

# The Communication of Mystical Experience

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The purpose of this paper is not to examine the work of individual mystics or to discuss the principles of mystical theology, but rather to consider the manner in which mystical experience is communicated, both from its sources to the mystic and from the mystic to the world at large, and to consider also the problems that are associated with such communication. But I must first attempt to define what mysticism *is*, and as a prelude to that definition to say what it is *not*. The term mysticism is loosely used to cover almost any non-rational concept, esoteric pursuit or aspect of the supernatural; such usage is not only loose but utterly wrong. Mysticism has its ground in the non-empirical world, but unless one follows Bertrand Russell in *Mysticism and Logic*) and argues that only the empirical world is real and that truth derives only from logical thinking about that world, it is nonetheless grounded in reality. What, then *is* mysticism?

I begin at the beginning with God, who is the ultimate source of empirical and non-empirical reality alike. Our understanding of God is almost invariably mediated by man, in the sacred office of priest, or by the work

of man, in the words of the sacred texts of the world's religions. But we also approach God more directly, through prayer, through the sacraments, and rarely — very rarely — by a conscious experience of the presence of God. All this, however, falls short of those experiences truly called mystical, which involve a direct, personal awareness of God: the mystic has an intense, personal experience of God, being absorbed, as it were, by and into God, yet retaining a sense of individual being even while utterly united with God. These words are, of course, hopelessly inadequate to convey the exact nature of such an experience; they involve the paradox of being united yet separate at the same moment, but this and other expressed paradoxes of the mystical experience are, I suggest, linguistic paradoxes that represent our inability to convey in the language of sense-experience the reality of events wholly beyond anything that is possible in the empirical world.

It is thus difficult to give a fully satisfactory definition of the term "mysticism", but if anything useful is to be said about the subject, a working definition is essential. Evelyn Underhill described mysticism as "final and personal. It is not merely a beautiful and suggestive diagram but experience in its most intense form"; and she adds "those whom we are to accept as mystics must have received, and acted upon, intuitions of a Truth which is for them absolute" (1). Following this way of thought, a more recent work on mysticism (2) defines it as the apprehension of "a truth that is beyond the grasp of the rational intellect". But this could apply equally well to the Christian contemplative or to the occultist

enmeshed in the maze of "New Age" beliefs. It is simpler, perhaps, to try to define the mystic: one who has experienced in his whole being the immediate and overwhelming presence of God as a loving personal relationship (I use *he* and *his* throughout for convenience; I am well aware that there have been as many female mystics as there have been male). This definition is itself open to criticism: firstly it accepts, also *a priori*, the existence of a non-empirical element in man by not distinguishing between sensory and non-sensory modes of awareness. For this I make no apology. I speak as a Christian to Christians; for us, God is real and our relationship with him is in eternity and thus necessarily in the wholly non-empirical spirit.

We must, however, be aware that mystics, their experiences and the doctrines they derive from those experiences, occur not only in all branches of Christianity and in all other world religions, but also in non-theistic systems of belief, and while it is easy to dismiss the non-theistic mystical experience as absurd, as invalid or in some way inferior to the religious mystical experience, such automatic dismissal is both unwarranted and unjust. F.C. Happold, in his book *Mysticism, a Study and an Anthology* (1963), says that

In the true mystic there is an extension of normal consciousness, a release of latent powers and a widening of vision, so that aspects of truth unplumbed by the rational intellect are revealed to him. Both in feeling and thought he apprehends an immanence of the temporal in the eternal and the eternal in the

temporal . . . Though he may not be able to describe it in words, though he may not be able logically to demonstrate its validity, to the mystic his experience is fully and absolutely valid and is surrounded with complete certainty (p. 19).

And this is true of *all* mystical experience, whether the mystic is Theist, Pantheist or Atheist; the difference between them lies in the subjective interpretation of both the experience and the reality that lies behind it. For the Christian the experience of the Christian mystic is more important than that of, say, the Sufi or Hindu mystic; but are there grounds, other than those of faith, for postulating the spiritual superiority of Christian mystical experience over the mystical experiences recorded in other faiths?

