DEFINING MYSTICISM: SUGGESTIONS FROM THE CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER WITH ZEN

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IF THE DIALOGUE with non-Christian religions is to bear fruit, Christianity must find common ground with the mysticism of Oriental religions. Repeated attempts to do so have been made, but the subject still remains difficult and delicate. Here I would like to propose a few ideas suggested by the Christian encounter with Zen.

I

Buddhism is essentially a mystical religion in the popular sense of the word, not only because it originates with the enlightenment of the Buddha, but also because its whole doctrine is focused upon a re-enactment in one's life of this liberating experience of the founder. For this reason it is sometimes said that Zen is the purest form of Buddhism, since its whole meaning is summed up in satori. "At all events," writes Suzuki Daisetsu, "there is no Zen without satori, which is indeed the Alpha and Omega of Zen Buddhism. Zen devoid of satori is like a sun without its light and heat. Zen may lose its literature, all its monasteries, and all its paraphernalia; but as long as there is satori in it, it will survive to eternity."[1] In this way satori (which, for the moment, I shall presume to call "mystical") is the very kernel of Zen Buddhism; and others after Suzuki continue to stress that kensho or "seeing into the essence of things" is the all-important thing for the Zen monk. Daito Kokushi, founder of the temple of Daitoku-ji, in his last sermon makes an admonition that is typical:

> Some of you may preside over large and flourishing temples with Buddha-shrines and rolls of scripture gorgeously decorated with gold and silver, you may recite the sutras, practice meditation, and even lead your daily lives in strict accordance with the precepts, but if you carry on these activities without having the eye of kensho, everyone of you belongs to the tribe of evil spirits.
>
> On the other hand, if you carry on your activities with the eye of kensho, though you pass your days living in a solitary hut in the wilderness, wear a tattered robe,

[1] D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (First Series; London, 1958) p. 230.

and eat only boiled roots, you are the man who meets me face to face every day and requites my kindness.[2]

This eye of kensho is the Zen attitude of mind, resulting largely from satori, by which one leads one's life seeing into the nature of things. It might be called a quasi-mystical vision of reality *as it is*, though the author of the above might not approve of this definition, for he declares: "If you ask me the question, 'What is kensho'—what is this 'seeing into one's own real nature' ? I am afraid I can give you no other answer than to say: 'Kensho is just kensho, nothing more.' "[3]

Be that as it may, everything in Zen is orientated towards enlightenment and towards the preservation of its spirit once found. Only the enlightened man can become a master and a recognized director of others; only the enlightened person can speak with real authority. And in this sense Zen can be called completely mystical: without enlightenment the whole structure falls to the ground.

Christianity, on the other hand, though it contains a strong current of mysticism, is not essentially mystical. If one wanted to push the parallel with Buddhism, of course, it might be argued that Christianity also is founded on the mystical (and Trinitarian) experience of Christ, who reveals the Father to the world; and it might also be maintained that the Christian life is a re-enactment of the life of Christ in a modern setting. But this parallel is not too exact. For the Christian life can be lived in full vigor without any enlightenment like satori; no one need feel in the depth of his spirit the psychological shock of enlightenment nor even the tranquility of the prayer of quiet; those who speak with authority make no claim to mystical enlightenment. The true Christian enlightenment comes after death; and even the most profound experience in this world is no more than a pale shadow of the future reality. For this reason, in the long process which precedes the canonization of a Christian saint, the Church never asks about the profundity of his enlightenment or the depths of his mysticism, but only about his practice of heroic charity; traditionally mysticism is only valued as a means to something more important, namely, the charity which is the center of the gospel message. When this charity expresses itself in

[2] Isshu Miura and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Zen Koan* (Kyoto, 1965) p. 38.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

mystical experience (that is, when the love of God becomes so violent that it drives the soul down into its very center in mystical darkness and existential abandonment of thought), then it is inestimably precious. But if a mystical mode of thought is divorced from charity or induced by other means than charity, then, however great its cultural and philosophical value, it cannot be called a central feature of the Christian life. In other words, mysticism as such has not been extolled by Christianity: it is always a way to, or an expression of, charity.

