spectacular outward signs, visions, voices and the rest. On this view, Luther, for example, was a mystic: "Mystic inwardness, which is utterly different from unhealthy contemplation, characterizes Luther's Christianity throughout".²⁸ Thus in Söderblom's later production, mysticism came to be a far wider term than in many writers on the subject.

It did not, however, remain a single undifferentiated concept. In his book *Uppenbarelsereligion* (1903, reissued 1930 and 1963), he drew a common but important distinction between two forms of religion, the "natural" and the "revealed".²⁹ Each, he maintained, has its own special form of mysticism: natural religion gives rise to what Söderblom called "the mysticism of infinity" (*oändlighetsmystik*), and revealed, or prophetic religion to "the mysticism of personality" (*personlighetsmystik*). The difference between them rests in the relative importance which each accords to the human personality.³⁰ Ecstasy, the ineffable Brahman and *Nirvāṇa* belong to the former class; Christian mysticism (*Mystik*) to the latter, at least when it is able to steer clear of the shoals of *Mystizismus*. The former tends to be non-moral; the latter highly moral. But above all, in the former the individual human personality is a burden to be shed, while in the latter, personality is a treasure to be preserved. Again Luther is held up as a model of the mysticism of personality, along with Jeremiah, St. Paul, St. Augustine, Pascal and Kierkegaard. This type of mysticism is characterized more by *Angst* than by ecstasy, more by fear and trembling than by journeys to the third heaven.

However, not for a further twenty years did Söderblom actually meet a man who he was prepared unreservedly to characterize as a mystic of this peculiarly Christian (or perhaps it would be better to say, Evangelical) kind. Even then, the man in question had about him the aura of vision and voices — matters which should have been of no real concern, on Söderblom's earlier theories, but which simply could not be ignored.

The man in question was an independent Indian Christian preacher called Sadhu Sundar Singh. Elsewhere I have written in some detail about the impact that the "Sadhu" (a *sadhu* in the Indian tradition is a solitary religious mendicant, who may or may not be a preacher) made upon the Christian world of the 1920s, and about the controversies to which his brief public career gave rise, and I do not have time to recapitulate the story here.³¹ But a few points must be made nevertheless. Born in 1889 (and therefore 23 years younger than Söderblom) of a thoroughly Hinduized Sikh family, he was converted to Christianity in his teens after a vision in which he saw, and heard the voice of, Jesus. He was baptized by an Anglican missionary, but shied away from institutional religion, and it was as an independent *sadhu* that he determined to serve his new Lord. For some years he took "Tibet" as his mission field (though whether he ever actually crossed the geographical frontier is still open to question: Bishop Stephen Neill once wrote to me that the Sadhu was never in Tibet, though he thought he was).³² Books were written about him, first by an Indian Christian called Alfred Zahir (1916), and two years later by his new "spiritual mother", a missionary by the name of Rebecca Parker.³³ In 1920 he paid his first visit to the west, and in Oxford met the noted New Testament scholar Burnett Hillman Streeter who (with the help of A.J. Appasamy) wrote yet another book about him, called simply *The Sadhu* (1921), but subtitled *A Study in Mysticism and Practical Religion*. This was, so to speak, the book which set the mystical cat among the Liberal Protestant (and Catholic) pigeons.

The causes of the subsequent furore were many and varied; but one of the most important was that Streeter had discussed the Sadhu's youthful visions and voices more in the terms of abnormal psychology than of mystical Christian devotion. Streeter and Appasamy were not unaware of the importance that could be attached to the Sadhu's appearance in the trivial and workaday West. "India is the land of Mystics [they wrote], but the Sadhu is the first Indian — or rather the first whose experiences we have on record — to become a Christocentric Mystic."³⁴ But the element of the ecstatic in the Sadhu's experience must nevertheless be treated with extreme caution: "To him Ecstasy may not be without danger but may bring actual profit. It is not so with the rest of us. The light that we must walk by is the light of conscious thought, with prayer and meditation. The spurious Visions and Revelations which come by the easy path of a facile trance-practice, whether in ourselves or others, we are mistaken if we admire, we are demented if we seek".³⁵ Statements of this order reduced at least one other European scholar, the maverick Catholic Friedrich Heiler, to a state of near-

apoplexy, since they so clearly discounted the possibility of direct supernatural intervention in the life of the mystic.³⁶ And certainly they are reductionist in the extreme. It was through Heiler that Söderblom was drawn into the debate surrounding the Sadhu's *bona fides*; but before the debate got out of hand (by which time the Sadhu himself was safely tucked away in the Simla hills), Sundar Singh had visited Europe again, and had met Söderblom. This was in 1922.

