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A STUDY OF MYSTICISM  
AND  
ITS FORMS OF EXPRESSION

by  
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## ABSTRACT

This study begins with a discussion of the phenomenological experiences and teachings of mystics from both West and East, understood from within their own philosophical frameworks. The mystics are classified into four overlapping types: metaphysical mystics, devotional mystics, nature-mystics, and occultist-mystics. Parallels and differences between the various types of experience are pointed out. The remainder of the study discusses certain philosophical points arising out of the phenomenological investigations, reference being made to the mystics studied to elucidate these points. The nature of mystical awareness and its epistemological value are discussed, and the connections between mystical experience and the forms of expression used to convey it (symbolism, metaphysics, paradox) are elucidated. It is argued that mysticism is an experiential reality, equally as real as our other types of experience, to be understood in terms of its own philosophical structure. The role of Universals in mystical philosophy is discussed, and the bearing that this has upon methodologies used in philosophical evaluations of mysticism, and it is argued that mysticism should be seen from within its own, essentially Idealistic, framework. Cross-cultural typologies of mysticism, and the essentialist/relativist debate, are examined, as well as the distinction between experience and interpretation. It is indicated that the question of the unity or diversity of different forms of mysticism must be considered on three levels: ontological source, experience, and interpretation. The parallels and differences between different categories of mysticism and different mystical traditions are discussed. It is suggested that a common spiritual life of humanity is shown by the unity of experience, symbolic expression, and so on, but that this does not necessarily involve

an a priori "essence" of mysticism. It is concluded that we need to remain sensitive to both the unity and the diversity shown between different forms of mysticism.

## NOTES

(1) For the phenomenological discussions of Chapters I to IV, I have consulted the relevant original texts in German (for Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso and Jacob Boehme), in Greek (for Plotinus), in Spanish (for St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila), and in 14th century English (for Richard Rolle). All words or phrases in these languages inserted into quotations from the writings of these mystics in square parentheses have been taken from the original texts.

(2) In view of the fact that each chapter of this study is long and the references numerous, I have adopted the policy of including References at the end of each Part, where Chapters are subdivided into Parts, in order to facilitate consultation. Thus in Chapters I, II, V and VI the References appear at the end of each Part; in Chapters III and IV, which are not subdivided into Parts, References are located at the end of the Chapters.

## INTRODUCTION

This study begins with an investigation of the experiences and teachings of a number of mystics from both East and West on a phenomenological level. Those of the West are from the Christian tradition, with the exception of the Neoplatonist Plotinus; the Eastern mystical writings are drawn in the main from mystics of the Hindu tradition. I adopt the approach of attempting to understand these writings from within their own philosophical frameworks and their own standards of 'rationality', elucidating the nature of mystical experience and its forms of expression. In the course of these opening four chapters attention is drawn to a number of philosophical points arising out of the phenomenological investigations, which are given more detailed treatment in Chapters V and VI. The mystics studied are classified into four broad types; however, it is important to note that these categories frequently overlap and should not be taken to be hard-and-fast. These categories are metaphysical mysticism, devotional mysticism, nature-mysticism, and occultist-mysticism, and the major characteristics of each are outlined. In the course of the descriptions of the teachings and experiences of the mystics studied, a large number of parallels are noted between different mystics within the same classificatory category, between mystics of East and West, and between mystics classified under different categories. Divergences of experience and teaching are, however, also apparent, most markedly between the different categories of mystical experience, but also between different mystics within the same category, and attention is also drawn to these differences.

Following on from these opening four chapters, Chapters V and VI are

devoted to the discussion of the philosophical points which arise out of the results of the phenomenological investigations. In Chapter V various points concerning the nature of mystical awareness and its epistemological status are discussed. I argue here that mysticism is an experiential reality, equally as real as other types of experience, and that it should be understood in terms of its own philosophical structure, its own 'language', and not, for example, in terms of a rational-empirical philosophical framework. The nature of some typical mystical modes of apprehension and consciousness is elucidated, and an attempt is made to demonstrate the connections between these forms of experience and the forms of 'language' used to convey them. Of these forms of expression, symbolism, metaphysics and paradox are discussed in detail. I argue that these forms of language serve a dual role of expression and technique, that is, they serve to express experiences which are felt to be to some degree ineffable in coherent form, and they also serve as a part of mystical method whereby the original experiences may be re-evoked. These forms of expression, then, should be seen within the context of a two-way interaction which relates to the two-way interaction between experience and interpretation, in turn discussed in Chapter VI. In the concluding sections of Chapter V the role of Universals in mysticism is examined and the implications of this discussed with regard to the methodologies employed by various writers on mysticism. I argue that most forms of mysticism are essentially Idealistic and hence should be evaluated from within their own Idealistic philosophical frameworks, rather than from the standpoint of modern 'particularist' philosophy which recognises a number of 'universes of meaning', all relatively true. Hence the notion of the relativity of all 'universes of meaning' cannot be applied to mystical



experience when we are attempting to understand any one of the mystical traditions discussed in this study in terms of its own 'language'. Nevertheless, it is suggested that in the context of a cross-cultural study of mysticism, it may be useful for heuristic purposes to see each category of mystical experience or each mystical tradition as a 'universe of meaning', rather than assume an a priori 'essence' of mysticism.

In Chapter VI the problems inherent in the methodologies of a number of former writers on mysticism are discussed, and the various standpoints which can be adopted to the cross-cultural study of mysticism are examined. I attempt to suggest a satisfactory approach to the problem of cross-cultural investigations, an approach which involves remaining sensitive to both the close parallels, and the divergences, shown between different categories of mysticism and different mystical traditions, and which holds that it is important to try to understand each type of mysticism in terms of its own inherent metaphysical structure and its own forms of expression.

It is further indicated in Chapter VI that in order to examine the question of similarities and differences between various examples of mysticism, it is important to consider the distinction between mystical experience itself, and the interpretations placed upon it. This important distinction is discussed with reference to the writings of a number of authors, and I argue that there is an intricate two-way interaction between experience and interpretation, which relates to the dual roles of expression and technique served by symbolism, metaphysics, and paradox. Following on from this examination of the distinction between experience and interpretation, it is argued that monistic and theistic mysticism are not the same experience differently interpreted (as some writers have

suggested) but two different types of experience; and I advance the view that the validity and worth of each type of experience should be recognised, without attempting to explain either one in terms of the other. I likewise argue that nature-mysticism and occultist-mysticism should be understood on their own terms and recognised as valid and valuable experiences.

In the final section of Chapter VI previous observations on methodological approaches to the study of mysticism, on experience and interpretation, and on the parallels and differences shown between the experiences and writings of the various mystics discussed in this study, are drawn together. I indicate that the question of the unity or diversity of different forms of mysticism must be considered on three separate levels: the ontological source of the experience, the phenomenological experience itself, and the interpretations placed upon the experience. I argue that there appear to be a number of basic but overlapping types of mystical experience, each of which is found within a number of cultures, variously interpreted in accordance with different metaphysical or theological frameworks. I indicate what, as a result of the phenomenological investigations of the first four chapters of this study, emerges as the unity between different examples of mysticism, and what I see as the diversity. I suggest that a common spiritual life of humanity appears to be shown by the unity of experience, symbolic expression, and forms of consciousness, found between different mystical traditions and categories and demonstrated in this study, but that this does not necessarily involve a common ontological source or a priori 'essence' of all mysticism; that is, that from a philosophical point of view the question of whether or not there might exist such an a priori essence cannot be answered either positively or

negatively. A 'Middle Way' between essentialism and extreme relativism (both of which are discussed with regard to the methodologies of various writers) is adopted, and it is concluded that we need to remain sensitive to both the unity and the diversity shown between different examples of mysticism.

CHAPTER I

METAPHYSICAL MYSTICISM

## METAPHYSICAL MYSTICISM PART I: PLOTINUS

As our first example of metaphysical expressions of mysticism, we shall look at the writings of Plotinus, which are of major importance for an understanding of mysticism; both in their own right and because of the immense influence that Neoplatonism was to have upon the whole of the Western mystical tradition. Plotinus (d. 270 A.D.) appears to regard Plato as the true source of his inspiration and teachings; he sees himself as clarifying or making explicit the philosophy of Plato, rather than as creating something entirely new. He is, nevertheless, an original and creative thinker in his own right, and while his metaphysics bear a great resemblance to Plato's system, they contain his own amendments and alterations. Plotinus was Egyptian by birth and from the age of twenty-seven or so studied in Alexandria, then a melting-pot of religious and philosophical syncretism. His writings suggest that the ancient mystery cults may have influenced his mystical doctrines profoundly, even though he speaks in philosophical, rather than mythological or ritual, terminology. He was familiar with Gnosticism and no doubt with Hermetic and Egyptian teachings and Jewish-Alexandrian philosophy. We cannot really assess accurately the extent to which all the different schools of thought of Alexandria may have influenced him; nor can we tell to what extent he may be indebted to his teacher Ammonius Saccus, also the teacher of Origen, who has left no writings. His pupil and biographer Porphyry says that "..... he followed his own path rather than that of tradition.....he took a personal, original view....." and adds that Plotinus was guided and inspired by the Divine Powers. (1) Nevertheless, Plotinus certainly regards himself as carrying on an ancient tradition, that of Platonic philosophy

and of the mystical-philosophical interpretation (as distinct from the popular manifestation) of the mythology, rites and symbols of the Mystery-religions. Many mystics in fact see themselves as representing an ancient tradition even where certain of their ideas differ from this tradition. Plotinus' view is "personal" and "original" in that he also speaks from his own experience and mystical inspiration, which demonstrate for him the veracity of the philosophical traditions from which he draws his metaphysics.

We are told by Porphyry that Plotinus was a gentle and benign man, open-minded and tolerant. He had remarkable penetration into the character of others, to the extent of possessing what we would call clairvoyant insight. He was an active teacher, spiritual guide and counsellor, and did a great deal of charitable work in his care for others (for example, he housed and cared for many orphans) yet he remained always absorbed in the inner life. He was a powerful speaker but an unorganised writer; like many mystics, he wrote when in a state of inspiration, tending to disregard what Rist calls "the pedestrian connections of thought" so that his literary style is that of a "stream of consciousness" (2).

As is the case with many metaphysically-orientated mystical writers, Plotinus' system is such an all-embracing, comprehensive whole that it is difficult to divide it into separate topics for the purpose of philosophical discussion. It seems most convenient to begin at the top and work down, as it were, giving an outline of Plotinus' account of the ultimate spiritual reality and its various emanations down to the material level, and to highlight some distinctive points of the metaphysical structure upon which his mysticism is based. This will be followed by a discussion of the mystical path proper, its methods and techniques, and of the nature of

mystical knowledge, and we shall conclude with some comments on Plotinus' attitude to the material world and on his use of symbolism.

Plotinus conceives of Divinity as a triad of "Hypostases": the One, the Divine Mind, and the Soul. These are bound together by a dual movement of emanation and return to source, so that, as we shall see later, Plotinus' system is characterised throughout by the notion of the interpenetration of all levels of being or reality in an ordered hierarchy. This gives rise to an all-embracing metaphysical scheme, beautiful in its order and internal coherence; all things in the universe are interlinked, all follow the principles of Divine Law.

### The One

The One (τὸ ἓν) is absolute Unity, transcendent, infinite, above even Being. No predicates are applicable to it -- it is not this or that (3) just as for Eckhart, as we shall see later, the Godhead is "neither this nor that" and as for Upaniṣadic sages Brahman is best described by "neti, neti". It is unchangeable, unmoved, and does not act or create -- again like Eckhart's Godhead and Śāṅkara's Brahman, both to be discussed in further sections of this study. Yet so all-transcending is this first principle that, while it does not move, it would be equally incorrect to say that it is static. Plotinus' spiritual world is a world of pure energy, of creative and vigorous life. It is unchanging and eternal, but complex in its powers and potencies. The One transcends all opposites -- including both the material world of "becoming" and the intelligible world of Being. In other words, it is beyond not only material form (defined by the limitations and boundaries of time and space) but also intellectual form (defined by the antithesis of Being and Nonbeing). It is prior to all things;

as the source of all, it makes all things possible; all things that are, exist by virtue of it; but it is not to be understood simply as the totality of all empirical and intellectual things. Nothing of which we can conceive can adequately define the One, although we can know it in a state of immediate intuitive awareness, and indeed, our knowledge of it (although usually unconscious) is presupposed by the fact of our having any knowledge at all, as (we shall see later) is also the case with Śankara's ātman. Any attempt to define the One, limits it to a particular concept or thing; all we can say of it is that it is indefinable, and then keep silence (4). It is in a sense beyond even Unity itself, for it is the source from which proceeds the very differentiation of unity and diversity -- hence it cannot be seen simply as a negation of plurality (5).

The One is omnipresent, immanent in all things, for all things emanate from it. Emanation necessarily and naturally proceeds from the One as a result of the One's "willing itself" or "thinking itself" -- a willing which automatically brings about the manifestation or actualisation of this will, while at the same time leaving the One undiminished and unchanged. We may compare Upaniṣadic creation myths in which the Absolute brings about creation by "thinking itself" (6) and perhaps we may suggest that the reflection of God brooding over the face of the primeval waters in Genesis 1:2 expresses a similar notion. Plotinus usually expresses the idea of emanation from the One by means of the analogy of the Sun and its light which is shed over all things, or of the centre of a circle, itself unmoved, from which many radii proceed, linking centre to circumference (7).

#### The Divine Mind (Nous)

The first emanation of the One, and the second Hypostasis, is the



Divine Mind (δ νοῦς ), the totality of Divine thoughts, the world of Platonic Ideas, the Intelligible World. This is both within us and outside us. Within us, it is the Intellectual Principle, the highest aspect of the self, eternally united with the Divine realm. (It should be noted that, like Plato, Plotinus uses the term "intellect" to denote a higher faculty of perception of a mystical type, quite different from discursive reason.) As the mediator to us of the ineffable One, Nous denotes the highest conceptualisable reality. This realm of Divine Ideas is also the world of pure Being, for knowledge and being are one at the level of Nous. It contains within itself the Ideas as prototypes of creation after which the material world is patterned. The Intelligible World can best be described as a unity-in-diversity, in contradistinction to the One which is the source of both unity and plurality. "It is not divisible as are the ingredients of discursive reason, conceived item by item. Still its content is not confused either: each element is distinct from the other...." (8) Plotinus' thought here is echoed by Eckhart (who was, as we shall see, profoundly influenced by Neoplatonism): Eckhart also speaks of the vision of unity-in-diversity in which all things are seen as in one whole, but without losing their distinctive qualities. There is distinction, or differentiation, but no rigid dichotomies or opposing dualities. We move here beyond the boundaries of space and time which normally differentiate one thing from another, beyond the limitations that condition our everyday experiences, and see that all things mutually include each other or flow into each other. Inge has many valuable comments on this aspect of Plotinus' philosophy:

Mutual externality is the condition of things in the world of sense, as mutual inclusion or compenetrations is the character of the spiritual world....In the spiritual world, which is the fully real world, there are no spatial partitions, and no obstacles to the free intermingling of existences which are inwardly in harmony with each other. (9)

In the ordinary world of space and time, 'identity' and 'difference' are contradictions; but it is space and time that determine identity and difference, that mark one thing off as separate from another. On the lower levels of existence, we observe resemblance without unity; beyond space and time as we know them, in the spiritual world of unity-in-diversity, there is distinction without division. Later in this study I shall attempt to argue that this may prove a fruitful guideline in the cross-cultural study of mysticism. Hence Inge comments that ".....In the spiritual world.....Identity and Difference are not mutually exclusive: they are united in the harmony of eternal life." (10) Sharp distinctions, rigid dichotomies, belong to the logical faculty, to discursive reason (ἡ διαλογική, ἡ δόξα). In the spiritual world, to the apprehension of spiritual perception (ἡ νόησις ) One and Many, Unity and Difference, indeed ultimately all opposites, are reconciled in a higher synthesis or harmony: this vision of the union of opposites is a key aspect of mystical experience. In everyday life, the external world appears to most of us as a collection of objects with no inner connections. In the spiritual world, on the contrary, while distinctions remain, they are qualitative rather than quantitative differences. We see distinction without multiplicity. We see the principles of all differentiation in their fullness and richness, but as yet unmanifest. We see ourselves in all things, and all things in each other:

.....all is transparent, nothing dark, nothing resistant; every being is lucid to every other, in breadth and depth; light runs through light. And each of them contains all within itself, and at the same time sees all in every other, so that everywhere there is all, and all is all and each all, and infinite the glory.....While some one manner of being is dominant in each, all are mirrored in every other. (11)

Inge comments that the idea behind Plotinus' reconciliation of 'identity' and 'difference' is that ".....all barriers which break up experience into fragmentary and opposing elements must be thrown down, not in order to

reduce life to a featureless mass of undifferentiated experience, but in order that each element in experience may be realised in its true relations, which are potentially without limit." (12) We have to learn to see each individual thing in its connections to others, as part of a whole or unity.

It should be noted that the Intelligible Realm of Divine Ideas is neither an independently existing external universe located in time and space, nor a mere subjective impression of the mind. (I shall later point out, in this connection, Boehme's teachings regarding 'other worlds' that are not physical worlds, but are just as real, on their own level of being, as is the physical world.) The spiritual faculty within us, and the spiritual world without, are mutually interdependent and again bear a relation of unity-in-diversity to each other. An important aspect of my argument in this study is that we cannot understand either one of these two if we attempt to reduce the spiritual world to a dualistic scheme whereby it must be either mind or matter, either 'subjective' or 'objective'. I have later commented in connection with Eckhart that to see his concept of the Godhead as an objectivisation of his inner experience, makes no more and no less sense than to see his inner experience as a 'subjectivisation' of qualities belonging to the Godhead. (13) Where knowledge and being are one, it is pointless to talk of them as if they just happen to coincide. Inge, likewise, holds that as regards Plotinus, "If we call the spiritual world the self-externalisation of Spirit, we must add that with equal propriety Spirit may be called the self-consciousness of the spiritual world." (14) The Divine cannot be localised, or confined to 'within' and 'without'. It is present in all things for those who know how to see it.

Plotinus says:

When the Spirit [ $\nu\acute{o}\upsilon\varsigma$ ] perceives this Divine Light, it knows not whence it comes, from without or from within; when it has

ceased to shine, we believe at one moment that it comes from within and at another that it does not. But it is useless to ask whence it comes; there is no question of place here. It neither approaches us nor withdraws itself; it either manifests itself or remains hidden.....The One is everywhere, and nowhere. (15)

### The Soul

The Divine Mind engenders the third Hypostasis, the Soul (ἡ ψυχή). Plotinus considers the Soul under two aspects, the World-Soul (All-Soul, Universal Soul) and individual souls. The World-Soul is the eternal emanation and image of Nous; its higher aspect contemplates the Divine Mind, while its lower aspect generates the material universe, basing it upon the model of the Divine Thoughts. Plotinus sometimes calls this lower aspect of the World-Soul the Logos (ὁ λόγος), the 'Reason-Principle' of the Universe or the creative powers of the Soul which convey spiritual energy to the lower forms of existence. The World-Soul animates and vivifies all particular things, giving them life and divinity; it is the vital principle within all lower manifestations of existence, the expression of the outgoing energy of the Divine. The All-Soul includes all individual souls, that is, they are parts of it, or proceed from it, whilst leaving it undivided. The human soul is the All-Soul 'particularised' or limited, incarnated within one person.

By now we can begin to see a pattern which constitutes one of the most distinctive characteristics of Plotinus' metaphysics. Just as the World-Soul looks, as it were, both 'up' and 'down' -- contemplating the Divine Mind, and engendering the world -- so the Divine Mind does likewise -- it contemplates the One, and emanates the All-Soul. This pattern is repeated throughout the whole universe, in both its macrocosmic and its microcosmic aspects; for, as we shall see shortly, the individual human

soul also has two tasks, that of contemplating its Source, and that of administering and caring for the lower levels of existence. Every 'world' or level of being in Plotinus' philosophy engenders an image of itself on the next level 'down', while also contemplating and trying to unite itself with the next highest principle. (This same basic pattern is also found in the emanationist mystical philosophy of the Kabbalah, which may owe some influence to Neoplatonism.) For example, as regards the soul, Plotinus says:

In directing itself to what is above itself, it thinks. In directing itself to itself, it preserves itself. In directing itself to what is lower than itself, it orders, administers, and governs. (16)

This is an example of Plotinus' notion of what we might call 'inter-lapping worlds', i.e., the interpenetration of all levels of existence in an ordered hierarchy. All things within the universe are interlinked in a harmonious whole, in a kind of golden chain of being from highest to lowest, each thing relating to what is above and below it; and indeed, if we have the vision to see, it would not be going too far to say that each and every thing in the universe is related to everything else; it is a matter only of discovering the correspondences. We shall later observe a similar notion in the teachings of Boehme, summed up in his 'Signature of all Things' and in the Hermetic axiom "As above, so below". (17) This basic idea in fact became an important aspect of the less orthodox expressions of Western mysticism. We may compare also Francis Thompson:

All things, by Immortal Power,  
Near and far,  
Hiddenly,  
To each other linkéd are. (18)

Inge, again, offers a perceptive comment on this aspect of Plotinus' philosophy, which (anticipating our later discussion a little) also con-

stitutes a good summary of Plotinus' world-view:

.....Plotinus conceives the universe as a living chain of being, an unbroken series of ascending or descending values and existences. The whole constitutes a 'harmony'; each inferior grade is 'in' the next above; each existence is vitally connected with all others. But those grades which are inferior in value are also imperfectly real, so long as we look at them in disconnexion. They are characterised by impermanence and inner discord, until we set them in their true relations to the whole. Then we perceive them to be integral parts of the eternal systole and diastole in which the life of the universe consists, a life in which there is nothing arbitrary or irregular, seeing that all is ordered by the necessity that eternal principles should act in accordance with their own nature. The perfect and unchangeable life of the Divine Spirit overflows in an incessant stream of creative activity, which spends itself only when it has reached the lowest confines of being, so that every possible manifestation of Divine energy, every hue of the Divine radiance, every variety in degree as well as in kind, is realised somewhere and somehow. And by the side of this outward flow of creative energy there is another current which carries all the creatures back toward the source of their being. (19)

While this concept of the linking of the 'above' and the 'below' permeates the whole of Plotinus' metaphysics, it is perhaps especially important with regard to the human soul, for this is the essential intermediary between the phenomenal and spiritual worlds. While it is true to say, ultimately, that "everything is present in everything else", nevertheless the distance between the One, and matter at the lower end of the spectrum, is great, and mediated only by the various interposing levels of reality. But the human soul plays a special role here, for it alone can unite all levels of being. The soul is a microcosm, embracing every level of reality and existence; it "binds extremes together" (20), it separates and yet unites the higher and lower realms. At his or her highest level of awareness, the human being is divine; at the lowest level (that of the physical body) he or she is mere matter. In between come various levels of emotional, mental, psychic and spiritual awareness. The soul, then, is a kind of pattern of all the worlds, a wanderer through the worlds, having affinities to all levels of reality:

For the Soul is many things, is all, is the Above and the Beneath [τὰ ἄνω καὶ τὰ κάτω] to the totality of life: and each of us is an Intellectual Cosmos [κόσμος νοητός], linked to this world by what is lowest in us, but, by what is the highest, to the Divine Intellect: by all that is intellective we are permanently in that higher realm, but at the fringe of the Intellectual we are fettered to the lower; it is as if we gave forth from it some emanation towards that lower, or rather some Act, which however leaves our diviner part not in itself diminished. (21)

The significance of this, as we shall see later, is that, since we are each of us a microcosm corresponding to the macrocosm, by withdrawing into ourselves we withdraw into the spiritual world. The inscription above the cave of the Delphic Oracle, "Know Thyself", is apposite: in knowing ourselves truly and fully, we know the Divine, although, as we shall discuss later, we have to search not only for the centre of the circle which is our own inherent divinity, but for the principle where all centres coincide (22). The aim, in any case, is to attune oneself as microcosm with the cyclic rhythm of the macrocosm. The emanation of all things from the One, and their eventual withdrawal back into it in recurrent world-cycles, on the macrocosmic level, correspond on the level of the individual soul to our incarnation, and our release, realisation or enlightenment.

We have remarked that the World-Soul is the vital, creative principle within Nature, so that both the World-Soul and individual souls can be seen to share this role of intermediary between spirit and matter. There is an important difference, however, in that when the World-Soul emanates the lower worlds "in its own image" there is no wrongdoing incurred, whereas in the case of the individual souls the opposite tends unfortunately to be the case, for reasons now to be outlined. It is the task of both the World-Soul and individual souls to illuminate the lower levels of existence, to make manifest the Light of the Divine, to take the Light down to the material level. Through this action, the soul bestows

order and beauty on the lower levels of being; it attempts to follow its duty to care for, order and govern that which is beneath it. The soul's divine task is to attempt to create a world which it can fashion after the likeness of the pattern of the Divine Ideas; to represent in the world of sense what is potential in the world of Deity (23). This, at least, is the nature of the action of the World-Soul, and ideally should also be that of individual souls:

The souls of men, seeing their images in the mirror of Dionysius as it were, have entered into that realm in a leap downward from the Supreme: yet even they are not cut off from their origin, from the Divine Intellect; it is not that they have come bringing the Intellectual Principle down in their fall; it is that though they have descended even to earth, yet their higher part holds for ever above the heavens.....All that is Divine Intellect will rest eternally above, and could never fall from its sphere but, poised entire in its own high place, will communicate to things here through the channel of Soul. Soul in virtue of neighbourhood is more closely modelled upon the Idea [*εἶδος*] uttered by the Divine Intellect, and thus is able to produce order in the movement of the lower realm, one phase (the World-Soul) maintaining the unvarying march (of the cosmic circuit), the other (the Soul of the Individual) adapting itself to times and seasons. (24)

The ideal state, then, is one in which individual souls remain attached to their source while bestowing care upon their creations over which they administer. Like rays of sunlight, they are 'attached to' the Sun but do not grudge their bounty to what lies beneath them; like kings, they engage in their administrative work under the supreme kingship of the World-Soul, without descending from their thrones. (25) But the souls of humanity have an inveterate tendency not merely to illuminate and rule over matter, but to become enslaved by the images they have created. They become self-centred and over-involved in the grosser pleasures of the material world; they want to create individual kingdoms for themselves based on selfishness, plurality and separation. They forget their Source, cease to be the rulers of their own kingdoms and sink to be bound and enslaved by the images of the material world. (26) Inge comments



that the fault of the soul does not ".....consist in exercising the creative activities which are an integral part of the world-order, but in treating as ends those constituents of the temporal order which were intended to be instruments." (27) The material world, which should be an instrument in the hands of the soul, to be moulded after the pattern of the Divine, often in practical experience becomes a weight which prevents the soul from using its wings to soar up to the Divine World.

Nevertheless, there is a nucleus at the heart of the soul which remains pure and uncontaminated (just as the Ground of the Soul of Eckhart and other Christian mystics is continually in union with the Divine, as we shall see later). The individual soul can always rise again, and through its entanglement with the world of sense, it will have gained much valuable experience which would otherwise have been unavailable to it. Thus it is that Plotinus sees the descent of the soul as having both positive and negative implications. In one sense it is a 'fall' (bringing about enslavement and limitations), in another sense it is a "willing descent for the perfection of the whole" (28). The descents and ascents of the soul are an essential part of the eternal laws of the Divine World, leading to an enrichment of our total experience. Through its descent, the soul brings the Divine powers into manifestation, powers which otherwise would have remained latent or suppressed -- indeed, for all practical purposes, nonexistent. (29) "Every nature must produce its next, for each thing must unfold, seedlike, from invisible principle into a visible effect.....It [the Divine principle] must proceed continuously until all things, to the very last, have within the limits of possibility come forth." (30) Only thus is the Divine purpose fulfilled; even the bondage of the soul to the material world is a necessary part of the process, for through the experience thus gained, the soul ".....can better appreciate the life

that is above and can know more clearly what is better by contrast with its opposite." (31) We have to know evil, before we can appreciate the good; if we would take the Light into the Darkness, we must surely know the Darkness. An interesting parallel with Boehme arises in connection with Plotinus' view. Boehme, like Plotinus, holds that in the highest part of our spiritual nature, we are in eternity; in our physical bodies, we are in time. Our souls, at the Fall, entered into the middle region that relates time to eternity; yet Boehme sees the Fall as a voluntary act, borne out of a desire to experience. We will later see in more depth how Plotinus' teaching regarding the soul's task of taking the Light into manifestation, corresponds to many of Boehme's ideals. Other Christian mystical writers have also interpreted the Fall in far more positive terms than the way in which orthodox Christianity has seen it, viewing it as a conscious and positive decision on the part of humanity to gain knowledge through experience in the regions of the phenomenal order, necessary for the fulfillment of the Divine purpose on all levels of existence. (32)

### Matter

At the bottommost rung of Plotinus' ladder of existence lies Matter (ἡ ὑλή), the lowest emanation of the One. ὑλή denotes Primal Matter, rather similar to the Indian prakṛti. Matter is at the furthest possible remove from true Being, but it is not Non-Being -- Absolute Non-Being is non-existent. Even matter contains within itself a faint spark of Divinity which gives it being. Matter does not have the power to engender anything below it, but it has the power of receiving Divine form, so even this lowest level of existence aspires to the next above it. (Conversely, the One, at the topmost point of the hierarchy, engenders those things below

but does not of course aspire to anything above itself.) Nature ( $\eta$  φύσις), conceived as the outer life-energy of the World-Soul, casts upon matter a reflection of the spiritual archetypes or Divine Ideas, thus giving order to the material world and imposing limitations of form. Matter, when 'ensouled' by Nature, is thus like a mirror (33) reflecting the Divine inasmuch as it participates in it. (The idea of the phenomenal world as a 'mirror' of the Divine will be taken up in connection with Nature-mysticism and in connection with Boehme.) Matter is not evil in itself (Plotinus attacks a certain Gnostic sect on this point) -- it is 'metaphysically neutral' -- but it can have insidious effects upon us due to our mistaken attitudes towards it. This point will be returned to when we discuss Plotinus' attitude to the material world.

Inge notes that 'Matter', however, is in fact often a relative term in Plotinus' phraseology: the same thing may be Form in relation to that which is below it, and Matter in relation to that which is above it. For example, the World-Soul is the 'Matter of Spirit' or 'Divine Matter'. Matter is the lower aspect of everything, or the "outside of every inside" (34). That is, Matter for Plotinus (on whatever level, spiritual or physical) is the receptacle of Form, that is, of spiritual forces which define, characterise and limit it. Matter is receptive, the spiritual forces are creative. The Matter of the higher realms is, of course, not physical matter. Nowadays many of us tend to use the words 'physical' and 'material' interchangeably, whereas for ancient mystical philosophy there were many things which were 'material' (as opposed to 'spiritual') without being 'physical', such as, for example, non-physical bodies of the astral or etheric type. This concept of matter (and of form) as relative can be seen to relate to Plotinus' system of 'interlapping worlds'. An intriguing parallel is found in the Kabbalistic teaching concerning the 'Extended

'Tree' of the Sephiroth. This is a complex subject which can only be touched upon here, but suffice it to say that the Kabbalah works with a kind of metaphysical diagram known as the Tree of Life, manifested in four worlds and composed of a number of Sephiroth (emanations of the Divine); and that the Kabbalist conceives of 'interlapping worlds' of much the same nature as does Plotinus, with each 'world' in essential relation to the ones above and below it. When the four Trees of Life (relating to the four worlds) are superimposed upon each other, terms such as 'matter' again take on a relative significance. Soul is, as for Plotinus, the 'Matter of Spirit'. The Kabbalistic system is explained in more detail in my study of Boehme. However, the direct relevance here of the relative significance of the term 'matter' in Plotinus, combined with his concept of 'interlapping worlds', is that it makes it hard to see how he can be accused of matter/spirit dualism, or 'this world/other world' dualism, as some writers have attempted to argue. Plotinus' system is far too complex to be reduced to two basic factors; there are many more than just two worlds for him. Furthermore, all these worlds are ultimately united in the One from which they emanate, and so Plotinus' system is obviously monistic, while embracing a multitude of variety. This is an important point which relates to the teachings of many mystics: the worlds are 'one and many', not two, and hence cannot be fully understood from within a dualistic philosophical framework.

#### The Mystical Path according to Plotinus

Although Plotinus does not refer to his own mystical experiences very often, there are a few very beautiful passages in the Enneads which do describe his own visions and illuminations, and it seems certain that the

general tenor of his writing is based on personal experience. Like all mystics, he stresses the necessity of personal experience of Divine Reality, for example in the following passage (of which the opening words show the attitude of secrecy that so often surrounds mystical doctrines):

"Not to be told; not to be written": in our writing and telling we are but urging towards it: out of discussion we call to vision: to those desiring to see, we point the path; our teaching is of the road and the travelling; the seeing must be the very act of one that has made this choice. (35)

"The road and the travelling" begins when the awakening soul feels itself to be an exile, a wanderer in this world. The soul as microcosm has the potentiality of living on three levels of existence: the animal level of the natural instincts; the level of discursive reason; and the level of the Divine, "the life of gods and of the godlike and blessed among men." (36) The newly-awakened soul is compelled by a kind of nostalgia or homesickness for its true home, to begin the ascent towards the spiritual realm. Then whole new levels of experience and meaning are encountered as the Divine Life within and without begins to open out:

The Universal circuit is like a breeze, and the voyager, still or stirring, is carried forward by it. He has a hundred varied experiences, fresh sights, changing circumstances, all sorts of events.....(37)

Plotinus' practical methods for the attainment of mystical insight include purification (detachment from the things of sense, etc.), the cultivation of ethical virtues, and the use of 'dialectic' to rise above the strictures of reason and logic to contemplation (*ἡ θεωρία*). (It should be noted that Plotinus uses the term 'dialectic' to refer to the process whereby one gains immediate insight, a higher Intellectual awareness of spiritual principles, close to contemplation itself. Dialectic does concern itself also with abstract theories and reasoning, but essentially operates on a higher plane than that of mere logic.) (38) The body, and the lower aspects of the soul (the senses, desires, emotions, the reasoning faculty,

etc.) are not to be rejected, but must be brought under control and made to co-operate in the soul's spiritual aspirations -- a process which requires constant self-discipline. We have to detach ourselves from the world of 'becoming', of multiplicity and flux, and of our own egotistical standpoint, looking deep within ourselves to find the eternal, unchanging order. The following treatise describes this withdrawal into the self, and in addition expresses so beautifully the wonder and joy of the mystical vision, that I shall quote at length from it.

....we must ascend again towards the Good [τὸ ἀγαθόν, a term synonymous with 'the One' for Plotinus], the desired of every Soul. Anyone that has seen This, knows what I intend when I say that it is beautiful. It is desired as the goal of desire. To attain it is for those that will take the upward path, who will set all their forces towards it, who will divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent; so, to those that approach the Holy Celebrations of the Mysteries, there are appointed purifications and the laying aside of garments worn before, and the entry in nakedness.....And one that shall know this vision -- with what passion of love shall he not be seized, with what pang of desire, what longing to be molten into one with This, what wondering delight!.....What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use.....Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smoothes there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiselling your statue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine. When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature.....when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step -- you need a guide no longer -- strain, and see. (39)

In addition to the symbolism of inwardness, expressing penetration into one's own depths, Plotinus also speaks of the mystical journey as an

ascent ("the upward path" in the above passage) and as a return to one's origins. To penetrate into the depths is the same as to rise higher, and both again are the same as to return to the Source. (I have commented on the interrelationship of symbolism of height, and of depth, in connection with Eckhart.) (40) All things (not only the mystic, but all of creation) are involved in this triple movement towards their Origin, except, of course, the One itself, which remains unmoved at the centre of this movement and at the innermost or highest point of the spiritual life. We have commented that the emanation of all things from the One, and their eventual withdrawal back into it, on the macrocosmic level, corresponds on the level of the soul as microcosm to our incarnation, and our eventual release. The mystical ascent is a return to the One which is our Source, and the mystic traverses in consciousness, levels approximating to all grades of reality -- from the lower self to Soul, Intellect, the One. In other words, levels of consciousness on the ascent correspond to levels of reality unfolded in the emanation or 'descent' of the universe from the One. I have later commented on a similar pattern found in Eckhart, who seems to conceive of the mystic tracing back the process of creation in reverse, as it were. (41) In the mystical ascent, the soul becomes spiritually what it has always been and always is ontologically -- for the higher part of the soul is eternally united to the One, even if we are unaware of this. It becomes in actuality what it always is potentially, by virtue of its emanation from the One. Plotinus' last words, as recorded by Porphyry, can be seen to express the goal of the mystic: "I am striving to give back the Divine in myself to the Divine in the All." (42) By attuning ourselves with the cyclic rhythm of the macrocosm, we are able to return to the Source, retracing the macrocosmic unfoldment backwards within ourselves. Hence Plotinus says, "The starting point is universally the goal"

(43). The following extract from one of T. S. Eliot's poems seems to express the same intention:

We shall not cease from exploration  
 And the end of all our exploring  
 Will be to arrive where we started  
 And know the place for the first time  
 Through the unknown, remembered gate  
 When the last of earth left to discover  
 Is that which was the beginning.....  
 And all shall be well and  
 All manner of thing shall be well  
 When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
 Into the crowned knot of fire  
 And the fire and the rose are one. (44)

The goal of the mystic, then, is to free himself or herself from earthly destiny, incarnation and predetermination by living according to the laws of the higher realms, just as the Hindu mystic seeks release from karma and saṃsāra. The soul becomes free on the spiritual level insofar as it understands the laws which determine it on the phenomenal level. The path entails an ascent from the world of sense, to the understanding of the Soul and the world of pure Intellect, and finally beyond even Intellectual form to the modeless vision of the One. The soul has an innate propensity to mystical knowledge:

There is, even in our souls, authentic knowledge [ἐπιστήμη ἀληθινήν] compounded not of images and reflections of the rational amid the sensate but of the same things that are there above; they are here below merely in another manner. The Ideas are not spatially estranged from us.....The realm of sense [δ αἰσθητῶς κόσμος] is localized; the intelligible realm is not. So whatever the freed soul attains to here [ἐνταῦθα] is also there [ἐκεῖ]. (45)

### The Vision of the Intelligible World

Plotinus describes the vision of the Intelligible World as one of great wonder and beauty. The Intellect dwells "in pure light and 'stainless radiance', it envelops everything with its own light." (46) In one well-known passage he describes how, many times, he has withdrawn into



himself to observe this marvellous beauty and has been assured of his own communion or even union with the Divine; yet then there comes the moment of descent from Intellection to reasoning, and discursive thought veils the light and splendour from him. (47) Plotinus is here obliquely referring to the inadequacy of reason and logic to comprehend levels of experience which are "greater than reason, reason's Prior, as far above reason as the very object of that thought must be." (48) As he says elsewhere:

Our intelligence [*λεγομένους νοῦς* ; Armstrong gives a literal translation: "our so-called intellects"] is nourished on the propositions of logic, is skilled in following discussions, works by reasonings, examines links of demonstration, and comes to know the world of Being also by the steps of logical process, having no prior grasp of Reality but remaining empty, all Intelligence [*νοῦς*] though it be, until it has put itself to school. The Intellectual-Principle we are discussing is not of such a kind: It possesses all: It is all: It is present to all by Its self-presence: It has all by other means than having, for what It possesses is still Itself, nor does any particular of all within It stand apart; for every such particular is the whole and in all respects all, while yet not confused in the mass but still distinct..... (49)

We can see from the concluding lines of this passage that it describes the mystic's experience of the unity-in-diversity which characterises the Intellectual Realm, where, as we have noted above, all things are seen as a whole, retaining distinction but yet united without duality. Again we see that levels of consciousness experienced by the mystic coincide with levels of reality; it is a fundamental principle for Plotinus that "like knows like" on all levels of the scale of being. That is, we know the Intellectual Realm by that part of ourselves which is one with it; similarly, only the One in us can know the One, and, Plotinus says, whoever would see God and Beauty must become godlike and beautiful. (50) We are ultimately one with the Intellectual Realm, and it is only by virtue of this fact that we have any knowledge at all. We are concerned here with a state of pure consciousness or awareness which is the basis of all know-

ledge, a type of consciousness which will be elucidated in my discussion of mysticism and epistemology in Chapter V. It is through the light of the Sun that we are able to see the Sun itself and to see all other things in the world; in the same way, says Plotinus, we see the spiritual world by its own light, or by that light within ourselves which is akin to it; and it is by this light also that we see all other things. (51) In the vision of the Intellectual Realm, the duality of knower and known is to a large degree transcended; the mystic "knows himself by means of the self -- in other words attains the self-knowledge which the Intellectual-principle possesses." (52) However, there is still a faint trace of duality left in the Intellectual Realm; it is not until we rise to the formless vision of the One that duality is completely transcended. Plotinus implies that in the vision of the Intellectual Realm, we are aware of ourselves as being in a state of knowledge, whereas in the vision of the One we have brief bursts of ecstasy in which we lose our self-consciousness altogether (although we do not lose our identity). Śankara also speaks of "knowing the self by means of the self" ("ātmani, ātmānam, ātmanā": "know the Self in the Self and through the Self"). As if in answer to the Upaniṣadic question "By what should one know the knower?" Śankara says:

As a lighted lamp does not need another lamp to manifest its light, so the ātman, being consciousness itself, does not need another instrument to illumine itself. (53)

For Plotinus, the object known is identical with the knowing act and the knowing agent; the Intellectual-Principle within, its exercise of Intellection, and the object of Intellection (the Intellectual World) are one. In mystical knowledge, we are united with the object of our knowledge, a point which we will find echoed by other mystics. There is a satisfying wholeness about Plotinus' philosophy here, granting as it does validity and value to mystical experience and orientating it within a coherent, all-

embracing epistemological framework. This framework really hinges on the isomorphism of knowledge and being: what we know, we become (or, rather, what we always and essentially are, we have to 'rebecome' or realise and make actual, all knowledge for Plotinus being 'recollection' -- ἀνάμνησις -- of eternally innate truths). Plotinus observes with some profundity that ".....if this identity [the identity of knower and known, of knowledge and being] does not exist, neither does Truth.....Truth cannot apply to something conflicting with itself; what it affirms it must be." (54) In order to know truth, the self must have some affinity with it. It may be argued that if this were not the case, it would be hard to see how we could say that our ideas bear any relation to reality. This is, of course, a problem with which dualism has had to wrestle over many centuries. The division of knowledge and being (a logical corollary of the dualism of mind and matter) has raised many epistemological problems regarding the validity of our perceptions, so that post-Cartesian philosophy has been preoccupied with the question how we can be sure that our so-called 'subjective' (i.e., inner) thoughts correspond to 'objective' (outer) reality. In the metaphysics of Plotinus, and of many other mystics, knowledge and being are one, and in mystical experience the subject/object duality is transcended; the boundaries of 'I' and 'non-I' break down. Knower and known become one as that which we know no longer remains exterior to us, but fuses with us until it becomes an essential part of our being, of our every thought, word and deed. Only in proportion as this is so can we say that we fully know.

#### Formless Awareness

But to reach the highest goal, we have to rise above not only the

duality of discursive thought, but also above any duality inherent in the Intellect. We have to rise to formless awareness of the One through the use of Intellect which is "inebriated" and thus attains to what is beyond it:

Such in this union is the soul's temper that even the act of Intellect once so intimately loved she now dismisses; Intellection is movement and she has no wish to move; the object of her vision has itself, she says, no Intellection, even though it is by means of the Intellectual-Principle that she attained the vision, herself made over into Intellectual-Principle and becoming that principle so as to be able to take stand in that Intellectual space. Entered there and making herself over to that, she at first contemplates that realm, but once she sees that higher still she leaves all else aside.....Intellectual-Principle, thus, has two powers, first that of grasping intellectually its own content, the second that of an advancing and receiving whereby to know its transcendent.....the first seeing is that of Intellect knowing, the second that of Intellect loving; stripped of its wisdom in the intoxication of the nectar, it comes to love..... (55)

It seems clear that we have here a close parallel to what Christian mystics term 'unknowing', which is discussed in depth in connection with St. John of the Cross later, and which in fact owes a great deal to the influence of Neoplatonism. The exercise of all the faculties, even the higher ones, must be transcended, and the mystic passes beyond the usual bounds of selfhood. The soul is "stripped of its wisdom", that is, the 'knowledge' that is now attained is a formless, all-embracing awareness without specific intellectual content. Unlike many Christian mystics, however, Plotinus does not speak of a 'Dark Night of the Soul' that must be undergone in order to rise to this formless apprehension. "We must go beyond knowledge and hold to unity," says Plotinus, "We must renounce knowing and knowable, every object of thought....." (56) Just as one who wishes to contemplate the Intellectual Realm must put aside the things of sense, so one who wishes to see what transcends even the Intellect must put away all that is of the Intellect, and rise above the symbol, above all words, to that which is symbolised. This ascent to the One can be dis-

orientating and requires absolute trust and dedication; but the soul that dares this ascent becomes enraptured, possessed, filled with the Divine. It abandons itself, is "not wholly itself", it has become another, it "stands outside itself" (ἔκστασις). (57)

In this union with the One, then, we lose our lower ego-consciousness and "become another"; we are no longer the beings we were. But we lose our life to gain it, for we enter now into a greater fullness and richness of true Life than we could ever have imagined, and in my opinion this is no loss of 'self-identity' (as some might argue) but a perfecting of it. Plotinus says:

As we turn towards The One, we exist to a higher degree, while to withdraw from it is to fall....Life not united with the divinity is shadow and mimicry of authentic life....Anyone who has had this experience will know what I am talking about. He will know that the soul lives another life as it advances towards The One, reaches it and shares in it. Thus restored, the soul recognizes the presence of the dispenser of the true life. (58)

In the experience of union, we may lose our individual selfhood in the sense of losing the illusory and limiting conditions that separate our lower selves from those of others. But Plotinus says that individual 'foci' are not abolished; rather, each one is the centre of an infinite circle. This is to attain true selfhood, complete 'individuality' in that we now realise the reason for our incarnation and are able to act as channels whereby the Light of the Divine may be expressed. The self retains its individuality in that it is a unique expression of the Divine purpose, a conscious fulfilment of an aspect of Deity. It is a facet of the jewel which is the spiritual world. Inge says, "Individual souls while on earth have to aim.....at a full understanding of the finite and particular purpose for which we are living our present lives.....The centre must be our prescribed station; to the circumference there is no necessary limit, since our life is continuous with that of the Universal Soul." (59) Thus Plotinus

speaks of the heights of mystical attainment as a going beyond the discovery of the centre of our own circle (attained through withdrawal into the self); we must find the place where the centres of all circles coincide. (60) In the height of the vision, we may have momentary loss of self-consciousness, but this leads us to a state not of unconscious vacuity but of superconsciousness. A parallel may be seen in that, in everyday life, we do things best when we are not thinking about them -- when we 'lose ourselves' in creative work, for example. In contemplation, we do not remember ourselves, or reflect upon who we are or what we are doing (indeed, the experience is too intense for this) -- we simply give ourselves up to the spiritual world, and become that world:

In our self-seeing There, the self is seen as belonging to that order, or rather we are merged into that self in us which has the quality of that order. It is a knowing of the self restored to its purity. No doubt we should not speak of seeing; but we cannot help talking in dualities, seen and seer, instead of, boldly, the achievement of unity. In this seeing, we neither hold an object nor trace distinction; there is no two. The man is changed, no longer himself, nor self-belonging; he is merged with the Supreme, sunken into it, one with it: centre coincides with centre, for centres of circles, even here below, are one when they unite, and two when they separate; and it is in this sense that we now (after the vision) speak of the Supreme as separate. This is why the vision baffles telling; we cannot detach the Supreme to state it; if we have seen something thus detached we have failed of the Supreme which is to be known only as one with ourselves. (61)

We are concerned, then, with a supra-conscious state in which the self seems momentarily to be lost, that is, our usual ego-consciousness no longer persists. But awareness of the higher self does persist -- and this, so different from our usual self-awareness, is nevertheless an awareness of what we ultimately and truly are. As Plotinus says above, it is "a knowing of the self restored to its purity", a seeing of oneself in the Divine. We need constantly to bear in mind the distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' selves in any discussion of mysticism. It may well be that many scholarly debates regarding whether or not the soul loses all

individuality in mystical union, spring from an insufficiently subtle and refined appreciation of this point. If Plotinus is to be interpreted as implying complete loss of self-awareness of any sort (as some commentators seem to intend), then it is hard to see how there can be any state of knowledge, insight or awareness remaining, for self-awareness of some sort would seem to be necessary for the conscious apprehension of what is experienced. Plotinus does not preach annihilation, and nor do any other mystics worthy of the name. In the highest state of union, having passed beyond the vision of the Intellectual World, rising to the One, we enter into the One's knowledge of itself -- the act of 'thinking itself' by which the One emanates all things -- and this knowledge is also knowledge of our own selves as they really are in the highest spiritual realm. The following passage may elucidate the matter further; here Plotinus describes how in the moment of union we have no memory of the lower self, but see ourselves in all things and all things in ourselves. But our individuality is not annihilated; and the heights of attainment can only last for a brief burst of consciousness at any one time. We descend to what Eckhart was later to call the "upper level of the natural order of things" (62) and, as Plotinus says, after the vision "speak of the Supreme as separate" (63):

There will not even be memory of the personality; no thought that the contemplator is the self -- Socrates, for example -- or that it is Intellect or Soul....in contemplative vision, especially when it is vivid, we are not at the time aware of our own personality; we are in possession of ourselves, but the activity is towards the object of vision with which the thinker becomes identified; he has made himself over as matter to be shaped; he takes ideal form under the action of the vision while remaining, potentially, himself....by the act of self-intellection he has the simultaneous intellection of all: in such a case self-intuition by personal activity brings the intellection, not merely of the self, but also of the total therein embraced; and similarly the intuition of the total of things brings that of the personal self as included among all....the Soul advances and is taken into unison, and in that association becomes one with the Intellectual-Principle -- but not to its own destruction: the two are one, and two [ἐν ἑστίν ἀμφω καὶ δύο ]....But it leaves that conjunction; it cannot suffer that unity; it falls in love with its own powers and

possessions, and desires to stand apart; it leans outward, so to speak: then, it appears to acquire a memory of itself. (64)

Thus, at the time of union, there seems to be no distinction between the mystic and the One; but differentiation in fact remains, at least for all practical purposes in our continuing life in the world. The One is transcendent to us as well as immanent, and remains transcendent insofar as we fall short of it, which even the most advanced mystic does some of the time. Hence arises a prime example of mystical paradox, a paradox which we will find repeated by other mystics: for Plotinus, the mystic is both the same as, and yet different from, the One.

#### Ineffability and Language

As we would expect, Plotinus insists that the content of the higher reaches of mystical experience cannot be fully expressed in words. "The One is in truth beyond all statement....we can but try to indicate, in our own feeble way, something concerning it." (65) For the modern philosopher, the problem is usually seen to centre around the fact that the experience of mystical reality is so different from our knowledge of finite things, that it cannot fully be described in finite terms; but nevertheless mystics have to make use of finite words as best they can if they are to attempt to express anything much regarding their experiences. Words always set limitations and restrictions; Plotinus himself is quite aware of this problem. Like many mystics, however, he sees our ordinary language as but a shadow of a higher 'unspoken language', which we can perhaps compare to Boehme's 'Language of Nature', to be discussed later (66).

The Soul thinks in its own way; The Intelligence thinks in a different way; The One thinks not at all. Do the thought of The Intelligence and that of The Soul have then only the name in common?.....



(At first it seems that Plotinus is anticipating Wittgenstein here; but he continues:)

.....Not at all; but the former is prior and the latter derivative and therefore different. It is an image of the inner word of another being, just as spoken language is an image of the inner language of the soul. As spoken language, compared to the soul's inner language, is fragmented in words, the language of the soul translating the divine word is fragmentary, if compared with that word. (67)

Plotinus thus sees human speech as an image of the "language of the soul", and this in its turn as an image of the "language of the Intellect (Divine Mind)". Our ordinary spoken language only partially expresses the reality of mystical experience. For the mystic, knowledge and language spring ultimately from knowledge and language of and about the Divine; this is the source of all true knowledge, and our everyday language is but a poor substitute for the unheard inner language, 'the Word'. For the materialist, knowledge and language have their roots in our impressions of the material world and the words we use to describe it. Wittgensteinian-influenced philosophy can be seen to take a kind of middle way between the two extremes in holding that no one type of knowledge or mode of expression can be seen as a paradigm by means of which others may be measured or understood. I have discussed in Chapter V of this study the problems inherent in the type of approach to mysticism which expounds a plurality of such 'universes of meaning'.

#### The Practical Effects of Mystical Attainment

The enlightened sage, says Plotinus, attains unity and peace and is filled with the Divine Light. The mystic becomes free from the buffeting of external impressions, emotions, desires, sufferings, fears. He or she is unconcerned by the changing sorrows and joys of this world, remaining

always calm and tranquil within. But this does not mean that the mystic is unconcerned for the welfare of others (we will remember that Plotinus did much charitable work, teaching and so on). Rather, he or she remains essentially detached from the trivialities of mundane life. We will recall that the higher part of the soul is always united to the eternal. It is above pleasure and pain -- it is still aware of them, but does not become involved with them. The mystic, dwelling now in this higher self, is able to look with equanimity upon the world's changing fortunes. Rist sees the dual attitude of the mystic (concern for the welfare of others, and detachment from pleasure and pain) as a reflection of the fact that the soul has two concerns: the creation and administration of the material world, and the contemplation of its own Source. (68) We might also note that it is a common belief that the mystic, in raising his or her own soul towards the Source, is raising the collective soul of humanity (or the World-Soul, in Plotinus' system) and so is helping others in this way as well. The aspiration to return to the Source can in any case not fairly be called 'selfish' (as some have attempted to argue), because in transcending the lower self, one usually becomes more concerned with the welfare of others, as the barriers dividing oneself from other people (and other things) dissolve. Plotinus does, however, hold that each person is ultimately responsible for his or her own life, his or her own problems and worries. The only real and lasting way of helping others is to show them the road to mystical realisation so that they too may rise above their mundane grievances.

#### Plotinus' Attitude to the Greek Gods and Popular Religion

Theism does not play an essential role in Plotinus' teachings. He

shows little interest in popular religion, and unlike Ramakrishna, for example (who is discussed later), does not see it as a useful 'means' to mystical realisation. However, he recognises the reality of godlike beings who are more divine than humanity -- or than most of humanity -- and holds to the ancient Greek conception of the divinity of the stars and planets, believing that the movements of the Heavens exemplify the operations of the World-Soul. He makes use of current mythological conceptions to illustrate his metaphysics: for example, he sometimes refers to Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus as symbolic of the first, second and third Hypostases respectively. He thus recognises the archetypal value of mythological symbols; although he usually chooses to speak in abstract, metaphysical language, he does hold that myths represent spiritual truths in concrete, symbolic form. He sees both prayer and magic as means of harnessing certain powers of the cosmos to our own ends -- both are effectual because of the interlinking of all levels of being. But they are the concern only of those who are unable to free themselves from the phenomenal world. The sage, living on a higher level of consciousness, is unconcerned with prayer (as commonly conceived) and unaffected by magic. (Plotinus does, however, value that higher form of prayer which is akin to contemplation, a prayer of unspoken words arising from the depths of the stilled and dedicated soul.)

#### The Material Realm

Plotinus' attitude to the material world is based on the Platonic theory of knowledge whereby the intention is not to reject the things of sense but rather to see through them, as it were; to see beyond them to the Ideas of which they are imperfect copies and in which they parti-

cipate. The visible world (ὁ κόσμος αἰσθητός) reflects the beauty of the invisible:

.....the loveliness that is in the sense-realm is an index of the nobleness of the Intellectual sphere, displaying its power and its goodness alike: and all things are forever linked; the one order Intellectual in its being, the other of sense; one self-existent, the other eternally taking its being by participation in that first, and to the full of its power reproducing the Intellectual nature. (69)

The visible realm is the world of 'becoming', constantly in flux. There is nothing wrong with the material world per se, but, as we have noted, it is liable to have ill effects on us because of our mistaken attitudes to it -- because we tend to see it as our ultimate aim in life, and to become enmeshed in purely material and sensual concerns. It is our attitude to the world that is wrong, not the world itself, our vision that is imperfect and fragmented. We see opposition where we should see harmonious differentiation; dichotomies where we should see a dynamic interplay of complementary opposites. If we see the world as it is in itself, our knowledge of it is only half-real -- a knowledge of shadows, of reflections of the real world as though in a mirror. But, since the visible world reflects the laws of Spirit, expressing these laws on a denser plane, then if we seek for the vital laws, the creative powers (λόγοι) that inform Nature and give a meaning to phenomena, we shall come to look upon Nature in a way which means looking beyond what is merely represented to our senses. Inge says: "What is most real in this world is that which reflects the purpose, meaning and plan which called it into being. By fixing our attention on this, we are taking the only path by which anything in heaven or earth can be understood, that is to say, by viewing it in relation to what is next above it." (70) If we can see things 'below' in the light of things 'above', they become more than shadows, and no longer deceitful. We may compare Śankara's famous analogy of the world as a

snake or rope, to be discussed later (71). Matter is redeemed and glorified when seen in the Light of the Spirit.

The world of sense, while having only relative reality, is a necessary part of the whole, for without it, we could not know Divine Reality. Without the phenomenal world, the spiritual world would be hidden, unmanifest. It is through the beauties of the natural world that we first begin our climb to contemplation of the One. Plotinus in fact attacks one Gnostic sect because they hold that the material world is evil; it should be appreciated, he says, as "kindred of those higher realities" to which it should lead us (72). These Gnostics' knowledge of the higher world must be merely verbal, says Plotinus, since they despise the beauties of this realm which point to the wonder of their Source.

#### Plotinus' Use of Symbolism

It remains to comment on a few interesting aspects of Plotinus' use of symbolism. One distinctive symbol used by Plotinus, and which was later to be used by a number of Christian mystics (among them Suso) (73) is that of the circle or solar disc, or of concentric circles. The soul's progress is pictured not as a linear motion, but as the movement of a circle around its centre; and this centre is itself in motion around its Source, the centre of all things, the Infinite centre in which the centres of all circles coincide. Or again, the One is seen as the Sun (the Light and Life of all) and souls as rays of sunlight proceeding from the Sun and shedding the Sun's light over the world. Or the One is seen as the centre of a circle from which many radii emanate, linking centre to circumference; the circumference is potentially without bound or limit. The following passage, which graphically portrays the emanation of the

Hypostases, combines the use of both images, the circle, and Light:

Imagine a center and about this center a luminous circle that sends off rays; then around this circle another circle equally luminous, light flowing from light; outside these two circles a third, which is no longer a circle of light but, lacking its own light, needs to be lighted by another. Imagine it like a wheel, or rather like a sphere that receives its light from the second circle to which it is nigh, and that is illuminated only to the extent that it receives this light..... (74)

We may note in passing that in astrological doctrine (with which Plotinus was familiar) the symbol for the Sun is a point within a circle, and this is held to signify the first beginnings of manifestation from out of the unmanifest. The symbol of the circle is an apt and widespread image of totality and wholeness, self-containment, the cyclic movement of the universe around the unmoving point at the centre. "God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and circumference is nowhere." (75) The Sun, as the centre of the solar system, also typifies such an unmoving point, and the two symbols (Sun and circle) naturally tend to merge with each other.

Like many other mystics that we shall later investigate, Plotinus also uses the symbols of the heavenly palace (76) and the inner sanctuary or temple (77) and refers to the purification of the soul as analogous to the refining of gold (78), but these are not of central concern to his use of symbolism.

Perhaps the most interesting and the most satisfying aspect of Plotinus' mystical philosophy is its all-comprehensiveness. His universe has a high degree of internal coherence, so that we can observe the interweaving of all aspects of existence in a unified harmony of what I have referred to as 'interlapping worlds'. Any one part can be deduced from the whole, and the whole from a part. Furthermore, such a map of the cosmos provides a good orientation for the practical pursuit of mysticism, as the interlapping of the various levels of existence provides a kind of 'ladder to Heaven'; the transition from one level to the next is made

possible, and the means for doing this are made clear. Seen from within such a perspective, mystical experience speaks for itself; it is an essential and central part of the whole, and by it the rest of the whole may be known. The experience comes to prove the philosophy. Doubtless this is one reason why Neoplatonism, under various guises and adaptations, has played such an important role in the history of Western mysticism.

References

- (1) Porphyry, 'On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Work', in Plotinus, The Enneads, trans. Stephen MacKenna. London: Faber, 1969, p.10.
- (2) J. M. Rist, Plotinus: The Road to Reality. Cambridge: University Press, 1967, p.10.
- (3) Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.3, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.
- (4) *Ibid.*, V.5.6.
- (5) W. R. Inge, The Philosophy of Plotinus. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1923, II, p.108.
- (6) See Brihadāranyaka Upaniṣad I.iv.1-3; I.iv.10.
- (7) Plotinus, Ennead I.7.1, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.
- (8) Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.5, in The Essential Plotinus, trans. Elmer O'Brien. Indiana: Hackett, 1975.
- (9) Inge, op. cit., I, Pp.163-164.
- (10) *Ibid.*, I, p.192.
- (11) Plotinus, Ennead V.8.4, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.
- (12) Inge, op. cit., II, p.62.
- (13) See below, p.50.
- (14) Inge, op. cit., I, p.123. Inge uses the terms "spiritual world" and "Spirit" for what most other commentators translate as the "Intelligible World" and "Intellect".
- (15) Plotinus, Ennead V.5.8, in Inge, op. cit., II, p.153.
- (16) Plotinus, Ennead IV.8.3, trans. O'Brien, op. cit. "It thinks" would perhaps be better conveyed as "It has intellection", as MacKenna translates here, since the contact of the soul with the Divine Mind produces not rational thought but Intellectual contemplation.
- (17) See below, p.352 ff.
- (18) Francis Thompson, 'The Mistress of Vision', in his Complete Poems. New York: The Modern Library, n.d.
- (19) Inge, op. cit., I, p.254.
- (20) Plotinus, Ennead IV.4.23, in Inge, op. cit., I, p.202.
- (21) Plotinus, Ennead III.4.3, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.
- (22) *Ibid.*, VI.9.8.
- (23) *Ibid.*, IV.7.13.
- (24) *Ibid.*, IV.3.12. "The mirror of Dionysus" is Matter.
- (25) *Ibid.*, IV.8.4.
- (26) *Ibid.*, IV.8.2.
- (27) Inge, op. cit., I, p.260; my emphasis.
- (28) Plotinus, Ennead IV.8.5, trans. O'Brien, op. cit.
- (29) *Ibid.*, IV.8.5.
- (30) *Ibid.*, IV.8.6.
- (31) *Ibid.*, IV.8.7.
- (32) See for example James S. Forrester-Brown, The Two Creation Stories in Genesis. London: Watkins, 1920.
- (33) Plotinus, Ennead III.6.13-14, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.
- (34) Inge, op. cit., I, p.139.
- (35) Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.4, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.
- (36) *Ibid.*, VI.9.11.
- (37) *Ibid.*, III.4.6.
- (38) Plotinus, Ennead I.3.4, trans. O'Brien, op. cit.
- (39) Plotinus, Ennead I.6.7-9, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.
- (40) See below, Pp.57-58.
- (41) See below, Pp.71-72.



(42) Porphyry, 'On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Work', in MacKenna op. cit., p.2.

(43) Plotinus, Ennead III.8.7, in MacKenna op. cit.

(44) T. S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets: Little Gidding' in The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot. London: Faber, 1969. The "unknown" yet "remembered" gate seems a fit expression for the Platonic concept of recollection (ἀνάμνησις), also a part of Plotinus' teachings. "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well" is a quotation from the 14th century mystic Mother Julian of Norwich. The crowned fiery rose is a complex and potent symbol of mystical perfection.

(45) Plotinus, Ennead V.9.13, trans. O'Brien, op. cit. "The same things that are there above....are here below merely in another manner" is echoed exactly by the Hermetic axiom "As above, so below, but after another manner". "Here" (ἐνταῦθα) i.e., this temporal world, and "There" (ἐκεῖ) i.e., the Divine World, is a terminological contrast often used by Plotinus.

(46) Plotinus, Ennead III.8.11, trans. O'Brien, op. cit.

(47) Plotinus, Ennead IV.8.1, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.

(48) Ibid., VI.9.10.

(49) Ibid., I.8.2.

(50) Ibid., I.6.9.

(51) Ibid., V.3.17.

(52) Ibid., V.3.4.

(53) [Śankara], Thus Spake Sri Sankara. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1969.

(54) Plotinus, Ennead V.3.5, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.

(55) Ibid., VI.7.35.

(56) Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.4, trans. O'Brien, op. cit.

(57) Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.11, in Rist, op. cit., Pp.223-224.

(58) Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.9, trans. O'Brien, op. cit.

(59) Inge, op. cit., II, p.252.

(60) Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.8, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.

(61) Ibid., VI.9.10.

(62) See below, p.70.

(63) Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.8, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.

(64) Ibid., V.4.2-3. "He has made himself over as matter (here ὕλη) to be shaped" I take to refer to Soul becoming the 'Matter of Spirit'.

(65) Ibid., V.3.13.

(66) See below, Pp.354-355.

(67) Plotinus, Ennead I.2.3, trans. O'Brien, op. cit.

(68) Rist, op. cit., p.165.

(69) Plotinus, Ennead IV.8.6, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.

(70) Inge, op. cit., I, p.199.

(71) See below, Pp.162-163.

(72) Plotinus, The Enneads, trans. A. H. Armstrong. London: Heinemann (Loeb Classical Library), 1966, II.9.16.

(73) See below, p.92.

(74) Plotinus, Ennead IV.3.17, trans. O'Brien, op. cit.

(75) This axiom of Hermes Trismegistus was later adapted by a number of other Western mystics.

(76) Plotinus, Ennead IV.8.4, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.

(77) Ibid., VI.9.11.

(78) Ibid., I.6.5.

Greek references have been taken from the Loeb Classical Library parallel text version of The Enneads, trans. A. H. Armstrong. London: Heinemann, 1966.

## METAPHYSICAL MYSTICISM PART II: MEISTER ECKHART

Meister Eckhart presents something of a problem for the writer on mysticism. To begin with, it is not entirely clear which of the works attributed to him are in fact authentic. In this study I shall be drawing only on those writings known to be authentic, with the occasional inclusion of others which seem to be so, but whose reliability may not be indisputable. Where passages of this latter nature have been used, this has been stated in the notes; however, none of these passages alter the nature of my assessment of Eckhart's thought. The second problem, which, no doubt, partially arises from the first, is shown in the fact that Eckhart has been interpreted in a variety of ways by writers on mysticism, ranging from attempts to uphold him as an orthodox Catholic led regrettably astray by the influence of Neoplatonism and his own fervent imagination, to presentations of him as a pantheistic Neoplatonist who, at his trial, recanted his more extreme doctrines out of mere lip-service to orthodoxy. Clearly these differing interpretations result not only from difficulties of textual authenticity, but also from theological or philosophical biases on the part of the authors concerned, from a desire to interpret Eckhart's thought in accordance with preconceived preferences. I shall wish to argue that the truth may in fact lie between the extremes, and that Eckhart's writings represent a conscious and intentional combination of various elements of philosophical and theological thought, a combination which Eckhart had recourse to because he felt this was the only way he could adequately express his own mystical experience. Before we can draw this conclusion, however, we need to examine what Eckhart himself has to say about his experiences.

Eckhart (c. 1260-1328) was possessed of brilliant intellectual gifts. As a Professor of Theology at Paris, a Dominican friar at Erfurt, and Vicar of Thuringia, he was widely read and had an abundance of both theological knowledge and personal religious experience; like St. John of the Cross, he was also an able and active Church administrator. He was influenced by the Neoplatonism of Dionysius and Augustine, but also by Aristotle and Aquinas, as well as by other lesser-known figures in the history of Christian mysticism, such as the Jewish theologian Moses Maimonides, and the Arab astronomer Alfraganus. The Aristotelian and Neoplatonic streams of thought therefore mingle in his writings, although with the latter always taking the upper hand. Like many mystics and early theologians, he regarded the two systems as complementary, not antagonistic. (I have elaborated on this point in my section of this study entitled 'Universals: Idealism and Realism in Mysticism'.) But there is in addition something in Eckhart's thought which seems to be entirely his own, which springs up from mystical insight, from his own inner depths, so that he brings new life and colour to Scholastic terminology; what is academic speculation for the Scholastics becomes for Eckhart the expression of an intensely-felt and inspiring vision. There is a great originality of thought in Eckhart, which comes over strongly in his use of striking phrases, vigorous imaginative language, and daring paradox. He shows great intellectual ability in dealing with abstract notions and fine distinctions; yet there is also a touch of the poet in him. He speaks with devotion and heart-felt dedication, from a deep insight into spiritual truths, an insight obviously gained through his own intimate experience. For all these reasons, to mention but a few, he is rightly regarded as the father of the great German mystics.

Eckhart's Conception of the Deity

Eckhart stresses the sublimity and majesty of God, who is so high above us that we cannot understand him; nothing that can be said of God is adequate, because our rational minds cannot grasp the Infinite. Nevertheless, in mystical perception we may transcend our usual modes of thought, rising above our natural faculties, to apprehend God in the 'unknowing' beyond all reason. Eckhart frequently contrasts the imperfect knowledge of the philosopher or theologian with the fuller experience of the mystic. In this life, by all natural means, we see God "in a mirror and mystery" (1) (an alternative rendering, used by Eckhart, of St. Paul's "through a glass darkly") for he is a hidden God, concealed in his Universe which mirrors his nature, revealing and yet veiling his being. Hereafter we hope to see him face to face; but in mystical apprehension, which is a foretaste of the greater vision to come in the next life, we may see him not "in a mirror and mystery" but "in a mirror and in light" (2) when the Divine Light streams over the powers of knowledge, raising the mind to a level which it cannot normally attain. (Concerning Eckhart's "in a mirror and mystery" and "in a mirror and in light", a striking parallel is found in the Kabbalah. The Kabbalah holds that the soul has two kinds of powers: the faculty for divine knowledge, called the Luminous Mirror, and the faculty for ordinary knowledge, called the Non-Luminous Mirror. The first is represented by the Tree of Life, the second by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, that is, knowledge of duality. Alternatively, the two Mirrors are sometimes identified with the Sephiroth Tiferet and Yesod respectively, representing divine intuition and the lower psychic realm. When the soul achieves its destiny in mystical union, it will no more look through the dark glass, but see face to face in the Luminous Mirror.)

Thus Eckhart speaks of two levels of apprehension:

No man can tell of God exactly what he is. According to St. Dionysius, God is not anything we can say or think.....Nay, I declare God beggars human thought; he transcends all human conception. No man knows what God is. Aught that a man could or would think of God, God is not at all.....And in this strain the heathen doctor argues in his book, The Light of Lights, that God is super-essential, super-rational, super-intelligible, i.e. beyond the natural understanding. I speak not of gracious understanding. By grace man may be carried to the length of understanding as St. Paul understood who was caught up into the third heaven and saw unspeakable things. He saw, but was not able to express them.....It was said by a philosopher that whoso knows of God that he is unknown, that man knows God. For it is the height of gnosis and perception to know and understand in agnosis and a-perception. (3)

Eckhart accordingly follows the Way of Negation, the Via Negativa of Dionysius and Augustine. Any attribute applied to God is misleading; human predicates are inapplicable; so too are all names, except the bare "I AM" of Exodus 3:14; for God is above all conceptual differentiations. (In the Kabbalah, "I am" -- Eheieh -- is the God-name of the Sephirah Kether, i.e., of the undifferentiated, nonconceptual source of all being, the highest aspect of the Godhead.) The purest affirmation that we can make regarding God's nature, says Eckhart, is the "denial of denial". Hence his statement, quickly seized upon by his interrogators at his trial for heresy, that God is not good, nor better, nor best. Eckhart means that God is not good, but rather, Goodness Itself, or Absolute Goodness, is a part of his being -- and a part only, for God is the One (Ein), absolute Unity beyond differentiation. Hence Eckhart, again following Dionysius, calls God 'Nothing' (Nihte) -- yet this Nothing is not a negative abstraction, but a positive yet unnameable Oneness. It is the fullness of being, the matrix of all things, Nothing which is also the All, for God, being unlimited, contains all things in himself in abundance:

If I say "God is good", I am attributing something to God. Unity is a negation of negation and a denial of denial. What does unity mean? It means oneness, to which nothing is added as an attribute.....All creatures have a negation in themselves; one denies

that it is the other. One angel denies that he is another. But God has the negation of negation; He is One and denies every other, for outside God there is nothing. All creatures are in God and are His own Godhead, and that means abundance....(4)

An important and distinctive aspect of Eckhart's teaching concerns the distinction between God and the Godhead (Gotheit). The Godhead is undifferentiated Deity; God is the three Persons. The Godhead and God are, for Eckhart, "as different as heaven and earth" (5) and I think it would be true to say that Eckhart's real 'God' is the Godhead, or what he calls the "God beyond God". In mystical union one passes beyond the triune God to become one with the undifferentiated Godhead, the "Nothing", "wilderness", "desert", or divine "darkness". The Godhead is absolutely one and indivisible, and is opposed by Eckhart to the many, the manifold world of duality and diversity, of becoming and change. In it are no distinctions whatsoever, and it does not create or act. We think of God as possessing different attributes, but the divisions exist only in our own minds; they are the only means we have of understanding something that goes beyond all division. The Godhead is eternal, unchangeable, beyond time and space; it is the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega. We can say that God is Being, as Eckhart often does, but he also says that in a sense even this is not true; God is above Being, because he is the cause of Being. He contains all Being within himself yet is more than all this; he is not simply the totality of empirical being; and he is emphatically not, for Eckhart, any one single, individual being:

The authorities say that God is a being, an intelligent being who knows everything. But I say that God is neither a being nor intelligent and he does not "know" either this or that. [got ist weder wesen noch vernunft noch bekennet niht diz noch daz] God is free of everything and therefore he is everything.....He is neither this nor that [niht diz noch daz]. As one saint says: "If anyone imagines that he knows God and his knowledge takes form, then he may know something but it is not God!" Thus when I say that God is not being and that he is above being, I have not denied him being but, rather, I have dignified and exalted

being in him. (6)

Similarly, we can say that God is Intelligence, Truth, Love, Goodness, Wisdom, etc. -- but again, he is also beyond any of these, for he is the cause of each of them, and ".....to think of his goodness, or wisdom, or power is to hide the essence of him, to obscure it with thoughts about him. Even one single thought or consideration will cover it up." (7) The Platonic Ideas, then, for Eckhart, are contained within God as aspects of his being, as archetypes, as prototypes of creation, causes and patterns of all contingent and particular things. They are in him eternally, and he creates the world according to these archetypes. The world is therefore an expression of God, for, since these ideas are part of him, he creates the world literally in his own image. He is in all things and all things are in him; all things live, move and have their being in, by and through him. All things are what they are inasmuch as they participate in their archetypes or Ideas.

The Godhead becomes God (as the triune Deity, creator, and as the object in a subject/object relationship) only with and for the soul -- it is as if Eckhart intimates that the personal God is manifested from out of the One so that we may understand the One, so that the soul/God relationship is made tangible. Before the world was, God (as distinct from the Godhead) was not. It is only in relation to creatures that the Godhead becomes the active, creative God. But in what Eckhart calls the "break-through" (durchburch) the mystic becomes more than the creature he or she was. Here we pass beyond the personal God, because we see what it is that God and ourselves have in common -- that is, the Godhead. The mystic breaks through to eternity, to the realm of the timeless Godhead from which issue both the personal God and all creatures.