Granted this, however, everyone must recognize that deep contemplative prayer is indeed a way (and perhaps the best way) to Christian charity; it has always held an honored place in the Christian life; and its importance in modern times is enhanced because it brings Christianity into contact with non-Christian religions. Indeed, without mysticism dialogue with many of these religions may well be impossible.

Let us now, then, ask about the meaning of this much-controverted word.

II

In some ways the word "mysticism" is unfortunate. It is too much surrounded with an aura of the occult stemming from its etymological origin, as though it spoke of something a little esoteric. The same is true of its Japanese equivalent "shimpi." This also suggests abnormal psychic experiences; it recalls Aldous Huxley and the addicts of LSD. Hence it is not surprising that so many Zen masters reject it, denying that their exercise is in any way mystical.

Contemplation is a much better word. Its Latin equivalent was the translation of the Greek *theōria*, which for Plato and Aristotle was the apex of the philosophical life, a supreme and magnificent act in which one intuitively grasped the truth in an instantaneous flash accompanied by great joy. Aristotle (usually so dry) speaks enthusiastically about these moments in which man's life is already like that of God, moments in which he tastes that real happiness for which he exists. But alas, says the realistic Stagirite, man cannot long maintain these ecstatic moments (Eliot's "human kind cannot bear very much reality") and so he must fall back to his merely human life, enlightened only by that "imperfect happiness" that stems from the good life.[4]

[4] Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.

Such contemplation as this is the fruit of dialectical and syllogistic thinking; it is the climax of an intense effort of thought. But medieval Europe knew also a contemplation of a different kind; it knew the passive, dark, negative mysticism with its strong Neoplatonic flavor which had been gradually Christianized by Dionysius, Augustine, the Rhineland mystics, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the rest. This was a species of what elsewhere I have called vertical thinking,[5] a process in which the mind goes silently down into its own center, revealing cavernous depths ordinarily latent and untouched by the flow of images and concepts that pass across the surface of the mind. It is that mysticism in which one descends to the "still point" or to the ground of the soul, thus finding a type of knowledge that is supra-conceptual and therefore ineffable, a species of superthinking whereby one grasps the unity of all things—a unity which becomes increasingly apparent as one's knowledge becomes more and more existentially voided of concepts, images, quiddities, and essences to remain utterly silent and receptive. And the silent devotion to this kind of thinking produces a certain liberation or detachment which is the fruit of a deep interiority. This is the apophatic mysticism of darkness which is complemented by the cataphatic mysticism of light found in Bernard of Clairvaux and the others less attracted by the silent passivity of the void.

From this it can be seen that already in medieval Euorope, before explicit knowledge of Oriental religions came on the scene, the many streams and varieties of mysticism and contemplation created a complex problem. This was further complicated by the difficulty of finding a common definition for contemplation which was totally Christocentric (and all genuine Christian contemplation is just that) and that Hellenic and Neoplatonic brand which knew nothing of Christ.

Aquinas, however, seems to have solved this problem with serene transcendentalism and without any trace of that narrow intolerance which we associate with the so-called Dark Ages. Far from denying that the "pagans" are contemplatives, he gives the broadest possible defini-

[5] Cf. William Johnston, *The Mysticism of "The Cloud of Unknowing"* (soon to be published by Desclee Co., Inc., New York).

tion of contemplation, which puts everyone, Christian and non-Christian, into one category. For him, contemplation is "a simple intuition of the truth" (*simplex intuitus veritatis*).[6] He who attains truth and rests in it is contemplative.