Actually, in the wake of the Parker and Streeter/Appasamy books, Söderblom had begun to lecture and write about the Sadhu before their first meeting took place. In a book entitled *Tre livsformer* (Three forms of life), he had set side by side mysticism, devotion and science as three complementary human ideals, with Sundar Singh as an example of the first of these: the lecture on which this chapter is based was first given in Sigtuna in August 1921. It is unremarkable.

The Sadhu was in Uppsala for only three days, April 21-23, 1922. Only one letter to Mrs. Parker appears to have been written during this brief visit. It reads, in part: "... today I am going to speak in the University and tomorrow I will preach in the Cathedral and the Archbishop himself will interpret for me into Swedish. He is a very nice man. Now I am staying with him for three days . . ."³⁷ This is a little disappointing, but fairly typical of the Sadhu's terse epistolary style (his English was never very good).

One cannot altogether avoid the impression that to begin with at least, Sundar Singh was impressed by Söderblom chiefly because he was Archbishop of Sweden. After all, on these tours he was meeting vast numbers of Christians (and others), and must have been under a fair strain. Söderblom, however, was both moved and stimulated by the encounter, and in a new book, *Sundar Singhs budskap utgivet och belyst* [Sundar Singh's message expounded and illustrated] (1923), he told the Swedish-speaking world about it, calling him "the Master's Indian apostle", and a man with whom it was good to keep company.³⁸ Unlike Streeter, Söderblom was in no hurry to explain away the Sadhu's visions. "Sundar Singh is a visionary", as well as being a man in whose universe remarkable things take place; in comparison with the classical mystics (on whose reported experiences almost all the mystical literature hitherto had of course been based) he stands out chiefly in that he does not follow the rules of the game! His mysticism is without a method: it is simply direct experience.³⁹

Söderblom admits that Sundar Singh's preaching engagements in Sweden were somewhat of a disappointment (he might have added that they had been fairly harshly criticized in some quarters of the Swedish press by non-mystical journalists who had wondered what all the fuss

was about). “Anyone who wants to hear an interesting discussion designed to entertain an audience, was disappointed.”⁴⁰ But more interesting were Söderblom’s personal conversations with the Sadhu. He took him to see Swedenborg’s tomb in Uppsala Cathedral, and Sundar Singh “. . . regretted that he had not had the opportunity to go more deeply into what Swedenborg tells about his visits to the other world and above all about Christ’s revelations to him.”⁴¹ In the Botanical Gardens, the Sadhu revealed his love of nature. In conversations, the Sadhu showed that he knew little about Christian denominations, that his much-publicized knowledge of the *Bhagavad Gītā* seemed superficial, that he disliked image worship, that he had attempted to convert Mahatma Gandhi (“What a pity that these conversations were never recorded”),⁴² and that he disapproved of those Westerners who failed to show respect for Indian culture.

Now in all this, there is only one point at which the Sadhu revealed any opinion with which Mrs. Rebecca Parker might not have approved, and that was his evident interest in Swedenborg. Otherwise his attitudes and views were throughout those of an Evangelical Christian — as were his sermons, which were Oriental, perhaps, in their imagery, but not in their content. As to his much-discussed visions, all one can say is that they either belonged to his past life, or that if they were perchance continuing, he contrived while in the West to keep them discreetly hidden. At the end of his 1923 book, Söderblom declared that Sundar Singh “. . . has a special importance, unlike that of any other before him, for the history of Christianity and the Church in India”.⁴³ Purely on this evidence, it is hard to see why. Was he *really* a “Christocentric mystic”, or was he perhaps no more than a convenient symbol of the spiritual coming-of-age of Christianity in India?