God is immanent and transcendent, within us and yet infinitely higher

than us; but, like all mystics, Eckhart stresses that God is to be found within, at the most inner or highest part of the soul. One of Eckhart's greatest skills is to point out and explicate the intimate correspondences between the nature of God, or the Godhead, and the nature of the soul, particularly the soul of the perfected mystic. Other mystics illustrate this in their writings, as we shall show; but perhaps no-one draws out the threads of the implications of becoming one with God so well as does Eckhart. He has a way of explaining the nature of the inner life so that if we have had the requisite experience, we know just what he means when he describes what God is, or how God acts, etc. The intimate unity of human and divine is the keynote of his teachings; the soul is a counterpart and image of the Godhead. Otto (8) raises the point (which, as a theist, he does not, however, agree with) that one could even take Eckhart's conception of God as an extension of his mystical consciousness of the soul's inner life: has he objectified as qualities of the Godhead, what he has experienced deep within? It seems to me that, in the last analysis, such a question would be rather pointless; since, for Eckhart, the soul and the Godhead are (ultimately) absolutely one (as I shall show later), one might as well ask whether he has 'subjectified' as qualities of his own experience, qualities belonging to the Godhead. In any case, the matter may become clearer as we proceed, when particular correspondences which Eckhart draws between God and the soul will be pointed out.

#### The 'Ground of the Soul'

Hidden beneath the lower powers of sense-perception, desire and reason, and also beneath the higher faculties of memory, will and under-



standing, lies the "Ground of the Soul" (der sêle grunde) which Eckhart also calls the Core, Spark, or Essence of the Soul. This is the foundation of all the soul's other powers or 'faculties'. It is the power by means of which we apprehend the Godhead, and it is inherently divine; here is the secret abode of the Godhead within, and here mystical union is attained. Here lies the still centre beneath all flux, beneath the coming and going of thoughts, emotions and desires, the centre which is unmoved but by which all things are moved. But for most of us, it is hidden by time, multiplicity, and our creaturely nature; we have to withdraw from the activity of the senses, discursive reason, and emotions, to hear the Inner Voice, the Word spoken in the inner depths. The soul has two aspects: one is turned towards the world, the other towards the Divine, and in the latter, Divine light shines continually, even if unknown to the soul which is not conscious of the light. We have a dual nature, 'outer' and 'inner', 'earth' and 'heaven'. Eckhart calls the first aspect of the soul the outward eye, and the second aspect the inward eye. The inward eye is identified with the Ground of the Soul, and Eckhart also often uses in this connection the symbol of the Inner Castle (discussed in greater depth later in connection with St. Teresa and Ramakrishna), or of the soul as an Inner House, Temple or Sanctuary, or as a strong, well-fortified City or Kingdom walled round by Divine Light:

The soul has two eyes -- one looking inwards and the other outwards. It is the inner eye of the soul that looks into essence and takes being directly from God. That is its true function. The soul's outward eye is directed towards creatures and perceives their external forms but when a person turns inwards and knows God in terms of his own awareness of him, in the roots of his being, he is then freed from all creation and is secure in the castle of truth. (9)

This inner Castle, the Ground of the Soul, is pure, free, perfect unity, unconscious of any forms, as ineffable and unnameable as God himself. It

is above time and space, uncreated and uncreatable, "so closely akin to God that it is already one with him and need never be united to him."

(10) Here the Godhead glows and burns like a fire in all its fullness, sweetness and rapture, and the other faculties of the soul cannot penetrate herein; indeed, not even God, as distinct from the Godhead, can enter this inner Sanctuary:

So altogether one and so uniform is this little castle, so high above all ways and agencies, that none can ever lead to it -- indeed -- not even God himself.

It is the truth as God lives. God himself cannot even peek into it for a moment -- or steal into it -- in so far as he has particular selfhood and the properties of a person.....And therefore, if God is to steal into it.....it will cost him all his divine names and personlike properties; he would have to forgo all those if he is to gain entrance. Except as he is the onefold [einvältig] One, without ways or properties -- neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit in this (personal) sense, yet something that is neither this nor that -- See! -- it is only as he is One and onefold that he may enter into that One which I have called the Little Castle of the soul. (11)

By penetrating into this inner Castle, the mystic surpasses God insofar as he is defined by his relations to creatures, and enters the silent desert of the Godhead to be united with the One in its pure essence. Here God is perceived "naked, stripped of goodness, or of being, or of any name." (12) It is here, too, that the birth of the Son takes place within. This is one of Eckhart's most distinctive teachings. He does not have a great deal to say about the historical Jesus, but, like many mystics, prefers to interpret the Scriptures symbolically as referring to the inner life. He speaks of the birth of the Son, or the speaking of the Word (Logos) in the soul, through a rebirth or regeneration of self; the 'Incarnation' thus represents the birth of the Divine in the 'Virgin', i.e., the pure soul that has stripped itself of all particular things or images. We are all, potentially, children of God, as Christ was, since we are made in God's image; the Word is manifested not only in one man, but in human nature as a whole; Christ is

seen primarily as a messenger, as the Christ-principle, as the ideal prototype of perfected humanity:

I say emphatically that all the worth of the humanity of the saints, or Mary, the mother of God, or even Christ himself, is mine too in my human nature. But this might prompt you to ask: If, in my present nature, I already have all that Christ achieved in his, why should he be exalted and honored as the Lord and God? Because he was a messenger from God to us, who carried a blessing that was to be ours. There in the inmost core of the soul, where God begets his Son, human nature also takes root....."God sent his only begotten Son into the world" -- and by that you must not understand the external world, in which he ate and drank with us, but you should know that it refers to the inner world. As sure as the Father, so single in nature, begets his Son, he begets him in the spirit's inmost recess -- and that is the inner world. Here, the core of God is also my core; and the core of my soul, the core of God's.....(13)

In eternity, the Father begets the Son in his own likeness. "The Word was with God and the Word was God". Like God, it had his nature. Furthermore, I say that God has begotten him in my soul. Not only is the soul like him and he like it, but he is in it, for the Father begets the Son in the soul exactly as he does in eternity and not otherwise.....The Father ceaselessly begets his Son and, what is more, he begets me as his Son -- the self-same Son! Indeed, I assert that he begets me not only as his Son but as himself and himself as myself, begetting me in his own nature, his own being.....Thus it is that I am his only begotten Son. (14)

God, then, speaks his Eternal Word eternally: he speaks it within himself and within the soul. He begets the Son eternally within himself and also begets the Son in us, or begets us as his Son. The Word or Son, when spoken in the Ground of the Soul, is the same as it is in God: that is, it is God's thought of himself. The birth of God within is simply God revealing his thought in a new manifestation or form. As Otto says: "To have the Word in one's self is to have part in God's own knowledge and in that very knowledge of God, by which God knows himself." (15)

Here, already, we can see a number of correspondences which Eckhart draws between God and the soul: the God without corresponds to the God within, the Godhead to the Ground of the Soul, Christ to the mystic or to the archetype of perfected humanity, and the Incarnation to the birth of

the Son within. More precise and specific correspondences will be observed when we come to discuss Eckhart's treatment of the mystical path and its goal. For the moment we should perhaps note that, while Eckhart (like any mystic) stresses the inwardness of mystical experience and the need to find the Divine within oneself, he does not intend to deny the reality of the Godhead over and above the soul, nor does he mean to imply that the inward vision bears no relation to the outward world. On the contrary, like so many mystics, he teaches that in the end we come to see God in all things, both within and without. Eckhart's attitude to the outer world will be explored later; here we might note in passing that he speaks of the inner birth referred to above as generating a Light which eventually comes to permeate the 'outward eye' of the soul as well, and to influence all one's activities. Thus the outer and the inner become one, and the earthly nature of the self is made divine:

.....the divine birth has the distinctive property of being always accompanied by new light.....In this birth God pours himself into the soul, and the light at the core of the soul grows so strong that it spills out, radiates through the soul's agents, even passing the outward man.....The light in the soul's core overflows into the body, which becomes radiant with it.....When one turns to God, a light at once begins to glimmer and shine within, instructing one in what to do and what not to do, and giving lots of intimations of good, of which, previously, one was ignorant and understood nothing. (16)

#### The Mystical Path according to Eckhart

Perhaps the first thing to note about Eckhart's 'path' is that it is not made up of stages of experience which can be clearly defined or demarcated. He does not go into details of mystical techniques or methods, and rarely mentions the traditional 'stages' of the way exemplified by mystics such as St. John of the Cross. He enumerates certain prerequisites of the path, but it is not clear whether he is referring to a meditative discipline

as such, or simply to an attitude of mind that one must adopt. He says that the goal " has no path which leads to it but is off any beaten track, moving at large." Blakney comments that the German word translated "path" here is wîse, a means or technique; "moving at large" (gat in die breite), he suggests, recalls the wind that "bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth". (17) Eckhart frequently emphasises this essential elusiveness of the path and the goal: "You should seek Him in such a way as never to find Him. If you do not seek Him, you will find Him." (18) This is not, however, to deny the necessity for effort and self-discipline (which Eckhart, indeed, stresses); it is rather another of the mysterious paradoxes of mystical life, that one can consciously try too hard, and that illumination may descend when one least expects it. Furthermore, for Eckhart the goal is in a sense limitless; there is perhaps no final attainment in the sense of reaching a static condition; there are always greater depths to be plumbed. The ever-elusive way recedes as we approach, and opens out before us ever more widely as we travel along it. Eckhart's inspired writings reflect the irresistible longing to journey along the path which is never-ending, because it takes us out of time, into Eternity:

....the human spirit [geist]....can never be satisfied with what light it has but storms the firmament and scales the heavens to discover the spirit by which the heavens are driven in revolutions and by which everything on the earth grows and flourishes.

Even then, the human spirit takes no rest. It presses on further into the vortex [der wirbel, "whirlpool"], the source [der Ursprung] in which the spirit originates.... (19)

Eckhart's path recalls the description found in the Tao te Ching: "The Tao (way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name." (20) In accordance with this, he argues that not everyone is called to God by the same road; we have to work out what is the best manner and method for ourselves: "God never

tied man's salvation to any pattern." (21) There are many ways to the Divine, for it can be found in all things and all activities:

All paths lead to God and he is on them all evenly, to him who knows. I am well aware that a person may get more out of one technique than another but it is not best so. God responds to all techniques evenly to a knowing man. Such and such may be the way, but it is not God.....Whatever the way that leads you most frequently to awareness of God, follow that way..... (22)

Nevertheless, we have to choose our way and stick to it -- an important point which can be seen to relate to the diversity of different types of mysticism on the level of practical involvement:

.....the good that God does, the good that he gives in one way, man may discover in a variety of ways. We must see that all good ways belong together in the One Way.....Still, a man must ever do one thing; he cannot do everything.....For if he tried to do everything, now this, now that, forsaking his own way to take on another which, for the moment, pleased him better, he would soon become quite unstable. One who leaves the world and once and for all time joins an order, will achieve mastery sooner than one who left his own order to join another.....This follows simply from the change of orders. Let a person choose one good way for himself and stick to it always and co-ordinate other good ways with his own, observing only that they are all God's. Let him not begin with one today and take another tomorrow. (23)

This is an admirable expression of one aspect of what I shall later refer to as the 'unity-in-diversity' of different mystical paths.

Although Eckhart hardly mentions specific mystical techniques or methods, he does give a good deal of advice on the sort of life we are to lead if we would find God. The soul must be withdrawn into itself, freed from the distractions of the senses, of worldly thoughts and images. We have to uproot sin, self-will, false ego-consciousness, ignorance -- in fact, all the limitations of everyday human existence have to be overcome. There are three main obstacles to the knowledge of the Divine: temporality, corporeality and multiplicity, or time, space and number. The mystic must abandon and empty himself or herself to the Divine Will, renounce all barriers. He or she must cultivate detachment, so as to remain steadfast and immovable whatever good or bad fortune comes along, accepting

everything that happens as the Will of the Deity. As Eckhart uses the Way of Negation to describe God, so he describes the withdrawal into the self in characteristically 'negative' terminology (emptiness, silence, passivity, receptivity). Yet, hidden behind this terminology is a very positive, creative, dynamic experience: we are emptied that we may be filled. The 'Nothing' that the mystic encounters is also All, just as God is Nihte and yet the fullness of all being; 'unknowing' is a very real type of knowledge, taking this latter term in its broadest sense.

### The Importance of Detachment

Like many other mystics that we shall encounter, Eckhart teaches not world-rejection and external penances, but detachment and self-discipline:

....if a man gave up a kingdom, or even the whole world and still was selfish, he would have given up nothing. If, however, he denies himself, then whatever he keeps, be it wealth, honor, or anything else, he is free from it all....

The more he regards everything as divine -- more divine than it is of itself -- the more God will be pleased with him. To be sure, this requires effort and love, a careful cultivation of the spiritual life, and a watchful, honest, active oversight of all one's mental attitudes towards things and people. It is not to be learned by world-flight, running away from things, turning solitary and going apart from the world. Rather, one must learn an inner solitude, wherever or with whomsoever he may be. (24)

To the extent that we are able to deny or empty ourselves in this manner, we are filled with the Divine; to be cast down is to be raised up, and to be humbled is to be exalted:

If....I deny myself, God will be mine much more than any thing could be; he shall be mine as much as his own, neither less nor more. He will be mine a thousand times more than any personal property one might own and keep in a safe....We shall merit this divine proprietorship by relinquishing all our rights to what is not God in this world.

....the highest heights of exaltation lie precisely in the lowest depths of humiliation; for the deeper the valleys go, the loftier the heights that rise above them....for depth and height are the same thing. (25)

The final paragraph of this quotation is interesting in that Eckhart (like many other mystics) uses the symbolism of height, and that of depth, as interchangeable terms (with regard, for example, to the 'heights' or 'depths' of the soul, or of mystical insight). Sometimes 'depth' indicates inwardness, but sometimes the depths of trial and darkness. When used in the second sense, the idea of depth and height being one reminds us that it is a typical feature of the alternating 'high' and 'low' states of the mystical life that, the lower one sinks into the depths in any one period of trial and darkness, and the more profound one's suffering, the greater heights one reaches on being released from the trial. The illumination attained is proportionate to the intensity of testing; the light is the brighter for the intensity of the darkness. Typically, in the mystical life one descends ever deeper and rises ever higher, each period of suffering, and each period of joy and illumination, being of greater intensity than the last, until eventually joy and sorrow, light and darkness, become one.

But let us return for a moment to Eckhart's writings on detachment, which are an important aspect of his teachings. Eckhart speaks in this connection of "disinterest" (abgescheidenheit) and "disinterested action" (we may compare the concept of disinterested action, action without \*concern for the fruits thereof, in the Bhagavad-Gītā). The important point here is that, when we are in a state of detachment or disinterest, we are free of our own way of seeing things, of our own desires, our personal limitations, our own interpretations of events and so on; we see things as they really are, in objectivity, and we are made empty of self so that God may fill us:

Experience must always be an experience of something, but disinterest comes so close to zero [nihte] that nothing but God is rarified enough to get into it, to enter the disinterested heart. That is why a disinterested person is sensitive to nothing but God. Each person experiences things in his own way and thus every distinguishable thing is seen and understood according to



the approach of the beholder and not, as it might be, from its own point of view.....

Now I ask what the object of pure disinterest is. I reply that it is neither this nor that. Pure disinterest is empty nothingness [blößen nihte], for it is on that high plane on which God gives effect to his will.....In a given heart, containing this or that, there may be an item which prevents God's highest activity. Therefore if a heart is to be ready for him, it must be emptied out to nothingness, the condition of its maximum capacity.....of maximum sensitivity.....if God is to write his message about the highest matters on my heart, everything to be referred to as "this or that" must first come out and I must be disinterested. (26)

We will later see a parallel in St. John of the Cross, who also insists that we must be attached to "neither this nor that" to enter into the empty nothingness in which God works. Here Eckhart also draws another of his parallels between God and the mystic: for, as God acts without specific motives, without desire, but from a pure pouring-out of his nature, simply from love, so the disinterested (selfless) person should act. (27) As God is the Unmoved Mover, so we have to penetrate the still, unmoving centre of our own being, the still centre which is the hub of all movement; and, having found quietness and peace at this still centre, we are no longer disturbed by the coming and going of thoughts, desires, 'good' and 'bad' occurrences, and so on. So we are able to act in disinterest, no longer being tied up in the desires of the lower self and the accompanying states of pleasure and pain.

We have to learn to fix our hearts on God, to cast aside all that is not God, to have God as the centre of the circle, the circumference of which is our life. (28) We have to purify ourselves so that our whole life becomes a unity, integrated and centred around the Divine; our lower faculties must be controlled by the higher ones, and these in turn by God:

The soul is purified in the body through its function in gathering together (all the body's) disparate elements. When (the forces) expressed through the five senses are gathered again into the soul, then the soul is one agent by means of which everything is unified.....That is the way the soul is made pure -- by being purged of much divided life and by entering upon a life that is

(focused to) unity. The whole scattered world of lower things is gathered up to oneness when the soul climbs up to that life in which there are no opposites. (29)

.....the soul's lower powers should be ordered to her higher and her higher ones to God; her outward senses to her inward and her inward ones to reason; thought to intuition and intuition to the will and all to unity, so that the soul may be alone with nothing flowing into her but sheer divinity..... (30)

Eckhart stresses that it is through knowledge of our true spiritual Self that we come to knowledge of God. Through knowing ourselves truly we can come to know the inner nature of all things, for the soul, the inner spark, is a microcosm corresponding to the macrocosm of God and the Universe: a theme which we shall find echoed by many other mystics. God dwells within the soul, and the soul therefore has the power to know all. Again, we see here the theme of the essential unity of human and divine.

#### Beyond Form to the Formless

Like St. John of the Cross, who will be discussed later, Eckhart teaches that we must pass beyond form to the Formless, rising above any particular apprehensions, whether 'good' or 'bad', however spiritual they may seem, into the Nothingness which is "neither this nor that". However, we do not find in Eckhart the division of mystical experience into stages as in St. John; for the latter, the mystic passes beyond images to a formless perception only after the Night of the Spirit. We observe in Eckhart rather a blending of levels of attainment into each other, which is, perhaps, in accordance with his elusive 'pathless way'. The transcendence of particular apprehensions and images in Eckhart is expressed by his characteristic teaching of passing beyond God, to the Godhead or the One. Eckhart, following Platonism, conceives of different degrees of

truth, the highest degree being free from our limited, contingent, personal ways of conceiving things, free from any particular idea or symbol that limits it. We have to depart not only from apprehensions and images gained through sense-perception and the lower powers of the soul, but also from knowledge gained through the higher faculties (understanding, memory and will); as Eckhart says, if we want the kernel, we must break the shell (31), we must destroy all symbols and particular perceptions to uncover the naked essence of things. The soul must denude itself, passing beyond itself, even beyond Being, beyond God, "breaking through" into the Godhead, so that it sees things as they really are, as they appear in the Divine Mind. We have to take leave of God for God's sake, as Eckhart puts it -- that is, we pass beyond human conceptions of God, to see God as he really is, in his own nature:

Back in the Womb from which I came, I had no god and merely was, myself. I did not will or desire anything, for I was pure being [ein ledic sîn, a free or unencumbered being], a knower of myself by divine truth [ein bekennner mîn selbes nâch götlicher wârheit]....And what I wanted, I was and what I was, I wanted, and thus, I existed untrammled by god or anything else. But when I parted from my free will and received my created being, then I had a god. For before there were creatures, God was not god, but, rather, he was what he was....Therefore, we pray that we may be rid of god, and taking the truth, break into eternity....I pray God that he may quit me of god, for (his) unconditioned being [unwesenlich wesen] is above god and all distinctions [ober got und ober underscheit]....then I shall rise above all creature kind, and I shall be neither god nor creature, but I shall be what I was once, now, and forevermore....I receive wealth so great that I could never again be satisfied with a god, or anything that is a god's, nor with any divine activities, for in bursting forth I discover that God and I are One. Now I am what I was and I neither add to nor subtract from anything, for I am the unmoved Mover, that moves all things [ein unbewegelichiu sache, diu alliu dinc beweget].... (32)

In such a state, things are seen not according to their usual associations and distinctions in time, space and multiplicity, but according to the eternal Now (Nu, the eternal present, the point of division between past and future, which has no duration and is the locus of eternity). Things are

transfigured, seen in ratione ydeali (in their eternal Idea, their uncreated essence). This is to see things as God sees them (another correspondence between God and the mystic) -- to see creation with the eye of the Creator -- in other words, to see things according to their Ideas or Archetypes which are contained within the Divine Mind. Eckhart is insistent that in mystical vision, Universals (the Ideas) are apprehended directly, and not through the mediation of the senses or by a process of mental abstraction, and in this he is very much a Platonist:

St. Augustine says that to apprehend apart from thought, apart from spatial forms and imagination, without (depending on) abstracting what is seen, is to know the truth of things. Those who do not know this way will laugh and mock at me and I shall pity them. They like to look at eternal things and consider divine works and to stand in the light of eternity, while their hearts still flutter about in yesterday and today, in space and time. (33)

#### The Nature of Mystical Knowledge

While Eckhart speaks with great feeling of his mystical awareness, he translates this feeling into metaphysical and intellectual terminology. He does not speak of personal emotions, raptures and visions, nor does he use the symbolism of the 'Mystical Marriage' which we shall later see to be an important means of expression of more devotionally-orientated mystics. His mysticism is a tranquil and ongoing awareness of God; he displays a wariness towards short-lived ecstasies and visions. Neither does he speak of experiences of the Nature-mystical type, although he does hold that God can be seen in all things, even in the stones and the grasses, as we shall see later.

Yet while Eckhart's mysticism is primarily a way of 'knowledge', it is a knowledge than includes and entails love; one of many illustrations of the fact that the dividing lines between types or categories of mysticism are not rigid. Strictly speaking, for Eckhart neither knowledge nor love

are uniting faculties; the faculty by which we are united to the Divine is the Ground of the Soul, which is the source and synthesis of both love and knowledge, and union is the condition of true love and true knowledge: for example, love is unity in expression in the sphere of the emotions. Like most mystics, Eckhart holds that love of the Divine is dependent on the will, the will that is conformed to the Divine Will. It is also through the powers of the will and of love that we are able to bear the suffering inherent in the mystical life. Eckhart does not make very much of suffering or of the difficulties of the mystical path -- quite unlike St. John of the Cross, he is very much an optimist, minimising the obstacles and emphasising the inspiration, joy and insight. However, like John of the Cross he says that our sufferings are due to our limitations, sins and shortcomings, but that suffering can be transmuted to joy through alignment of the self with God's Will (34). He speaks on occasion of the Inner Fire (as do John of the Cross, Rolle, and many others) which purifies the soul like gold in the furnace, and which leads the mystic from darkness to light, and from inner death to the new life which is the birth of the Son within.

Eckhart is very informative regarding the nature of mystical knowledge. He talks of 'unknowing' (unwissen) as a state which comes not from lack of knowledge but from knowledge that has been transformed (35). This type of knowledge has a certainty of conviction about it, and is attained by becoming one with the object of knowledge, so that to know and to be are one and the same:

How does anyone know with certainty? Because there is a divine light that deceives nobody, and in that light things are seen clearly, without coatings [*dâ blôz*, "naked", *umbedeket*, "uncovered"], and undisguised.....The authorities say that being and knowing are identical [*wesen unde bekantnisse sî al ein*], because if a thing does not exist no one knows it, but that whatever has most being is most known. Because God's being is transcendent, he is beyond all knowledge.....There, where the soul is informed

with the stamp of primal purity [ersten lûterkeit], stamped with the seal of pure being, where it tastes God himself as he was before he ever took upon himself the forms of truth and knowledge, where everything that can be named is sloughed off -- there the soul knows with its purest knowledge and takes on Being in its most perfect similitude. (36)

We can say that in this 'unknowing' in which we, paradoxically, know All, our knowledge is certain because it is not knowledge of any particular empirical or intellectual thing, but rather an apprehension of that principle which is the basis of all knowledge. This point will be found echoed in the writings of other mystics whom we shall later discuss. In order to realise this principle we have to become one with it; again we encounter the theme of 'like knows like' which I have commented on in connection with Plotinus. Knowledge is brought about through the union of like principles:

Affections, desires, and loves are due to likeness; for things are always attracted by their own kind, to love them. The pure love purity; the just love justice and are inclined to it, and the mouth of every man utters what is in the man. (37)

Likes love and unite with one another; unlikes hate and shun each other. (38)

But, as we shall see later in our discussion of mystical union, Eckhart maintains that we must eventually lose all dissimilarity with the Godhead, becoming entirely transformed into it, so that we are not merely like it but one with it without distinction, for likeness is itself born out of the Oneness which is our final goal:

All likeness among things, but especially in the divine nature, is born out of the Oneness (of the Godhead) and this likeness, begotten of the One, and in and of the One, is the beginning, the source of that glowing flower: love. The One itself, however, is a source that had no beginning, a source to which all likeness looks as to its origin, and for the fact of its existence and beginning. In contrast, love's nature is such that it appears only where two are; but itself turns out to be one and uniform and never twofold; for love cannot exist divided....Likeness and love hurry upward like flames, to bring the soul to its origin....So I say that likeness born of the One leads the soul to God, for he is One, unbegotten unity....The more one thing is like another, the more it pursues it, and swiftly follows its scent, and the

sweeter and more delightful the pursuit becomes. The farther it leaves its former self behind, departing from all that its object is not, the more unlike its old self it becomes, the more it grows like the object it so hotly pursues. And since likeness flows from the One, drawing, attracting with power borrowed from the One, there can be neither rest nor satisfaction, either for the attracter or for the attracted, until at last they are united in the One....Thus I have argued that the soul hates likeness; it has no love for likeness in and of itself, but loves likeness for the sake of the unity that lies hidden in it....(49)

Eckhart, like all mystics, stresses that the only way to know the Divine truly and fully is through personal experience:

To have wine in your cellar and never to drink it, or even inspect it, is not to know whether it is good or not. (40)

I tell you that the soul knows the eternal Word better than any philosopher can describe it. What anyone can set forth with words is far too little -- less than the soul learns in one lesson from the eternal Word. (41)

If anyone does not understand this discourse, let him not worry about that, for if he does not find this truth in himself he cannot understand what I have said -- for it is a discovered truth which comes immediately from the heart of God. (42)

As Eckhart says, "what anyone can set forth with words is far too little": the depth of insight revealed to the mystic remains in the last analysis ineffable, for it is "too immense and too mysterious to take definite shape in (the) understanding" (43); it yields no idea or form by which we may express it. The ineffability of mystical experience can be seen to relate to the Via Negativa: the Divine is described by way of negation because we cannot say what it is, because its nature transcends reason and the limitations of language and concepts. Hence Eckhart, like many mystics, takes refuge in paradox: and here, again, there is a correspondence between the experience of the mystic, and the nature of God, because God, for Eckhart, transcends all opposites. We have to rise above all pairs of opposites, says Eckhart, and see things as part of a whole in which warring polarities disappear:

There all is one, and one all in all....Love and suffering, white and black, these are contradictions, and as such these cannot

remain in essential Being itself. Herein lies the soul's purity, that it is purified from a life that is divided and that it enters into a life that is unified. All that is divided in lower things, will be unified so soon as the (perceptive) soul climbs up into a life where there is no contrast. (44)

However, this does not mean that the world of multiplicity is denied or rejected, nor, obviously, that it disappears from our view once and for all; we are concerned here with a vision of unity in which there is nevertheless room for diversity. The opposites coincide and are reconciled in a higher unity, without ceasing to be what they are in themselves: hence Eckhart calls this type of perception "perceiving distinction without number and without multiplicity" (45). This is very close to Plotinus' vision of the Intellectual World.

#### Beyond Time and Space

A distinctive aspect of Eckhart's writings concerns passing beyond time and space as we know them: for it is time and space that differentiate one thing from another, that cause opposites to come into being, that bring about all relativity. No two things can be in exactly the same place at the same time -- unless, that is, they exist on different levels of being. As the Godhead is timeless (Eternal) and spaceless, so the mystic has to penetrate to the timeless, spaceless, still centre at the Ground of the Soul, the unchanging core from which all multiplicity springs, and in relation to which all multiplicity may be understood. We have to live in the 'Eternal Now' so that we are, as it were, everywhere at all times, and we see all things in or as one whole: ".....all time is contained in the present Now-moment." (46) We come to see the Divine in all things, and all things in the Divine, for by now we are a channel or agent for God's activity:



....he [the mystic] has only God and thinks only God and everything is nothing but God to him. He discloses God in every act, in every place. The whole business of his person adds up to God. His actions are due only to him who is the author of them and not to himself, since he is merely the agent. If we mean God and only God, then it is he who does what we do and nothing can disturb him -- neither company nor place....since God cannot be distracted by the numbers of things [manicvaltekeit, "multiplicity"], neither can the person, for he is one in One [einz in dem einen], in which all divided things are gathered up into unity and there undifferentiated....When one takes God as he is divine, having the reality of God within him, God sheds light on everything. Everything will taste like God and reflect him. God will shine in him all the time. He will have the disinterest, renunciation, and spiritual vision of his beloved, ever-present Lord. (47)

Just as God enjoys all things as aspects of himself, so the mystic comes to see and enjoy all things in God, in eternity (48). This point will be returned to later when we discuss Eckhart's attitude to the world of nature and creatures.

#### The Final State of Union

As we would expect, the theme of the intimate relationship of human and divine is shown especially in Eckhart's teachings regarding mystical union. God became man, that man might become God: "Our Lord says to every living soul, 'I became man for you. If you do not become God for me, you do me wrong.' " (49) We can compare Boehme's saying: "God must become man, man must become God; heaven must become one thing with the earth, the earth must be turned to heaven...." (50) Eckhart's bold statements that in union one becomes absolutely one with the Godhead without distinction were, needless to say, quickly seized upon by his interrogators at his trial. He says that we are lifted above our own natures and transformed, changed into God, so that our heart and his are one heart, our body and his one body, our will and his one will, and likewise for all our faculties, thoughts, etc. (51) God reveals all to us, all

his wisdom, all his Godhead, all his truth, withholding nothing. We are all essentially eligible to a union as high as that which Christ had with the Father, if we can rise above our limited natures. Yet this rising above ourselves is no negation of the human condition, but a fulfilment of it -- it is to become truly human, to find the goal and true purpose of human existence. In becoming truly human we become divine. Union with the Godhead entails not just similarity, but absolute oneness; we are made one life and one being with God, equal to him, and having power over him to the extent that we have power over (or control of) ourselves. Eckhart's descriptions of this union are often daringly monistic; the following may serve as examples:

God is that same One that I am, the One I create in my nature by remaining in the bosom and heart of the Father. (52)

God's is-ness [istikeit, a 'coined' word] is my is-ness, and neither more nor less. The just live eternally with God, on a par with God....If.....I am changed into God and he makes me one with himself, then, by the living God, there is no distinction [kein unterscheid] between us. (53)

When God has touched the soul and rendered it uncreaturely, it is then as high in rank as God himself [als edel als got selber]....wherever God is, there is the soul, and wherever the soul is, there is God! [swâ got ist, dâ ist diu sêle, unde swâ diu sêle ist, dâ ist got] (54)

This is the birth of the Son within, by which we become the only-begotten Son of God -- and here we are one with the Father, as is the Son. The soul is essentially divine and essentially part of the One; before we were created, and before God was, we were one in the eternal Godhead:

There are no distinctions in God and no differences between the divine persons, since they are to be regarded as one in nature. The divine nature is Oneness and each person is One, the same One in nature....When that oneness is no longer in oneself, then division has crept in. Since we find God in oneness, that oneness must be in him who is to find God....Be therefore that One so that you may find God. (55)

Of course, this does not mean that the Divine is debased, or reduced to a

mere aspect of the personality which could be explained away by psychology. Rather, we are exalted; God is ".....brought down, not completely, but only within, that we may be raised up. That which was above came to be within.....Not that we take anything away from Him, Who is above us." (56) (This passage relates to the idea of God being both one with the soul and yet in some measure above it; just as God is Being and yet beyond Being.) In Eckhart's teachings regarding union we again encounter the theme that to know is to become; we "know as we are known" in the fullest sense. To know God and to be known by God, to see God and to be seen by God, are the same thing. "He who hears and that which is heard are identical constituents of the eternal Word." (57) Hence Eckhart's celebrated saying, "The eye by which I see God is the same as the eye by which God sees me." (58) When we are wholly united with the One, the knowledge thus attained is beyond the subject/object, knower/known dichotomy. The soul does not so much have knowledge of God; it is God's knowledge of himself -- God knows himself in us. Otto comments that the heart of the matter is that the soul's knowledge is not a discovery of her own; she only knows at all insofar as the self-knowledge of God is in her. (59) In other words, she has found that principle which is the basis of all true knowledge.

The knowledge thus attained is formless, 'unknowing' without specific concepts or apprehensions, and Eckhart holds that we do not retain self-consciousness in this state, although we do retain our identity. (The philosophical questions raised by formless awareness are discussed in a later section of this study.) Eckhart discusses the view that the highest blessing of the soul in union is that it is aware or conscious that it is knowing the Deity:

.....That is to say, he knows it is God he is looking at and knows that he knows him. Now some people wish it to appear that the

flower, the kernel of blessing is this awareness of the spirit, that it is knowing God. For if I have rapture and am unconscious of it, what good would it do and what would it mean? I cannot agree with this position.

For granting that the soul could not be happy without it (consciousness of its own processes), still its happiness does not consist in that; for the foundation of spiritual blessing is this: that the soul look at God without anything between; here it receives its being and life and draws its essence from the core of God, unconscious of the knowing-process, or love or anything else. Then it is quite still in the essence of God, not knowing at all where it is, knowing nothing but God.

When, however, the soul is aware that it is looking at God, loving him and knowing him, that already is a retrogression, a quick retreat back to the upper level of the natural order of things.....This much is certain: when a man is happy, happy to the core and root of beatitude, he is no longer conscious of himself or anything else. He is conscious only of God.....For a man must himself be One, seeking unity both in himself and in the One, experiencing it as the One, which means that he must see God and God only. And then he must "return", which is to say, he must have knowledge of God and be conscious of his knowledge. (60)

But in such losses of consciousness, says Eckhart, God safeguards the soul's identity so that its creaturely existence is not destroyed. The mystic is thus able to undertake the 'return to the world' which is such a common theme of mystical writings, to relate his or her sublime experiences to everyday life, teaching others and acting on the material plane. The mystic has to pass beyond God, through the 'abyss' (abegründe) in which we are deprived of all knowledge with form and of all images, dying to the personal self, to plunge into the formless void which is darkness, i.e. knowledge without mode, which is Nothing and All. (References to the formless, 'dark' knowledge of the 'Void' beyond the 'Abyss' can be observed in the writings of many mystics. St. John of the Cross speaks of the void -- vacío -- and the abyss -- abismo -- in this connection; so too does Suso, Eckhart's pupil. Boehme also speaks of the Abyss or Unground which is 'Nothing and All'. In the Kabbalah we meet with a spiritual experience known as the 'Vision across the Abyss' in which the mystic perceives higher spiritual realities without form, symbols or spec-

ific concepts.) Having transcended all other form and matter, we have to take on the formless 'form' of the Godhead, thus attaining to our eternal, essential image. Having reached this summit of realisation, we return to point out the way to others. Eckhart teaches that, as humanity was manifested from out of the Godhead at the Creation, so we return to it in mystical union; the mystic's progression back to the Source can thus be seen as a tracing back of the process of the Creation in reverse, as it were, a tracing of the stages of cosmic unfoldment back to unity. We can see this as an outflowing of Divine power into humanity, followed by an inflowing of self back into the Divine, a return of manifestation to the One. It is most interesting to reflect upon the symbolism of the Creation in this connection: at the Creation, the "darkness upon the Face of the Deep", the "earth without form and void" of Genesis 1:2, becomes manifest with "Let there be Light!" as Light is brought out of the formless Darkness. Conversely, the mystic progresses through the Divine illumination of Light (knowledge with mode) to the Dionysian Divine Dark, the knowledge without mode which is the formless Void beyond the Abyss. (This is of course only one of a number of possible mystical interpretations of Genesis.)

Once we have attained union, we are permeated by divine presence, and radiate this presence out to others; we are fired and inflamed by the divine light-ray which shines straight down from above. We perceive the essential divine nature without intermediary. We are set free from the world of multiplicity, of time and space, to find rest, perfection and peace. We now live in continual mystical consciousness, so that our life, our being and our will are one with the Divine. This is our ultimate end and goal, our only true happiness. A number of specific correspondences between the mystic and God can be observed here. There is a homology

between the formless, suprapersonal Godhead and the formless, suprapersonal knowledge received in the Ground of the Soul. As God is a 'Nothing' which is at the same time the fullness of all being, so, when the mystic seeks to know nothing, he or she comes to know all in 'unknowing', through penetrating the Ground of all knowledge which is itself not a specific item of knowledge. (Similarly, when we desire nothing, we enjoy all, and so on.) As God, the fullness of all life, is the Unmoving Source of all movement (the Unmoved Mover) so the mystic has to act in this world from a centre of repose, peace and inward calm. This inward calm gives the power and strength for ceaseless vital, dynamic activity; we work in and from our inward being, says Eckhart, so that our inner self breaks forth into activity and the activity is again drawn into our inwardness. (61) A parallel to this dual inward and outward movement is found in Boehme's writings: the mystic, says Boehme, ".....shall hear unspeakable but effectual words of God, which shall bring him back and outward again, by the divine effluence, to the very grossest and meanest matter of the earth, and then back and inwards to God again; then the spirit of God searcheth all things with him, and by him; and so he is rightly taught and driven [getrieben, "led, actuated"] by God." (62) Both Eckhart and Boehme are striving to express here the rhythmic, dual movement of the mystical life, which involves turning inwards to receive spiritual inspiration, and turning outwards to put this into effect in everyday life; when the self is integrated these two facets of the mystical life are not opposing but complementary.

#### Eckhart's Attitude to Theism

In spite of Eckhart's insistence that we become absolutely one with

the Godhead beyond God in union, there seems little doubt that theism (of a type) does play an essential role in his teachings. It is hard to be sure to what extent this is a matter of adaptation to orthodox dogma, or of Eckhart's use of the theological concepts of his cultural background to express experiences which perhaps do not actually require theism as a part of their interpretation. We could perhaps see Eckhart's theism as the recognition of the value of a theistic path as a 'means', in the same way as theism is seen by Śankara. In any case, Eckhart acknowledges simple piety as readily as mystical union with the One; his religious feelings are expressed with inward fervour and warmth, so that, as Otto says (63), there is a positive relationship between his mysticism and his theism. In spite of his teachings on the essential divinity of the soul, humility, repentance and faith are extremely important virtues for Eckhart. He revivifies traditional theistic dogmas and doctrines by giving them a new depth and inwardness. Nevertheless, it remains true that absolute unity with the One is a higher degree of attainment for Eckhart than a union of similarity or 'likeness' where distinction remains, and in this respect his views correspond to those of Śankara:

....when turning away from creatures we get on the track of truth, which is Jesus Christ, we are not wholly blessed, even though we are looking at divine truth; for while we are still looking at it, we are not in it. As long as a man has an object under consideration, he is not one with it. Where there is nothing but One, nothing but One is to be seen. (64)

In fact, Eckhart seems to distinguish two levels of attainment, a union of likeness and an absolute unity without distinction, the former being, as we have seen, "a retrogression, a quick retreat back to the upper level of the natural order of things." (65) It seems to me that Eckhart implies that we are united with the triune God, but one without distinction in the modeless Godhead, which makes good philosophical sense. (The Kabbalah, likewise, conceives of two levels of union, a union with distinction and an

absolute unity. In between these two lies the Abyss, which I have already discussed in connection with both Eckhart and the Kabbalah, which the mystic must cross in order to pass beyond particular forms, images and apprehensions. It seems to me that this may represent an exact parallel to the experiences of which Eckhart speaks.) Eckhart's writings are therefore of profound importance for any study concerned with the differentiation of types of mystical experience, as he appears to have undergone both theistic and monistic types of experience. A consideration of his writings may also throw light on the debate regarding the necessity of studying mystics within their total theological and cultural context, i.e., on the interrelationship between experience which is conditioned by the concepts, images and values brought to the experience, and, on the other hand, experience which is wholly a creative and individual revelation or realisation. To summarise Eckhart's teachings regarding union, it seems to me that what he is saying is that inasmuch as the Ground of the Soul, the 'divine spark' within, is united with God, we are God. In other respects, we are distinct from God. If we could live up to our highest realisations all the time, we would be one with the Godhead without distinction eternally; but we cannot bear the intensity of this vision for more than brief periods, at least not in this life. So we return to 'knowledge with mode', to a lower, but still divinely inspired, form of consciousness; but although this is in a sense a regression, at the same time it is our sacred duty, for it is a part of the mystic's calling to return, to teach, to show the way to others, to act on the material plane. Hence the importance both of God becoming man, and of man becoming God.

#### The Material World

This is reflected in Eckhart's attitude to the material world. His



mysticism is a mysticism of action, concerned with giving out the Light of the Divine to others, and making it manifest in our every action. Through inner realisation, the outer world is made divine: "The more [God] is within, the more without." (66) To know God is to know all because God is the All. To seek for God is to find both God, and the world seen in its true light, because God contains all things within himself. The mystic comes to see the Divine in the whole of creation, even in the sticks, stones and grasses, for all that appears outwardly manifold is really one in essence. Even earthly things that were, at the beginning of the path, a hindrance along the way, now themselves reflect the Divine:

Everything stands for God and you see only God in all the world. It is just as when one looks straight at the sun for a while: afterwards, everything he looks at has the image of the sun in it. (67)

After forsaking oneself, one comes back more truly to oneself; after the things of this world have been renounced as multiplicity, they come back to us in simplicity. Like the Unmoved Mover, the mystic now understands all multiplicity within himself or herself, while remaining unchangeable and still at the inmost centre.

Using the image of dawn which will later become very familiar to us from the writings of many other mystics, Eckhart says that when one knows creatures as they are in themselves, that is "twilight knowledge", but when they are known in God, that is "daybreak knowledge". (68) He clearly regards the coordination of the mystical vision, with life in this world, as the highest of goals, and in fact he holds that the world is a kind of necessary 'mediator' to us of the Divine Light. We could not bear to look upon the Light directly, without its being "steadied by matter and supported by likenesses". (69) It is through the world that we are led up to the Divine, made accustomed to it, strengthened so that we may bear the intensity of the vision.

Eckhart often speaks of the world and creatures as being 'nothing', i.e., seen in themselves (in "twilight knowledge") they are empty, transient, vain, an obstacle to realisation. He does not mean to imply that the world has no empirical reality, nor that it should be shunned or rejected; rather, he implies that creatures have no being independent of their relationship to the Divine, which gives them their being. Compared with the absolute reality of the Divine, the reality of creatures is as nothing; but inasmuch as creatures are of God, they have inherent divinity. They are images of Being, made in God's image. We may compare Śankara, who holds that the world seen simply in its material aspect alone is an appearance (māyā), whilst seen in its transcendental aspect, i.e., as Brahman, which gives it being, it is real.

In accordance with his view of the world, Eckhart upholds the interdependence of contemplation and practical action. Anyone who wishes to succeed in the contemplative life must build on firm foundations in this world, developing the active life. What we plant in the soil of contemplation, what we behold in unity, we reap in the harvest of action, in variety and diversity. Eckhart, like all mystics, stresses that good deeds in themselves can never be worth much if the inward life is undeveloped; but they are instituted so that our outer activities may be directed to God, and not diverted from him by incompatible pursuits. And, after realisation, they come completely naturally to us -- we do good because this is our nature, because we could not do otherwise. The ideal is to coordinate the contemplative life, and the active:

If a person withdraws into himself, with all his powers, mental and physical (i.e., agents of his soul), he comes at last to a condition in which he has no ideas and no limitations and in which he exists without activity of inner or outward life.

He should observe, then, whether or not he is moved to come back to life, but if he finds that he has no urge to get back to work or responsible activity, then he should break loose and get to work of some kind, mental or physical. For a man should ne-

ver be content (with such indulgence)....which really does violence to his nature..... Not that one should give up, neglect or forget his inner life for a moment, but he must learn to work in it, with it and out of it, so that the unity of his soul may break out into his activities and his activities shall lead him back to that unity. (70)

This anti-quietist attitude reflects our previous observation, that the 'return to the world' from the heights of formless consciousness, is an essential part of the mystical path. The vision of the Divine must be 'channelled down' into the practical concerns of daily life.

### Orthodoxy and Heresy

We have seen that there are many Neoplatonic elements in Eckhart's writings: the concept of the formless Godhead, the One, beyond God; the emphasis on the Via Negativa; the Platonic account of Universals; and so on. But he also absorbs into his teachings certain more orthodox strands of belief: the trinity of Persons, while not the highest truth, is nevertheless a spiritual reality; the grace of God, repentance from sin, and faith are stressed. In view of the variety of elements in Eckhart's thought, it is hardly surprising that he has been interpreted in a variety of ways; however, the more extreme interpretations of his teachings tend to twist the evidence by assuming that certain of Eckhart's principles can be discounted, that they are not what he 'really' meant; they involve simplifying the evidence to make it fit preconceived categories. Such approaches represent basic methodological problems which I shall discuss in greater length in Chapter VI of this study. To my mind, those interpretations which hold that Eckhart was really a wholly orthodox Catholic are unsatisfactory, and do not represent his writings in anything like a true light. Such interpretations appear to be motivated either by theological dogmatism, or by the insistence on the contextual study of mysticism

carried to an unrealistic extreme -- the assumption here being that Eckhart must have been orthodox because he was a Dominican: where could he have got unorthodox ideas from? This approach denies the possibility of individual, creative mystical revelation, and also ignores the fact that Eckhart was a very widely-read and highly intelligent scholar. It seems to me that Eckhart combined Neoplatonic and Catholic ideas intentionally and in full knowledge of what he was doing, in an attempt to express what he felt he had to express -- what he felt to be the truth, which 'would out' -- this truth springing from his own inner experience. The indwelling of the Divine which he felt within was more compelling to him than any Church dogma -- yet he did not wish to be a heretic, and was certainly not a pantheist in the strict sense (i.e., as distinct from a panentheist), as some have attempted to argue. Otto comments that Eckhart's own thought continually cuts across his Scholastic framework; there is something in him -- a fundamental mystical intuition -- which is entirely his own, not conditioned by his Scholastic background. Otto sees his Scholastic terminology as a rationalisation of something welling up from a hidden depth, something which speaks directly to us and is understood of itself without explanation. (71) The interweaving of individual revelation and theological terminology in Eckhart results in his stamping orthodox ideas with the vivid pattern of his own inspirations. He enlists the help of theology and scriptural tradition to illustrate and confirm his mystical intuitions.

The impression received from his defense at his trial for heresy is that he understood Christianity, in its innermost mystical sense, far better than his accusers; he was far more advanced than they in the spiritual life, and perhaps also possessed of greater intellectual gifts, and they simply did not understand what he was saying. With regard to the

articles on which he was attacked, Eckhart says that "....the truth (of them) and the reasoning of the truth is evident and also, either the definite malice or the crass ignorance of those who contradict me and attempt to measure things divine, subtle and incorporeal by a material imagination." (72) He says that he may be in error but he cannot be a heretic; for error depends on the intellect, whereas heresy depends on wilful adherence to heretical doctrines. He tries to clarify and explain his statements, quoting scriptural passages and the writings of the Church Fathers to support his views, showing a profound insight into their inner and deeper meanings. He often says that certain articles which are under attack sound bad as they stand, but are true in the absolute sense -- the propositions, isolated from one another and written down as formal statements, lose something which gives them truth ("the letter kills, the Spirit gives life").

It is certain that much of what Eckhart teaches is alien to Catholic dogma, but, to my mind, he is a Christian in the truest sense of the word, and a prime representative of the Christian mystical tradition, so many of whose members (Boehme being another notable example) have tragically been persecuted by the Church. What can we feel but pity for the commission who condemned him for what they called the extreme and paradoxical ways in which he expressed his thought, holding that he might contaminate the hearts of those who listened to him, and that "he wanted to know more than was fitting"? (73)

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- (25) Eckhart, *ibid.*, Pp.38-39, 37.
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- (27) Eckhart, *ibid.*, p.241.
- (28) Eckhart, *ibid.*, p.240. Compare Plotinus' symbolism of the circle: see above, Pp.39-40.
- (29) Eckhart, *ibid.*, p.173.
- (30) Eckhart, in C. de B. Evans *op. cit.*, p.40.
- (31) Eckhart, in Blakney *op. cit.*, p.148.
- (32) Eckhart, *ibid.*, Pp.228, 229, 231-232. Blakney points out that the phrase translated "back in the Womb" (in meiner ersten ursache) literally means "in my prime Origin".
- (33) Eckhart, *ibid.*, Pp.72-73.
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- (35) Eckhart, *ibid.*, p.107.
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this passage may not be indisputable.

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### METAPHYSICAL MYSTICISM PART 3: HENRY SUSO

Eckhart's teachings came to have a great influence on Western mysticism, and in particular his metaphysics determined the speculative aspect of the writings of many other German mystics. Tauler (c. 1300-1361), for example, was a direct pupil of Eckhart, and their writings are very similar. The Flemish mystic Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) adopted many of Eckhart's teachings (the Abyss, imageless perception, the modeless Godhead, the birth of the Logos in the soul, etc.) adding to Eckhart's metaphysical framework a more emotional, theistic element expressed in the language of the Mystical Marriage, and also adding a set of 'stages' (the Seven Steps of the Ladder to Heaven, or the Seven Grades of Love) not found in Eckhart.

Suso (c. 1295-1365) was also a pupil of Eckhart, and we shall now consider him in detail. Whereas Suso, too, adopts Eckhart's metaphysics, unlike his spiritual mentor he tells us in detail about his own visions and revelations, about his intimate personal experience. He is of great interest as a mystic who illustrates a visionary apprehension of the spiritual world, an apprehension which clothes itself in allegorical or pictorial representation. I have classified Suso as a 'metaphysical' mystic, but his writings also show a strongly devotional attitude; a further illustration of the fact that any categories that we may use to divide mystical experience into types, will overlap in many cases.

Suso's mysticism is a vivid, colourful expression of the inner journey or adventure, and his autobiography plainly reveals to us the intensity, and the great inherent value, of his experiences of vision, ecstasy and rapture. He tells us of other worlds, of regions beyond the realm of sense. Born of a noble German family, Suso often uses the imagery of Courtly



Love and Knighthood to express his ideal of what he calls "spiritual chivalry", and in this respect we can compare his writings to the Arthurian legends and Grail romances (which became a vehicle for the expression of mystical ideas). But even when expressed under other symbolic forms, there is always a note of the romantic and dramatic about Suso's descriptions of his mystical experience.

### Suso's Visionary Experiences

Suso's earliest recorded ecstatic vision lasted between half an hour and an hour, and during this time he could not be sure whether he was still in the body or whether he was undergoing what would now be called an out-of-the-body experience; but when he came to his senses, it seemed to him that he had returned from another world. After this, he was filled with longing for God:

He walked with his body, and no one saw or noticed anything outwardly in him, but his soul and his heart were inwardly full of heavenly wonders. The celestial visions went in and out in his deepest depths, and he felt somehow as if he was hovering in the air. The powers of his soul were filled with sweet heavenly scent just as if one pours a good balsam out of a box, and the box afterwards retains a sweet smell. This heavenly odour remained with him a long time afterwards, and gave him a heavenly longing for God. (1)

(St. Teresa also speaks of a 'heavenly perfume' in connection with her visionary experiences, as we shall see later.) (2) The effect of Suso's experience, then, was to confirm him in his dedication to the spiritual life. This point will be enlarged upon in our discussion of the validity of visionary experience.

Suso refers to himself throughout his autobiography as the "Servant of the Eternal Wisdom". He sees himself as being given in spiritual marriage to Eternal Wisdom personified as a beautiful woman, and here uses the

symbolism of Courtly Love. (On other less frequent occasions, Suso sees the infant Jesus, clasped to his mother's breast, as representing Eternal Wisdom.) He was especially fond of the Books of Wisdom, and was inspired to the above self-dedication by certain passages from these scriptures, such as Proverbs IV:7-9:

Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honour, when thou dost embrace her. She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee.

The concept of Wisdom in the Books of Wisdom is often esoterically interpreted as the spiritual bride of the soul, and the teaching is therefore seen as concerned with the union of masculine and feminine principles within the self. (Kabbalistically, Wisdom here is also seen as Shekinah, the 'vestment' or 'body' of God, the manifestation of God immanent in the world. The passage quoted above could also be interpreted Kabbalistically as referring to the first three Sephiroth, Kether, Chokmah and Binah; this, however, lies outside the sphere of our discussion. Christian mysticism has, in certain cases, been profoundly influenced by the Kabbalah, as we shall show in our discussion of Boehme. There does not appear to be any evidence that Suso was directly acquainted with its doctrines, but it seems to me that scholars of Christian mysticism have neglected to consider that, since Christianity came out of Judaism, Christian mysticism may owe more than is suspected to Jewish mysticism. I have discussed later the probability that St. Teresa of Avila, who came from a Jewish background, absorbed Jewish mystical elements into the structure of her book The Interior Castle. I have also already pointed out a number of correspondences between Eckhart and Plotinus, and the Kabbalah.)

In one vision Suso saw Eternal Wisdom "hovering high above him on a

throne of clouds. She shone like the morning star, and burnt like the glowing sun. Her crown was eternity, her garment was blessedness, her words sweetness, her embrace the satisfaction of all desire. She was both far and near, high and low: she was present and yet hidden.....She towered over the topmost heights of the highest heavens, and touched the deepest chasm of the abyss [Abgrund]." (3) We may be reminded of the vision of Revelation 12:1, the woman clothed with the Sun, with the Moon at her feet, and crowned with stars; or, again, of Boethius' vision of Philosophy as a Divine female instructress. (4) Parallels can also be found in the conception of Sophia (Wisdom) personified as a female figure, the feminine aspect of the Godhead and source of mystical insight. Sophia appears in this guise in Gnosticism, and also in the writings of Boehme, as we shall see later. It might be mentioned that in his dedication to Eternal Wisdom -- and through his devotion to the Virgin Mary -- Suso brings about an equilibrium between the masculine and feminine principles in his approach to the Divine; a balance not often achieved within the Christian tradition, and one which in my opinion is of great importance for mysticism. This point will also be further discussed in a later chapter. Another vision of Eternal Wisdom is described thus by Suso:

After a time of suffering, it happened early one morning that he was surrounded by the heavenly host in a vision. Then he requested one of the bright princes of heaven to show him what God's hidden dwelling-place in his soul looked like. Then the angel said to him: "Now cast a joyful glance into thyself, and see how God is caressing thy loving soul." Swiftly he looked in and saw that his body above his heart was clear as crystal; and he saw in the midst of his heart Eternal Wisdom sitting peacefully, in a lovely form, and beside her sat the soul of the Servant, in heavenly longing. She was leaning lovingly at the side of God and His arms held her embraced and pressed to His divine heart. Thus she lay, entranced and in an ecstasy of love in the arms of God the beloved. (5)

Suso was also greatly devoted to Mary as Queen of Heaven, the fount of mercy and compassion, the mediator between Christ and the soul. His

description of what he calls the "game of love" played between God and the Virgin is more reminiscent of Indian conceptions of Śiva and Śakti than of orthodox Christianity:

Thou [the Virgin] art God's, and He is thine, and ye two form an eternal, infinite play of love [minnespil], which no duality can ever separate! [daz enkeine zweiheit niemer me gescheiden mag].  
(6)

The "Game of Love" (ludus amoris) in Christian mysticism, here used by Suso to describe the relationship between God and Mary, is more usually used to describe the relationship between God and the soul, and the fluctuations in the soul's awareness of the Divine presence, and Suso does in fact also use the term in this sense. Eternal Wisdom explains the nature of this 'game' to Suso in a passage which could well be taken to illustrate the bittersweetness of the 'love-in-separation' found in devotional forms of mysticism:

All the time that Love is with Love, Love does not know how dear Love is. But when Love is separated from Love, then only does Love feel how dear Love is. (7)

Suso frequently uses the imagery of lover and Beloved, and speaks of the fire of Divine love, like the devotional mystics whom we shall discuss in Chapter II; he changed his name to Amandus (the lover) because of a vision in which he was given this new name by Eternal Wisdom.

Not all of his visions, however, are centred around Eternal Wisdom. We hear also of frequent inner encounters with a heavenly youth, who appears to have been a kind of spiritual guide, and who seems to mediate the power of the Guardian Angel whom Suso also saw on a few occasions. Once, for example, Suso saw this youth, "who seemed to be a heavenly minstrel sent to him by God" and who, together with a band of musicians, led Suso in a dance which was "not like those that are danced in this world. It was like a heavenly flowing forth and back again into the lonely abyss of the divine mystery [abgrund der götlichen togenheit]." (8)

Suso also had many other visions, quite diverse in character. Once in an ecstasy he saw a golden cross ornamented with precious stones which appeared shining over his heart; on another occasion he met his Guardian Angel and was transported to another land. He had intimations of the future which often came true; visions of heaven and hell; and so on. Suso also claims that "many souls appeared to him when they had departed from this world" -- including Eckhart, and a friar called Johannes de Fuoterer, both of whom gave Suso mystical instruction and described the nature of their after-death states. (9) Some of Suso's visions, then, were precognitive, revealing things that later came to pass; others were revelations of certain truths or insights; others, such as the following, served to comfort him in times of suffering:

Once, when the Servant had turned to God with great earnestness, and asked Him to teach him how to suffer, there appeared before him in a spiritual vision the likeness of the crucified Christ in the shape of a seraph; and this angelic seraph had six wings, with two it covered its head, with two its feet, and with two it flew. On the two lowest wings it was written: "Accept suffering willingly"; on the middle ones it said: "Bear suffering patiently"; and on the two highest ones: "Learn to suffer after the example of Christ." (10)

Suso's visions are indeed extremely numerous, and many of them are full of colourful and interesting imagery. To the sympathetic reader, they speak for themselves, and convey a great sense of radiance of spiritual power. To enumerate all Suso's visions in detail would lie outside the scope of this discussion, but we shall refer to two more of particular interest.

In a treatise known as 'The Colloquy of the Nine Rocks', Suso uses the symbolism of nine rocks to represent nine degrees or stages of the mystical path. The sea which surrounds these rocks is spread with the nets of the devil. In his vision, Suso is taken from the lower rocks to the higher, and finds their inhabitants more beautiful and shining in the light

of grace the higher he goes. On the ninth rock he finds those who have arrived at the highest degree of perfection, and is told that it is still possible for these to fall from grace, and that those who fall from this height are even more to be avoided than the demons themselves, because they have abused their divine knowledge -- like Lucifer, they fall because of pride. (This same basic idea is common to many esoteric teachings. We may be reminded of the maxim corruptio optimi pessima, 'the best when corrupted becomes the worst'.) Suso looks at the sea itself, and sees among the nets two men: one black as the devil, the other beautiful and bright as an angel. Of the former he is told that he was once an inhabitant of the ninth rock, but fell like Lucifer. The other is still in truth a dweller on the ninth rock, but has thrown himself among the nets so that he may be able, if possible, to help those who have fallen. His great compassion means that he would endure even the pains and torments of hell for these others, if by so doing he might deliver them from the power of the enemy. His virtue and his trust in God mean that he need not fear to cast himself among the nets in this manner, for he will not be ensnared by them. (11) This shows an interesting parallel to the concept of the Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism, who, because of his or her great compassion, postpones enlightenment in order to strive for the release of all beings, and whose wisdom prevents him or her from becoming re-entangled in the 'nets' of material existence. Both for Suso, and for the Mahāyāna, it is compassion that is the motive force behind this voluntary descent into the material world. However, for the Bodhisattva it is wisdom that prevents re-entanglement in the world of matter (the balance between wisdom -- *prajñā* -- and compassion -- *karuna* -- being a key aspect of the Bodhisattva's character); for Suso, it is virtue and trust in God that prevent the dweller on the ninth rock -- a Redeemer after the

pattern of Christ -- from becoming thus ensnared.

Suso's vision of heaven has a quality of great ethereal beauty. Many medieval cosmologies posit nine heavens; in Suso's vision, above the ninth is a "heaven of fire" and a fair city of gold, pearls, and precious stones, where there grow beautiful flowers. There is singing, dancing, and music, and all is joyful. The inhabitants "drink of the living sparkling fountain" and "gaze at the pure, clear mirror of the naked Godhead [den lutren klaren spiegel der blozen gotheit] in which all things are made known and revealed." Eternal Wisdom leads the perfected soul into this celestial paradise, and adorns it with "the fair garment of the light of glory", the "transfigured body, which is seven times as bright as the sun's beams, swift, subtle, and impassible". She places on the head of the perfected soul "a fair golden crown, and thereon a golden halo." (12) It seems that herein Suso's early dedication of himself to Eternal Wisdom is fulfilled, his aspirations crowned: "She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee."

Suso tells us in his Prologue to the Little Book of Eternal Wisdom that the visions he describes were not seen with the physical eyes, nor were his conversations with Eternal Wisdom carried on by means of physical speech. (13) A few mystics do have 'exterior' visions, seen with the physical sense of sight, as well as 'inner visions' (Ramakrishna, who will be discussed later, is a case in point) but most mystics are extremely wary of such exterior visions. Suso himself tells us that in the more developed stages of mysticism, the workings of God are more interior, and do not break forth into exterior manifestation. (14) Inner vision is in fact an important aspect of contemplative or meditative insight. The type of 'seeing' involved here is not, of course, visual apprehension of physical objects, but is none the less just as real as such seeing (and indeed, may

seem to the seer to be more real). The point to be grasped is an apparently simple one, and yet has infinite ramifications, this being that there are levels of reality other than the physical. Modern materialistic thought finds it difficult to conceive of these other planes of being, and so perpetuates the dichotomy between an 'objective' world of physical objects capable of empirical detection, and a 'subjective' realm containing anything that does not come under this former category (this realm in fact, it might be added, embraces a number of different types of experience, which should not strictly speaking all be identified under the one heading). The question of this dualistic assumption concerning the 'subjective' and the 'objective', the inner and the outer, will be further explored in Chapter V. I shall also discuss visionary experiences in greater detail later, by reference to the writings of Ramakrishna and of St. Teresa, who has some valuable points to make regarding different types of visions and their value. For the present, I shall simply add that visions can be seen as symbolic manifestations or objectivisations of our perception of the spiritual world. As Moore notes (15) visions have frequently been excluded from philosophical studies of mysticism, on the grounds that they represent an impure or lower form of mystical experience. Stace, for example, excludes visions from consideration at the beginning of his study. But visionary experience has played a more important part in mysticism than many writers have suggested, and in some forms of mysticism (such as the Jewish Hekhalot tradition) it has been deliberately cultivated. If the mystic has what is known as a strong power of visualisation, or if naturally of artistic temperament, pictorial representation will play an important part in the psychic life. Visions, as Underhill says, are "symbolic reconstructions of reality on levels accessible to sense" (16). We do not have to regard them as divinely-instituted miracles; nor, on the other



hand, is that view acceptable which regards them as no more than hallucinations, signs of emotional or psychological imbalance. This does not, of course, exclude either of these as possibilities in certain cases; we clearly need some criterion for distinguishing visions from hallucinations. (Examples of such criteria are discussed in my section on Teresa of Avila, and are also mentioned in the section of this study entitled 'The Referent of Mystical Experience'.) Mystics themselves are fully aware of this, and this is one reason why they tend to be wary of visions, more particularly of those exterior visions seen with the physical sense of sight. Nevertheless, there is no reason to suppose that even such exterior visions may not in some cases be valid and valuable. There is no reason, for the monist at least, why something apprehended on the physical level may not be a representation or revelation of spiritual truth. We have remarked that many of Suso's visions confirmed him in his dedication to the mystical life, gave him strength in times of suffering, revealed certain truths to him, and so on. Visions, clearly, are important not in themselves, or because of the form they take, but because of what they show or teach us. (Hence, it is taught that they should not be sought after for their own sake; if pursued purely for themselves, they can be a hindrance to development, a sidetrack.) But the highest type of vision, insist the mystics, is the vision of the formless: as in the case where Suso, we are told, was ravished out of himself in a state of ecstasy, and no longer knew if he was in the world or out of it, because in this vision he saw only God, unique and simple, without any multiplicity. (17)

That which is revealed to us in visionary experience is typically symbolic and spiritual truth rather than facts about the physical world, although there are exceptions to this, as with Suso's precognitive visions. Thus the medieval cosmology of the nine heavens as seen by Suso can be

taken to signify nine states of consciousness or spiritual development, like the nine rocks of the 'Colloquy'. The truth is the truth of inner meanings or essential significances and correspondences. It is the truth of symbol which is none the less 'real' for being symbolic: it is simply a truth of another order of being than the material. The medieval cosmology is still true on its own level now, and in a certain way reflects more truth than does a materialistic-scientific description of the universe, which considers only its physical aspect. A parallel to the allegory of the nine heavens or nine rocks can also be seen in Suso's use of the image of several concentric circles to signify the emanations of the Godhead, whereby the Divine essence flows down or out through all things and into the soul of humanity. The still point at the centre of all the circles would here be symbolically equivalent to the highest heaven or the ninth rock, the symbolism being that of height in the latter two cases, inner depth or centrality in the former.

#### Suso's Life as an Illustration of the Mystical Path

Like many mystics, Suso speaks of periods of intermittent 'pleasure' and 'pain' states, of oscillation between illumination, and deprivation of the Divine presence. In his case these oscillations lasted for a period of sixteen years, during which time he subjected himself to harsh penance and mortification, a discipline which the modern mind finds distasteful and unnecessary. Such practices, although not unknown in antiquity, were largely a medieval development. Self-discipline, self-denial, and the training of the will are certainly necessary for any aspiring mystic, but there is a vast difference between these, and the often repulsive mortifications of some of the medieval saints and of some Hindu mystics. In any

case, Suso was eventually instructed by an angel in a vision to desist from his mortifications. Shortly afterwards, he was visited by the Heavenly Youth, who said that he had been long enough in the "lower school" and that he would now lead him to the "highest school". This meant a release from physical austerities, but entailed the most difficult form of discipline of all: the complete surrender of the self to God. Suso was told that he would have to undergo suffering of a different kind, which would involve the public ruin of his good name and his being forsaken by both God and the world. In another vision, this progression to the "upper school" was allegorised as Suso's admission to the rank of knighthood from that of squire, to fight the "spiritual chivalry". He was to endure blows, attacks, suffering; to "sit firm in the saddle and let blows rain upon him"; to endure right to the end of the tournament, and to bear it valiantly and cheerfully, not to show fear or pain. As the prize of the best knight in earthly tournaments of the time was to have a gold ring put open his finger by the fairest lady present, so Suso yearns to have a ring of union vouchsafed to him by Eternal Wisdom. (18)

As usual, his visions were right: for ten further years he was plagued by temptations, inner turmoil, spiritual aridity, doubts and torments. He was falsely accused of stealing and of other fictitious offences, and was also accused of writing heretical books; in addition, he suffered serious illness. Later he suffered slander and was deserted even by his closest friends. He had many adventures whilst travelling, and several times nearly met a horrible death, but each time was saved by some 'coincidence' or stroke of 'luck'. He came to take his suffering for granted; one trial followed another, so that once he was able to say that he feared God had forgotten him, because he had not been attacked in his body or his reputation for four weeks! In spite of his many trials, however, we are

struck by his utter dedication, his purity of heart and will, which can clearly be felt throughout his life story.

After ten years of such torments and tribulations, suddenly Suso finds that he does not know what suffering is -- he only knows bliss and joy, and the love of God in which he lives and moves -- and he has all his heart's desire. He has transcended the duality of pleasure and pain. This mystery is explained to him in a vision: those who die to themselves, he is told, "are so completely lost in soul and mind in God that, so to speak, they know nothing else of themselves save that they apprehend themselves and all things in their prime origin [sich und ellú ding ze nemene in ire ersten ursprunge]." (19) They continue to feel pleasure and pain like other people -- in fact sometimes more deeply than others, because of their refined sensitivity -- but they remain detached from such emotions:

Having died to themselves, they are raised above, as far as is possible, so that their joy is full and unchanging in all things. For in the divine being, into which their hearts have passed, if they have found the right way, there is no place for pain or grief, but only for peace and joy.....pain is there no longer pain and suffering is no longer suffering, but all things are pure peace..... (20)

This basic theme will be echoed again and again by other mystics whom we shall encounter: the 'death' of the lower self, suffering and joy becoming one, detachment from pain and pleasure, seeing "all things in their prime origin" (or, as the Bhagavad-Gītā puts it, seeing "all beings in the Self"). (21) As for so many other mystics, so for Suso, the transmutation of suffering is achieved through a death/rebirth experience in which one's will becomes one with the Divine will:

The will of God tastes so sweet to them and they obtain so much glory from it that everything that God decrees for them makes them so joyous that they neither wish nor desire anything else. (22)

Suso says (and herein lies a great deal of truth) that if we do not willingly give up those of our desires and attachments that keep us from

the full vision of the Divine, the time shall surely come when we will have to give them up against our will. (23) For God's will will be done anyway, and in the long run less pain results from aligning oneself with it, than from pointlessly attempting to fight it. As for the necessity of suffering, which always sets its foot upon the mystical path sooner or later, it is said that in the acceleration of inner development brought about by the mystical life, one draws to oneself lessons and trials with which one would otherwise be given longer to deal; in other words, all one's inner experience is, as it were, telescoped into a brief burst of energy or consciousness. Only through bearing this in fortitude and detachment comes the perfection of mystical life; and thereafter, all one can do, as Suso says, is to:

.... cease from asking questions; listen to what God speaks within thee. Thou hast reason to rejoice that it has been given to thee to know what is hidden from many, and however hard the learning of it has been, it is all over now, in the fullness of time. Nothing now remains, save to dwell in divine peace, and in quiet rest and joy to abide the hour when thou wilt pass from this world to perfect bliss. (24)

On attaining this goal, this beautiful stillness and perfect inward peace, the mystic no longer needs to strive towards his or her goal as something far-off and unattained.

### The Metaphysical Structure of Suso's Writings

It remains to discuss the more strictly metaphysical aspects of Suso's writings, and the extent of his debt to Eckhart will readily be seen here. Indeed, his metaphysical doctrines and his mystical instruction given to his pupils have quite a different tone from his descriptions of his own experience, showing that a distinction needs to be drawn between mystical experience itself, and metaphysical or theological frameworks of

interpretation. This distinction will be discussed in depth later in this study.

Eckhart's teachings determined the philosophical side of the writings of the 'Friends of God' who included amongst their number Suso, Tauler, Ruysbroeck, the anonymous author of the Theologia Germanica, and others. German mysticism as taught by the 'Friends of God' was strongly metaphysical and abstract, and greatly influenced by Neoplatonism. It emphasised submission of self to the Divine will, and a stripping of the intellect of all sensible images, and even all "intellectual images" or rational ideas, however sublime and spiritual, so as to enter into the void of "divine darkness". Union was the return of the soul to the divine unity of which it was always essentially a part.

Like Eckhart, Suso distinguishes between God and the Godhead, the latter being the unity of Divine Being undifferentiated into the three Persons. God acts and "begets" or creates, but the Godhead is pure unity, and being unchangeable, cannot act. However, God and the Godhead are said to be ultimately one. The source and final goal of all things, the "eternal uncreated Truth" (25) is a Non-Being or Nothing (Niht) which cannot be named, because we cannot conceive of it under our usual structures of thought -- but "by common agreement, men call this Nothing 'God'." (26) (Obviously the "common agreement" here is the agreement of mystics, not of the orthodox.) Everything comes forth from this "welling spring of the naked Godhead", this "unfathomable abyss" (27); it is the source of all knowledge, being, and life. All creatures are poured forth from this inflowing and overflowing fountain of goodness, and all are absorbed back into it, thus giving rise to a cyclic pattern of 'involution' and 'evolution', or centrifugal and centripetal movements of energy. (This doctrine is often found in the less orthodox expressions of Western

mysticism, and is also basic to Hindu thought: Bhāgavan or Brahman is said to emanate all worlds and creatures and to absorb them back into him, her or itself at the end of each cosmic cycle.) Following Eckhart, Suso describes the Absolute as naked, simple purity and unity, a divine darkness which is yet full of light; a "dark stillness", an "uncreated creativeness", a "self-comprehending light". (28) God is in all things and outside all things; he is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. God is Being: when we look at this or that particular thing, we are unable to see pure Being, which is everywhere one, and which is the cause enabling us to see all other things:

....particular beings distract and dazzle the mind, so that it cannot see the Divine darkness, which is in itself the brightest of all brightness. (29)

Suso's language, like Eckhart's, is replete with striking paradoxes of this kind. The Divine Being is the light by which we are able to see all things, whilst in itself it is the darkness of which we can say nothing.

Suso is an emanationist, as is illustrated above: the one source of all, possessing utmost unity and spirituality, emanates the multiplicity of things from itself. Humanity bears within itself a "divine spark"; the human soul is one of the "vessels" which receives the all-penetrating Divine light and essence:

The supreme and superessential Spirit has ennobled man by illuminating him with a ray from the Eternal Godhead....Hence from out the great ring which represents the Eternal Godhead there flow forth....little rings, which may be taken to signify the high nobility of natural creatures. (30)

Our nature, therefore, says Suso, is richly endowed as it is in its present state, and God is found through turning within, through looking into oneself: "A man should dwell in his centre, which is God." (31) It is refreshing to find in Suso no obsession with sin, but an optimistic and healthy confidence in humanity's inherent spirituality and divinity. His

practice of extreme austerities and tortures in the earlier stages of his mystical life may seem to contradict this; but we do not find him recommending such behaviour to others, and it seems that in his own case he felt such practices to be necessary in order that he might conquer his self-will. Suso in fact appears to regard the devil and evil as having no independent existence of their own (this point connects with the 'Colloquy of the Nine Rocks', where Lucifer's originally angelic status is brought out), but as being brought about through our attachments to the world and to our selfish desires (32); and once these have been transcended, there is no need for austerities. It might be added that such discipline does not impede effective action in this world: "He who has attained to the purification of the senses in God performs so much the better all the operations of the senses." (33)

Unlike some visionaries, Suso does not fall into an excess of emotionalism, but always retains his philosophical discrimination. He speaks of the importance of discrimination and reason: in the vision of formlessness, in which everything is seen as one and everything in God, it is easy for the mind to "run wild, like new wine which is still fermenting and has not settled." (34) There is a danger of going astray here, for

.....when (these persons), with their undisciplined reason, they try to behold God as all in all, and endeavour, according to their imperfect intelligence, to let go this and that [notice the terminology borrowed from Eckhart], they know not how. It is true, indeed, that every thing must be let go by him who would attain perfection; but they do not understand how this letting-go of things is to be managed, and they try to let go this and that without discretion, and to rid themselves of all things without attending to the necessary distinctions.....Hence many a one imagines that he has attained everything if only he can go forth out of himself in this way, and detach himself from himself. But it is not so. For he has only slunk over the outer ditch of the still unstormed fortress, under cover of the screen behind which he skilfully and secretly conceals himself..... (35)

This surely illustrates beyond doubt that (as I argue throughout this study) that which is above reason is not therefore 'irrational', but continues to



embrace reason within its scope. The ideal is not to vanish into some cosmic haziness, but rather to attain that state in which:

....all things present themselves to him now in the manner in which they are in God, and yet they all remain each one what it is in its own natural essence. (36)

In other words, we are concerned again with a vision of unity-in-diversity, in which the mystic sees all things in the Divine, the Divine in all things -- but in which particular objects nevertheless retain their distinctness, and are all the richer and more beautiful for this. Freed from the multiplicity of images, one no longer sees things in their sensible or material aspect alone, but as manifestations of Deity.