Yet Aquinas does not say that all forms of contemplation are the same. He was not given to such oversimplification. The distinct feature of Christian contemplation, separating it from anything in the Hellenic world, was that the truth intuited is the fruit of faith and charity. An intense love welling up within the heart of him who believes enlightens the intelligence, which is now flooded with a new knowledge, no longer stemming from discursive reasoning. This is the truest wisdom, which only love can engender. Superior to logical thinking, it is a deepening of the gift of wisdom common to all who love God; and this knowledge is called by Thomas "connatural," since it arises from consciousness of one's union with God in love. Its nature is beautifully expressed by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in a traditional metaphor: "As when the candel burneth, thou mayest see the candel itself by the light thereof, and other things also; right so when thy soul burneth in the love of God, that is when thou feelest continuously thine heart desire after the love of God, then by the light of his grace which he sendeth in thy reason, thou mayest both see thine unworthiness and his great goodness. And therefore . . . profer thy candel to the fire."[7]

So here in the Middle Ages we find a generic definition of a contemplation including everyone, Greek or Christian, who attains to the truth, side by side with a specific Christian contemplation grounded on faith in, and love for, Christ.

III

Coming now to modern times, one wonders if the introduction of Oriental mysticism to the West (and especially Zen, which interests us here) need really modify this theological doctrine so much; perhaps the whole problem can still be studied within the Thomistic framework. At first sight, of course, the silent, cross-legged sitting of Zen might seem utterly removed from anything known to Aquinas, but a second glance shows that it bears resemblances even to the *theōria* of Aristotle.

[6] *Sum. theol.* 2-2, q. 180, a. 3, ad 1m.

[7] *A Treatise of the Study of Wisdom*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson (Oxford, 1958).

In both cases long hours are devoted to preparatory thought and intense concentration, which culminates in a momentary flash of tremendous light. Both demand ascetical preparation and the practice of virtue. In both cases enlightenment is taken as the end and aim of man's life in which he finds his truest happiness. In both cases there is a certain reticence about the exact content and nature of the experience itself (it is surprising how Aristotle, usually so devastatingly analytical, becomes mystically reserved on this point). Again, in both cases it can be said that there is a sense of union or "oneness" with all things; and here again Aristotle, contrary to everything he writes elsewhere, comes so near to a species of pantheism that Averroist interpreters claimed that he was propounding a world soul, a *nous* that was the same in all men.[8] Finally, in both cases the search for enlightenment is not just an escapist flight from the world; for just as the Buddhisattva vows to save all sentient beings, so the Greek philosopher comes back to the world to work for social and political reform.

Where Zen and Aristotle part company is in the former's silence, passivity, emptying of the mind, suppression of thought and imagery—all of which is foreign to the way of thinking of the active, peripatetic Greek. Yet a somewhat similar state is found in the Neoplatonic stream of apophatic mysticism to which I have already referred. So striking is the similarity between this way of thinking and certain branches of Oriental mysticism that scholars of no small name hold that they had a common origin in a certain type of shamanism in India, the Eastern version of which was to influence yoga, Mahayana Buddhism, and (after its meeting with Taoism) Zen, while the Western version branched out into Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, which in turn greatly influenced the negative theology of Eastern Christianity.[9] Be that as it may (for much of this remains hypothetical, and similarities may be

[8] It was against this interpretation made by Siger of Brabant that Thomas wrote *De unitate intellectus*.

[9] Cf. Etienne Cornélis, "Christian Spirituality and Non-Christian Spiritualities," in *Concilium* 9 (New York, 1965) 81–90, where the author quotes Dodd and Eliade as holding this theory. The extent of the Indian influence on Neoplatonism remains uncertain. We know, however, that in the early Christian era Alexandria was a crossroad between East and West; we know that there was trade between its port and the ports of India; it is just possible that there was a Buddhist colony in this great city; here was a library containing the most famous books of Greece, Israel, Persia, and India; Plotinus went East with the Emperor Gordian and may even have gone as far as India.

due to "anthropism" arising from a common human nature), many elements of Zen meditation were known to medieval Europe; and it seems to me that the same Thomistic definition which includes Aristotelian *theōria* and Christian mysticism can also be applied to the Zen satori and to any other religious or philosophical experience which genuinely grasps the truth: all can be put in one category as *contemplatio*, a simple intuition of the truth.