Between 1922 and his mysterious disappearance in April 1929, Söderblom and Sadhu Sundar Singh corresponded in a somewhat lopsided fashion: Söderblom’s letters moved on the level of exuberant spirituality, the Sadhu’s (curiously and sadly) mainly on the level of business and finance, publishers and complimentary copies. But to this latter rule there was one startling exception — a letter dated November 13, 1928, which reads in part: “Now I want your advice on another matter. It is this: I have often seen in my visions your noble countryman Swedenborg, he is a most wonderful personality. He has told me several interesting facts. Do you think it would be useful if I wrote my conversation with him in a book form? Please tell me frankly about it and I will never misunderstand you . . .”⁴⁴ Whether Söderblom did tell him frankly about it, I have no way of knowing, but I suspect that he did not — at least there is no record of his having replied to this particular letter.

It should be recorded that by this time the Sadhu was mortally ill, and that since about 1924 he had been the focus of some fairly unscrupulous attacks, about which I have written elsewhere.⁴⁵ Almost all these attacks had centred on his early visions and experiences, and had accused him of being either a psychopath or a confidence trickster. His opponents included a couple of Jesuits and at least one Freudian psychoanalyst; his defenders were led by Friedrich Heiler of Marburg, and included Söderblom, C.F. Andrews, B.H. Streeter, Friedrich von Hugel (with reservations) and many other "liberal" Christians, as well as a fair proportion of Protestant missionaries in India. This division of forces is itself curious, if for no other reason than that most of his defenders were liberals, while the conservatives, whether Catholic or Protestant, for the most part either suspected, or chose to attack him. Heiler firmly believed that the Jesuits had been encouraged to discredit the Sadhu because he was being presented to the world as that contradiction in terms, a non-Catholic mystic; and even Friedrich von Hugel felt that the Sadhu's indifference to ecclesiastical questions was the weakest point in his otherwise impressive personality.⁴⁶ Be that as it may, the fact remains that only those theorists of mysticism who viewed the mystical question in the broadest of terms were in the last resort prepared to accept the Sadhu, while at the same time remaining sceptical or agnostic about his voices and visions (which were after all among the traditional signs of the mystic); those on the other hand whose vision of mysticism *included* these uncomfortable manifestations seemingly felt either that they no longer happened, or that if they happened outside the bosom of Mother Church, they were probably fraudulent or demonic. The Sadhu's own view of the Church was expressed in these words: "There are not in the Church enough men of the deepest spiritual experience to give final authority to what its teachers say. So I go direct to God . . . With me a revelation in Ecstasy counts for more than Church tradition."⁴⁷ This Liberals could, at a pinch, accept, provided that the result was in accordance with what they already believed to be the heart and mind of Christ (and the Sadhu's public utterances were mostly remarkable for their Evangelical orthodoxy); for Catholics, at least in those tough pre-Conciliar days, when the voice of the dialogical turtle had not yet been heard in the land, they posed wellnigh unsurmountable problems. Perhaps they would not go so far as to say that the only good mystic is a dead mystic; but most appear to have believed that the only *safe* mystic was one who had crossed into protective custody across the Jordan (or the Styx, for Neo-Platonists). Be that as it may, the years from 1922 to 1929 were sad and disappointing years for the Sadhu. In April 1929 he wrote to various friends (among them Söderblom) that he was setting off

on a final preaching tour to "Tibet"; he left Subathu, and was never seen or heard of again.

Two years later, shortly before his death, Söderblom delivered in Edinburgh his celebrated Gifford Lectures on *The Living God* (1933, 2nd ed. 1939). In them, Sundar Singh rates only one mention, and then only as "the evangelical Hindu beggar-monk and saint" who knew the Bhagavad-Gītā by heart when he was ten years old, and could not abide the thought of his mother being called a heathen.⁴⁸ The word "mysticism" appears fairly often in the index, and yet it is never once linked with the name or the person of Sundar Singh. Folke Holmström's massive (431-page) study of Söderblom and mysticism, *Uppenbarelsereligion och mystik* (1937) has no index, but appears never to mention Sundar Singh; nor do any of the early Söderblom biographies (Andrae 1931, Berggrav 1931, Nystedt 1931). In his 1968 Söderblom biography, Bengt Sundkler at least refers to Sundar Singh twice, though only in passing, and rather in connection with Söderblom's internationalism than with his studies in mysticism.⁴⁹ Söderblom's disciple, biographer and successor, Tor Andrae, published in 1926 a 658-page study of *Mystikens psykologi* (reprinted 1968), in which he quotes Söderblom's distinction between *personlighetsmystik* and *oändlighetsmystik* with evident approval, but discusses the Sadhu only briefly. "The Sadhu is clearly not a fraud," he writes, "But his apprehension of reality is different from ours. His stories about his life are not factual accounts but confessions of faith, testimonies to his Lord's glory and power."⁵⁰ Otherwise the Söderblom-Sadhu connection is not mentioned, and Andrae's book continues to treat the mystical question apparently as a choice between dead visionaries and living eccentrics.