Suso's teachings regarding the methods to be followed towards mystical attainment are much the same as those of many other mystics. We should be the same in success and adversity, profit and loss; we should remain detached from all worldly things, and even from our own ideas or knowledge, however spiritually-orientated, for "an unbounded longing, even for what is divine, when it is excessive, may become a secret obstacle." (37) After purifying ourselves so that our desires are subject to the spirit within, we must abandon our will to that of God, accepting all suffering patiently. All the powers of the soul should be conformed to the Eternal Truth. Suso also gives instructions for contemplative or meditative techniques, involving withdrawal from the messages of the senses, reason, etc. His potent literary style well expresses the intensity of experience that may be engendered by following such mystical techniques:

If thou wouldst enter into the hidden mysteriousness mount boldly upwards; and disregarding thy outer and inner senses, and the workings of thy reason in itself, and all things visible and invisible, and all that is and is not, mount upwards to the simple Unity.....on that mysterious, incomprehensible, all-dazzling pinnacle of pinnacles marvellous things are heard from out the low whispering silence and marvellous things are felt, new and yet unchangeable, amid the splendours of that dark obscurity, which

is the fullness of light and glory manifested, wherein all that is shines forth, and which fills to overflowing the sightless mind of the beholder with its incomprehensible, invisible, and effulgent luminousness. (38)

The mystic must lose himself or herself in the "dark obscurity" which is God, in what Suso calls the "endless where in which the spirituality of all spirits finds its end" (39), where all multiplicity ceases, where one may "gaze without any medium upon the naked Godhead" (40). Suso follows Eckhart in calling the return to the Godhead the "break-through" (41) and with his characteristic descriptive power (perhaps in this passage also borrowing the symbolism of height and depth from Eckhart) says that here

The spirit.....soars up now flying on the summitless heights, now swimming in the bottomless depths of the sublime marvels of the Godhead. (42)

#### The Heights of Mystical Attainment

In the highest state of union, the soul is "divested of itself" and "ceases to be conscious of its own proper name and existence...."; it "no longer takes note of any distinction between individual existences"; but, on the other hand, says Suso, it recognises and holds to the "separate existence of every creature." (43) Time and again, Suso repeats this apparently baffling paradox. In one place he explicitly states that the mystic "...becomes one and the same thing with God while retaining his particular and natural being." (44) Elsewhere, he attempts to explain this at greater length. The soul in the state of union no longer distinguishes herself and her actions from God; she "penetrates intimately into God." (45) Nevertheless, she remains a creature; but she does not consider whether she exists or whether she is a creature. She does not lose that which she already has (her individuality) but acquires that which she has not, that is, divine existence. In mystical union the soul does not reflect on itself, but after returning to everyday consciousness, it is aware of its

separate existence as a creature, distinct from God:

He [the mystic] comes to understand it [the divine life within] more and more purely, and it remains in him. But nevertheless, he cannot live up to all this after the return. If he is to attain this, he must be in the ground which is hidden in the aforesaid Nothing. There one knows nothing, there is nothing there, nor is there any place there. Whatever one says of it is a mere mockery. (46)

In this state "before which all words recoil" one cannot even know that one knows, or know that one is in a state of union, for there is no duality; and as the Upaniṣads say, "By what should one know the knower?" (47) -- with what should one understand the principle which is itself the source of all knowledge? -- for knowledge, in the usual sense of the term, presupposes a knowing subject and an object to be known. I have illustrated from the writings of other mystics the mode of apprehension of mystical truth which, it is claimed, involves a transcendence of subject and object, and in which we become what we know. Suso's description of union may serve as a further illustration of this. But once we become aware of the state of consciousness we are in, or of the knowledge we possess, says Suso, we begin to return from the highest state itself, which, as he remarks, we cannot live up to after our return. Suso appears to follow Eckhart directly here; but we find the same basic ideas in other mystical traditions also. I have discussed in Chapter V of this study the question of loss of awareness in the higher reaches of mystical experience.

The apparent paradox of the unity-in-diversity of the state of the soul in union as described by Suso, may be partially explained when we remind ourselves that for Suso all creatures issue forth or emanate from the Godhead; they all exist eternally in God and are the same life, essence and power, insofar as they are in God. It would seem to follow (although Suso does not explicitly state this) that union (as for Plotinus,

Eckhart and Śankara) is a realisation of what we always and eternally are in the depths of our beings -- rather than a complete change into something that we have not before been. Our distinctness from God is obvious, while our unity with God awaits discovery in our inner depths. Looked at from a slightly different angle, one could say that in the highest stages of mystical experience, the mystic brings the Godhead down into manifestation within himself or herself. In certain passages, Suso implies that momentarily at least, in the highest state of union, all difference fades away, and we do literally become God without any diversity; multiplicity only returns on our descent to everyday consciousness. Elsewhere he says that even when the soul becomes one spirit with God, having lost herself in God, her being remains, "but in another form, in another glory, and in another power." (48) He uses here the simile of a drop of water merging into a larger quantity of wine, which may remind us of the famous symbol of rivers running to the ocean, found in Hindu mysticism and in St. Teresa (49). Clearly we have here another illustration of the limited powers of purely rational thought and logic. The Truth itself, says Suso, is formless, and one cannot, therefore, adequately express it in words, figures, or images. The difficulties that we encounter in trying to understand the state of the mystic in union proceed from what Suso calls human reason, whereas in mystical experience itself we touch what he calls the reason above human understanding, known to other mystical traditions as gnosis (γνῶσις) or jñāna. Attempts to express the nature of this mystical perception in words, will very often have to make use of paradox, and as Suso says,

Unless a man can understand two contraries, that is, two contradictory things, together, then truly and without any doubt it is not easy to speak to him of such things. For, until he understands this, he has not yet started out on the path of the life that I am talking about. (50)

The use of paradox is essentially related to the ineffability of the higher reaches of mystical experience, and Suso, like all mystics, insists that we cannot say what God is; the Deity cannot be known by reason or book-learning, but only through experience, an experience which is supreme bliss, in which we penetrate the centre of the divinity which is the unity of all things, an experience which cannot be adequately expressed in words:

.....unlike as it is, when a man heareth himself a dulcet instrument of strings sweetly sounding, compared to whoso but heareth tell thereof, even so are the words which are received in the purity of grace and flow forth out of a living heart by a living mouth unlike to those same words if they are beheld upon the dead parchment.....For there they grow cold, I know not how, and wither away like roses that have been plucked....." (51)

Like Eckhart, Suso speaks of the highest stages of mystical experience as entailing passing beyond time as we know it. He tells us that we should strive to attain "the now of eternity" (52) and says that "For him who enters eternity there is no more past, no more future, only the present." (53) 'Eternal life', then, is found not in some future state but in the here and now, by rising above the temporal order (although the mystical life, for Suso as a Christian, is not perfected until after physical death). This may be seen to be the significance, also, of Suso's statement that union is completed "in the fullness of time" (54): it takes place in a timeless state, in which it is no longer meaningful to speak of 'before' and 'after', of past, present or future. It is well known that in deep states of meditation, time seems to 'expand' or 'contract' so that the mystic is unaware of its rate of passing. The same basic experience, of transcending time or entering into a different dimension of time, can be seen in various rituals in tribal societies, such as rites de passage, or ritual reversals. (55) Myths, symbols, and metaphysics, likewise, all partake in their own ways of this timeless realm of eternity. The "once

upon a time" of fairy tales is timeless or mythical time; we may mention also the widespread theme in Celtic folklore of the visitor to Faery who is missed on earth for years, while it seems to him or her that he or she has only been away a few days. (56) But perhaps the prime example of mystical symbolism in mythology in this respect is the passage to the Otherworld as symbolised by the bridge of a hair's breadth, the castle of the revolving door, the clashing rocks, and other synonymous images -- the passage which must be made "in the twinkling of an eye" or "in a split second": the present moment, the 'now' which is so short in duration as to be timeless, is the only gateway to eternity.

Despite the difference in tone and literary style between Suso's autobiography, and his metaphysical teachings, we can see some of the same characteristics in each -- the sense of the dramatic and romantic, the overflowing flood of visionary expression, and the nonetheless well-structured Eckhartian metaphysical framework. As Underhill has commented, mysticism for Suso seems to be not so much a doctrine to be imparted to others, more an intimate personal experience (57) (although he certainly also did much for the spiritual welfare of his fellows, through teaching and through other means). Suso tells us in depth of his own sufferings and trials, his visions and realisations. He seems to have been led and guided along the way largely by his own visions, intuitions, dedication, and 'spiritual trial-and-error' -- learning through his experience, and working out his own path -- and this is one reason for his appeal to the modern reader. He awakens an answering call in us through his depth of sincerity and his sublime power of expression, and surely comes as close as anyone can to communicating that which in the last analysis lies beyond encapsulation in words.

Now raise up thine eyes, and see where thou dost belong. Thy home is the celestial paradise; here thou art a strange guest, an exiled pilgrim. (58)

### References

- (1) Henry Suso, The Life of the Servant, trans. James M. Clark. London: James Clarke, 1952, p.20. This is Suso's autobiography, which is expressed in the third person.
- (2) See below, p.228.
- (3) Suso, The Life of the Servant, op. cit., p.23.
- (4) See Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy.
- (5) Suso, The Life of the Servant, op. cit., p.29.
- (6) Henry Suso, Little Book of Eternal Wisdom and Little Book of Truth, trans. James M. Clark. London: Faber, 1953, p.113.
- (7) Suso, in S.M.C., Henry Suso, Saint and Poet. Oxford: Blackfriars, 1947, p.42.
- (8) Suso, The Life of the Servant, op. cit., Pp.29-30.
- (9) Ibid., p.30.
- (10) Ibid., p.142. Compare the vision of the six-winged seraph in Isaiah 6:2. According to S.M.C. (p.82) the words on the middle pair of wings were "Carry the cross in patience" (Feras crucem aequanimiter). The three sayings are said to describe the three degrees in the perfection of suffering.
- (11) Suso, in S.M.C. op. cit., p.52.
- (12) Suso, in Little Book of Eternal Wisdom and Little Book of Truth, op. cit., Pp.90-91.
- (13) Ibid., p.44.
- (14) Suso, The Life of Blessed Henry Suso by Himself, trans. Thomas Francis Knox. London: Methuen, 1913, p.229.
- (15) Peter Moore, 'Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique', in Steven T. Katz, ed., Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis. London: Sheldon Press, 1978, p.119.
- (16) Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism. London: Methuen, 1948, p.283.
- (17) Suso, in S.M.C. op. cit., p.118.
- (18) Suso, The Life of Blessed Henry Suso by Himself, op. cit., Pp. 142 f.
- (19) Suso, The Life of the Servant, op. cit., p.94.
- (20) Ibid., Pp.94-95.
- (21) Bhagavad Gītā 6:29, in Hindu Scriptures, trans. R. C. Zaehner. London: Dent, 1966.
- (22) Suso, The Life of the Servant, op. cit., p.95.
- (23) Ibid., p.133.
- (24) Ibid., p.150.
- (25) Suso, Little Book, op. cit., p.176.
- (26) Ibid., p.191.
- (27) Suso, The Life of the Servant, op. cit., p.24.
- (28) Suso, The Life of Blessed Henry Suso, op. cit., p.243.
- (29) Ibid., p.231.
- (30) Suso, in Underhill op. cit., Pp.97-98.
- (31) Suso, in S.M.C. op. cit., p.121.
- (32) Suso, Little Book, op. cit., p.181.
- (33) Suso, The Life of Blessed Henry Suso, op. cit., p.215.
- (34) Ibid., p.206.
- (35) Ibid., Pp.206-207.
- (36) Ibid., p.212.
- (37) Ibid., p.222.
- (38) Ibid., p.247.
- (39) Ibid., p.241.

- (40) Ibid., p.238.  
 (41) Suso, Little Book, op. cit., p.182.  
 (42) Suso, The Life of Blessed Henry Suso, op. cit., p.242.  
 (43) Ibid., Pp.245-246.  
 (44) Suso, in S.M.C. op. cit., p.119.  
 (45) Ibid., p.115.  
 (46) Ibid., p.195.  
 (47) Brihadāranyaka Upaniṣad IV.v.15, in R. C. Zaehner, trans., Hindu Scriptures. London: Dent, 1966.  
 (48) Suso, in Underhill op. cit., p.424.  
 (49) See below, p.232.  
 (50) Suso, Little Book, op. cit., p.190.  
 (51) Suso, in Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy. Oxford: University Press, 1958, p.61 note.  
 (52) Suso, The Life of Blessed Henry Suso, op. cit., p.222.  
 (53) Suso, in S.M.C. op. cit., p.119.  
 (54) Suso, The Life of the Servant, op. cit., p.150.  
 (55) See Victor Turner, The Ritual Process. London: RKP, 1969.  
 (56) See my article 'Symbolism in Keltic Folk Music Part 2: Thomas the Rhymer', Inner Keltia, No.3, 1983.  
 (57) Underhill, op. cit., p.464.  
 (58) Suso, Little Book, op. cit., p.89.

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## METAPHYSICAL MYSTICISM PART 4: ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) unites in his writings, like Suso, devotional and metaphysical approaches to the Divine, but with a stronger metaphysical leaning. His prose works show a great depth of theological learning and are rigorously analytical, containing meticulously detailed expositions and elucidations. His poetry, by contrast, is rich in colour and texture, deeply creative, full of symbolic complexity, showing us the workings of a deeply personal relationship with the Divine; he is in fact widely acclaimed as one of Spain's greatest poets. He thus gives the pleasing impression of one who unites deep intellectual scholarship with inspired creative ability. St. John entered the Carmelite Order, and became co-worker with St. Teresa of Avila in bringing about Carmelite reform, and 'Spiritual Director' at St. Teresa's Convent of the Incarnation. St. John and St. Teresa had a close spiritual relationship, and many correspondences between their writings can doubtless be traced to mutual influence.

### Gradations of the Mystical Path

Many mystics see the mystical path as consisting of more or less distinct phases of transformation, or sequences of attainment of more and more exalted levels of consciousness. St. John of the Cross is a fine example of a mystic who conceives of spiritual progress in this way, as a set of stages, in each of which the soul requires a different type of guidance and different rules for spiritual practice, and in each of which we have different types of experience and a different view of things, necessitating constant reorientation. It should be noted, however, before we proceed to an exposition of St. John's schema, that such stages of

progress can only ever be 'ideal-typical', that is, that they represent only a broad generalisation or rough scheme. Sometimes a lower state may coexist with or alternate with a higher; or on rare occasions it is possible for the mystic to skip a stage completely. Indeed, there is some plausibility in the argument that St. John's distinctions between the various stages are logical, not temporal, divisions -- that they represent a means by which he breaks down what he has to say into easily handled topics, rather than a rigidly strict, temporally successive sequence of types of experience. This will be set within the context of St. John's writings as we proceed.

Catholic mysticism often works with three stages of mystical experience (Purgation, Contemplation, Union). St. John uses these classic three stages, interspersed with his Nights of Sense and Spirit. Other mystics use schemes made up of a different number of stages; St. Teresa uses a sevenfold scheme of progression in her book The Interior Castle, and St. John also speaks of seven degrees of love, seven "wine-cellars"; in the seventh and innermost cellar the mystic may drink of the Beloved in the final and intimate union. (1) This sevenfold scheme is not, however, central to his teachings. Suso uses a ninefold scheme in his 'Colloquy of the Nine Rocks', discussed above. Some mystics do not use schemes of progression at all; I have commented in this connection on Eckhart's 'pathless Way' (2). One cannot necessarily expect Protestant mystics such as Boehme, or Eastern mystics, or Nature-mystics, to conform to these schemes: the negative result of the Catholic threefold schema was that any type of experience not corresponding to one of the three stages came to be regarded as suspect (for example, nature-mystical experiences were regarded as coming 'from the Devil'). In what follows, I shall discuss St. John's own scheme of progression.

Purgation

All the works of St. John that we now have were written when he was between the ages of 36 and 49, and well advanced on the mystical path. Furthermore, they were written mainly for nuns and monks of the Carmelite Order. Hence he does not give us a great deal of information about the initial awakening of the soul, its first consciousness of and longing for the Divine. The first stage that St. John refers to consists in mastering our senses, and the world of desires and images which they and their objects create in our minds. The senses must be purified and detached from their objects, and trained to follow the will of the spirit. This is the 'Purgative Way' or the purification of the lower self, with which all mystical methods begin by way of standard procedure. It is often called by St. John the way of beginners (principiantes). It also involves meditation upon provided material and the use of discursive reasoning to attempt to understand what is thus revealed. At this stage, visual aids to devotion (religious pictures, crucifixes, etc.) are valuable, because they serve to direct the spiritual sense towards the realities which they symbolise; but we must not become attached to them for their own sake, mistaking the symbol for the reality:

The means is good and necessary for the attainment of the end, as are images for reminding us of God and the saints. But when a person uses and dwells upon the means more than he ought, his excessive use of them becomes as much an impediment as anything else.....Images will always help a person toward union with God, provided that he does not pay more attention to them than is necessary, and that he allows himself to soar -- when God bestows the favor -- from the painted image to the living God, in forgetfulness of all creatures and things pertaining to creatures. (3)

Elsewhere St. John speaks of the possessiveness and attachment found in beginners who ".....weigh themselves down with overly decorated images

and rosaries; they will now put these down, now take up others; at one moment they are exchanging, and at the next re-exchanging; now they want this kind, now they want another...." (4) Such attachment is contrary to the poverty of spirit which is required if we are to find true devotion, which looks only to the truth represented by these objects. St. John also goes into details of other spiritual faults and shortcomings commonly found in those at the beginning of the path, but for reasons of brevity we shall not discuss these here.

We are fortunate in that St. John himself wrote long commentaries on his major poems. These commentaries contain an abundant wealth of both spiritual insight and learning. The Dark Night and The Ascent of Mount Carmel both expound the poem 'In a Dark Night' ('En una Noche Oscura') although only in a general manner. The Spiritual Canticle and The Living Flame of Love are more detailed, verse-by-verse commentaries upon the poems bearing these same names; and we can glean a little more information on the Purgative Way from The Spiritual Canticle. The poem uses the language and imagery of the Song of Songs, and recounts the quest of the Bride (the soul) for her divine Bridegroom, and her eventual union with him, thus using the same form of expression as devotional types of mysticism expressed under the symbolism of the Mystical Marriage. St. John explains in his commentary that the allegory represents the whole course of the spiritual life, with stanzas 1 to 5 representing the Purgative Way. In the opening verse the soul longs for union with the Bridegroom; she has been wounded by love (an experience which we will find symbolically portrayed in the devotional mysticism of St. Teresa, Mīrābāī, and others), and cries out at his absence, asking him to reveal to her where he is hidden and how she may find him. St. John's typically mystical elucidation of the bride's question, in his commentary, need come

as no surprise: God is hidden within us:

The Word, the Son of God, together with the Father and the Holy Ghost, is hidden in essence and in presence, in the inmost being of the soul. That soul, therefore, that will find Him, must go out from all things in will and affection, and enter into the profoundest self-recollection, and all things must be to it as if they existed not. (5)

The soul itself is the dwelling and secret chamber and hiding place of the Bridegroom. "And what else do you search for outside, when within yourself you possess your riches, delights, satisfactions, fullness, and kingdom -- your Beloved whom you desire and seek?" (6) Why, then, if the Beloved is within, and with us all the time, do we not experience him? Because, says St. John, he is concealed, and we neglect to conceal ourselves in order to discover him. "Anyone who is to find a hidden treasure must enter the hiding place secretly, and once he has discovered it, he will also be hidden just as the treasure is hidden." (7) The Bridegroom is calling us to his secret chamber; in order to find him we have to forget all possessions and all creatures and hide in the secret chamber of the spirit. We should pay no attention to what can be understood by reason or by the senses, but mount upwards in self-forgetfulness, faith and love, which are the guides to that which is incomprehensible and which has darkness as its hiding place.

In the second verse of the 'Canticle', the soul reaches towards the Bridegroom with all her faculties, and by the aid of angelic intercessors (personified as shepherds and sheepfolds respectively). In the third stanza, she cultivates virtue (represented as journeying to the mountains) and spiritual exercises (journeying to the waters); she ignores the temptations of the world (wild beasts) and denies herself with detachment the pleasures and gratifications of the material realm (refusing to pluck the flowers by the wayside). In stanzas 4 and 5 she seeks the Bridegroom in the things of the created universe, seeing his traces in the beauty he has

made; but she does not succeed in finding him, for the created order, beautiful as it is, and manifesting the Divine as it does, is no possible substitute for its Maker, to the soul who longs to see him face to face:

O groves and thickets  
Planted by the hand of the Beloved;  
O verdant meads  
Enamelled with flowers,  
Tell me, has He passed by you?

A thousand graces diffusing  
He passed through the groves in haste,  
And merely regarding them  
As He passed  
Clothed them with His beauty. (8)

The soul soon realises that nothing less than her Beloved's presence will satisfy her; the sight of the 'messengers' (God's traces in the physical world) only increase the agony of 'love-in-separation':

Oh! who can heal me?  
Give me at once Thyself,  
Send me no more  
A messenger  
Who cannot tell me what I wish. (9)

This is the onset of the Night of Sense, inasmuch as a definite starting-point for it can be given; through this Night, the soul will be led from the Purgative Way to the Illuminative Way. (An explanation regarding the term 'Dark Night of the Soul', derived from St. John's writings, may be in order here. This term is sometimes loosely used by writers on mysticism to express any major period of spiritual aridity and suffering; or more often it is used to refer more precisely to what St. John calls the Night of the Spirit, which will be discussed later. In fact, St. John's division is into Nights of Sense and Spirit, and he nowhere refers to a 'Night of the Soul' as such, except inasmuch as the whole spiritual life can be seen as a Dark Night. His work often called The Dark Night of the Soul is in the original Spanish simply Noche Oscura, the Dark Night. We should also note that in the cases of both the Night of Sense and the Night of Spirit, St.

John distinguishes between 'active' and 'passive' nights; active nights are those brought about by one's own efforts, passive nights are those caused solely by God, those which come upon one as a force from without, uncalled for. But in any case, there is always a certain interaction between the two, and hence between 'effort' and 'grace'; both kinds of night are necessary.)

### The Night of Sense

In the Night of Sense, the soul suffers a terrible aridity and dryness; it can no longer find the consolation and sweetness which it used to have in spiritual things. It undergoes many trials, worries and annoyances, of various kinds, interior and exterior. It is profoundly conscious of an inner emptiness; it feels that God has deserted it, and suffers the agonies of separation from the Beloved, and of seeing its own utter unworthiness. It feels acutely and painfully conscious of its own misery, inadequacies and iniquities. It thinks it is not serving God, that it is falling back from its previous state of realisation. Remembrances of the Beloved only wound it more and more, for it has lost the vision, and "something I know not what" -- something once glimpsed but now veiled from sight -- leaves it dying from a wound of Love. (10) This Night continues the purification of the senses which was begun in the early stages of the Quest. It refers, however, not only to a Night of the five bodily senses, but also to a purification of what St. John calls the "interior sense", i.e., the imagination, which is employed in the meditative exercises pertaining to the stage of 'beginners' described earlier. (By the "interior sense", St. John may also mean what we would now call the clairvoyant faculties.) The mystic finds that he or she can no longer imagine Divine things as before

-- there is an inability to make discursive acts of meditation which involve thinking around specific topics, visualising particular symbols, and so on. The five exterior senses, for their part, are in Night in that no pleasure is gained from that which is perceived by their agency. The external things of the world, and the delights of the senses, give no joy. There is therefore aridity and void concerning both the things of God as previously experienced, and the things of this world, and the soul feels lost, wandering in Darkness, unable to go forward because it has lost its bearings and does not even know which way it is facing. Into this desolation and darkness, St. John brings Light: the reason for this time of torment is that God is drawing the mystic out of the state of beginners, into that of "proficients" (aprovechantes) or "progressives" (aprovechados), of contemplatives. (This distinction between meditation and contemplation is a standard one in Catholic spirituality.) God is communicating to the soul the beginnings of "infused" or "passive" contemplation. One must try to accept the aridity; one should not resist, or one may hinder this Divine action taking place within oneself. Sometimes, because of one's own ignorance, or because of misunderstandings on the part of spiritual directors, one may render oneself incapable of receiving these Divine communications through one's extreme agitation, worry, and resistance, through one's natural tendency to try to fight the suffering and to try to meditate as before. But this is not an appropriate course; the soul must now progress in a different manner. Only direct knowledge of God can now satisfy the mystic; and in order to receive this knowledge, he or she has to be emptied of all that pertains to the senses (interior and exterior). Therefore, instead of trying to meditate discursively, and to search for spiritual sweetness and satisfaction, one should now be content with a simple, loving faith and absorption in God:



.....a person at this time should be guided in a manner entirely contrary to the former. If, prior to this, directors suggested matter for meditation, and he meditated, now they should instead withhold this matter, and he should not meditate. For, as I say, he is unable to do so even though he may want to, and were he to try he would be distracted instead of recollected. If previously he sought satisfaction, love, and devotion, and found it, now he should neither desire nor seek it, for not only does he fail to procure it through his own diligence, but on the contrary he procures dryness. Through the activity he desires to carry on with the senses, he diverts himself from the peaceful and quiet good secretly being given to his spirit. In losing the one good, he does not gain the other, for these goods are no longer accorded through the senses as before. (11)

.....God begins now to communicate Himself, no longer through the channel of sense, as formerly, in consecutive reflections, by which we arranged and divided our knowledge, but in pure spirit, which admits not of successive reflections, and in the act of pure contemplation, to which neither the interior nor the exterior senses of our lower nature can ascend. Hence it is that the fancy and the imagination cannot help or suggest any reflections, nor use them ever afterwards. (12)

The mystic is now setting out on a journey towards the incomprehensible and ineffable "nothing" (nada) and hence naturally feels confused and disorientated; for as St. John says, "To reach that which you do not know, you must travel by a way you do not know." (13) It should, however, be noted that this is far from being a 'negative' state in any pejorative sense:

In this loving awareness the soul receives God's communication passively, just as a man, without doing anything else but keep his eyes open, receives light passively. This reception of light infused supernaturally into the soul is a passive knowing. It is affirmed that the person does nothing, not because he fails to understand, but because he understands by dint of no effort other than the reception of what is bestowed. (14)

This knowledge which is now communicated to the soul is light and love, a secret inflowing of the Divine which can set the soul on fire. It is 'dark' to the intellect because it is contemplative knowledge, unable to be penetrated by the powers of discursive reason; hence St. John, following Dionysius, calls it a "ray of darkness" (rayo de tiniebla). Yet through the reception of this Divine ray, the mystic can now act as a

channel through whom Divine light, power and love can flow into the world. Gradually the light will become more abundant until the soul remains in very real and close contact with God during the whole time of contemplation, and even, sometimes, in the course of everyday life. Gradually, pain gives way to sweetness, and aridity to love; one finds within oneself the beginnings of a new life which must in time develop little by little to end in divine transformation:

The burning fire of love, in general, is not felt at first, for it has not begun to burn, either because of our natural impurity, or because the soul, not understanding its own state, has not given it a peaceful rest within. Sometimes, however, whether it be so or not, a certain longing after God begins to be felt; and the more it grows, the more the soul feels itself touched and inflamed with the love of God, without knowing or understanding how or whence that love comes, except that at times this burning so inflames that it longs earnestly after God. (15)

We shall later discuss this burning inner fire in connection with Rolle and others, the fire which purges and purifies, which refines the base metal of the self to gold, and which transmutes pain and suffering into love and joy. St. John, making use of a very ancient image (used for example in ancient Egypt, and mentioned by Herodotus and Pliny) compares the burning up and subsequent renewal and transformation of the soul in the fire, to the phoenix which burns itself in the fire and rises anew from the ashes. This is the death of the lower self; the bride of the 'Spiritual Canticle' cries:

How do you endure  
 O life, not living where you live?  
 And being brought near death  
 By the arrows you receive  
 From that which you conceive of your Beloved.....

Reveal Your presence,  
 And may the vision of Your beauty be my death;  
 For the sickness of love  
 Is not cured  
 Except by Your very presence and image. (16)

The symbolism of this arrow that pierces the soul will later be encoun-

tered in the writings of St. Teresa and Mīrābāī. St. John explains these verses by commenting that the soul "lives where she loves more than in the body she animates" (17); she does not live in the body so much as give life to it, and lives in and through love in the Beloved. She knows that she cannot see the Beloved in his full glory in this life; she knows that she must die in seeing him; yet the bliss of what she has already seen is so unendurable in its intensity and beauty that she asks that this vision may be her death. (Compare Exodus 33:20, "No man shall see Me and live". The intensity of mystical experience is often felt to be such that the mystic declares it cannot be borne for long in this life. It may be more than coincidental that many great mystics died at an early age, having, perhaps, 'burned themselves out'.) St. John elaborates as follows:

Death cannot be bitter to the soul that loves, for in it she finds all the sweetness and delight of love. The thought of death cannot sadden her, for she finds that gladness accompanies this thought. Neither can the thought of death be burdensome and painful to her, for death will put an end to all her sorrows and afflictions and be the beginning of all her bliss. She thinks of death as her friend and bridegroom.....

The soul is right in daring to say, may the vision of Your beauty be my death, since she knows that at the instant she sees this beauty she will be carried away by it, and absorbed in this very beauty, and transformed in this same beauty, and made beautiful like beauty itself..... (18)

We may compare the following passage from Rolle, who is discussed in Chapter II:

And I spake thus to Death: O Death, where dwellest thou? Why comest thou so late to me.....?.....Thou art the end of heaviness, the mark [goal] of labours, the beginning of fruits, the gate of joys. Behold I grow hot and desire after thee: if thou come I shall forthwith be safe. Ravished, truly, because of love, I cannot fully love what I desire after, until I taste the joy that Thou shalt give to me.....After death he [the perfected mystic] is taken soothly to songs of angels; because now being purged, and profiting, he dwells in the music of the spirit.....Now grant, my best Beloved, that I may cease; for death, that many dread, shall be to me as heavenly music. (19)

Two points should be noted here. Firstly, St. John is referring to the

longing for physical death and the blissful enjoyment of God in the afterlife (for in keeping with his Christian faith, he holds that mystical union is never fully perfected in this life). But he is also referring to the spiritual death of the lower self. For this spiritual death is indeed a foretaste of the greater transmutation that awaits us after physical death; and it is noteworthy that after seeing and conquering death in this life, in spiritual death and rebirth, the mystic has no more fear of physical death. The second point to be noted is that this spiritual death of which St. John speaks is a 'dying to live', a profound experience of the typical mystical paradox of death in life and life in death, death which leads to fullness of life or Life Eternal. Spiritually, death without life is to be completely cut off from the Divine; this is a living death:

.....love of God is the soul's health, and the soul does not have full health until love is complete. Sickness is nothing but a want of health, and when the soul has not even a single degree of love, she is dead. But when she possesses some degrees of love for God, no matter how few, she is then alive, yet very weak and infirm because of her little love. In the measure that love increases she will be healthier, and when love is perfect she will have full health. (20)

#### Detachment

In the Night of Sense, then, we have the mystic departing on a Dark Night, entering into a purgation of all sensible appetites, becoming enkindled with love of the Divine. The mystic departs when his or her "house is at rest", i.e., when the sensory appetites are stilled; the escape is unnoticed and unimpeded by the passions and lower appetites:

In a dark night,  
With anxious love inflamed,  
O happy lot!  
Forth unobserved I went,  
My house being now at rest. (21)

St. John stresses that this stilling of the lower appetites is to be brought about not by extreme mortification but by detachment (desasimiento; the

Spanish implies the act of loosening or disentangling oneself from something). Detachment, indeed, could be said to be the keynote of his teaching; like Eckhart, he upholds its importance at all stages on the mystical way; as we shall see later, we have to be detached not only from the things of the senses, but (as for Eckhart) from all particular apprehensions, however spiritual; from all things, whether 'good' or 'bad', that are not Divine Reality itself. This aspect of St. John's teaching will be discussed later; for the moment we shall confine ourselves to his writings regarding detachment from the things of the senses. He does not advocate extreme asceticism, and in fact he attempted to moderate the harsh penances of his day, stressing that spiritual goodness consists in interior acts, not exterior acts of physical mortification:

The ignorance of some is extremely lamentable; they burden themselves with extraordinary penances and many other exercises, thinking these are sufficient for the attainment of union with the divine wisdom. But these practices are insufficient if a person does not diligently strive to deny his appetites. If these people would attempt to devote only a half of that energy to the renunciation of their desires, they would profit more in a month than in years with all these other exercises. (22)

St. John teaches that attachments, cravings and desires are the great enemies of the soul on our journey towards divine realisation. It is not the presence or absence of possessions or of worldly things that is the important point, rather our attitude towards them. So long as the craving for sensible things remains, the soul is not empty; but the absence of desire, or of direction of the will towards sensual appetites, produces emptiness and freedom of the soul, "nakedness of spirit", even if there may be an abundance of possessions. As one who is in darkness does not comprehend the light, so a person attached to creatures will not be able to comprehend God. (23) It matters little whether our attachments are great or small; any attachment whatsoever will impede our progress:

It makes little difference whether a bird is tied by a thin thread

or by a cord. For even if tied by thread, the bird will be prevented from taking off just as surely as if it were tied by cord -- that is, it will be impeded from flight as long as it does not break the thread. (24)

St. John goes into great detail on the various insidious effects of desires, cravings and attachments. They are wearisome and tiring, they are never sated or satisfied; they engender torment and affliction as dreadful as the torture of the rack; they sap the strength needed for perseverance in the practice of virtue, because they take up psychic energy that could be used elsewhere; they cause blindness and darkness of the will, and of the mirror of intellect:

Vapors make the air murky and are a hindrance to the bright sunshine; a cloudy mirror does not clearly reflect a person's countenance; so too muddy water reflects only a hazy image of his features. In just this way a man's intellect, clouded by the appetites, becomes dark and impedes the sun of either natural reason or supernatural wisdom from shining within and completely illumining it. (25)

Many of St. John's teachings on detachment and the effects of cravings are expressed in terminology rather reminiscent of Buddhism; the above passage in particular may remind us of the 'Platform Scripture' of the Sixth Ch'an Patriarch: "The mind is like a clear mirror. At all times we must strive to polish it, and must not let the dust collect." (26)

True detachment for St. John means to rest content in the Divine Will and to desire nothing. Through surrender to the Divine Will comes true freedom; through possessing nothing, we possess all:

To attain to enjoyment of all things  
 desire to enjoy none  
 To attain to knowledge of all things  
 desire to know nothing of any  
 To attain to possession of all things  
 desire to possess none  
 To become everything  
 desire to be nothing. (27)

St. John made such detachment manifest in his life; it was said of him that he saw the Divine Law acting in everything that befell him, and so

was ready to accept in peaceful equanimity whatever life brought to him, whether 'good' or 'bad'. Hence he teaches:

Remember always that everything that happens to you, whether prosperous or adverse, comes from God, so that you neither become puffed up in prosperity nor discouraged in adversity. (28)

The secret key to such detachment is love, for there is a continual interplay between love and detachment. It is because of our love for the Divine that we begin the process of attempting to live in detachment; without this love, we would neither want to do this nor be able to do it. Love gives us the strength to see this process through; but also, conversely, by freeing the heart, detachment makes us capable of greater love, and of a purer, stronger, more exalted kind of love. It makes us masters of all our powers and faculties, so that they can be directed towards the one true object of our love:

A love of pleasure, and attachment to it, usually fires the will toward the enjoyment of things that give pleasure. A more intense enkindling of another, better love (love of one's heavenly Bridegroom) is necessary for the vanquishing of the appetites and the denial of this pleasure. By finding his satisfaction and strength in this love, a man will have the courage and constancy to deny readily all other appetites....For the sensory appetites are moved and attracted toward sensory objects with such cravings that if the spiritual part of the soul is not fired with other more urgent longings for spiritual things, the soul will neither be able to overcome the yoke of nature nor enter the night of sense; nor will it have the courage to live in the darkness of all things by denying its appetites for them. (29)

#### Illumination

Following the Night of Sense, the mystic enters the period known as Illumination, which is distinguished by "infused" or "passive" contemplation rather than meditation, and in which the Spiritual Betrothal takes place. (Some writers, such as Trueman Dicken, have argued that both Betrothal and Marriage belong to the later Unitive Life. That this is not so is evidenced by St. John's explicit statement that Betrothal belongs to the state of Illumination, and Marriage to Union. (30) However, he does

sometimes intimate that Betrothal does not occur until towards the end of the Illuminative period.)

"Contemplation, by which God enlightens the understanding," says St. John, "is called mystical theology, that is, the secret wisdom of God, because it is a secret even to the understanding which receives it." (31) It is a ray of darkness, a mysterious, almost ineffable state of pure consciousness. Nothing that the imagination can conceive or that reason can comprehend is like it. We cannot comprehend the experience by means of any familiar categories of understanding; it is quite unlike our usual mode of perception; for the more one advances in spirituality, the more one ceases from identifying particular objects (however sublime) with the Divine. The earlier meditative methods are no longer requisite; the soul ".....gives itself up to one sole, pure, and general act; and so its powers cease from the practice of that method by which they once travelled towards the point to which the soul was tending." (32) This is a state of direct perception, without the necessity of apprehensions being channelled through particular reflections, forms or figures. We could say that the mystic has passed beyond the symbol, to that which is symbolised by it. The Night of Sense was a painful process of transition from one to another form of knowledge, demanding great adjustments in spiritual orientation. Now, with Illumination, comes a sure and living awareness of the reality of the Divine, a new and deepened understanding of Divine laws, and a greater desire to act according to the Divine Will. This is effected through leaving behind one's own powers of rational understanding, and passively receiving the Divine knowledge which now flows into the self. Hence St. John calls this state one of "unknowing" rather than knowledge:

I entered into unknowing  
Yet when I saw myself there



Without knowing where I was  
 I understood great things;  
 I shall not say what I felt  
 For I remained in unknowing [no sabiendo]  
 Transcending all knowledge [sciencia].....

The higher he ascends  
 The less he understands,  
 Because the cloud is dark  
 Which lit up the night;  
 Whoever knows this  
 Remains always in unknowing  
 Transcending all knowledge.

This knowledge in unknowing [saber no sabiendo]  
 Is so overwhelming  
 That wise men disputing  
 Can never overthrow it,  
 For their knowledge does not reach  
 To the understanding of not-understanding, [no entender entendiento]  
 Transcending all knowledge. (33)

St. John regards this "unknowing" as introducing a new element into the soul, an element which he calls supernatural. God is essentially incomprehensible; St. John, as a Thomist, holds that we cannot attain to knowledge of him through our finite or "natural" faculties. The beginner has to use the natural faculties to acquire some sort of understanding of God and to kindle desire for a greater understanding; but the more advanced mystic receives direct knowledge of the Divine, granted by grace, and henceforth the way to still further realisation will lie in transcending the knowledge of both the senses and the "spiritual faculties" in the Night of Spirit. For the moment, however, the mystic perceives Divine Reality through the "spiritual sense" (sentido espiritual) which approximates to higher intuition or mystical illumination, and which is received by way of the "Divine Spark" within which links us to God. This "ray of darkness" St. John calls "confused", not because it is not clear -- on the contrary, it is an apprehension of reality itself, full of light and clarity -- but because it cannot be rationally analysed. Hence it is received in the will rather than the understanding, for whereas the understanding cannot

comprehend it, the will can respond to it, just as one may feel the warmth of a fire that one cannot see. (34) I have discussed "unknowing" in depth in my article 'St. John of the Cross and Mystical Unknowing' (35); most of the points made in this article have been extracted and included in the present study.

St. John speaks of Illumination as a time of interior spiritual joy, delight and tranquillity, of peaceful exchange of love with the Beloved, of subtle and delicate knowledge which enters into the inmost substance of the soul:

.....the soul has a vision and foretaste of abundant and inestimable riches, and finds there all the repose and refreshment it desired; it attains to the secrets of God, and to a strange knowledge of Him.....it is conscious of the awful power of God beyond all other power and might, tastes of the wonderful sweetness and delight of the Spirit, finds its true rest and divine light, drinks deeply of the wisdom of God....." (36)

The soul is conformed to God's will, and attains to "exceeding pureness and beauty" and to a "terrible strength" (37) because of the divine power now flowing through it:

.....were we to desire to speak of the glorious illumination He [the Bridegroom] sometimes gives to the soul in this habitual embrace, which is a certain spiritual turning toward her in which He bestows the vision and enjoyment of this whole abyss [abismo] of riches and delight He has placed within her, our words would fail to explain anything about it. As the sun shining brightly upon the sea lights up great depths and caverns and reveals pearls and rich veins of gold and other minerals, etc., so the Bridegroom, the divine sun, in turning to the bride so reveals her riches that even the angels marvel and utter those words of the Canticle: "Who is she that comes forth like the morning rising, beautiful as the moon, resplendent as the sun, terrible as the armies set in array?" (38)

We might note that St. John uses the symbol of the sun here to denote the Deity -- as do Plotinus, Suso and others. The moon as symbol of the soul denotes that the soul is receptive of the light of the Divine, just as the moon shines by no light of her own but reflects the sun's light.

At this stage, too, one comes to see God in all things, and the Divine

manifest in the world of multiplicity:

In that nocturnal tranquillity and silence and in that knowledge of the divine light the soul becomes aware of Wisdom's wonderful harmony and sequence in the variety of His creatures and works. Each of them is endowed with a certain likeness of God and in its own way gives voice to what God is in it. So creatures will be for the soul a harmonious symphony of sublime music surpassing all concerts and melodies of the world. (39)

St. John speaks of this symphony as a "silent music"; we may compare the inner music of Rolle, who speaks of contemplation in terms of a celestial melody, as we shall discuss later. In this experience, natural symbols seem to be seen as manifestations of Divine powers or archetypes: hence the bride in the 'Spiritual Canticle' says:

My Beloved is the mountains,  
And lonely wooded valleys,  
Strange islands,  
And resounding rivers,  
The whistling of love-stirring breezes. (40)

St. John comments on this stanza that mountains, in their vastness, beauty, great height, etc., are like the Beloved; similarly the valleys, because they are pleasant, cool, flowing with fresh waters, refreshing and giving rest in their solitude and silence. Strange islands are surrounded by water and situated across the sea, far withdrawn and cut off from communication with humanity; there are many strange things on these islands, of strange kinds and powers unknown to us, like the wonderful new things and the strange knowledge which the soul sees in God. The soul compares God to a resounding river, St. John continues, because rivers inundate everything they encounter; they fill up all the low and empty places in their path; and they muffle and suppress other sounds. Similarly, the soul feels the torrent of God's spirit forcibly taking possession of her, filling the low places of her humility; it is like an immense interior clamour and sound which clothes the soul in power and strength, drowning all the sounds of the world. The "love-stirring breezes"

indicate the graces of the Beloved which lovingly touch the soul. Different phenomena of nature are, then, seen here as symbolic of different divine qualities or attributes.

But in spite of this sublime apprehension of the Divine, the soul is still far from perfected. Betrothal requires great purity, and renunciation of self to the Divine Will. But the mystic does not yet enjoy God habitually; the union is not yet permanent. The soul receives many visits from the Bridegroom, but the communications received are fairly transitory, whereas in Marriage they will become continual:

In the espousal there is only a mutual agreement and willingness between the two, and the bridegroom graciously gives jewels and ornaments [symbolic of spiritual virtues] to his espoused. But in marriage there is also a communication and union between the persons. Although the bridegroom sometimes visits the bride in the espousal and brings her presents, as we said, there is no union of persons, nor does this fall within the scope of the espousal. (41)

The union of the will, effected in Betrothal, is not yet the highest possible union. After the forthcoming Night of Spirit, when all the soul's faculties will be balanced in equilibrium and equally developed, will come the final union, when all the higher faculties will be united to God, and the lower part of the self (the senses, etc.) altogether tranquil and in subjection to the higher part. (To be more precise, final union for St. John is a permanent union of the substance of the soul -- la sustancia del alma, corresponding to Eckhart's Ground of the Soul -- while the union of the faculties is intermittent. Thompson perceptively comments: "Today we might say that union is permanent unconsciously but not always consciously experienced. In this he [St. John] no doubt reflects his own experience of a tension between the glory of union and the fact that everyday life has to go on and sometimes other activities intervene to engage the 'faculties' of the soul." (42) ) St. John says that the senses never quite lose all their imperfect habits until the time of Spiritual Marriage; so the

Night of Sense continues intermittently into Betrothal, although most of the suffering associated with it has vanished. But there is a new hurdle to be overcome, which will become intensified in the Night of Spirit, and which the soul now also feels intermittently in the midst of its joy in illumination: this is an ardent thirst and longing for the Divine, which is stronger than ever, for the closer the mystic draws to God, the more he or she becomes conscious of the distance yet remaining to be travelled. The soul longs that the truths which are now being revealed inexplicitly and obscurely, may be seen clearly and perfectly: it longs, in short, to see God face to face, no longer to see darkly but to know even as it is known. "At this period," says St. John, "the soul feels that she is rushing toward God as impetuously as a falling stone when nearing its centre. She also feels that she is like wax in which an impress is being made, but not yet completed. She knows too that she is like a sketch or the first draft of a drawing and calls out to the one who did this sketch to finish the painting and image." (43) Using a symbol now familiar to us from Eckhart, and which we will later encounter in the writings of Boehme and Ramakrishna, St. John compares this state to the rising dawn before the brilliant sunlight of final union:

She [the soul] very appropriately calls this divine light "the rising dawn", which means the morning. Just as the rise of morning dispels the darkness of night and unveils the light of day, so this spirit, quieted and put to rest in God, is elevated from the darkness of natural knowledge to the supernatural knowledge of God. This morning light is not clear.....but dark as night at the time of the rising dawn. Just as the night at the rise of dawn is not entirely night or entirely day, but is, as they say, at the break of day, so this divine solitude and tranquillity, informed by the divine light, has some share in that light, but not its complete clarity. (44)

In this Illuminative stage, visions, raptures and trances may occur frequently. St. John distinguishes between various kinds of visions, but the exact details of this need not detain us. Briefly, he says that visions

can sometimes be a genuine source of Divine knowledge, but he is extremely wary of them (an attitude which St. Teresa, who is discussed in Chapter II, greatly modifies). We should not seek for them, nor should we be attached to them if they occur; they are no criterion of true spiritual progress. Even the highest type of vision, wrought by the spiritual intuition, must be transcended in the forthcoming Night of the Spirit; to value visions is to be attached to something which is not itself the Divine Reality and which will therefore hinder union.

### The Night of Spirit

As the Night of Sense was intermittent with the preliminary stages of the mystical way from an early stage (for hard-and-fast dividing lines cannot be drawn) so the Night of Spirit soon becomes intermittent with Illumination, until as it gradually increases in intensity, one passes out of Illumination and fully into this second Night, which will take one from the state of "proficient" to that of "perfect", to the Unitive Way. As the senses and imagination were purified in the first Night, so in the latter are purified the understanding, memory and will. These three are the 'higher faculties' or 'spiritual faculties' of Christian mysticism and they make up, for St. John, the higher part of the soul (la parte superior) which he also often calls the spirit (el espíritu).

God now denudes the faculties.....leaving the understanding in darkness, the will dry, the memory empty, the affections of the soul in the deepest affliction, bitterness, and distress..... (45)

The higher faculties now (as the senses previously) are unable to derive satisfaction from the direction of their activities towards the Divine; there is a deprivation of consciousness of God. As the mystic had previously to detach himself or herself from the things of the senses, now

detachment even from the communications to these higher faculties is necessary. This is so because no natural human power or faculty, for St. John, can be a means of Divine Union; reliance on any of these will obscure the vision beyond. Any one single or particular attachment, affection or apprehension, any one particular, limited or narrow mode of understanding, cannot reach to an apprehension of the Divine. The goal is beyond all this, and the mystic must go beyond even the highest thing which he or she knows or feels, passing on to that which he or she knows not, that which cannot be measured by our limited apprehensions but which is rather the source of and measure for them. This may remind us of the theme we have encountered in the writings of Plotinus and Eckhart, of penetration to the ground or source of all knowledge, the one principle at the heart of all.

....the soul courageously resolved on passing, interiorly and exteriorly beyond the limits of its own nature, enters illimitably within the supernatural, which has no measure, but contains all measure eminently within itself. (46)

This process of the emptying of the faculties does not, however, mean that we do not allow our higher faculties (or our senses) their natural mode of operation on their appropriate levels; on the contrary, this is necessary if we are to fulfil the Divine Will in practical action in everyday life. What is important is to be detached from these faculties and the communications received through them, to recognise their limitations and rise above them. We continue to experience them, but are free of them. Furthermore, to be emptied is to be filled: St. John, in answer to a hypothetical objection that he teaches the complete annihilation of the faculties and is therefore guilty of destroying, not building up, the spiritual edifice, says that it is necessary to empty the faculties of all natural things so that they may be filled by the "supernatural" (47), which will then automatically flow into the soul. By a similar paradox, it is

through knowing nothing that we know all, through possessing nothing that we possess all: the spiritual knowledge now communicated to the mystic is not confined to any particular matter of reason, imagination, etc., and so is so clear, pure, comprehensive and diffused that it embraces and searches into all things, for (as St. John says) "Wisdom cometh and goeth through all things by reason of her purity." (48)

Until the mystic has become adjusted to this new level of consciousness, though, this is a time of agonising, desperate sufferings and horrifying darkness, even more terrible and tormenting than the first Night. There seems to be nothing but emptiness wherever one turns; one feels utterly abandoned by God, completely desolate; one is more painfully aware than ever of one's own sins, limitations, shortcomings, unworthiness. Indeed, the torment now experienced results from these imperfections themselves, which are not yet purified. The light is so abundant that we cannot bear it; we have not the strength to look upon it, and so it seems to us to be darkness. The mystic at this point is being brought into contact with realities that seem incomprehensible; is being initiated into an entirely new and different manner of seeing and knowing. An interior struggle is going on between the limited, human life of the lower self, and the great, rich life of the Divine which is being opened out and revealed. This, then, is the agony of the final death of the limited self and the birth of divine life. There are, of course, many parallels between the first and second Nights, but the Night of Spirit takes place on a higher plane. Following the Night of Sense, the mystic in the Illuminative period identified the Divine with the sweetness and joy which he or she enjoyed from the Divine. But in the Night of Spirit, all attachment to personal joys, however spiritual, must be left behind; it is the last painful tearing away of the self from a limited perspective on life. The higher



part of the soul, having acquired mastery over the inferior part, must now itself be surrendered completely to the Divine. It must forsake its own life, its own way of seeing things, of thinking and feeling, in order to live in the Life Divine. It is refined "like gold in the crucible [como el oro en el crisol]" (49) by the Divine Fire until finally, in union, it too will become a "living flame of love". (50)

### Union

This ensuing state of union, says St. John, is quite ineffable, and its wonders far transcend anything that words can tell of it. The soul now communes directly with the Deity without the intervention of the natural faculties; it is clothed in God, lifted beyond all manner of human knowing, until it knows as God knows and with the knowledge which he possesses, with the "unknowing" which transcends all knowledge:

God vests the soul with new knowledge when the other old ideas and images are cast aside. He causes all that is of the old man, the abilities of the natural being, to cease, and attires all the faculties with new supernatural abilities [vistiéndose de nueva habilidad sobrenatural según todas las potencias]....This is achieved in the state of union where the soul in which God alone dwells has no other function than that of an altar, on which God is adored in praise and love. (51)

The entire life of the soul is turned towards God and permeated by him; the soul lives and acts only in and through God; it is divinised through and through, so that its acts are Divine acts; it is made godlike (deiforme). It is clasped to the Divine in an embrace through which it lives the Divine Life. Perhaps the poetic imagery of the 'Spiritual Canticle' may best convey the nature of this union:

In the inner cellar  
Of my Beloved have I drunk; and when I went forth  
Over all the plain  
I knew nothing  
And lost the flock I followed before.....

My soul is occupied,  
 And all my substance in His service;  
 Now I guard no flock,  
 Nor have I any other employment:  
 My sole occupation is love.

If, then, on the common land  
 I am no longer seen or found,  
 You will say that I am lost;  
 That, being enamoured,  
 I lost myself; and yet was found. (52)

St. John's descriptions of the relationship obtaining between the soul and God in union are often quite daring for one who is regarded as a Doctor of the Catholic Church: he speaks of the soul being transformed and enlightened in so high a degree as to make it seem to be God (53); it becomes God by participation; it is "more divine than human" (54); it is transformed or transfigured into the Beloved; an equality (igualdad) is begetted between the soul and God. St. John even says on one occasion that the soul is elevated above God (55) (perhaps meaning, like Eckhart, that it passes beyond God as he is conceived by us?) and often says that God praises the soul in union, just as the soul praises God. However, he holds to the theological doctrine that the soul in union retains its individuality:

.....when the spiritual marriage between God and the soul is consummated, there are two natures in one spirit and love.....This union resembles the union of the light of a star or candle with the light of the sun, for what then sheds light is not the star or candle, but the sun, which has absorbed the other lights into its own. (56)

The soul "seems to be God" in that it is elevated to the level of the Divine. Hence there is an intimate interrelationship between self-knowledge and knowledge of the Deity: to know ourselves truly, to know what we really are in our inmost depths, is to know the Divine; for God indwells us at our deepest centre, and union can only be achieved when the soul penetrates to the still, quiet depths of its own core.

St. John describes union as a state wherein the mystic is lifted above all previous torments and sufferings; a state of perfect peace and fulfilment, sweetness and tranquillity. The Bridegroom reveals wonderful secrets and mysteries to the bride, so that all previous knowledge seems pure ignorance compared to this divine wisdom and truth. God now guides and protects the soul in all things, and wonderful communications of love pass between the bride and the Bridegroom. The soul has found her All, eternal fulfilment of her love in God, and is no longer troubled by the things of the world which were previously temptations to her; indeed, these are now seen as divine themselves, and even the senses, now that they have been fully purified, can enjoy the Divine after their own fashion. This is well expressed by the 'Spiritual Canticle': in the early part of the poem, as we have observed, the things of nature are not adequate to express the Divine -- lovely as they are, they are sidetracks, hindrances to the questing soul. At the end of the poem, by contrast, the Divine is seen indwelling them, as the essence giving life to all things. The poem thus expresses the idea of the sanctification of the senses through mystical experience. As channels to mediate God to the soul, the senses were useful only in the preliminary stage; but once God is known mystically; they can become the means whereby his oneness with all reality is expressed. We could say that, following an 'ascent' by which the various faculties are awakened to consciousness of the Divine, there is a 'descent' which consists in making them into tools of the enlightened consciousness. We can detect here the widespread mystical theme of renunciation, followed by realisation, followed again by a return in which one sees the world in a new light, and the Deity in all. Once we have emptied ourselves of all particular ideas and images (to "know nothing"), we come to apprehend all things seen in the light of the one principle

which is their source, ground or basis (to "know All" in "unknowing"), and we then see them as manifestations of the Divine. This can be related to St. John's teaching that the lower faculties are not 'annihilated', nor do they lose their efficacy, but on the contrary, in the end perform their functions more perfectly for our being detached from them:

In this union of the divine wisdom these habits [i.e., lower knowledge] are united with the higher wisdom of another knowledge, as a little light with another which is great; it is the great light that shines, overwhelming the less, yet the latter is not therefore lost, but rather perfected, though it be not the light which shines pre-eminently. (57)

Likewise Suso, as I have shown, holds that "He who attains to the purification of the senses in God performs so much the better all the operations of the senses" (58) and Boehme, too, says that by knowing the inward ground of all things, we come to know the outer world in a truer and deeper way than does the person who merely knows the physical world by means of the senses (59). Hence St. John, like Plotinus, teaches that the world harms us only insofar as our attitude to it is wrong. He was himself a lover of nature, and saw in the beauties of creation the traces of the Divine hand. He taught that through detachment from created things, the mystic acquires, in the end, a clearer and truer understanding of them, and a pure joy in them which is quite different from the transient and bittersweet pleasure granted to those who continue to view the world from a limited, egotistical standpoint:

If you purify your soul of attachment to and desire for things, you will understand them spiritually. If you deny your appetite for them, you will enjoy their truth, understanding what is certain in them. (60)

### The Night and the Light

The most distinctive aspect of St. John's writings is his use of the symbolism of the Night. It should be understood that the darkness, the

aridity, the sense of "nothingness", the stripping of the self of all that is not God, represent a process which is far from 'negative', and this for a number of reasons. The poem 'On a Dark Night' describes the soul searching for the Beloved, shrouded in the thick darkness of a night in which it is deprived of every possession and of all support and companionship. But, stripped of everything, it is free; and it is guided by the light of love that glows within the heart. It is the night that guides the lovers to their meeting, and hence the night is, paradoxically, also a guiding light "more lovely than the dawn":

In that happy night  
 In secret, seen of none,  
 Seeing nought myself,  
 Without any other light or guide  
 Save that which in my heart was burning

That light guided me  
 More surely than the noonday sun  
 To the place where He was waiting for me,  
 Whom I knew well,  
 And where none appeared.

○ guiding night;  
 ○ night more lovely than the dawn;  
 ○ night that hast united  
 The lover with His beloved,  
 And changed her into her love..... (61)

The night is positive and creative, because the soul is filled with the Divine in proportion as it is emptied of all other things. We are led through the darkness to greater light; and indeed, the darkness is itself light, but because of our limitations and imperfections we perceive it as darkness. The darkness is the necessary counterpart of the light; light is revealed only through darkness; the darkness, instead of preventing one from seeing, helps the inner vision. It is darkness and "nothingness" to the powers of reason that would try to dissect it; but to the mystical insight, it opens out into Light, and All. This paradoxical quality of the night is well expressed in one of St. John's poems in which the night is identified

with the abundant vital force of a fountain or spring (a widespread image for the source of all life); it is the hidden source of the depths of all being, which is limitless, permeating all, hidden and secret, found only in darkness:

That eternal spring is hidden,  
For I know well where it has its rise,  
Although it is night.

I do not know its origin, for it hasn't one,  
But I know that every origin has come from it [todo origen della viene].  
Although it is night.....

I know well that it is bottomless  
And that no one is able to cross it  
Although it is night.

Its clarity is never darkened,  
And I know that every light has come from it  
Although it is night. (62)

St. John in fact uses the symbolism of night and darkness in two different yet interrelated senses: firstly, to denote the purgations of the Nights of Sense and Spirit, and secondly, in the sense of the Dionysian "Divine Dark" of unknowing, of the apparent 'blindness' of faith and mystical insight when considered from the point of view of reason. (Of course, it could equally well be said that reason is blind to mystical insight.) Hence the whole of the spiritual life can in a sense be called a Night. The night never really ends; one never really emerges from it once one has entered, except perhaps in the ultimate state of union; but completely perfect union (for St. John) can in any case not be achieved in this life. One does emerge from the aridity of the night; the darkness dissipates as the soul is flooded with Divine Light; but this light is still darkness to the rational understanding. Again, the trials of the soul never quite cease, they merely reappear under different forms. In the spiritual life, we never cease to need to apply self-discipline and continual effort on all levels. The logically distinguishable aspects of the Night do not fall

into hard-and-fast categories: the onset of the Night of Sense occurs before the onset of the Night of Spirit, but both will later continue side by side. The painfulness of the Night of Sense lessens considerably as we progress, but it never disappears entirely until final union, because the lower part of the soul cannot be fully purged until the higher part is also fully purified. Indeed, the further we progress along the way, the more we are aware of our own shortcomings and inadequacies, and the harder and more difficult the trials and testings become. There are thus broad overlaps between the various stages; they do not have clear dividing lines. This is the way of spiritual progress: the lower stage is absorbed into the higher in a transmuted form. As Schnapper says, the various stages of mystical advancement ".....represent rallying points in which the previous phase finds its consummation but where, at the same time, lies embedded the seed for further growth. Thus each step stands for a new level of development and a new departure; one conditioning and, in a transmuted form, being contained in the other." (63)

Lest St. John's teachings should seem unduly pessimistic, we should add that in proportion as our suffering increases, so does our joy and love; the more we know the darkness, the more we see the light; for eventually, through sounding the very bottom of suffering, we come to that region where suffering and love are one, and pain is transmuted to joy; and in detachment from our trials, we cease to feel grief at them. The willing acceptance of suffering, and the surrender of the self, empty the soul of self-love and give us an energy, strength and inner beauty that know no bounds. One of St. John's poems illustrates this most beautifully:

And though I suffer darkneses  
In this mortal life,  
That is not so hard a thing;  
For though I have no light

I have the life of heaven.  
For the blinder love is  
The more it gives such life,  
Holding the soul surrendered,  
Living without light, in darkness.

After I have known it  
Love works so in me  
That whether things go well or badly  
Love turns all to one sweetness  
Transforming the soul in itself.  
And so in its delighting flame  
Which I feel within me,  
Swiftly, with nothing spared,  
I am wholly being consumed. (64)

St. John certainly shows us the inevitability of suffering; but this should not lead us to think of him as being unnecessarily pessimistic. All the sufferings are the natural effects of the raising of the inner life to ever higher planes. The deeper the suffering, the higher the new level when it is attained. The soul is tested almost to breaking point, until a crisis is reached which necessitates a burst of strength and effort which will carry the mystic over the threshold to a new and higher level of consciousness. Suffering is a necessary partner to growth in St. John's teachings: if we could find a Path with no obstacles, we would probably find that it leads nowhere. St. John calls to us to take up our personal cross: "The gate entering into these riches of His wisdom is the cross, which is narrow, and few desire to enter by it...." (65) (St. John, in one of his numerous mystical interpretations of scripture, identifies the "narrow gate" of Matthew 7:14 with the Night of Sense, and the "straight way" with the Night of Spirit.) Some have found St. John too negative, 'annihilistic', too preoccupied with suffering and purgation: an attitude which may result from a neglect to scale the heights of his doctrine. As Father Gabriel says, "True it is that John of the Cross is the Doctor of the Night, but the title befits him because he has brought light into the night...." (66)



"Nothingness"

Similarly, it should be observed that St. John's teaching on the theme of "nothingness" is not wholly negative, because through possessing nothing we come to possess all; through knowing nothing (i.e., through transcending the limitations of the rational faculty) we know all; through seeking hedonistic pleasure in nothing we find true joy in all. St. John often refers to "nothingness", "emptiness", and the "void" (vacío):

The path of Mount Carmel: spirit of perfection, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, even on the mount nothing. (67)

Neither this, nor this, nor this.....nor that, nor that....." (68)

This final quotation finds parallels in Eckhart, Suso, Plotinus and Śankara, our other representatives of metaphysical mysticism: for all these, the Godhead or Absolute is "neither this nor that". (69)

The nothing, the unknowing, is really a state of understanding all but thinking about no specific item of knowledge; perceiving all but conceiving of nothing in particular. This is another example of St. John's frequent use of paradox, and can be seen to relate to his teachings on detachment: through emptying ourselves, we are filled. Again, certain writers have adopted a somewhat one-sided approach to St. John here; for example, Zwi Werblowsky (70) calls St. John's attitude "anticognitive" and interprets him as rejecting all knowledge of whatever kind, however spiritual. Of course this is partly a question of how we define 'knowledge', but nevertheless it remains true that St. John does refer to union as giving us a very real knowledge of God, even if this type of knowledge cannot be compared to our ordinary means of understanding. If, in union, there were no 'knowledge' of any kind, there would be no consciousness

of the experience; the mind would be a complete blank and in effect 'annihilated'; and it is clear that St. John does not mean to imply this (as I have also argued in connection with other mystics). Zwi Werblowsky, then, it seems to me, fails to distinguish between different types of 'knowledge', and misses out on the mystical paradox of unknowing by concentrating only on the second part of St. John's saying, "To attain to knowledge of all things, desire to know nothing of any."

### Paradox and Symbolism

As we have seen, St. John is very fond of the use of paradox, although he employs it more in his poetry than in his prose writings. In addition to the paradoxes of Darkness and Light, Nothing and All, we encounter true freedom which comes through surrender of the will to God; the wound of Love, an excruciating pain which is also exquisite delight; Life in Death and Death in Life; and so on. St. John also uses a number of interesting and expressive symbols in his poetry; there is a dense interweaving of Biblical and ancient Classical symbolism. He makes wide use of romantic and sexual symbolism, adapting (like the Bhakti poets) the techniques and style of the secular love poetry of his age to spiritual themes; this is known in Spanish as divinización. In particular, he draws heavily on the Song of Songs. He often uses symbols derived from the four elements: fire (the flame of love) water (fountains and springs as the source of life) air (breezes, winds, an ecstatic soaring high in the sky) and earth (mountains, valleys, meadows). One of the most effective uses of imagery, however, and one which is again paradoxical, is the interplay which St. John sets up between images of inward penetration, and symbols of a wide open spaciousness which is exhilarating and liberating.

This is shown in the 'Spiritual Canticle', where the theme of inner penetration, solitude, withdrawal and secrecy is symbolised by the "inner cellar", by walled gardens and hidden caves; yet these images alternate with open landscapes, mountains, strange islands, rushing water and rocky heights, symbolising the awakening to a more expansive life of greater liberation, the emergence of latent powers and possibilities. In the poem, the soul goes out in search of her Lover, ranging through all creation until she finds him; then, after a brief ecstatic flight, come the images of inwardness, denoting penetration to the mystical centre, the still, silent point of rest at the hub of all motion; finally, at the end of the poem, the images of spaciousness recur, yet as Margaret Wilson has observed, these images ".....are mysteriously one with penetration into dark and hidden depths." (71) At the end of the poem, inner and outer (seclusion and spaciousness) have become one. (The theme of the inner and the outer becoming one will be seen more fully developed in Boehme, who is discussed later in this study.)

St. John's teachings are full of mystery and paradox, so much so that they could perhaps be summarised by saying that if we wish to be sure of the road on which we are travelling, we must close our eyes and walk in the dark; yet he wrote with the express intention of guiding others along the dark road on which he had himself travelled. Having undergone much suffering himself in the spiritual life, he was deeply moved by suffering in others, and sought to alleviate it and to point out landmarks along the way by which the soul wandering in darkness could find its bearings. Hence his writings are truly, as he had hoped, ".....sayings of discretion for the wayfarer, of light for the way, and of love in the wayfaring." (72)

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## METAPHYSICAL MYSTICISM PART 5: ŚĀNKARA

As an Eastern parallel to those mystics we have so far discussed, we shall consider the philosophy of Śānkara, which was a major contribution to the development of Hindu thought. Born in an age of spiritual and social discord in India, and of conflict among the various spiritual and philosophical sects then in existence, Śānkara attempted to bring unity to this discord through his philosophy of nondualism. *It is claimed that* he was born of a Brahmin family, probably around 788 A.D., and died *According to popular tradition* around 820. *he* came to be regarded as an avatāra of Śiva; a vision was given to his parents before his birth intimating this, and various miraculous tales are told in connection with his conception and childhood. At a very early age, it appears, he had mastered the Vedic scriptures and familiarised himself with the current systems of religious and philosophical thought. He soon became a saṅnyāsin, his first teacher being Govinda Bhagavatpada, a disciple of Gaudapada. Later he went to Varanasi, the centre of India's spiritual learning, and disciples began to attach themselves to him. He led a strenuous life, travelling widely around India teaching, visiting the temples of all denominations, and founding several monastic orders. Like Plotinus, he disclaimed any originality for his teachings; like Boehme, Ramakrishna and all great mystics, he regarded himself merely as a channel for teachings and powers which came from the Divine.

Śānkara went on to refute the opinions of the current philosophical schools, attempting on the one hand to prove the validity of his own nondualistic system, and on the other to restore unity and wholeness amongst the different systems. He apparently believed in the ultimate non-difference of all systems, and we shall later see how this was developed in the Neovedānta of Rāmakrishna. He regarded every sectarian

deity (Śiva, Devī, Sūrya, etc.) as an aspect of the same reality (Īśvara or Brahman) spoken of in different ways. As Ramakrishna was to do later, Śankara too acknowledges the value of both theistic and monistic approaches to the Divine, but unlike Ramakrishna he sees the theistic approach as only a relative truth, a lower, exoteric teaching; as a necessary means, perhaps, advantageous at a certain level of spiritual development, but not the highest truth. The personal deity, we might say, is regarded as a symbol for the higher, formless reality. However, Śankara's hymns and prayers show that he was not lacking in devotion to God conceived under theistic form. We have commented that Eckhart appears to have known both theistic and monistic mystical experiences, whilst regarding the monistic as the ultimate truth, and the same may be said of Śankara. The relative truth of theism is not denied; as is so common in mystical teachings, we have the acceptance of different levels of truth, each valid on their own plane of reality. The following hymn to Śiva, ascribed to Śankara, may illustrate this:

From the standpoint of the body, O, Siva, I am Thy servant;  
from the standpoint of the soul, O Thou with three eyes, I be-  
come a part of Thine; and O the Self of all, from the standpoint  
of the Self, I am verily Thou. (1)

Śankara attempts to systematise the philosophy of the Upaniṣadic teaching of Brahman and ātman, interpreting this in his own rigidly monistic manner. For reasons of brevity, we shall not go into his Vedic sources in detail, but shall confine ourselves to a discussion of his metaphysics, and his teachings regarding mystical attainment and the methods and techniques leading to this. We shall merely note here that like Eckhart, John of the Cross, and so many other mystics, Śankara interprets the scriptures in a mystical sense, as referring to inner processes: creation myths, for example, are seen as means to produce in us realisation of the oneness of



ātman and Brahman (2); the various Upanisadic speculations regarding the first principle of the universe (prāna, ākāśa, etc.) all really refer to Brahman (3); and so on.

### Nirguṇa Brahman

The highest reality, for Śankara, is nirguṇa Brahman (Brahman without qualities or attributes); this is the Absolute, the only full Reality, the only thing that truly is. It is beyond being and non-being, but inasmuch as we can conceptualise it at all, we may say its nature is sat, cit, ānanda -- infinite Being, Consciousness and Bliss -- in contrast to the world of "names and forms" (nāma-rūpa) which is unreal (anṛta), non-intelligent (jaḍa) and sorrowful (duḥkha). As infinite Being, Brahman is the ground of the universe, projecting and sustaining all things. It is the underlying substratum or essence of all, permeating everything. As infinite Consciousness, all knowledge proceeds from it; by knowing it, everything becomes known. As infinite Bliss, it is the basis of all true happiness. It is absolutely transcendent and non-dual; eternal, infinite, changeless and indivisible. Nothing that we can say or think of can adequately describe nirguṇa Brahman, for it is beyond all determination; it cannot be categorised in terms of finite, limited characteristics. As for Eckhart and Plotinus, the Absolute is not this nor that. Also as for Eckhart and Plotinus, whilst we may describe the Absolute as pure Being, more correctly it is beyond both Being and Nonbeing, the manifest and the unmanifest. "Even to say that it is one is not strictly true, for the category of number is inapplicable to the Absolute." (4) Hence, Śankara calls his philosophy Advaita -- which means "nondualism" rather than

"monism". Statements regarding Brahman must use philosophical language in order to be intelligible, but these are not the reality itself, merely a way of expressing in relatively concrete form, what is ultimately beyond form and beyond words. This will be seen to be a prime illustration of my argument, elaborated upon in Chapter V of this study, that metaphysics can be seen as a rationalisation of mystical experience, an attempt to express it in conceptual terms, and that it is most important in a study of mysticism to distinguish between experience and interpretative frameworks; for, whereas we cannot fully describe Brahman, we can realise it in a state of intuitive insight. Thus Brahman should not be regarded as a mere negation; the denial of all attributes to it, the insistence that it cannot be defined (neti, neti) is a means to a higher affirmation or personal realisation (tat tvam asi -- a concept which is developed below). "It is true that it cannot be grasped as an object of knowledge," says Hiriyanna, "but there may be other ways of 'experiencing' it; and the whole tenor of the advaitic theory of perception as well as its scheme of practical discipline.....shows that there is such a form of experience and that we can 'know' Brahman by being it." (5)

#### Brahman as ātman

Indeed, it is a corner-stone of Śankara's philosophy that Brahman is known with certainty precisely because it can be found within us. The primal source of the universe, Brahman, is identical with the inmost spiritual essence of humanity, the ātman: "That thou art" (tat tvam asi). Brahman and ātman are synonymous terms. One refers to the macrocosm and the other to the microcosm, but these two are themselves ultimately

one. The unconditioned Absolute is the same reality on both levels, the 'within' and the 'without', the inner Self and the universe. All is Consciousness; through the understanding of microcosmic and macrocosmic correspondences, the mystic is able to expand his or her consciousness so as to identify the Self within with the universe without, and with the Consciousness which permeates it. The "inner ruler" of all, on which all worlds rest, is found whole and undivided as the "inner ruler" within ourselves. In the West, such microcosmic and macrocosmic correspondences are found most fully developed in Plotinus and Boehme amongst the mystics examined in the study.

Thus it is that Śankara holds that the existence of Brahman does not need to be proved, for it may be directly known within us as the ground of all proof, the basis of all certainty, of all thought and knowledge. Even if we deny the ātman, we are thereby presupposing it in that we are engaged in the activity of thought and denial. The ātman is not an object of knowledge, but the subject which knows in us; it is Pure Consciousness, the source of all knowledge itself. All that is perceived is perceived through the light of the ātman or Brahman, and it is perceived by its own light, just as through the light of the Sun we perceive the Sun itself and all other things. Śankara says:

Just because it is the Self, it is not possible to doubt the Self. For one cannot establish the Self (by proof) in the case of anyone, because in itself it is already known. For the Self is not demonstrated by proof of itself. For it is that which brings into use all means of proof, such as perception and the like, in order to prove a thing which is not known. For the objects of the expressions ether etc. require a proof, because they are not assumed as known of themselves. But the Self is the basis (āgraya) of the action of proving, and consequently it is evident before the action of proving. And since it is of this character, it is therefore impossible to deny it. For we can call in question something, which comes to us (āgantuka) (from outside), but not that which is our own being. For it is even the own being of him who calls it in question..... (6)

We are reminded of the Cartesian cogito, where it is held that even if I doubt my own existence, I must exist in order to doubt; my existence is therefore a self-evident truth. The divergence, of course, lies in the very different views of the self put forward by Descartes and Śankara: for Descartes, we are "beings that think" (ego sum res cogitans); reason, not spiritual consciousness, is seen as the basis of the self. Mahadevan comments as follows on Śankara's 'cogito', if we may thus describe it:

.....there must be something which itself being unexperienced makes all other experiences possible; and that is the self. Since it is itself experience, it is not an object of experience. The self is not an object of cognition, since there is neither a cognizer nor cognition apart from it. The witness-self is always the seer and never the object of sight. Scripture declares: "Where there is duality, there one perceives another, one smells another, one tastes another, one contacts another, one knows another; but where all this is the self, who is there to be heard by whom, who is there to think, touch and know whom? Who can know him by whom all this is known? Who can know the knower?" Because the self is not an object of experience it is not proper to say that it is non-existent. It is not a non-object of experience like the horns of a hare or the son of a barren woman. It is self-resplendent experience, and hence not an experienced object. It is existence, and not an existent. Self-existence cannot become a matter of controversy. Nobody doubts his own existence.....In self-consciousness, thought and existence cannot be separated.....Self-existence is the basic fact on which all knowledge and logic are grounded. Self-knowledge is inseparable from self-existence. Śankara says that self-knowledge which is neither logical nor sensory is the pre-supposition of every other kind of cognition. It is beyond proof, since it is the basis of all proof. If a person asserts that the self is unreal, then he is predicating his own unreality; for he is no other than the self. (7)

By what should one know the knower? : Śankara replies, the Self is known by means of the Self alone (ātmani, ātmānam, ātmanā: "Know the Self in the Self and through the Self"). "As a lighted lamp does not need another lamp to manifest its light, so Ātman, being Consciousness itself, does not need another instrument of consciousness to illumine Itself." (8)

It might seem that there is a problem inherent in Śankara's argument here. Assuming that the existence of the Self is not open to doubt, it still

remains to be shown exactly what this Self is. In other words, some might argue, we may perceive with an unshakeable certainty the existence of our own self, but are we justified in identifying this self with the source and ground of the universe, and thereby claiming that Brahman necessarily exists? Śankara himself is quite aware of this problem. He holds that Brahman is known on the ground of its being the Self within each one of us; but there is still room for enquiry into it, for different philosophical schools have conflicting opinions regarding the exact nature of the self. But whatever our views on the nature of the self, it is clear at least that Śankara cannot be accused of illegitimately inferring by rational argument the existence of Brahman, in the same way as one might attempt to 'prove' the existence of God; for the point to be grasped is that Brahman is our Self; we are Brahman, and all we have to do is to awaken to the truth of this, to realise it within ourselves. (This same point also applies to mystics of other traditions, for whom the Divine is found by turning within.) This does not, of course, amount to 'reducing' Brahman to the level of the empirical self; rather, it is a matter of seeing our self in its full glory. In other words, Śankara's argument hinges on self-knowledge, knowledge of ourselves as we truly are. Thus whether his argument is found convincing will depend wholly on the nature of our own inner experience. And if we have not had such an experience ourselves, we can hardly debate the possibility of its reality as experienced by others. We may question an inference made from an experience, but cannot question the experience itself. Or, as Śankara puts it above, ".....we can call into question something which comes to us from outside, but not that which is our own being."