IV

If, then, the teaching of Aquinas had been preserved and developed, there might have been less theological confusion in defining mysticism today. As it was, post-Reformation Catholic theology pursued a slightly different line of thought, based upon its own conception of grace; and when, at the beginning of this century, Christianity came face to face with non-Christian mysticism, the theologians' handling of the problem was less felicitous than that of their 13th-century forerunner when he confronted the Greeks. It was clear to everyone that the non-Christian experiences ought to be called mysticism in some sense of the word; but what was the nature of this mysticism? What was its relationship to Christianity? Was it the work of grace? These were the crucial questions. While the theologians of the day must have been willing, at least theoretically, to admit that God's grace was at work outside the visible Church, they were reluctant to admit that non-Christian mysticism might be the result of grace—which for them was something of a superstructure added to the Christian at baptism and working with special vigor in the mystic. Christian mysticism was the expression of a special grace which the non-Christian could rarely have (and if he did have it, he was already a Christian and the problem was solved); and so they coined the term "natural mysticism" for the non-Christian experience as opposed to the "supernatural mysticism" of the Christian: Christian mysticism was performed with the help of grace, non-Christian mysticism by unaided nature alone. In this way the presence or absence of grace was the dividing line that separated the Christian mystic from his non-Christian counterpart.

Yet this way of thinking and speaking is unsatisfactory. For one thing, it necessarily irritates the non-Christian, who feels that some crumbs of "nature" are thrown to him while the Christian basks in the

complacency of "supernature." Furthermore, non-Christians have great difficulty in understanding the theological meaning of "supernatural" and sometimes take it (erroneously, of course) that Christians are claiming a phenomenological superiority for their mysticism, as though it were something much more psychologically profound than what is found in other religions. But apart from this, there is the fact that orthodox theology recognizes no "natural" state, everyone being either in grace or in sin. The theologians, of course, in their effort to avoid ascribing grace to the non-Christian, were trying to describe a hypothetical state of man left to himself; but since such a state does not exist, the whole solution as applied to the concrete, existential situation of the non-Christian mystic was not satisfactory.

In the postconciliar Church, however, reluctance to admit that non-Christians have grace and are helped by God has given place to an attitude which sees the working of the Holy Spirit in all religions. It is possible now to say with Rahner that "theology has been led astray for too long by the tacit assumption that grace would be no longer grace if God became too free with it."[10] That non-Christians may have grace no one will now deny; that in consequence their mysticism may in some sense be supernatural can be maintained. Nor is this to go to the other extreme, asserting that everyone is in grace and that all mysticism is supernatural; rather is it to say that in a given case we simply do not know and have no means of finding out with certainty, since grace is so intimately intertwined with nature that it does not fall within the scope of observation and clinical psychology; but in doubt it is not unreasonable to presume with Rahner that the non-Christian is moved by grace, that he is an anonymous Christian. In distinguishing between Christian and non-Christian mysticism, therefore, it seems to me much better to abandon the whole nature-versus-supernature approach and return to the Thomistic norm, which is an empirical one and acceptable to non-Christians: namely, mysticism which arises from, and culminates in, love of God in Christ is Christian; that which does not (but yet remains a simple intuition of the truth) is non-Christian. Nor does the Christian claim that his experiences are deeper, more soul-stirring, more phenomenologically extraordinary than those of his non-Christian brother. As for the ques-

[10] Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace* (New York, 1964) p. 133.

tion of where nature ends and supernature begins, this need not even be asked and cannot be answered, for supernature is normally so bound up with nature that its working in a given instance cannot be detected.

