

A Preliminary approach to Mystical Experience

by Geoff Forster

The theologian Karl Rahner once suggested that the Christian of the future must be a mystic, otherwise his/her Christianity would fade. With this in mind I now offer a preliminary introduction to what is arguably the apex of religious/spiritual experience, while acknowledging that our ordinary language is essentially inadequate for this purpose, but that its use is inevitable.

I begin with American psychologist William James's masterpiece *The Varieties of Religious Experience (1)*, where he offers four characteristics of mystical experience, *viz*,

1. Noetic the experience yielded knowledge or gave insights
2. Ineffable: Difficult or not possible to be adequately expressed in words
3. Passive: The experience is given, rather than actively achieved
4. Transient Of limited duration, or when our ordinary sense of the passage of time is not generally experienced.

The poet Rupert Brooke exclaimed, in 'Dining Room Tea', 'One instant I knew as God knows all'. This explicitly or implicitly involves all four characteristics. When Jacob Boehme reported, on gazing into his pewter dish, that he then knew as much as if he had attended a university for several years, all four are again explicitly or implicitly involved.

An important contribution was made by English author Evelyn Underhill in her scholarly study, *Mysticism (2)*. Superb as it was, however, as

philosopher Walter Stace has pointed out, it was written before the advent of depth psychology and linguistic analysis, both of which if availed of, would have enhanced it.

Underhill also wrote a much shorter work, *Practical Mysticism* (3) - practical in terms of every day significance, but also, and more importantly, procedures about how to facilitate the emergence of mystical experience: control of the emotions, the mind and the will; disciplines such as concentration, meditation and contemplation. Overall, this is an excellent treatment of the topic.

Next is F. C. Happold's book on mysticism (4). This general survey includes the relationship between knowledge and wisdom, nature-mysticism, soul-mysticism, God-mysticism, stages on the mystical path, and the validity of mysticism. The mystics chosen in the Anthology are predominantly Christians, and cover a very wide range. To the four features given by William James, Happold adds the following three:

5. The rather obvious one of the sense of union with God
6. The conviction that as well as the everyday phenomenal ego there is transcendental ego or higher self
7. The sense of timelessness

One significant comment of Happold's is worth quoting: 'The mysticism of St John and St Paul has been termed Christo-mysticism It is a mysticism of a loving faith in a Mediator between the naked Godhead and weak suffering humanity For St John and St Paul, Jesus Christ is both the Life and the Life-giver, both the Revelation and the Revealed, both the Way and the Goal. In him are gathered into one things earthly and heavenly ... Spirit and matter, the

eternal and the temporal, coincide and are at last seen no longer in opposition' (p. 165).

The philosopher Walter Stace (5) distinguished between:

- (a) Extrovertive mysticism, i.e. the conviction of an all-pervading unity in the external world, and (b) Introvertive mysticism, the conviction of union with God, Suchness, the One, etc., according to the background of the mystic.

He also gave some other general characteristics in addition to those previously listed:

- 8. Sense of joy, peace
- 9. Sense of the sacred, holy
- 10. Paradoxicality, as exemplified in such phrases as 'dazzling obscurity' and 'the teeming desert'

In a previous issue of this periodical [March 2014] I discussed one of Raynor Johnson's contributions to the topic (6). In general, Johnson's contributions are illuminating and wide-ranging. Here I shall simply mention his criteria in the foregoing reference for evaluating a mystical experience: 1. Does it lead to an enhanced quality of life? 2. Is it consistent with, though not necessarily supportive of, reason? 3. Is it unifying and integrative?

Edward Carpenter (7) provided some very helpful insights, including the following:

That limitation and hindrance 'are part and parcel of the soul's deliverance', and that these subserve the evolution of self-consciousness and the sense of identity'.

'Each soul is a gradual rising to consciousness of the All-Soul, a gradual liberation of and self-discovery of the divine germ within it.'

Richard Bucke, a Canadian medical doctor, wrote of an experience which he described as 'cosmic consciousness', a term which he gave to the title of his book (8). A brief extract follows. Note that he uses the third person in his description.

He was in a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment. Almost at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped as it was by a flame-coloured cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city; the next he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Among other things he did not come to believe, he saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of an is immortal, that the foundation of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of everyone in the long run is absolutely certain.

Mention must next be made of a recent book by transpersonal psychologist David Fontana, recommended both by our Fellowship and also by the Programme Director of the Scientific and Medical Network, David Lorimer (9). Here seven potential stages in our post-mortem journey are described. The

first four planes of 'form' bear certain resemblances to life on earth; the three upper planes are 'formless realms of higher consciousness'.

1. Earth (attachment thereto; failure to move on)
2. Hades (not Hell) an intermediate state
3. The Plane of Illusion (the lower astral plane)
4. The Plane of Colour (upper astral or Summerland)
5. The Plane of Pure Flame (Intellectual harmony) sometimes termed the Causal Plane
6. The Plane of Pure light (Plane of Cosmic Consciousness)
7. The Seventh Plane (contemplation of the Supreme)

Elsewhere, our highly esteemed Dr Martin Israel gives an example from a 16-year-old boy (10):

From this experience I learned that (a) there is survival of death, death of the body not being the end, but merely a transitional phase in consciousness; (b) rebirth is a law of created life; (c) God exists and is not merely a hypothesis; (d) God is not a person, indeed no person can delineate Him, and while in rational consciousness it is permissible to say 'He', He is outside personality, which by its very nature is finite and particular, and yet He is known to us through embracing personality in relation to us.

Conclusion

Contemplation of the data of mystical experience can lead to soundly based convictions that can have an enriching effect on our lives. Of course there is nothing like a personal experience!

References

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2. Evelyn Underhill, 1930, *Mysticism*. Methuen and Co.
3. Evelyn Underhill, 1914, *Practical Mysticism*. J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.
4. F C Happold, 1963, *Mysticism*. Penguin Books
5. Walter Stace, 1961, *Mysticism and Philosophy*. Macmillan
6. Raynor Johnson, 1959. *Watcher on the Hills*. Hodder and Stoughton
7. Edward Carpenter, 1938, *The Drama of Life and Death*. George Allen & Unwin
8. Richard Bucke, 1956, *Cosmic Consciousness*. E P Dutton and Co.
9. David Fontana, 2009, *Life Beyond Death*. Watkins Publishing
10. From *Life, Death and Psychological Research*, 1973, Ed, J R Pearce Higgins and Stanley Whitby. Rider and Co.