The Jīva

Brahman as ātman, the Self within, is the changeless core of our innermost being, immortal, enlightened, blissful, pure, free from attachment and beyond suffering. It is distinct from the body, senses, mind (manas), intellect (buddhi), from the accretions of karma, from the various limitations (upādhis) which condition our view of the world. The ātman does not act or undergo change; like Brahman, it is eternally unchanging and attributeless. All activity, enjoyment, suffering, and so on, are in reality attributes of the lower self, the non-Self (the ego, senses, body, mind, etc.) while the ātman is the unmoving witness of these changing states, an impartial observer. But we, through delusion or ignorance (avidyā), fail to discriminate between the true Self and the lower self; we ".....superimpose on the stainless Ātman, which is Existence and Consciousness Absolute, the characteristics and functions of the body and the senses." (9) We fall under the false impression that we (in our highest Self) are actors, enjoyers, seers, knowers. We do not realise our true nature, and mistakenly identify ourselves with the ego and with our desires and sense-experiences, with the mind and body, with our pleasure and pain; we become attached to the fruits of action. For example, if a person feels pain, this pain in reality belongs only to the body, emotions, etc.; and while it is true to say that we experience pain if we identify ourselves with this lower aspect of the self, it remains true also that the ātman, our true Self, is beyond pain and suffering. The aspect of ourselves that feels pain, that is the agent or actor in the changing states that we experience, is the jīva. The jīva is the individual empirical self, the soul endowed with a psycho-physical organism, and is but an appear-

ance, having no reality independent of Brahman; that is, all that is not Brahman in it, is māyā ('appearance', sometimes, though perhaps rather misleadingly, translated 'illusion'). Our attachment to the jīva binds us to the phenomenal world and causes us to be reincarnated again and again in the wheel of saṃsāra, of birth, death and rebirth, according to the laws of karma. The true Self, the ātman, does not transmigrate, being beyond birth and death. The ideal is to rise above our narrow, fragmentary view of reality; to remove the false, limiting conditions of our lower selfhood. Then we realise the true Self and are set free from the round of births and deaths. "The limiting adjuncts (upādhis) from Brahmā down to a clump of grass are all wholly unreal. Therefore one should realize one's own Infinite Self as the only Principle." (10) Underlying Śankara's attitude here is the conviction that our forms of consciousness, our attitudes, are a major cause of our bondage and continued transmigration. All our limitations persist because of our deluded consciousness. Consciousness being the cause of bondage, is also the cause of liberation, and if we can but purify the self so as to realise what we truly are, we are set free. (11)

The jīva is composed of the causal body (kāraṇa-śarīra), the subtle body (sūkshma-śarīra), and the gross physical body (sthūla-śarīra). Transmigration entails a change of physical body; the causal body transmigrates, and the subtle body also, with some alterations. Śankara also speaks of a higher aspect of the jīva, the "witness-self" (sākṣin) which is close to Brahman (indeed on occasion it seems to be identified with the ātman) and becomes absorbed into Brahman when, at liberation, the various upādhis of the lower self are dissolved into māyā. Perhaps we may compare the sākṣin to Plotinus' higher aspect of the soul which eternally

contemplates Nous, and to the "Ground of the Soul" of Christian mysticism. It is the pure element of awareness in all knowing -- it is by means of the sākṣin that we attain to mystical knowledge (jñāna).

### Saguṇa Brahman

We have referred to the distinction between relative and absolute truth in connection with Śankara's teachings regarding theism and monism. The personal God, Īśvara or saguṇa Brahman (Brahman with attributes, in contrast to the formless nirguṇa Brahman) is given qualities such as goodness, Lordship, omniscience, omnipotence, creatorship, etc. Īśvara, speaking now on the level of relative truth, is conceived of as bringing the world into existence, preserving it and destroying it again, through the power of māyā, which is his śakti or creative energy and the first cause of the physical universe. From the absolute or esoteric standpoint, however, the world is nothing but an appearance of Brahman. We will note, then, that the Absolute Reality is not the creator, just as Plotinus' One and Eckhart's or Suso's Godhead do not create or act. Māyā obscures the unity of Being and causes us to perceive the world from the standpoint of our limited egos -- avidyā being māyā 'individualised' or considered as it affects a particular jīva, while māyā is avidyā seen from the macrocosmic standpoint. On account of māyā/avidyā, the one reality, Brahman, appears as the personal Deity, individual jīvas, and the world. There are two standpoints from which we may view reality: the absolute (pāramārthika) and the relative (vyāvahārika), corresponding respectively to the higher esoteric doctrine (para vidyā) concerning knowledge of nirguṇa Brahman, and the lower exoteric doctrine (apara vidyā) concerned



with worship of Īśvara. (It should be noted, however, that the two viewpoints are often interwoven in Śankara's writings.) From the absolute point of view, Brahman is the one, sole, unchanging reality without forms or characteristics. From the relative point of view, Brahman appears as Īśvara. The personal Deity can therefore be seen as Brahman conditioned by māyā, or Brahman as it appears to us rather than as it is in itself. Perhaps we may say that the personal God is manifested from out of the impersonal Absolute in order that we may understand that Absolute -- just as for Eckhart, the Godhead becomes God only with and for creatures. Brahman takes on different theistic guises through the power of māyā, assuming those aspects which the devotee chooses, taking on limited "names and forms" so as to be comprehensible to the mind. That is, although eternally unborn, Brahman appears to be born or embodied as an avatāra whenever dharma (cosmic order) is threatened, and also appears to manifest in temple images, etc.

Śankara interprets Upaniṣadic passages which speak of Brahman as all-seeing, all-knowing, etc. (the "cosmic ideal") as referring to saṅgā Brahman. Similarly, passages giving mythological or symbolic attributes to Brahman, or drawing correspondences between 'parts' of Brahman and aspects of the physical universe, refer to saṅgā Brahman. Passages speaking of Brahman as not to be heard, not to be seen, without form, neither great nor small, etc. (the "acosmic ideal") refer to nirṅgā Brahman:

What then is the higher Brahman, and what the lower? To this we answer: Where, by discarding the differences of name, form and the like, ascribed by Ignorance, Brahman is indicated by the (purely negative) expressions "nor gross (nor fine, nor short, nor long)" and so on (Bṛih. 3,8,8) it is the higher. But where, on the contrary, exactly the same (reality), for the purpose of worship, is described as distinguished by some difference or other, for example, in words like: "Spirit is his material, life his body, light

his form" (Chānd. 3,14,2) it is the lower. (12)

It will be seen that, in the context of a discussion of mysticism, it is Śankara's esoteric doctrine that is of most relevance to us, the "lower doctrine" being more theological and concerned with relative truths. This is in itself an interesting point, which may relate to the distinction between mystical experience itself, and theological interpretations of that experience, a distinction which will be investigated in more detail in Chapter VI of this study. It might also be pointed out that we can see the "acosmic ideal" and the "cosmic ideal" of the Upaniṣads as corresponding to the "via negativa" and "via affirmativa" of Christian theology respectively; and that mystics in many cultures (especially those of metaphysical orientation such as are discussed in this chapter) have tended to lean heavily towards the "negative way", as if to give voice to the inadequacy of words, of particular theological formulas, to encapsulate what is apprehended as being beyond precise determination. I do not, however, wish to give the impression that nirguṇa Brahman and Īśvara are two separate deities for Śankara; on the contrary, they are ultimately one, even if Śankara accomplishes this by holding that saguṇa Brahman is reducible to nirguṇa Brahman plus the limiting adjuncts of māyā. We should also note that saguṇa Brahman is just as real as the empirical world (in fact, it seems to me that Śankara often seems to grant more reality to Īśvara than to the world; both are relative, dependent realities, but the world may be more relative and dependent than Īśvara!). The reality of one stands and falls with that of the other. When we attain final realisation, the reality of the world and the reality of Īśvara disappear simultaneously as we see that only nirguṇa Brahman is truly real.

There is one important difference between Īśvara's use of māyā as his

śakti, and the human self's bondage to māyā under its individualised form of avidyā; and here we encounter a most illuminating parallel between Śankara and Plotinus. Śankara teaches that whereas Īśvara is in control of māyā as his śakti, his creative energy (he is the māyin, Lord of māyā), the jīva is not in control of avidyā but is in bondage to it. The limitations imposed by avidyā on the jīva make it forget its real nature; but Īśvara is not injured by māyā: he uses māyā as an instrument for the purposes of creation, preservation and destruction of the worlds, and in order to manifest himself under various forms. He recognises that all this is but a divine game (līlā). (It may be objected that "māyā" is used in two different senses here; that is, that on the one hand it is the creative energy of Īśvara, on the other it is that which prevents us from seeing things as they really are. Nevertheless, these two connotations of the word "māyā" are inseparable, because māyā as the creative energy of Īśvara is a kind of magical power by which Īśvara 'conjures up' a continually changing world, a world in which things appear and disappear like a magical show. Hence both uses of the term "māyā" indicate that the world is only a contingent reality, and that it deludes us into ascribing false ontological status to things.) We will recall that Plotinus teaches that when the World-Soul emanates the lower worlds, it is in no way corrupted thereby; but the individual souls of humanity have an inveterate tendency not merely to illuminate and rule over matter (as does the World-Soul) but to become enslaved by the images they have created. It is the task of both the World-Soul and individual souls to illuminate the lower levels of existence, to make the Light of the Divine manifest on the material level, to order and govern the lower realms. But individual souls become self-centred and over-involved in the grosser pleasures of the material

world; they want to create individual kingdoms for themselves, based on a pluralistic and egocentric view of reality. Śankara teaches in just the same manner that the jīva attempts to create for itself its own limited universe (jīva-sṛṣṭa). The individual souls, for Plotinus, forget their Source and their true nature, and sink to be bound and enslaved by the images of the material world, because they have regarded as ends or ultimate aims in life, those activities and constituents of the temporal order which are intended to be instruments. The World-Soul, on the other hand, like Śankara's Īśvara, continues to use the lower orders of being as an instrument, and is not bound by the images thus created. This thought-provoking parallel between Śankara and Plotinus is heightened by the fact that saṅgha Brahman can be identified with the Cosmic- or World-Soul, according to Deussen (13). Furthermore, while for Plotinus the World-Soul fashions the lower worlds according to the patterns or eternal archetypes of the Ideas, Śankara too conceives of eternal species of things (ākṛiti) similar to the Platonic Forms. These are the powers or archetypes by which Īśvara creates the world, and are associated with the words of the Veda; they are the "Names and Forms" of creation. (This interpretation of ākṛiti is Deussen's, but it is convincingly argued and supported by a number of quotations from Śankara.) (14)

### Māyā

The concept of māyā is of vital importance for an understanding of Śankara's mystical thought, and yet it is so enigmatic that it is hard to grasp. To begin with, it should be noted that māyā is not a substantial reality or 'thing' alongside or apart from Brahman. Māyā is that which is

not; ultimately, it is either seen itself to be Brahman, or it is seen not to exist. From a more concrete perspective, māyā is said to be neither real nor unreal. It is real in that we experience its effects, but these effects are themselves only appearance. "Because the world of plurality appears, maya is not unreal; because maya is sublated by the knowledge of the non-dual self, it is not real. It cannot be both real and unreal. Therefore it is indeterminable (anirvachaniya). Any inquiry into maya is not to make the concept intelligible, but to enable one to go beyond it. When one has gone beyond, there remains no problem to be solved." (15) Like Īśvara and the world, māyā is relatively real, but not absolutely so. It is unreal in that it is not absolute reality; it is real in that it is not imaginary. Māyā cannot be explained; indeed, the aim of Śankara's philosophy is not to attempt theoretically to understand māyā, but to remedy the sufferings which it brings about. When the Absolute is known, māyā and what it generates (the finite world, the finite self, etc.) are seen to have no reality -- or, that is, no reality independent of Brahman. Māyā is conceived of as a veil which obscures the one eternal truth and reality, making it appear as the world of saṁsāra, of change, relativity and becoming, and of the opposites of pleasure/pain, life/death, good/evil, etc. More precisely, māyā has two powers: the power of veiling or concealment (āvaraṇaśakti) and the power of projection (vikṣepaśakti). The first obscures the true nature of Brahman; the second projects conditions of relativity, duality, causality and so on. The symbolism of the veil that obscures truth finds interesting parallels in other religious traditions. In ancient Egyptian religion, the face and form of Isis were covered with a veil, symbolic of ignorance which stands between ourselves and truth. Isis lifts her veil and shows herself only to the person

who earnestly seeks to understand the mysteries of the universe. Only the few who have earned the right to remove her veil can see the Divine Presence without mediation. (16) In the Zohar, the Torah is symbolically portrayed as a beautiful woman secluded in an isolated chamber of a palace, who reveals herself to her lover only slowly and by gradual steps, until finally she removes her veil and holds converse with her lover on her secret mysteries. (17) We will recall also that the Veil of the Temple divides the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. In many traditions, the veil seems to symbolise the manifest world, or relative knowledge, which obscures deeper esoteric truth. It is very often found in association with feminine personifications of Deity; sometimes (as in Sumero-Semitic mythology) the veil is the world of manifestation woven by the Goddess. Māyā, and its associated concepts Śakti and prakṛti (primordial matter) are also feminine principles. For Śankara, the veil of māyā must be torn before we can see things as they really are.

### The Phenomenal World

Since māyā has no ultimate reality, Śankara holds that the world is just an appearance of Brahman, made up of the "names and forms" and other dualities and relativities projected by māyā. There is no real causation; Brahman does not change into the world, or become manifest as the world, or emanate the world as a substantial entity separate from itself. This, one of Śankara's most distinctive teachings, is known as the theory of phenomenal appearance (vivartavāda) as against the theory of transformation (pariṇāmavāda) held by Rāmānuja. (Rāmānuja is discussed in more depth later in this section.) Brahman and the world, cause and

effect, are identical for Śankara. We naturally tend to think of God as cause, and the world as effect -- but causality, "the bond which binds all the phenomena of the phenomenal world together" (18) does not bind the phenomenal world to the Eternal. As the world was identical with Brahman before its appearance as the world, so it remains during this appearance. The "name and form" only has changed; the inner nature remains the same. The world, therefore, exists eternally unmanifest even when it is not manifest; its appearance or 'creation' is a becoming visible of what was already latently existent. There is no transition from non-existence to existence. The cause simply appears in the form of the effect. (19) The world, then, is simply Brahman seen through a veil of limitations, which are generated by the mind under the bondage of māyā:

That which is supremely real is non-duality, through maya it appears as diverse....the partless unborn reality can by no means become different. This is the meaning. If what is immortal, unborn, and non-dual were to become really different, then it would become mortal, like fire becoming cool. But that is not acceptable, for a change of one's nature into its contrary is opposed to all evidence. The unborn non-dual Self becomes different only through maya, not in reality. Therefore, duality is not the supreme truth. (20)

The entire universe, then, for Śankara, is really Brahman, just as a jar is a mere modification of the clay of which it is made. (21) The world is a kind of crystallisation of Brahman at the level of "names and forms". Everything is pervaded by Brahman; indeed, there exists nothing that is not Brahman, and "If any object other than Brahman appears to exist, it is unreal like a mirage." (22) It should be pointed out, however, that the world as Brahman is not denied; all that is denied is the illusion which makes the world appear as other than Brahman. "This whole multiplicity of production existing under name and form in so far as it is Being itself is true. Of itself (svatas tu) it is untrue." (23) We can see here a reap-

pearance of the theme encountered in the writings of many other mystics, that all hinges on our attitude to the world, on our consciousness, on the way that we relate to and apprehend the world. This world is not wholly unreal -- it is real once we see it as the  $\text{Īlā}$  or 'divine play' of Brahman -- it is our fragmentary perception of it that is at fault. Śankara does not view the objects of everyday experience as wholly unreal -- they exist because they are perceived (as for Berkeley), because they are experienced. The experience is real; even an illusion is real to one who is under its spell. What we perceive to be reality is conditioned by our state of mind, that is, we alter our apprehension of reality through the nature of our mental attitudes. Consciousness sustains everything that is; all things are consciousness itself. If we can bring about the correct attitude, the requisite state of consciousness, within ourselves, we will see the objects of empirical existence as the  $\text{Īlā}$  of Brahman.

Śankara illustrates this teaching with his famous analogy of the snake and the rope, where the snake represents the world and the rope Brahman. If we mistake a piece of rope for a snake, our perception is not correct, but nor is it wholly unreal -- firstly, it is real to us as experience, and, secondly, the snake is not absolutely non-existent -- it's just that what is there is not really a snake, but a rope. The snake is  $\text{māyā}$ , it is not what it seems. The rope is, as it were, the substratum ( $\text{adhiṣṭhāna}$ ) underlying the snake -- the underlying reality which we in our ignorance do not perceive, but which gives the appearance of reality to an illusion based upon it. When we see our mistake, and realise the true nature of the rope, our false perception of the snake disappears. Śankara teaches that error arises when we superimpose false qualities upon things. Names and forms are superimposed upon Brahman through



māyā; the notion of 'snake' is superimposed upon the rope. Error is "illegitimate transference" (adhyāsa) which results from a confusion between two different realms of being, that is, in this case, from attributing absolute reality to what is relative. Here we encounter the typically mystical conception (found also in Plotinus, Eckhart, Boehme, etc.) that each realm of being or reality has its own objectivity on its respective level. Hiriyanna comments: "The conception of truth and error in the system [of Śankara] thus becomes relative, and it is essentially wrong to speak of any knowledge as true or false without mentioning at the same time the sphere with reference to which it is adjudged." (24) Thus it is that Śankara admits the reality of the names and forms of the phenomenal world before realisation, and for all practical purposes:

Prior to the realisation of the identity of Ātman with Brahman, the world of senses and other things have their definite form.....So long as the idea of the Self is identified with body-consciousness, i.e. till the realisation of Ātman, the world perception, the reality of the world is also equally valid. (25)

Just as the snake is not wholly unreal, but seen to be an error when we correctly perceive the rope; so empirical knowledge is not unreal, but when we see things as they really are, it is seen to fall short of the truth. When we see in mystical vision, we see things as they are, we see the rope.

### The Mystical Path

Sankara's mystical techniques and disciplines include the cultivation of detachment and disinterested action (niṣkāma-karma); devotion to Īśvara; mental purification and concentration. These three correspond to the paths of karma-yoga, bhakti-yoga and dhyāna-yoga, and are prelimin-

ary methods used in the earlier stages which provide the basic 'ground-work' making one eligible to tread the path of knowledge (jñāna). This in turn is conducted by way of study of the scriptures under a guru (śravaṇa), reflection upon what is thus learnt (manana), and meditation (nididhyāsana). Śankara's path is very much the way of knowledge, but not to the total exclusion of all other means to realisation. (Indeed it could be said, in the light of our observations that categories overlap and that the mystical way of 'knowledge' entails love, and the way of 'love' knowledge, and so on, that each mystical path contains within itself elements of other paths, but subordinate to the main path.) Śankara also mentions the four basic qualifications necessary for the pursuance of the Vedāntic path: renunciation of the enjoyment of the fruits of action both in this world and the next; the cultivation of various virtues; discrimination between the eternal and the transient; and the aspiration for liberation. (26) Like all mystics, he stresses the importance of personal experience:

The true nature of things is to be known personally, through the eye of clear illumination, and not through a sage; what the moon is, is to be known with one's own eyes; can others make him know it?.....A disease does not leave off if one simply utters the name of the medicine, without taking it; (similarly) without direct realization one cannot be liberated by the mere utterance of the word Brahman. (27)

We have to rise above our egotism, our limited, fragmentary view of things, to come to know our own Self as it really is: ".....drown the mind in the Supreme Self that is within, and through the realization of thy identity with that Reality destroy the darkness created by nescience....." (28) This requires constant self-watchfulness and unwearying dedication to the spiritual ideal. All the techniques enumerated by Śankara are, however, no more than means or "auxiliaries" (sahakārin) to the attain-

ment of knowledge (29). Knowledge is subject to no prescribed rule, just as for Eckhart God has not tied salvation to any one pattern; no means can be certain to bring about realisation. All effort is 'work', and work is tied to the phenomenal. Brahman is independent of circumstances and conditions, so that after we have attained true knowledge, the meditative disciplines and so on are no longer important:

The noble soul who has perfectly realized the Truth, and whose mind-functions meet with no obstruction, no more depends upon conditions of place, time, posture, direction, moral disciplines, objects of meditation and so forth. What regulative conditions can there be in knowing one's own Self? (30)

Having attained this state, one sees the Self in all things, all times, all places and all actions. But moral and religious activities, in the earlier stages, are aids to the attainment of jñāna; they are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the dawning of enlightenment. Śankara exalts the value of knowledge over and above 'works'. Works, unless done in a perfect state of detachment, are bound by karma and are one of the causes of our continued existence in saṃsāra. Since Brahman is unchangeable, liberation cannot be brought about by doing something, by action, for this implies change and is still within the world of relativity:

Action does not remove nescience, as it is not opposed to it; knowledge does destroy nescience, as light (destroys) dense darkness.....The opposition between wisdom (jnana) and works (karma) is unshakeable like a mountain.....He who regards Brahman as the self-complete end will not see any use in action. (31)

Action in and of itself will not bring about jñāna -- but it is still commended as a preliminary. But liberation consists not in doing, but in knowing; in the knowledge of something already present or innate, veiled from us by ignorance. We do not 'become' Brahman, since we always are Brahman, although we do not recognise this truth. We have to awaken to what we already are deep within ourselves, to awaken to our eternal

oneness with the Absolute. Platonic 'recollection' (ἀνάμνησις) thus finds an exact parallel in Śankara:

The Self, although always attained, is unattained, as it were, through nescience; when that (nescience) is destroyed, it becomes manifest..... (32)

Self-knowledge is therefore the keynote of Śankara's teachings. When we truly know ourselves, we see that we are one with absolute spiritual reality, and this is the only way to break the bonds of saṃsāra.

It should be noted that the knowledge thus attained is not a matter of discovering a particular object. It is rather a knowing of that which is the subject of all knowledge. The seer of all seeing cannot be seen. It is 'unknowable' in the sense that it cannot be attained by discursive reason; it cannot be known by any type of knowledge which separates subject and object, inner state and external thing. It is to be known only as one with oneself. Hence in mystical knowledge, where knowledge and being are isomorphic, there is a transcendence of the divisions of knower, object known, and act of knowing, as the mystic becomes what he or she knows.

The (Vedantic) teaching has for purport the removal of difference posited by nescience. Not, indeed, does the teaching seek to expound Brahman as an object, as a "this". What then? It expounds (Brahman) as the inner Self, as non-object, and thus removes the difference consisting of the object of knowledge, the knowing subject, and the knowledge-process, which is a projection of nescience. (33)

The Supreme Self on account of its being of the nature of all-encompassing bliss, does not admit of the distinctions of the Knower, Knowledge and the object of Knowledge. It alone shines. (34)

One must, therefore, rise above the use of all rational comprehension, symbols, forms, and so on, to realise Brahman within as the ground of All, and as one with oneself, without the intermediacy of sense-perception or mental cognition -- as in Plotinus' νόησις, and the 'unknowing' of Christian mystics. The mystic must pass beyond form to the Formless. The formless

vision of jñāna is identified by Śankara with turīya, a state of pure transcendental consciousness without upādhis, which is the basis of, and the reality behind, the other three states of waking, dream and deep sleep.

### The Heights of Mystical Attainment

This pure transcendental consciousness, in which subject and object merge in formless awareness, is not to be construed, Śankara says, as a void or as nothingness. It is the discovery of the true Self; the upādhis having been cancelled out, only Brahman remains, and the mystic enters a state of absorption in Brahman (nirvikalpa samādhi). Two types of samādhi are distinguished. In savikalpa samādhi the distinctions of knower, state of knowledge, and object known, remain. The mystic is still aware of the relative world and retains self-consciousness, although he or she also sees Brahman quite clearly. In the higher state of consciousness now under consideration, nirvikalpa samādhi, the mystic becomes completely one with Brahman, and self-consciousness is lost. The mystic is transformed into Brahman; time and space as we know them and all relativity are transcended; the bonds of karma are broken. But complete liberation cannot be attained just by experiencing nirvikalpa samādhi once or twice; continual practice and self-discipline are necessary to rid oneself of all the accretions of māyā. Parallels can be found with Plotinus and Eckhart: both speak of two types of mystical experience, one where some distinctions remain and self-consciousness is retained, and another higher vision in which we seem to lose self-consciousness. The latter type of experiences may be very short-lived, for we cannot bear their intensity for long; by

themselves they do not constitute criteria for final release (valuable as they are), for it is not brief visions and marvellous experiences that are the most important aspect of mystical life, rather the calm and constant awareness of living bathed in Divine Light and Peace in everyday life, given such serene expression in Eckhart's writings. This corresponds to Śankara's ideal of the jīvanmukta, which will be discussed later.

Śankara gives some moving descriptions of the ineffable experience of enlightenment in which one becomes Brahman:

My mind has vanished, and all its activities have melted, by realizing the identity of the Self and Brahman; I do not know either this or not-this; nor what or how much the boundless Bliss (of Samādhi) is!

The majesty of the ocean of Supreme Brahman, replete with the swell of the nectar-like Bliss of the Self, is verily impossible to express in speech, nor can it be conceived by the mind -- in an infinitesimal fraction of which my mind melted like a hailstone getting merged in the ocean, and is now satisfied with that Essence of Bliss.....

I neither see nor hear nor know anything in this. I simply exist as the Self, the Eternal Bliss, distinct from everything else.....

I am without activity, changeless, without parts, formless, absolute, eternal, without any other support, the One without a second.

I am the Universal, I am the All, I am transcendent, the One without a second. I am Absolute and Infinite Knowledge, I am Bliss and indivisible. (35)

In becoming one with the All, with the root of all knowledge, we know All (as for St. John, Plotinus, etc.); and also as for these mystics, this knowledge is not of particular mental concepts. It is a formless, all-embracing awareness which penetrates all things. All dualities are transcended in this state of awareness, so that it is seen that even the duality of bondage and liberation is ultimately an upādhi, an attribute of the buddhi (intellect) which does not apply to the one Eternal Reality. "There is neither death nor birth, neither a bound nor a struggling soul, neither a seeker after liberation nor a liberated one -- this is the ultimate truth." (36) The reality of saṁsāra stands or falls with the reality of the lower

self and the world.

Śankara holds that the mystic does literally become Brahman; there is only the "one without a second" in the highest state of attainment. Whatever we truly aspire towards in life, whatever we direct our aims and energies to, that we become. The person who directs his or her energies towards the Real becomes the Real, through the strength of his or her one-pointed devotion. (37) Those, on the other hand, who identify themselves with the body, or with the mind, are transformed, as it were, into that. (38) The mystic, in the final reaches of mystical experience, does actually become Brahman without any distinctions remaining. But this does not amount to abolishing altogether the distinction between the self and God on the lower level of truth. The jīva is not Īśvara, but the ātman (what the self really is) is Brahman (what the personal Deity really is). (Compare the hymn to Śiva quoted at the beginning of this discussion.)

Śankara says:

Granted, that the soul and God (Īśvara) are related as the part and the whole, yet it is evident that the soul and God are of different character. How stands it, then, with the identity of God and the soul? Does it exist, or not? In truth it exists, but it is hidden; for Ignorance (avidyā) hides it. (39)

But this identity is realised when we seek for liberation and begin to make progress along the mystical path. We may compare Eckhart's teaching that we eventually pass beyond God, because we see what God and the soul have in common -- that is, the Godhead. For Śankara, likewise, the maxim "That Thou art" illustrates that we must rise above the differences between Īśvara and the jīva to recognise their identity, which is shown by the fact that the essence of both is Cit, Knowledge Absolute. (40) For both Eckhart and Śankara, in the highest reaches of mystical experience, the personal God, the individual soul and the impersonal

Absolute merge into one, as we see that it is the Absolute that is the reality behind them all.

To what extent, then, can we say that there is retention of individual selfhood in the final unity? The structure of Śankara's metaphysics is uncompromising here; he always stresses unity, the One without a second, so that we perhaps miss the richness of dynamic interplay found, for example, in Plotinus' unity-in-diversity. However, Plotinus, like Śankara, speaks of momentary loss of self-consciousness in the higher reaches of mystical experience; and there is, it seems to me, a great deal of difference between such a temporary loss of self-consciousness, and an actual continued loss of identity. It may be questioned whether Śankara implies the latter; if he is to be interpreted thus, then it is difficult to see any difference between such a doctrine and annihilation. Śankara emphasises that he does not mean to imply annihilation, although his statements to this effect may not convince everyone. In any case, the fact that the enlightened sage remains in the world as a jīvanmukta and continues to carry on an existence which to the eye of the beholder appears relatively normal, would seem to count against such an argument. We could see Śankara as teaching that the individual self is not annihilated, but expanded infinitely until it contains the whole universe. This could be expressed by saying that we experience an absorption of the All into the Self, rather than the Self into the All; or that we experience not Nothing but Everything. The empirical self is 'annihilated', but that Self which is our true Self, which is Brahman, will remain. In other words, we are speaking not of an unconscious but of a supraconscious state. Thus no individual discriminatory or contingent consciousness remains -- for consciousness of this sort is not possible without duality, without an 'other' to be seen or experienced.



But Brahman is said to be infinite, pure, non-differentiated Consciousness. And if we accept that this non-differentiated supraconsciousness is our true Self, then in this sense self-awareness (or rather Self-awareness!) persists. But of course it is true that we will not find the idea of persistence of personal identity in the Western philosophical sense in Vedānta. To expect to find this would in any case amount to imposing Western ideas of the soul, of personal identity, etc., upon Advaitin conceptions of the self, which are in many respects different. For Śankara, it is enough simply to be Brahman in a state of pure peace and transcendent knowledge, to merge with the ocean of being. Rāmānuja's ideas here are more similar to many Western notions; but in Śankara's teachings there is no persistence of any kind of "name and form" or individuality in the sense in which we would understand it. It is here that Śankara differs most widely from even the most monistic mystics of the West. All that continues on absorption into Brahman is the essence of which the mystic, as a particular person, was a crystallisation under a particular "name and form".

Brief reference might be made to Śankara's teachings regarding transmigration, although from a mystical point of view it is the experiences of the self in this life that are of more direct relevance. Those who neither achieve mystical knowledge nor perform good works in this life are reborn as animals or plants; good works lead to the "Path of the Fathers" (Pitṛiyāna): enjoyment of reward for works, followed by descent into a new incarnation. Lower spiritual knowledge (of the *apara vidyā*) leads to the "Path of the Gods" (Devayāna). Here the soul dwells with *saguṇa* Brahman in a kind of heaven or celestial paradise. It does not return to this earth, but is not yet fully liberated; higher knowledge of

nirguṇa Brahman is needed for this. From the paradisiacal realm, the soul eventually attains perfect knowledge and liberation. This indirect, exoteric path is known as "progressive liberation" or "liberation by stages" (karmamukti). (41) The important point, however, is that the truly mystical experience of the "higher doctrine" can be achieved in this life. Whilst liberation is not attainable only from a human birth, humanity does nevertheless have a special place in Śankara's teachings, the role played being similar to the idea of man as microcosm in Plotinus and Boehme, and finding expression in the Upaniṣads in the figure of Primordial or Cosmic Man (Puruṣa). Humanity alone knows both the visible and the invisible worlds, and can see the immortal through the mortal; the ātman is brought to perfection through a human incarnation. Just as for Plotinus, the soul both separates and unites the divine realm and the realm of matter, so Śankara refers to the ātman as a "bridge" which differentiates and yet binds together the two worlds, eternal and temporal. (42)

#### The Jīvanmukta

The purport of this teaching can be seen in the importance of the jīvanmukta, the sage who is liberated whilst in the body. Such a person has an immediate and continual awareness of the identity of the inner Self with Brahman. There is no more pain or fear, no more attachment to the fruits of action or karmic consequences ensuing therefrom. The jīvanmukta shows forth in his or her life and actions the reality of Brahman, pointing the way to others. Having risen above the narrow egotism of the lower self and its fragmentary view of the world, such a

one is able to look upon all things with equanimity and detachment. The jīvanmukta looks upon the play of māyā as a detached spectator; though living in the world of relativity, he or she is unaffected by all the conflicting pairs of opposites, and is no longer even concerned about the antithesis of bondage and liberation, for the ātman is forever free. The jīvanmukta is full of compassion, peace, tranquillity and strength. He or she is beyond the socially-defined ethical norms, yet practices virtue quite naturally and without strain (for when our will is one with the Divine Will, we are unable to act immorally. We then do to others as we would they would do to us, because in our vision of the unity of all being, we see that they are us at the highest level, where there is no multiplicity of selves). The mystic may now enjoy even the sense-objects without attachment. The physical body remains alive because of the momentum of karma from past actions, but the mystic no longer identifies himself or herself with the body and is able to engage in "actionless action" like an actor playing a role, or an unconcerned spectator watching the actions of the body. He or she is higher even than the gods, who are still bound to the laws of karma and relativity. All desires and wishes are now inwardly fulfilled, for if we enter into ourselves, there to find the All, we no longer need to seek after the outward satisfaction of desires. If we contain all things within ourselves, then within we can find whatever we seek. Deussen comments: "...what we long for, is everywhere and always only the satisfaction of our own Self; but our Self is identical with the highest Godhead and only apparently different from Him; he who sees the illusory nature of this appearance, who has become conscious of God as his own Self, has and possesses the perfect satisfaction, which he has sought in vain in striving after the outward." (43) It will be seen that

there are many close parallels between the condition of the jīvanmukta as described by Śankara, and the state of the liberated mystic as described by the other mystics we have examined. The key to many of the characteristics of the enlightened sage in the East is that he or she sees all things as the Self and the Self in all things, just as Christian mystics speak of seeing all things in God and God in all. Śankara says:

The yogi endowed with complete enlightenment sees, through the eye of knowledge, the entire universe in his own Self and regards everything as the Self and nothing else. (44)

Or as Plotinus puts it, "....by the act of self-intellection he has the simultaneous intellection of all." (45) (We may compare the "eye of knowledge" referred to above with Boehme's "eye of eternity" and Wordsworth's eye that "sees into the life of things", both of which will be encountered later in this study.)

#### Some Aspects of Śankara's Symbolism

Like Plotinus, Śankara usually expresses himself in abstract, metaphysical language, but he does make use of certain symbols which show close parallels to those used by Plotinus and other mystics. The most striking of these parallels centres around the use of solar symbolism: just as all that is perceived is perceived through the light of the Sun, and the Sun is perceived by its own light, so, through the light of the Absolute (Śankara's Brahman/ātman, Plotinus' One) we perceive the Absolute itself and all other things. The ātman, the "Sun of Knowledge", "illumines all and also Itself." (46) One whose vision is obscured by ignorance does not see the ātman, as the blind do not see the radiant Sun (47); but when knowledge of the ātman arises, it is like darkness vanishing before the

glow of the rising Sun (48). We have commented on the imagery of dawn denoting realisation or enlightenment in Eckhart and St. John of the Cross, and it will also be encountered in Boehme and Ramakrishna. Śankara identifies the Sun as ātman with the heart (49), a correspondence also found in other mystical traditions (in the Kabbalah, for example); in the system of microcosmic and macrocosmic correspondences, the Sun as the centre of the solar system, the ātman as the centre of the Self, Brahman as centre of All, and the heart as centre of the body, are all interlinked. All such correspondences are aspects of the same reality portrayed symbolically on different levels of being. Another symbol used by Śankara for the innermost centre of the Self is the "secret chamber" (50) or the "inner city" of Brahman, which find their parallels in Western mysticism in the images of the inner temple or sanctuary, interior castle or palace, hidden chamber, etc. Śankara also uses alchemical symbolism, likening the transmutation of the self to the purification of gold in the fire (51), and speaks of an inner fire that dries up the ocean of sorrow (52). In addition, he uses the symbol of the sword to illustrate discrimination between the true and the false (53). All these images find widespread representation in other mystical traditions.

### Śankara and Plotinus

We have already pointed out a number of parallels between the mystical teachings of Śankara and Plotinus, and indeed the correspondences between their systems are in many ways remarkable, whilst also seeming to highlight an important difference between mystical traditions. We pass over the seemingly endless scholarly debates as to whether

Plotinus absorbed any Indian influence, as our concern here is with ideological resemblances rather than historical cross-fertilisation. It may be as well to summarise our previous points regarding Śankara and Plotinus before indicating some other general correspondences. In the writings of both Śankara and Plotinus the Ultimate Spiritual Reality (nirguṇa Brahman, the One) is conceived of in non-personal terms and is said to be transcendent, infinite, formless, changeless, non-dual, eternal, beyond suffering, etc.; it is "not this or that" (54). It does not act or create. It is beyond rational understanding and verbal formulation, realisable only in a state of intuitive insight which is pure consciousness, beyond the duality of knower and known. It is the ground of all being, all knowledge, etc., and is itself beyond both Being and Nonbeing. It is beyond unity and diversity, being rather the source of both. All things are existentially dependent upon this one Source. All that is perceived is perceived by its light, and it is perceived by its own light; both Śankara and Plotinus use the analogy of the Sun here.

Śankara's ātman, the transcendental Self within, corresponds in a general way to Plotinus' second Hypostasis, Nous; but, whereas for Śankara ātman and Brahman are interchangeable terms, for Plotinus the One and Nous bear a relation not of absolute unity but of unity-in-diversity. Plotinus is thus closer to Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita than to Śankara here. Śankara's jīva corresponds closely to Plotinus' soul of the individual, and Śankara's Īśvara to Plotinus' World-Soul (both these latter being the creators of the material universe), and we have already commented on the intriguing parallels concerning the bondage of the jīva/the individual soul to the lower realms, and the lordship of Īśvara/the World-Soul over them. The realm of eternal, unchanging reality is opposed by

both Śankara and Plotinus to the world of 'becoming', of time and flux and reincarnation. The individual soul/jīva has forgotten its true origin; deluded by ignorance (Śankara) or forgetfulness (Plotinus) it has become attached to its desires and sense-experiences. It identifies itself with the lower self and regards the material world as its ultimate aim in life. It will be reincarnated again and again, unless it can remember what its true nature is. It is a question not of becoming what we are not, but of realising what we already are, of bringing to light innate knowledge. This realisation is brought about by detachment from the things of the senses, from our lower egotistical view of things, and from the phenomenal world of multiplicity; also by ethical self-improvement, by study, and by mystical contemplation achieved through withdrawal into the innermost Self. Thus we come to attain a state of mystical knowledge or insight (jñāna/ νόησις) which is above reason, in which we eventually pass beyond all forms, symbols, etc., to a formless, ineffable vision without sense-perception or discrete mental contents. Often certain distinctions and a degree of self-awareness remain, but in the higher reaches of supraconscious experience they are lost. Whereas both Śankara and Plotinus stress the importance of this mode of apprehension which is beyond reason, they are also both, nonetheless, thorough theoreticians and highly rational philosophers, expressing themselves in abstract metaphysical language, in contrast to more emotional, or more concretely symbolic, forms of mysticism. They both advocate the way of 'knowledge', and stress the necessity of rising above the gods and rituals of popular religion, although Plotinus is much more insistent on this point than Śankara. Śankara has a more positive relationship between his theism (seen as a relative truth) and his mysticism. Even though saṅgā Brahman

is not an absolute Reality, he certainly plays a more important role in Śankara's system than do the gods in Plotinus: as we have seen, Plotinus hardly considers the gods of popular Greek religion as worth his attention at all.

One who has attained such a state of insight reaches a condition of self-integration in which he or she realises the eternal, unchanging state within. The mystic "knows the self by means of the self" (55), a condition which simultaneously entails attaining the knowledge of the Absolute and of all things as they relate to this Absolute. He or she looks upon the vicissitudes of the material world as if upon a play, remaining ever the same in the inner stillness of his or her being, regardless of the changes of fate and fortune. The enlightened sage attains unity and peace and is set free from the buffeting of emotions, sufferings, fears, etc. Such a one is no longer bound by multiplicity, space, time, dualities and dichotomies. This is to see all things in the Self and the Self in all. The path culminates in that state of absolute insight into the nature of things which is final liberation: the mystic is released from the wheel of death and rebirth.

We have noted also the special role of humanity as microcosm, separating and uniting the divine and temporal worlds, in Śankara and Plotinus. In addition, a number of the symbolic images used by Śankara are also used by Plotinus: the Sun, the refinement of gold, the inner sanctuary or chamber.

The most important difference between Śankara and Plotinus, it seems to me, is their respective attitudes to the material world. For Śankara, all that is not Brahman is māyā; creation is apparent, not real. "Brahman alone is true and the world is false; the jiva is Brahman only and not



different from it." (56) What this amounts to is that Brahman is not related to the material world except in appearance (māyā). We either see the world as the līlā of Brahman, or we are deceived into regarding it as possessing independent reality; and when we see it as Brahman, it disappears (as it were) for what it is in itself, i.e., in its character of having independent reality and of being worthy of our aims. It could be said that Śankara never really satisfactorily explains the relationship between Brahman, and the world and individual jīvas. If Brahman does not emanate the world or evolve into it or create it, how precisely are we to understand this 'appearance' of Brahman as the world? Both Śankara and Plotinus are agreed that all things exist only by virtue of the One Reality that is their Source; but for Plotinus, the world is a genuine emanation from or manifestation of the One (his metaphysics thus correspond more closely here to Rāmānuja's theory of pariṇāmavāda, in which the manifold things of our experience in the material world emerge from Brahman and are re-absorbed back into it). Hence, in Plotinus' theory of knowledge, the beauties of this world can be seen as intimations of the Beauty of the invisible realm. Śankara, on the other hand, does not seem to conceive of the soul rising to the Eternal through an appreciation of the phenomenal seen in its 'translucent' aspect. In other words, there appears to be no 'half-way house' in Śankara; no stepping-stone serving as a means of ascent from the realm of multiplicity to Brahman, no ladder of gradual stages of ascent through levels of reality. The phenomenal world is either Brahman, or it is māyā, without compromise. Śankara does not see Brahman in all the individual things of the world -- rather, he effaces their differentiations to see them all as Brahman. He looks not to the paradox of unity-in-diversity but to a bare stark unity which eventually

seems to take us outside the realm of human life as we know it. I think that in Śankara's writings we never quite get away from the feeling that the material world is something to be fled from or even rejected. (It is noteworthy that Śankara finds it necessary to excuse the jīvanmukta for remaining in the world on account of the momentum of karma from past actions; somehow he never seems to feel quite happy about this.) I do not wish to overstress this point (it seems to me that this has been done by many writers on mysticism in the past who have attempted a comparison between East and West). The difference may be one of emphasis rather than kind; but I think that we do see a fundamental divergence between Śankara and Plotinus here. The material world is given a more positive evaluation in Plotinus. Our mystical destiny according to Plotinus, we might say, is to bring the Light of the Divine down into manifestation, to care for, order and control the forces of the physical plane: or in Boehme's words, to "turn Earth to Heaven", to "give the Earth the Heaven's food". (57) Śankara, on the other hand, takes manifestation up to the Light. Both paths result in an illumination of the world by the Light, but from them there issue different attitudes to the world. For Plotinus, the descents and ascents of the soul, its entanglement in the realm of matter and its release, add to the enrichment of the total experience, and make manifest the fullness of all life's potential. The descent of the soul is a "willing descent for the perfection of the whole" (58), an attempt to illuminate the lower levels of existence and to fashion them after the likeness of the pattern of the Divine Ideas. This gives his mysticism a dynamism and vitality which I feel we miss in Śankara. The important question is whether we see the One and the many as mutually exclusive (all that is not Brahman is māyā) or as constituting a dynamic, working

polarity of equilibrating interchange. Plotinus, whilst he knows and speaks of visions of Absolute Unity, concentrates upon the apprehension of unity-in-diversity, seeing distinction without rigid dichotomies or dualities. Having realised Unity, we have to bring it back to relate it to the world. Śankara, in his stress on the "One without a second", appears to imply that eventually the empirical world is lost to view as one no longer sees any multiplicity whatsoever.

### Śankara and Rāmānuja

Further light may be shed on these points by a brief comparison of Śankara's teachings to those of Rāmānuja. (In including Rāmānuja in this chapter, I do not mean to classify him as a metaphysical mystic; although he writes from a philosophical point of view, he fits more securely into the devotional, theistic forms of mysticism to be discussed in Chapter II. He is, however, included here by way of contrast to Śankara.) Like Śankara, Rāmānuja attempted to expound what he saw as the true spirit of the Upaniṣads; unlike Śankara, however, he advances a theistic system, Viśiṣṭādvaita ("qualified monism") with Viṣṇu as personal Deity elevated above the impersonal Brahman. Rāmānuja finds Śankara's talk of nirguṇa Brahman and of pure transcendent consciousness without subject/object division unintelligible, and his notion of absorption into nirguṇa Brahman annihilistic. He holds that all knowledge necessarily implies a subject/object (knower/known) relationship, and that what is known is necessarily known as characterised or differentiated (saguṇa) in some way; this applies even to our knowledge of ultimate spiritual reality. We will recall that for Śankara, the division of reality into 'knower' and 'known' is the

result of avidyā. There is for him a higher type of perception in which we become one with the thing perceived, and perceive it as pure Being unqualified by attributes. Rāmānuja finds this idea of unqualified pure Being a mere metaphysical abstraction, holding that there is always a distinction between consciousness and its object. Even in the highest types of religious knowledge, a subject/object distinction remains; Rāmānuja strives for a loving relationship of communion between the self and Deity in which a plurality of conscious selves persist. It should be noted, however, that his attitude is not dualistic; although the self and Deity are separate, they bear an intimate relationship to each other and are in fact both modes of the selfsame Absolute; hence they are distinguishable, but do not form a dichotomous polarity.

Rāmānuja emphasises that the human being is a permanent, conscious self or ego and cannot be reduced to impersonal 'pure Consciousness'. For Śankara, self-consciousness (consciousness of the ego) is a product of avidyā; pure Consciousness appears as the ego, and in the final oneness with Brahman, self-consciousness is not retained. For Rāmānuja, on the other hand, the self as a person is the centre or focal point of spiritual experience. By advancing this view, Rāmānuja does not, of course, intend to condone egotistic, self-centred attitudes, but rather to stress the uniqueness and worth of the human individual. He strives to rise above the incorrect or impure concept of the self brought about by avidyā, attachment, and the bonds of karma, to the realisation of the self as pure, eternal and essentially spiritual, a self that is thus made fit for union with the Deity. But he does not wish to abolish the concept of the self as a conscious individual.

Rāmānuja was a Śrī-Vaiṣṇava, whereas Śankara was a Śaivite, and to

some extent their respective positions are reflected in the differences between Vaiṣṇavite and Śaivite bhakti, as we shall see in Chapter II of this study. Rāmānuja's theistic, devotional theology, which did so much to make bhakti philosophically respectable, is also explored in my section on the bhakti mystics, and I shall not, therefore, go into this in depth here. We may note, however, that Rāmānuja agrees with Śankara that the Divine can only be fully known by revelation or intuition, not through perception or inference. Our ordinary human knowledge, says Rāmānuja, is true as far as it goes, but it cannot give us perception of God. We need to cultivate moral and spiritual virtues and to cleanse our perception of imperfections -- then we may have intuitive knowledge of the Divine. This intuitive knowledge, for Rāmānuja as for Śankara, is immediate, direct, certain, comprehensive. But not only does Rāmānuja disagree with Śankara regarding the exact nature of this knowledge, he also disagrees regarding the means of its attainment. He holds that it is the bhakti-relationship of devotion, love, and the grace of God that leads the soul to full development of its spiritual potential and to realisation of the Divine. It seems, then, that Rāmānuja and Śankara are talking about two different kinds of direct, intuitive knowledge. One tends, perhaps, to associate direct vision with monistic mysticism, but it seems that there is also a relational, theistic mysticism of devotion that leads to a direct, intuitive, immediate vision, as we shall see in Chapter II.

We find in Rāmānuja the idea of a 'golden chain of being' as in Plotinus, where all levels of existence and knowledge, from the highest religious experience to the basic facts of everyday life, are granted validity and reality. In Rāmānuja there is the idea of a continuum of being, as Lott puts it, in contradistinction to the undifferentiated, simple

identity of Śankara. (59) Rāmānuja sees the lower levels of existence, such as matter and finite selves, as in every way real, not as 'appearance' as does Śankara; but they are only dependently real. He sees the world and finite souls, and in fact the whole material universe, as the 'body' of God. As the body is controlled by and supported by the soul as a conscious agent, so in the same way God controls and supports the world and finite souls, which are subordinate to him and dependent upon him for their existence:

The entire complex of intelligent and non-intelligent beings (souls and matter) in all their different estates is real, and constitutes the form, i.e., the body of the highest Brahman.....we have to cognise Brahman as carrying plurality within itself, and the world, which is the manifestation of his power, as something real. (60)

Thus, both Śankara and Rāmānuja, in their different ways, grant relative and dependent reality to the lower levels of existence; but there is a profound difference in tone between their attitudes, which hinges on the distinction between pariṇāmavāda and vivartavāda. We have seen that according to Śankara's doctrine of vivartavāda, Brahman merely appears as the world; for Rāmānuja, on the other hand, Brahman evolves or unfolds into the world, emanating the world from itself and reabsorbing it back into itself. (Brahman and God, it should be explained, are the same thing for Rāmānuja -- that is, saṅguṇa Brahman and Īśvara are the same, while Rāmānuja does not conceive of nirguṇa Brahman in Śankara's sense.) This results in Rāmānuja's granting more reality and value to the lower levels of existence than does Śankara. Rāmānuja holds that spiritual reality must be understood in relation to the finite things of ordinary human experience: he searches for a harmony between God and the world, and for a positive evaluation of the world, teaching that ".....the world becomes the object of unsurpassably excellent love to one who recognises

that it is ensouled by Brahman...." (61) (how different in tone from Śankara!) The universe, as we have said, is God's 'body' -- or, to put it another way, God is the inner self of the universe, he is the ātman, the inner being, of all things. As part of God's 'body', the world is not to be denied or rejected: it is a manifestation of his glory, and bears an important and inseparable relationship to him.

Rāmānuja, then, does not try to negate difference and multiplicity, as it could be said Śankara does, but assimilates or synthesizes differences into a unity-in-diversity. We find some of the same richness in him as we do in Plotinus, the same idea of the wealth and value of all types of experience (except the mystical experience of absolute absorption!), the same idea of a chain of being which is also a ladder by means of which the mystic may ascend from one level of awareness to another. On the other hand, against Rāmānuja, it has to be pointed out that his system does not allow for the validity of absolutely monistic mystical experience of the type expounded by Śankara (whereas Śankara does grant validity to theistic experience, at least as a relative, lower experiential truth). At times, too, it seems to me that Rāmānuja's thought becomes rather too concrete to do full justice even to theistic mysticism: that is, in comparison with theistic mystics like Rolle and the Bhakti poets, so full of fire and life, Rāmānuja is almost the dry theologian. Furthermore, even theistic mystics do very often speak as if their experiences entail becoming one with the object of their knowledge and rising above the knower/known dichotomy, as we shall see in Chapter II.

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- (2) Śankara, Mandukya-Karika-bhashya, iii.15, in Mahadevan, op. cit., p.97.
- (3) Śankara, in Paul Deussen, The System of the Vedānta, trans. Charles Johnston. Delhi: Oriental Publishers (Sacred Books of the Aryans Vol.III), 1972, p.145 ff.
- (4) Mahadevan, op. cit., p.59.
- (5) M. Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy. London: Allen & Unwin, 1975, p.376.
- (6) Śankara, in Deussen, op. cit., Pp.127-128.
- (7) T.M.P. Mahadevan, The Philosophy of Advaita. Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1969, Pp.126-128. The "witness-self" referred to by Mahadevan is the sākṣin, a concept to be elucidated below. The scriptural quotation is from Brihadāranyaka Upaniṣad, IV.v.15.
- (8) Śankara, Ātmabodha, 28, trans. Swāmi Nikhilānanda. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1975.
- (9) Ibid., 20.
- (10) Śankara, Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, 386, trans. Swami Madhavananda. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1970. Some scholars have questioned whether the Vivekachūḍāmaṇi is the authentic work of Śankara, but it appears to me to be in line with his teachings.
- (11) Ibid., 169-174.
- (12) Śankara, in Deussen, op. cit., p.115.
- (13) Ibid., p.458.
- (14) Ibid., Pp.69-71.
- (15) Mahadevan, Sankaracharya, op. cit., Pp.65-66.
- (16) Manly P. Hall, An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy. Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society Press, 1936, facing p.XLV.
- (17) Zohar: The Book of Splendour, ed. Gershom G. Scholem. London: Rider, 1977, Pp.89-91.
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- (20) Śankara, Mandukya-Karika-bhashya, iii.19, in Mahadevan, Sankaracharya, op. cit., Pp.89-90.
- (21) Śankara, Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, op. cit., 251.
- (22) Śankara, Ātmabodha, op. cit., 63.
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- (26) Śankara, Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, op. cit., 18-27.
- (27) Ibid., 54, 62 (original emphasis).
- (28) Ibid., 366.
- (29) Deussen, op. cit., p.411.
- (30) Śankara, Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, op. cit., 529.
- (31) Śankara, Ātmabodha, 3; Isavasya-upanishad-bhashya, 2; Kena-upanishad-vakya-bhashya, Introduction; in Mahadevan, Sankaracharya, op. cit., Pp.101-103.



- (32) Śankara, Ātmabodha, 44, in Mahadevan, Sankaracharya, op. cit., Pp.118.
- (33) Śankara, Brahma-sutra-bhashya, I.i.4, in Mahadevan, Sankaracharya, op. cit., Pp.77-78.
- (34) Thus Spake Sri Sankara, op. cit., p.75.
- (35) Śankara, Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, op. cit., 481, 482, 485, 515, 516.
- (36) Ibid., 574.
- (37) Ibid., 358, 359.
- (38) Ibid., 370. This is a common mystical observation and a profound psychological truth. Cf. Chāndogya Upaniṣad VIII.ii.10: "On whatever end a man sets his heart, whatever (object of) desire he desires, by a mere act of will that same (end and object) rises up before him and, possessed of it, he is (duly) magnified." (In Hindu Scriptures, trans. R. C. Zaehner. London: Dent, 1966.) Cf. also Matthew 6:21: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."
- (39) Śankara, in Deussen, op. cit., Pp.86-87.
- (40) Śankara, Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, op. cit., 248-249.
- (41) Deussen, op. cit., p.398.
- (42) Ibid., p.162.
- (43) Ibid., p.174.
- (44) Śankara, Ātmabodha, op. cit., 47.
- (45) Plotinus, Ennead IV.4.2, trans. Stephen MacKenna. London: Faber, 1969.
- (46) Śankara, Ātmabodha, op. cit., 67.
- (47) Ibid., 65; cf. Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, 142.
- (48) Ibid., 43; cf. Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, 318.
- (49) Ibid., 67.
- (50) Śankara, Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, op. cit., 132.
- (51) Ibid., 361; cf. Ātmabodha, 66.
- (52) Thus Spake Sri Sankara, op. cit., Pp.29-30. The Sea as a symbol, and Sorrow, under the spiritual experience known as the 'Vision of Sorrow', are intimately connected in the Kabbalah.
- (53) Śankara, Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, op. cit., 147.
- (54) Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.3, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.; corresponding to Śankara's "neti, neti".
- (55) Plotinus, Ennead V.3.4, ibid., corresponding to Śankara's "ātmani, ātmānam, ātmanā".
- (56) Thus Spake Sri Sankara, op. cit., p.96.
- (57) Jacob Boehme, The Signature of all Things, X.53. London: Dent (Everyman), n.d.
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## CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER I

I have already pointed out some parallels between the mystics so far discussed. It should by now be seen that these parallels are in fact extremely numerous, so numerous that it would be quite impossible to draw out all the threads of each of them here. I shall, however, summarise the most important points, and then offer some comments on the differentiating divergences.

For the metaphysically-orientated mystics, the spiritual Absolute (the One, Brahman, the Godhead) is transcendent, ineffable, beyond all opposites. It is the Source and Ground of All. It is not one being amongst others, but "neither this nor that", often described in negative terminology. For the Christian mystics, it is an Abyss, a Void, a Darkness, 'Nothingness' or 'Emptiness'. The personal Deity (or, for Plotinus as an absolute non-theist, the lower levels of spiritual reality) is manifested from out of this Absolute, seen as a symbol for it, a making actual of its powers, and a means of attaining to it. But the formless, impersonal aspect of Divine Reality is always stressed: the mystic must pass beyond the Divine as it is conceived by us under various forms and guises, to the formless Absolute.

The path of these mystics is primarily a way of 'knowledge', but not to the exclusion of love, devotion, and intensely-felt experience. While expression is primarily in metaphysical or philosophical terms, great importance, nonetheless, is attached to rising above reason and logic. Personal experience is all-important. To attain to the vision of formlessness, rational comprehension must be transcended; so too must emotion, sense-perception, and, eventually, all symbols, forms and particular

concepts. By this means the mystic hopes to reach the state called by the Christian mystics unknowing, by Plotinus noesis, by Śāṅkara jñāna: a state of immediate, direct, intuitive apprehension of Divine Reality which entails union or oneness with the object of knowledge and a corresponding transcendence of the dichotomy of 'knower' and 'known'. In this formless, all-embracing awareness the mystic sees into all things, because he or she has penetrated the one ineffable principle at the heart of all, the source of all being, knowledge and reality. The mystics speak of bursts of ecstasy which involve a brief loss of self-consciousness, followed by a descent to an awareness of self and to the rational process which begins to attempt to understand and order the experience and to express it in conceptual, coherent language.

The human soul or self is seen as an intermediary between the divine realm and the material world, and as a microcosm, "made in the image" of God or of the Absolute. Self-knowledge can therefore lead us to knowledge of the Divine. The centre of the self, its innermost core, beneath the fluctuations of surface thoughts and feelings, remains pure and uncontaminated, in union with the Divine. The mystic must "know the Self by means of the Self" by withdrawing into this still centre.

The methods and disciplines that are used towards this end are purification, the cultivation of detachment, the cultivation of ethical qualities, study, and meditation and contemplation. Christian mystics, in particular, also stress abandonment of self to the Divine Will, and speak of the 'inner death' that the mystic must undergo in order to win through to rebirth. The mystic attempts to pass beyond the world of multiplicity, relativity, and flux, to a state of unity, illumination, peace, wisdom, and equanimity. The opposites are reconciled (for example, sorrow and joy are

seen as one) and the mystic "sees things as they really are", free from subjective projections. He or she sees "all things in the Self" or "all creatures in God"; the Divine is seen made manifest in all things, including the material world (Śankara may be an exception here). As a result of this vision in which all things are seen as part of a Divine Whole, the mystic undertakes the "return to the world", showing the way to realisation to others and making the Light manifest in his or her actions.

I have also pointed out some specific parallels of symbolism, and the question of symbolic expression will be further discussed in Chapter V, when symbols used by mystics yet to be examined will also be analysed.

However, alongside this unity of experience, of methods and disciplines, and of certain basic spiritual truths, we find also a diversity of more precise points of metaphysical or theological exposition. For example, I have already contrasted Śankara's attitude to the material world to that of Plotinus, and have discussed how Śankara's ideal of absolute absorption into Brahman differs from the teachings of even the most monistic Western mystic. The mystics examined can perhaps be placed on a continuum ranging from the uncompromisingly absolutist monism of Śankara, to the 'modified monism' of St. John of the Cross. (Rāmānuja is, of course, an example of a similar type of 'modified monism', but as I have indicated, he is more of a devotional than a metaphysical type, and does not allow for the possibility of undifferentiated awareness.) Within this continuum, differences of opinion are also found regarding, for example, the value of theism, or the way in which the mystic charts out a scheme of progression made up of more or less definite stages. Plotinus, for example, knows brief moments of absolute unity and absorption in the One, but devotes much of his attention to the

vision of the unity-in-diversity of the Intelligible Realm, where we see distinction without duality. He is not a theist in any sense of the word. One of the most distinctive aspects of his mystical philosophy is the notion of the 'golden chain of being', the interweaving of all levels of experience and reality. Eckhart is similar to Śankara in his belief that theistic experience represents a lower type of experience than the monistic, but that it is nevertheless still a valuable type of experience; but unlike Śankara, he sees the world as a genuine emanation from the Godhead. Suso's metaphysics are more or less identical to those of his teacher, although perhaps less daringly and explicitly monistic; he stresses personal experience and the value of his colourful and inspiring visions. St. John of the Cross works with a 'modified monism' in which theism is granted a high value, but he nonetheless emphasises formless states of awareness. The soul in union is given a very high status, but is not totally absorbed into the Godhead. His most distinctive contribution to Christian mysticism lies in the elaboration of the concept of 'unknowing' and of the dark knowledge of the empty Void or Abyss. His concept of the mystical way as made up of a number of 'stages' is also distinctive, and can be contrasted, for example, with Eckhart's 'pathless Way'. Finally, for Śankara, theism is seen only as a relative, lower truth, and absolute unity with the formless nirguṇa Brahman is the highest goal; the world and the lower self are seen only as 'appearance'.

Too often, writers who have attempted an analysis of the parallels and the differences between various forms of mysticism have been motivated by theological bias which has proved a stumbling-block in their methodology. Otto's Mysticism East and West (1) is a prime example of this. Otto here points out a number of close parallels between Śankara

and Eckhart. Some of these parallels certainly do exist, but Otto seems over-concerned to engage in a form of Christian apologetics here, for (basing his analysis of Śāṅkara largely on the latter's commentary on the Bhagavad-Gītā, which emphasises theism more than do Śāṅkara's other and more essential works) he twists Śāṅkara's system so as to attempt to show that it has an essentially "theistic foundation" and hence finds himself able to claim that theism is not found chiefly in the Western world but "somehow arises out of the deep necessity of mankind in general". (2) He claims that the name 'Īśvara' has for Śāṅkara "the same full solemnity as Dominus Deus has for the Christian of the West" (3) but nevertheless manages to find enough differences between Śāṅkara and Eckhart to elevate the latter as superior to the former, accusing Śāṅkara of quietism, world-rejection, lack of humility, and inadequate ethical theories. Otto is quite right in arguing that there are both important parallels, and important differences, between Śāṅkara and Eckhart, but I would disagree with him as to exactly what constitutes these parallels and differences: his argument is based on a priori assumptions as to what ought to be the case. It seems to me that a satisfactory cross-cultural study of mysticism must begin by accepting the validity of both monistic and theistic forms of experience, without attempting to reduce one to the other. In the following chapter we shall see how the experiences of devotionally-orientated mystics both differ from and show parallels to the experiences of the mystics so far discussed.

References

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- (3) Ibid., p.105.

CHAPTER II

DEVOTIONAL MYSTICISM



## DEVOTIONAL MYSTICISM PART 1: RICHARD ROLLE OF HAMPOLE

In order to understand the varieties of mystical experience and the manifold modes of its expression, we shall next turn our attention to the more emotionally-orientated mystics, who express themselves in poetic and romantic language, and who tend to disregard metaphysical details and sophistries; nevertheless, we shall find that certain basic metaphysical ideas similar to those advanced by the mystics already studied, lie implicitly hidden in these mystics' reports of their experiences.

When expressed in terms of emotion and feeling, mystical experience centres around a pure love for the Divine which pours itself out from the depths of the heart as an inner flame or consuming fire. Typically, there is not a transcendence or renunciation of all emotion, so much as an intense channelling of emotion in one direction; the emotions are purified, refined, raised to a higher plane, in concentration upon the one object of true Desire or Love. This love for the Divine is in essence an eternal joy that knows no bounds; but it is a bittersweet love, often bringing with it much sorrow, for the mystic is ever conscious of the pain inherent in being a finite self that would be one with the Infinite. This pain is inherent in the giving up of our finite and selfish desires and interests. The Infinite within us struggles to be free of the finite, and as long as we oppose it in any way by setting up egotistical barriers, there is conflict, effort and toil. Thus in devotional forms of mysticism there is often an emphasis on love-in-separation, a feeling that the goal can never quite be reached in this life, the longing never quite fulfilled. The mysteries of love are also bound up with the mysteries of life, death, and rebirth -- true love requires self-sacrifice, a dying to the self for the

sake of the Beloved, in order for union to occur. These experiences -- the Inner Fire, suffering, death and rebirth -- are also encountered in metaphysical expressions of mysticism; the distinction between emotionally- and intellectually-orientated mystics should not be taken to be too hard-and-fast. Nevertheless, the experiences and forms of expression outlined above seem to predominate in the writings of devotional mystics.

As our first example of this type of mysticism, we may turn to Richard Rolle of Hampole, born in Yorkshire, c. 1300. Rolle's desire is to know God through personal experience, rather than to know about God. He does not bother to discuss points of doctrine or metaphysical questions:

Thou askest what God is?....If thou wilt know properly to speak what God is, I say thou shalt never find an answer to this question.....For if thou knew what God is thou shouldest be as wise as God is: that neither thou nor any other creature may be. (1)

At first sight this seems to provide a contrast to the likes of Plotinus, Eckhart and Śāṅkara, for whom we become what we know; for Rolle, we can never know what God is because we are not God and can never become God. This, of course, reflects his relatively orthodox Christian faith; but the matter is not as clear-cut as might appear, since, as we shall see later, Rolle claims that contemplatives "become like what they love". (2) Rolle thus opposes love to knowledge. This might seem to us to be a somewhat arbitrary dichotomy in view of the fact (to be elaborated upon later in this study) that there are many different types of 'knowledge', of which rational understanding is only one. It is clear, however, that it is to such rational understanding that Rolle refers when he opposes it to love; in other words, Rolle's point is that we cannot know God through reason alone, and on this point metaphysically-inclined mystics would agree with him. Even the most metaphysically-orientated

mystics desire not only to know about the Divine but also to know it through personal experience; otherwise they would not be mystics. Rolle in fact says that we can 'know' God in a sense, through love:

Also it is to be praised to know God perfectly; that is to say,  
He being unable to be conceived: knowing Him to love Him..... (3)

Rolle in fact sees love as engendering knowledge of a type, that is, insight into heavenly mysteries, wisdom, and illumination. It seems to me that any dichotomy of love and knowledge (or faith and knowledge) is shown by mystical writings to be far from absolute; and that such a dichotomy can only come about within a dualistic system of theology where the immediate apprehension of mystical experience has been rejected. This is illustrated, for example, by the fact that Rāmānuja, like Western theistic mystics, regards devotion (bhakti) not as rigidly separated from knowledge, but as giving the devotee a type of knowledge which is a "direct vision of supreme clarity" (4): "The word bhakti has the sense of a kind of love," he writes, "and this love again that of a certain kind of knowledge." (5) In any case, Rolle, as we have remarked, has a distaste for theological speculation:

Wherefore let us seek rather that the love of Christ burn within us than that we take heed to unprofitable disputation. Whiles truly we take heed to unmannerly seeking, we feel not the sweetness of the eternal savour.....An old wife is more expert in God's love, and less in worldly pleasure, than the great divine, whose study is vain..... (6)

### Detachment

In Rolle, as in the other mystics we have so far examined, we find that the teaching centres around detachment rather than extreme asceticism, and we encounter the theme of dedicating one's every action to

God:

In meat and drink be thou scarce and wise. Whiles thou eatest or drinkest let not the memory of thy God that feeds thee pass from thy mind; but praise, bless and glorify him in ilka morsel, so that thy heart be more in God's praising than in thy meat.....  
 ....truly abstinence by itself is not holiness, but if it be discreet it helps us to be holy.....oft it happens that he that before men is seen least to fast, within, before Christ, is most fervent in love. (7)

For Rolle, as for all mystics, it is the inner purity of one's nature, not any outward show of spirituality, that is important. Rolle advocates a kind of 'Middle Way' between the extremes of excess, on the one hand, and undue mortification on the other. Sometimes, like many medievals, he is too preoccupied with "the world, the flesh and the Devil" for our taste, but for his time and age, his attitude is one of balance and moderation. In his youth, in the early stages of his mystical experiences, he put himself through a fair degree of ascetic mortification; but his later teachings are evidently the result of mellowed judgement. This is in fact a fairly common pattern amongst mystics: at first, they are very strict with themselves in their battles against worldly things. Later, when a degree of freedom from this world has been achieved, it can be seen in a new light, for one sees the Divine in all. The point here is that self-denial strengthens the will and enables the mystic to rise towards transcendence of the lower self and to surrender his or her will to the Divine Will. Once this is accomplished, this preliminary hardship is no longer necessary. The Bhagavad-Gītā tells us to "hold pleasure and pain, profit and loss, victory and defeat to be the same" (8) and likewise Rolle concludes that:

Righteousness is not at all in fasting or in eating; but thou art righteous if contempt and praise, poverty and riches, hunger and need, or delights and dainties be all alike to thee. (9)

Love, Divine and Human

Rolle's mystical love, says Comper, ".....although it is a personal love for the Beloved, is not selfish or merely emotional; it is supernatural. The will is its pivot, and the will must be purified and strengthened by suffering.....Pain, hardness, suffering must be where love is, but it is turned to delight when borne for love's sake. Love is the true philosopher's stone by which the dross of pain is converted to the gold of endless joy in the Beloved, for this supernatural love eliminates pain." (10) We can find parallels between this heavenly love, and earthly love in its highest aspect. The case of Ferdinand in The Tempest comes to mind: "The mistress which I serve," says Ferdinand, "quicken what's dead, and makes my labours pleasures". (11) This kind of earthly love is a pure love which does not attempt to possess the object of its affections nor to ask for anything, but simply pours out love without thought of reward. It may also involve a knowing of the beloved on what seems to be a deeply spiritual level. The one partner manifests the Divine for the other, within his or her own person, on the level of duality. It will be seen that there are interesting connections between such an elevated type of earthly love, and various religious or mystical systems which symbolically express the union of the self with the Divine in terms of love, marriage or sex; for example, Tantra, Bhakti, the Song of Solomon. (Romantic symbolism in the Bhakti mystics is discussed in Part 3 of this Chapter, and certain parallels with the Song of Songs are pointed out here. Tantra is discussed in Chapter IV of this study.) A similar theme is illustrated by a number of Celtic myths and folktales which tell of the winning of an Otherworld

lover. (12) We are not, however, suggesting that love for the Divine can be fully understood in terms of earthly love, nor that the symbolism of the Mystical Marriage can be explained away in terms of sexual and emotional frustration among celibate contemplatives and ascetics (which argument is belied by the symbolism of the Mystical Marriage being used by non-celibate mystics, and which in any case surely fails to recognise the essential spirituality of true earthly love). In fact, for mystics with a strongly Idealistic component to their philosophy, it is the other way around: earthly love springs from love of the Divine, from the Eternal love of which it is a reflection. As Plotinus puts it:

Those that desire earthly procreation are satisfied with the beauty found on earth, the beauty of image and of body; it is because they are strangers to the Archetype, the source of even the attraction they feel towards what is lovely here. There are souls to whom earthly beauty is a leading to the memory of that in the higher realm and these love the earthly as an image; those that have not attained to this memory do not understand what is happening within them, and take the image for the reality. Once there is perfect self-control, it is no fault to enjoy the beauty of earth; where appreciation degenerates into carnality, there is sin.....

Thus Love is, at once, in some degree a thing of Matter and at the same time a Celestial sprung of the Soul's unsatisfied longing for The Good. (13)

For Plotinus, then, earthly love may be enjoyed if it is seen as a reflection of Divine Love; as in the case of how we should conduct ourselves in worldly affairs, it is our attitude towards things that is all-important. Rolle, for his part, is considerably more world-rejecting than Plotinus. He was himself a celibate, and in occasional passages of his writings views women as temptresses threatening to lead him into carnal sin, which attitude we cannot condone; nevertheless, he had a number of close spiritual relationships with women. His attitude may be summed up thus:

.....friendship betwixt men and women may be perilous, for fair beauty lightly cherishes [i.e., easily allures] a frail soul, and temptation seen sets fleshly desire on fire and oftentimes brings in

the sin of body and soul; and so the company of women with men is wont to happen to the destruction of virtue. And yet this friendship is not unlawful but meedful; if it be had with good soul, and if it be loved for God and not for the sweetness of the flesh. (14)

Rolle agrees with Plotinus that earthly love is a reflection of Divine Love: ".....Love is a stirring of the soul for to love God for Himself, and all other things for God." (15) Nevertheless, he frequently opposes earthly love to Divine Love. Thus we shall see that there are a number of possible mystical attitudes to earthly love: it may be rejected or regarded with suspicion; it may be seen as symbolic of Divine Love; or on rare occasions, such as in left-hand Tantra, it is seen as an actual means to mystical experience.

#### Heat, Song and Sweetness

Rolle's mystical experiences are typically expressed by means of a threefold formula: Heat, Song and Sweetness, which are for him all essential aspects of the love of God. The experience of an inner burning heat is a common accompaniment of mystical experience: Rolle calls this heat the "Fire of Love". Sweetness, or an overwhelming joy (known in the Hindu tradition as ānanda), is also a universal element of mystical experience (except, of course, in certain stages of the experience such as the Dark Night of the Soul, where this sense of joy and blessedness is lost). Rolle's use of the symbolism of Song and Music is perhaps rather more unusual, and is an interesting theme which will receive fuller treatment shortly.

Rolle's 'Heat' is actually felt quasi-physically: it is an inner flame within the heart, so sweet as to be a mystery:

More have I marvelled than I showed when, forsooth, I first felt my heart wax warm, truly, and not in imagination, but as if it were burned with sensible fire....ofttimes, because of my ignorance of such healthful abundance, I have groped my breast seeking whether this burning were from any bodily cause outwardly....First truly before this comfortable heat, and sweetest in all devotion, was shed in me, I plainly trowed such heat could happen to no man in this exile: for so truly it enflames the soul as if the element of fire were burning there.... (16)

This, in the experience of many mystics, is felt as a fountainhead of love which radiates out from what the yogic systems of India would call the 'heart chakra', the centre of spiritual energy which corresponds on a subtle level to the physical heart. In the Western Kabbalistic tradition, a similar 'Heart Centre' is also used in meditative practice. The experience of this inner fire of love is indeed felt quasi-physically, but it is nonetheless a spiritual Fire: St. Teresa, who is to be discussed shortly, speaks of many types of spiritual experience which, like this, are primarily "of the soul" but in which the body also shares. Symbolically, Fire is the element of purification, of transmutation and of purified insight through spiritual discrimination (this symbolism being used by the spiritual Alchemists, amongst others). It is purging, demanding dedication and surrender, and this often involves much pain and suffering. As Underhill puts it:

This "divine furnace of purifying love" demands from the ardent soul a complete self-surrender, and voluntary turning from all impurity, a humility of the most far-reaching kind: and this means the deliberate embrace of active suffering, a self-discipline in dreadful tasks. As gold in the refiner's fire, so "burning of love into a soul truly taken all vices purgeth". (17)

Rolle uses this alchemical image himself:

....the fire of love, that shall burn in thy heart, will bring to nought all the rust of sin, and purge the soul of all filth; as clean as the gold that is proved in the furnace. (18)

Sometimes, says Rolle, the fire is so intense that it seems it cannot be borne:

O who is there in mortal body that all this life may suffer this



great heat in its high degree, or may bear for long its continual existence? (19)

We may compare a description of one of Plotinus' visions, previously referred to, where, he says, the light and splendour that he sees "overwhelm me and I have not strength to endure it." (20) Indeed, it very often seems that one's soul cannot contain the beauty and intensity of the mystical vision.