However, in another memorial essay, the same Tor Andrae makes what appears to me to be a most important observation. He writes that it is improbable that Söderblom's growing interest in mysticism bore any relation to his own personal life of faith. Points of contact there certainly were — for instance in the asceticism he inherited from his father. Andrae continues: "But it is noteworthy, that this sympathy for mysticism appears only when he speaks *about* religion. One gains a different impression from his statements *in* religion; his own proclamation moves in the spiritual world of trust (faith) and forgiveness. It bears no mark of mysticism. It is the striving of his universal, ecumenical spirit to reach a deeper understanding of this piety, which has given Christian spirituality so many of its most remarkable figures, which brought him closer to mysticism."⁵¹

What then of Söderblom's encounter with Sundar Singh? One must be cautious, but it is my impression that Andrae (who after all knew

Söderblom well) was quite right, and that to Söderblom, the Sadhu was a fascinating enigma who temporarily supported some of his long-held theoretical views on the nature of mysticism and religion generally, but who in the end disappeared from the good Archbishop's life almost as mysteriously as he had vanished from the Simla hills. He was prepared to break a lance with those who, for whatever reason, questioned the Sadhu's honesty (and that of his *chela* Heiler). What Söderblom was not prepared to do — what he was incapable of doing — was to share the Sadhu's experiences, particularly perhaps where Swedenborgian visions were concerned.

During the frantic Sundah Singh debate of the late 1920s, little enough was said or written that deserves to be remembered for its wisdom or its charity. One exception, however, was a contribution made in 1926 by the Norwegian psychologist of religion Eivind Berggrav to the journal *Kirke og Kultur*.⁵² Berggrav had been a student of Rudolf Otto's in Marburg, and was therefore well enough acquainted with the "mysticism" debate. He saw the controversy as being between two extremes: superstition and rationalism. It is always unhealthy, he maintained, when we attempt to nourish faith by removing miracles. But he too had met the Sadhu, and also knew Appasamy (Streeter's co-author of the first notable Sadhu book) from Marburg. Previously, though, he had simply not trusted himself to write about the Sadhu; there was, he felt, too great a religious and cultural distance involved, and Mrs. Parker's book on the Sadhu had puzzled him more than it had enlightened him. It was, however, the *cultural* remoteness of the Sadhu which had troubled him most. No Norwegian, he held, would accept what an American might have to say in a book about Norway. No psychoanalyst would claim to understand a Western patient on a lesser basis than *weeks* of personal contact. Surely, then, Westerners ought to be extremely cautious about trying at the drop of a hat to evaluate the spiritual life of a Hindu/Sikh, however familiar some of his words might sound. Berggrav still, in fact, believed that between Eastern and Western spiritualities there were points of contact; but that these emerged only gradually through a maze of culturally conditioned differences. The implications are clear — that most had not taken the time or the trouble to discover those points. While as far as the Sadhu's "miracles" were concerned, Berggrav was firm in saying that had he *based* his message on those miracles (the "mystical signs"), then "that would have made impossible every immediate and direct Christian fellowship with him. The same applies to his visions and ecstasies. If he had obtained from them the contents of his faith, there would have been a gulf fixed between us."⁵³ But he did not base his faith on them. Or did he? How

important were they to him? Might it not have been the case that, like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sadhu Sundar Singh slipped into and out of trance states (*samādhi*) regularly; but that he deliberately refused to speak to the West about his visions, and even appeared to subordinate them to a conventionally expressed Evangelical Christianity? "Those who were constantly with him, in the later years of his life, have told me that this refusal to speak about wonders became more and more his settled mood."⁵⁴ As Söderblom had said: "Remarkable things happen in Sundar's universe."⁵⁵ But *what* things, and *how* remarkable? Berggrav did not know; Söderblom did not know; nor can we — though the Swedenborg episode is surely worth bearing in mind.