V

If, however, nineteenth-century theologians found it difficult to define Oriental mysticism, they found no less difficulty in disentangling "natural" and "supernatural" elements in their own Christian mysticism; and once again the whole difficulty arose from the conception of grace. A theory was worked out that by one's own efforts one could "acquire" certain degrees of prayer (these were classified as "discursive prayer," "affective prayer," and "the prayer of simplicity"), but beyond this no one could go with his own efforts but must wait for the purely gratuitous gift of "infused contemplation," which God gave to some and not to others according to His free election. Thus de Maumigny, in his well-known book on mental prayer, clearly draws the dividing line between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" prayer at the point where silence predominates in the interior life. In general, spiritual writers agreed that silence, passive receptivity, emptiness, and darkness were not to be spoken of much, for they were "pure gifts," belonging to the category of "prayer which cannot be taught" as opposed to the active "prayer which can be taught." Mystical prayer was a special grace, a special superstructure imposed upon the prayer life of the ordinary Christian by God, who gave it to some and not to others.

And yet perhaps all this needs some rethinking—for several reasons. First of all, according to orthodox theology no prayer can be acquired or taught. Taking literally the words of Christ "Without me you can do nothing," the Church has defined that even to call on God demands a grace from Him. What these theologians meant, of course (for they knew this doctrine well enough), was that infused contemplation in passive receptivity could not be reached without a "special grace"—though it is not at all easy to determine the nature of this special grace, nor is there clear evidence for its existence in the Scriptures and in the official tradition of the Church. Some modern theologians (notably Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange) have gone to great pains to show that infused contemplation is not quite so "special" and that the

notion of a special mystical path mysteriously opening before "chosen" souls is not completely in keeping with the Christian tradition as it existed up to and including Aquinas, for whom there was only one way, that of an ever-growing charity leading to the truest wisdom—as I have already pointed out. This was the path of every Christian.

It is difficult, then, to see the theological foundation for a clear-cut distinction between prayer which can be taught and that which cannot. At any rate, it is difficult to see why anyone should point to a certain stage in prayer saying: "Here starts the special grace: simple prayer is the border line, silence marks the advance into extraordinary prayer." If the old theologians meant that silent and wordless concentration in the absence of thoughts and images cannot be attained to by ordinary human endeavour, then they were wrong, as is clearly proved by Oriental mysticisms, which *as far as concentration is concerned* seem to be little different from the Christian counterpart. "Although the descriptions of the stages of prayer," writes Friedrich Heiler, "their number and their characteristics vary, yet there is no essential difference between the Neo-Platonic, Sufi, Hindu, and Christian mystics; their basic psychological character is identical even with the stages of absorption in the Yoga and in Buddhism, though in the latter every notion of prayer, that is, communion with God, is excluded."[11] It may be that the nineteenth-century notion of a special grace from on high was given some impetus from the fact (attested to by many mystics) that infused contemplation is often beyond the control of the person who enjoys it: it comes a little mysteriously at unexpected times and places, while it may be absent in times of formal prayer. This may have made people think that God was intervening in some extraordinary way that was psychologically inexplicable. But with the advance in depth psychology, we know that the unconscious from which this concentration arises can play all sorts of unpredictable tricks, surging into consciousness when one least expects it; and so (once again) this very unexpectedness does not give reason for drawing a clear line of demarcation: here the action of man ends and God takes over.

The statement of Heiler I have quoted refers to phenomenology—in which line it seems difficult, perhaps impossible, to distinguish Christian mysticism from others. If, then, we wish to set Christian mysticism

[11] Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer* (tr. S. McComb; Oxford, 1958) p. 194.

apart, we can only do so by a theological definition. And I have tried to say that the best definition is not that Christian mysticism is performed with grace and is supernatural, whereas the other is natural (for of this we can have no surety), but that Christian contemplation is found in that wisdom which arises from a deep love of God in Christ. This is the Thomistic definition, which, I believe, non-Christians will gladly recognize.

This theological definition alone, however, is not sufficient for the spiritual guide whose chief interest is in giving direction to the mystic. For this reason it must be supplemented by a phenomenological description.