Rolle speaks of contemplation in terms of an invisible melody, spiritual music, celestial song. The spiritual world is not 'seen' so much as 'heard': whereas Suso sees the spiritual world revealed in vision, Rolle hears it through what the mystics call audition. "Song I call it," he says, "when in a plenteous soul the sweetness of eternal love with burning is taken, and thought into song is turned, and the mind into full sweet sound is changed." (21) The song is a song of love and joy: the soul becomes a "pipe of love", as Rolle puts it, a part of the great Divine melody. Rolle's heavenly music is not heard with the physical sense of hearing; but we might mention that music is often said to be the form of creative expression best able to express the spiritual, for it does not deal with material forms and shapes (although any art form may, of course, express spiritual truths symbolically). It is significant in this connection that art (in its broadest sense) has often been regarded as a spiritual endeavour, and in many traditional societies the arts and crafts have been a means of initiation into the Mysteries. Music, in particular, is often used as a medium to prophetic inspiration, as well as a medium through which to express spiritual insights. We might also mention the Pythagorean theory of the 'Music of the Spheres', which is particularly interesting in connection with Rolle's Celestial Songs and Divine Harmonies. This, briefly, is the conception that the seven planetary heavens, like the seven strings of

a lyre, uttered divine harmonies as they moved, or were in some way symbolic of these harmonies. Rolle certainly seems to think of his inner music as being patterned after the harmonies and rhythms of the spiritual realm. He says that those who love God are filled with music in their souls, with heavenly song and sweetness (22); they are ravished by divine melodies (23). These melodies are "as the Song of Angels". (24) Rolle tells us that we can tell whether we have truly heard these divine melodies or not, by whether or not when we hear earthly music the inward song is brought to mind. (25) This is an interesting illustration of the argument put forward by Otto in The Idea of the Holy, that music is one of the most effective "ideograms" or symbols which may awaken within us the sense of the Numinous, by feelings analogous to it. (26)

Rolle's third characteristic of Divine love, 'Sweetness', will not require detailed exposition, since (as we have already mentioned) it represents that sense of joy, blessedness, grace, beauty and rapture which accompanies many forms of mystical experience. Sweetness may be caused by, or be a cause of, Heat and Song. Rolle sums up his threefold scheme thus:

Soothly, heat I call it when the mind is truly kindled in love everlasting; and the heart in the same manner, not hopefully but verily, is felt to burn. For the heart turned into fire gives the feeling of burning love.

Song I call it when in a soul the sweetness of everlasting praise is received with plenteous burning, and thought is turned into song; and the mind is changed into full sweet sound. These two are not gotten in idleness, but in high devotion; to the which the third is near, that is to say sweetness untrowed. For heat and song truly cause a marvellous sweetness in the soul; and also they may be caused by full great sweetness. (27)

Rolle's descriptions of mystical love are full of poetic beauty. We may give as an example one of his lyrics:

Love is thought, with great desire,  
of a fair loving [of the object of love];

Love I liken til a fire  
 that slacken may na thing:  
 Love us cleanses of our sin,  
 love us bote [a remedy or cure] shall bring,  
 Love the king's heart may win,  
 love of joy shall sing.

The settle of love is lift high,  
 for in til heaven it ran;  
 Methink on earth it is sly [full of artifice, secret, mysterious],  
 that makes men pale and wan.  
 The bed of bliss is goes full nigh,  
 I tell thee as I can;  
 Though us think the way be dregh [long, tedious],  
 Love couples God and man. (28)

The theme of the inner death of the lower self plays a prominent part in Rolle's writings, the mystery of love being intimately connected with spiritual death and rebirth. Death is the gateway to truer and fuller Life lived in and through the Divine. "Therefore," says Rolle, "Let us live and also die in love." (29) Love, and Life, can only be found through death and rebirth. Love transmutes suffering into joy, and death into life; "Love is Life that lasts ay." (30)

### The Three Degrees of Love

Just as Rolle speaks of a threefold experience of Heat, Song and Sweetness, so he speaks of three degrees of love, called insuperable, inseparable, and singular. Love is "insuperable" when nothing may overcome it -- neither pleasure nor pain, health nor sickness, can shake it. This would seem to approximate to that state of detachment from the pairs of opposites and from earthly fortunes which is such a widespread characteristic of mysticism, and which we have seen illustrated in the metaphysical mystics. Love is "inseparable" when ".....all thy thoughts and all thy wills are gathered together and fastened wholly in Jhesu Christ,

so that thou may no time forget Him, but ay thou thinkest on Him." (31)  
 This is clearly a description of a state of ongoing contemplation, absorption in love of God, continuing mystical consciousness. In "singular" love, "the soul is all burning fire" and finds no delight in anything other than God:

Then thy soul is Jesu loving: Jesu thinking: Jesu desiring: only in the desire of Him breathing: to Him singing: of Him burning: in Him resting. Then the song of loving and of love has come; then thy thought turns into song and into melody.....  
 In this degree is love stalwart as death, and hard as hell; for as death slays all living things in this world, so perfect love slays in a man's soul all fleshly desires and earthly covetousness. (32)

This final degree of love would seem to be the soul's final union with God, involving a dying to the lower self, which death is true life:

For all that I had in this world or of this world is ended, and nought is left but that Thou lead my soul to another world where my treasure is most precious and my substance richest, and unfaillingly abides. (33)

It should be pointed out, however, that it is hard to extract clear-cut systems or exact definitions from Rolle's writings: he is a poetic writer, pouring out depths of feeling, and does not express himself systematically. In any case, in the final state of union, love "makes lovers one in deed and will....it turns the loving into the loved, and ingrafts him. Wherefore the heart that truly receives the fire of the Holy Ghost is burned all wholly and turns as it were into fire; and it leads it into that form that is likest to God." (34) Love enters into the bedchamber of the Everlasting King, wherein is the espousal bed of Christ and the soul; it "ascends the ladder of heaven" (35); it makes us "clearer than gold and brighter than the sun" (36). Rolle's descriptions of mystical experience often rise to ecstatic heights, and he makes use of a number of interesting symbolic images such as those above, which we shall later see employed by other devotional mystics. Love, he says, is a transforming into the thing loved

(37); it binds together God and man (38); it "makes me and my love one, and makes one out of two" (39). For Plotinus and Śāṅkara, we become what we know; for Rolle, we become what we love. We may also compare the Upaniṣadic saying: "As a man acts, as he behaves, so does he become." (40) This is usually taken to refer to karma and reincarnation, but it may be seen that it encapsulates the same basic psychological truth as is spoken of by Plotinus, Śāṅkara and Rolle: whatever is the nature of our inmost self -- our desire, our knowledge, the way these are manifested in action -- that we become. Boehme, likewise, says that ".....the property into which he [the mystic] turns himself, into that world is he introduced, and of that world's property will he eternally be, and enjoy the same.....what life imagines [sic] after, that it receives." (41)

As we have remarked, the way of Love involves much suffering (as indeed does any mystic way, but the aspect of suffering is intensified in the writings of emotionally-orientated mystics). This is beautifully expressed in a poem by the 13th century Franciscan mystic, Jacopone da Todi:

Before I knew its power, I asked in prayer  
 For love of Christ, believing it was sweet;  
 I thought to breathe a calm and tranquil air,  
 On peaceful heights where tempests never beat.  
 Torment I find instead of sweetness there,  
 My heart is riven by the dreadful heat;  
 Of these strange things to treat  
 All words are vain;  
 By bliss I am slain,  
 And yet I live and move. (42)

The suffering inherent in the love of the mystic for God is often expressed in terms of love-in-separation; as Rolle cries:

O honeyed flame, sweeter than all sweet, delightful beyond all  
 creation!  
 My God, my Love, surge over me, pierce me by your love, wound  
 me with your beauty.  
 Surge over me, I say, who am longing for your comfort.

Reveal your healing medicine to your poor lover.  
 See, my desire is for you; it is you my heart is seeking.  
 My soul pants for you; my whole being is athirst for you.  
 Yet you will not show yourself to me; you look away; you bar  
 the door, shun me, pass me over;  
 You even laugh at my innocent sufferings. (43)

The symbolism of the 'wound of love' will be further explored in connection with St. Teresa and Mīrābāī, and we shall see that the healing medicine and the barred door also find parallels in the symbolism of other devotional mystics.

In spite of this suffering, though, pain is turned to delight when borne for the sake of love; for love eliminates pain, turning it to joy. In this connection, the Bhagavad-Gītā tells us that: "That pleasure which a man enjoys after much effort spent, making an end thereby of suffering.....at first seems like poison but in time transmutes itself into what seems to be ambrosia....." (44). Rolle tells us that in the third degree of love, the "singular", the soul is unable to suffer pain, and this is connected with the transcendence of opposites and with perfect detachment:

.....he that loves God perfectly, it grieves him not what shame or anguish he suffers, but he has delight, and desires that he were worthy to suffer torment and pain for Christ's love.....For whoso loves, they have no pain..... (45)

### Works and the World

Rolle agrees with Śāṅkara, Eckhart, and many other mystics that works alone cannot bring about apprehension of the Divine. "Love is verily in will, not in work save as a sign of love," he says. (46) Nevertheless, just as Śāṅkara holds that karma yoga may be a means towards jñāna, so Rolle holds that whoever lives well in his active life is taking steps towards the contemplative life. (47) Rolle stresses the contempla-

tive life above action in this world, but he did "return to the sheepfold", going out into the wider world to teach and to try to kindle the fire of love within the hearts of others, letting his love show in his work. He tells us:

I was seen in company with the worldly, and was familiar with the houses of the rich.....sometimes playing and laughing with the rest, as it seemed to them, but inwardly praising. For this was the object that I thus should wander forth, so that I might teach all that they should love their Maker..... (48)

We may be reminded of Vimalakīrti, the model Bodhisattva of Mahāyāna Buddhism, who comes into contact with all worldly pleasures and yet remains detached from them, making such occasions into opportunities for expounding the Dharma. (49) The justification of this, of course, is that as Rolle tells us, some things are neither good nor bad of themselves (50); it is a matter of our attitude to the world. Thus, Rolle on the one hand says that if we love earthly things, we do not love God (51); but on the other hand, ".....if our love be pure and perfect, whatever our heart loves it is God." (52) In other words, if we love earthly things in themselves (for their own sake) our love is misplaced; but if we reach that stage of mystical insight where we are able to see the Divine in all things, we love them not for themselves but in their translucent aspect (for that which they mirror and towards which they point).

#### Implicit Metaphysics in Rolle

We have remarked that whereas devotionally-orientated mystics often have a dislike of metaphysical arguments, an implicit metaphysics nevertheless underlies their expressions of their experiences. It remains to point out a few examples of this in Rolle's writings. Rolle was strongly

influenced by Platonism: we can see a Platonic influence in his talk of perfect spiritual Love, which is unchanging and eternal, in contrast to the empirical world, which is the realm of constant flux and change, and of pain:

The joy that men have seen  
is likened til the hay,  
That now is fair and green,  
and now wites [withers] away;  
Swilk [such] is this world, I ween,  
and beës til domes day,  
All in travail and teen [toil and trouble];  
flee that na man may. (53)

Rolle says that all true love springs from Christ, and that his love is the life of all. He also asks, "What is turning from God but turning from unchangeable good to changeable good.....?" (54) He speaks of the "unseen beauty" and the "unmade wisdom". This all has a Platonic ring; and Rolle also says that Christ contains all things in himself, and that when he is seen, one has all. This is reminiscent of the One of Plotinus or of Śankara's Brahman: the ground of all being, knowledge, goodness, etc., that by knowing which, everything is known. We have also seen that there are a number of other parallels between Rolle and the more intellectually-orientated mystics. For example, we become what we love; in the final state of union we die to the lower self and transcend the duality of pain and pleasure through detachment; and so on. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that this metaphysical structure is not explicitly or systematically presented in Rolle's writings; it is rather a matter of gleaning it from a number of more or less isolated remarks which reflect ideas that Rolle seems to take for granted, that is, unconscious metaphysical presuppositions. There is a simplicity about Rolle; we respond to him in terms of feeling, not intellect; he appeals to the poetic, romantic sense. As one writer has said, he has a simple, carefree, happy enthu-



siasm: "He is of the springtime of English literature, and the early sunlight and fresh dew rest upon his words." (55) His writings are full of joy, of what he calls "a wonderful longing flowing out in love to God". (56) He speaks straightforwardly, with an absence of involved symbolism or high-flown metaphysical language.

Rolle differs from the metaphysically-inclined mystics, and also from some other devotional mystics, in that he seems never to have experienced formless, undifferentiated states of awareness, 'emptiness', or the 'Divine Dark'. His highest experiences are expressed in terms of the soul's participation in the Divine Harmonies which he hears as 'spiritual music', and in terms of the pouring-out of his Heart in joy and love. He does not speak of 'unknowing', of the Abyss, or of radically ineffable experiences, but talks rather in beautiful and evocative terms of becoming a part of the Universal Divine Melody. His mysticism is a strictly theistic mysticism of relation. Some theistic mystics do speak of formless states of awareness; we shall later see an example of this in St. Teresa of Avila's "suspension of faculties". Teresa has experienced formless states, but places a higher value on a theistic experience of relation; Rolle, however, does not speak of undifferentiated awareness at all, and apparently believes that his experiences represent the summit of the mystical life. (57) What Rolle takes to be the heights of attainment, would rank lower on the scale in the schemes of such mystics as Eckhart, John of the Cross, or Śankara. It seems to me that it would probably be doing Rolle an injustice to suggest that he had only travelled half of the way (as a Śankara or an Eckhart might have it); nor is it feasible to suggest that he misinterpreted all his experiences, that his experiences were 'really' experiences of an undifferentiated unity, as writers such as Stace would

have us believe. (58) It seems, then, that monistic and theistic mysticism must each be understood from within their own framework, and that it may be fruitful to pursue the possibility that they are two different types of experience (not the same experience differently interpreted). This distinction between experience and interpretation as it relates to the classification of types of mystical experience is explored in depth in Chapter VI of this study.

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- (57) *Ibid.*, p.94.
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## DEVOTIONAL MYSTICISM PART 2: ST. TERESA OF AVILA

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) presents a contrast to many mystics that we have studied in her direct simplicity and down-to-earth practicality. She does not discuss metaphysical questions, and constantly stresses that she is no learned theologian; many of her teachings take the form of common-sense reflections on the implications of the mystical life, and almost homely exhortations to her nuns. She entered the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation at Avila in 1536 and was later made Prioress; St. John of the Cross, as I have said, was a Confessor at this same Convent, and the two had a deep spiritual relationship. Teresa was an active and practical administrator and reformer, infusing a new vitality into her Order. It is not surprising that we can detect many close parallels between the mystical writings of St. John and St. Teresa; what is perhaps more interesting is the divergences they show, and the way in which they come over as two quite different personalities. Teresa had much contact with the Jesuits (she had several Jesuit confessors) including some instruction in Jesuit methods of prayer and meditation. But what strikes us most strongly about the difference between Teresa and St. John, is Teresa's colloquial, 'matter-of-fact' self-expression, and her totally unpretentious humour, presenting such a contrast to the sublime, rarified metaphysical mysticism of John of the Cross.

Unlike St. John, Teresa does not stress the Via Negativa, and while she speaks of states equivalent to St. John's Dark Night, she does not emphasise suffering and darkness. Rather, she talks of a continual awareness of God's presence -- an intimate and affective contemplation -- and of visions and raptures. Sometimes it seems that she is in fact describing the same basic experiences as St. John, but expressing them in much

plainer, less high-flown language: for example, her "suspension of faculties" (which I will discuss later) may well illustrate the same inner experience as St. John's heights of formless awareness, the "unknowing". But unlike St. John, Teresa was intensely subject to visions and locutions, trances, ecstasies and raptures. Hence she modifies St. John's wariness of visionary experience and stresses the great value of her own experiences. As the writings of St. Teresa will not add anything of great value to our discussion of mysticism from a philosophical or metaphysical point of view, we shall therefore concentrate on her attitude to visions, raptures, etc. I shall also comment on her treatment of the stages of progression on the mystical path, and shall conclude with some comments on her book The Interior Castle, which from the point of view of the mystical journey is the most interesting of her writings.

#### Visions and Voices

Mystics typically divide visions and locutions (and also the less common experiences of visionary touch, smell and taste) into three categories: corporeal, imaginary and intellectual. Corporeal visions are seen with the physical eyes, and very few mystics actually experience this kind of vision (Ramakrishna is a notable exception, as we shall see later); where they do, they are usually extremely wary of them, holding that it is difficult to be sure that they are not merely hallucinations (or, as some Christian mystics argue, sent by the Devil). Teresa says that she has never experienced corporeal vision. (1) The second class of visions or auditions, imaginary ones, contain distinct images or words, but are experienced not with the physical senses but with the 'inner eye', the 'eye of the soul', or with the 'inner hearing'. In Teresa's terminology

imaginary vision is always spontaneous, coming upon her without foreknowledge or forewarning from an inner depth. In other words, a mental picture or visualisation deliberately induced for the purposes of meditation, would not count as a vision. Teresa does use conscious, willed visualisation in meditation -- here images are called up in the imagination, kept under the control of the mind, and dismissed at will. But true vision cannot be dismissed when it comes upon us, nor can it be conjured up by the will and imagination. True visions have a life and reality and depth which a visualised image does not possess; for example, they are often seen to shine with a radiant light. The visions are seen with the eyes of the soul more clearly, if anything, than we see with the eyes of the body. In addition, the images may often be highly symbolic and can teach the mystic much regarding the state of his or her inner self, or regarding Divine laws, etc. Mystics vary in their attitude to imaginary visions, some granting them greater importance and validity than others. Suso is a prime example of a mystic who had many valuable imaginary visions.

The third type of vision, intellectual vision, is more abstract: it is a type of inspiration or intuition close to contemplation, and is formless, that is, it is seen neither with the eyes of the body nor with the eyes of the soul. Mystics are more or less unanimous in granting the greatest importance and the least possibility of delusion to this type of vision. Formless or intellectual vision is similar to a consciousness of the presence of Deity, but differs from a general, diffused awareness of God's presence in that a specific point in space seems to be able to be localised, a point which generates some specific kind of Divine power. The whole experience is therefore more sharply defined than a general consciousness of the presence of the Divine in everything. Teresa's own

experiences, which we shall shortly discuss, may serve as examples of typical visions and auditions, some imaginary, some intellectual.

Teresa seems to be something of a 'natural' visionary; she constantly says that the 'favours' (visions, raptures, and other spiritual experiences) granted to her are far in excess of her virtue and her degree of inner progress. Certainly these statements can be partially ascribed to humility, and also to the sense of wonder felt by all mystics at such experiences. But we do, nevertheless, continually sense in Teresa's writings the wonder of being worked upon from without -- the amazement, incomprehension and joy engendered by experiences not achieved through one's own will nor due to one's own virtue. Teresa stresses this point in her discussions of the differences between true vision and imagination. True visions and auditions, as we have said, cannot be called up at will, nor can they be resisted when they occur. They come upon us irresistibly, when they will, and apparently from without. We have to experience what is revealed to us, when it is revealed -- we cannot alter it, add to or subtract from it, by the imagination. O'Donoghue, in an interesting article on St. Teresa, comments that we cannot ask what, in a vision, is there objectively; neither can we call the experience 'subjective' as if it merely proceeded from Teresa's own imagination. Visions are neither corporeal nor the work of the imagination; they are given. (2) It will be obvious, then, that true visions cannot be 'faked': talking here of locutions, Teresa says:

If it [a locution] is something invented by the understanding [entendimiento], subtle as the invention may be, he [the mystic] realizes that it is the understanding which is making up the words and uttering them, for it is just as if a person were making up a speech or as if he were listening to what someone else was saying to him. The understanding will realize that it is not listening, but being active; and the words it is inventing are fantastic and indistinct and have not the clarity of true locutions. (3)

Teresa recognises that such locutions are little more than "ravings of the



mind". (4) But genuine locutions are clear and distinct; and when they come from God (for they may sometimes be deceptive or come from the Devil) they reveal great things to us, and bring about positive effects upon our dedication, character and development:

There is a voice which is so clear that not a syllable of what it says is lost.....the soul hears long set speeches addressed to it which it could not have composed.....

.....the Lord impresses His words upon the memory so that it is impossible to forget them, whereas the words that come from our own understanding are like the first movement of thought, which passes and is forgotten.....The Divine Words.....instruct us at once.....and by their means we can understand things which it would probably take us a month to make up ourselves. (5)

True visions or auditions leave the mystic absorbed in God, with a new love for God working within to a high degree. They bring peace and inner consolation, and issue in a life of an improved ethical quality and increased psychological integration. (In addition, many are precognitive, prophesying events which later come to pass.) When such effects occur, we can be sure that a vision is genuine, and does not come from the Devil or the work of the imagination ("the imagination is completely transcended" says Teresa). (6) Teresa's main criterion for the truth of visions or auditions is that they are known "by their fruits". A moment's thought here will show to us that the validity of spiritual truths is not conveyed only by the words spoken of them. It is conveyed also by the integrity, ethical worth and inner depth of the person who gives voice to them: by the person's harmony, integration, constructive attitudes, ability to love and to give. If our observation of a person convinces us that they live up to their spiritual ideals, that they are at peace with themselves, that they have a profundity of character, extra weight seems to be added to their statements regarding spiritual truth, although of course other criteria may also be relevant here. Teresa underwent much trouble and inner turmoil because of those who told her she was deluded, or that her

visions were evil. These persons included some of her own confessors and superiors, so for a part of her life she really did have to "tread her own Path" and be guided by the Light within that revealed these things to her. Many visionaries in her lifetime were persecuted by the Inquisition: some were imprisoned, or even tortured and murdered. Teresa did have several brushes with the Inquisition; they came to nothing, but make the attitude of caution only too understandable. Perhaps because of this, Teresa is at pains to explain how we can know that a vision genuinely comes from God, and gives the following beautiful illustration. Speaking of those who tried to persuade her that her visions were delusory, she says:

I once said to the people who were talking to me in this way that if they were to tell me that a person whom I knew well and had just been speaking to was not herself at all, but that I was imagining her to be so, and that they knew this was the case, I should certainly believe them rather than my own eyes. But, I added, if that person left some jewels [symbolic of spiritual virtues] with me, which I was actually holding in my hands as pledges of her great love, and if, never having had any before, I were thus to find myself rich instead of poor, I could not possibly believe that this was delusion, even if I wanted to. And, I said, I could show them these jewels -- for all who knew me were well aware how my soul had changed.....the difference was very great in every respect, and no fancy, but such as all could clearly see. (7)

Many of Teresa's imaginary visions were of Christ, and she speaks of them as experiences of great beauty, beauty sometimes so intense and awesome that it is hard to bear. She often speaks of an "infused radiance", a pure, softly shining Light, surrounding the figures of her visions. The following may serve as an example of one of Teresa's visions of Christ; it is an interesting example in that she appends her interpretation of the symbolism.

On one occasion, when I was reciting the Hours with the community, my soul suddenly became recollected [se recogió: "became withdrawn into itself"] and seemed to me to become bright all over like a mirror: no part of it -- back, sides, top or bottom -- but was completely bright, and in the centre of it was a picture

of Christ our Lord as I generally see Him. I seemed to see Him in every part of my soul as clearly as in a mirror....This, I know, was a vision which, whenever I recall it, and especially after Communion, is always of great profit to me. It was explained to me [dióseme a entender: "it was given to me to understand"] that, when a soul is in mortal sin, this mirror is covered with a thick mist and remains darkened so that the Lord cannot be pictured or seen in it, though He is always present with us and gives us our being..... (8)

I have commented in my discussion of John of the Cross on his use of the mirror as a symbol of the self, a mirror which when cloudy or murky does not reflect the Sun of Wisdom, and I compared St. John's analogy to a parallel passage in Ch'an Buddhist teachings. (9) I have also discussed the teachings of Eckhart and of the Kabbalah on the dark mirror and the luminous mirror. (10) The mirror is indeed a widespread symbol of the soul or self in its capacity to reflect the invisible world, the Divine intelligence. In other contexts the mirror has an extended meaning, denoting the whole manifest world as an image of Deity; we will later see how it is used in this way in nature-mysticism and in Boehme.

On another occasion, Teresa had a vision in which Christ placed a crown on her head (11) which recalls Suso's being crowned by Eternal Wisdom (12). She had many other visions of Christ, and in addition she had visions of the Virgin, of devils, of Hell, etc. Her approach to the visions of devils is interesting: these caused her great distress, and she tried many means to banish them, but came eventually to the conclusion that the best thing was to ignore them: ".....every time we pay little heed to them, they lose much of their power and the soul gains much more control over them....." (13) Here, as on so many other occasions, Teresa shows herself possessed of a shrewd psychological insight. On certain occasions, she says, she saw a multitude of devils around her, yet she was enveloped by a Light which prevented them from coming nearer (14): the 'devils' have very little power to harm the mystic who is strengthened

and protected by the Armour of Light fashioned of Divine power. Teresa is here "resisting not evil, but overcoming evil with good" by inwardly receiving, generating and radiating the Light of the Divine. On another occasion Teresa had a vision in which she saw a great Light within herself, and was transported to a beautiful garden with heavenly music of birds and angels in the air (15), recalling a similar vision of Suso's which he sees as a vision of the Celestial Paradise (16). Certainly Heaven or Paradise is very often symbolically portrayed as a beautiful garden or fair city, with flowers, singing, dancing, music, and a joyful atmosphere, the buildings of gold and precious stones and the inhabitants adorned with the same. (All of these elements are present in Suso's vision, and many of them in St. Teresa's.) Descriptions of the Otherworld from pre-Christian Celtic mythology are very similar. (17) In the devotions of the Vaiṣṇavite bhakti mystics, the cowherd village of Vṛndāvana, scene of Kṛṣṇa's childhood, became metamorphosed into a Paradise full of beautiful flowers and plants, with music, song and dance. Here, no-one knows old age or death, and normally hostile animals are friendly to each other, just as in the Christian Paradise the wolf lies down with the lamb.

In addition to her visions and locutions, Teresa experienced a type of inspired writing to which many mystics are subject: writing in an absorbed, contemplative or entranced condition in which the pen seems guided by some other Power. The writer is frequently amazed by the words that appear on the paper, and often does not fully understand their meaning until later. This is a kind of 'dictation from above', an experience eloquently expressed by Boehme:

.....the burning fire often forced forward with speed, and the hand and pen must hasten directly after it; for that fire comes and goes as a sudden shower.....We will here write what the time hath brought forth and manifested, and if it were not manifest by man, yet the beasts should be driven to manifest the same; for the time is born, and nothing can hinder: The Most High acc-

omplisheth his work. (18)

As for Teresa's intellectual visions, these are marked, like those of other mystics, by a consciousness of the presence of the Divine localised at a specific point in space, which brings a constant companionship, a special knowledge of God, and ever deeper yearnings to give oneself wholly to his service. For example, one is conscious that God walks at one's right hand (19); or, in another vision, Teresa is conscious that Christ is at her side, but sees him "neither with the eyes of the body [los ojos del cuerpo] nor with those of the soul [los ojos del alma]." (20) Although nothing is seen, there is a Light so great that it gives sure perception and knowledge: ".....One can no more doubt it than one can doubt the evidence of one's eyes -- indeed, the latter is easier, for we sometimes suspect that we have imagined what we see, whereas here, though that suspicion may arise for a moment, there remains such complete certainty that the doubt has no force." (21) There is also, says Teresa, a similar kind of locution, in which no words are actually heard -- a kind of spiritual language through which "the Lord introduces into the inmost part of the soul [lo muy interior del alma] what He wishes that soul to understand." (22)

### Raptures and Ecstasies

Many mystics, St. Teresa included, grant great importance to rapture and ecstasy. These are typically seen as a higher form of spiritual perception than vision, but one which must nevertheless be scrutinised to see if the experience is genuine. Rapture and ecstasy are brief states where the soul is caught up, transported, into immediate union with the Divine. The physical effects are often those of trance: immobility, and a

slowing-down and quietening of the breath almost to the point of inaudibility; sometimes loss of the use of the senses and a coldness of the extremities. (These effects are shared by mediumistic trance, but the content and spiritual significance of what is revealed are of a quite different nature.) Surface-consciousness may be partially retained, or momentarily lost as in Teresa's "suspension of faculties" (to be discussed later). Teresa uses a number of terms for this state: rapture (arrobamiento), transport (arrebataimiento), elevation (elevamiento/levantamiento), flight of the spirit (vuelo de espíritu), ecstasy (éxtasi). (Some writers have attempted to draw distinctions between these states, but in fact Teresa says in one place that these are all different words for the same experience (23) and uses the terms interchangeably when all her writings are taken into account.)

In rapture, says Teresa, ".....the Lord gathers up the soul.....and raises it up till it is right out of itself [levántala toda de ella].....and begins to reveal to it things concerning the Kingdom that he has prepared for it." (24) The soul is carried away like a bird set loose from its cage, to another world, and often seems to leave the body -- Teresa speaks of one occasion when she was seen by others to actually levitate physically as a result of this incredibly strong impulse. The physical effects of such raptures embarrassed Teresa, and she often tried to resist them -- but she does not disparage them as being "from the Devil" or as being unimportant for spiritual progress. She in fact found that such flights of the spirit could not be resisted: ".....often it comes like a strong, swift impulse, before your thought can forewarn you of it or you can do anything to help yourself; you see and feel this cloud, or this powerful eagle, rising and bearing you up with it on its wings.....you are being carried away, you know not whither....." (25) The soul "has grown new wings and has

learned to fly". (26) This may remind us of the Platonic doctrine of the soul that loses its wings and falls to earth, eventually regrowing them after a long period of philosophical contemplation, thus being able to attain once more to the vision of Being. (27) Teresa sees rapture as a great gift from God; during the experience there occur great revelations and visions of Divine secrets, which enrich and strengthen the inner life and bring many spiritual advantages. Concerning these revelations Teresa says: ".....the soul, when enraptured, is mistress of everything, and in a single hour, or in less, acquires such freedom that it cannot recognize itself....." (28) Or again, ".....the glory which I felt within me, at that time cannot be expressed in writing, or even in speech, nor can it be imagined by anyone who has not experienced it. I felt that all the things that can be desired were there at one and the same time, yet I saw nothing." (29) "In a single instant he [the mystic] is taught so many things all at once that, if he were to labour for years on end in trying to fit them all into his imagination and thought, he could not succeed with a thousandth part of them." (30)

Just as she is well aware that visions can be deceptive, so Teresa recognises the fact that raptures and ecstasies are not always what they appear to be, and that there are similar experiences which are no more than "frenzies", illusions. Until one has had a good deal of experience of rapture, one can afford to be doubtful; but in genuine rapture, one is united with God, and upon return one cannot possibly doubt the truth of this. (The "by their fruits" test is again used to ascertain whether a rapture is genuine.) The joy experienced is greater than all the joys of earth. (31) When we descend to everyday consciousness again, we feel enchained and imprisoned in this world, once more shut up in a cage; but we are filled with greater humility and love of the Divine.

The rational mind cannot fathom the experience of rapture; the understanding is often so completely transported, and the experience so intense, that the mystic has no power to think about what is occurring. The heights of such rapture are always brief, and often seem of even shorter duration than they are according to earthly time: "I thought I had been there only a very short time and I was astounded when the clock struck and I found that I had been in that state of rapture and bliss for two hours." (32) The experience of transcending time as we know it is well-known to mystics: time seems to expand or contract so that we see all things in Eternity. Eckhart and Suso are eloquent teachers on the necessity of rising above time to the realm of the Timeless, as we have discussed. (33)

#### The Mystical Path according to St. Teresa

St. Teresa's scheme of the mystical Way is made rather complex by the fact that ecstatic or rapturous states may include either imaginary or intellectual vision or audition. (Teresa speaks of many such ecstasies of her own.) Visions and auditions may occur at almost any stage along the Path (but not when the faculties are "suspended", for this is a formless state where there is no inner seeing, hearing, or understanding). We do not usually begin to experience ecstasy or rapture until we are reasonably accomplished in contemplation, although there are exceptions to this rule. What Teresa calls "impulse" may also occur at any stage: this is a spontaneous type of mystical experience which is not preceded by any meditative preparation or discipline.

Many writers have attempted to systematise Teresa's writings into neat schemes of progression (some sevenfold, some fourfold, etc.) but the



fact remains that Teresa is not even self-consistent, using different classifications in each of her major writings and different means of subdividing the various types of experience. In the end, it matters little into how many 'stages' we divide the mystical Way, for any dividing lines will be fluid, and any scheme of use only in that it helps us to understand the mystical life (whether from without or from within). We shall therefore content ourselves with discussing the remaining aspects of spiritual experience described by St. Teresa in the most logical sequence possible.

Recollection (recogimiento) is the first stage in meditation, whereby ".....the soul collects together all the faculties [recoge el alma todas las potencias] and enters within itself to be with its God." (34) Like all mystics, Teresa holds on the basis of her own experience that God, while omnipresent, is to be found especially within the Self. In Recollection, we detach ourselves from sense-perception and outward stimuli, turning away from exterior things, stilling the surface mind, and fixing all our 'faculties', every ounce of our attention and dedication, on one point -- the centre of the soul where the Divine dwells. The senses and faculties are not 'suspended', but their activities are withdrawn into the Self to concentrate upon God. This is a form of meditation which requires much personal effort at first, and our success in it depends upon our degree of control over the body, senses and will. When we have become proficient in Recollection, we enter a state which Teresa calls the Prayer (or Orison) of Quiet (Oración de Quietud). She does not always clearly differentiate between Recollection and Quiet in her writings, as they are not separate stages so much as a method and its resultant effect. In the Prayer of Quiet, we experience interior peace and joy, inner silence and receptivity. The faculties are absorbed in or wholly occupied with the Divine (but still not 'suspended'); the will is united to God's will, but the

other higher faculties (memory and understanding, as for John of the Cross) are not so united. The following passage well describes the beauty of this experience:

Both the inward and the outward man seem to receive comfort, just as if into the marrow of the bones had been poured the sweetest of ointments, resembling a fragrant perfume, or as if we had suddenly entered a room where there was a perfume coming not from one place, but from many, so that we cannot tell what or where the perfume is -- we only know that it pervades our whole being.....So anxious is it [the soul] not to lose this love that it would fain stay still without moving and neither speak nor even look anywhere lest it should vanish. (35)

This is an experience of inner peace and tranquillity and beauty, freedom from care or worry or agitation; the flow of consciousness may seem to have an almost tactile silky-smoothness about it in its purity and timelessness. Teresa says that great truths are communicated to the soul in this state, and it may be beside itself in a kind of Divine intoxication. (36)

Recollection and Quiet may culminate in the Prayer of Union (Oración de Unión). It is important to explain that Teresa does not use this term to refer to the final, ultimate mystical achievement of oneness with God; this later stage she calls the Spiritual Marriage. Union is, however, a foretaste of the final stage of Marriage, or even a temporary experience of it, a high-state of contemplative prayer in which the mystic is very close to God. It is from this stage onwards that one may experience "suspension of the faculties" (la suspensión de las potencias), a concept which requires fuller investigation. What this amounts to is that the mystic has so completely surrendered himself or herself to the Divine that a suspension of normal consciousness results, and the use of the higher faculties, imagination and senses is momentarily lost. The soul is so absorbed in God during the actual experience (which is always brief) that there is no rational understanding of what is happening. But on return to

the lower levels of consciousness, we know beyond doubt that we have been with God, even temporarily united to him, and the experience brings great spiritual benefits. It is certainly not to be seen as an unconscious or 'negative' state: the surface-consciousness is inhibited, but, so to speak, a seed is planted in the deeper consciousness of which the surface-consciousness later becomes aware, and which subsequently blossoms forth in the outward life and lower mentality. Teresa describes the experience as follows:

.....the Bride is lost to herself and enraptured for love of Him, and.....the very strength of love has taken from her the power of understanding.....she neither knows how, nor understands what, she is loving; the exceeding great love borne her by the King Who has brought her to this high state must have united her love to Himself in a way that the understanding is not worthy to comprehend. These two loves, then, become one [estos dos amores se tornan uno]: the love of the soul has been brought into genuine union with that of God. How could the intellect ever grasp this? (37)

There are a number of philosophical problems attendant upon the type of experience which Teresa describes here. For example, if our memory is suspended, how do we later recall the experience? This is a problem for mystics as well as for philosophers; they make no secrets of their difficulties in remembering such experiences and in bringing them through to everyday consciousness. The problems connected with formless states of awareness are fully explored in Chapter V; for the moment, we shall simply note that Teresa insists that on return to rational understanding, one has a sure feeling that one has been with God; and she reintroduces her "by their fruits" test to substantiate this. Comparing the soul to gold, in which God sets precious and elaborately worked enamel, she continues:

But it [the understanding] becomes well aware of it [the union in love of God and the soul] later on, when it sees the soul so wonderfully enamelled and decorated with precious stones and pearls, which are the virtues..... (38)

Following on from Union, the mystic enters a more or less distinct

phase of spiritual experience similar to John of the Cross' Night of the Spirit, which Teresa calls the "Pain of God" or the "Wound of Love". There is an acute awareness of separation from the Divine, combined with an ever greater love and yearning for it, producing desolation, pain, loneliness and anguish as the mystic realises that no earthly thing or person can ever fulfill this love. It is the pain of the finite that would be Infinite, the bittersweet pain of insatiable love. Like St. John's Dark Night, this is a time of purification through suffering and eventually of rebirth through the inner death of the lower self. Like Rolle and so many other mystics, Teresa speaks of this experience in terms of a burning inner Fire which refines and purifies the self; she also speaks of the Heart being pierced by an arrow or spear of Fire. She had one very intense vision, in particular, of an angel with his face all aflame:

In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. (39)

Because of this vision, Teresa is often depicted in ecstasy with an angel piercing her heart with an arrow or spear. The wound caused by this arrow, she says, is "not.....in any region where physical pain can be felt, but in the soul's most intimate depths. It passes as quickly as a flash of lightning and leaves everything in our nature that is earthly reduced to powder." (40) It cannot be resisted, any more than a person thrown into a fire can make the flames lose their heat and not burn her. (41) The mystic ".....thinks of herself as a person suspended aloft, unable either to come down and rest anywhere on earth or to ascend to Heaven" (42) -- stuck between two worlds, one of which cannot satisfy and the other of which seems out of reach. Teresa says that this state actually involves peril of physical death, and many other mystics, Rolle included, claim

that the experiences of the fire of love and the arrow that pierces the soul bring the mystic close to death through their intensity.

It is only through utter transformation of the self that this conflict can be ended and the upper of the two worlds attained. The stroke of the Flaming Spear -- or the Flaming Sword, in the accounts of other mystics -- will finally liberate once and for all: but it demands total dedication and self-renunciation. We have to cut the bonds that tie us to plurality, and to destroy our barriers to realisation. A parallel from Boehme is informative here. Speaking of the angel with the Fiery Sword who was placed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were driven forth, he says:

The angel with the fire-sword is the right destroying angel, who carrieth life and death in his sword; he hath therein God's love and anger, and when man dieth in this world, then he cometh before the gates of Paradise, before this angel..... (43)

The sword is in us, says Boehme. Where there is true repentance, there is the angel with the Flaming Sword, and there one may pass again into Paradise. One must "stand under Christ's cross, in Christ's death" and the "piercing sword of tribulation and grief" must pass through oneself. Until the spiritual principle within the self wins the battle, there is much "going up and down in sorrow and sadness, trouble and perplexity", many trials and tribulations. The Flaming Sword, for Boehme, is both the instrument by means of which we are prevented from entering Paradise, and the instrument by means of which, once we learn to wield it correctly, we may re-enter Paradise. (44) It may be seen then that an important symbolic meaning of the Sword is the power of discrimination between the Light and the Dark, the spiritual and the material.

The mystic who can emerge from this trial, who can die in order to live, enters the ultimate state of union, called by Teresa the Spiritual Marriage (matrimonio espiritual). Jacopone da Todi, obviously having

undergone a parallel experience to that of Teresa, puts it thus:

Now we are one, we are not separate;  
 Fire cannot part us, nor a sword divide;  
 Not pain nor death can reach these heights so great  
 Where Love hath snatched and set me by His side..... (45)

The mystic now lives in and through the Divine, having died to the lower self. Teresa says that whereas in lower stages, periods of separation from God may still occur, in Marriage the mystic is continually united with God in the deepest centre of the soul. Using an image common to many mystical traditions, notably the Hindu tradition (46), she says:

It is like rain falling from the heavens into a river or spring; there is nothing but water there and it is impossible to divide or separate the water belonging to the river from that which fell from the heavens. Or it is as if a tiny streamlet enters the sea, from which it will find no way of separating itself..... (47)

Another difference between Marriage and the lower stages is that, whereas before the soul understood little of what was happening to it, now the scales are removed from its eyes, and in intellectual vision it sees what it before held by faith. (48) Teresa might well agree with St. John and Eckhart that we no longer see through a glass darkly -- or in a dark and murky mirror -- but face to face. The mystic now experiences continual inner tranquillity, being completely resigned to the Divine Will, and making it manifest in his or her own life. This does not, of course, mean that we no longer experience any difficulties at all in life; there may be many outward trials, and the faculties, senses and passions may not always be at peace, but the centre of the soul, where the mystic now dwells, remains unruffled. "They have no lack of crosses, but these do not unsettle them or deprive them of their peace." (49)

Teresa emphasises the practical effects of Marriage, the "return to the world", the efforts to work for God's glory and to fulfill the Divine Will on the material plane:

The interior part of the soul works in the active life, and in things which seem to be exterior; but, when active works proceed from this source [i.e., Spiritual Marriage], they are like wondrous and sweetly scented flowers. For the tree from which they come is love of God for His own sake alone, without self-interest; and the perfume of these flowers is wafted abroad, to the profit of many..... (50)

The mystic now acts in a pure pouring-out of love and service, without thought of personal reputation or desire for personal credit. Teresa, in her activities connected with reform and administration, is herself a prime example of the superhuman strength, courage and energy to accomplish things shown by all the greatest mystics; the reception of power from on high seems to give the will and ability to work with unflagging dedication and perseverance. Teresa's statement above regarding active works proceeding from the interior Source, can be compared with Eckhart's teaching previously discussed. Eckhart says that through living in the inward calm at the centre of the soul where God dwells, we are given the power and strength for ceaseless dynamic activity; we work in and from our inward being, so that our inner self breaks forth into activity and the activity is again drawn into our inwardness. (51)

A few more general comments on Teresa's conception of the mystical life may be in order. She always stresses the need for a solid basis of humility, prayer, virtue and meditation: "We must not build towers without foundations." (52) Her writings show her own deep humility and consciousness of her shortcomings and imperfections, and give us a picture of a woman always deeply questioning herself so as to grow in self-knowledge. She also stresses the necessity of selfless love, and of detachment both from created things and from our own self-will.

An interesting point is that Teresa disagrees with John of the Cross that we must entirely leave behind all form, all specific images, etc. She wishes to retain meditation upon Christ's life and visualisation of him

even in the higher stages of contemplation, although it must be added that it is hard to see how this could be achieved in the suspension of faculties! Here Teresa is more rigidly theistic than St. John, and here also her down-to-earth nature is shown. Although she admits that we may have brief periods of ecstasy or rapture where we rise above all form, the soul, she feels, is "left in the air" on such occasions. She wants always to keep before her the image of Christ's humanity, feeling that this is the most appropriate Path for incarnated human beings. With practicality and humour she says:

We are not angels and we have bodies. To want to become angels while we are still on earth.....is ridiculous. As a rule, our thoughts must have something to lean upon [tener arrimo: "a support to hold onto"]..... (53)

Here Teresa breaks with the Dionysian tradition of 'unknowing' and formless apprehension that has played such an important part in mystical Christianity. I have remarked that Teresa had some instruction in Jesuit meditation; the object of Jesuit exercises was not to attempt to rise above symbols and images so much as to use and develop them in meditative visualisation, so perhaps this played a part in developing her ideas here. As I have said, she does speak of brief experiences of formless cognition, and I have suggested that her suspension of faculties may well represent the same basic experience as the 'unknowing' of John of the Cross, where the faculties are emptied of all particular ideas or images so that we may rise above them to receive direct knowledge of the Divine. But it is clear that in any case Teresa does not attach as much importance to this type of perception as does St. John. Perhaps her experiences of the suspension of faculties disturbed her, just as the physical effects of her ecstasies and raptures embarrassed her; perhaps she was frightened by the sensation of being "left in the air" with nothing



to hold onto. O'Donoghue argues that Teresa does not mean that we should not rise above discursive meditation to contemplation. Rather, the contemplative experience, however high-flying, should always be "anchored in the Word made flesh"; representations of Christ, of key episodes in his life and so on, are used as a "launching pad of the mind's journey into the world of Divine Mystery". (54) The image of Christ is therefore seen as a kind of focussing-point for the mind -- "something to lean upon", as Teresa puts it above -- a common meditative device. This is not, however, to belittle the importance of Christ in Teresa's mysticism, for whatever there may be beyond Christ in formless awareness, it is certain that his supreme reality is not for a moment doubted by Teresa, and plays a central part in her most fervent devotions. Teresa, therefore, even though she knows moments of formless awareness, values more highly a theistic union of relation, not an experience of absorption where no differentiation remains. Her attitude is therefore the reverse of that of Eckhart or Śankara, both of whom appear to have undergone both monistic and theistic types of experience, but who value the monistic over the theistic. Teresa's testimony also lends further weight to the argument that monistic and theistic mysticism are two distinct types of experience.

#### The Interior Castle

The Interior Castle is in my opinion the most interesting of Teresa's writings; it is certainly the most mystical, the work in which she speaks with greatest intensity of feeling about her own experiences. It was written after a vision in which Teresa saw the soul as a beautiful diamond or crystal Castle, with seven mansions; the book is an account of her stages of mystical realisation as she roams from room to room,

progressing from the first to the seventh mansion, in which last she is united with the King in Spiritual Marriage. The King dwells in this innermost seventh mansion, illuminating and beautifying all the other mansions by his presence. The mansions are pictured as being inside each other, like a series of concentric circles. The nearer one gets to the centre, the stronger is the Light. Outside the Castle limits all is foul, dark, and infested with toads, vipers and other venomous creatures. Due to our ignorance as to the beauties that may be found inside the Castle, we interest ourselves exclusively in the outer wall of the building -- the body and lower self. We allow the rooms of the Castle to fall into a poor state of repair; their governors and stewards (the faculties) become blind and ill-controlled. When we undertake the mystical journey, we have to enter within the Castle and explore its many rooms, remaining constantly alert for the enemies at the gate who may try to breach the fortress at some weak spot, and for the evil powers who try to prevent us from passing from one room to another.

Teresa gives detailed descriptions of the experiences encountered in each mansion, but we shall not discuss these here, as they merely augment, with some minor variations, our previous discussions on her conception of the mystical Path and her visions and ecstasies. Each soul, says Teresa, is "an interior world" (a microcosm) containing all the beauties of each mansion (55) and she humourously remarks to her nuns that they can enter this Castle and walk about in it at any time without asking leave of their superiors. (56)

I have argued in my article 'Saint Teresa of Avila and Hekhalot Mysticism' (57) that the influence of Jewish mysticism can be traced in Teresa's thought, basing my argument on the fact that Teresa was of Jewish descent, and on the structure of The Interior Castle. It seems to

me certain that Teresa, in this book, makes use of symbolism drawn from the Jewish mystical tradition (with which her background would have provided her) as a means of expression of her experiences. The Interior Castle bears many close resemblances to the early Jewish Merkavah/Hekhalot mystical tradition, which was continued in Kabbalah; and Spain had been a centre of Kabbalistic thought and activity for some centuries prior to Teresa's lifetime. In Merkavah (Chariot) mysticism, the mystic ascends through seven Heavenly Palaces (Hekhalot) to the vision of the Divine Throne and to union with the King in the Seventh Palace. The overall structure of the Sevenfold Castle/Palace, with the King dwelling in the seventh room, is thus common to both Teresa and Merkavah/Hekhalot mysticism; and in the Jewish tradition, the Palaces are inside each other, just like Teresa's Mansions. There are also certain other, more specific, symbols and images used by Teresa in The Interior Castle which correspond closely to Merkavah and Kabbalistic mysticism. For a full discussion of Teresa's Jewish origins, and of the connections between The Interior Castle and Jewish mysticism, the reader is referred to my article, of which it has only been possible to give a brief synopsis here.

Another important point is that the Castle is a widespread symbol of the mystical Self; it is interchangeable with the Inner Palace, and indeed Teresa does on occasion refer to the Castle as a Palace. In a further article (58) I have discussed in detail the significance of the image of the Castle/Palace in the writings of a number of different mystics, and of a parallel symbolism in mythology and folktale. To take just two examples from the teachings of mystics who are discussed in this study, Eckhart, as we have seen, speaks of the "Little Castle of the Soul", by which he denotes the "Ground of the Soul" into which the mystic must penetrate. (59) Ramakrishna, as we shall see later, also makes use of the image of

an Inner Palace -- and, most remarkably, his Palace has seven rooms like Teresa's Castle, with the inmost room inhabited by the Divine King. The Castle as an image of the innermost, tranquil centre of the Self, the abode of Deity within, has a number of interesting symbolic characteristics. For example, it is walled, defended, protected from the outside world; it therefore contains the spiritual energies and forces which radiate out from its centre. Because it is protected and enclosed, the Castle is also difficult to penetrate; the unworthy and the unready cannot enter. In mythological representation, the Castle usually contains within it some treasure (denoting spiritual treasure or attainment) which the hero must win, often by defeating monsters or ogres (aspects of the lower self which have to be transformed, like Teresa's venomous creatures that dwell outside the Castle) or by undergoing various tests and ordeals. The Inner Castle is symbolic of the still centre of the human soul, and when represented mythically, is often also at the symbolic centre of the universe -- that is, it is an Axis Mundi. Thus if we can find the tranquil centre at the hub of all movement that is our innermost self -- the inner room of the Castle which is the secret abode of the Deity within -- we shall find the spiritual centre of the Universe, the Axis Mundi, the one principle at the heart of all. Each of us, as St. Teresa says, is an interior world wherein are many and beautiful mansions; we are each of us a microcosm embracing every level of reality patterned in the microcosm. The Inner Castle is a complex and potent mystical symbol of the progress of the self through different levels of attainment and realisation (symbolised by the different rooms and passages of the Castle). The reader is again referred to my article for greater elaboration on the use of this symbol in mysticism, mythology and folktale.

Some Other Aspects of Teresa's Symbolism

While the image of the Castle is the most striking of the symbols used by Teresa, there are other aspects of her symbolism that may merit notice. She is fond of water symbolism, and speaks of the soul as a fountain or "spring of life" from whose centre flows heavenly water (60) as does John of the Cross. She speaks of the Living Water of Life which is as medicine for the soul wounded by the Arrow of Fire. (61) We have seen that she also uses the symbols of rain falling into a river, or a river flowing to the sea, to illustrate the Spiritual Marriage which is consummated after passing through the experiences associated with the Wound of the Fiery Arrow. Water extinguishes Fire, refreshes, revivifies, brings peace in suffering, dissolves and washes away impurities. On another occasion, Teresa compares the soul to a Garden; we have to uproot the weeds, put good plants in their place and labour to make them grow. The Garden can be watered in four ways: by taking the water from a well; by a water-wheel and buckets drawn by a windlass; from a stream or brook; and by heavy rain. In each of these there is progressively less need for heavy labour on the part of the Gardener (the self); Teresa uses this simile to illustrate a fourfold subdivision of prayer, the soul receiving greater grace as it progresses. Many Western mystics use the Garden as a symbol of the soul, the plants being the qualities cultivated in it.

In keeping with her use of water-symbolism, Teresa sometimes refers to the soul's journey as a sea-voyage (62) and to God as an Ocean -- images which find counterparts in many other mystical teachings, for to cross the sea is very often symbolic of a transition from one level of consciousness to another. A more unusual illustration of the soul's journey

is shown in Teresa's analogy of a Game of Chess. In the "game of love" (ludus amoris) played between God and the soul, we have to checkmate the Divine King. (63) Teresa's image of concentric circles in The Interior Castle (64) also denotes the different stages of the soul's journey, which is here conceived as a journey inward to the centre of the circles; this can be compared to Plotinus' use of concentric circle symbolism (65). More general symbols of the soul used by Teresa include the Tree of Life (66), the Sun (67) and the Inner Temple (68) (more or less synonymous with the Castle/Palace).

Like St. John of the Cross, Teresa speaks of the soul's purification and transformation through the burning Inner Fire as analogous to the refining of gold in the crucible (69); and speaking of the inner death and rebirth brought about by this experience, she uses the illustrative symbol of the phoenix rising from its own ashes (70). In The Interior Castle, she also uses the image of a silkworm turning into a butterfly to denote this process of metamorphosis. (71)

Although Teresa's style of writing is so simple and down-to-earth, we can readily detect therein the wonders and inspirations of her mystical experience. She shows a shrewd insight into the character and inner nature of both herself and others. Her writings are permeated by deep self-questioning, the resolution of inner conflicts, and the formulation of reflections upon the spiritual life from what she has learnt from her own experience. "I see clearly that all I gain comes to me through these revelations and raptures: it has nothing to do with me; I am no more than a tabula rasa." (72) "So the life of this soul continues -- a troubled life, never without its crosses, but a life of great growth...." (73) Teresa's personal reflections tell us as much about the ongoing experience of the mystical life as do her schemes of progression or her visions and raptures.

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### DEVOTIONAL MYSTICISM PART 3: THE BHAKTI MYSTICS

As an Eastern counterpart to Rolle and St. Teresa we may consider the devotional manifestations of Indian mysticism exemplified by the bhakti mystics. The general religious position of the various bhakti movements which arose in India from the 6th century onwards is theistic, emphasising separation between the devotee and the Deity. The human soul is seen as unworthy, helpless, unable fully to understand the Divine; or at least these characteristics are emphasised when bhakti is seen in comparison to Indian monism. There is therefore a strong accent on love, the grace of the Deity, devotion, ecstasy, adoration: the mystic throws himself or herself into a passionate relationship, surrendering to and putting all trust in Bhagavān (the personal Deity). The same basic characteristics can be observed in devotional mysticism in the West, although here they may be rather less intensely and passionately expressed. In bhakti, blissful enjoyment of the mutual love between the soul and Deity, rather than liberation from saṃsāra, is the typical mystical goal, although these two are sometimes seen as coexisting; unbelief rather than ignorance (avidyā) is viewed as the problem to be overcome. The imagery used is very often that of love-in-separation with an impassioned longing for union, and wide employment is also made of other romantic and sexual metaphors; in the Western tradition, the closest parallel to this imagery is perhaps found in the Song of Songs, and I shall later point out some close parallels of terminology and symbolism between Mīrā Bāī and the Song of Songs, and also between Mīrā Bāī and St. Teresa.

I have remarked in connection with Rolle that in devotional forms of mysticism there is not a transcendence or renunciation of all emotion, such as is emphasised by metaphysical types of mysticism, so much as an

intense channelling of emotion towards the one object of true Love. This can be seen to apply equally well to bhakti. Dasgupta notes that:

Among various Hindu sects it was held that an engrossing passion of any kind may so possess the whole mind that all other mental functions may temporarily be suspended, and that gradually, through the repeated occurrence of such a passion, the other mental functions may be altogether annihilated. Thus, absorption in a single supreme passion may make the mind so one-pointed that all other attachments are transcended..... (1)

The bhakti cults rejected the outward forms and ossified rituals of Brahminism, emphasising instead inner purity, devotion and personal mystical experience. As with most emotionally-orientated forms of mysticism, there is a disregard for sophisticated metaphysical speculation, but again, as in the case of Rolle, there is an implicit, underlying metaphysics, as we shall see.

### Śaivite Bhakti: Mahādēvī

The Vīraśaivas or Liṅgāyatas were a Śaivite Dravidian bhakti movement originating in the 10th century, whose devotees have left us a collection of vacanas (lyrical poems) describing their devotion to Śiva in intensely personal, passionate and poetic language. These poems mirror a desire to by-pass traditional ritual: true experience of Śiva comes through his grace and cannot be commanded or invoked, only caught (if one is lucky enough) in a state of spontaneity and unmediated awareness. One of the greatest of the Vīraśaivas was Mahādēvīyakkā (Akka Mahādēvī), whose vacanas are characterised by intense feeling and deep insight. It is said that Mahādēvī was married against her will, although this may be legend; in any case, her poems are full of references to the contrasts between human and divine love. From her childhood, her only love was Śiva as Cennamallikārjuna, "my Lord white as jasmine", and at an early

age she severed her ties with the material world and wandered as a homeless ascetic so as to give her whole self to love of the Divine:

Husband inside,  
lover outside.  
I can't manage them both.

This world  
and that other,  
cannot manage them both. (2)

Sometimes, Śīva is represented as her illicit lover; sometimes as her only true husband. The following vacana illustrates the second of these images:

I have fallen in love, O mother, with the Beautiful One, who knows no death, knows no decay and has no form;  
I have fallen in love, O mother, with the Beautiful One, who has no middle, has no end, has no parts and has no features;  
I have fallen in love, O mother, with the Beautiful One, who knows no birth and knows no fear.  
I have fallen in love with the Beautiful One, who is without any family, without any country and without any peer; Chenna Mallikārjuna, the Beautiful, is my husband. Fling into the fire the husbands who are subject to death and decay. (3)

We will note in passing that Śīva is described here as formless, a point which will be returned to later. Ramanujan has remarked that the above "ambiguous alternation of attitudes regarding the legitimacy of living in the world" -- portrayed on the one hand by the image of Śīva as illicit lover, on the other by Śīva as true husband -- is one of the most fascinating aspects of Mahādēvī's poetry. (4) Her progress along the mystical path is constantly expressed in romantic and sensual imagery, following the conventions of Indian love poetry, just as St. John of the Cross adapts the style of the secular love poetry of his age to express spiritual themes:

Come to me, O my groom, auspicious-scented, gold-adorned and rich-clad.  
Your coming would verily be the coming back of my life.  
I am watching the roads, all athirst, hoping that Chenna Mallikārjuna will come. (5)

Mahādēvī's writings show her love to be that pure spiritual love which asks for no reward, which loves for love's sake. She loves because she has

to love, because she has to pour out the feeling and devotion springing from the depths of her heart. This type of love, in spite of its intensity and passion, always retains a certain element of detachment: perhaps we could say that the spirit of the devotee remains still at the centre of an enraptured heart. Mahādēvī will continue to devote herself to Śīva regardless of whether or not there is any response to her impassioned cries, for she wishes not for her will to be obeyed, but to obey Śīva's will:

○ Lord, listen to me if you will, listen not if you will not; I cannot rest contented unless I sing of you.  
 ○ Lord, accept me if you will, accept not if you will not; I cannot rest contented unless I worship you.  
 ○ Lord, love me if you will, love not if you will not; I cannot rest contented unless I hold you in my arms. (6)

Ultimately, in fact, she is helpless, a puppet in the hands of Śīva as the māyin; she can do nothing except through him, she can do nothing but act out, like a game, the divine līlā:

Monkey on monkeyman's stick  
 puppet at the end of a string  
  
 I've played as you've played  
 I've spoken as you've told me  
 I've been as you've let me be..... (7)

The idea that seems to be conveyed here is that the guṇas (the constituents of matter which bind the self to the world) are acting while the true Self looks on as a spectator. Līlā is the 'game' played by Śīva as the māyin, the 'Cosmic Magician' (as also by the other gods of Indian theism when they are placed in this role). By his magical power of creation (māyā) he brings all things into being; his 'game' consists in his fettering the soul in saṁsāra and in also being the cause of its release. Parallels to Mahādēvī's poem above regarding līlā can be found in Platonism and Neoplatonism. Plato's Laws speaks of people as puppets of the gods, acting out a game; the various inner states and drives of the person are

seen as 'strings' by which one is pulled in one direction and another. (8) Plotinus speaks of people acting out their lives like a play, on the stage which is the world. Death and transmigration are seen as a change of body only, like an actor altering his make-up and costume and assuming a new role. (9) We may also compare the Shakespearian adage that "All the world's a stage,/And all the men and women merely players." (10)

Mahādēvī makes use of the common theme of love-in-separation:

Four parts of the day  
I grieve for you.  
Four parts of the night  
I'm mad for you.  
I lie lost  
sick for you, night and day,  
O lord white as jasmine..... (11)

We have noted in connection with Rolle the suffering inherent in the way of Love, and have remarked that this pain is nevertheless turned to joy when borne for love's sake. In Mahādēvī's writings we often find an emphasis on the agony rather than the joy:

O lord white as jasmine  
your love's blade stabbed  
and broken in my flesh

I writhe..... (12)

O mother I burned  
in a flameless fire

O mother I suffered  
a bloodless wound

mother I tossed  
without a pleasure:

loving my lord white as jasmine  
I wandered through unlikely worlds. (13)

The inner Fire (Mahādēvī's "flameless fire"), which we have discussed particularly in connection with Rolle, and the arrow, spear or sword of love (the "love's blade" above), which we have seen exemplified in the symbolism of St. Teresa in particular, emerge from this study as wide-

spread symbolic motifs of devotional mysticism, closely connected with the pain of love-in-separation. It is interesting to note that Mahādēvī expresses a desire to be united with Śiva and yet still to experience this love-in-separation:

Better than meeting  
and mating all the time  
is the pleasure of mating once  
after being far apart.

When he's away  
I cannot wait  
to get a glimpse of him.

Friend, when will I have it  
both ways,  
be with Him  
yet not with Him,  
my lord white as jasmine? (14)

We see, then, that there is in fact a blissful aspect to this love-in-separation for Mahādēvī, even if she gives more eloquent expression to the pain: it is a bittersweet love. It is characteristic of most of the bhakti sects that blissful enjoyment of the Deity's love in a state of duality is an end in itself, and not a means to another end (such as release from saṁsāra, or absorption into the nondifferentiated Absolute): as Srinivasachari puts it, ".....mukti has no value, if it were emptied of bhakti. Saṁsāra with uninterrupted bhakti has itself the value of apavarga or mokṣa....." (15) Thus the Vaiṣṇavite devotee of Mahārāṣṭra, Tukārām, prays:

Hear, O God, my supplication --  
Do not grant me liberation.

'Tis what men so much desire;  
Yet how much this joy is higher! (16)

In bhakti generally, as in Mahādēvī's vacana above, there is a tension between desire for union with the Deity, and enjoyment of the bliss of love-in-duality, which often makes itself most poignantly felt. The various bhakti sects differed in their exact approach to the monism/dualism

question: the Vaiṣṇavite sects were strongly influenced by Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita system, and so conceive of a final state of deliverance in which the devotee's individuality is preserved in a state of loving communion with Kṛṣṇa. Some Śaivite schools follow a similar model, but most tend towards a classical Advaitin interpretation of the goal of mystical endeavour, where the mystic attains the same form as Śiva or becomes absorbed into him. In these systems, the individual soul is ultimately identical with the Absolute; according to Thipperudra Swamy (17) Vīraśaivism was uncompromisingly monistic. But even in the Vaiṣṇavite bhakti mystics there often seems to be found that leaning towards identity of the soul with the Deity which finds its way into so much of Indian theism. In any case, we are not really dealing with clear-cut categories and explicit theological doctrines in the poems of the bhakti mystics, which are expressions of devotion and of personal experience, not metaphysical treatises. Mahādēvī, in the vacana quoted above, seems to be striving for a kind of identity-in-difference; but she stresses that the Deity is to be found within:

When I didn't know myself  
where were you?

Like the colour in the gold,  
you were in me.

I saw in you,  
lord white as jasmine,  
the paradox of your being  
in me  
without showing a limb. (18)

She shows us that the conception of a complete dualism of the Deity and humanity is a sign of not knowing oneself, and the road to knowledge of Śiva begins with self-knowledge, finding Śiva within the heart. Compare Tukārām's verse below, which offers a parallel, too, to the theme of "knowing the Self by means of the Self" encountered in Plotinus and

Śankara:

Nought know I but thy name alone: --  
Thus to myself myself am known. (19)

Mahādēvī speaks elsewhere of an absorption into Śiva's being, at a later stage in her mystical experience when she rises to a formless, nondifferentiated condition:

I do not say it is the Liṅga,  
I do not say it is oneness with the Liṅga,  
I do not say it is union,  
I do not say it is harmony,  
I do not say it has occurred,  
I do not say it has not occurred,  
I do not say it is You,  
I do not say it is I,  
After becoming one with the Liṅga in Chenna Mallikārjuna,  
I say nothing whatever. (20)

In this ineffable state, neither oneness nor duality, neither sameness nor difference, adequately describe the experience; all descriptive terminology seems equally inadequate. Mahādēvī is perhaps, as she desired, "with him yet not with him". The verse below also shows Mahādēvī's highest experiences to have been monistic:

After my body became  
Thyself, whom could I serve?  
After my mind became  
Thyself, whom could I invoke?  
After my breath became  
Thyself, whom could I worship, pray?  
After my consciousness was lost in Thee,  
Whom could I know?  
Being Thyself in Thee,  
O Cenna Mallikārjuna Lord,  
Through Thee have I forgotten Thee! (21)

The question of the sameness or difference of the Deity and the human soul is, of course, inextricably bound up with the question of the sameness or difference of the Divine and the material world, and thus forms of mystical thought which pronounce the ultimate identity of the soul and the Divine will often be pantheistic, while on the other hand a dualism of Deity and the soul involves a dualism of Deity and the world.



Mahādēvī, like many of the bhakti mystics, shows leanings towards a panentheistic nature-mysticism. Śiva is immanent in all things (yet, in this vacana, ever elusive):

You are the forest

you are all the great trees  
in the forest

you are bird and beast  
playing in and out  
of all the trees

O lord white as jasmine  
filling and filled by all

why don't you  
show me your face? (22)

The world seen simply as the world, in its material aspect, is māyā, appearance, having no ultimate reality independent of the Divine in which it is grounded; yet seen in its 'translucent' aspect, all the world is full of Divine Power, and all nature has an inward symbolic meaning:

Every tree  
in the forest was the All-Giving Tree,  
every bush  
the life-reviving herb,  
every stone the Philosophers' Stone..... (23)

The reference to the life-reviving herb and the Philosophers' Stone here shows, at least implicitly, the influence of Indian alchemy. (24) These images, together with that of the All-Giving Tree, are examples of the esoteric symbolism found in many bhakti vacanas, which is sometimes extremely complex. The symbolism used is usually drawn from yogic and tantric philosophy; Indian alchemy was closely associated with both Tantra and Śaivism. Such occult symbolism is not strongly in evidence in most of Mahādēvī's poems, but is most noticeable in the vacanas of Allamaprabhu, another of the Vīraśaivas. Mahādēvī does, however, make use of a related poetic device, the extended metaphor. In one of her vacanas māyā is represented by the mother-in-law, the world by the

father-in-law, the three guṇas by three brothers-in-law, karma by the husband, and so on. Mahādēvī expresses her desire to cuckold her husband with Śiva as the adulterous lover, thus again making use of the conventions of Indian love-poetry to express her mystical yearnings. (25) The bhakti poets also drew upon the common stock of ancient Indian symbolic images to express their experiences: such images as the seed and the tree, the river running to the sea, the spider and the web, and warp and woof of weaving, and so on.

### Śaivite Bhakti: Lalleśwarī

Lalleśwarī (also known as Lalla, Lāl Diddi, or Lāl Ded) was a Śaivite mystic of Kashmir living in the 14th century. Her life, like that of Mahādēvī, is shrouded in legends and folkloric accretions. In spite of the fact that her mystical experiences are expressed in the emotional language of love-in-separation, her writings illustrate, like those of Mahādēvī, the essential oneness of Śiva and the devotee, belying the theistic attitude of some forms of bhakti. Śiva is found within one's own heart:

Passionate, with longing in my eyes,  
Searching wide, and seeking nights and days,  
Lo! I beheld the Truthful One, the Wise,  
Here in mine own house to fill my gaze. (26)

In the final stage of mystical experience, the self becomes one with the nondifferentiated Absolute, consciousness of limited individuality being absorbed. Lalleśwarī describes it thus:

There nor [sic] even Śiva reigns supreme,  
Nor his wedded Energy hath sway.  
Only is the Somewhat, like a dream,  
There pursuing an elusive way. (27)

Her monistic persuasions do not, however, prevent her from believing in

grace, devotion and love of Śiva. This belies the common argument that one can have a loving relationship only with a personal God. It is perfectly possible to combine monism with devotion, and to have a passion and desire for an impersonal principle; Plotinus, too, illustrates such a love of an impersonal Absolute.

Like Mahādēvī, Lalleśwarī uses the symbolism of love-in-separation:

Striving and struggling, for the door was tight  
Bolted and barred, till she longed the more  
Him to behold that was beyond her sight,  
Yet she could not but gaze at the door. (28)

(Compare the symbolism of the barred door used by Rolle.) (29) But essentially, the mystic is one with Śiva:

Learning myself to be the Self Supreme,  
I have learnt, Nārān, why Thou dost part:  
I have solved the Riddle of the Dream,  
Where we twain do as one Self consort. (30)

Lalleśwarī's writings on the identity of the soul with Śiva often make most beautiful poetry, and furthermore give us an insight into the nature of mystical union and the conditions by which it is brought about. Just as Eckhart says that "Likes love and unite with one another" (31) so Lalleśwarī tells us that "Like shall with like unite"; she calls Śiva the "Self of my Self". (32) It may be argued that any type of love, whether human or divine, results from a faculty or level of awareness in one person, being, or power, being attracted by the corresponding same or similar faculty in the other. Union is made possible through like attracting like; the spirit calling to the spirit, life to life. All things eventually return to the source from which they came, and so (just as dust returns to dust, and ashes to ashes) the spirit returns to the Spirit, and the heart to the Heart. With love of the Divine, the Deity, or the Absolute, is the "Life of our Life" or "Self of our Self" -- in the Divine we live, move and have our being, and in the later stages of mysticism, after the 'death' of

the lower self, the mystic comes to live only in and through the Divine, which is his or her higher Self. For the more metaphysically-inclined mystics, it is our essential oneness with the Divine that makes possible mystical apprehension: we know the Divine by that light within ourselves which is akin to it, or which simply is it, as we have observed in Chapter I. Thus Plotinus says that whoever cares to see God and Beauty must first become godlike and beautiful. (33) For the metaphysical mystics, then, there is a fundamental unity between our knowledge and the principle of Divine knowledge or consciousness (Śankara's *cit*). Likewise, our being is essentially connected with Divine being (*sat*) as a manifestation of it; and all our true happiness with Divine bliss (*ānanda*). This is one of the main reasons for the identification of the self with various modes, manifestations, or mythological images of Deity in meditation: through this means, we come to realise the corresponding faculty or mode of divinity within ourselves, and only through the realisation of this essential unity can the union of like principles come about. We have to unite each aspect of ourselves, as microcosm, to the corresponding aspect of Deity as macrocosm. This is illustrated by the writings of many bhakti poets, of which the following may serve as further examples:

Life clings to life  
in a bondage of its own. (34)

Love of Shyām  
is the life of my life..... (35)

Each part of my being  
cries for each part of his,  
and my heart for his heart's meeting. (36)

A further point that should be noted about Lalleswarī is that like so many of the other mystics we have encountered, she stresses that the best mystical way is not one of total rejection of the material world, but rather one of working within the world without caring for the fruit of

one's labour, dedicating one's every action to the Divine as a form of worship:

Yet if I toil with no thought of self,  
All my works before the Self I lay:  
Setting faith and duty before self  
Well for me shall be the onward way.....

Whatsoever thing of toil I did,  
Whatsoever thing of thought I said,  
That was worship in my body hid,  
That was worship hid in my head. (37)

In this state of consciousness, where we see the Divine in all our activities and in all things around us, we are averse to pleasure or pain, profit or loss:

Let them blame me or praise me or adore me with flowers; I  
become neither joyous nor depressed, resting in myself and drunk  
in the nectar of the knowledge of the pure Lord. (38)

### Vaiṣṇavite Bhakti: Nammālyār

Vaiṣṇavite bhakti first came to prominence in South India with the twelve Alvārs, mystics and poets of c. 600-900 A.D., of whom Nammālyār is one of the best known, and regarded by many as the greatest. In his Tiruvāymoli (part of the Nālāyira Prabandham) and other writings, Nammālyār describes his spiritual experience and expounds the way to Divine Love: ".....the devotee places himself in the position of the beloved and yearns for the Lord as the Lover." (39) (We may note in passing that this is a reversal of the more usual relationship of the Deity as the Beloved and the devotee as lover; however, the same idea is obviously conveyed.) This love is performed for love's sake alone, without thought of reward, and finds its fruition in dedicated and detached service, the mystic performing every action as a sacrament (a 'making sacred'). Kṛṣṇa is seen as the Supreme Lord who is ever adorable, blissful, the saviour of

all; he enchants the souls of devotees by his bewitching beauty and dwells forever in their hearts. Bhakti is again seen as both means and end, not as a means to a further end. Brahman, the Absolute, is immanent in all things and is the source of all, yet is also transcendent, beyond all things. Kṛṣṇa, as a manifestation of Brahman, descends into the world to promote righteousness. In spite of the fact that, in the first Tiruvāymoli, Nammālyār refutes the view that Brahman is nirguṇa (without qualities), he nevertheless says elsewhere that "He is not a male, He is not a female, He is not a neuter; He is not to be seen; He neither is nor is not." (40) Again we find a tendency to revert to monistic doctrines, which we have remarked upon before. Nammālyār's writings are less purely devotional than those of the mystics discussed above, with a more marked philosophical leaning; but the stress is always on the importance of faith, devotion, personal experience and mystical insight, and on living in and through the Divine Life and Love.