In the absence of sure knowledge, what is the scholar to do? — particularly if he or she should be a stranger to those experiences commonly described as "mystical". All that *can* be done, it seems to me, is to try to incorporate them into the scale of religious values which one already holds, and if that scale leaves little or no room for the visionary and the ecstatic, then one must explain them away as best one can.

Even so, the crux is whether one is prepared to allow that, given certain conditions, they may well be part of *the subject's* spiritual universe, or whether one is not. C.F. Andrews published in 1934 a book on Sundar Singh in which he attempted to explain away the Sadhu's trances and visions largely in terms of the life of the imagination. He was neither "unspiritual" nor an enemy of the Sadhu's: nevertheless at one point he felt compelled to write that "Not only inwardly, but also outwardly, during these [the Sadhu's] adventurous journeys, he seemed to be moving in a world of spirit. His passion for solitude and his practice of trance-like moods evidently increased this initial childhood's difficulty of distinguishing fact from imaginative vision."⁵⁶ While still young and still in India he was prepared to relate his visions (and in 1920 he was still able to talk about them to Appasamy, as an Indian); later, discovering that the Christian West remained uncomprehending, "at last he ceased to speak about such abnormal incidents altogether".⁵⁷ At the opposite pole stands Oskar Pfister's book *Die Legende Sundar Singhs* (1926). Pfister, though a Pastor and President of the Swiss General Mission Society, was a Freudian — a curious combination. His book assumed not an imaginative, but "a morbid confusion between fact and fancy"; later he went even farther, and accused the Sadhu of wilful distortion of facts, "evident untruth", "boasting pretension", and the like — though these accusations refer rather to the facts of his earthly life than to his commerce with the heavenly.⁵⁸ But why, in the area of mysticism, should these "facts" be important at all? Only the toughest-minded rationalist would want to claim that a mystic's utterances on his day-to-day

activities should be taken as proof or disproof of the genuineness of his spirituality. And yet the anti-Sadhu literature of the late 1920s revolved almost entirely around the factual accuracy of the minutiae of Sundar Singh's early life, as retold either by the Sadhu himself or by Alfred Zahir.

In Pfister's case, however, this was in spite of everything not the root of the problem. The Sadhu he considered in fact "more and more a danger to the Mission and Christianity",⁵⁹ partly because of what the Reformed Pastor (with apologies to the shade of Richard Baxter) felt to be his crypto-Catholicism, but more because of "his want of interest in social and political questions".⁶⁰ And this, finally, may have been what caused the Sadhu's eclipse. A mystic he may have been; but he had no political programme for India. He had failed (like many other Christians) to convert Gandhi; and in the end it was that other holy man, Hindu to the core despite his eccentricities, who captured the imagination of India — and of much of the rest of the world. And oddly enough, the ethically-minded Christian West believed itself to understand Gandhi far better than it had ever understood the mystical Sadhu; perhaps it did, or at least if it did not, the discrepancies troubled it less.

It may be that we have somewhat to learn at this point about Söderblom's attitude to the Sadhu. For Söderblom, ethical — and therefore also political — questions were of considerable importance. During the first world war, he had laboured to bring together Christians from the belligerent countries in an attempt to bring hostilities to a close.⁶¹ And the immediate post-war years were for him a time of unremitting effort in the same direction, culminating in the first Life and Work Conference of 1925.⁶² The Sadhu's visit to Uppsala came in the midst of these preparations. Söderblom's studies in mysticism, and his theories about mysticism, belonged to an earlier period in his career, when he was still a professor of comparative religion, and not yet a world ecclesiastical celebrity. We recall Andrae's words, that Söderblom was no mystic, and that he spoke confidently only when he spoke *about* religion; his utterances *in* religion moved on a different level altogether. He desperately wished to understand, but he had no real desire to participate in what was to him an unattainable type of visionary piety. The practical consequences of the Sadhu's spirituality were, and remained, indistinct for all save the Sadhu himself; and in the meantime there was work to be done.