Herein lies the great problem of mysticism; not in demonstrating that such experiences occur, but in finding the common ground that necessarily exists, if they are both universal and valid, between the reported experiences of mystics from a wide range of belief systems, systems that are often incompatible and mutually exclusive. That all mystical experiences have features in common has been long recognised; Saint-Martin in the 18th century said, "All mystics speak the same language, for they come from the same country" (3). Their dialects, however, vary, and it is not always easy to recognise similarity, let alone identity, in their experiences. It is, indeed, a mistake to assume that common surface features indicate identity in the depths beneath; a dangerous mistake, as has been emphasised by R.C. Zaehner, who says

Because these experiences are recorded at all times and from all parts of the world, it is fatally easy to assume that because they are, one and all, praeternatural, that is, not explicable in the present state of our knowledge, and because the keynote of all of them is "union", they must necessarily be the same. It is not realised often enough that once these experiences are assumed to be identical and of identical provenance, the conclusion that the transports of the saint and the ecstasies of the maniac are identical cannot be escaped. If this were really so, and if these praeternatural experiences were what religion is principally concerned with, then the only sensible course to adopt would be that which Rimbaud followed; we should all attempt to induce in ourselves an attack of acute mania (4).

More specifically, the purely physiological features of the mystical experience do not *alone* constitute the fullness of that experience, which point was made by the agnostic Marghanita Laski in her book *Ecstasy: A Study of some Secular and Religious Experiences* (1961), in which she sees ecstasy as only one facet of mysticism. "Among the experiences generally known as mystical it is possible to isolate a group which I have generically called ecstatic experiences and which can be circumscribed by the language used to describe them" (p. 369). That is, the emotive language of the feelings. The religious mystic, and specifically the Christian mystic, may be caught up in ecstasy but there is an element in his

experience that is absent from the exaltation of the nature mystic and of other non-religious ecstasies: that is the moral element.

His vision of God and union with God are not solely for his own pleasure and glory; a duty is imposed upon him to return to the everyday world and to bring a better understanding of God's Love and of God's Will to his fellow-men. "And those who enter into this state come back into the world, with the yoke of the kingdom upon them in a law of service. Then God shall give them work" (5). And this element of a duty imposed is one indication of the validity of the experience, but the mystic is yet human and there is always the danger of his glorying in the experience for its own sake: St Paul needed the "thorn in the flesh" of his infirmities to avoid being puffed up with pride at his own experiences (6).

And his example brings me back to the purpose of this paper. How do we know that St Paul "was caught up into Paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter"? We may accept his statement as a matter of faith, but the same problem arises with every report of mystical experience, whoever is the mystic, and appeals to Biblical inerrancy will not explain the ecstasies of St Teresa of Avila or the exalted perceptions of Jacob Boehme. Nor is the problem the simple question of being certain that the experience occurred: we must have the means of knowing that it not only occurred but that the mystic truly understood his experience and truly transmitted it to us. That is, to understand both the nature and the communication of the mystical experience we must have

criteria for establishing the objective reality of the experience itself, and for explaining the means by which the mystic receives the experience, by which he is able to comprehend its purpose and by which he is able to express both the experience and its purpose to others so that they, too, can truly comprehend it.

Let us consider first the reality of the experience. There can be no question but that the mystical experience is an experience of the whole man: of the spirit and of the body and mind, for if it were of the spirit alone then the mystic would have no memory of it and could give no description of it whatever, even to himself. Similarly, were it a purely physical experience the memory would remain but it would be a memory of physical sensation alone without the moral content that is the hallmark of any direct experience of God. All religious mysticism has this moral element, but although it is a necessary condition for accepting the reality of a mystical experience it is not a sufficient condition. There must also be the ineffable element, the stated inability of the mystic to describe in the language of sense-experience just what has happened to him; he cannot describe the experience because there are no descriptive words in any human language that apply to it. He can only say that it was like, yet unlike, this or that, or that it was not-this and not-that: "We have no language for the things of God" (7). Further, we must be assured that the mystic behaves rationally in the everyday world and that he is articulate in reporting his everyday experiences. Without such assurance there would be little to justify us in distinguishing between the super-sensory

experience of the mystic and the disordered hallucination of the schizophrenic. The mystic, then, returns from his direct experience of God his unitive experience — with a message for us, but a message that in one sense he cannot express.