Nammālyār's writings are particularly interesting in that they illustrate an Eastern counterpart to that phenomenon of mysticism known in the West as the 'Game of Love' (ludus amoris), the alternating states of the pain of separation from the Deity, and the bliss of the developing mystical consciousness. The 'game' (Kṛṣṇa-līlā) played between the Deity and the soul has likewise two alternating aspects: sams̄leṣa, the blissful experience of Kṛṣṇa's beauty and of communion with him, and vis̄leṣa, the sorrow of separation from him. This reflects the dual aspect of love described previously -- love-in-separation that involves both suffering and joy -- but Nammālyār in fact also describes vis̄leṣa in terms very similar to those used to express the deprivation and inner agony of the Dark Night of the Soul in Western mysticism. Discussing Nammālyār's writings on the subject, Srinivasachari comments:

In *viśleṣa*, the joy due to the intimate presence of the Lord and His beatific vision is swept away, and the dark night of forlornness or deprivation sets in..... self-love and sensuality are rooted out.....It is a state of spiritual lassitude, or ennui and pallor, aroused by a sense of unworthiness, blankness and impotence, which is known in the language of mysticism as the dark night of the soul. The absence of God leads to the feeling of utter emptiness and helplessness; and nothingness takes the place of the fullness of the orison of union..... (41)

I would wish to argue that the Dark Night of the Soul is not the same as love-in-separation. In the latter, one is aware of the Divine Love even though not fully united with it -- the elusiveness of the Deity, and the longing for union, being key aspects of the experience. In the Dark Night, by way of contrast, one is stripped of even the memory of Divine Love, and of the awareness of the possibility of union, and one's soul is torn apart in a state of utter confusion, and, as Srinivasachari says, of blankness, nothingness, spiritual lassitude. The difference between these two states may be illustrated by considering the profound difference in feeling-tone between Mahādēvī's "I am watching the roads, all athirst, hoping that Chenna Mallikārjuna will come" and Vidyāpati's poem below which is a profound expression of the dejection of the Eastern equivalent of the Dark Night:

I hold his loveliness now  
in the core of my heart  
but as a constant pain.  
And I live only for the moment,  
like a lamp without oil. (42)

It may be that Srinivasachari is over-hasty in claiming that *viśleṣa* and the Dark Night are identical, although it is certainly true that similarities can be observed. What we can say, anyway, is that love-in-separation as expressed by devotional mystics in both East and West involves the state of *Kṛṣṇa-līlā* or *ludus amoris*, the game of love, consisting of alternating states of communion with Deity and awareness of separation from the Deity; and that the experience of separation embodies a state which may

come close to the experience of the Dark Night of the Soul. The Dark Night of the Soul purges the mystic so as to bring about detachment from the desires of the lower self; and we find that in bhakti, the main reason for the onset of the profound sense of separation from the Divine (viśleṣa) is the attempt to exclusively possess the Beloved -- to see the Beloved as standing in an exclusively special relationship to oneself, we might say -- an attitude which obviously retains a subtle egoism. In the Gītāgovinda (a 12th century text describing the love of Kṛṣṇa and the gopīs), when Rādhā claims exclusive possession of Kṛṣṇa, he suddenly disappears. Eventually the mystic comes to realise that on the (frequently lonely) path there is only oneself, alone, and as Dwija Chandidās puts it, "....there is none in the worlds of Gods, demons or men who can be known as one's own." (43) According to Nammālvār, viśleṣa is followed by an agony of disappointment in which the mystic charges the Beloved with desertion and treachery. This gradually gives way to a renewed vision of the Divine, and eventually the mystic way culminates in the final state of union, where the mystic is united with Kṛṣṇa and lives in an intoxicated state of Divine Love that knows no bounds: "When Beauty rushes to the embrace of the beloved, the beloved expires in the arms of ecstasy." (44)

#### Vaiṣṇavite Bhakti: Mīrā Bāī

Vaiṣṇavite bhakti is eloquently expressed by Mīrā Bāī, a Rajpūt princess of the 16th century who eventually rejected the values of the society in which she had been brought up to become a wandering ascetic. Her expressions of her love for Kṛṣṇa as Giridhara Nagar are full of vivacity and feeling. This love, she says, "....can never be given up. It is eternal." (45) Again, her devotion is beautifully expressed in terms of the



## 'Mystical Marriage':

Dwell in my eyes, O Son of Nanda; enchanting is Your figure, dusky Your complexion, large are Your eyes. So beautiful looks the flute on Your nectar-like lips; on Your chest is the garland of vaijanti (forest weeds). The belt of little bells round Your waist and the trinkets on Your ankles look charming and tinkle sweetly. (46)

Like many of the passages in Mīrā Bāī's writings, the above is similar in tone and even in certain descriptive details to the Song of Songs:

My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand.  
His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven.  
His eyes are like doves beside springs of water, bathed in milk, fitly set.  
His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance. His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh.  
His arms are rounded gold, set with jewels. His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires.  
His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold. (47)

Mīrā Bāī speaks also of love-in-separation, and of the Divine 'Madness' (dīvānī) induced by the acute sense of the absence of Kṛṣṇa:

O Friend, I am mad with love; none can know my anguish. Only he who has been wounded or he who dealt the blow understands the wounded..... Smitten with pain, from forest to forest I roam. No physician have I found. Mīrā's pain will vanish only when the Beloved Himself becomes the physician. (48)

Again, we may compare the Song of Songs:

I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer.  
The watchmen found me, as they went about in the city; they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those watchmen of the walls.  
I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love. (49)

The dual aspect of love-in-separation, involving as it does both pain and joy (since in this material existence the Deity is both present and absent for us) is well expressed in the following poem:

Not seeing you,  
my eyes sting.  
Since you left  
I have no rest.  
When I hear a sound  
my heart trembles --

but that in itself  
is sweet, lovely..... (50)

The Song of Songs:

I slept, but my heart was awake.  
Hark! my beloved is knocking..... (51)

Mīrā Bāī gives poignant expression to the point in love where agony and  
ecstasy meet:

Strange is the path  
When you offer your love.  
Your body is crushed at the first step.  
If you want to offer love  
Be prepared to cut off your head  
And sit on it.  
Be like the moth,  
Which circles the lamp and offers its body..... (52)

She speaks of the necessity for sacrifice, yet also of the way in which  
suffering is turned, by love, into joy -- just as does Rolle. Making use of  
an image from the Bhagavad-Gītā which I have already referred to as a  
parallel to Rolle, she speaks of the cup of poison which is transmuted to  
nectar, to illustrate this facet of her experience.

The following of Mīrā Bāī's poems expresses in allegorical fashion the  
dangers and pitfalls of the mystical path, and the trials that beset one  
upon the journey:

The alleys are closed for me,  
how can I walk to join Krishna?  
The road is rugged and slick  
and my unsteady feet  
falter again and again  
as I figure my pace  
with judgement and care.  
I can hardly climb the stages  
to the palace of my love --  
long, long away.  
My heart proceeds by jolts.

Mile after mile the road is guarded  
as brigands watch.  
O God, what made you plant my village  
so terribly afar? (54)

But when she attains union, as we would expect Mīrā Bāī ceases to write

of love-in-separation:

Only she whose Beloved is abroad  
Needs to write letters.  
My Beloved rests ever in my heart,  
He neither comes nor goes. (55)

"The arrow of love has transpierced me and come out the other side," she says of this stage of her experience, "and I have begun singing of knowledge divine." (56) Her Beloved now lives in her heart, and she is dyed in his colour, as she puts it; she speaks of a dream in which she is married to Kṛṣṇa, just as St. Teresa is married to the King in the seventh mansion of her Interior Castle. Alston (57) argues that Mīrā Bāī's religious attitude is essentially one which looks to absolute absorption in or oneness with the Deity as the highest goal, supporting this argument by reference to lines from her poems such as "Thou and I are like the sun and its heat" and "Let my light dissolve in Your light". I do not find Alston's argument convincing; the sun and its heat are not exactly the same thing and in fact the sun and its heat or light is a common mystical image denoting the unity-in-difference of the Deity and the soul: Plotinus, for example, uses the symbol of the sun and its rays to denote the unity-in-difference of souls and the One. The poem which Alston refers to regarding light dissolving in light is inconclusive and gives no clear indication as to exactly what Mīrā Bāī means by this. In my opinion, Mīrā Bāī's mysticism is a theistic mysticism of relationship, which is after all what one would expect of a Vaiṣṇavite bhakti mystic.

In Mīrā Bāī we find that love of and poetic sensitivity to nature which is common to many of the bhakti mystics, and which often seems to merge into nature-mysticism:

Clouds of the month of shrāvana,  
The longing of shrāvana:  
Shrāvana enchants my heart  
With the sounds of Krishna's steps.  
Lightnings flash. As the storms rage,

Layer upon layer of gathering clouds  
Burst in gentle showers..... (58)

We also find an unconditional and utter devotion, which points to the fact that Love of the Divine requires the total giving of oneself to the very core of one's being:

I gave in full, weighed to the utmost grain,  
My love, my life, my soul, my all. (59)

Mīrā Bāī surrenders herself utterly to her Lord, taking refuge in him alone. This 'love for love's sake', as we have previously remarked in our discussion of Rolle, has no thought of selfishness or reward, and is a dedication to the Divine Will which is deeper and dearer than even one's own life: as two other bhakti mystics say:

Whether I live or perish, yet  
On Pāṇḍuraṅg my faith is set. (60)

Now I submit me to thy will  
Whether thou save or whether kill;  
Keep thou me near or send me hence,  
Or plunge me in the war of sense. (61)

A number of important and close parallels of symbolism can be found between Mīrā Bāī and St. Teresa which appear to point to an essential element of a mysticism of devotion and very likely to a common experience. Like Teresa (and like Rolle), Mīrā Bāī speaks of the inner Fire brought about by the pain of separation from the Divine (52) and like St. Teresa, connects with the experience of this Fire, the arrow of love which pierces the heart:

An arrow from the quiver of love  
Has pierced my heart and driven me crazy..... (63)

Shyām shot an arrow  
That has pierced me through.  
The fire of longing  
Is burning in my heart  
And my whole body is in torment. (64)

The correspondence with St. Teresa's experience (65) is remarkable.

Like Teresa, too, Mīrā Bāī speaks of mystical attainment in terms of

rivers running to the sea, and symbolises the spiritual journey by the crossing of an ocean:

I care neither for Ganges nor Jamna,  
I am making my way to the sea. (66)

I will sail the boat  
Of the name of Shyām  
And cross the Ocean of Becoming. (67)

She also speaks of "losing body-consciousness" or "losing consciousness of her surroundings" -- a state which seems to be very similar to St. Teresa's ecstasies and to her "suspension of faculties", and which we will also later see reflected in the experiences of Ramakrishna. For Mīrā Bāī, these experiences often seem to be associated with hearing the sound of Kṛṣṇa's flute, and she speaks of "losing control of her faculties" when she beholds the beauty of Kṛṣṇa's face. (68)

### The Metaphysical Framework of Bhakti

We have observed that even in the case of devotionally-orientated mystics, an implicit metaphysics underlies their experiences. In the case of Śaivite bhakti by the time of Mahādēvī and Lalleśwarī, this was provided by the Śaiva Siddhānta (a theological system based on the earlier poems of the 63 Nāyanars as well as on the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad) and the Āgamas. Broadly speaking, Śīva is identified with Brahman the Absolute, and is both immanent and transcendent, pervading the entire cosmos and dwelling in the heart of his devotees. He is Creator and Destroyer; the universe emanates from him and is reabsorbed back into him. He is the source of all wisdom, bliss, being, etc., yet is essentially beyond all form and transcends all pairs of opposites. He is also the māyin, as we have discussed, who by his magical power entangles or fetters souls in saṁsāra, while at the same time being the cause of their

eventual release. He is essentially united with his Śakti or feminine creative power which enables him to bring the material world into being.

Śaivite bhakti seems to have been quite different in tone from Vaiṣṇavite bhakti: for one thing, it was more monistic, influenced more by Advaita; for another, it became associated with yoga, Tantra, Indian alchemy and obscure occult symbolism. This was especially true of the Vīraśaivas. The Vīraśaivas also developed a complex metaphysical system of mystical stages of ascent (in spite of their professed rejection of philosophical speculation). In this system, the Absolute, which is nondifferentiated but identified with Śiva's essence, is called Sthala. Through the power of Śakti, Sthala becomes divided into two: Liṅgasthala (Śiva) and Aṅgasthala (the soul). These two are seen as ultimately one, that is, Śiva appears as the finite soul. The mystical journey is seen as a succession of stages, a ladder of ascent; six stages are recognised, each with clearly-defined characteristics (although it is important to note that the Vīraśaivas themselves held that the stages were not hard-and-fast; they might merge into each other; they were really only a way of trying to express the unspeakable in coherent form). In each stage, a specific relationship obtains between Liṅgasthala and Aṅgasthala. Creation is brought about through Śiva's 'engagement' (pravṛtti); liberation is achieved through 'disengagement' (nivṛtti). Bhakti 'disengages' the soul from māyā and saṃsāra, taking the mystic step by step towards union with Śiva represented as the liṅga. A complex and highly esoteric hierarchic arrangement was devised, involving the stages of mystical ascent, the aspects of Śiva and of Śakti, the types of bhakti, and so on. Often the elements, the chakras, and numerous other correspondences were included in this scheme. (69)

Ramanujan describes the six Vīraśaiva stages of experience as

follows:

(i) A preliminary stage of devotion and worship.

(ii) A phase of ordeals, trials, sufferings and temptations.

(iii) A more peaceful stage in which Śiva is seen in everything, but more particularly in all the things of the outer world.

(iv) A movement from the outer world to inner experience; the self having been cleansed, the devotee now sees Śiva within.

(v) The devotee is very near to Śiva and suffers only as one suffers the absence of a lover. There is a feeling of "living in two worlds".

(vi) The final stage of absolute oneness with Śiva. (70)

I would suggest that some interesting parallels can be seen between this scheme of experience and that of the classical mystical path in the West, as described for example by Underhill in her major work Mysticism. The preliminary stage of devotion and worship, as described by Ramanujan, would correspond to the preliminary awakening of the mystical consciousness in the West, which of course often involves deep religious feeling and devotion. The phase of ordeals, trials and temptations would correspond to the 'Purgative Way' in the West, the phase of purification, the Night of Sense in St. John of the Cross' writings -- a time which likewise involves much ordeal, trial and suffering. The third stage described by Ramanujan would find its reflection in the Western phase of 'Illumination', a time of heightened consciousness and greater tranquillity in which the sense of Divine Presence is strong; just as in the Vīraśaiva stage described by Ramanujan, here one sees God in everything. Illumination is closely connected with nature-mysticism, and this reflects Ramanujan's statement that the Vīraśaiva mystic in this phase of experience sees Śiva particularly in all the things of the outer world. Ramanujan's fourth stage of Vīraśaiva experience would correspond to the Western 'Contemplation',

the turning inward to see the Divine within, which follows on from Illumination. The fifth stage corresponds to the Western Night of the Spirit (in St. John of the Cross' terminology), or what is often loosely termed the Dark Night of the Soul: to the pain of separation from the Deity, expressed by the devotional mystics by means of the symbolism of the Wound of Love, the Arrow of Fire and so on. In this phase of experience, there is a "feeling of living in two worlds" just such as Ramanujan describes: I have commented on this in my discussion of St. Teresa. (71) The final stage of oneness with Śīva would of course find its reflection in the Western experience of union with the Deity.

A further point to be noted in connection with Śaivite mysticism is that, as Olson notes (72), the Śaivite mystic aims at attaining an androgynous condition (that is, a balance of the masculine and feminine principles within the self), patterning his or her behaviour on an androgynous Deity: for Śīva is seen as essentially both male and female, when united with Śakti, and also, when identified with the nondifferentiated Absolute, as being beyond the masculine and feminine, beyond all pairs of opposites. The aim of the mystic is to realise the union of Śīva and Śakti within oneself -- to unite the two halves of one's nature into a harmonious whole. This 'Mystical Marriage' is an essential aspect of Śaivite bhakti, as also of the Tantric elements which influenced Śaivite mysticism. Often Śīva is seen as the Bridegroom and the soul of the devotee as his loving wife, as in the writings of Mahādēvī; the male Śaivite mystic Māṇikkavācakar, however, sees the soul as male and Śīva as feminine.

Olson comments that the Śaivite mystic thus transforms himself or herself "from a fragmented individual into a whole being" and adds that: "The process of androgynization, however, is merely a cipher of a much larger proceeding. The mystic has joined within himself the opposing



forces of the cosmos and finite existence." (73) That is, the symbols of 'masculine' and 'feminine' represent all the pairs of opposites, both within the self and within the wider universe. The Śaivite mystic aims at uniting all pairs of polarities, and thus at passing beyond division and fragmentation to a state of oneness, harmony and unity. I have commented elsewhere on the significance and importance of the balance of masculine and feminine principles in mysticism. (74)

In the case of Vaiṣṇavite bhakti, the first representatives of this movement, the Ālvars, based their songs of devotion on the Bhagavad-Gītā and the Mahābhārata. Kṛṣṇa was seen as the Supreme Lord, immanent and transcendent, Creator and Destroyer, māyin -- in much the same way as Śiva was seen by the Śaivites, with the difference that Vaiṣṇavite bhakti was more theistic, and did not stress the union of opposites. The emphasis was on attaining a loving, personal relationship with Kṛṣṇa by means of bhakti and the detached action of the Gītā (action dedicated to Kṛṣṇa without desire for the fruits thereof).

Later, by the time of Mīrā Bāī, Rāmānuja had evolved a theology based on the poems of the Ālvars, the Bhagavad-Gītā and the Vedānta Sūtra. He did much to make Vaiṣṇavite bhakti philosophically respectable, basing his theology on the importance of devotion, worship, and surrender to Kṛṣṇa, and conceiving of the ultimate mystical state as one of loving relationship, not of absorption into a nondifferentiated Absolute. It is the bhakti-relationship of love and the grace of the Deity that, for Rāmānuja, lead the mystic to full development of spiritual potential and to realization of the Divine. This theistic, relational view of religious experience allowed the bhakti path of devotion and worship to be evaluated not merely as a lower 'means', as it was seen by Advaita, but as an end in itself, as the true aim and spiritual fulfillment of the mystic. Rāmānuja's

conception of *jīvas* as distinct selves retaining their identity even in the highest state of realisation, and as dependent upon Kṛṣṇa, gave credence to the attitude of the Vaiṣṇavite bhakti mystics of regarding the self as dependent upon Kṛṣṇa for salvation, and to the corresponding attitude of utter surrender and devotion. Thus, as Lott says,

Rāmānuja provided an ontological and cosmological basis for the bhakti-relationship. The bhakti-bhāva is able to maintain its crucial position in Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭa-advaita system just because it is under-girded by his relational view of all reality. For Śaṅkara, devotion, worship, acts of meditation, and so on, can never be more than [sic] provisional or concessional aids to some more exalted end, which is the intuited experience of Identity.... Rāmānuja's whole ontological and theological structure undergirds his insistence that the bhakti-relationship is the ultimate status for which the soul is destined. (75)

For Advaita, theistic attitudes were seen simply as a lower 'means' through which one must rise to oneness with the nondifferentiated Brahman; thus the validity of worship and devotion was granted only on a lower, relative level as a means to a higher end. Rāmānuja, by contrast, provided a philosophical justification for devotional mysticism of a type that would satisfy the Vaiṣṇavite bhakti mystic, seeing theistic mysticism as an end in itself:

What Rāmānuja does establish is that it is of the essence of the soul to stand in a serving and subservient relation to the Lord. Other systems found this notion of essential service and dependence a serious threat to the self's eternally immutable nature....the fact that bhakti implies a relationship meant that, for Śaṅkara, it can only be thought of as leading beyond itself to an identity of Being in which all relational terms become obsolete. Rāmānuja allowed for no such transcendent experience beyond the bhakti-experience. (76)

Followers of Rāmānuja down the centuries have been divided over the question of the relative importance of human effort and Divine grace in the way of devotion, and Rāmānuja has been interpreted in a variety of ways regarding this point. The extreme attitude of *prapatti*, which seems to have been adopted by some bhakti mystics, implies giving up all hope in the efficacy of one's own efforts, and surrendering oneself entirely to

the Deity, who alone can enlighten his devotees through an act of transcendent grace which the finite mind is unable to fathom. For some bhakti mystics, prapatti is just a subordinate aspect of bhakti, implying taking refuge in Kṛṣṇa, but not implying the renunciation of all effort or all action. For those of the more extreme viewpoint, prapatti, absolute surrender, is seen as a means of liberation in its own right; even bhakti is "superseded, or reduced to size, as being based on human effort in view of the divine grace revealed in prapatti." (77) It seems unlikely to me that Rāmānuja intended bhakti to be superseded by absolute surrender; while he certainly emphasises that Divine grace is essential to a truly fulfilled spiritual relationship, it does not seem to me that he expounds the more extreme view of renouncing all effort and action; indeed, he follows the Gītā's ethic of action in holding that action should be continued, but without desire for personal benefit. Nevertheless, it seems that he was interpreted in the latter, more extreme sense by some bhakti devotees.

Also by the time of Mīrā Bāī, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa had combined the devotional attitudes of the Ālvārs with Vedāntic philosophy, and had made the mythology of Kṛṣṇa's childhood and his dalliance with the gopīs popular. These colourful mythological and folkloric elements influenced the Vaiṣṇavite bhakti mystics greatly; Mīrā Bāī, for example, believed herself to have been a gopī in a former incarnation. The mythological and folkloric detail tempered the more theological image of Kṛṣṇa found in the Gītā, so that Kṛṣṇa took on the characteristics of a Divine Lover bewitching in his Otherworldly beauty. He incites his devotees to abandon and passionate devotion, to an ecstasy repudiating social norms and customs. Bhakti mystics would often identify themselves with the gopīs and especially with Rādhā. Intimacy and blissful love became the keynotes

of their experiences, and the other aspects of Kṛṣṇa as found in the Gītā sank into the background.

### Use of Symbolism in the Bhakti Mystics

I have already indicated some parallels of symbolism between Mīrābāī and St. Teresa; it remains to point out a number of interesting correspondences between the bhakti mystics and Rolle, our other example of Western devotional mysticism.

Rolle's 'Fire of Love', the inner flame within the heart, finds a counterpart in the bhakti mystics:

O my life's dear love,  
as I counted the nights for you,  
flames of fire rose in my heart,  
spreading and growing,  
till I was bodily scorched by love..... (78)

Now all my being yearns,  
Yearns with a strong desire,  
My love within me burns,  
A wasting fire. (79)

As in Rolle's writings, this fire of love is often connected with the symbolism of alchemical transmutation, indicating the purging and purification of the self:

What enters fire, its former nature lost,  
Fire to itself transforms,  
Touched by the magic stone, lo, iron now  
Gold that the world adorns. (80)

The symbolism of music is perhaps even more prominent in bhakti than in Rolle, and especially in Vaiṣṇavite bhakti, where Kṛṣṇa with his enchanting flute is a prototype of the Celestial Musician, captivating all hearts with the sound of his heavenly music. Rolle's inner melodies are paralleled by Kabīr's "unstruck music": ".....the whole sky is filled with sound", he says, "and there that music is made without fingers and

without strings." (81) Indeed, in the bhakti writings we find an explicit teaching regarding music as a means to mystical attainment. Tyāgarāja (1767-1847), for example, a famous musician of Tamilnad and a devotee of Rāma, proclaims the value of music in conjunction with devotion as a path to salvation. (82) In accordance with this type of attitude, the Deity in the form of Kṛṣṇa or Śiva is seen as a master musician, and the mystic asks to learn the secrets of music, or to be himself or herself the instrument upon which the divine melody is played:

Ragas and rhythms  
are housed in your bosom --  
you have mastered  
the mysteries of music,  
its octaves and its scales.

Teach me then the secrets of the sweet prelude  
I shall banish my bamboo flute  
and, sitting near you,  
learn your enchanting songs..... (83)

Make of my body the beam of a lute  
of my head the sounding gourd  
of my nerves the strings  
of my fingers the plucking rods.

Clutch me close  
and play your thirty-two songs  
O lord of the meeting rivers! (84)

To the final poem quoted above, by the Vīraśaiva Basavaṅṅa, we may compare the Sufi mystic Rumi: "We are a lyre and Thou pluckest". (85) The lyre and the lute are two of the instruments most frequently employed in this symbolism of the divine melody. It is striking to note also that in Platonic and certain Gnostic teachings the lyre was regarded as a symbol of the human constitution: the body of the instrument represented the physical form and the strings the nerves, as for Basavaṅṅa; the musician was the spirit (Śiva, in Basavaṅṅa's vacana). The idea was that the musician (spirit) should create divine harmonies through his or her control of the instrument (body and nervous system).

The symbolism of dance, as the perfection of the rhythmic beauty of the divine life, is often found in connection with that of music (and dance and music in fact play an important part in some forms of bhakti worship):

The enchantress  
and the master enchanter  
are joyously engrossed in the dance of delight.  
Their rhythmical ringing voices  
sing the many chords of love. (86)

As Rolle speaks of love as ascending the ladder of heaven, so the bhakti poets speak of building a ladder (sopāna) from earth to heaven by means of bhakti; we have seen that the Vīraśaivas, for example, saw their sixfold scheme of mystical progress as a ladder. The philosophy of Divine grace in bhakti is seen as a ladder from heaven to earth; the movement of bhakti is thus upward, the movement of grace downward, in terms of spatial symbolism; the mystic ascends to the Divine, the Deity descends to humanity. The symbolism of a ladder from heaven to earth is in fact a widespread image, found in Jewish Hekhalot mysticism, ancient Egyptian religion, Mithraism and shamanism, to name but a few. The English mystic Walter Hilton (d. 1396) uses the symbol of such a ladder in his book The Scale of Perfection; the "ladder of divine ascent" of the Orthodox mystic St. John Climacus is another example, as is Jacob's Ladder. The rungs of the ladder usually represent stages of attainment, degrees of reality and of realisation. Often connected with the ladder is the symbol of a perilous bridge which the mystic must cross in order to reach the goal, the bridge providing as it were the means of passage from one realm to another. In bhakti this is portrayed as a bridge of hair over a river of fire. In other cultures the bridge is similarly narrow and hard to cross, and often has razor-sharp edges. In the Arthurian legends, which became a vehicle for the expression of mystical ideas, Lancelot has to cross a

bridge made of a sword (87). We may compare also the Katha Upaniṣad:

A sharpened razor's edge is hard to cross --  
The dangers of the path -- wise seers proclaim them! (88)

In Rolle's writings, the mysteries of love are intimately bound up with the mysteries of spiritual death and rebirth, and similarly in bhakti we find that love requires a dying to the self for the Beloved's sake: the death of the lower self is the doorway to fuller Life, to a life in the Life Divine. Tukārām expresses this well:

I saw my death with my own eyes. Incomparably glorious was the occasion. The whole universe was filled with joy. I became everything and enjoyed everything. I had hitherto clung to only one place, being pent up in egoism (in this body). By my deliverance from it, I am enjoying a harvest of bliss. Death and birth are now no more. I am free from the littleness of 'me' and 'mine'. (89)

Anantadās expresses the same feeling more simply but none the less movingly:

He gave me my life  
And I am his expression now. (90)

-- to which we may compare, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (91)

A few words should perhaps be said on the subject of romantic and sexual symbolism. We have remarked in our discussion of Rolle that the symbolism of the Mystical Marriage rests upon the idea that all true earthly love springs from love of the Divine, from the Eternal love of which it is a reflection or lesser manifestation. Similarly, in many Indian philosophies human love is held to be a fractional expression of the infinite Divine love which is its source. Yājñavalkya hints at this when he tells Maitreyī that: "It is not for the love of contingent beings that contingent beings are loved. Rather it is for the love of the Self that contingent beings are loved." (92) But earthly love is as fleeting as the world of flux to which it belongs; the only way to obtain immortal love is

through knowledge of the Divine. Bhakti can thus be seen as love spiritualised, raised to a higher level, sublimated, directed towards the source and centre of all love. This is symbolically expressed in the sensual language and images of Indian love-poetry, but the meaning of such imagery is spiritual: thus as Srinivasachari says, "Every form of Vaiṣṇavite mysticism is sensual in garb but has a spiritual meaning" (93) -- and this would, of course, also apply to the Śaivite systems. We are, therefore, dealing with sensual imagery which is a symbol for an experience that goes beyond mere sensual enjoyment; but also with sensual experience or imagery as a manifestation of spiritual energies. It is said by bhakti mystics that the body houses the bodiless God of love (in much the same way as in the West the body may be seen as the "temple of the Spirit"):

When by our body we touch, then in the body  
the unembodied Self is manifested. (94)

....as Rādhā and Kāna's eyes joined,  
both hearts became the targets  
of the mind-born God..... (95)

It is in fact implicit in bhakti mysticism (where it is not actually made explicit) that the symbolism of lover and Beloved represents one fundamental power which divides itself into two, only to become one again in loving union (whether in absolute oneness or in union-with-difference). This will be seen to relate to our previous comments concerning the tension between desire for union with the Deity, and blissful enjoyment of love-in-separation. Bhandarkar notes that:

In the apocryphal Nāradapañcarātra-Saṃhitā..... the one single lord is represented to have become two, one a woman and the other a man, who was he himself. He then had amorous intercourse with her. The woman was Rādhā. In the Brahmavaivarta-Purāṇa she has been made to spring from the primordial body of Kṛṣṇa, forming its left side..... (96)

Srinivasachari comments that whereas love presupposes the duality of the experiencing subjects -- it presupposes 'otherness' -- nevertheless,



The one Self that is without a second sports as two, as the lover and the beloved, without losing His wholeness.....The blissful Brahman in its sportive act of love separates itself from its beloved other, seeks it, and then becomes one with it. The Absolute itself assumes a bewitching form of beauty in order to attract its other to itself. (97)

This is exemplified by the 'game of love': through the  $\bar{m}\bar{a}$  of mystic love wrought by the Divine Enchanter, the lover is transformed into the Beloved or into the likeness of him, and becomes one with him:

As each reached the other,  
their bodies met in a single form. (98)

Hear my words on the game of enchantment:  
Toying together in the festival of Spring,  
the lovers have transfigured each into other.....  
Who can tell  
who is the man  
and who the woman  
in this ecstasy? (99)

Each seeing each,  
each was possessed --  
each becoming the other. (100)

This will be seen to relate to my discussion on androgyny and the union of masculine and feminine principles. As for Rolle, so for the bhakti mystics, love makes the lovers one, transforming the lover into the Beloved: we become what we love. The bhakti mystics acknowledge that the Beloved is to be found within oneself through a change of consciousness, not through seeking outside the self:

For all their search  
they cannot see  
the image in the mirror.

It blazes in the circles  
between the eyebrows.  
Who knows this  
has the Lord. (101)

#### The Nature of Mystical Apprehension in the Bhakti Poets

I have remarked that in the case of metaphysically-orientated mystics, the faculty of mystical apprehension is not reason but the higher

intuitional mental faculty, unknowing, noesis or jñāna. Similarly, in devotional mysticism we are dealing not with the lower emotions or feelings, but with a higher devotional faculty which is pure, dedicated, not associated with worldly cravings, which springs from the innermost depths of the heart's true longings. This higher emotional faculty is certainly an important aspect of the pursuit of mystical realisation. The failure to recognise the reality of the higher mental and emotional faculties is the pitfall of many unsympathetic works on mysticism, works which reduce mystical consciousness to 'abstract speculation' or to 'mere feeling'. Furthermore, 'dogmatically intellectual' mystics, that is, those who are very strongly metaphysically orientated, often see the devotional mystics as motivated by subjective feeling, while 'dogmatic emotional' mystics may fail to recognise the higher intellectual faculty, and see metaphysically-orientated mystics as over-concerned with reason and philosophical argument. We need to recognise that both the Way of Love and the Way of Knowledge are valid and necessary aspects of mystical endeavour, without attempting to reduce either one to sentimentalism or intellectualism. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, ultimately knowledge and love usually become fused into a higher unity of aspiration and intuition. But the bhakti mystics certainly lean strongly towards the side of love and emotion. Perhaps they misunderstand the Way of Knowledge, seeing it as being centred on reason. To some extent they were a product of their time and cultural circumstances, and reacted strongly against the orthodox Brahminism of their time, which had degenerated into ossified ritualism and vain philosophical argument. The same reaction can be seen in some devotional mystics in the West: Rolle, after studying theology for a short while, became disillusioned with the orthodox system and 'dropped out' to wander over the Yorkshire moors and eventually to become a

hermit. Where the intellectual side of the faculty of mystical apprehension has been rejected, the emotional side becomes dominant; and so bhakti, and Western devotional mysticism, propound not the renunciation of emotion, but the purification of the emotions and the devotion of the emotional nature to the service of the Deity. The bhakti mystics have little regard for metaphysical speculation; they wish merely to blissfully experience Divine Love, living in and through the Deity. Lalleśwarī expresses it most beautifully:

Self of my Self, for Thou art but I,  
Self of my Self, for I am but Thou,  
Twain of us in one shall never die,  
What do they matter -- the why and how? (102)

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- (2) Mahādēvī, Vacana 114, in Speaking of Śiva, trans. A.K. Ramanujan. Middlesex: Penguin Classics, 1973.
- (3) Mahādēvī, in T. N. Sreekantaiya, 'Akka Mahādēvī', in Women Saints of East and West. London: Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, 1972, Pp. 31-32.
- (4) Ramanujan, Speaking of Śiva, op. cit., p.112.
- (5) Mahādēvī, in Women Saints of East and West, op. cit., p.39.
- (6) Mahādēvī, *ibid.*, p.34.
- (7) Mahādēvī, Vacana 20, in Speaking of Śiva, op. cit.
- (8) Plato, Laws 644 D-E.
- (9) Plotinus, Ennead III.ii.15-18, trans. Stephen MacKenna. London: Faber, 1956.
- (10) Shakespeare, As You Like It, ii.7.
- (11) Mahādēvī, Vacana 79, in Speaking of Śiva, op. cit.
- (12) Mahādēvī, Vacana 319, *ibid.*
- (13) Mahādēvī, Vacana 69, *ibid.*
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- (15) P.N. Srinivasachari, The Philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita. Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1943, p.378.
- (16) Tukārām, XCII, in Psalms of Marāṭhā Saints, trans. Nicol MacNicol. Oxford: University Press, 1919.
- (17) H. Thipperudra Swamy, The Vīraśaiva Saints: A Study, trans. S.M. Angadi. Mysore: Rao & Raghavan, 1968.
- (18) Mahādēvī, Vacana 50, in Speaking of Śiva, op. cit.
- (19) Tukārām, LXI, in MacNicol, op. cit.
- (20) Mahādēvī, in Women Saints, op. cit., p.40. Śiva is represented by the liṅga (phallus) and this symbol is of special importance to the Vīraśaivas, who wear a phallic amulet which is given by the guru at initiation. It appears that for many Vīraśaivas, the liṅga in fact symbolised a formless state of awareness.
- (21) Mahādēvī, in Thipperudra Swamy, op. cit., Pp.104-105.
- (22) Mahādēvī, Vacana 75, in Speaking of Śiva, op. cit.
- (23) Mahādēvī, Vacana 274, *ibid.*
- (24) Indian Alchemy is discussed in Chapter IV of this study.
- (25) Mahādēvī, Vacana 328, in Speaking of Śiva, op. cit. See also Ramanujan's comments on this vacana in his Introduction, Pp.49-52.
- (26) Lalleśwarī, in Mrs. Chandra Kumari Handoo, 'Lalleśwarī or Lāl Diddi of Kashmir', in Women Saints, op. cit., p.45.
- (27) Lalleśwarī, *ibid.*, p.46.
- (28) Lalleśwarī, *ibid.*, p.47.
- (29) See above, p.208.
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- (33) Plotinus, Ennead I.vi.9, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.
- (34) Chandidās, a late 14th century West Bengal temple priest and bhakti poet, in Songs of Kṛṣṇa, trans. Deben Bhattacharya. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978, p.57.
- (35) Jnānadās, a 16th century West Bengal bhakti poet, in Songs of Kṛṣṇa, op. cit., p.159.

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- (44) Srinivasachari, *op. cit.*, p.455.
- (45) Mīrā Bāī, in Mrs. Lajwanti Madan, 'Mīrā Bāī', in *Women Saints*, *op. cit.*, p.53.
- (46) Mīrā Bāī, *ibid.*, p.57.
- (47) Song of Songs 5:10-15.
- (48) Mīrā Bāī, in *Women Saints*, *op. cit.*, Pp.56-57.
- (49) Song of Songs 5:6-8.
- (50) Mīrā Bāī, in *Songs of Kṛṣṇa*, *op. cit.*, p.136.
- (51) Song of Songs 5:2.
- (52) Mīrā Bāī, in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. A.J. Alston. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980, p.114.
- (53) Mīrā Bāī, *ibid.*, Pp. 50, 51. Cf. Bhagavad-Gītā XVIII:37.
- (54) Mīrā Bāī, in *Songs of Kṛṣṇa*, *op. cit.*, p.129.
- (55) Mīrā Bāī, in Alston, *op. cit.*, p.42.
- (56) Mīrā Bāī, in *Women Saints*, *op. cit.*, p.56.
- (57) Alston, *op. cit.*, Introduction.
- (58) Mīrā Bāī, in *Songs of Kṛṣṇa*, *op. cit.*, p.128. Shrāvana is the monsoon month between the middle of July and the middle of August.
- (59) Mīrā Bāī, in *Women Saints*, *op. cit.*, p.51.
- (60) Nāmdev, XIV, in MacNicol, *op. cit.* Nāmdev was a Mahārāṣṭra bhakti mystic, probably 14th century. Pāṇḍurang is one of the names of Kṛṣṇa.
- (61) Tukārām, LVIII, *ibid.*
- (62) Mīrā Bāī, in Alston, *op. cit.*, Pp.76, 77.
- (63) Mīrā Bāī, *ibid.*, p.49.
- (64) Mīrā Bāī, *ibid.*, p.97.
- (65) See above, Pp.230-232.
- (66) Mīrā Bāī, in Alston, *op. cit.*, p.42.
- (67) Mīrā Bāī, *ibid.*, p.48.
- (68) Mīrā Bāī, *ibid.*, Pp. 70, 102, 103, 106, 110.
- (69) See Ramanujan, Appendix I to *Speaking of Śiva*, *op. cit.*
- (70) Ramanujan, Appendix I, *ibid.*, Pp.172-174.
- (71) See above, p.230.
- (72) Carl Olson, 'The Śaiva Mystic and the Symbol of Androgyny', *Religious Studies*, XVII, (3), September 1981.
- (73) Olson, *ibid.*, p.384.
- (74) See Chapter IV of this study, Pp.393ff.
- (75) Eric J. Lott, 'The Conceptual Dimensions of Bhakti in the Rāmānuja Tradition', *The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, II, (2), Autumn 1981, Pp.100, 102. (Original emphasis)
- (76) Lott, *ibid.*, Pp.102-103. (Original emphasis)
- (77) Lott, *ibid.*, p.111. (Original emphasis)
- (78) Chandidās, in *Songs of Kṛṣṇa*, *op. cit.*, p.53.
- (79) Tukārām, XXXVII, in MacNicol, *op. cit.*
- (80) Tukārām, LXXXV, *ibid.*

(81) Kabīr, in MacNicol op. cit., in Introduction, p.25. Kabīr (1440-1518) wrote much devotional verse, and drew on both Hindu and Islamic ideas to found a new religious movement.

(82) Tyāgarāja, in de Bary, op. cit., I, Pp.360-361.

(83) Rādhāmohandās, a bhakti poet, musician and scholar, 1688-1778, in Songs of Kṛṣṇa, op. cit., p.169.

(84) Basavaṇṇa, Vacana 500, in Speaking of Śiva, op. cit. Basavaṇṇa was a Vīraśaiva mystic of Tamilnad, 1106-1168.

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(86) Rādhāmohandās, in Songs of Kṛṣṇa, op. cit., p.168.

(87) See Chretien de Troyes, Lancelot, in Richard Barber (ed.) The Arthurian Legends. Suffolk: Boydell, 1979.

(88) Katha Upaniṣad III.14, in Hindu Scriptures, trans. R.C. Zaehner. London: Dent, 1978.

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(90) Anantadās, a 15th century disciple of Chaitanya, in Songs of Kṛṣṇa, op. cit., p.142.

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(92) Brihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad II.iv.5, trans. Zaehner, op. cit.

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(98) Govindadās, a West Bengal bhakti poet, 1381-1457, in Songs of Kṛṣṇa, op. cit., p.121.

(99) Uddhabadās, an 18th century Bengal bhakti poet, *ibid.*, p.176.

(100) Balarāmdās, a West Bengal bhakti poet, dates unknown, *ibid.*, p.183.

(101) Allama Prabhu, Vacana 836, in Speaking of Śiva, op. cit. Allama Prabhu was a Vīraśaiva of Tamilnad; the details of his life are shrouded in a mass of conflicting legends. "The circles between the eyebrows" I take to be a reference to the 'Third Eye', an important faculty of spiritual vision in Hinduism.

(102) Lalleśvarī, in Women Saints, op. cit., p.47.

## DEVOTIONAL MYSTICISM PART 4: RAMAKRISHNA

Ramakrishna was born in Bengal in 1836, at a time when India was ripe for a spiritual renaissance following the period of British rule. Hinduism had been undermined by the influx of Christianity and materialistic ways of thought, and by internal factors such as ossification. National self-esteem needed to be raised, and Ramakrishna was one of the many great thinkers of his time who helped to rekindle an awareness of the Indian heritage -- in his case, particularly, an awareness of the possibility of direct encounter with Divine Reality within oneself.

Like Suso and St. Teresa, Ramakrishna was a visionary, and intensely ecstatic. He had his first vision at the age of six, and various tales are told of supernatural experiences in his childhood, although it is hard to be sure how many of these are factual, and to what extent mythological themes may have accrued around the account of his early life. In any case, he certainly had trances and ecstatic experiences from a very early age, and showed a deep interest in religious matters, spending much of his time with saṅnyāsins. Ramakrishna's parents had been told of his forthcoming birth in a vision, and believed him to be a divine incarnation (avatāra), although their faith in this possibility waxed and waned as his life went through the various phases to be described below.

### Ramakrishna's Visions

Ramakrishna's spiritual career really began when at the age of 20 he became a priest of Kālī at the Dakshineswar Temple. He could not content himself with merely going through the fixed ritualistic routine of many priests, and became intoxicated with a great yearning to form a

deeply personal relationship with the Goddess Kālī, the Divine Mother of the Universe. With absolute faith in the grace of the Divine Mother, he would cry before her image like a child, beseeching her to appear to him, spending hours in prayer and meditation, often breaking out into passionate songs and similar expressions of spiritual fervour.

Ramakrishna obviously had great spiritual potential, but had no knowledge of techniques for directing his mystical yearnings and insights, and at this stage was led entirely by his own dedication, devotion and intuition. Swami Nirvedananda says:

Not conversant with yoga, the traditional Hindu science of disciplining one's mind, and led solely by the impetuous zeal of his ecstatic moods, Ramakrishna advanced fearlessly along the hazardous path pointed out to him by his own unsophisticated mind. One day, unable to stand the painful separation any longer [i.e., separation from Kālī; his inability to achieve union with her], and seized by a grim determination, he frantically rushed to put an end to his life, when, all on a sudden, the Mother's grace descended upon him. The veil was off, the beatific vision was unfolded before his eyes, and he became immersed in an ocean of ecstasy. (1)

The acceptance of the possibility of death, it seems, gave way to spiritual rebirth. Concerning the above vision, Ramakrishna himself later said:

.....the whole scene -- doors, windows, the temple itself -- vanished. It seemed as if nothing existed any more. Instead, I saw an ocean of Spirit, boundless, dazzling. In whatever direction I turned, great luminous waves were rising. They bore down upon me with a loud roar, as if to swallow me up. In an instant they were upon me. They broke over me, they engulfed me. I was suffocated. I lost consciousness and I fell. How I passed that day and the next I know not. Round me rolled an ocean of ineffable joy. And in the depths of my being, I was conscious of the presence of the divine Mother. (2)

We will note here the apparent disappearance of physical surroundings and the loss of surface-consciousness associated with ecstatic experience. (That this is not a total loss of consciousness is evidenced by Ramakrishna's statement that he was conscious of Kālī's presence in the depths of his being, and of an ineffable joy.) Following this experience, Kālī began to appear before Ramakrishna often; at first especially in



meditation, but soon he was conscious of her presence in all his daily activities, showering blessings upon him. While Kālī figured most prominently in Ramakrishna's mystical experiences at this time, he also had other visions. For example, he was attracted for a short while to Rāma (an incarnation of Viṣṇu) and decided that the best way to realise him was to imitate his great devotee Hanuman the monkey.

By constant meditation on the glorious character of Hanuman I totally forgot my own identity. My daily life and style of food came to resemble those of Hanuman. I did not feign them, they came naturally to me. I tied my cloth round the waist, letting a portion of it hang down in the form of a tail, and jumped from place to place instead of walking. I lived on fruits and roots only, and these I preferred to eat without peeling. I passed most of the time in trees, calling out in a solemn voice, "Raghuvir!" My eyes looked restless like those of a monkey, and most wonderful of all, my coccyx enlarged by about an inch..... (3)

Faced with such unusual expressions of mystical ecstasy, it is hardly surprising that the local people, and many of Ramakrishna's relatives, felt that he might be in need of psychiatric attention or exorcism! However, at the end of this period he had a very vivid and wonderful vision of Sītā, Rāma's consort:

One day I was seated in the place now known as Panchavati in quite a normal state of mind -- not at all entranced -- when all of a sudden a luminous female figure of exquisite grace appeared before me. The place was illumined with her lustre.... [Ramakrishna continues to describe her sublime and loving countenance, then continues:]....In an excess of emotion I was about to fall at her feet crying "Mother", when she entered into my body, with the significant remark that the smile on her lips she bequeathed to me! I fell unconscious on the ground, overpowered with emotion. This was the first vision I had with eyes wide open, without meditation on anything. (4)

Ramakrishna also experienced a vision in meditation where a red-eyed man of black colour came out of his body, reeling about as if drunk. Shortly after, there emerged from his body a saṅnyāsin in an ochre robe, holding a trident (symbol of Śiva), who attacked and killed the former figure, who was a personification of evil (Pāpa-Puruṣa). This vision can be seen to represent the vanquishing of Ramakrishna's lower nature by his

higher self. On other occasions the sañnyāsin would appear alone, and tell Ramakrishna to concentrate his thought on the Divine, threatening to plunge his weapon into his body if he did not do so (compare the pierced heart of Teresa, Mīrābāī, etc); or he would instruct Ramakrishna in spiritual matters.

It appears, then, that the sañnyāsin was Ramakrishna's higher Self in symbolic guise (compare the heavenly youth seen by Suso, as previously discussed); or he may have been what is known as the 'astral double', a vehicle of consciousness through which one may make out-of-the-body journeys, for Ramakrishna adds:

*When I wished to see some deities in distant places or participate in religious chantings held afar off, I would see this shining figure step out of my body, go along a luminous path to those places, and re-enter my body after fulfilling the particular desires..... At those times I might retain a little outward consciousness, but more often I lost it completely .....When he re-entered this body, I recovered my normal state. (5)*

At this stage, many of Ramakrishna's visions were seen not as the 'inner visions' common to many mystics, but as images exterior to himself, seen with the eyes open. Later, these gave way to inner visions; but nowhere do we find either Ramakrishna, or any of his commentators, condemning these exterior visions. Christian mystics, by contrast, have tended to be extremely wary of such visions, warning that they may come from the Devil, or may merely be hallucinations. This latter point is certainly to be considered; but the more extreme Christian attitudes may be a reflection of dualistic bias. Whilst acknowledging that we clearly need some criterion for distinguishing exterior visions from hallucinations, there is no reason to suppose that even exterior visions may not in some cases have validity and value. As I have remarked in my discussion of Suso, there is no reason, for the monist at least, why something apprehended on the physical level may not be a pictorial representation or

symbolic manifestation of spiritual truth. An example of this would be Ramakrishna's frequent exterior visions of Kālī at this time:

I actually felt Her breath on my hand..... At night when the room was lighted, I never saw Her divine form cast any shadow on the walls, even though I looked closely. From my own room I could hear Her going to the upper storey of the temple with the delight of a girl, Her anklets jingling. To see if I were not mistaken, I would follow -- and find Her standing with flowing hair on the balcony of the first floor, looking either at Calcutta or out over the Ganges. (6)

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that many of the experiences related by or about Ramakrishna at this early stage sound more like the results of psychological imbalance than of true mystical insight. His intense ecstasies, visions, trances, and self-imposed austerities came to have a negative effect on his physical and mental health. He needed someone to give him spiritual guidance, to show him how to direct his energies and use his abilities correctly. This need was fulfilled in the person of a female Tāntrika devotee (whose name we are not told) whom Ramakrishna met when he was about 26. She believed that she had been commissioned by God, in a vision, to bear some message of profound spiritual import to Ramakrishna. He told her everything about his visions, austerities, and physical sufferings; it seems that at this time he himself had worries as to how many of his experiences were genuine, and whether some of them might not be caused by psychological imbalance. The lady, however, recognised from her knowledge of mystical lore that Ramakrishna was passing through an exalted phase of ecstatic love for the Divine (mahābhāva). Even his physical ailments tallied completely with the physical symptoms traditionally associated with this stage. (By a process somewhat similar to psychosomasis, certain physical symptoms often manifest themselves at certain stages on the mystical path. These are known to mystics in both East and West: physical symptoms associated with the Dark Night of the Soul are, for example, described by St. John

of the Cross and others.) She believed Ramakrishna to be an avātara, and an assembly of scholars of religion whom she called together were unanimous on this point. In later life, Ramakrishna came to agree with this consensus, but like a true mystic never identified himself as ego with this; his attitude was never "I am an avatāra", but "God has incarnated in this body". Throughout his life, he saw himself only as the instrument on which the Divine melody was played.

### Tāntrika Sādhanā

Ramakrishna had previously had some contact with Tantra through Kenārām Bhattacharya, a Brahmin of Calcutta, and now asked the Tāntrika devotee to lead him through Tantric spiritual exercises. These exercises are practical methods for realising the unity of oneself with the Absolute, as in the Vedantic path; but unlike the typical Vedāntic way of knowledge (jñāna) the Tantric path is characterised by ritual and yogic exercises. "Through contemplation of God in concrete forms and performance of ceremonial worship," says Nirvedananda, "Tāntrika sādhanā [sādhanā denotes the practical forms of spiritual exercises and discipline] provides a graded course of tuning up the naive mind of the devotee. He is enjoined to meditate on his oneness with the formless Absolute and then to think that out of the formless impersonal God emerge both his own self and the distinct and living form of a goddess whom he is to place before him, through imagination, and worship as the divine Mother." (7) (Compare our comments on the personal Deity and the soul emerging out of the formless Absolute in the writings of Eckhart and Śankara.) Ramakrishna had also to learn, during the course of his Tantric sādhanā, to conquer sensual desires not by avoiding or ignoring them, but by

facing, overcoming and sublimating them, and finally coming to see the objects of sense-gratification as manifestations of the Divine. (He did not, however, follow the path of 'Left-Hand' Tantra, which makes actual, rather than symbolic, use of sexuality and other forms of sensual gratification in ritual.) Ramakrishna's Tantric training seems to have had a great effect on the formulation of his later teachings, as will later be seen. During this period, he had a number of visions. He practiced Kuṇḍalini yoga and experienced the various insights and visions corresponding to the different stages of the rise of Kuṇḍalini energy. The Kuṇḍalini power is described in Tantric and Yogic writings as divine energy coiled up like a serpent at the base of the spine. By sādhanā it is made to rise up the spinal column, passing through various chakras or centres of spiritual energy, and its progress through the different stages is characterised by distinct phases of mystical experience, corresponding to different levels of reality encountered by the mystic. In the West, similar methods are used in certain forms of Kabbalistic exercise, although the centres of divine energy used do not correspond exactly with the chakras of the Hindu system. But there is a close correspondence between the Kabbalistic throat centre and the Hindu throat chakra as described by Ramakrishna in the passage below: just as Ramakrishna speaks of the ineffability of experiences connected with those chakras above the throat, so in the Kabbalah experiences connected with the centres of divine energy above the throat are felt to be ineffable. The throat centre in Kabbalah is the counterpart in the human microcosm of the Abyss; the passage into formless awareness is the key experience connected with it. Ramakrishna describes the rising of Kuṇḍalini thus:

Something rises with a tingling sensation from the feet to the head. So long as it does not reach the brain I remain conscious, but the moment it does so, I am dead to the outside world. Even the functions of the eyes and the ears come to a stop, and

speech is out of the question. Who should speak? The very distinction between "I" and "thou" vanishes..... When it has come to this, or even to this (pointing to the heart and throat chakras) it is possible to speak..... But the moment it has gone above this (pointing to the throat), somebody stops my mouth, as it were, and I am adrift..... (8)

This passage is also interesting as regards the problem of ineffability in mysticism, illustrating as it does that not all types of mystical experience are ineffable, but only the higher stages in which "the very distinction between 'I' and 'thou' vanishes", and in which one is struck dumb at the formless vision of "that before which all words recoil". Ramakrishna also later explained his Tantric exercises as follows: the concept of different planes or levels of being, with their corresponding spiritual experiences, is again very similar to the Kabbalistic system, and has also been touched upon in our discussions of other mystics.

The Vedānta speaks of seven planes, in all of which the Sadhaka [spiritual aspirant] has a particular kind of vision. The human mind has a natural tendency to confine its activities to the three lower centres -- the highest being opposite the navel -- and therefore is content with the satisfaction of the common appetites such as eating and so forth. But when it reaches the fourth centre, that is, the one opposite the heart, the man sees a divine effulgence. From this state, however, he often lapses back to the three lower centres. When the mind comes to the fifth centre, opposite the throat, the Sadhaka cannot speak of anything but God. When I was in this state I would feel as though struck violently on the head if anybody spoke of worldly topics before me.....Even from this position a man may slip down. So he has to be on his guard. But he is above all fear when his mind reaches the sixth centre -- opposite the junction of the eyebrows..... There is only a thin transparent veil between this and Sahasrāra or the highest centre..... (9)

After this veil is broken, continues Ramakrishna, one becomes eternally one with the Deity, and this is known as entering the seventh plane.

### Bhakti

After the culmination of his Tantric sādhanā, Ramakrishna was instructed in bhakti by a Vaiṣṇavite. He was particularly attracted to the

imagery of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā and the gopīs. His passionate love for his divine sweetheart, his mental and spiritual anguish and longing, and his austerities, eventually brought back his physical ailments. "The burning sensation all over his body, oozing of blood through the pores of his sin, and almost complete cessation of physiological functions during ecstatic fits....brought him again to the limit of physical endurance." (10) After a few months of this terrible ordeal, he was granted a vision of Rādhā, and soon after, one of Kṛṣṇa. "The thrill of the vision kept him spell-bound for a period of three months, during which he would always see Kṛṣṇa in himself and in everything about him, sentient or insentient." (11) Whilst listening to a reading of the Bhāgavata Purana, he had a vision of Kṛṣṇa in resplendent beauty standing before him. Luminous rays emanating from the Deity's feet touched the Bhāgavata and then Ramakrishna's own chest -- linking up Bhagavān, the scriptures and the devotee.

### Advaita

By 1864 (having spent only two years on Tantra and Bhakti together) Ramakrishna was drawn to Advaita Vedānta, which as we have seen in our discussion of Śankara preaches the realisation of the identity of the self with the impersonal Absolute, Brahman. He was instructed by the Divine Mother to follow Tota Puri, the Vedāntic teacher who now appeared on the scene. Tota Puri was a strict monist, believing that nirguṇa Brahman was the only reality, and that all creation was an appearance; at first he used to look on Ramakrishna's attachment to Kālī as the illusion of a naive mind. Ramakrishna became a saṅnyāsīn, and very quickly attained nirvikalpa samādhi, a superconscious state in which all that remains is an awareness of one's identity with Brahman. Shortly

afterwards, he entered this state again for a period of no less than six months, during which time, it is said, "not a sign of life could be discerned in his body except at long and rare intervals, and that too of very short duration." (12) Then one day he received the command from his Divine Mother that he must remain on the threshold of relative consciousness for the sake of humanity (as avatāras are said to do).

### Other Religions

Not content with the wide range of types of spiritual experience offered by Hinduism in its manifold forms, Ramakrishna next felt drawn to investigate other religious traditions. His early life gives us the picture of a man continually searching, never quite satisfied, always hungry for more experience and more knowledge, wanting to know the Divine in every possible way, every aspect, and desiring to integrate all these different ways into his own life.

In 1866, then, Ramakrishna was introduced to Islam. He "started dressing, dining, praying and behaving in every way like an orthodox Muslim. All his thoughts, visions, and ecstasies associated with Hindu gods and goddesses vanished for the time being, and he went on repeating the name of Allah and reciting the namāz regularly like a devout Mohammedan faquir..... His arrival at the goal was marked by a vision, probably of the Prophet: a personage with a white beard and grave countenance approached him in his effulgent glory. Immediately he realized the formless God with attributes as described in the Islamic scriptures, and then became merged in the impersonal God, Brahman without attributes. Thus the transcendental region of the Absolute, the One without a second, the supreme Brahman beyond the pale of any differentiation, appears from



Ramakrishna's experience to be the last halting place to which both the paths of Hinduism and Islam equally lead." (13) The syncretism implied here and in Ramakrishna's philosophy as a whole will be discussed later. A few years after this, after having had the Bible read to him, Ramakrishna found a picture of the Virgin and Child. "Instantly the holy figures appeared to be warmed into life; he observed that they were radiating rays of light that pierced his flesh and went straight to his heart. Immediately the Hindu child of the divine Mother became thoroughly metamorphosed into an orthodox devotee of the Son of Man. Christian thought and Christian love appeared for three successive days to be the sole contents of his mind." (14) On the fourth day he had a vision of Christ, and "Christ merged in Ramakrishna, who forthwith lost his outward consciousness and became completely absorbed in the savikalpa samādhi, in which he realized his union with Brahman with attributes." (15) Later, Ramakrishna often referred to Christ as the master-yogin who poured out his heart's blood for the redemption of humanity.

It will be noticed that Ramakrishna interprets his Islamic and Christian experiences from within the framework of Hindu philosophy -- as is indeed only to be expected. The Islamic God is associated with Brahman, and Christ is seen as a "yogin", the embodiment of Brahman with attributes. Ramakrishna, throughout his experiments with different religious traditions, always seems in the end to come back to his first Beloved, Kālī, and to see all that he experiences as so many manifestations of Kālī or Brahman. Swami Nirvedananda suggests that Ramakrishna tried out all these different paths only to see if they led to the same goal. The more sceptical reader might argue that in his early life he was unsure of his true path, constantly being led astray by the new and the different. An experience such as that had by Ramakrishna

while looking at the picture of the Virgin and Child is not uncommon nowadays, as religions of other cultures become more accessible and as we come to understand them better; one may indeed feel identification with a religious image of another tradition from one's own, and even have certain types of mystical experience involving it. It will be noticed, however, that Ramakrishna did not pursue all these different paths for very long. He spent only two years on Tantra and Bhakti together; another two to supposedly exhaust Advaita; while Christian thought occupied his mind (to the exclusion of all other religious traditions) for only four days, and yet on the strength of this he was "thoroughly metamorphosed into an orthodox devotee of the Son of Man". One wonders how many Christians would agree with this judgement. It is usually said that any mystical path takes a lifetime, or the best part of a lifetime, to complete -- or, in religions which believe in reincarnation, many lifetimes are involved. It could be argued that Ramakrishna did not in fact spend long enough following each tradition to know if they led to the same goal or not; he may have assumed this on the basis of a previously held conviction, and interpreted his experiences accordingly. While it would be an underestimation of Ramakrishna's spiritual genius to suggest that his knowledge of all these different paths was superficial, it may have been less thorough than his devotees have liked to claim.

#### Ramakrishna's Later Life and Teachings

In his later life, Ramakrishna ceased to see exterior visions. "Formerly," he said to a group of devotees in 1883, "I used to see divine forms with the naked eye -- as I am seeing you. Now I see them in a state of trance." (16) The following may serve as an example of the sublime

spiritual perception of his later years:

One day I found that my mind was soaring high in Samādhi along a luminous path. It soon transcended the stellar universe and entered the subtler region of ideas. As it ascended higher and higher, I found on both sides of the way ideal forms of gods and goddesses. The mind then reached the outer limits of that region, where a luminous barrier separated the sphere of relative existence from that of the Absolute. Crossing that barrier, the mind entered the transcendental realm, where no corporal being was visible. Even the gods dared not peep into that sublime realm, and were content to keep their seats far below. But the next moment I saw seven venerable sages seated there in Samādhi. It occurred to me that these sages must have surpassed not only men but even the gods in knowledge and holiness, in renunciation and love..... (17)

The "luminous barrier" that separates the relative level of existence from the Absolute can be compared to the Abyss in Christian and Kabbalistic mysticism. It is interesting to note that Ramakrishna elevates the enlightened sages above the gods here, seemingly abandoning his usual, more theistic attitude; but such an elevation of the mystic is not uncommon in Indian religion.

During the course of his life, Ramakrishna also had other visions in addition to those mentioned, many of which were of goddesses, who often talked to him and advised him in various ways. He often experienced the 'inner Fire' which we have described in our discussions of Rolle, St. Teresa and the Bhakti mystics. He had numerous 'supernatural' or psychic powers (known in India as siddhis) such as clairvoyance, etc., which came to him (as also to many other mystics) as a result of his spiritual realisation; but (like most mystics) he considered them to be unimportant, and even a hindrance to the mystical goal. Nevertheless, Ramakrishna says to one devotee that whereas such powers do not help one towards realisation of the Divine, they are helpful when, after realising Divine reality, one engages oneself in its work; and herein lies some truth. (18)

Following his training in the various spiritual traditions mentioned, Ramakrishna, now seeing the Divine in all things and at all times, began

to gather around him a large group of disciples. He laid no claim to originality, and ascribed all his inspiration to the Divine Mother, just as so many of the other mystics we have examined see themselves merely as channels for teachings which are not their own. He always encouraged his devotees to test for themselves the truths of his teachings. He also advised them to notice whether he himself practised what he preached, to test him before accepting him as their spiritual guide. We shall now proceed to an exposition of the teachings which he gave to his followers.

For Ramakrishna, the true purpose of human life is to realise the Divine. "Man should possess dignity and alertness. Only he whose spiritual consciousness is awakened possesses this dignity and alertness and can be called a man. Futile is the human birth without the awakening of spiritual consciousness." (19) He does not deny the validity of pursuing the other traditional Hindu ends of life (*kāma*, pleasure; *artha*, wealth; and *dharma*, ethical duty) but advises that they should be done without desire for the fruit of action (*niṣkāma*, "disinterested action"; compare Eckhart's "disinterested action" (20)) and should be subordinated to the final and true end, here following the teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. *Sakāma*, "interested actions" with desire for the fruit thereof, intensify our attachment to things of the world and make us forget God.

The realisation of Divine Reality, as the true aim of human life, must be a matter of direct personal experience. It is not enough merely to be learned in the scriptures, or to be rationally convinced of God's existence. Indeed, without *sādhana* the true or deeper meaning of the scriptures cannot be grasped. Experience must take precedence over discursive knowledge. It may be argued that the function of discursive reason is not to reveal the existence of something, but to enable us to understand and interpret our experience -- and it is this experience that reveals exis-

tence. This is a typically mystical view of the relation between reason and immediate experience, and is a view which I shall later argue for at greater length. Ramakrishna says:

It is not enough to be convinced of the existence of God. Even to have a vision of Him is not the culmination of spiritual life. You must be intimately familiar with Him -- you must have direct communion with Him. Some have heard of God, others have seen Him, but only a few have thoroughly tasted Him. Many may have seen the king. But very few can entertain him as a guest in their homes. (21)

All knowledge, then, must be transformed into personal realisation, must be taken into one's consciousness so that it becomes a vital part of one's life. Ramakrishna uses a number of parables and metaphors to illustrate this point, and to show that reason alone cannot grasp Divine Reality, or measure the Immeasurable:

Once a salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean. It wanted to tell others how deep the water was. But this it could never do, for no sooner did it get into the water than it dissolved. Now who was there to report the ocean's depth? (22)

You have come to the orchard to eat mangoes. Eat the mangoes. What is the good of calculating how many trees there are in the orchard, how many thousands of branches, and how many millions of leaves? One cannot realize Truth by futile argument and reasoning. (23)

(An identical story to the following is told by the Sufis, with the Sufi Mulla Nasrudin in the place of the passenger. (24) Ramakrishna's contact with Islam opened him up to Sufi influences, and it seems likely to me that he has adapted the parable below from Sufism:)

Once several men were crossing the Ganges in a boat. One of them, a pundit, was making a great display of his erudition, saying that he had studied various books -- the Vedas, the Vedānta, and the six systems of philosophy. He asked a fellow passenger, "Do you know the Vedānta?" "No, revered sir." "The Sāṃkhya and the Patañjala?" "No, revered sir." "Have you read no philosophy whatever?" "No, revered sir." The pundit was talking in this vain way and the passenger was sitting in silence, when a great storm arose and the boat was about to sink. The passenger said to the pundit, "Sir, can you swim?" "No" replied the pundit. The passenger said, "I don't know the Sāṃkhya or the Patañjala, but I can swim." What will a man gain by knowing many scriptures? The one thing needful is to know how to cross the river of the world. (25)

So all rational knowledge must be transcended. Ramakrishna agrees with St. John of the Cross and other Christian mystics of the Dionysian school that in the ultimate stage of mystical realisation, knowledge of whatever sort, however spiritual, must be left behind; for absolute realisation is beyond both knowledge (jñāna) and ignorance (ajñāna):

With the visions wrought by vidyā-māyā [this concept will be discussed shortly] or spiritual intuition, one has to free oneself from the tyranny of sense-impressions, and then one has to leave aside even the spiritual intuition and transcend the plane of mystic visions, before the individual soul is able to realize its identity with the eternal Spirit. (26)

This final realisation of oneness with the Absolute is ineffable -- it cannot be represented to us through reason or imagination, yet is known by becoming one with it:

Once four friends, in the course of a walk, saw a place enclosed by a wall. The wall was very high. They all became eager to know what was inside. One of them climbed to the top of the wall. What he saw on looking inside made him speechless with wonder. He only cried, "Ah! Ah!" and dropped in. He could not give any information about what he saw. The others, too, climbed the wall, uttered the same cry, "Ah! Ah!" and jumped in. Now who could tell what was inside? (27)

What happens when the mind reaches the seventh plane cannot be described. Once a boat enters the 'black waters' of the ocean, it does not return. Nobody knows what happens to the boat after that. Therefore the boat cannot give us any information about the ocean. (28)

Nevertheless, although this state is indescribable in that one cannot give any "information" about it, one who has realised it may come down to a lower plane, the plane of relative consciousness, in order to teach others; one's exuberance and enthusiasm may make one try to communicate the experience to others, and to direct them so that they may experience it for themselves.

#### Ramakrishna's Syncretism

A distinctive aspect of Ramakrishna's teachings is his belief that

different religions are all paths to one and the same goal. This clearly grew out of his personal involvement with many different traditions:

I have practised all religions, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects.....I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths..... (29)

He whom the Jñānis call Brahman is addressed by the Yogis as Ātman and by the devotees as Bhagavān..... Some call Him Allah, some God, and others designate Him as Brahmā, Kālī, Rāma, Hari, Jesus or Durgā. (30)

Ramakrishna sees the apparent divergence of different traditions as reconcilable, the different ways resulting merely from different ways of seeking the Divine and from different methods of conveying the same essential truth. Each religion embodies some different aspect of the Absolute, which is beyond all its various manifestations. "In different ages and countries, under different names and forms one God is worshipped.....the religious teachers of all countries and races receive their inspiration from one Almighty Source." (31) Different creeds are different means or methods, different paths, suited to different capacities, tendencies and stages of spiritual development of different people. All seek the same God; excessive importance should not be attached to the differences. Ramakrishna's claim here grew out of personal experience, not rational analysis; he did not go through any process of closely comparing the teachings of different mystical traditions, looking for similarities and divergences, but bases his claim on the visions described in our account of his life. "The devotee who has seen Him in one aspect only, knows that aspect alone. But he alone who has seen Him in manifold aspects can say, 'All these forms are of one God, for God is multiform!'" (32) We must admire Ramakrishna for his attempt to create greater harmony between conflicting religious sects; his attitude is one of great tolerance. But there is a difference between tolerance and syncretism.

Syncretism always seems to result in depriving each tradition of the specific characteristics peculiar to it, those characteristics which give it its uniqueness and richness; and there is, in addition, always the danger that one religion will become explained and interpreted in the terms of another, in an ethnocentric manner, so that the teachings of the former are distorted. I have already commented on the extent of Ramakrishna's involvement with the various traditions, and the problems connected with his claim. Indeed, it could be argued that it is an impossibility for anyone to reach the goal of all mystical traditions one after the other, and thus to claim that they are identical. Firstly, life is simply not long enough; secondly, one will tend to interpret one's latter experiences in the light of the former; thirdly, involvement in one tradition may preclude the success of exercises from another tradition, on the practical level of 'sādhanā'. Ramakrishna's disciples have held that he was able to achieve the ultimate goal of all these different traditions in such a short time because he was a Divine Incarnation; but the non-devotee remains to be convinced. One might ask, for example, to what extent Ramakrishna's vision of Christ was authentic, whether a Christian mystic would accept it as such, and whether there is any real sense in calling Christ a "master-yogin" or "Brahman with attributes" -- in the sense that implies identity of the terms rather than similarity. Certain of Ramakrishna's claims may well be applicable to the different mystical traditions within Hinduism; in spite of the manifold expressions of religious belief and practice, there remains a basic unifying factor which enables us to speak of 'Hinduism' as a religion distinct, for example, from Christianity. For example, it is a commonly-held Hindu belief that, as Ramakrishna puts it, "Many are the names of God and infinite the forms through which He may be approached. In whatever name and form you worship Him, through that



He will be realised by you." (33) But whether it is legitimate to apply this typically Hindu statement to include religions other than Hinduism, is another question. Again, it is a standard Hindu belief (and also a standard tenet of mysticism in many other cultures) that different types of spiritual practice are suited to different people with different natures, tendencies and capacities; but this does not necessarily imply that all these different practices will lead to a goal that is identical in all cultures. Or, even if we were to argue that the final goal is objectively or phenomenologically the same, there would still be subjective or qualitative differences in the way the experience presents itself to the experiencer, because of the influence of factors of doctrine and belief of the mystic's own tradition, as well as factors to do with the personal character traits of individual mystics.

#### Ramakrishna's Contribution to Hindu Thought

In spite of these criticisms, we have to admire Ramakrishna's sense of balance and the way in which he brought about a reconciliation of opposite tendencies and qualities in Hinduism. Although nurtured on traditional values, his approach was in many ways revolutionary. He saw the formless Absolute and the personal Deity, *jñāna* and *bhakti*, the life of the *saṁnyāsin* and that of the householder, Divine Reality and the material world, etc., not as contradictory but as complementary.

The formless Absolute and the personal God or Goddess are, for Ramakrishna, two aspects of one Deity: *Kālī* and Brahman are one. Why is it necessary, he asks, that we should feel we have to make a choice between the nondifferentiated Absolute and a personal Deity who may be the object of our devotion? Ramakrishna practised both ecstatic devotion

to the Divine Mother, and absorption in the ocean of Oneness; I have, however, included him in my discussion of devotional mystics because he leans more strongly in this direction. But he spoke of the difference between God without form, and God with form, as no less irreconcilable than the difference between water and ice; when frozen, the formless water takes on a definite form or aspect. Perhaps we could say that the personal Deity, then, is a kind of crystallised Absolute. "The formless Brahman assumes various forms under the influence of an aspirant's devotion. As a toy apple suggests to one the real apple, or a photograph reminds one of one's absent father, so images and symbols help the devotee to the vision of God as He really is." (34) Even a clay image has its valid use. As a mother prepares different kinds of food for her children, according to their power of assimilation, so God provides for different forms of worship to suit different grades of aspirants. (35) Brahman and its manifestation are inseparable -- each entails the other. Either one conception (God with form, or God without form) to the exclusion of the other, is limited, represents only one of the Divine aspects, only one of its qualities or attributes. Different forms of God are crystallisations of different types of Divine force -- crystallisations from out of the same one eternal Absolute. Ramakrishna, then, held that the Absolute is both with and without qualities (both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*); with and without form; personal and impersonal; yet also in a sense beyond both of each of these pairs of opposites, being unable to be limited by our conceptions, and in this sense indescribable. Regarding the question of the unity or difference of the perfected mystic and the Divine Being, we could say that this means that what appears as a unity at one level, appears as a duality at a higher level or a lower one, and vice versa, in a sort of multilayered progression. In fact, a consideration of

this point may go some way towards resolving the apparently contradictory claims made by some mystics regarding the identity or difference of the Deity and the soul in union. Ramakrishna, on being asked whether one retains any sense of selfhood in Samādhi, is recorded as saying that usually a small degree of self-awareness remains -- just enough to allow one to enjoy the experience. But sometimes even that little sense of self disappears, and "No one can say what that state is, it is the absolute transformation of one's own self into His." (36) For some mystics (whether primarily metaphysically- or devotionally-orientated) the experience of absolute oneness, and the experience of union with diversity, may perhaps be complementary, tending to merge into each other, or to come and go like the ebb and flow of the tide. Plotinus, Eckhart, Suso, St. Teresa, and Ramakrishna could all be seen as examples of this. According to Ramakrishna, we cannot really say that either of these experiences, or these conceptions of the Divine, is 'higher' or more true than the other. He felt that both types of experience were equally genuine; reality has many aspects and forms, and many ways of manifestation, and also in one aspect is formless and unmanifest. The personal Deity and the impersonal Absolute are the same reality under different names, or looked at in different ways. This reality, in its essential and immutable aspect of pure Being (nitya-rūpa) is called Brahman, and in its sportive, creative activity (līlā-rūpa) is called Kālī, the Divine Mother, or Śakti, the feminine creative principle:

There is no distinction between Impersonal God (Brahman) on the one hand and Personal God (Shakti) on the other. When the Supreme Being is thought of as inactive, He is styled God the Absolute (Shuddha Brahman); and when He is thought of as active -- creating, sustaining, and destroying -- He [sic] is styled Shakti or Personal God. (37)

A vision of Ramakrishna's may be seen to illustrate this: he saw a woman of great beauty ascend from the Ganges and slowly approach. In a short

time she gave birth to a lovely child and was tenderly nursing the baby. A moment later he saw that she was no longer tender, but had assumed a terrible aspect. She put the child between her jaws and crushed it to pieces, and, swallowing it, again disappeared beneath the waters of the Ganges. (38) Ramakrishna apparently associated this vision with the emanation, preservation and destruction of the universe, and with the never-ending round of birth, growth and death. But we may suggest that it also illustrates how Śakti, as the agent of creation, preservation and destruction, comes from and returns to the formless Absolute (represented by the waters). The vision may in addition be seen to relate to the dual nature of Kālī, both tender and terrible, both loving and destructive. She is seen as the source from which all emanates and unto which all returns: the womb and tomb of the universe.

It will be noted that Ramakrishna's conception of the relation between the personal Deity and the Absolute is not quite the same as Śankara's distinction, nor is it the same as Rāmānuja's teachings here. For Śankara, as we have previously shown, Īśvara is not as real as Brahman -- ultimately, Īśvara is an appearance, like the world of māyā. For Rāmānuja, on the other hand, the personal God is seen as the absolute spiritual reality, and there is no completely formless Absolute. But for Ramakrishna, the personal Deity and the Absolute are the same identical reality in two different aspects. God is not a lower grade of reality than the Absolute -- she or he is the Absolute itself, in its active aspect.

Reality, then, considered as a whole, is many-faceted and appears in many forms, all of them true, while the truth is also beyond all the forms. Ramakrishna illustrates this with a parable:

Once a man entered a wood and saw a small animal on a tree.  
He came back and told another man that he had seen a creature

of a beautiful red colour on a certain tree. The second man replied: "When I went into the wood, I also saw that animal. But why do you call it red? It is green." Another man who was present contradicted them both and insisted that it was yellow. Presently others arrived and contended that it was grey, violet, blue, and so forth and so on. At last they started quarrelling among themselves. To settle the dispute they all went to the tree. They saw a man sitting under it. On being asked, he replied: "Yes, I live under this tree and I know the animal very well. All your descriptions are true. Sometimes it appears red, sometimes yellow, and at other times blue, violet, grey and so forth. It is a chameleon. And sometimes it has no colour at all. Now it has a colour, and now it has none."

In like manner, one who constantly thinks of God can know His real nature; he also knows that God reveals Himself to seekers in various forms and aspects. God has attributes; then again He has none. Only the man who lives under the tree knows that the chameleon can appear in various colours, and he knows, further, that the animal at times has no colour at all. (39)

In Ramakrishna's philosophy (as indeed in all mystical philosophy, whether implicitly or explicitly) there are many different levels of reality or being, revealed to us by different types of consciousness (e.g., sense experience; devotional feeling; various grades or stages of mystical insight; rational understanding; dream; imagination; etc). To know reality fully, we must admit all its revelations from different levels of consciousness or experience. In Ramakrishna's thought, there is a place for all levels of reality, and for all types of spiritual experience, which are all seen as equally valid, genuine and true on their own level.