VI

To understand the phenomenological aspect of mysticism, it is necessary to go back to the Reformation with its stress on the inner light and on religious experience as a norm of action. This had been something of a break with a medieval tradition characterized by objectivity and much less preoccupied with subjective reactions and feelings. And in the field of mysticism the medieval distrust of subjectivism was especially evident. In the course of the search for God (immanent and transcendent), certain psychic phenomena such as ecstasy or what the moderns call "increased perception" might arise, but the orthodox medieval directors, wary of such phenomena, constantly put the contemplative on his guard against them with the warning that what one feels or experiences is not God Himself in His essence—for God is above anything one can feel or experience in this life. Furthermore, traditional spirituality always put obedience to the director (who stood for the Church) above trust in one's private interior motions. Later, Teresa of Avila is to show extraordinary distrust of her own subjective feelings, which she always puts second to her director's counsel.

With the Reformation, however, begins the strong subjectivism, the rejection of priests and dogma in favor of the inner light and attention to the voice of God, which (in spite of its many excellent aspects) reaches an unfortunate climax in a tendency to reject everything except the inner light: it does not really matter if Christ existed or not, if the Scriptures are historical or not, if the Church is apostolic or not;

the only thing that matters is my inner experience, my meeting with Christ in prayer. In short, religious experience occupies the center of the picture.

Now of all religious experience, the most fascinatingly interesting is that of the mystic. And so a good deal of popular Christianity since the turn of the century has occupied itself with the psychological states of this enigmatic figure—with his feelings, his visions, his darkness, his anxiety, his dark nights, his revelations, his ecstasies, and so on. And once again the same pattern appears: it does not matter whether or not these feelings correspond to anything real; it does not matter whether or not the God of the mystics really exists; what matters is the religious experience, the increased perception, the ecstasy. Gone is the time when these phenomena were considered dangerous distractions; now they are an end in themselves. The Rhineland mystics, St. John of the Cross, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* had intransigently forbidden any search for psychic anomalies (which, however, they recognized might sometimes accompany a true love of God), and the "nothing, nothing, nothing" of the Spanish mystic as well as the "cloud of forgetting" of the anonymous Englishman precisely meant that one should be completely detached from ecstasies, consolations, clairvoyance, visions, or any of these phenomena which fall under the modern terminology of "increased perception." St. John of the Cross goes so far as to say that "all visions, revelations, and feelings *coming from heaven*, and any thoughts that may proceed from these, are of less worth than the least act of humility."[12] He was only concerned with the love of God and the fulfilment of the first commandment; the bringing into play of ordinarily latent mystical faculties was a by-product of little importance. But now the tables are turned, and the subjective feelings that were previously a by-product are the goal.

But if religious experience is so important, it might be a good idea to stimulate it. And so arises the use of drugs as a way to mysticism. The best-known experimenter in this line is, of course, Aldous Huxley, whose brilliant little book *The Doors of Perception* told of the inner world of mystical space that the author had discovered under the influence of mescalin. A religious adventurer Huxley may have been,

[12] *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3, 9, 4.

but no one can deny that he could write and entertain. Anguished man, he insists, feels an irresistible need to escape, to transcend self, to get away from the drab world; and of all the possible ways of achieving this transcendence, mescalin, which induces mystical experience, is the least innocuous and most successful. ("All I am suggesting is that the mescalin experience is what Catholic theologians call 'a gratuitous gift,' not necessary to salvation but potentially helpful and to be accepted thankfully if made available.") The sometimes tragic subsequent history of mescalin need not occupy us here. Some years ago, while visiting a Zen monastery far out in the countryside at the foot of Mount Fuji, I was astonished to hear the good Roshi refer to an article about "instant Zen" in *Time*, where it was indicated that LSD might be a short cut to satori. The monk smiled good-humouredly. He neither affirmed nor denied. But his smile bespoke what was in his heart.

VII

Yet the growing interest in states of consciousness which has characterized the last fifty or sixty years has led to the appearance of significant and useful phenomenological studies which might well have done a great service to Christian spiritual direction, if only the theologians and psychologists had succeeded in getting together a little earlier in a joint effort to solve their problems. Jung, indeed, frequently expressed his desire to collaborate with theologians and wrote a preface to a theological work.[13] But this was exceptional. Preconciliar mystical theology was not too eager to co-operate, and only in comparatively recent times has a real mutual understanding begun to develop.