If it cannot be expressed in the language of sense-experience, how could the mystic, who, like us, must use that language, have understood the experience as it happened to him? This is the first problem of communication, what we may call the internal transmission of the experience to the mystic's consciousness and to his memory. Consciousness may be other than physical, but the memory traces within the brain are certainly not, whether they are seen as the initial dynamic memory (i.e. reverberating circuits of electrical impulses) or the long-term static memory (i.e. the recording of events by permanent changes in neural pathways). The mystic is conscious of his experience as supersensory but remembers it with his physical brain. It follows, if the experience is real, that somewhere within the brain is a mechanism for linking the sensory with the supersensory, a mediator between the empirical and non-empirical parts of man. What the mechanism is and where it is located we do not know, but it is feasible to suggest that we can discover it.

It may be objected that such a suggestion is rather like the nineteenth-century demands for chemical analysis of consecrated hosts: a mistrust of God and a demand for empirical proof of his presence. This objection, however, can safely be waived for even if such a



mechanism can be identified, we will not know how it works, how it mediates between two distinct orders of reality. Ultimately we have no alternative to faith, a point made in non-theistic terms by the psychiatrist Jan Ehrenwald:

We must realise that there is an irreducible gap in our ultimate understanding of how neurophysiological processes are converted into conscious perceptions, or how they trigger acts of volition. The gap, in what can be described as the autopsychic sphere, is admittedly small and usually ignored or glossed over by both scientists and laymen. It is more conspicuous and much larger on the psi level or in the heteropsychic sphere. But it is essentially of the same order (8).

If we yet wish to find the mediator in the human brain we shall need to build upon the work of researchers into the neuro-physiological effects of hallucinogenic drugs, for experimenters with such drugs report experiences analogous to those of the mystics and which, on the physical plane, must involve similar if not identical neural processes. Indeed it should be borne in mind that the experience of ecstasy is reported in remarkably similar terms whether the stimulus is psychological, physiological or super-sensory (9). It is sufficient for our present purposes, however, to accept that there is a neural mechanism to provide a link between sense and super-sense and that all mystical experiences have an essential physical component without which we could never be made aware of the transcendent reality that they exemplify.

Once the experience has been preserved in the whole being of the mystic there remains the problem of how it is transmitted from the mystic to his fellow-men. Obviously the experience itself cannot be transmitted but its purpose can: subject to the frailties of the physical, impermanent part of the whole man. The memory of the experience may be preserved in full, and may be brought at will to the forefront' of the mystic's consciousness (indeed, it may have so suffused his whole being that he lives, as did Boehme, permanently in an altered state), but to transfer that full awareness of its nature and purpose to another is quite impossible. For this reason some researchers, e.g. Fritz Staall (10), have claimed that it is impossible to understand any mystical experience without personally undergoing it. This is overstating the case. We live under the shadow of a vicarious atonement and there is no need for each of us to be crucified in order to be saved; similarly we can accept and understand the reality of mystical experience without ourselves directly undergoing it. The point was better made by Coventry Patmore:

Let none of those comparatively few who have attained to the knowledge of "the secret of the King", which is nothing less than the supersession of faith by sight, despise those who are still walking by faith only; but let them remember the word of Jesus: "Because thou hast seen me, Thomas, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed" (11).

We may not receive the full awareness, but in what manner is that part we can receive transmitted? What the mystic is trying to convey is quite simple: "I have seen God face to face, I have been united with him, and I want to bring that experience of his love to you". Intellectually we may be prepared to accept the *bona fides* of the mystic, to believe that he is telling us the truth and to agree with him that God loves us, but such an acceptance is devoid of all spiritual content; we are not altered although the purpose of the mystic is to bring us to the stage where our perception of God is changed so that we are altered in our very being as he has been altered. For this purpose the language of sense-experience is inadequate (this is less true for Indian mysticism; in Sanskrit there is a precision of meaning for the technical terms of spirituality not found in Western languages, but they do not readily translate into English and the language barrier remains: we cannot gain any sudden enlightenment merely from reading the Indian mystics), but whether writing or speaking the mystic must use everyday language to convey his transcendental experience and so must develop techniques for overcoming this limiting factor. He is not always successful.