In a similar way, Ramakrishna blends jñāna and bhakti into a synthesis in his teachings, although he does lean a little more towards the path of devotion, exalting the values of love, faith, and surrendering one's whole self to the Divine. The difference between jñāna and bhakti, though, is really relevant only on the preliminary stages of the Path -- both are a type of 'knowledge':

Infinite are the ways leading to the ocean of immortality. You have to plunge in somehow. Suppose there is a pool of nectar, and you will become immortal if you sip a few drops. Of your own accord you may jump into the pool, or descend the steps and leisurely sip the nectar, or someone may push you in -- the result is the same. You will be immortal if you but taste the

nectar. There are infinite paths. You may follow any of these -- knowledge, devotion, or work. If you are sincere, you will realise Him. (40)

I have already argued in connection with other mystics that the paths of 'love' and 'knowledge' are not mutually exclusive, and indeed should complement each other, and that each is a type of 'knowledge' after its own manner; Ramakrishna's thought may serve as a further illustration of this.

The Knowledge and Love of God are ultimately one. There is no difference between pure Knowledge and pure Love..... To a Bhakta the Lord manifests Himself in various forms. To one who reaches the height of Brahma-Jñāna in Samadhi, He is the Nirguna Brahman once more, Formless (Nirākāra), Unconditioned. Herein is the reconciliation between Jñāna and Bhakti. (41)

Ramakrishna extols the value of the path of devotion, because jñāna, he says, is a difficult path, and also perhaps because of his own fervent devotion to the Divine Mother; but on the other hand he often speaks of knowledge of the Formless, attained primarily through jñāna, as being in some sense higher than knowledge of God with form. But ultimately, both the bhakta and the jñāni may realise the Divine in both personal and impersonal aspects, if their dedication is strong enough; and the goal of jñāna and bhakti are, he holds, the same. Ramakrishna's teaching that both the jñāni and the bhakta may realise the Divine in both personal and impersonal aspects is an important point: one tends to think of devotional mystics as theistic, and of metaphysical mystics as non-theistic, but this is at best a generalisation.

### The Material World

Ramakrishna does not recommend extreme asceticism or world-rejection, but rather detachment. One must be "in the world but not of it", fulfilling necessary worldly duties in a spirit of detachment, with

one's mind concentrated on the Divine. If we develop our spiritual nature before becoming enmeshed in the things of the world, we can then work in the world without fear of overattachment to it:

The world is like water and the mind like milk. If you put milk in water, they get mixed up and you can't separate the two. But if you make curd out of the milk and churn that into butter, you may put it in water and it will float. Therefore you must first churn the butter of knowledge and devotion through practice in solitude. Then if you put it in the water of the world, it won't mix up, but will float. (42)

This is related to Ramakrishna's general attitude to the world: whilst it is true that one has to retain one's discrimination between the phenomenal and the Eternal, nevertheless, after realising God one comes to see the Divine in all things and to see the world itself as Divine:

.....after realizing God one finds that He alone has become māyā, the universe, and all living beings. This world is no doubt a "framework of illusion", unreal as a dream. One feels that way when one discriminates following the process of "Not this, not this." But after the vision of God this very world becomes "a mansion of mirth". (43)

We have seen *this same teaching* echoed by all the other mystics we have investigated: on realising the Divine, one's whole perspective of the world is changed. Ramakrishna sees both absolute and relative as Divine: one is the source, the other its phenomenal expression. Brahman is present in everything, in the whole of nature. Earth, heaven, plants, trees, animals, humankind -- all are forms of the Divine Mother. Ramakrishna does not adopt Śankara's view that Brahman only appears as the world -- rather, he follows Rāmānuja's view that Brahman (as Śakti or Kālī) emanates the world, individual souls, and matter, as its 'body'. Thus on the mystical path, an initial withdrawal from the world is followed by an affirmation of its embodiment of Divine Reality. There is nothing undivine in the whole universe; all things shine with the light of Divine consciousness, although different things do, of course, manifest Divine power in different degrees. The Absolute as an all-inclusive whole must embrace all things --

including māyā. Ramakrishna does not see māyā as Brahman's magical power of conjuring up an illusory world. He distinguishes between "vidyā māyā" and "avidyā māyā". Avidyā māyā is the flux of appearance of the everyday world that binds us to the wheel of births and deaths. In this sense, mundane reality is relatively 'unreal' inasmuch as it is transient, insubstantial -- it is only relatively real, and does not have permanent and eternal reality like Brahman. When the creative activity of Brahman ceases, there is no world at all. Likewise in samādhi, the objects of the world and even one's ego appear to cease to exist, and only Brahman abides as a pure, eternal, self-luminous light. But after one has perceived one's identity with Brahman, one returns to the world to see it in a new light, and māyā itself takes on a new role. The transcendent is now seen as immanent in the world of physical experience: the Infinite is seen in the finite. Ramakrishna calls this aspect of appearance vidyā māyā, "appearance with knowledge", or, as it has also been translated, "spiritual intuition" or higher knowledge. This is a form of knowledge higher than sense-perception, reason, imagination, and feeling, but lower than the ultimate state of realisation in that it is still grounded in forms, images, and intuitive ideas.

Ramakrishna's realisation of Divinity in the phenomenal world made him more open to human suffering and social injustice, and he stressed the ideal of serving others in the attitude of realisation that they are themselves God under a particular 'name and form' -- a form of service which must be executed entirely selflessly. This is not equivalent to humanitarian service in the sense commonly understood, but rather the worship of Deity through man and woman as the embodiment of Deity. Ramakrishna himself looked upon all women as embodiments of the Divine Mother.



The Lower Self and the Self Divine

The ego or lower self is the product of māyā and avidyā. We mistakenly identify ourselves with the ego, whereas in reality our self (jīva) is pure consciousness, one with Brahman, eternal, free, above time, space and causality:

The true nature of the Jīva is eternal Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. It is egotism that has brought about so many Upādhis (limiting adjuncts), till he has quite forgotten his own nature. (44)

This true self is not the agent of works nor the enjoyer of the fruits of work; it is not involved in the changes which beset the mind-body complex. When we shake off the false ego, the false sense of 'I' and 'mine', we realise our oneness with Brahman; this is the highest knowledge, the knowledge of what we truly are. We can never (in this life) abolish the ego altogether; it persists in spite of efforts we might make to get rid of it; in practical life we behave as if we were the ego. But whereas we cannot eliminate it entirely, once and for all, we can transform or sublimate it. The lower 'I' is the product of avidyā, but there is also a higher 'I' which is 'I' as the servant of the Deity. The ego may be transformed into this higher 'I'. To live in this sense of higher selfhood, we have to dedicate our every action, even our whole will, to the Divine:

Who is this that is teaching? What have I read? What do I know?  
O Mother, I am the instrument (Yantra), Thou art the mover (Yantri); I am the room, Thou art the tenant; I am the sheath, Thou art the sword; I am the chariot, Thou art the driver; I do as Thou makest me do; I speak as Thou willest me to speak; I behave as Thou, within me, behavest; not I, not I, but Thou. (45)

This higher self is the product of vidyā, for we do not contact it until we have realised the illusions centred around the concept of the lower 'I'; the higher self may be retained so that we are able to live and act in the world and to teach others, and indeed has to be retained if we are to

function adequately on this plane.

Through *sādhanā*, we come to live in this higher sense of selfhood continually, so that we are one with the Divine. We have remarked that, whereas the Divine is shown forth in all the universe, different things manifest it in different degrees. God is especially strongly manifested in the *avatāra*, who is the human medium for the expression of the Divine; when we see an *avatāra*, we are in effect seeing God. (Compare "Who sees me, sees the Father".) Secondly, God is present in abundance in the heart of the advanced devotee:

The heart of the devotee is the temple of the Lord. He is more or less manifested in all things, but especially so in the devotee's heart. (46)

Thirdly, God is manifest in all human beings, more so than in animals or nature. In the West, this teaching finds its parallel in the idea that humanity is "made in God's image", and in the widespread symbolism of humanity as the 'Axis Mundi', the centre of creation, the Vicegerent of the Divine on Earth.

### Practical Mystical Methods

Ramakrishna's practical methods blend spiritual idealism with common sense. His tolerance and compassion allowed him to recognise human failings and limitations. He met his disciples on almost equal footing, and did not attempt to thrust at them dogmas and doctrines, but rather prescribed a different kind of *sādhanā* for each, according to his or her temperament and capacity. His methods include meditation, prayer, purification of the mind, the cultivation of detachment, discrimination between the Eternal and the ephemeral. The grace of the Deity is all-important; our quest is not crowned with success without Bhagavān's

grace in revealing him/herself to us; but our own efforts are also indispensable, because we have to earn Bhagavān's grace, that is, to make ourselves worthy of receiving it. (This will be seen to be another example of Ramakrishna's talent at synthesising extremes; the question of 'grace versus effort' has been a perennial one in Indian religious thought.) Absolute dedication and sincerity are also requisite. Discussing the means of seeing God, Ramakrishna says:

Retiring now and then to solitude, taking His name and singing his praises, and discrimination -- these are the means....One can see Him if one weeps for Him with a great intensity of heart....One must pray to Him with the required degree of intensity.... As soon as you have this yearning [i.e., an intense yearning for God] it means that the rosy dawn is already in sight, and the sun will soon be up. Immediately after yearning comes realisation. (47)

(The symbolism of dawn, denoting enlightenment, has already been pointed out in the writings of John of the Cross, Eckhart and Śāṅkara.) (48) Good works, Ramakrishna continues, can be a means (and no more than a means) to seeing the Deity, provided they are done in the right spirit:

Householders engage in philanthropic work, such as charity, mostly with a motive. That is not good. But actions without motives are good. Yet it is very difficult to leave motives out of one's actions.

When you realise God, will you pray to Him, "O God, please grant that I may dig reservoirs, build roads, and found hospitals and dispensaries"? After the realisation of God all such desires are left behind.

Then musn't one perform acts of compassion, such as charity to the poor? I do not forbid it. If a man has money, he should give it to remove the sorrows and sufferings that come to his notice. In such an event the wise man says, "Give the poor something." But inwardly he feels: "What can I do? God alone is the Doer. I am nothing." (49)

The all-important thing is to uncover the Deity within. Using the alchemical image now familiar to us from the writings of other mystics, Ramakrishna says: "There is gold within you, about which you as yet know nothing. It is just under the surface." (50) Through *sādhanā*, the base metal of the self is refined to gold. To vary the metaphor, Ramakrishna

says that God is always drawing us to him, as a magnet draws iron. But when the iron is covered with dirt, it is not attracted to the magnet. As soon as the dirt is removed from the mind, it is instantly drawn to God. (51)

### The Inner Palace

To denote the progress of the self through the stages of spiritual advancement, Ramakrishna makes use of the image of a seven-roomed Palace within which dwells a King. "Strangers have access only to the lower apartments; but the prince, who knows the palace to be his own, can move up and down from floor to floor." (52) Avatāras, and others well advanced in spirituality, can climb to the roof, come down again by the stairs, and move about on the lower floors. This I take to indicate that after Divine realisation, one sees the world and the lower levels of the self as manifestations of the Divine, and one returns to the world to teach others; also that the advanced mystic has freedom to pass back and forth across the various thresholds of consciousness at will. Ramakrishna's image of the seven-roomed Palace represents the seven planes spoken of earlier, which he refers to in connection with his Tantric meditative practices.

The king dwells in the inmost room of the palace, which has seven gates. The visitor comes to the first gate. There he sees a lordly person with a large retinue, surrounded on all sides by pomp and grandeur. The visitor asks his companion, "Is he the king?" "No", says his friend with a smile. At the second and the other gates he repeats the same question to his friend. He finds that the nearer he comes to the inmost part of the palace, the greater is the glory, pomp and grandeur. When he passes the seventh gate he does not ask his companion whether it is the king; he stands speechless at the king's immeasurable glory. He realizes that he is face to face with the king. He hasn't the slightest doubt about it. (53)

This image is particularly interesting, finding as it does a striking parallel in the West in St. Teresa's seven-roomed Castle in the innermost room of

which dwells the King, which I have already described. (54) It will be seen that the correspondences of symbolism between Ramakrishna and St. Teresa here are astonishingly close, and it seems to me that they may well point to a common inner experience.

Gandhi has said of Ramakrishna that he was a "living embodiment of godliness" and that "his life enables us to see God face to face". (55) Ramakrishna practised what he preached down to the minutest detail; indeed, his 'preaching' grew out of his practice. The same could be said, of course, of any great mystic. Ramakrishna was poor and uneducated, in fact almost illiterate, yet he commanded the attention and respect of many intellectuals by his original and illuminating sayings and by his life of great spirituality. His presence stirred in the hearts of others a yearning for the Divine, and often aroused in them revelations, spiritual inspirations, and the sense of the joy and wonder of mystical experience. It was said of him, as of many great mystics and spiritual teachers, that he could transmit spiritual power and realisation through a mere glance, touch or word; the Divine Presence which he had made manifest within himself found a response in the latent presence of the Divine in the hearts of others. Contemplating the life and teachings of this God-intoxicated man, we are led to agree with Pratap Chandra Mazumdar, a Brāhmo Samaj preacher, who said of Ramakrishna:

His religion is ecstasy, his worship means transcendental insight, his whole nature burns day and night with a permanent fire and fever of a strange faith and feeling. (56)

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- (56) Nirvedananda, op. cit., p.683.

## CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER II

We have seen that the mystics discussed in Chapter II of this study express themselves in emotional, romantic language, and have a relative disregard for metaphysical exposition. They emphasise grace, devotion, love, often intense passion. They speak of the Inner Fire within the heart, the fire of purification and purgation that turns the base metal of the self to gold. They speak of the bittersweetness of love-in-separation; of the death to the lower self for the sake of the Beloved; of the suffering that is eventually turned, through love, into joy. They use symbols such as the 'Wound of Love', the arrow or spear that pierces the Heart, the healing medicine, the barred door, the absent lover; and, of course, a wealth of other romantic and sexual imagery. They speak of the alternating states of blissful enjoyment of the Deity, and the pain of deprivation of consciousness of the Divine: the Game of Love (Ludus amoris/ Kṛṣṇa-ṅīlā) which culminates in the Mystical Marriage of the bride to the Beloved Bridegroom, perhaps the crowning symbol of devotional mysticism.

Many parallels can be detected between the mystics discussed in Chapter II, and the metaphysically-orientated mystics. The basic mystical methods of turning within to find the still centre of the self (St. Teresa's recogimiento), meditation, contemplation, the cultivation of detachment and virtue, self-purification, and so on; these are common to both metaphysical and devotional mystics, and the inward-looking tendency of these two types of mysticism has been contrasted with the 'outward-looking' stance of 'extrovertive' nature-mysticism. (1) However, unlike the metaphysical mystics, the devotional mystics do not often insist upon the transcendence of all particular ideas, images and forms, and in addition they advocate the channelling of emotion towards the Deity, rather than



the transcendence of all emotion. The phenomenological effects of the mystical disciplines of the two types are, however, similar in many respects (the Divine is seen in everything; there is equanimity to the warring pairs of opposites; the mystic attains a state of peace, unity, etc.). There are numerous parallels of symbolism used by both metaphysical and devotional mystics: the Castle, the Dawn, the Mirror, to mention but a few that have been discussed here. The visions, raptures and ecstasies to which both 'metaphysical' and 'devotional' mystics may be subject also seem to be very close phenomenologically. In addition, the implicit metaphysical ideas adopted by devotional mystics show many parallels to those of the explicitly metaphysical mystics.

As for the metaphysical mystics, so for the devotional mystics, in the final state of attainment one is transformed into the Divine (the lover becomes one with the Beloved). But an important difference also arises here in that love, the method of the devotional mystics, presupposes the duality (to some degree) of the lover and the Beloved. Thus the devotional mystic (with certain exceptions, such as Mahādēvī in the more monistic heights of her experience) strives for enjoyment of a loving relationship with the Deity, rather than absorption into an undifferentiated Absolute. Correspondingly, the transcendence of form, images and ideas, so important to the metaphysical mystics, is not often stressed, although (as we have seen) the exact attitude here varies from one mystic to another. It is worth noting in this connection that much of the symbolism used, and the experiences described, by devotional mystics are concentrated on the Heart Centre (the pierced heart, the fire within the heart, etc.), the heart being widely symbolic of love in everyday thought; and this 'Heart Mysticism' can be contrasted to the 'Head Mysticism' of the metaphysical and intellectual mystics, whose formless visions are

associated with the centres of spiritual energy above the throat, as I have discussed above. (2)

These and related points are strongly highlighted in the disagreements between Śankara and Rāmānuja, who can be taken to represent the two extreme points of a continuum. Ramakrishna, the final mystic discussed in Chapter II, sits close to the middle of this continuum, siding with neither Śankara nor Rāmānuja, blending together as he does knowledge and devotion, monism and theism. Close to Śankara on the continuum are Eckhart, Suso and Plotinus; St. John of the Cross and the Śaivite bhakti mystics are also on the monistic side. Close to Rāmānuja on the other side of the continuum is Rolle, and between Rāmānuja and Ramakrishna come St. Teresa and the Vaiṣṇavite bhakti mystics. To think of the mystics as arranged along a continuum in this way, rather than as falling neatly into two separate groups, will guard us against the danger of reifying categories used for the purposes of classification.

References

(1) This distinction was elaborated upon in particular by W. T. Stace, Mysticism and Philosophy. London: Macmillan, 1961.

(2) See above, p.287.

CHAPTER III

NATURE-MYSTICISM

## NATURE-MYSTICISM: WORDSWORTH & RABINDRANATH TAGORE

If we are to appreciate the variety of possible types of mystical experience, we must consider nature-mysticism, in addition to the more theologically orthodox types of mystical expression already investigated. To begin with, we should point out that there are, in different historical eras and different cultures, various meanings and interpretations of the word 'Nature'. All forms of nature-mysticism are centred around a divinised Nature which might perhaps (to avoid restriction to the modern connotations of the word 'nature') be better expressed by the terms 'the Universe' or 'the Cosmos'. In other words, we are not speaking purely of the physical aspect of nature, but of the notion of the whole world seen as a harmonious, ordered whole which is divine. But 'Nature', and the relation of Nature to 'God', or to the Divine Principle, may be conceived of in a number of different ways. In a number of tribal religions, the idea of Nature, often personified as a goddess or other feminine power, as the origin of all life, and of growth, fertility, death, rebirth -- the source from which all things come and unto which they all return -- is prominent. This notion finds its counterpart in the world religions, for example in Hinduism, where Śakti, the feminine principle which enables a male god to create the world, is seen as a fount of unlimited creative energy, a source of boundless life, and is identified with the magical power of creation (māyā). For the pre-Socratics, and for the Indian Sāṃkhya system, Nature denotes the primal matter out of which the world evolves, and the aim of Boehme and the alchemists in investigating Nature was likewise to penetrate to the Prima Materia, that is, the subtle forces of the primal substance behind creation. (The ideal of penetrating the secrets of both God and Nature, found in Boehme and in the Hermetic

tradition, is discussed in the next chapter.) Platonic philosophy sees divinised Nature as a 'bridge' intermediate between the material world of flux and becoming, and the Eternal realm of pure Being; Nature participates in the reality of the higher, Ideal world, but is distinct from it. A similar idea is found in medieval conceptions of the goddess Natura, who also represents a parallel notion to that of śakti. The conception of Natura developed out of classical philosophy and Christian theology, and she came to be seen as a personification of the creative power of nature, a source of creative energy intermediate between the Divine realm and the material world. She is the creative principle by means of which God fashions matter after the pattern of the Divine Ideas. (1) In this respect she also corresponds to Boehme's Sophia (2) although this latter feminine principle also has other aspects. For the Stoics, by way of contrast, the world, God and Nature are more or less interchangeable terms. Nature brings order out of chaos, creating a harmonious whole; Nature is the creative principle, the divine intelligence and law of the Cosmos, and is therefore synonymous with God.

Accordingly, nature-mysticism may itself receive a variety of expressions and interpretations. In 'panentheistic' nature-mysticism, where the Deity is both immanent and transcendent, nature discloses the Divine but is not itself God. In pure pantheism, Nature and God would be seen as completely identical.

A sense of union or oneness with nature, and a feeling of being part of a life-force which permeates all things, is a relatively common experience, granted to a fairly large number of people at some point in their lives. Such feelings of union with nature very often accompany the development of introvertive mystical consciousness, and would appear to be particularly prominent in the Illuminative stage of the mystical path

according to the Catholic scheme. This stage of Illumination is characterised by a consciousness of Divine Presence, but in the Catholic scheme of things it falls short of the perfection of Union. Intuitive glimpses of truth, and poetic or artistic inspiration, are examples of an Illuminative state of consciousness; the illuminated vision of the phenomenal world in a state of heightened perception is another. Unfortunately, the fact that a certain type of nature-mystical experience occurs in the Illuminative stage of Catholic mysticism has led some writers to reject all nature-mystical experience as an inferior or incompletely developed form of mystical consciousness. Now clearly, one could not be called a 'mystic' in the full sense of the word simply by virtue of having a sense of union with nature on a few isolated occasions; but nor could one be called such by virtue of having a few isolated intimations of Divine Presence independent of the natural world. In the lower stages of introvertive mystical experience, the mystic may experience brief flashes of a unitive type of experience well before he or she has reached full attainment of union; and likewise it may be that nature-mystical experience has its own 'Illuminative' and 'Unitive' phases, so to speak, its 'Illuminative' phase representing a less fully-developed mystical consciousness than its 'Unitive' phase. In other words, I would argue that nature-mysticism should be seen as a type of mystical experience in its own right, rather than being relegated to an undeveloped form of potentially theistic mystical consciousness, as some writers wish to argue. There is always a great danger inherent in trying to explain one form of mysticism from within the scheme of progression of another type. There is no reason to see nature-mysticism as an inferior form of mystical consciousness, just as there is no real sense in saying that the world is 'inferior' to God. The world can rather be seen as distinct from the Divine in certain respects,

but essentially interrelated with it and complementary to it, and as a vital means of its manifestation.

An apprehension of the divinity of nature may also be an important part of the experience of those who have developed introvertive mystical consciousness fully and permanently. Here, it is seen that ultimately, the Divine principle and Nature are one. This is a state of consciousness in which one sees the Divine in all things; but the Divine is not, as it were, 'reduced' to the level of the empirical world; rather, nature is 'elevated' to the level of the Divine -- divinised, seen in its 'translucent' aspect. The world is only seen as Divine in proportion to the degree of freedom from it, in its purely material aspect, that one has attained. Whilst the world continues to exercise its influence on our selfish desires, hedonistic interests, and so on, we cannot see it in this light. Nasr comments:

God is both transcendent and immanent, but He can be experienced as immanent only after He has been experienced as transcendent..... Nature is herself a divine revelation with its own metaphysics and mode of prayer, but only a contemplative already endowed with sacred knowledge can read the gnostic message written in the most subtle manner upon the cliffs of high mountains, the leaves of the trees, the faces of animals and the stars of the sky..... Man cannot contemplate the cosmos as theophany until he has journeyed through and beyond it. (3)

A fully developed type of nature-mysticism presupposes some knowledge of the Divine in and of itself, and it seems to me quite unjust to see this as an inferior form of mystical consciousness. The world is seen as Divine inasmuch as one sees through and beyond it in its material aspect.

Theistic theologies, standing as they obviously do in opposition to pantheism, have tended to reject nature-mysticism (although this may be partially because of a confusion between pantheism and panentheism). In any case, as I have discussed elsewhere with regard to the methodological approaches of Underhill and Zaehner (4), theistic writers discussing nature-mysticism tend either to represent it as a lower, undeveloped type



of mysticism, or to see it as not worthy of the name of mysticism at all, as not representative of 'true' mysticism. Underhill adopts the first approach, and I have argued against this that the apprehension of nature as divine may form a vital part of a fully developed mysticism. To assume otherwise, and to reject nature-mysticism out of hand, is to assume that 'God' and 'Nature' represent a rigid dichotomy; it is to adopt a preconceived theologically dualistic standpoint, which is not valid for an analysis of all (if any) types of mysticism. The more extreme approach, where nature-mysticism is completely rejected, is followed by Zaehner, who identifies it with drug experiences and forms of mental disorder:

.....communion with Nature is attainable without any effort and without any moral perfection, without charity and even self-denial..... The experience which, in its pan-enhenic aspect, is identical with that of manics and the takers of drugs, has, in itself, no moral value..... (5)

I am unable to agree with Zaehner here, and I think that the examination of the writings of Wordsworth and Rabindranath Tagore to follow will refute his argument entirely. It may be informative to note that Zaehner suggests that Christian mystics may be referring to nature-mysticism when they speak of the Devil's ability to counterfeit mystical states. (6) This is highly debatable, it seems to me, but it may be true that they have made this assumption in certain cases; and if so, it reflects a dualism of the world and God, the identification of the ways of the world with the temptations of the Devil, and the tendency to world-rejection which accompanies a rejection of nature-mysticism. We might note in this connection that the various 'pagan' deities ousted by Christianity have tended to become identified with 'Nature-worship' and so-called 'Devil-worship'.

In contradistinction to such dualistic approaches, I would wish to argue that the more one loves the Divine, the more one loves the world

as a manifestation of the Divine; I believe this to be an essential aspect of any mysticism worthy of the name. We have seen that the mystics we have so far considered emphasise not complete renunciation or rejection of the world, but detachment from it, adopting a new attitude towards it (even though they may well go through an early phase of world-rejection before arriving at this considered conclusion). The deeper our mystical understanding, the more Divine the world appears; and, having experienced this vision of a transformed world, we no longer wish to reject the world, but rather to continue our work in the world in a knowledge of its essential divinity, while, of course, remaining aware of the human attitudes and limitations which prevent this divinity from reaching full expression. Contact with the Divine gives the mystic a new impetus towards creative action -- towards expressing his or her experience in some tangible manner in this world. "If you will make heaven out of the earth, then give the earth the heaven's food," says Boehme. (7)

It might also be mentioned that the fact that many members of modern society find it hard to see nature in her transcendent aspect is not only due to a loss of the sense of the transcendent, but is also intimately bound up with our separation from nature. Nature is seen as a thing separate from humanity, something which must be controlled, dominated, conquered -- and therefore, ultimately, destroyed. By ceasing to live harmoniously alongside nature, and by polluting and destroying her, humanity has robbed her of her divinity.

Stace has pointed to one of the essential differences between nature-mysticism and monistic or theistic mysticism. He distinguishes between 'extrovertive' and 'introvertive' mysticism: the former involves looking outward through the senses, seeing unity in the empirical world; the latter, detachment from the senses, looking within to the experience

of unity in one's inner self. (8) Nature-mysticism clearly comes under the former type. It is important to note, however, that mystics do not themselves tend to draw a hard-and-fast distinction between 'extrovertive' and 'introvertive' mysticism; indeed, many mystics claim that the inner and outer unities are one, as Stace notes (9), and this point is closely connected with the rejection or modification of dualism. It also points out to us again that the categories that we use to divide mystical experience into types should not be artificially reified; that the different types of mystical experience should not be seen as unrelated to each other. This point will be taken up again later. (10)

A key aspect of nature-mystical experience is an awareness of one life-force, one power, which permeates all of visible nature and is also found within the heart or soul of humanity. The unity of the Divine Life is apprehended both in the inner self and in the outer world. The human soul is sometimes seen as a higher or more perfect expression of the Divine, than is nature, because of humanity's volitional, reasoning, and spiritual faculties, and because of the conscious striving towards Deity not found in animals or inanimate nature (these points being connected with the notion of humanity as microcosm, the 'axis of the Universe' or 'measure of all things', the 'bridge' between the Divine and the material). But in any case, the nature-mystical vision typically involves seeing the same Spirit in all things -- it is an apprehension of microcosmic and macrocosmic correspondences embracing nature, humanity, and the Divine. There is the same vital spiritual energy, the same basic Life, in human consciousness, animal life, and 'inanimate' nature: in the flowers, trees, mountains, meadows and streams. Rabindranath Tagore, who will be discussed in greater detail later, expresses it beautifully:

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow. (11)

Nature-mysticism therefore illustrates the union of like principles and the apprehension of like by like, as previously discussed in connection with introvertive mysticism (12): this spiritual energy within the self knows its like in the wider world because of the correspondence between them. There is an experience of union with Nature in which, as in union with God or with the Absolute, the subject/object duality will often seem to be transcended: the mystic becomes one with Nature, the boundary between self and not-self dissolving, so that, as Eckhart says, we enjoy "all creatures in God, and God in all creatures". (13) When we are able to see the world thus, to understand the transcendent meaning of the divine order of nature, to see the Infinite in the finite and the Eternal in the temporal -- then we are free of the world, in that we are released from our selfish attachments; and, paradoxically, then and only then can we find true and lasting joy in the world. In order to possess all, we must possess nothing; to enjoy all, we must desire hedonistic or selfish pleasure from nothing.

In this experience of union with nature in which nature is seen as divine, there is a heightening of sense-perception, a new clarity of vision which might be called seeing the outer world with the inner eye. One of the most important distinctions between nature-mysticism and introvertive mysticism, as I have said, is that the latter stresses a turning inward and a detachment from sensory stimuli, unlike the outward-looking vision of nature-mysticism. In nature-mysticism, a new radiance and a transcendental beauty are seen to shine forth from all natural objects; the world is transfigured, it becomes full of life, vital power, transfused by a

magical quality, and it seems that even the smallest flower springs forth from the earth in order to rejoice at its participation in the Spirit. Underhill aptly calls this "beholding Creation with the Creator's eye". (14)

Another essential aspect of the nature-mystical vision is that each natural object may be seen to have its own essential significance because of its relation to an unseen order. Each tree, each stone, each blade of grass, bears within it a presence and an inner meaning. This is illustrated by Boehme's notion of the "Signature of all Things", to be discussed later (15): the Spirit is known in the external forms of all creatures, says Boehme, all things manifesting their inner natures in their external forms, from which the inner nature can be read. Boehme's biographer tells us that he once looked into the inner heart of the phenomenal world in this way, going into a field, where, "....viewing the herbs and grass of the field in his inward sight, he saw into their essences, use and properties, which were discovered to him by their lineaments, figures and signatures...." (16) Boehme intuitively grasped the occult sympathies or correspondences between the natural order and spiritual truths or forces (and, as a result of this, was able to extend his practical knowledge of herbal properties). (I shall later argue that what has become broadly known as the Western esoteric tradition, comprising a number of different elements from Kabbalistic, Platonic, Hermetic, and other sources, and of which I have taken Boehme as representative, combines the inner contemplative experiences of introvertive mysticism, with the outward-looking vision of nature-mysticism, and adds other elements of its own, and should thus be seen as a fourth category of mysticism.) Nature, in the kind of vision described above, is a world of symbolism, a 'book' in which can be read spiritual truths, or a mirror in which they can be discerned; the visible world both conceals and reveals an invisible mystery. The forms of nature

both veil the eternal Archetypes or essences that stand behind them, and yet also reveal or unveil these essences, acting as they do as symbols of and means of manifestation for these essences. The forms of nature, then, act rather like the forms of symbol, or the intellectual forms of metaphysics and other types of mystical expression: they point to and act as means of expression for realities that lie beyond them. (17) Eliade expresses a similar notion in saying that the different 'modalities' of the sacred are manifested in the structure of the world, and that:

The world stands displayed in such a manner that, in contemplating it, religious man discovers the many modalities of the sacred, and hence of being.... The sky directly, "naturally", reveals the infinite distance, the transcendence of the deity. The earth too is transparent; it presents itself as universal mother and nurse. The cosmic rhythms manifest order, harmony, permanence, fecundity. The cosmos as a whole is an organism at once real, living, and sacred.... (18)

One can go further with this language of symbolism: the sun has been seen as the life-giving spirit; the moon as the receptive principle receiving the light of the sun (shining by no light of its own) has been taken to represent the human soul; and the planets various aspects of the psyche (as I have explained in my discussion of Boehme and astrology). (19) Mountains, immovable, unchangeable over millions of years, seem to be Guardians of the power of the earth; and in stretching towards heaven seem to mirror the soul's own aspirations. Rivers and streams may suggest to us mutability, ever-changing flow or flux; or again, the image of rivers running to the sea, as the self to the Absolute, is common in Indian mystical philosophy, and sometimes found in the West. (20) The elements of fire, earth, air, water, all have their deeper meanings. (21) Thus nature always expresses something that transcends it; all outward things have an inner meaning. "All teems with symbol; the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another." (22) As Eliade says, a sacred stone, for example, is venerated because it is sacred, not because it is a stone, and

"....it is the sacrality manifested through the mode of being of the stone that reveals its true essence." (23) The various phenomena of nature -- thunder, lightning, the sun, stones, mountains, and so on -- may be representations of, or symbols for, the Divine; and they may participate in Divine reality, being manifestations of the one Divine life; but they are clearly not worshipped in and for themselves, in their purely material aspect. (Indeed, it might be said that the person who lives in spiritual consciousness is unable to view anything in its purely material aspect; the inner meaning is always the most important, the most real, and the one that presents itself as first and last, most basic and most final.) Different aspects of nature can thus be symbolic of various divine qualities or attributes; and since the symbol participates in the reality which it symbolises (24), nature itself becomes divine through this vision. We might briefly mention in this connection the use of natural symbols in mythology. The World Tree, the holy mountain, the sea to be crossed, the magical island in the middle of the lake -- all these widespread mythological images (to mention just a few) may represent a particular facet of the inner life, as may the actual world of nature visible to the bodily eye.

We should also point out the importance of the cycles of nature -- of the seasons, the day and the night, the sun and the moon, of vegetation, of birth, growth, decay and death -- which are bound up with the idea of nature as the source of all life, but also have their counterparts in the inner spiritual and psychic cycles of the individual. When one lives in harmony with nature, one becomes attuned to her own pulsebeat; the rhythms of nature penetrate into the very marrow of one's being and become an essential part of one's consciousness. One's life comes to reflect the inherent rhythms of nature, which are themselves reflections

of the divine rhythmic order; the spiritual rhythms of the Universe come to flow through oneself; and this is indeed a natural corollary to the realisation that one is part of the same 'life-force' as the rest of nature, part of the same unity.

### Wordsworth

Wordsworth is often considered a typical nature-mystic, and an examination of some of his poems will illustrate the above points. His self-expression is highly intuitive, different in tone both from metaphysical teachers like Plotinus or Śankara, and from those more emotionally-orientated mystics recently discussed. For Wordsworth, all of nature -- from the trees, to the flowers, to the human soul, to the world seen as a cosmic whole -- is alive, vital with divine power, and all participates in the same single 'life-force':

.....The immeasurable height  
 Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,  
 The stationary blasts of waterfalls,  
 And in the narrow rent at every turn  
 Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,  
 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,  
 The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,  
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side  
 As if a voice were in them, the sick sight  
 And giddy prospect of the raving stream,  
 The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,  
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light --  
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;  
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
 The types and symbols of Eternity,  
 Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (25)

All of nature (described in its power and awe, its 'numinous' aspect, so effectively here) is seen as the "workings of one mind", and each aspect of it is a "symbol of Eternity" which can lead us to a realm of timelessness "first, and last, and midst, and without end". This has a



strong Platonic ring: the idea is that sensory stimuli (such as the sight of the beauties of nature) may raise us to a transcendental level of awareness; sense-experience leads to the supersensible. Natural beauty is heightened by its 'participation' in eternal Beauty (or, indeed, only possesses beauty at all because of this Beauty which is its Source). Nature shines with a pure light, a power and splendour, because of the spirit shedding its radiance over the objects of sense-perception. Thus natural objects take on a new glory, a transcendental beauty, a magical quality of vitality. The objects of our everyday perception are transfigured, seen in a new way, or seen as they really are. Coleridge says of Wordsworth that his aim was to ".....give the charm of novelty to things of everyday, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand." (26) We have to look at the world with new eyes, so that we are able to see the Infinite in the finite things around us:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream..... (27)

The empirical world is therefore seen as a stepping-stone to the higher world of the Spirit. Nature transports the soul into "worlds beyond the reign of sense" (28); the power inherent in her material forms is the "express resemblance" of the power of the transcendent and infinite (29). Nature bears within herself a presence leading one to "the joy of elevated thoughts", a presence or a spirit which is within all things animate and

inanimate, that "rolls through all things". (30)

This apprehension of unity, in which we "see into the life of things", seems to come about for Wordsworth especially in a kind of visionary state of stillness, calm and harmony in which one sees with the inner eye:

Of in these moments such a holy calm  
 Would overspread my soul, that bodily eyes  
 Were utterly forgotten, and what I saw  
 Appeared like something in myself, a dream,  
 A prospect in the mind. (31)

.....the breath of this corporeal frame  
 And even the motion of our human blood  
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
 In body, and become a living soul:  
 While with an eye made quiet by the power  
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
 We see into the life of things. (32)

These are clearly descriptions of a type of meditative insight; of a state of meditation (or perhaps even a trance state) which may bear similarities with introvertive mystical technique (such as the stilling of the surface mind, bodily relaxation and so on). We might note that Wordsworth's "dream", the "prospect in the mind", is no mere figment of fancy, but a living reality, none the less real for being essentially inward. One of the most interesting aspects of Wordsworth's poetry, as Rader observes, is the way in which he combines an intense inwardness, an awareness of his inner spiritual life, with an acute perception of natural objects. Rader finds that these two poles of Wordsworth's thought are complementary, indeed intimately connected. The radiance of outward things when seen with the 'inner eye' or visionary power, matches the radiance and light to be found within. We have previously remarked that most mystics do not themselves tend to see 'introvertive' and 'extrovertive' mysticism as two rigidly separate categories of experience; and Wordsworth illustrates this. For him, as for so many other mystics, the inner and the outer, mind and matter, are one. One spirit, one life, embraces both the inner mind and

soul, and the outer objects of sensory perception, giving rise to a series of microcosmic and macrocosmic correspondences, so that Wordsworth can exclaim:

How exquisitely the individual Mind  
.....to the external World  
Is fitted: -- and how exquisitely, too.....  
The external World is fitted to the Mind. (33)

As one might expect of a poet and nature-mystic, Wordsworth sees analytical reason as inadequate to understand the fullness of human experience. "Just as fancy, an inferior faculty of the poetic spirit, precedes imagination in order of mental evolution," says Rader of Wordsworth, "so also mere logical reason, a lower faculty of the intellect, appears in advance of the synthetic reason, which integrates thought and feeling." (34) This is reminiscent of my previous discussions on the higher mental and higher emotional faculties, and on the synthesis of 'knowledge', and 'faith' or 'love', found in typical forms of mystical cognition. Wordsworth speaks of the faculty he calls "imagination", which corresponds to mystical intuition; it unites or blends together into a whole, elements (whether objects of sense-experience, thoughts, feelings, and so on) originally of a different nature. Thus is achieved a unity-in-diversity, a unity of distinct things, even a unity of opposites. "Imagination" is a creative act of synthesis achieved in a single moment of intuition; it is a transcendental force, which gives unity to all life and unites humanity with the Divine. Like the Divine Spirit, with which it is essentially linked, it is present both in nature and in the creative activity of the human mind. When speaking of any of the higher mental and emotional faculties by which we apprehend the Infinite, Wordsworth appears to regard them as fundamentally one. Spiritual love, "imagination", "synthetic reason" which unites thought and feeling, all these are expressions of the divine principle within us by means of which we attain mystical insight:

This spiritual Love acts not nor can exist  
 Without Imagination, which, in truth,  
 Is but another name for absolute power  
 And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,  
 And Reason in her most exalted mood. (35)

Imagination having been our theme,  
 So also hath that intellectual Love,  
 For they are each in each, and cannot stand  
 Dividually..... (36)

While Wordsworth insists that the empirical world and the lower faculties are not to be rejected, nevertheless, he is like any other mystic in his observation that an excess of analytical rationalism, or an excessive attachment to the desires of the senses, sap the soul's vitality and its visionary power. Excessive rationalism, relied upon exclusively without regard for the other faculties of awareness, is a

.....false secondary power  
 By which we multiply distinctions, then  
 Deem that our puny boundaries are things  
 That we perceive, and not that we have made. (37)

In other words, it promotes belief in the paradigmatic value of distinctions and dichotomies which are created by our own minds: a danger against which mystics continually warn us. We should try instead to see the unity behind appearances, and this, for Wordsworth, can only be done by subordinating rationalism to "imagination", and the "bodily eye" to the "intellectual eye" (38) -- that eye by which we "see into the life of things". Parallels to this visionary 'eye' are found in the writings of other mystics: Boehme says that the "eye of time" must be brought under the governance of the "eye of eternity" to make a single eye; but we should never seek to destroy the "eye of time", or the faculty of reason, or the lower aspects of the self. (39) The Imitation of Christ speaks of the left eye which looks upon transitory things, and the right eye which looks upon the things of Heaven. (40) Eckhart speaks of the outward eye and the inward eye, the latter being identified with the

Ground of the Soul. (41) Boehme's ideal of forging a "single eye" can be compared to the eye that is "single and full of light" (42) and to the "Third Eye" of spiritual insight in the Hindu tradition: in each case the ideal is to unite the dualities (represented by the two eyes) into one.

It would appear that in his earlier life, Wordsworth was a strict pantheist, holding to the identity of God and Nature; later, partly due to the influence of Coleridge, he abandoned this belief for a new stage of panentheism (immanent theism). In his early poetry, Wordsworth expresses the belief that in "the one interior life" all beings are themselves God in a nondifferentiated whole (43); he speaks of nature in a way that suggests it is to be seen as the creative principle in the Universe and as non-different from God. (44) In his later life, however, he came to believe that the beauty in nature must come in part from another, transcendent source (45) as did the soul:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home..... (46)

The nature-mystic, through the inspiration attained through contemplation of nature, becomes "A thousand times more beautiful than the earth/On which he dwells, above this frame of things." (47) Certain passages in 'Tintern Abbey' illustrate the transition in belief. Looking back on his youth, Wordsworth says that Nature was then to him "all in all" and its beauty "had no need of a remoter charm/By thought supplied, nor any interest/Unborrowed from the eye" -- he felt no need for the belief in a transcendent divine power other than or 'outside' Nature. But that time of "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" is now passed: the vision is less intense and ecstatic than in his youth, but has been replaced by

other gifts which he feels to be "abundant recompense": a mature understanding, richer, deeper, and more stable:

.....For I have learned  
 To look on nature, not as in the hour  
 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
 The still, sad music of humanity,  
 Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
 To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
 A motion and a spirit, that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
 And rolls through all things. (48)

Such a transition from the intense vision of youth (the "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures") to a more mature understanding, could be regarded as a purely natural change which the years tend to bring; but it is possible also that it may represent Wordsworth's transition from an Illuminative stage such as has been previously described (the stage of heightened and intensified inspiration where the phenomenal world is seen transfigured in the vision of radiance) towards later phases of mystical apprehension which are nonetheless still nature-mystical (this in contrast to Underhill's argument that nature-mysticism per se belongs to the Illuminative phase of mysticism). The first fires of youth's love, whether in an earthly or a spiritual relationship, do not last forever; but in place of the "dizzy raptures" we enjoy a deeper intellectual understanding, a growing maturity of vision and a stronger resolution. For Wordsworth, in his later poetry, there is a quieter yet stronger sense of the oneness of humanity, God and Nature; and accompanying this, a new value and meaning seems to be seen in everyday objects, events, experiences and feelings -- a trait also often found amongst introvertive mystics who have passed through and beyond a phase of world-rejection. The unity of life does not in the end negate the individuality or worth of particular things; on the con-

trary, it enhances and reveals the richness of their singularity.

For Wordsworth (as also for Boehme, we shall see later), every natural object has its own inner or symbolic significance:

To every natural form, rock, fruit, or flower  
 Even the loose stones that cover the highway,  
 I gave a moral life: I saw them feel,  
 Or linked them to some feeling: the great mass  
 Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all  
 That I beheld respired with inward meaning. (49)

We also encounter, as in Boehme, the theme of the Universe as a book in which can be read hidden secrets. Wordsworth speaks of a child listening to the sounds within a sea-shell:

.....from within were heard  
 Murmurings, whereby the monitor expressed  
 Mysterious union with its native sea.  
 Even such a shell the universe itself  
 Is to the ear of Faith; and there are times,  
 I doubt not, when to you it doth impart  
 Authentic tidings of invisible things;  
 Of ebb and flow, and ever-during power..... (50)

Wordsworth's poetry also illustrates other characteristics of nature-mysticism that I have outlined in the first part of this chapter. He speaks of humanity's being out of tune with the harmony of nature's laws (in, for example, 'The world is too much with us'), and believes that we should attempt to love all living beings and attempt to live in harmony with the natural cycles and rhythms of the cosmos, as animals and plants do instinctively.

Wordsworth's experiences certainly do not seem to support Zaehner's views on nature-mysticism (that it is attainable without efforts towards self-perfection, has no moral value, etc.). Communion with Nature, according to Wordsworth's own evaluation of his experiences, is able to purify both feeling and thought, "sanctifying by such discipline/Both pain and fear" (51) -- so that the nature-mystic, perhaps, like the introverted mystic, passes beyond fear and pain in the sense that they can no longer

touch him or her. It gives strength and hope, "life and food/For future years"; it can infuse us with "lofty thoughts" so as to "have no slight or trivial influence/On that best portion of a good man's life." (52) The difference between Wordsworth's own evaluation of his experiences, and Zaehner's derogatory attitude to nature-mysticism, points up the fact that we must pay attention first and foremost to what mystics themselves say about their experiences, rather than attempting to analyse these experiences in terms of a preconceived theological framework. The mind of the nature-mystic, according to Wordsworth, "feeds upon infinity"; it is "sustained/By recognitions of transcendent power"; and those who follow this way attain "the highest bliss/That flesh can know", which is twofold:

.....the consciousness  
Of Whom they are, habitually infused  
Through every image and through every thought,  
And all affections by communion raised  
From earth to heaven, from human to divine..... (53)

In other words, the emotions are spiritualised, and there is a consciousness of the Divine in all things and at all times; and also, through knowing oneself, the Deity becomes known. Wordsworth also tells us in this passage that those who attain this state of consciousness are freed from the bondage of attachment to sense-impressions, and so are able to "hold converse with the spiritual world"; they attain peace, true freedom, and "cheerfulness for acts of daily life" -- that new evaluation of everyday experiences mentioned above. It seems, then, that the final or long-term phenomenological effects of nature-mystical experience are very similar to those of introvertive mystical experience.

#### Rabindranath Tagore

A parallel to Wordsworth's communings with nature is found in the



East in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore. Like Wordsworth, Tagore was a poet, and just as Wordsworth has more than a touch of the religious philosopher about him, so Tagore was also a highly-acclaimed philosophical and spiritual writer. Both are intuitive, romantic thinkers, idealists; their modes of expression are really very similar, in contradistinction to metaphysical and devotional expressions of mysticism. Tagore, like Wordsworth, stresses the futility of an excessive rationalism (although he does, of course, accept the validity of reason on its own level); his type of thought is intuitive and poetic.

Tagore sees the Divine made manifest in the flowers, the rivers, the trees, in the cyclic recurrence of the seasons and of day and night, even in the very air we breathe and in the earth on which we walk. He stresses the interrelationship of God, humanity, and nature, which three make up a harmonious whole, a whole which is spiritual and which is fundamentally full of beauty and peace (even if we are not always able to see it as such). Tagore follows Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition, rejecting Advaita, holding that Divine Reality is personal and that the human soul is a minute portion of the Deity; the Deity is seen as both immanent and transcendent, and in his immanent aspect, with which we will be most concerned here, he is manifest both in nature and in the human self. Tagore stresses the richness, the worth, the unique individuality, to be found in the diversity of human souls and of all created things. He gives a very positive evaluation to the material world and to outward action, far removed from some earlier Indian ideals of renunciation and asceticism. While God is manifest in all of creation, he manifests himself more fully in the human soul than in any other aspect of creation; I have touched on this idea of humanity as the microcosm or Axis Mundi above. God's ideal is made manifest in humanity, and it is our

sacred duty to strive towards perfect realisation of this ideal. Tagore follows Viśiṣṭādvaita in holding that, even in the highest stages of mystical realisation, the soul retains its individuality; his is a mysticism of communion, not of absorption into an impersonal Absolute.

We find a fundamental nature-mystical conception in Tagore's concept of the one life-force that flows through ourselves and through all things, and which gives us a fundamental spiritual harmony, an intimate relationship, with nature. This force he calls the "force of life" (jivani-shakti), the "stream of life" (jivana-pravaha), the "flow of breath" (pranadhara), the "stream of consciousness" (chetana-pravaha).

It flows through every blade of grass, every branch of every tree. It thrills the green fields around me. I see every fibre of palm sapling quivering with consciousness. (54)

This is the primal power of life itself, the energy behind all phenomena, equivalent to Wordsworth's "presence that rolls through all things". Just as Wordsworth sees nature as vital with divine power, and sees the whole universe as the "workings of one mind" in which humanity, the world and the Deity are interlinked, so Tagore's vision of this universal 'life-force' gives rise to a system of microcosmic and macrocosmic correspondences embracing both the human soul and the outer objects of the world in a Divine harmony and unity:

.....the earth and the sky are woven with the fibres of man's mind, which is the universal mind at the same time. (55)

The world without us and the intellect within us -- these two are the expressions of the same shakti. Having understood this, we experience the unity of nature with the human mind and also the unity of the mind with God. (56)

Like Wordsworth, too, Tagore sees that every natural object has its own precise inner or symbolic significance; nature, manifesting as it does the Infinite in its every detail, can be read like a 'book':

I understand the voice of your stars  
and the silence of your trees..... (57)

He speaks of a "Language of Nature" which we can compare to Boehme's Language of Nature. (58) Speaking of plants, for example, Tagore says:

Their language is the primal language of life, and their movements point to the first springs of Being. The history of a thousand and forgotten ages is stored up in their gestures. (59)

As for Boehme, so for Tagore, the correspondences between the natural order and spiritual truths enable us to see each aspect of nature as expressing a certain spiritual principle or an aspect of the inner life; but Tagore expresses this in a more poetic, less precise way than Boehme:

The sky here seems penetrated with the voice of the infinite, making the peace of its daybreak and stillness of its night profound with meaning..... the sun rises from the marge of the green earth like an offering of the unseen to the altar of the Unknown, and it goes down to the west at the end of the day like a gorgeous ceremony of nature's salutation to the Eternal. (60)

My realisation is in the light of this blue sky; liberation is in the stars and in the green grasses of this world. (61)

Throughout his writings, Tagore emphasises his conviction that creation possesses a unity, a harmony, a transcendent beauty. He always stresses harmony, balance, and unity -- but his unity does not exclude diversity, rather it embraces it in all its richness. He emphasises too, like Wordsworth, that we must ourselves try to live as a part of this unity -- to live in harmony and kinship with nature -- neither ignoring or rejecting her, nor destructively attempting to bend her to our own ends. We should attune ourselves to her rhythms, which are also our own rhythms and the rhythms of the cosmos. If we love the Deity, we should also love the world -- again and again Tagore stresses this essential threefold unity and harmony between ourselves, nature, and God.

Tagore speaks of the typical nature-mystical experience in which sense-perception is heightened, and in which natural objects take on a new glory, a transcendental beauty. In the following passage, which

describes this experience, he also sees the same joyous spirit in nature as in the depths of his own self, as a 'layer' is removed from his eyes and he 'sees all things anew':

One morning, I stood on the balcony of our Calcutta house and looked at the gardens of free school. The sun was just rising behind the green branches of trees and I looked on. Suddenly I felt as if a layer was removed from my eyes. I saw an ineffable beauty. I felt an inexplicable joy within the depths of my own being and I found the whole universe soaked in it. My discontent vanished instantaneously and a universal light flooded my entire being. (62)

Like Wordsworth, he is "seeing into the life of things".

An essential part of Tagore's philosophy, and one which is vital as regards his nature-mysticism, is his conviction that the world is not antagonistic to the spirit, but is a means through which the spirit should be expressed. Tagore often represents his concept of divinised nature by a feminine principle, the woman "in the heart of creation", which we can see as a new and more positive evaluation of *māyā/prakṛti*, the passive, 'feminine' principle in the creation of the Universe:

She who is ever returning to God his own outflowing of sweetness; she is the ever fresh beauty and youth in nature; she dances in the bubbling streams and sings in the morning light; she with heaving waves suckles the thirsty earth..... (63)

It is through this divine feminine principle that the active aspect of the Deity realises itself in the world, makes itself actual, in an outburst of creative joy and love. We can compare Boehme's Sophia, to be discussed in the next chapter, and medieval conceptions of the Goddess Natura, discussed above, to Tagore's thought here. Through his concept of this divine feminine principle, as well as in the general tenor of his thought as a whole, Tagore stresses the importance of the union of finite and Infinite as two essential parts of the universal harmony. The Infinite without the finite is barren, empty, unrealised, unable to manifest itself. The finite without the Infinite, that is, the finite seen simply in its

material aspect without consciousness of the transcendent, is illusory (māyā), a bondage. But when it is seen in its true relationship to the Infinite, it is neither bondage nor illusion. Nature and the world, Tagore says, are not to be rejected or escaped from, they are to be spiritualised. The world is not evil in itself, although our attitude to it is frequently wrong: a point which we have found echoed by other mystics, in particular by Plotinus. (64) Nature should be the instrument of the spirit. The world does not make us impure; it is the necessary means whereby our spiritual nature must grow to maturity. The world is the image of God (as so are we); it should be a channel for expression of Divine power and love, and a means by which we can approach the Divine. All the objects of nature can lead us to God, if we look at them in the right light, in the correct spirit. I have argued in Chapter V of this study that symbols, metaphysical terminology, and other forms of mystical 'language' have a twofold purpose: they serve as means for the expression of Divine power, and as methods by which we may rise to immediate experience of this power. Similarly, in nature-mysticism, the material world is both a manifestation of the Divine, and a means by which we can approach the Divine. For a mystic like Tagore, the world itself is the prime means of mystical expression or 'language', and our life itself is the prime mystical technique: that is, mystical practice must be lived in every moment of our everyday lives. Tagore thus challenges the attitude of world-rejection which has played a substantial part in the ascetic strand of Indian thought:

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.... No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight. All my illusions will burn into illuminations of joy, and all my desires ripen into fruits of love. (65)

The Deity is to be found within the world, within our every daily activity.

For Tagore, as for so many other mystics, the all-important question is that of our attitude to the world:

Bondage has its stronghold in the inner self, not in the outside world. Bondage is in the dimming of our consciousness, in the narrowing of our perceptions, in the wrong valuation of things. (66)

It is obvious that any sympathetic appreciation of nature-mysticism must be based on the premise that the visible world reflects the beauty of the invisible realm, and that through the beauties of the natural world we may be led to contemplation of the Divine (whether seen as synonymous with Nature, or as bearing a relation of 'identity-in-difference' to it). Plotinus aptly remarks, in his attack on a certain Gnostic sect, that those who despise "the kindred of these higher realities" (i.e., who despise the beauties of this world), "do not know the higher beings either but only talk as if they did" (67) -- their knowledge of higher realities is merely verbal. In dualistic systems of theology, God and the world are rigidly separated, and nature-mysticism is rejected. In most monistic systems, on the other hand, the Universe is an emanation of the Absolute. As regards creation, this is often seen in terms of the Absolute "thinking itself", and thus taking on form, which is its body, and which becomes the created Universe: this account of creation is seen in Boehme and in much other Western mysticism, as well as in Indian thought. The Universe is therefore a mirror of the Absolute, and the Divine can be seen in all creation. William Law (an 18th century English mystic, a pupil of Boehme) saw materiality as the Body of Light, or the Garment in which Light is clothed, and therefore as containing all the properties of Light within it, and only differing from Light in terms of brightness, beauty and power. (68) The same type of monism is basic to Plotinus and the Platonic theory of knowledge, and to the Kabbalah, which holds that "Kether [the ineffable, nondual source of all] is in Malkuth [the physical world]."

Plotinus may well be right in suggesting that dualists have not really experienced mystical reality, but only talk as if they had. It may well be that to experience the immanence of the Divine in nature is an essential corollary to the vision of the reflection of divinity within oneself -- monism or dualism of God and the world implying a corresponding monism or dualism of God and the soul. I have argued elsewhere in this study that any account of mysticism which is to be metaphysically coherent, must admit to an essential unity of the Divine and the soul, and thus the world, too, should be seen as an image of the Divine, as a channel for divine life and energy. But if we attempt to bend the world to our own ends, using it for our own selfish sensation and enjoyment, we will not find the Divine in it. It is found only through self-surrender and dedication to spiritual ideals, and through seeing all the finite things of this world not simply in themselves, limited and in opposition to other things, but in their relationship to the whole. In nature-mysticism the One is found in rather than beyond the many; but we must, nevertheless, keep our sights on the One, and not become entangled in the material world for its own sake. Thus nature-mysticism, while showing some differences from introvertive mysticism, also shows some important similarities. We must see the world in the light of that vision of beauty which is within the world while yet pointing beyond it.

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- (38) Rader, *op. cit.*, Pp.107-108.
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- (42) Matthew 6:22, Luke 11:34.
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CHAPTER IV  
MYSTICISM & OCCULTISM

## MYSTICISM AND OCCULTISM: JACOB BOEHME, TANTRA AND INDIAN ALCHEMY

Jacob Boehme, the German mystic and occult philosopher (1575-1624), was strongly influenced by alchemy, astrology, and other branches of esotericism which during his lifetime permeated certain streams of European thought. Much of his writing is veiled in alchemical symbolism which is often obscure. It would be outside the scope of this study to give a full exposition of alchemical symbolism; fascinating as this is, our main concern must be with Boehme's more strictly mystical writings. Nevertheless, we cannot appreciate Boehme without some understanding of his methods of exposition and his forms of expression. His mystical philosophy raises the question of the precise interrelationship between 'mysticism' and 'magic' or 'occultism', and of the validity of occult practices as means towards spiritual realisation.

I have elsewhere noted the futility of anthropological discussions regarding whether magical or ritual action is to be regarded as 'symbolic' or as 'instrumental' (i.e., intended to be causally efficacious). This is closely connected with an assumed dichotomy between the 'subjective' and the 'objective', which is discussed in this connection. (1) I have also elsewhere mentioned the rejection of occult philosophy by certain writers such as Underhill, who views it as a spurious and arrogant heresy. (2) Certainly there are some forms of occult activity which have little to do with any mysticism worthy of the name, but the higher or more spiritual aspects of what is known as 'magic' are often very close to mysticism. Boehme is a prime example of the occultist who is also a great mystic. He distinguishes between 'natural magi' and 'divine magi', a distinction which broadly corresponds to what are today known in occult circles as practitioners of 'low' and 'high' magic. The divine magus, says Boehme, under-

stands how to read the Divine laws in nature, the word of God manifest (a key point in Boehme's philosophy); he or she understands "the ground of eternal nature, out of which the nature of this world had its original, and wherein it standeth"; whereas the natural magus merely manipulates elemental forces. (3) The true magician works in and through the Divine, and for the glory of the Divine, and not through any selfish or arrogant motive:

Therefore should a magus give up his will to God, and fix his magic faith (wherewith he will search the figure of nature in its forms and conditions) in God, that he may apprehend the word of God, and introduce it into the figure of nature, and then he is a right true divine magus, and may master the inward ground with divine power and virtue, and bring nature into a figure. He that practiseth otherwise herein, he is a false and wicked magus.....  
(4)

Magic (Boehme uses the term magia) is potentially a power for good or evil, but used with discretion and understanding, is a valid aspect of mystical endeavour:

And it is no way to be thought, as if a Christian ought not to dare to meddle with the ground of nature, but that he must be a clod and dumb image in the knowledge and skill of the secret mysteries of nature; as Babel saith, Man ought not to dare to search and know it, it were sin; which all of them, one and other, understand as much of the ground of sin as the pot doth of the potter..... (5)

Magic is the best theology, for in it true faith is both grounded and found. And he is a fool that reviles it; for he knows it not, and blasphemes against God and himself, and is more a juggler than a theologian of understanding ....the unjust theologian looks on Magic through a reflection, and understands nothing of the power. For it is godlike, and he is ungodlike, yea devilish.....  
(6)

Indeed, we shall see later that the Law of Correspondences which is so basic to magic, and on which Boehme's 'Signature of all Things' is based, is also highly important in mystical philosophy, particularly as a means to relate one's insights and inner revelations to this world, to bring them down or through, as it were, and to bridge the gap between the inner and the outer, the 'subjective' and the 'objective', the psychological exper-

ience and the world. Without a knowledge of the occult forces he or she is working with, the mystic can easily lose touch with material reality, or lapse into quietism and passivity, unable to relate his or her experiences to everyday life. It could be argued that, once the higher aspects of occultism are understood, every mystic should be an occultist and every occultist a mystic. According to Rabbinical legend, the angel set to guard the gate of Eden at the Fall instructed Adam in the mysteries of Kabbalah and alchemy, promising that when humanity had mastered the wisdom concealed therein, entry to Paradise might be regained. Boehme's philosophy can be seen as a profound attempt to regain the inner Paradise, through a study of these subjects and through attempting to return to the condition of Adam (Primordial Man) in Paradise.

The onset of mystical consciousness for Boehme entailed a vision of the inner meaning of the phenomenal world, and has been mentioned in our discussion of nature-mysticism. Going into a meadow, he "gazed into the very heart of things, the very herbs and grass....he saw into their essences, use and properties, which were discovered to him by their lineaments, figures and signatures...." (7) This experience, in which Boehme saw revealed the occult sympathies or correspondences between natural forms and spiritual forces, must have been the basis of his 'Signature of all Things', which will be discussed below. But at this stage, his knowledge was entirely intuitive. He was not a learned scholar, but a poor shoemaker; although later in his life he studied more deeply, at this stage he was unable to understand or explain his experience rationally:

In one quarter of an hour I saw and knew more than if I had been many years together at a university .....For I saw and knew the Being of all beings, the Byss and Abyss [Ungrund], also the birth or eternal generation of the Holy Trinity; the descent and original of this world, and of all creatures, through the divine wisdom [göttlichen Weisheit = Sophia]. I knew and saw myself in all three worlds, namely the divine, angelical, and paradisiacal world; and then the dark world, being the original of nature to

fire; and then, thirdly, the external or visible world, being a procreation, or external birth; or as a substance expressed or spoken forth from both the internal and spiritual worlds; and I saw and knew the whole being in the evil and in the good, and the mutual original and existence of each of them.....I saw it (as in a great deep) in the internal, for I had a thorough view of the universe, as in a Chaos, wherein all things are couched and wrapped up, but it was impossible for me to explicate and unfold the same. (8)

(The various terms and details of Boehme's philosophy used here are elucidated below.) Twelve years later, when Boehme was 35, a further illumination occurred, when his scattered, fragmentary intuitions were co-ordinated into a coherent whole. His first work, the Aurora, was written as a result of this illumination, and many other writings followed. (The Aurora shows a parallel to the symbolism of dawn, denoting illumination, which we have observed in the writings of many other mystics. The title page of the Aurora reads : "Aurora. That is, the Day-Spring. Or, Dawning of the Day in the Orient, or Morning-Rednesse in the Rising of the Sun. That is the Root and Mother of Philosophie, Astrologie, and Theologie from the true Ground.")

### The Signature of all Things

Boehme's Signatura Rerum, or Signature of all Things, is basic to his philosophy. It is grounded in the notion that outer forms express inner qualities, and are outward or visible symbols of inward essences or realities. The visible world is a manifestation of the interior spiritual world; the Deity is manifested in nature and in the human soul; this world is "a reflection of eternity which allows eternity to make itself visible" (9). Boehme says, "the external is a type [bild: image, symbol, or representation] of the internal" (10); "time coucheth in eternity" (11). Everything finite reflects the Infinite:

And now observe, as it stands in the power and predominance of the quality, so it is signed and marked externally in its outward form, signature, or figure; man in his speech, will and behaviour, also with the form of the members which he has, and must use to that signature, his inward form is noted in the form of his face; and thus also is a beast, an herb, and the trees; everything as it is inwardly (in its innate virtue and quality) so it is outwardly signed [ein jedes Ding wie es in sich ist, also ist es auch auswendig bezeichnet] .....Therefore the greatest understanding lies in the signature, wherein man (viz. the image of the greatest virtue) may not only learn to know himself, but therein also he may learn to know the essence of all essences; for by the external form of all creatures, by their instigation, inclination and desire, also by their sound, voice and speech which they utter, the hidden spirit is known..... (12)

The external form of all particular things, then, reflects a certain type of power, virtue, quality, or energy, and this applies to all of nature, from metals, to herbs, flowers and trees, to animals and humankind. To take an example, from the colour, smell and form of a flower, we can deduce its inner properties. This knowledge (which is basic to the lore of herbal medicine) is in fact based on astrology. The outer form (etc.) of a herb tells us what planet it is 'ruled' by (with which planetary influence it corresponds) and this in turn gives a knowledge of its inner properties. Boehme refers to astrological doctrines throughout his writings, and many of his speculations are based on the archetypal seven symbolic planetary forces known to the ancients (the seven 'planets' or heavenly bodies being Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn). These are the seven properties through which Divine power operates, and Boehme often refers to them as the seven qualities of Eternal Nature. It is through an understanding of these seven forces that one is able to proceed from the outer to the inner, in other words, to discover the hidden qualities concealed within the manifest form. Conversely, whoever understands the eternal Ground underlying all things can understand its manifestations, and proceed from the inner to the outer, reading the Signature (inner meaning) in the form by a slightly different procedure. The true magician,

whom Boehme calls the divine magus, can read the Signature in this latter sense. (Whereas the first method of procedure can, if necessary, be worked out by means of reason and learning alone, this is not the case with the second.) The divine magus has sought the Kingdom of Heaven -- he knows the Ground underlying all things -- and these things have been added unto him. Boehme calls the 'language' of the essence or spirit within, as distinct from the language concerned with outward forms, the 'Language of Nature'. He imagines that this might be the single language spoken by all people before the building of the Tower of Babel. (Boehme uses 'Babel' to mean the opinions of the hypocrites who put on a show of holiness and self-righteousness, engaging in learned debates about God without having the necessary spiritual insight; they have brought about the 'division of languages' which means that people can no longer understand one another because they are blind to the true significances of things, and so they set up warring factions and religious sects.) Boehme suggests also that the Language of Nature is the language according to which Adam gave names to all things. He says that Adam in Paradise was "full of all knowledge" and that "....God brought all the beasts to him, that he should look upon them, and give every one its name, according to its essence.....And Adam knew what every creature was, and he gave to every one its name, according to the quality of its spirit. As God can see into the heart of all things, so could Adam do also....." (13) The 'language' of the Signature, the Language of Nature, is the magical language of the 'true names' of things, the language formed by the connections between Divine force, and the forms which it indwells. Each created thing is a particular mode of Divine revelation. To know this language, to know the inner essence of things, amounts to knowledge of the one Principle at the centre of all, and of the ways in which this Principle becomes



manifest throughout all the Universe. "As God could see into the heart of all things," says Boehme above, "so could Adam do also." God's omniscience is paralleled by our own potential omniscience, and hence the goal of Boehme, as I have said before, is to return to the state of Adam in Paradise. This is seen as an expression of a mystical regeneration which will embrace the whole person, and also as the expression of a religious regeneration in society, which in Boehme takes on a slight Apocalyptic or Millennial tone.

Lest the speculations above should seem fanciful, it may be as well to elucidate their philosophical basis. We have already encountered in our discussion of nature-mysticism the basic mystical experience of the unity of all life; and in our examination of the metaphysical systems of Plotinus, Śankara, and others, we have come across the notion that there is some ineffable power which is the basis of all knowledge, being, etc. This is the key to all knowledge -- that, by knowing which, all is known. Boehme's Signature of all Things is grounded in the Law of Correspondences previously referred to, according to which all things are interlinked, all planes or levels of being interrelated, in an all-embracing unity. All things are governed by one central law or principle, and that which is true upon one level of being finds its truth reflected after another manner on other levels. This is contained within the Hermetic axiom, "As above, so below". To fully understand the one Principle at the centre of all creation is therefore to penetrate its secrets in manifestation, this being the goal of Boehme's 'divine magia'. It corresponds to the realisation of the one power which is the basis of all (as in Plotinus, Śankara, etc.) together with an apprehension of its manifestation on all levels of being (one aspect of this being shown by the awareness of unity in nature-mysticism). Boehme's goal is the typical goal of the Renaissance

magus: to penetrate the secrets of both God and Nature. His mysticism is both 'introvertive' and 'extrovertive', and in addition embodies other elements of its own, such as a type of quasi-science or meta-physics in its alchemical theories.

The Law of Correspondences is also basic to astrology, and a brief discussion of this may elucidate the matter further. Astrological thought does not hold that the planets literally 'cause' events on earth: the relation is one not of causality but of correlation, or of what Jung has called synchronicity. (14) Through an understanding of the one principle at the centre of the universe, and the various ways in which it may manifest, events on earth can be correlated with the movements of the planets, or 'read off' from them. One part of the universe may be read from another (hence the ability to prophecy or foretell the future) but the cause is transcendent to all the particular parts. 'Signs', wonders, miracles and so on, can also be explained according to the Law of Correspondences, and indeed it is basic to magical practice. Plotinus, speaking of astrology, describes it thus:

We may think of the stars as letters perpetually being inscribed on the heavens or inscribed once for all and yet moving as they pursue the other tasks allotted to them: upon these main tasks will follow the quality of signifying, just as one principle underlying any living unit enables us to reason from member to member, so that for example we may judge of character and even of perils and safeguards by indications in the eyes or in some other part of the body. If these parts of us are members of a whole, so are we: in different ways the one law applies.

All teems with symbol; the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another, a process familiar to all of us in not a few examples of everyday experience .....All things must be enchained; and the sympathy and correspondence obtaining in any one closely knit organism must exist, first, and most intensely, in the All. There must be one principle constituting this unit of many forms of life and enclosing the several members within the unity .....Thus each entity takes its origin from one principle and, therefore, while executing its own function, works in with every other member of that All from which its distinct task has by no means cut it off....." (15)

It could be argued that this philosophical theory, far from being an

outdated archaic fancy, is an essential aspect of a coherent and 'wholistic' mystical philosophy; we shall see later that it has profound import for questions concerning 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity', and for the 'Problem of Reference' in the philosophy of religion.

### Astrology in Boehme

Boehme makes use of astrological symbolism to elucidate certain aspects of his philosophy. He speaks of the seven 'forms' in nature, as we have mentioned above, seven archetypal forces or properties by which all things are governed, and which correspond to the seven 'planets' of the ancients:

There are especially seven forms in nature, both in the eternal and external nature; for the external proceed from the eternal [die aussere geben aus der ewigen]. The ancient philosophers have given names to the seven planets according to the seven forms of nature [sieben Gestalten der Natur]; but they have understood thereby another thing, not only the seven stars, but the sevenfold properties in the generation of all essences [die siebenerlen Eigenschaften in der Gebarung aller Wesen]..... (16)

These seven properties can be seen to be manifest in the Divine Essence, in the outer world of nature, and also within ourselves. Each archetype corresponds to a certain aspect of the psychic life, to certain drives, desires, and patterns of behaviour, and to certain spiritual qualities which are linked to their analogues in the Divine Being. The aim of astrology (when not reduced to mere fortune-telling) is self-knowledge: the more one becomes consciously aware of the various forces within the psyche and the way in which they interrelate in one's own particular case, the better one is able to understand oneself and one's life. In its highest expression, astrological doctrine (now as in Boehme's time) conceives of a goal similar to that of the nontheistic mystic: to free oneself from all the particular limitations and contingencies of the lower self, as represented

by the planetary patterns. In astrological parlance, this is known as "ruling one's stars" (cf. the adage "The wise man rules his stars") whereas one who has not attained to this degree of understanding is said to be "ruled by" his or her stars. As far as the deterministic aspect of astrology is concerned, this amounts to the assertion that once we understand the nature of the bonds and limitations by which we are determined, and once we are able to put this knowledge into action, we are free. Our life is determined on the phenomenal level, but we are truly free on the noumenal. It is interesting to compare Boehme's expression of this idea, with that given by a modern astrological textbook:

For the outward life is fallen quite under the power of the stars, and if thou wilt understand them, thou must enter into God's will, and then they are but as a shadow, and cannot bring that to effect which they have in their power .....For the image of God in man is so powerful and mighty, that when it wholly casteth itself into the will of God, it overpowereth nature, so that the stars are obedient to it..... (17)

Inasmuch as a man identifies himself with his physical self and the physical world about him, so he is indissolubly part of it and subject to its changing pattern as formed by the planets in their orbits. Only by the recognition of that which he senses as greater than himself can he attune himself to what is beyond the terrestrial pattern. In this way, though he may not escape terrestrial happenings, by the doctrine of free and willing "acceptance", he can "will" that his real self is free in relation to them. (18)

### Alchemy

Boehme, however, makes greater use of alchemical than of astrological symbolism, although the two are often intertwined. In the former, references not only to the planets but also to the metals 'ruled' by them, are used to express the stages on the path to self-understanding and spiritual realisation. The one principle at the centre of all things, that root of all knowledge upon which the Law of Correspondences and the

Signature are based, is identified with the Philosophers' Stone (or, less frequently, with the Tincture, the Elixir of Life, etc.). It transmutes the base metal of the lower, selfish desires and attachments into the Gold of spiritual understanding. The quest for this principle is known as the Magnum Opus, the Great Work, and amongst Christian alchemists (Boehme included) is identified with the unfoldment of the Christ-principle within the self; analogies are drawn between Christ's life (here seen primarily in the symbolic rather than the historical sense) and the stages of the alchemical process of the transmutation of metals. Man is the microcosm, containing the 'divine spark' within; the 'measure of all things', because of the manifold correspondences that can be drawn between the human psyche and outward bodily form, and the universe of which we are a part. Ideally, or speaking from the point of view of ultimate realisation, the human being is himself or herself the Philosophers' Stone, and is also identified with the Prima Materia, the first substance of the universe out of which all things evolve (cf. the Hindu prakṛti). The Philosophers' Stone or Prima Materia is made up of the seven planetary principles and of the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) brought into equilibrium and equal proportion, and transmuted into the 'Quintessence' -- raised up to a higher unity or synthesis. It was said by the alchemists that to reattain the Prima Materia, one must reconcile extremes: all pairs of opposites must be balanced, and fire and water, air and earth, must be brought back into unity and harmony. The four elements here are symbolic of certain principles in the human constitution, as will be discussed later. This idea of the union of opposites was also expressed in the 'Hermetic Marriage' symbolised by the marriage of a King and Queen, or of the Sun and Moon. It represented both the union of masculine and feminine principles within the self, and the union of divine and human conscious-

ness. The symbolism of Mercury, Sulphur and Salt is used to express the triune human constitution of spirit, soul and body. (The exact details of this system are complex, and sometimes inconsistent, and must remain outside the scope of our discussion. The basic point is that the alchemists used the symbols of Mercury, Sulphur and Salt to represent various principles in God, humanity and the world of nature.) The three are enclosed in a vessel symbolising the self, and the fire applied to the vessel -- the Incendium Amoris, Rolle's purificatory 'Fire of Love' -- begins the process of the Great Work.

Without attempting to begin to fully elucidate Boehme's alchemical symbolism, we may give an extract from his writings which will show by way of example how allegory and simile are used by the alchemists, and how apparently obscure, archaic terminology may still hold a vital meaning for us today if we are able to penetrate the veil of symbolism. The following passages makes explicit (which is fairly unusual; alchemy is notorious for obscurity) the identification of the alchemical process with both the life of Christ and the inner life of the mystic-cum-magus. Beneath the complex symbolism is revealed the nature of a death/rebirth experience, here identified with the crucifixion, which brings about a transformation:

I will hereby give the well-wisher fundamentally to understand how it went with Christ, and how in like manner it goes with his philosophic work; both have wholly one process. Christ overcame the wrath of death in the human property, and changed the anger of the Father into love in the human property; the philosopher likewise has even such a will, he wills to turn the wrathful earth into heaven, and change the poisonous Mercury into love..... And as it went in the humanity of Christ, betwixt God's love and anger, and both were transformed into one; so likewise it is in his work of nature, the poisonous Mercury in the Sulphur of Mars and Saturn gives its lunar menstruum, viz. the greatest poison of the dark source into Venus's property; when Venus thirsts after the fire of love, then Mercury gives his poison into the thirst of Venus, and Venus's thirst gives itself wholly to the poison, as if it died; it wholly yields up its desiring life, whereupon arises the great darkness in the philosophic work: For the

materia becomes as black as a raven, for Venus has resigned its life, from whence the glance (or splendour) arises, as it is to be seen by Christ, that the Sun lost its light, and there was a great darkness contrary to the common course of nature. (19)

If this is not entirely clear, it is hoped that the interaction between Boehme's mystical teachings and his alchemical and Hermetic symbolism will become clearer as we proceed to discuss his teachings regarding the nature of the Divine and of the mystical life.