Despite all the brave words that were spoken in the early 1920s about the Sadhu setting a new spiritual standard for the Christian Church in India (and perhaps outside India), in the end he did not do so. Perhaps his detractors had done their work too well, though I hardly think so.

C.F. Andrews wrote that to the East, "the Sadhu brings the message that Christ belongs to them no less than to the West; that it is their function to express Him truly as belonging to the East", while to the West, he brought the message that racial barriers are no barriers to the Christian Gospel.⁶³ But whatever he may in the end have done for the East (a subject on which it would be unsafe to generalize), to the West he spoke chiefly as an exotic image of a Christ who was already too well-defined to bear very much revision. Equally, he was made to appear a mystic at a time when (for no fault of the Sadhu's) the word "mysticism" was curiously fashionable, and was being forced into whatever moulds happened to be available — antiquarian, intellectual, pathological, psychological, romantic, theological. But because all of these rested on piles driven deep into the subsoil of Western intellectual life, none quite fitted the Sadhu's case. In Western company, the Sadhu spoke plainly as an Evangelical to Evangelicals, and the Western world delighted in his picturesque imagery. He spent hours in prayer — but then so did many other Christians. The signs of his mystical experience were locked away in his own mind, and in the pages of pious biographies. And in the end, those who met him — Söderblom included — were clearly tempted to remark on his transparent Christian piety, which was unusual only in that it was Indian. What might have been going on under the Sadhu's turban, all the books and articles notwithstanding, no one in the West ever knew.

To this extent, Sadhu Sundar Singh's mysticism in the end differed little from that of those other remote virtuosi of the spiritual life whose life-stories and experiences were chronicled in the solemn mystical literature of earlier this century. He emerged from obscurity, and finally disappeared into still greater obscurity. He may have been saint or sinner, humble or conceited, a man whose voice and visions were spontaneous or induced by unwise and excessive fasting. We shall never be able finally to decide between these possibilities in his case, any more than in the cases of St. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhardt or St. Catherine of Genoa. For mystical experiences (one would be almost tempted to say "by definition", were there such a thing as a definition of mysticism) are ineffable and irreducible, or they are nothing.

To bring this paper to a conclusion is no easy matter. Let me end, therefore, with two quotations, one from the Sadhu himself and one from Archbishop Söderblom.

First Sadhu Sundar Singh:

"When we awake from sleep we are hardly able to tell how much Time has passed during our sleep. Even in our waking moments, Time is so unreal. In sorrow and suffering, a day seems to be a

year; in joy, a year a day. Time has no Reality, therefore, for Reality is real under all circumstances, and we have no sense for Time as we have been created for Reality, which is Eternal."⁶⁴

And now Söderblom:

"In the history of religion Sundar is the first to demonstrate to the whole world how the good news of Jesus Christ is genuinely reflected in an Indian soul. Sundar answers a question which Christian thinkers and others have asked, ever since India entered seriously into spiritual exchange with the West: 'How will India's Christianity look, if it is to become something other than a colony or several colonies, spiritually occupied by mission and shaped, to the best of its ability, in its own image?' Here now we have an Indian soul who, as we have seen, has remained Indian while at the same time becoming absorbed by his love for Christ and making the Gospel his own."⁶⁵

"Man dväljes gärna med denne man."

"It is good to be in this man's company."⁶⁶

Notes

1. Underhill, *Mysticism*, 12th ed. 1930, p.vii.
2. *Ibid.*, p.xiv.
3. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902, pp.380-2.
4. Spencer, *Mysticism in World Religion*, 1963, p.9.
5. cf. Moore, "Recent Studies of Mysticism", in *Religion* 3/2, 1973, pp.146-156.
6. *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 1913, Vol.IV, p.618.
7. *Brockhaus*, 1971, Vol. XIII, p.146.
8. cf. *ibid.*, p.141.
9. *Journal*, August 28, 1763.
10. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 1825, p.381.
11. Scott, *Waverley*, 2nd ed., 1814, Vol. I, p.93f.
12. Underhill, *op. cit.*, p.xiii.
13. Vaughan, *Hours with the Mystics*, 6th ed., 1893, p.x.
14. *Ibid.*, p.xv.
15. *Ibid.*, p.xxvii.
16. *Ibid.*, p.15.
17. Knox, *Enthusiasm*, 1950, passim.
18. Vaughan, *op. cit.*, p.27.
19. In 1937, George A. Coe described mysticism as becoming "a refuge from the disintegrating structure of modern theology" earlier in the century. Ferm (ed.), *Religion in Transition*, 1937, p.102.