The writings of the mystics fall into two categories. First, the direct reporting of the mystical experience and of the manner in which it was attained, and second, the interpretation of the experience as a series of doctrinal statements or as a developed theology. The latter is necessarily coloured by the cultural environment and religious tradition in which the mystic lives, and assessing the relative degree of truth or falsity of a given

mystical theology is not our immediate concern, although it is, perhaps, the central problem of mysticism considered in global terms. The direct account of the experience has an immediacy that is absent from the theological reflections based upon it, and it does not suffer from the cultural contamination inherent in the latter, while the practical steps of the Mystic Way, the method of attaining the mystical experience, can be described entirely in empirical terms that are not, as a rule, ambiguous. In describing the experience the mystic must use analogy and sensory symbols. The Vision of God is usually described by means of sensory superlatives to convey both a qualitative and quantitative superiority over anything mundane, while the overwhelming experience of Divine Union is often presented as analogous to the consummation of a marriage: there is an ecstatic element common to both, but the mystic is at pains to emphasise the super-sensual nature of the unitive experience. Jacob Boehme described it thus:

Then after some hard storms my spirit broke through hell's gate into the inmost birth of the Godhead, and there I was embraced with Love as a bridegroom embraces his dear bride" (12).

Nonetheless, however impassioned and eloquent are the words of the mystic, they cannot give us a direct awareness of Divine Union, they can only make us receptive to such an awareness and awaken a desire in us for the unitive experience. But even such a partial response implies the existence of an internal trigger in man, activated initially by a verbal stimulus. In Christian mysticism these non-verbal stimuli seem to rely on

the direct effect of pictorial imagery, whereas in eastern mystical traditions the heightening of awareness may be brought about by a blocking of rational thought processes through the use of paradox: as in the confusion of the mind in Zen Buddhist practice (e.g. asking, "what is the sound of one hand clapping?"). Pictorial imagery may represent the progress of the soul or the object of the soul's quest, or a combination of both. It is not, however, always successful in conveying what the mystic intends. Every observer will recognise the power of William Blake's paintings, but only some will grasp the message that they contain. Similarly, the pictorial symbols of alchemy represent the soul's quest for union with Christ, but only those aware of the traditions of Western Hermeticism will recognise the symbols for what they are, and only those few with an inner sympathy for the goals of the spiritual alchemists will grasp the experience that they represent" (13).

Spoken presentations of mystical experience suffer from the same limitations. The mystic may preach, as did Tauler, but only some of his listeners will fully understand the true meaning of the words, even though the preacher has the advantage over the writer of being able to utilise gesture and all the subtle variations that can be conveyed by speech. He is still limited by the limitations of human language. Even pictorial symbols are interpreted in the human mind by processes of reasoning. For the mystical experience to be communicated in full the mystic must overcome the barrier of double translation: from his own transcendent, unitive experience to the language of sense-experience, and then from

that language to an intuitive awareness on the part of his audience via a mental process that we do not know and cannot name.

Ultimately this can be done only on an experiential level, not by all of us attaining the unitive state, but by the mystic communicating his experience direct from mind to mind: a form of telepathy that bypasses all rational thought-processes. Such communication is found, for example, in the "sudden illumination" of Zen Buddhism, or in the spiritual influence of Martin Moller upon the young Jacob Boehme. How it takes place we do not know, but it is theoretically possible to seek and to find the mediating structure in the brain even though such a quest may seem morally distasteful. More importantly, all such cases of direct communication seem to require a moral purity, even a sanctity, on the part of both the communicator and the recipient. The Mystic Way demands a loving relationship with both God *and* Man; it is a way of the body and spirit both, and it does not require the denial of either: the abnormal self-torture of Henry Suso is as alien to the Mystic Way as is the self-centred ecstasy induced by hallucinogenic drugs.