At the beginning of the century William James gave a descriptive definition of mysticism intended to cover a wide variety of experiences. Writing before the rise of Suzuki, he seems to have been unfamiliar with Zen—which, however, fits neatly into his categories, showing how remarkably world-wide is this mystical pattern. As chief characteristics of mysticism he singles out first of all *ineffability*: the mystics state that their condition cannot be expressed or communicated to others. He puts it well: "One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love oneself to understand a lover's

[13] See Jung's foreword to Victor White's *God and the Unconscious* (Chicago, 1953).

state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment."[14]

The second characteristic according to James is a certain *noetic* quality. In mystical states one attains to true knowledge: "They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain. . . ."[15] This again is true both of genuine Christian mysticism and of Zen. In neither case does one sit in utter vacuity; rather is there an attainment of really supraconceptual knowledge (which explains why everything is nothing and vacuity is plenitude). The Cartesian trend in Western thought has tended to assume that knowledge can only be found in clear and distinct ideas; but mystical knowledge, dark and obscure, has nothing to do with concepts. That is why it is ineffable; but it is true knowledge.

James ends his definition with these two characteristics; but he adds two other qualities usually found. The first is *transience.* This, I believe, is true of the highest states of mysticism (though even these may be prolonged for days at the summit of the mystical life). But the deep sense of the presence of God and the samadhi of Zen, ineffable and noetic though they be, are not always transient but continue almost unbrokenly in the lives of some persons.

The second quality is *passivity*: "when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power." This is certainly true of many forms of mysticism, including Christian. It probably would not be accepted by some Zen masters who determinedly reject all suggestion of being grasped by "a superior power"; but others, such as Dogen, assert that in the greatest moments of enlightenment they were grasped by something greater than themselves.

It seems to me, then, that James's description, stressing the ineffability and noetic quality, and suggesting that transience and passivity are often present, is a good phenomenological definition.

[14] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, 1960) p. 367. This book contains the Gifford Lectures delivered in 1901.

[15] *Ibid.*

VIII

Now let us attempt to find a comprehensive definition. The complexities of the matter under discussion can only be dealt with by approaching the problem from three angles: philosophical, theological, and phenomenological.

First of all, philosophical. I have expressed my opinion that the best philosophical definition is the Thomistic "simple intuition of the truth." This covers Christian mysticism, Hellenic and Neoplatonic contemplation, and Zen. All of these can, I think, be truly said to culminate in an intuitive grasp of the truth which becomes increasingly "simple" in proportion as duality (particularly subject-object duality) is lost in an experience of unity. But can this definition cover experiments like those of Mr. Huxley? Here I would say no—if the subject, far from seeking truth, is trying to escape from it. And Aldous Huxley avowedly is doing just this.

Then the theological aspect. I have referred to the Thomistic contention that faith in, and love for, God in Christ enlightens the mind with high wisdom. In other words, what is special to Christian mysticism, both in its initial and final stages, is precisely this sapiential and unitive love. Such a way of speaking is, I believe, eminently suitable, and the Zen Roshi would readily agree that their exercise does not fit into this category.

As for the drugs, if they do not induce mysticism in the philosophical sense, a fortiori they have nothing to do with theology.

Thirdly, there is the phenomenological aspect. Here the description of William James remains, I believe, substantially accurate and acceptable. Perhaps it is most significant in pointing out that mysticism plunges downward, opening up a new and deep level of the psyche untouched by discursive thinking and reasoning. And again, while admitting that it covers both the Zen and the Christian experience, we might ask if a similar psychological condition is induced by the mescalin experiment of Huxley.