20. Strachey, *Religious Fanaticism*, 1928, p.164.
21. *Ibid.*, p.206.
22. Inge, *Vale*, 1934, p.34.
23. *Ibid.*, p.38.
24. *Ibid.*, p.42.
25. James, *Varieties*, 1902, pp.386ff.
26. The English-speaking reader is sadly limited in his choice of Söderblom material. But see Sundkler, *Nathan Söderblom*, 1968.
27. Hölmstrom, *Uppenbarelsereligion och mystik*, 1937, p.45.
28. *Ibid.*, p.51.
29. *Op. cit.*, 1963 edition, pp.34ff.
30. *Ibid.*, pp.72ff. In English, the same distinction is to be found in Söderblom's article "Communion with Deity", in Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. III, 1910, pp.736ff.
31. Sharpe, "Sadhu Sundar Singh and his Critics", in *Religion* 6/1, 1976, pp.48ff.
32. Letter dated April 17, 1975.
33. Cf. Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p.52. Zahir's book (which I regret that I have never seen) appeared in 1916; Mrs. Parker's first in 1918, though it was reprinted many times and translated into a number of European languages.
34. Streeter and Appasamy, *op. cit.*, p.143.
35. *Ibid.*, p.155f.
36. Heiler, *Apostel oder Betrüger?* 1925, pp.96ff.
37. Letter: Sundar Singh to Rebecca Parker, April 22, 1922.
38. Soderblom, *Sundar Singhs Budskap*, p.7f.
39. *Ibid.*, pp.88f, 110.
40. *Ibid.*, p.127.
41. *Ibid.*, p.129.
42. *Ibid.*, p.248.
43. *Ibid.*, p.285. Cf. Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p.53f.
44. Letter: Sundar Singh to Nathan Söderblom, November 13, 1928.
45. Sharpe, *op. cit.*, pp.59ff.
46. See Gwendolen Greene (ed.), *Letters from Baron von Hügel to a Niece*, 1928, p.167.
47. Quoted in Streeter and Appasamy, *op. cit.*, p.149.
48. Söderblom, *The Living God*, 2nd ed., 1939, p.104.
49. Sundkler, *Nathan Söderblom*, 1968, pp.67,385.
50. Andrae, *Mystikens psykologi*, 2nd ed., 1968, p.363.
51. Andrae, "Nathan Söderblom som religionshistoriker", in Karlstrom (ed.) *Nathan Söderblom in memoriam*, 1931, p.61.
52. Berggrav, "Opstyret om Sundar Singh", in *Kirke og Kultur*, 1926, pp.439ff.
53. *Ibid.*, p.444.
54. Andrews, *Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 1934, p.161.
55. Söderblom, *Sundar Singhs Budskap*, p.110.
56. Andrews, *op. cit.*, p.159.
57. *Ibid.*

58. These phrases are taken from Pfister's pamphlet *Sadhu Sundar Singh's Evident Untruths: A Warning and an Appeal* (n.d.) The book is somewhat more carefully worded.
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.* But it is worth noting that Mrs. Parker had warned the Sadhu against becoming involved in politics — a warning he appears to have taken to heart. Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p.52.
61. Dealt with in detail by Karlström, *Kristna samförståndssträvanden under världskriget 1914-1918*, 1947.
62. Söderblom, *Kristenhetens möte i Stockholm*, 1926.
63. Andrews, *op. cit.*, p.237.
64. Sundar Singh, *Reality and Religion*, 1924, p.87.
65. Söderblom, *Tre livsformer*, p.52.
66. Söderblom, *Sundar Singhs Budskap*, p.8.