But such an explanation will satisfy neither the sceptic nor the evangelical Christian, for mind-to-mind communication cannot be proven empirically and has overtones of the supernatural. The disquiet of the evangelical should be settled by pointing out that the conversion experience is itself a mystical experience: there is a direct awareness

of and surrender to God, and the whole life of the converted Christian is consequently changed. The fervour and the desire to bring the experience to others are both there, although the descriptive terminology used is quite different, as the theological stance adopted by most who undergo this form of "conversion" tends to stress the severity of God rather than his love. Validating the mystical experience to the satisfaction of the sceptic is more difficult. He can be shown the results of physiological and psychological research into altered states of consciousness (14) for the reality of the experience, and the distinction can be made between the self-centred nature of the purely physical forms of exaltation and the presence of a moral (or spiritual) content in religious mysticism. He will not be convinced but he will at least be compelled to respect our integrity.

There are also other avenues of research to be followed besides that of probing the physiological nature of human ecstasy. The most obvious is also the most difficult because of the gigantic scale: that is, a literary analysis of *every* recorded text of religious mysticism. Its scope could be reduced initially by considering first the work of those mystics who experienced and reported a direct, loving union with a personal God, and by leaving aside the work of those who sought, and apparently attained, a contemplative union with an impersonal absolute. If such a task could be undertaken it would require first that the works in question be analysed in the languages

in which they were written, and second that they be divided into accounts of the experience itself on the one hand, and theological interpretations on the other. The former accounts would then be collated and common features identified: these being separated into universal common features and features specific to particular faiths. The features unique to each mystic would be related to his own life-history and cultural and religious background. From this detailed analysis a picture should emerge of the essential nature of the experience of Divine Union.

To further our understanding of the methods of communication we would need to examine the influence of each mystic, and to look for records of how his disciples, followers, or listeners down the centuries came to accept the validity and importance of that particular mystic. Collation of the results of this analysis should enable us to construct a model of the ideal means of communication. If both of these tasks could be carried out we would then be in a position to carry out a comparative analysis of the doctrines of the mystics and, ultimately, to find a common ground of mystical experience in all monotheistic faiths.

An initial attempt to codify mystical experiences in in this way was made by Richard Kirby (15), but his definition of mysticism was too broad and his work very much a tentative beginning. Our task is to build upon such foundations. As parapsychologists we have a duty to



disseminate our understanding of the mystical experience. If by studying the dynamics of that experience and the content of the mystics' message, we can bring about a growth of man's love for man than we shall complement the work of the mystics. Their love of God has led to their bringing about a greater awareness in mankind of God's love for man; our true comprehension of the nature of their work will complete the cycle of love and their work will be brought to its true end. This is the work that God has given us to do.

## **References**

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4. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (1957), p.199.
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6. 2 Cor, 12. 1-7.

7. D.H.S. Nicholson, *A Handbook of Mystical Theology*, being an abridgement of 1/ *Direttorio Mimic*<sup>o</sup> by G.B. Scarameni, SJ (1913), p.6.

8. "The Non-Euclidian Mind: A Neurophysiological Model of Psi Phenomena", in *Psychiatry and Mysticism*, edited by Stanley R. Dean (1975), p.67.

9. cf. Laski, *op. cit.*

10. F. Staal *Exploring Mysticism* (1975).

11. Aurea Dicta CXLVIII, in *The Rod. the Root and the Flower* (1895), p.45.

12. Aurora, xix, 1 2. Quoted in J.J. Stoudt, *Sunrise to Eternity: a study in Jacob Boehmes Life and Thought* (1957), p.58.

13. Evelyn Underhill was one of the few. See, e.g., *The Spiral Way*, (written under her pseudonym of 'John Cordelier' (1922), pp.167-168.

14. e.g. S.R. Dean, *op. cit.*; R.E. Ornstein, *The Nature of Human Consciousness: a Book of Readings* (1973).

15. *The Mission of Mysticism* (1979).