It seems true, indeed, that certain drugs can touch the same level of psychic life as does mysticism, actuating the same faculties and enabling one to see into the essence of things in a way similar to Zen. Indeed, James himself indicates that "the drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness." Intoxicants, anaesthetics, and alcohol, he feels, have a "mystical" effect: "The sway of alcohol over mankind

is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour."[16] All this has led some scholars to the conclusion that drugs like mescalin may perhaps induce a genuine mystical experience in the phenomenological sense. Even Professor Stace, a much-esteemed writer on mysticism, can assert that

> those who have achieved mystical states as a result of long and arduous spiritual exercises, fasting and prayer, or great moral efforts, possibly spread over many years, are inclined to deny that a drug can induce a "genuine" mystical experience, or at least to look askance at such practices and such a claim. Our principle says that *if* the phenomenological descriptions of the two experiences are indistinguishable, so far as can be ascertained, then it cannot be denied that if one is a genuine mystical experience the other is also. This will follow notwithstanding the lowly antecedents of the one of them, and in spite of the understandable annoyance of an ascetic, a saint, or a spiritual hero, who is told that his careless and worldly neighbour, who never did anything to deserve it, has attained to mystical consciousness by swallowing a pill.[17]

And yet I would be reluctant to call such experiences mystical, even in the phenomenological sense. The reason is that the true mystical descent to the core of one's being is always accompanied by progress in moral virtue and in psychic maturity, and it effects a reform or a conversion or whatever it may be. In Christian mysticism it has always been the moral norm, formulated in the so-called Rules for Discernment of Spirits, that determines the validity of mystical experiences. But in the use of drugs no such moral change is evident: Aldous Huxley himself made no claim to have grown in virtue after swallowing the mescalin. There is as yet no evidence for the existence of a drug that effects the detachment and the serenity resulting from silent meditation. And all this indicates a profound difference between the experiences. Stace, preoccupied with phenomenology alone, seems to assume that his ascetic, saint, and spiritual hero were looking for some delectable experience. But they were not. They were looking for God and cared little about what they experienced. Besides, even phenomenologically one cannot only judge by what a person experiences at the moment; one must also take into account the transformation and conversion (or lack of it) which follows.

Indeed, in this whole context the term "false mysticism" (little in

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 373.

[17] W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London, 1961) pp. 29–30.

vogue today) may not be inept. For the experimentation of Huxley is not so new as might at first sight appear. Even the medievals knew that the by-products or side-effects of mysticism could be produced by means other than prayer to God; and so they used the term "false mysticism" with all its grotesque overtones. They knew well enough that the pure spiritual joy accompanying the "intensified perception" (to use again the modern term) of mystical experience was something so delectable that any reasonable man would sacrifice the grossest pleasures of sense to obtain it; they knew that even the genuine mystics may easily fall into the trap of mistaking the by-product for the reality; they knew well the dangers of seeking the pleasures of mysticism without seeking God. And so they stressed the danger of undue emphasis on phenomenological aspects as norms of genuinity. Nor was Mr. Huxley ignorant of all this; for some of the most lurid passages in his novels depict the absurdities and obscenities of false mysticism, or they describe the unscrupulous, ambitious politician who in the name of mysticism and with a reputation for sanctity wants to influence the masses and speak with the voice of God. And apart from these enormities, he knew of those who imagine they are in the night of sense when they are half-asleep or who imagine they are undergoing diabolic assaults when they are disturbed and ill. Yet if we simply define mysticism as the actuation of a certain consciousness ordinarily dormant, all this is brought into one category without distinction.[18]

In conclusion, then, it can be said that a scientific consideration of the question demands this threefold approach, and that if one is lacking, the whole thing may become lopsided. The philosophical definition enables adherents of various religions to find common ground for dialogue. The theological definition points to the specific difference between mysticisms of the different religions, saving us from relativism and from the oversimplification that "all are the same." The phenomenological definition, besides giving the raw material for the other two, provides valuable practical knowledge which is of the utmost necessity for skilled spiritual direction.

[18] Though I have denied that drugs can induce mystical experience, it is not my intention to say that experimentation with them is useless and pernicious or that it is necessarily linked with escapism. In fact, the increased perception which they effect may perhaps cure neurosis by uncovering diseased parts of the mind and tapping the unconscious. Furthermore, this experimentation opens up immense possibilities of investigating a sector of the mind which is not linked to time and space.