A note should perhaps be added regarding what I have so far called the 'symbolic' nature of alchemy. There has been much scholarly debate regarding the exact nature of the alchemical work: to what extent were the descriptions of alchemical experiments symbolic of inner processes? Did the alchemists seriously believe that they might be able to turn base metals to gold? This is in fact a complex question, and the answer hinges on philosophical principles as much as on historical evidence. Firstly, there must certainly have been some alchemists who were motivated purely by the desire for material riches, and who failed to discern any inner meaning in the doctrines. We need not discuss them further, as they clearly do not qualify as mystics of any description. Secondly, a large number of alchemists saw the doctrines in their symbolic meaning only; Boehme was one such. Thirdly, many early alchemists, it seems, in fact intended their chemical experiments to be understood both literally and symbolically; unless the experiment resulted in the Tincture or Philosophers' Stone being produced on all levels of being -- physical as well as spiritual -- it had not been wholly successful. This may seem incredible, and I shall not comment on the possibility of literally transmuting base metal into gold (although it seems no less incredible than changing water into wine). What is of more importance, for our present discussion, are the philosophical premises upon which such a belief is built. These premises are those of the Law of Correspondences; of an essential connection

between different levels of being; and of the lack of a dichotomy between the symbolic and the real. There is a point at which the symbolic and the real meet, at which the inner psychic world and the outer world of nature are one. The Magnum Opus of the early alchemists, then, was intended to be accomplished both within the soul and in matter; both in the abstract and in the concrete. One writer comments:

As it is in the spiritual and material universes, so it is in the intellectual world..... Through art (the process of learning) the whole mass of base metals (the mental body of ignorance) was transmuted into pure gold (wisdom), for it was tinctured with understanding. If, then, through faith and proximity to God the consciousness of man may be transmuted from base animal desires..... into a pure, golden and godly consciousness, illumined and redeemed .....if also the base metals of mental ignorance can, through proper endeavour and training, be transmuted into transcendent genius and wisdom, why is the process in two worlds or spheres of application not equally true in the third? ....That which is true in the superior is true in the inferior. If alchemy be a great spiritual fact, then it is also a great material fact. If it can take place in the universe, it can take place in man; if it can take place in man, it can take place in plants and animals. (20)

The growth of a tiny seed into a great tree, or the transmutation of consciousness undergone by the mystic, can be seen to be just as 'miraculous' as the idea of transmuting base metals into gold. Boehme would certainly have agreed with the paragraph quoted above, from a writer sympathetic towards alchemy; the type of philosophy expressed is the same as his own, even though he probably never actually performed any alchemical experiments himself on the physical level. We may be justified in expressing scepticism as to the possibility of the Magnum Opus being accomplished on the physical level, but in all fairness, it should be added that, since the transmutation was to take place on all levels of being at once, no-one could hope to bring it about on the physical level without undergoing the mystical transformation within; in order to perform successful alchemy, one has to be a divine magus in Boehme's sense. "Unless the greater alchemy has taken place within the soul of man, he



cannot perform the lesser alchemy in the retort" (21) -- which elevates physical alchemy more or less to the status of a divinely-inspired miracle.

### Esoteric Scriptural Interpretation

Boehme's writings are also full of fascinating teachings as to the inner or hidden meaning of the Scriptures, which often contain a good deal of insight. The prime example of this is his work Mysterium Magnum, which expounds the creation myth of Genesis according to Boehme's Three Principles (shortly to be discussed); the seven days of creation are related to the seven properties of Nature and of the Divine Essence. Through his Language of Nature, Boehme arrives at a method of esoteric scriptural exegesis which gives inner meanings to the stories and parables and myths of the Bible, meanings which are vitally connected with mystical understanding, and which often centre around parallels drawn between Adam and Christ, representing earthly and heavenly humankind:

The acts of the Bible are not set down because men should see the life and deeds of the old holy men or saints, as Babel supposeth. No, the kingdom of Christ above all is thereby deciphered, as also the kingdom of hell: the visible figure continually pointeth at the invisible, which shall be manifested in the spiritual man..... whosoever will read and understand aright the history of the Old Testament, he must set before him two types, viz. externally Adam, viz. the earthly man, and internally Christ, and change both these into One; and so he may understand all whatsoever Moses and the prophets have spoken in the spirit. (22)

To give an example, Boehme interprets the "waters above the firmament" of Genesis as the spiritual "water of life" (the alchemical Aqua Vitae), the waters "below the firmament" being material and elemental water. Therefore Boehme says:

If he be awakened in man in the water above the firmament, which disappeared in Adam, as to his life, that man seeth through all; otherwise there is no understanding here, but all is dumb. (23)

In other words, if one has awakened to the Spirit within, the true meaning of the Scriptures will be understood. All the different wrangling opinions and futile debates about God, says Boehme, are the result of our not having the divine vision given by this Spirit within; we no longer understand the one Language of Nature, and speak in the "confounded tongues" of Babel. (24)

### The Nature of the Deity

The nature of the Deity receives a highly original treatment in Boehme's writings, at least from the point of view of orthodox Christianity. He calls that which underlies all things the Unground or Abyss (Ungrund). The Abyss contains within itself everything and nothing; that is, everything in a state of latency or potentiality, but nothing in actuality or in a manifest state. It is nothing (nichts) and all (alles). It transcends all opposites, and is devoid of determination, indescribable in rational terms. It clearly corresponds to Plotinus' One, Śankara's Brahman, Eckhart's Godhead. All things are manifested from out of this one principle:

.....the eternal mind has manifested itself from the highest majesty, even to the lowest (meanest, or outermost thing), viz. to the greatest darkness; and this world, with the sun, stars, and elements, and with every creaturely being, is nothing else but a manifestation of the eternity of the eternal will and mind....  
(25)

Boehme does not believe in creation ex nihilo, but holds that God creates (eternally and cyclically, not in time) from out of his own nature, wherein all things dwell in a latent condition. That is, the Abyss makes actual what is latent in itself through the intermediary action of the Three Principles and the Seven Natural Properties. Hidden within the Abyss (Ungrund) is an eternal, uncreated "Byss" or Will or Ground (Grund), the

Infinite Father. This Will ever desires to become manifest (the "Nothing" desires to become "something") and continually emanates all things from itself. It fashions what is called a Mirror, which reflects all the manifold things already existing in the Divine Mind in a latent condition, thereby giving the idea of form to them, although not yet making them actually physically manifest. The Mirror is the Infinite Mother, Eternal Wisdom, Sophia, who plays an extremely important part in Boehme's writings. She is (i) God's consciousness of himself (ii) the means by which he creates the world (iii) the means by which he is revealed in the human soul through intuitive realisation, the "bride" of the soul. By "seeing himself" in the Mirror which is Sophia, the Father comes to consciousness of himself, which is the beginning of Creation. By projecting his own image onto the Mirror, God also projects all the diversity of forms that are latent within the Will, and which are later to become actual created things. Thus all the powers and forms of God are made manifest. Stoudt says: "Revelation perfects itself not in the One's self-sufficiency in self-contemplation but in that the One leads itself into separate opposition to itself.... Wisdom creates a fruitful self-realization of God's inner life; life's unity realizes itself in multiplicity ....[Wisdom] is the first principle of differentiation in which God glimpses potential variations of being." (26) But Wisdom is also the guide and teacher of the soul in the Divine Mysteries, and the image of God in humanity, "the image of the heavenly world's substance in the soul's inner ground" (27). When we know the Deity, know ourselves, and know 'all', it is through Wisdom, here seen as the power of mystical intuition and as bride of the soul, but still essentially related to Wisdom as the Mother of All, the feminine aspect of the Godhead, and God's means of creation. As Wisdom is also God's consciousness of himself, it follows that for Boehme (as for Eckhart

and Plotinus) in mystical insight we enter into the knowledge which the Divine has of itself.

As the process of creation continues, all manifestation results from the interaction of these two complementary opposites which together make up the creative power of the Universe: the active and the receptive, the masculine and the feminine, Father and Mother, Will and Wisdom:

When the Will, or the Father, beholds Himself and his wonders reflected in the Eternal Idea or Virgin Sophia, the Mother, He desires that they shall not merely remain passive or hidden, but become actual and manifest. The Mother also yearns for the manifestation of the marvels latent in Her. Through the union of the Will and the Wisdom, the Father and the Mother, the unmanifest becomes manifest, the latent becomes active. (28)

Boehme is not yet dealing with actual physical manifestation at all, but with the spiritual forces behind manifestation. Indeed, many passages in his writings which refer to 'creation' are actually concerned with what precedes the creation of temporal and material reality, that is, with the spiritual and subtle forces and patterns behind the material world, which Boehme felt he had seen in vision. Boehme's 'Eternal Nature' is a non-material world, an intermediary state between the Deity itself and the material world, which enables the material world to become manifest; the "seven forms of Eternal Nature" are, so to speak, the inner processes of creation. Boehme "wished to explain the inner movement of eternal reality, its processes, changes, and the gradual manifestation of itself to its expression in the visible world." (29)

Underlying all Boehme's teachings are his 'Three Principles' which are formed of the above pairs of complementary opposites, and a third principle produced by their union. For example, the Father and the Mother beget the Son, and everywhere in the universe and in humanity are to be found the three principles which are an image of the divine

Trinity of Father, Mother, Son. On other occasions, Boehme substitutes the usual Christian Trinity for the Father/Mother/Son Trinity, but the idea of the Three Principles remains. He speaks of the Godhead as being a balanced unity of two opposing principles which he terms Fire and Light, or Wrath and Love. These two principles exist in all created things, and from their union proceeds the third principle, namely exterior or material nature (the etheric life-principle, the outer world, and the physical body). What Boehme calls 'Fire' is a dark principle, dark in the sense of being a hidden Void in a latent or unmanifest condition, forming a ground upon which the Light principle can act. It appears that Fire and Light cannot be identified with the Father and Mother aspects of the Godhead; Boehme is extremely obscure here, and also uses the term 'Fire' in different senses in different contexts and at different periods in his life's writings, but there does not seem to be a satisfactory correlation here. The three principles are manifested in the human being, who has his or her existence in the dark fire-world, the light-world, and the elemental/material world, or in soul, spirit and body respectively:

Man has indeed all the forms of all the three worlds lying in him; for he is a complete image of God, or of the Being of all beings..... (30)

The Dark principle (Fire, or Wrath) becomes identified with evil, but is not really so in itself; it only becomes evil when roused to activity and no longer in a latent state, but before it is transformed by the Light or Love principle. This is the state of humanity and the world at present, says Boehme. Humanity stands midway between good and evil, the Light and the Dark Worlds, having the will to choose either one, the potential to become angel or demon. We can choose egoism and self-love, or Light and divine Love. If we choose the first, evil is born. A selfish desire, or what Boehme calls "false imagination", having become kindled, increases

in intensity until it becomes "anguish", causing struggle and anxiety within the self. What are known as the devil and hell and evil thus make their appearance when the negative or Dark power, in separation from the power of Light, becomes manifest, instead of remaining in concealment or dormancy. Boehme sees this as the true meaning of Lucifer's Fall. Lucifer fell from the Divine Order when he became self-centred, setting his will in opposition to God's; he desired to rule in his own might, over his own kingdom. This applies not only to Lucifer, but to all of us -- for we perpetuate the condition by our refusal to turn to the Light. We set ourselves up as Lords while we should be Servants of the Light. There is a close parallel here to Plotinus' teachings regarding the soul, its ideal and actual states. (31) But Lucifer's originally angelic status is stressed, as is our own inherent divinity; in this respect, Boehme's teachings regarding evil correspond to those of Suso.

#### Boehme and Kabbalistic Cosmogony

There are some very close correspondences between Boehme's doctrine of creation, and Kabbalistic cosmogony. Boehme never explicitly mentions Kabbalah, but it seems certain that he was influenced by it. In the Germany of his day were a profusion of mystical and occult groups influenced by Kabbalah, alchemy and the teachings of Paracelsus; Boehme had contact with several such groups (he was actually a regular member of one, The Conventicle of God's Real Servants) and appears to have derived some of his ideas from their teachings. The Kabbalah (to give a brief indication of what is directly relevant here) is an emanationist system of metaphysics, positing, like Boehme, a formless source of all, transcending all opposites, etc. This is referred to as Kether, the first

Sephirah, and would correspond to Boehme's Ungrund. From Kether emanates the second Sephirah, Chokmah, the Great Father, the primal active, masculine, "Light" principle, and from Chokmah emanates Binah, the third Sephirah, the Great Mother, the primal receptive, feminine, "Dark" principle. Binah is seen as that which gives the idea of form or manifestation to the Divine Ideas inherent in the masculine principle, but, just as in Boehme, this is not yet actual physical manifestation. The Kabbalah works with a kind of metaphysical diagram known as the Tree of Life, made up of three 'pillars'. Two of these pillars are headed by Binah and Chokmah respectively, and are referred to as the pillars of Severity and Mercy, which might correspond to Boehme's Wrath and Love. The Middle Pillar of the Tree represents a balance formed by the union of the other two, as does Boehme's third principle. Boehme's Seven Natural Properties, by which God manifests in Nature, find a parallel in the seven further Sephiroth of the Tree of Life below Kether, Binah and Chokmah, through which the forces of these three are mediated down to material existence. Boehme's descriptions of the attributes of these Seven Properties do not correspond exactly with the attributes of the Sephiroth, but the Seven Properties are roughly divisible into Dark/Fire/Severe and Light/Mild types, showing another correlation with the two side Pillars of the Tree of Life. Boehme's seventh property does in addition find a very close correspondence to the final Sephirah of the Tree of Life, Malkuth. Both represent actual physical existence, and in both it is held that all the foregoing powers and energies are gathered into a whole, as though into a receptacle. Boehme says:

The seventh form is.....where the sound of the speaking word embodies itself in being, as an entity in which the sound..... embodies itself for manifest utterance ....This seventh form is a comprehensibility of all the qualities, and is properly called the whole of nature, or the formed, expressed Word. (32)

Boehme calls this seventh property God's Corporeity, the Abode of God, and the Kingdom -- the 'Kingdom' being the literal meaning of the Hebrew word Malkuth, and the former two ideas finding parallels in Kabbalistic doctrines of the world as the body or dwelling-place of God. Boehme also holds that in the seventh property, Wisdom (Sophia) is finally realised, made actual, brought through into life; and similarly the Kabbalah posits a close connection of this nature between Binah, the idea of Form, and Malkuth, actual form, both seen as feminine archetypes, and known respectively as the Superior Mother and the Inferior Mother. There are a number of other points in Boehme's philosophy which correspond closely to Kabbalistic teachings (Adam as Primordial Man; various points of esoteric scriptural interpretation, and so on) but it would be a major task to explore all the parallels in detail.

#### Boehme's Approach to the Problem of Evil

Evil, says Boehme, is a necessary aspect of this world, for it constitutes a ground upon which our development may be formed. We must eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in order to gain wisdom through our experience. The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil are not two different trees, but one tree "manifest in two kingdoms" or considered under two different aspects. (33) Boehme seems to see the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as indicating duality, and the Tree of Life as indicating unity. Certain Kabbalistic teachings, likewise, hold that as long as the two trees, which are seen as springing from one root, remain united, harmony between the opposites is assured; but when unity is lost and the two trees are seen as separate, disharmony ensues and evil prevails. (34) Boehme teaches the



ultimate nonduality of 'good' and 'evil'; but this should not, of course, be taken to imply amorality. The point is that we should "resist not evil, but overcome evil with good" -- a maxim which is not simply to do with "turning the other cheek", as the remainder of this discussion on Boehme should make clear. Boehme says (herein voicing a psychological truth) that the more evil is resisted, the greater power it gains; it should be overcome by God's light. (35) This can be compared to St. Teresa's attitude to her visions of devils. (36) For Boehme, the Magnum Opus which the mystic-cum-magus must accomplish involves transmuting evil into good, turning the Dark qualities within the self into Light; and in the process, the anguish and strife within the self are ended; evil is no more. This transmutation is accomplished by abandoning one's will to the Light, so that the Light is one's only will. Thus the selfish or 'evil' will is given up or transformed into the Light. Like Christ, we must conquer Hell -- the Hell within.

The problem of evil tormented Boehme greatly, and he tried to give a positive meaning to it by seeing it as a necessary counterpart to good. Good cannot be conceived of without evil; Light cannot reveal itself without darkness to shine in:

The darkness is the greatest enmity of the light, and yet it is the cause that the light is manifest. For if there were no black, then white could not be manifest to itself; and if there were no sorrow, then joy were also not manifest to itself. (37)

Or, as Boehme often puts it, the Yes cannot exist without the No. His experience of evil in the world led him to admit a Dark principle into the Deity itself, and to conceive of the Universe as engaged in a kind of ritual battle between light and darkness. While God as the Absolute (the Ungrund) is beyond the duality of good and evil, in manifestation he comprises both poles of all dualities:

Thus we are to conceive of the eternal light of God, and the

eternal darkness of God's anger; there is but one only ground of all; and that is the manifested God: but it is severed into sundry Principles and properties .....For the God of the holy world, and the God of the dark world, are not two Gods; there is but one only God: he himself is all being, essence or substance; he is evil and good, heaven and hell, light and darkness, eternity and time, beginning and end. [Denn der heiligen Welt Gott und der finstern Welt Gott sind nicht zween Götter: es ist ein einiger Gott; er ist selber alles Wesen, er ist Böses und Gutes, Himmel und Holle, Licht und FinsterniB, Ewigkeit und Zeit, Umfang und Ende.] (38)

There is a positive meaning in the conflict of the opposing forces which characterise all existence -- that is, that only through this conflict are the highest spiritual ideals made possible. If there were no evil, no tension, there could be no growth; every spiritual development within ourselves is a reaction against 'evil' in some form, against negative forces which act as a kind of thrusting-block from which we must push off. Evil is in good, and good in evil; in other words, there is nothing so evil that no positive virtue, no good, is to be found in it. Boehme suggests in places that we are spiritually 'cured' by that which is corrupted in us, by homeopathy as it were: poison is eliminated by means of poison:

This the learned searchers of nature do in like manner understand, viz. that there lieth excellent art, and also virtue, in the ens of the Serpent. If the devil's poison be taken from it, the greatest cure doth then lie in it for the healing of all fiery venomous hurts and distempers .....As God doth dwell hiddenly in the cursed earth, so likewise is it here. Notwithstanding, it is given to the wise godly searcher of the art, and he need not be astonished or afraid of the curse..... If he were not so much captivated in a bestial and proud manner in the Serpent's essence our sense and meaning might be opened unto him, and he might here well find the arcanum (or secret) of the world. (39)

Boehme seems to see the Serpent, always an ambivalent symbol, as representing wisdom rather than evil here; an attitude which is often found in conjunction with the idea of the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life as one tree. The point he seems to be hinting at is that, whereas 'evil' and 'good' are certainly a real duality for us in our present state, for God they are one:

The reason why man's thought is the contrary of God's is that

God's concept is so vast that before the human mind can apprehend it it must be broken up into two. Thus the actual one thing becomes, for man, two things, as darkness and light, weakness and strength, wisdom and folly. The truth is not that -- of these two -- God holds one and man the other, but that God apprehends both as one..... God's "right" is man's "right" and "wrong" synthesised, or at-oned..... (40)

For Boehme, in God all dualities and antitheses are resolved. But our own conceptions are limited: there are our personal limitations as individuals, the limitations imposed upon us by cultural norms of 'right' and 'wrong', and so on. Hard as we may try not to do so, we have an inveterate tendency to think in dichotomies and oppositions, and to assume that because something is good, its opposite must therefore be evil, or vice versa. But it may not be correct to think of good and evil as polar opposites; we could see 'good' as a perfect balance between the opposing complementary forces of the universe, while 'evil' would result from an imbalance in either one of two directions. For example, to take a standard illustration from the Kabbalah, unqualified mercy degenerates into weakness and laissez-faire, while too much severity is destructive and cruel. In order to obtain a balanced viewpoint on some matter, it may often be necessary for us to consider the point of view opposed to that which we are naturally accustomed to hold. 'Good' may prove to issue in an equilibrium or synthesis of opposing principles, each of which would be 'evil' when carried to excess. And it is through such a synthesis that we are able to rise above evil, to transmute it, to overcome it with good without resisting it as though it were a polar opposite to good, and to see evil and good as one, as does God. In the Kabbalah, the mystic ascends the Middle Pillar of the Tree of Life by balancing the complementary opposites of the side Pillars -- these side Pillars sometimes being identified with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (of duality). In a similar vein, Boehme says:

And withal, the command was given to him [to man] that he in his free will should not lust after evil and good, viz. after the divided properties; he should continue steadfast in the equal harmony of the properties, and rule with the light over the darkness; and then the properties of the wrath had stood in mere joy, delight and melody in him, and he had been a mirror and form of the divine wisdom [ein Spiegel und Form der göttlichen Weisheit = Sophia]. (41)

It has often been thought that the theme of 'transcending good and evil', so common to mysticism, must imply amorality; this is far from the case, for surely to hold the transmutation of evil into good as one's ideal, is a higher ethical goal than an ideal which assumes that good and evil must always remain fundamentally opposed.

#### The Mystical Path according to Boehme

The ideal of equilibrium is also reflected in Boehme's teachings regarding the mystical way, which are centred around the figure of Christ, regarded symbolically as the archetypal or ideal human being, as Primordial Man, who combines in his person the highest attributes of both masculine and feminine qualities, held in balance. As Adam, before Eve, was originally androgynous (and "made in the image" of an androgynous Deity), so the mystic, of whom an androgynous Christ is the exemplar, must conjoin the opposites within himself or herself to regain 'Paradise' or the perfected state of wholeness. The accomplishment of the alchemical Magnum Opus is often represented by the figure of an androgyne. Just as within this world, male and female in union give birth to all things, so too the mystical birth of the Christ within, and the death of the fallen Adam in us, entails a 'marriage' or uniting of the male and female principles. Adam was a "fire-spark" of God (this is to be understood as denoting that each one of us has the "divine spark" within) but broke off from the "universal being", thus bringing about his own Fall

through his selfishness. (42) It is through the "divine spark" within that we are able to understand the Mysteries, for we are each of us a microcosm corresponding to the divine macrocosm:

.....the human soul is a spark [funke] out of the eternal-speaking Word of the divine science and power: and the body an ens of the stars and elements; and also as to the internal ground an ens of heaven, viz. of the hidden world; therefore he hath might and ability to speak of the Grand Mystery whence all essences do originally arise. (43)

God is the Being of all beings, and we are as gods in him, says Boehme (44); in Primordial Man as microcosm, all things are contained. Through truly knowing ourselves, we can know all things, because of the correspondences between our inner nature, and the outer world:

The best treasure that a man can attain unto in this world is true knowledge; even the knowledge of himself: For man is the great mystery of God, the microcosm, or the complete abridgement of the whole universe: He is the mirandum Dei opus, God's masterpiece, a living emblem and hieroglyphic of eternity and time; and therefore to know whence he is, and what his temporal and eternal being and well-being are, must needs be that ONE necessary thing, to which all our chief study should aim..... (45)

Hence,

The scope and eye-mark of our writing is, to search out the image of God; how it was created, and how it is corrupted, and how it shall come again into its first essence. (46)

Primordial Man, Adam in Paradise, is a kind of prototype of the divine magus, and rules over the four elements. In him the opposites are balanced in harmony, and the Divine Light shines within him:

.....Adam was to be a lord over the stars and elements, nothing should touch him, he had power over them all, he could have removed mountains with a word, he was lord over fire, air, water and earth.

For there was no death in him, the light shone in him, he was in paradise, paradisaical fruit grew for him, he was one single man, and not two, he was the man, and also the woman..... (47)

Elsewhere, Boehme, drawing one of his frequent parallels between Adam and Christ, identifies the crucifixion with what is known as death on the elemental cross (the figure of a cross in which each arm represents one

of the four elements), i.e., a spiritual death in which the four elements are transformed, transmuted. (48) He also sees the crucifixion as an allegory of the mystical death to the lower self and subsequent 'resurrection', the cross here representing terrestrial life, made up of the four elemental properties: that terrestrial life which 'crucifies' the mystic and yet which (like evil) is the necessary ground of our development. We have previously shown that the reattainment of the Prima Materia, for the alchemists, entailed the reconciliation and balancing of the elements and their transmutation into the Quintessence, the fifth principle which is the source of the other four. Boehme says that at Lucifer's Fall, a world arose in which the dual principles of the universe were separated and became unbalanced; the four elements became in conflict with each other in a state of confusion. The goal of the alchemist is to bring fire and water, air and earth, back into unity again. The goal of the divine magus (now as in Boehme's time) is to learn to control the elements through perfect control and balance of their forces within his or her own psyche.

This has more relevance to mysticism than might at first appear. I have previously argued that mystical apprehension is usually a matter not of 'faith' nor of 'knowledge' exclusively, but of the two taken up into a higher synthesis. To be more precise, we should see mysticism as entailing a balance of all four elements: in the Western occult tradition, air is used to symbolise rational knowledge; water for faith and feeling; fire for will; and earth for practical action. The four elements should be taken up into the Quintessence, the higher synthesis: for when we truly know (through the knowledge which implies faith and love) we see that we have to will and act in accordance with our knowledge. We cannot reach the deepest insight through reason alone (air), nor through 'good works' (earth) and so on; the height of mystical attainment may be seen as a synthesis of

intuitive and intellective insight, with will in action.

Not only the four elements, says Boehme, but also the seven archetypal planetary energies within ourselves must be purified, transformed, and taken up into one; they must die to themselves:

.....all the seven forms of nature must be crystallised and purified, if the universal shall be revealed ....[each form] must transmute itself into the crystalline sea which stands before the throne of the ancient in the Revelation and change itself into paradise .....The universal is not yet there, till all seven give their will into one..... (49)

Through the union of opposites previously referred to, allegorised as the union of man and woman, is brought about a son, an illuminated magus who has to pass through seven bonds or spiritual trials corresponding to the seven planetary forms. The idea of passing through an initiation in each planetary sphere, in each one transmuting the force in question, was a basic alchemical doctrine. To each stage corresponded a particular part of the process of the transmutation of metals. This magus or "champion" is said to be both male and female; s/he has made the love of God and the wrath of God (light and darkness) into one, as did Christ; evil for him/her is no more. (50) The outward being is transformed by the inner, the earth is turned to heaven. The "champion" is given the "crown of pearls", a symbol for mystical attainment which may recall Suso's being crowned by Eternal Wisdom:

And when we thus converse in the love and the righteousness of God, and in the obedience of faith, then we put on Christ, who setteth the fair crown of pearls upon us, viz. the crown, the Mysterium Magnum: He crowneth us with his wisdom, so that we know his wonders..... (51)

Other symbols of attainment used by Boehme are the True Corner-Stone of the Temple (the perfected mystic becomes a 'Temple of God' wherein the Divine dwells) and of course the Philosophers' Stone:

It [the Noble Stone] must be sought for, a lazy person findeth it not, and though he carrieth it about with him, yet he knoweth it not..... But the seeker findeth the Stone, and its virtue and ben-

efit together, and when he findeth it, and knoweth that he is certain of it, there is greater joy in him than the world is able to comprehend ....It is accounted the meanest of all stones in the Adamical eyes, and is trodden under foot, for it affordeth no lustre to the sight; if a man lights upon it, he casteth it away as an unprofitable thing ....He who hath it, and knoweth it, if he seeketh, he may find all things whatsoever are in heaven and earth..... (52)

As we have remarked, the human being has his or her existence in all three worlds: the Dark, the Light, and the material world of ordinary existence. Our task is to take the Light into the Darkness, and into the outer world, but at the same time we have to attempt to co-ordinate the three worlds within ourselves: then we are truly in God's likeness. Only through this co-ordination can we overcome evil (the Dark world) without resisting it; thus we transform Darkness into Light. By taking the Light into the outer world of everyday existence as well, we "turn Earth to Heaven", we make all things divine and all things part of a unity:

God must become man, man must become God; heaven must become one thing with the earth, the earth must be turned to heaven: If you will make heaven out of the earth, then give the earth the heaven's food..... (53)

The life of humanity, says Boehme, is "a true mirror of the Deity, wherein God beholds himself". (54) (The Mirror here is Sophia as the image of the Divine in the soul.) As long as we aspire to God, we receive God's power and light, and thereby know God. When we aspire to earthly things, we become weighed down by earthly things, we receive earthly things. "Then is life's mirror shut up in darkness, and loses the mirror of God, and must be born anew." (55) We become attached to plurality and to our own self-will. The only way to release ourselves from this condition is through a death/rebirth experience: "If it [the life of the soul] will not give itself up to death, then it cannot attain any other world." (56) To know the Divine means to bring the Divine to birth in one's soul -- it is a knowledge which is being. We must resign our will to the Divine Will, even



resign our life; but we leave behind the world, or lose our life, only to find true Life in the Divine. We must give up all things in order to own all, rule over all, all things then being seen in God, and all things being accounted alike. Having balanced the opposites, we are able to transcend them, and to see pain and pleasure as equal, and hence to pass beyond suffering:

.....they [God's children] must leave their honour and welfare, and also put their life in hazard, and resign themselves wholly to God, to do whatsoever he will with them; for they must forsake all for God's sake ....In this last proof and trial man becomes the image of God [Gottes Bild] again, for all things become one and the same [gleich und Eines], and are alike to him. He is all one with prosperity and adversity, with poverty and riches, with joy and sorrow, with light and darkness, with life and death .....he himself is all, and yet hath nothing .....He is as it were dead to all things, and yet himself is the life of all things. He is ONE, and yet NOTHING and ALL [er ist Eines und doch auch Nichts und Alles] .....then in him light proceeds out of darkness, life out of death, and joy out of sorrow; for God is in and with him in all things..... (57)

We hardly need to point out the correspondences between Boehme's experiences as described here, and those of the other mystics which we have examined. The same basic pattern (resignation of self-will, seeing all things in the Divine, living in the Divine Life, seeing pleasure and pain as one, transmuting sorrow into joy, etc.) has been encountered again and again. Boehme also speaks, like Rolle and others, of the Fire of Love which destroys all egoity, and which is stronger than death and hell. His practical methods for attaining mystical insight include a basic meditative technique which also finds close parallels in other forms of mysticism: silencing one's own thoughts and sense-impressions and remaining passive to the impressions of the Spirit within; gathering all one's energies and powers into the centre, and fixing them upon one point. (58)

Like other mystics, too, Boehme teaches not rejection of the world, but detachment from it:

It is not meant that one should run from house and home, from

wife, children, and kindred, and fly out of the world, or so to forsake his goods as not to regard them; but the own self-will, which possesseth all this for a propriety, that he must kill, and annihilate. And think, that all that of which he is a master, is not at all his own. (59)

A passage already referred to from Eckhart on detachment (60) affords an exact parallel to this, and St. John of the Cross echoes the sentiment:

There is no detachment, if desire remains..... detachment..... consists in suppressing desire, and avoiding pleasure; it is this that sets the soul free, even though possession may be still retained. It is not the things of this world that occupy or injure the soul, for they do not enter within, but rather the wish for, and desire of them, which abide within it. (61)

Just as the material world should not be rejected, so we should not attempt to annihilate our lower faculties (senses, emotions, etc.) for these are a support for the higher faculties, and without the former, the latter would be dissipated. There are two wills in the soul, one seeking higher and one lower things; two eyes looking in opposite directions. What Boehme calls the "eye of time" must be brought under the governance of the "eye of eternity"; the former must be kept within its bounds, and regulated by the latter; but both eyes should operate together in harmony, not disturbing each other. The ideal is to forge a single eye which sees eternity in time, and God in Nature. (62) Then,

The Paradise shall be in me, all whatever God has and is shall appear in me as a form and image of the divine world's being [eine Form oder Bild der Göttlichen Welt Wesen]; all colours, powers, and virtues of his eternal wisdom [ewigen Weisheit = Sophia] shall be manifest in me, and on me, as on his likeness: I shall be the manifestation of the spiritual divine world, and an instrument of God's Spirit, wherein he makes melody with himself..... (63)

Throughout Boehme's writings, we find that he stresses the importance of living according to our mystical insights. There is a fairly strong anti-book learning element in his character; in places he emphasises the idea of a childlike faith (although in fact, this might seem to contradict his use of highly complicated, obscure alchemical symbolism).

My beloved Reader, if you would understand the high Mysteries, you need not first put an academy upon your nose, nor use any such spectacles, nor read the books of many artists and scholars: for the high Mysteries are not to be sought after, searched out, and found, only in the high schools or universities: whatsoever reason seeketh in the art of this world, without the divine understanding, is vain and fictitious; it findeth nothing but this world, and not half of that either..... (64)

There is only one way to pass from the "false imagination" into the true Light, and that is simply to cease to think and act according to the false imagination. This is not really a simple matter at all, however, for it entails dying to the lower self and undergoing rebirth or transformation. There is no path that falls short of absolute transmutation of the self. One cannot penetrate these Mysteries and expect that one's life should remain as before; the tremendous creative and spiritual forces released mean that many changes must be undergone.

As I have remarked, Boehme was not an educated man. His writings are often extremely abstruse; his symbolism is often confused; he frequently expresses himself with lack of clarity. It is clear that his spiritual vision is of the strongly intuitive type, and hence, no doubt, he felt book-learning to be unnecessary. He says that Nature is his master, that he has learned his philosophy, astrology and theology from Nature and its creative force, not from other people's writings. (65) He is at pains to stress, too, that he speaks from his own experience. His mode of mystical apprehension is one of high inspiration; indeed, he takes no credit for his writings, but ascribes all credit to God:

I write not in the flesh but in the Spirit, in the impulse and motion of God. If the Spirit were withdrawn from me, I could neither know nor understand my own writings..... (66)

By my own powers I am as blind as the next man and can do nothing, but through the Spirit of God, my own inborn spirit pierces all things..... (67)

This is common amongst mystics, because it is felt that it is not the self (i.e., the lower self or ego) which knows spiritual truth. One feels no

need to demand recognition for actions which are performed not by one's self, but by the Spirit working through oneself. Suso and Ramakrishna, amongst others, echo Boehme's feelings here. The mystic feels himself or herself to be an instrument, a channel; through oneself flows a power which is felt not to be wholly one's own, and which is shown in the inspiration which causes Boehme to declare:

We will here write what the time hath brought forth and manifested, and if it were not manifest by man, yet the beasts should be driven to manifest the same; for the time is born, and nothing can hinder: The Most High accomplisheth his work. (68)

It is a matter not of pronouncing one's personal opinion upon something, but of tuning in to what is. To the sceptic, then, who questions the certainty of his knowledge, Boehme might well reply, ".....although indeed I know it not, yet the spirit of Christ knoweth it in me." (69)

#### The Inner and the Outer

The relationship between the inner, spiritual life and the outer world of everyday life is a fundamental theme in Boehme, and a vital keynote of his philosophy. We have seen that according to his 'Signature', outward forms are visible manifestations of inner qualities, because of the inter-linking of all levels of being: "the outermost is also the innermost" (70), "the external is a type of the internal" (71). This was a basic alchemical doctrine; compare the adage of the alchemist known as Solomon Trismořin: "All that is without thee also is within, thus wrote Trismosin." (72) The Godhead, for Boehme, transcends all opposites, as we have seen, and hence is both without and within, or, rather, transcends this dichotomy, and cannot be encapsulated within its terms. God is manifest in all nature, and is within the human soul, and yet is outside all this. He dwells within all, yet is not bound to time and space, and "hath no particular

place where he dwelleth" -- to which Boehme adds in a footnote, "Or no sundry habitation above the stars in an empyrean heaven, as reason fancieth." (73) We hardly need to point out that it is naive to think of God as an old man with a beard living up in the sky; but what has not always been realised is that it is not really any better to think of the Deity as no more than a psychic archetype within the mind, after the manner of certain psychological accounts of religion. The Divine cannot be localised, or confined to 'without' and 'within'. Now we will recall that for Boehme, the human being is a microcosm, and in his or her deepest self, is a perfect reflection of the Divine: "As above, so below". Likewise, all Nature mirrors spiritual truths and divine laws. It follows that through insight into oneself, one obtains insight into the whole cosmos. By finding the Philosophers' Stone -- that mysterious jewel at the heart of all knowledge, that one principle on which all is based -- one may have knowledge of all things. It is obvious that such a belief is tenable only on the basis of a monistic philosophy; it may be seen, also, that it is a logical corollary of the theme of the transcendence of subject/object, knower/known duality, which we have encountered in the metaphysical mystics in particular. Boehme states his position at the beginning of his Mysterium Magnum, from which we may extract the most relevant passages:

.....behold thyself, and consider what thou art, view what the outward world is, with its dominion; and thou wilt find that thou, with thy outward spirit and being, art the outward world. Thou art a little world out of the great world [Du bist eine kleine Welt aus der groBen].....

What the superior being is, that also is the inferior .....When I take up a stone or clod of earth and look upon it, then I see that which is above and that which is below, yea, I see the whole world therein; only, that in each thing one property happeneth to be the chief and most manifest.....

There is but one only root whence all things proceed .....the inward world is the heaven wherein God dwelleth; and the outward world is expressed out of the inward..... Therefore there is nothing nigh unto or afar off from God; one world is in the

other, and all are only one..... (74)

By knowing the inward ground of things, says Boehme, we in fact come to know the outer world in a truer and deeper way than does the person who merely knows the physical world by means of the senses. (75) This reflects his ideal of penetrating the secrets of both God and Nature. The ideal is to make manifest in the outer world, the spirituality of the inner; to rule over both kingdoms, with the two in balance and harmony, but controlled by the inner spiritual self. Knowledge of the 'Signature' is most important if one is to be able to achieve this interrelating of outer and inner. The following passage describes Primordial Man in the paradisiacal state, to which state the perfected mystic-cum-magus returns:

All the properties of the inward holy body, together with the outward, were in the first man composed in an equal harmony, none lived in self-desire, but they all gave up their desire unto the soul, in which the divine light was manifest .....Thus the inward man held the outward captive in itself, and penetrated it.....

.....the outward life of man was a play unto the inward holy man, which was the real image of God. The outward spirit and body was unto the inward as a wonder of divine manifestation .....the inward was given unto it for a ruler and guide.

As God playeth with the time of this outward world, so likewise the inward divine man should play with the outward in the manifested wonders of God in this world..... (76)

The reference here to "playing" is interesting, and may call to mind the divine game of creation (līlā) played by God as the cosmic magician (māyin) in Hinduism. The idea of the inward "playing with" the outward suggests to us that the outward is not to be thought of as independently real or, as worthy of our highest aspirations; but it should not be rejected or despised. Far from it: it should be loved, it should be made part of an innocent and joyful game, a toy in the hands of the divine magus. Thus is achieved a continual, dynamic interplay between outer and inner. Boehme (in a rare moment of poetic clarity) expresses this most beautifully:

.....the inward loved the outward as its manifestation and sensation, and the outward loved the inward as its greatest sweetness

and joyfulness, as its precious pearl and beloved spouse and consort. And yet they were not two bodies, but only one; but of a twofold essence..... (77)

The outcome of this interplay and essential oneness of the inner and the outer is that, for the mystic-cum-magus, to have control over the inner self is to control the elements, to know the self within is to penetrate the secrets of nature. Plotinus expresses the same basic idea with rather more direct simplicity than does Boehme:

.....by the act of self-intellection he has the simultaneous intellection of all: in such a case self-intellection by personal activity brings the intellection, not merely of the self, but also of the total therein embraced; and similarly the intuition of the total of things brings that of the personal self as included among all. (78)

This interweaving of the inner and the outer is basic to Boehme's mystical teachings. The mystic's, or magician's, goal is to conquer his or her lower self and live in and through the Divine, and, most importantly, following this self-mastery, to bring the Godhead down into manifestation, to "apprehend the word of God and introduce it into the figure of nature" (79), to "turn Earth to Heaven", to redeem and spiritualise matter, so that the outer world and the inner world are again united, as they were in Paradise. Then the end is as the beginning (a common concept in alchemical writings, often portrayed symbolically by the image of the Ouroboros, the snake biting its own tail to form a circle):

.....the inward man is not its own, but God's instrument, with whom God makes what he pleases, till the outward with its wonders in the mirror shall also be manifest in God; and even then is God all in all, and he alone in his wisdom and deeds of wonder and nothing else besides; and this is the beginning and the end, eternity and time. (80)

#### Eastern Parallels to Boehme: Tantra and Indian Alchemy

The closest parallel in the East to Boehme's preoccupation with the

occult is found in the mystico-magical doctrines of Tantra and Indian alchemy (rasāyana). As Eliade notes, ".....more than one curious parallel can be noted between tantrism and the great Western mysterio-sophic current that, at the beginning of the Christian era, arose from the confluence of Gnosticism, Hermetism, Greco-Egyptian alchemy, and the traditions of the Mysteries." (81) Boehme was profoundly influenced by what Eliade calls this "mysterio-sophic" current. There are some aspects of Boehme's thought which do not find any reflection in Tantra or rasāyana, but the parallels that do exist are sufficiently close to be worth noting.

Tantra is found within both Hinduism and Mahāyāna Buddhism. Like the philosophy of Boehme, it is unorthodox, magical, and tending to a rejection of book-learning. It is an esoteric system revealed only to initiates, and one could certainly argue that the same was true of many of the sources from which Boehme drew his teachings.

The most important point to note about Tantra is that, like Boehme, it stresses the importance of the reconciliation of opposites (coincidentia oppositorum). As we have seen, Boehme speaks of the Deity as possessing both masculine and feminine qualities. For him, all manifestation results from the interaction of the two complementary opposites: active/receptive, masculine/feminine, Father/Mother, will/wisdom (Sophia). The Absolute Deity, however, (the Abyss, the Ungrund) is nondifferentiated. The aim of the mystic is to conjoin the opposites within himself or herself, the accomplishment of this task being represented symbolically by the figure of the Alchemical androgyne. Tantra, likewise, holds that the Absolute is nondual, but expressible only in terms of polarity: god/goddess, man/woman, static/dynamic, wisdom (prajñā)/means (upāya), compassion (karuna), or dynamic energy. The aim of the mystic is again to



merge the opposing poles of the masculine and feminine principles within the self. There are some hermaphroditic representations of Śīva and Śakti which symbolise this in the same way as the Alchemical androgyne of the West; the rather more widespread Tantric erotic sculptures and paintings also express the union of opposites.

In Hindu Tantra the feminine deity (usually Śakti, Kālī or Durga) is the active, dynamic principle, and the masculine deity (usually Śīva) is the passive principle of wisdom. Buddhist Tantra adopts a reverse scheme, with the feminine deity playing the role of a passive wisdom and the masculine deity the role of an active means or compassion. In Boehme's thought, wisdom is passive and feminine, and the Will of God active and masculine, so the polarities here align more closely with Buddhist Tantra; but we might note that in all three cases 'wisdom' is a passive principle. I have said that Boehme's Sophia is also the means through which the masculine Will is able to create the world; like a Mirror, she reflects the latent Divine ideas, thereby making them actual and manifest. Similarly, in Hindu Tantra Śakti is the creative power or energy through which the world is brought into being by Śīva. In each case, the feminine principle is seen as a kind of mediatrix between the masculine principle and the material world. Boehme says:

The wisdom is the outflown Word of the divine power, virtue, knowledge and holiness; a subject and resemblance of the infinite and unsearchable Unity .....the wisdom is the passive, and the spirit of God is the active, or life in her..... The wisdom is the great Mystery of the divine nature; for in her the powers, colours, and virtues are made manifest..... (82)

Tantra differs from some orthodox forms of Hinduism in that it stresses that the phenomenal world of polarity must be used as a means whereby to rise to a state of oneness and nonduality. Realisation must be attained through and by means of phenomena. There is therefore in Tantra none of the rejection of the world, nature and the body that we

find in the more ascetic strand of Hindu thought. The body is seen not as a source of suffering, but as a valuable instrument in the quest for liberation. One practical application of this view is seen in the use of ritual sexual intercourse, held to be the most perfect representation in the material world of the union of opposites. Another can be seen in the Tantric emphasis on the value of keeping the body healthy and strong; elixirs and drugs were sometimes used to promote longevity and health. Tantra, then, stresses that all of life's experience, in total, is valid towards mystical endeavour. Boehme, in a similar kind of way, does not reject the material level in any sense, but searches for life in all its fullness, for the fullness of the Divine Will in manifestation; he sees wealth, colour, richness, not colourless, abstract principles. Other strands of Western esoteric thought by which Boehme was influenced also emphasise that the body should be seen as essentially holy, that it should be treated with respect and kept in good health, and (a corollary of this) that the material world should be seen as a manifestation of the Divine. Kabbalists, for example, like to stress that the material world is the 'Garment of God' and that the body is the 'Temple of the Spirit'. In a similar vein, the Buddhist Tantric Saraha says:

I have visited in my wanderings shrines and other places of pilgrimage  
But I have not seen another shrine blissful like my own body.  
(83)

In accordance with this view, Tantra holds that there is an essential identity between the phenomenal world (saṁsāra) and the absolute state of realisation (mokṣa). Boehme is not quite as monistic as Tantra here, but it may be worth comparing his sayings "the outermost is also the innermost"; "the external is a type of the internal"; "time coucheth in eternity" (84) with the Tantric assertion that "saṁsāra and mokṣa are one". Boehme sees the material world as "a reflection of eternity which

allows eternity to make itself visible" (85) and this is similar to the Tantric notion that absolute reality can only be experienced in and through the dualities of the phenomenal world.

It is well known that Tantra makes use of ritual extramarital intercourse, wine, meat, fish, and a certain type of grain (the '5M'), which are anathema to orthodox Indian religious systems, as a means to realisation. The idea here is that enlightenment may be attained through actions thought by cultural standards of the society in question to be 'evil' or at least immoral, always provided (an important point) that they are executed in a state of purity and detachment. The point is that to abandon the things of the senses is held to be just as wrong as to be attached to them; the truth is beyond all such dualities. Sensual desires are conquered not by running away from them, but by facing them -- whether this means actual use of the objects of sensual desire as a kind of sacrament (as in left-hand Tantra) or just symbolic representation of them (as in right-hand Tantra).

Just as water that has entered the ear may be removed by water and just as a thorn may be removed by a thorn, so those who know how, remove passion by means of passion itself. Just as a washerman removes the grime from a garment by means of grime, so the wise man renders himself free of impurity by means of impurity itself. (86)

There is certainly no evidence whatsoever that Boehme indulged in Tantric-like ritual practices, but he does see an ultimately positive meaning in the dark or evil side of our natures and of the world, as I have discussed; and his teaching regarding the virtue of the "ens of the Serpent" when the "devil's poison" has been taken from it (87) may perhaps bear some comparison to the Tantric practice of "removing grime by means of grime".

A further important aspect of Tantra is the use of Kuṇḍalini yoga, a means of uniting the masculine and feminine principles within oneself.

Three 'veins' or 'channels' are envisaged running up the body, one representing the active principle, one the passive wisdom, and in the middle, corresponding to the spinal column, is the 'vein' representing the balance between the two. The Kuṇḍalini power, the divine energy, is made to rise up the spinal column by meditative and ritual exercises, culminating at the top of the head, where Śiva and Śakti are united in a nondual state; thence it flows down again to pervade the whole body. On its upward way, it passes through the chakras, of which there are seven altogether, corresponding to seven planes of being. Spiritual energy exists in a latent state in the chakras and as the Kuṇḍalini energy rises upwards, seven distinct phases or types of mystical experience may be realised, culminating in the final state of absolute oneness. (I have elsewhere given Ramakrishna's description of his own experiences with Kuṇḍalini yoga.)

(88) It is interesting to observe the many similarities that Kuṇḍalini yoga bears to a certain Kabbalistic meditative exercise. Here the two side 'Pillars' of the Tree of Life are envisaged running up the sides of the body, representing the masculine and feminine polarities, and the 'Middle Pillar' running up the centre of the body represents the balance between the two. On all three Pillars are centres of energy very similar to the Eastern chakras, although not all of the centres correspond exactly as regards their location and nature. As in Kuṇḍalini, in the Middle Pillar exercises spiritual energy is circulated up the central column and then down to pervade the rest of the body, and different types of spiritual experience corresponding to the centres of energy are thus generated. It is characteristic of both Tantra, and the broad Western esoteric tradition (including Kabbalah) by which Boehme was influenced, that the symbolism and the metaphysical ideas used to refer to the wider spiritual macrocosm, are extended to refer also to the body of the mystic; this is just

one example of this. There are no exact parallels in Boehme's writings to Kuṇḍalini, but he does speak of a sevenfold mystical progression undergone after balancing the opposites within the self, which he connects with the seven planetary forces and with various stages in the transmutation of metals. (89)

A number of other aspects of Boehme's symbolic philosophy find reflections, although not exact parallels, in Tantric ritual and imagery. Tantra, like Boehme, makes use of astrology (for example, to find a propitious time for initiation). The symbolism of the four elements is also used in Tantric ritual, for example, in the construction of mandalas. Tantra was also closely associated with Indian alchemy, and it is to this that we shall now turn.

According to Eliade, one of the aims of the Tantric mystic is to construct a 'divine body' (divya-deha) or 'body of wisdom' (jñāna-deha) worthy of the aspirant who is liberated in this life (jīvan-mukta). This is an immortal 'subtle' body which allows the mystic to enter higher realms of being. (90) To this end, certain Tantric aspirants who were also involved in alchemy laboured to produce an 'elixir of immortality'. The Indian alchemists, like their Western counterparts, were also known for their efforts to find the Philosophers' Stone and to turn base metals into gold. Eventually, the production of the elixir and the transmutation of metals came to be rather superstitiously looked upon merely as siddhis (magical powers). But there was, as in Western alchemy, a deeper spiritual teaching behind the seemingly materialistic experiments. This was based on the notion of an essential correspondence between mystical truth and empirical truth -- a notion common to both Eastern and Western forms of alchemy, and summed up in the Western Hermetic axiom "As above, so below". I have commented that the early alchemists in the West

intended their experiments to have effect on all levels of existence, from the divine down to the physical, and that this was based on the notion of essential connections between all the different levels of being. (91)

Similarly, the Indian alchemists aimed at bringing about transformations in substance (prakṛti), and at operating upon the subtle forces informing matter, and hence effecting transmutations on the spiritual levels also. A moment's thought will reveal the connection with Tantric ritual, for here again the initiate uses physical matter (the body) and the subtle energies that flow through it (the Kuṇḍalini power; also the power of sexual energy) in order to procure spiritual benefits. Eliade comments:

.....the physico-chemical processes of the rasāyana serve as the "vehicle" for psychic and spiritual operations. The "elixir" obtained by alchemy corresponds to the "immortality" pursued by tantric yoga; just as the disciple works directly on his body and his psychomental life in order to transmute the flesh into a "divine body" and free the Spirit, so the alchemist works on matter to change it into "gold"..... Hence there is an occult correspondence between "matter" and man's physico-psychic body -- which will not surprise us if we remember the homology man-cosmos, so important in tantrism. Once the process of interiorization had led men to expect spiritual results from rites and physiological operations, it followed logically that similar results could be obtained by interiorizing operations performed on "matter"; in a certain spiritual condition, communication between the different cosmic levels became possible. (92)

For the alchemist, 'matter' was not dead and inert, but a receptacle of spiritual forces. These spiritual forces could be awakened by working upon matter, because of the 'sympathies' and correspondences that linked together the different levels of existence. Alchemy, whether in East or West, was therefore a spiritual technique veiled under material symbolism.

If we set aside the folklore that proliferated around the alchemists (as around all "magicians"), we shall understand the correspondence between the alchemist working on "vulgar" metals to transmute them into "gold" and the yogin working on himself to the end of "extracting" from his dark, enslaved psychomental life the free and autonomous spirit, which shares in the same essence as gold. For, in India as elsewhere, "gold is immortality" (amṛtam āyur hiraṇyam). Gold is the one perfect, solar metal and hence its symbolism meets the symbolism of Spirit..... (93)

Thus for the Eastern alchemists, as for Boehme, the transmutation of metals represented the transformation of the mystic's lower nature into the Gold of spiritual illumination and wisdom.

#### The Balance of Masculine and Feminine Principles

I regard as the most balanced forms of mysticism, those that like Boehme and Tantra acknowledge both masculine and feminine aspects of Deity. Of course, most mystics would acknowledge that it is nonsense to speak of Deity as literally possessing gender; but the complexes 'masculine' and 'feminine' have a wealth of symbolic meanings, and in my opinion it is important both for the dynamism of a religious tradition and for the psychic balance of the mystic, to effect an equilibrium between these two polarities.

The typically mystical conception of Deity as being beyond all opposites, includes of course being beyond the masculine/feminine polarity; on this level God is neither 'male' nor 'female'. But to be beyond the opposites also implies, for mystical philosophy, to embrace both poles of any pair of opposites as a whole; hence it is that many mystical teachings speak of the Divine as being both male and female. The orthodox monotheistic faiths have excluded the feminine aspect of Deity from the spiritual lives of their adherents; but it is interesting to see how many mystics who are adherents of these faiths reintroduce this feminine element. Sometimes this is done quite consciously, and made a developed part of the philosophy of the mystic (as in the case of Boehme); in other instances it seems to be a more or less unconscious drive (perhaps compelled, I suggest, by some deep psychic necessity) as in the case of Mariolatry in Catholicism. Of course, those mystics who develop this

feminine aspect of Deity consciously and explicitly, run the risk of grave criticism from the orthodox, and often of accusations of heresy.

Within Western mysticism (Boehme being only one example of this tendency) the feminine aspect of the Godhead is often personified as the Divine Wisdom, Sophia: she is the source of mystical insight, the Bride of the soul, and the manifestation of God immanent in the world, and also plays an essential role as God's 'helpmate' in the process of creation. (Cf. Proverbs 8:22-31; Wisdom of Solomon Chaps. 7, 8; and the Books of Wisdom generally). Suso elaborates on this conception; he calls himself 'Servant of the Eternal Wisdom' and sees Eternal Wisdom personified as a beautiful woman to whom he is eventually united in 'Spiritual Marriage'. He was also greatly devoted to the Virgin Mary, and speaks of the Virgin and God as forming "an eternal, infinite play of love [minnespil, = ludus amoris] which no duality can ever separate." (94) In many Catholic mystics we find a devotion to the Virgin which verges on Mariolatry, and which seems again to provide something of an equilibrium between masculine and feminine aspects of Godhead. The more metaphysical mystics stress that Deity is beyond all opposites; thus for Plotinus or Śankara the Ultimate Deity is neither male nor female, rather than both, but within each teaching there is usually a feminine spiritual principle somehow involved, such as Plotinus' World-Soul. Eckhart also brings out the notion of Deity being beyond all opposites, while on occasion he does also say that God is our mother as well as our father. Within Western mysticism, though, the most explicit exponent amongst the mystics we have examined of the union of masculine and feminine polarities in Deity is Boehme. But many of the more obscure branches of Western mysticism by which Boehme was influenced have also long upheld the importance of this equilibrium: alchemy, Gnosticism, the Kabbalah, all stress the union



of masculine and feminine principles both within the Deity and within the self.

In Hinduism, the androgyny of the Divine is often made explicit. Outside Tantra, a further example of this would be in Śaivite bhakti, where Śiva, as I have discussed, is seen as essentially androgynous, and the mystic aims at the union of Śiva and Śakti within the self. (95) Certain other sects of Śaivite mysticism, such as the Nātha-Yogins, absorbed Tantric elements into their practices: Kuṇḍalini and other exercises were used to unite within oneself the opposing principles of manifestation, symbolised by Sun and Moon, Śiva and Śakti. (96) The Śaivite bhakti mystics whom we have discussed did not use these techniques, but it was implicit in much of bhakti mysticism that the symbolism of lover and Beloved represents one fundamental androgynous power which divides itself into two, only to be reunited in the 'Mystical Marriage'. Androgyny also found its way into Vaiṣṇavite bhakti through this conception. (97)

It should perhaps be pointed out that the notion of the union of masculine and feminine principles implies the union of all pairs of opposites, of all the opposing dualities that make up finite existence -- for 'masculine' and 'feminine' are themselves symbolic terms for these pairs of opposites, and embrace an inexhaustible range of qualities. This is brought out especially well by the Taoist philosophy of 'yin' and 'yang': here everything is either 'yin' (feminine) or 'yang' (masculine) or a combination of the two, in varying proportions. To unite the opposing dualities means to pass from a state of fragmentation and imbalance, to harmony, integration and oneness. It also means to unite the Divine and the human: to raise human consciousness to awareness of the Divine, and (conversely, and equally as important) to attempt to show the Divine forth

in this world.

We can see, in some of the greatest mystics, the actual results of this balancing of the masculine and feminine principles, where the latent side has been developed and the two integrated. The great mystics are remarkable combinations of strength and gentleness, inspiration combined with practical application, creativity combined with precision of philosophical analysis. St. Teresa, in spite of her femininity, has tremendous strength, drive, and powerfulness of character; Suso, in spite of his masculinity, has a poetic receptivity and intuition. Far from destroying the essential femininity of a woman mystic, or the masculinity of a male mystic, this balance seems on the contrary to perfect them: to make them more whole individuals.

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- (2) See below, p. 527 ; see also Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism. London: Methuen, 1948, Chap.VII passim.
- (3) Jacob Boehme, Mysterium Magnum, 68.2, 68.10. London: Watkins, 1965.
- (4) Ibid., 68.24.
- (5) Ibid., 68.25. Boehme uses the term "Babel" to mean the opinions of the hypocrites who put on a show of holiness and self-righteousness; they engage in learned debates about God, but have no true spiritual understanding.
- (6) Jacob Boehme, Six Theosophic Points and other Writings. Michigan: University Press, 1970, Pp.134-135.
- (7) So we are told by Boehme's biographer; see Underhill op. cit., p.256.
- (8) Boehme, in W. P. Swainson, 'Jacob Boehme', in Swainson & A. E. Waite, Three Famous Mystics. London: Rider, N.D.
- (9) Nicolas Berdyaev, Introduction to Six Theosophic Points, op. cit., Pp.vii-viii.
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- (11) Ibid., 6.10.
- (12) Boehme, The Signature of all Things, I.11, I.14. London: Dent (Everyman), N.D.
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- (14) See below, p. 520.
- (15) Plotinus, Ennead II.3.7, trans. Stephen MacKenna. London: Faber, 1969.
- (16) Boehme, Signature, op. cit., IX.8.
- (17) Boehme, The High and Deep Searching Out of the Threefold Life of Man through (or according to) the Three Principles, XI.38, trans. John Sparrow. London: Watkins, 1909.
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- (20) Manly P. Hall, An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy. Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society Press, 1936, p.CLIV.
- (21) Ibid., p.CLVI.
- (22) Mysterium Magnum, op. cit., 74.51, 46.29.
- (23) Ibid., 12.28.
- (24) Ibid., Chap. 36.
- (25) Signature, op. cit., III.40.
- (26) Stoudt, op. cit., p.222.
- (27) Boehme, in Stoudt, op. cit., p.260.
- (28) Swainson, op. cit., p.95.
- (29) Russell H. Hvolbek, 'Was Jacob Boehme a Paracelsian?', The Hermetic Journal, 19, Spring 1983, p.14.
- (30) Signature, op. cit., I.6.
- (31) See above, Pp.17-20.
- (32) Boehme, in Stoudt, op. cit., p.235.
- (33) Mysterium Magnum, op. cit., 17.11.

- (34) Edith B. Schnapper, The Inward Odyssey. London: Allen & Unwin, 1965, Pp.186-187.
- (35) Six Theosophic Points, op. cit., p.90.
- (36) See above, Pp.221-222.
- (37) Mysterium Magnum, op. cit., 5.7.
- (38) Ibid., 8.23-24.
- (39) Ibid., 20.17-18; see also Signature Chap. X. "Ens" here means "essence"; "the art" is alchemy.
- (40) Threefold Life, op. cit., Introduction, p.xv.
- (41) Mysterium Magnum, op. cit., 29.13.
- (42) Ibid., 17.42.
- (43) Ibid., Preface, 9.
- (44) Threefold Life, op. cit., VI.4.
- (45) Signature, op. cit., Preface, p.3. (Original emphasis)
- (46) Mysterium Magnum, op. cit., 21.17.
- (47) Threefold Life, op. cit., VII.26-27.
- (48) Ibid., V.140-142.
- (49) Signature, op. cit., X.17, X.19; see also XII.30. Boehme interprets the crystal or glassy sea before the throne in the Revelation of St. John as the seventh form or property in which all things are to be brought into the one essence.
- (50) Ibid., XI.42-43.
- (51) Threefold Life, op. cit., XII.45.
- (52) Ibid., VI.100-103.
- (53) Signature, op. cit., X.53.
- (54) Six Theosophic Points, op. cit., p.65.
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- (56) Ibid., p.70.
- (57) Mysterium Magnum, op. cit., 66.61, 66.63, 66.68.
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- (61) St. John of the Cross, The Ascent of Mount Carmel, in The Mystical Doctrine of Saint John of the Cross, ed. R.H.J. Stuart. London: Sheed & Ward, 1974, p.7.
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- (63) Signature, op. cit., XII.12.
- (64) Threefold Life, op. cit., III.29.
- (65) Introduction to Six Theosophic Points, op. cit., Pp.vi-vii.
- (66) Boehme, in Swainson, op. cit., p.90.
- (67) Introduction to Six Theosophic Points, op. cit., p.vii.
- (68) Mysterium Magnum, op. cit., 36.22.
- (69) Ibid., 18.1.
- (70) Threefold Life, op. cit., X.24.
- (71) Mysterium Magnum, op. cit., XI.33.
- (72) Manley P. Hall, op. cit., p.CLI.
- (73) Mysterium Magnum, op. cit., L.2.
- (74) Ibid., II.5-10.
- (75) Threefold Life, op. cit., X.11.
- (76) Mysterium Magnum, op. cit., XVI.5-10.
- (77) Ibid., XVIII.8. The Gnostics used the symbol of a pearl inside an oyster to indicate the soul within the body.
- (78) Plotinus, Ennead IV.4.2, trans. MacKenna, op. cit.
- (79) See above, p.350.
- (80) Signature, op. cit., IX.66.

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(83) 'Saraha's Treasury of Songs', in Edward Conze, Buddhist Texts through the Ages. Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1954, p.230.

(84) See above, Pp.352, 382.

(85) See above, p.352.

(86) 'The Cleansing of Thought', in Conze op. cit., p.221.

(87) See above, p.372.

(88) See above, Pp.287-288.

(89) See above, p.377.

(90) Eliade, op. cit., p.274 ff.

(91) See above, Pp.361-363.

(92) Eliade, op. cit., p.283.

(93) Ibid., p.281.

(94) Suso, Little Book of Eternal Wisdom and Little Book of Truth, p.113; see above, p.86.

(95) See above, Pp.266-267,

(96) See Carl Olson, 'The Saiva Mystic and the Symbol of Androgyny', Religious Studies, 17, (3), September 1981.

(97) See above, Pp.274-275.

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CHAPTER V

MYSTICISM & EPISTEMOLOGY

## MYSTICISM & EPISTEMOLOGY PART I: THE COGNITIVE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE

The final two chapters of this study are devoted to the discussion of a number of philosophical points. In this chapter various questions concerning the nature of mystical awareness and its epistemological value are discussed. In Chapter VI the question of relativism and essentialism in the cross-cultural study of mysticism will be examined.

We have seen in our descriptions of the phenomenological experiences of various mystics that the all-important fact about mysticism is that it is an experiential reality, and I would argue that philosophical analysis has an important but nonetheless limited role to play in the elucidation and clarification of mystical experience. The essential key to mysticism is personal experience, but a non-mystic may well have a kind of sympathy for mysticism so that he or she is able to understand, to some degree or after a certain manner, the nature of mystical apprehension. It is well known that many artists, musicians, poets and other creative persons, for example, have a kind of 'leaning towards the mystical', and the same may be said of some philosophers and metaphysicians. But it remains true that a full and total understanding of mystical experience cannot be grasped by the non-mystic, just as a full and total understanding of what it is like to be in love, for example, cannot be grasped by someone who has never been in love. For this reason it seems imperative to me that the study of mysticism, if it is to make progress, should perhaps be undertaken by scholars who have themselves undergone mystical experience, or who are following some mystical discipline or other; this point has been well argued by Staal in his book Exploring Mysticism. (1) Certainly the detached, scholarly approach has its advantages, but greater advantages

still can be found by the scholar who also has personal experience of or personal commitment to mysticism. It may be as well to remember in this connection that many of the greatest mystics were themselves highly accomplished metaphysicians or theologians; yet these same mystics never fail to emphasise that metaphysics or theology can never be a substitute for direct experience.

Philosophical investigation can, however, serve the purpose of clarifying or making explicit the assertions of mystics, helping us to understand their claims after a certain manner, elucidating the philosophical frameworks upon which their interpretations of their experiences are based, and helping us to see the epistemological and metaphysical implications of their experiences. Where philosophical analysis is undertaken for this purpose, the analysis must involve seeing each mystic in relation to his or her total cultural and doctrinal setting, but without attempting to reduce mystical consciousness to social or doctrinal factors. Lott succinctly sums up the role of philosophy in this respect:

.....while there is certainly a non-analysable experiential centre of each religious tradition, the descriptions given by the teachers of each religion are quite cognisable and therefore subject to analysis of various kinds. Naturally in the study of religion no purely "objective" analysis is either possible or desirable. The analysis should be within the terms of that particular religious system..... the analysis needs to be "sympathetic" and in tune with the inner logic of the system. There is a kind of initiation required before such intelligent sympathy can be attained. But given such affinity with the inner dynamic of a tradition and its concepts, is it not possible for the "outsider" to make a special kind of contribution towards the analysis of that tradition? His ability to stand back and comment gives him the advantage of a less involved perspective, which surely has its uses. (2)

Lott's remarks here have a bearing not only on the scope of philosophical analysis in its treatment of religion -- its contribution, and its limits -- but also on other important philosophical questions. As Lott points out, no purely 'objective' analysis, undertaken from within a framework alien to



the mystical tradition in question, is desirable. We need to attune ourselves to the inner dynamic of a mystical tradition in order to evaluate it sympathetically. In the same way, if we are considering mystical experience generally in a broader sense, it is not desirable to undertake an analysis from within a framework alien to mystical philosophy -- for example, from within a materialistic framework. There are many types of 'rationality' and 'intelligibility', and many types of 'knowledge', and it is inadmissible to attempt to evaluate the ultimate validity of one type of knowledge, by means of another type. All forms of religious 'reductionism' involve an attempt to explain religion, or mystical experience in our case, by means of standards of reference or of 'rationality' exterior to or alien to religious or mystical life and consciousness. They begin by making metaphysical presuppositions regarding the nature of things, regarding what is 'real' and what is 'illusory', and end, very often, by assuming alternative Absolutes, other than the mystical, which are said to explain mystical consciousness; by advancing some other form of absolutism. I have elaborated on these points elsewhere. (3) Usually, such alternative Absolutes offer no real explanation of mystical experience at all, but merely try to explain one 'unknown' by means of another (as, for example, when it is argued that mysticism is a product of the Unconscious).

All these considerations imply that we cannot expect reason or logic to be in a position to pass judgement on the validity of mystical cognition, or to tell us, for example, whether Plotinus' talk of the One, or Boehme's talk of the Philosophers' Stone, is 'intelligible' or not. It is certainly perfectly intelligible to one who has had the requisite experience. However, this does not of course mean that mysticism is purely a matter of 'faith', nor that it is 'irrational'; it includes reason within its

scope; it encompasses reason, reason does not encompass it. (4) Why should we assume that analytical thought can 'prove' or 'disprove' the validity of a certain experience or of a different type of knowledge? The most important question may be not what philosophy makes of mystical experience, but what mysticism tells us about the limits of rational understanding. Mystical states show our rational consciousness to be only one kind of consciousness, and one which is not paradigmatic, which cannot be used as a guideline by which we can understand all forms of experience and knowledge. They show us that there are other dimensions to our life, other kinds of truth and knowledge; as William James says, they can be seen as "windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world." (5) Mystical states show us a form of truth which embraces the whole self, which is not limited to reason or to feeling and which cannot therefore be measured by them.

Indeed, it may be that as regards mysticism, modern philosophy has tended to underestimate the role that experience plays in revealing reality to us. Hick's remarks are instructive here; discussing the question of mystical experience as a source of knowledge, he says:

We have to trust our own experience for otherwise we have no basis on which to believe anything about the nature of the universe..... Of course we also know that sometimes particular parts of our experience are delusory, so that experience is not always to be trusted. But we only know this on the basis of trust in the general veracity of our experience..... One who has a powerful and continuous sense of existing in the presence of God must, as a rational person, claim to know that God exists; and he is as entitled to make this claim as he and the rest of us are to claim to know that the physical world exists and that other people exist. (6)

In the case of mystical experience, as in the case of sense-perception or of other means of knowledge, doubt is always theoretically possible; as Moore comments, there is a degree of uncertainty and ambiguity intrinsic

in all human experience. (7) But we can only live on the assumption that our experience is generally cognitive of reality; indeed, it would be both practically difficult and psychically confusing to attempt to live in any other way! If on a certain occasion we find that we have been deluded, we do not reject the whole idea of experience as a valid form of knowledge -- we treat the delusion as an exception to the rule. We may come to doubt that certain of our experiences were genuine (i.e., that they really did reveal reality to us) but we revise our beliefs and attitudes in this way in every area of life. Mystics indeed often admit to mistaking or misinterpreting certain specific experiences that they have had, developing and modifying their claims in the light of new experiences, as Moore has pointed out. (8) There is room for theoretical doubt with any kind of experience; but the main point to be made here is that philosophical objections raised against the epistemological status of mystical assertions could apply to any other area of life and thought, and in the end all we can do is to trust in what we believe to be true in this respect as in any other.

Of course, we need to bear in mind the distinction between experience and interpretation here; the interpretation of the experience, or the metaphysical claims made, may be incorrect or inappropriate, while the reality of the experience considered simply as experience remains unquestioned. Mystics themselves are well aware of this, and continually warn us against deluding ourselves as to the true significance of experiences. St. John of the Cross, for example, speaking of locutions, says, "....though it is true that there can be no illusion in this communication, and in the enlightenment of the understanding [i.e., in the experience taken simply as experience], still illusions may, and do, frequently occur

in the formal words and reasonings which the understanding forms about them [i.e., in interpretation]...." (9) It is important to note, though, that not all mystical experience, by any means, is used to advance claims regarding entities or realities not given in the experience itself. The Argument from Religious Experience, for example, which attempts to prove God's existence from the fact of religious experience, is not used by any mystics that I know of; metaphysical claims are very often formulated by apologists of mysticism rather than by the mystics themselves. Mystical experience has its own worth and validity. Metaphysical claims may be made after the experience, as a result of consideration of its meaning and so on, but at the time of the experience itself, one simply does not need to formulate hypotheses about it. Often the experience is so intense that this is the last thing one would think of doing; often it takes all one's powers simply to experience it. At the time of the experience, external confirmation regarding metaphysical entities is felt to be unnecessary; the experience is sufficient unto itself. Moore has some valuable comments regarding these points, and I shall quote at some length from his article:

.....claims based on mystical experience, like those based on other forms of experience, are of both inferential and non-inferential kinds, so that clearly it is important not to confuse one kind with the other. Mystical experience is often treated as if it consisted of mental images which are then made the basis for unwarranted and unverifiable inferences concerning the existence of entities or realities not themselves the immediate objects of the experience. Not only does this kind of analysis not ring true when we turn to examine the writings of the mystics themselves; in addition it invents a difficulty for mystical claims where none exists, or at least raises objections which have no more force in the context of mysticism than they do in non-mystical contexts. To adduce universal problems of perception as the grounds for doubting the validity of the mystical claim in particular is a case of playing the same card twice over. For as one writer has pointed out, the mystic is not like one who infers the existence of fire from the appearance of smoke when he has no independent rule of inference justifying the link between the

two, but like one who "infers" smoke from the visual sensing of smoke -- that is, like one who sees the smoke directly. While it is certainly the case that some mystical claims are presented as inferences (valid or invalid as the case may be), others no less certainly refer to perceptions of objects or realities immediately apprehended.

The sense of immediacy or objectivity of what is apprehended in mystical experience comes across very strongly in mystical writing, and mystics stress that it persists long after the experience is over. Now to affirm this sense of immediacy or objectivity does not amount to a claim that mystical experience is self-authenticating; it does not imply certainty regarding the true status or correct interpretation of the experience. Indeed a mystic might insist that his experience was vividly real, and yet be unable to say anything much else either about its specific content or about its likely significance. Furthermore, the sense of objectivity on the one hand and the certainty which a mystic might or might not have regarding the significance of an experience on the other are both distinct from the doctrinal certitude which a mystic may possess on other grounds (i.e. through faith, reasoning, religious training, and so forth). The sense of immediacy or objectivity, certainty in regard to interpretation, and doctrinal certitude are, therefore, three logically distinct factors in mystical claims, however closely they may be related in actual accounts. (10)

Moore makes a number of important points here: that mystical experience is a matter of direct perception of the Divine, not of inference; that this does not necessarily imply that the experience is self-authenticating, or that the interpretation of it stands unchallenged; and that objections raised against mysticism which assume that all mystical statements are inferential, would apply equally well in non-mystical contexts. Concerning the first point, that mysticism is a matter of immediate perception of the Divine, I have repeatedly stressed this point, whilst also allowing that inferences and interpretations are often formulated after the experience itself. Concerning the second point, Moore is quite right that there are occasions where a mystic may be unable to say very much about the significance of an experience. It is quite possible, indeed it happens quite frequently, that a vision or intuition is obscure as to its meaning, or fleeting, or lacking clarity. Concerning Moore's third point (as I have

summarised the three points above), it is quite true that, even where an inferential claim is advanced by a mystic, objections raised against the inference could apply equally well to the interpretation of other forms of experience. Wainwright also argues along these lines, basing his argument on an analogy between mystical experience and sense experience:

There is a gap between the phenomenological object of mystical experience and its apparent object. For example, although the phenomenological object of theistic mystical experience is a loving will, theistic mystics typically experience or interpret this object as God. But there is also a gap between the phenomenological object of sense experience and its apparent object. When I look at my desk, the phenomenological object of my experience is a desk-like surface seen from a particular point of view. However, its apparent object is the desk itself. There is another gap between the claim that one appears to be confronted with a loving will and the claim that this loving will is real, but, similarly, there is a gap between the claim that one is appeared to [sic] in a desk-like way and the claim that there really is something which appears to one in that fashion..... The point is this. It is by no means clear that the logical relations between sense experiences and physical objects are significantly different from the logical relations between mystical or numinous experiences and an object like God. It is thus not clear that some sort of special justification is needed in the one case which is not needed in the other. (11)

The obvious lesson to be learnt from all this is there is a difference between 'philosophic' or theoretical doubt, and practical doubt. To take another example of the relation between experience and inference: we very often try to deduce the thoughts or feelings of other people from our experience of their actions. Sometimes we find that we are mistaken regarding their thoughts or feelings; but this does not generally prevent us from persisting in such attempts, nor does it make us doubt that very often our attempts will be fruitful. If we must be sceptics, we should at least be consistent sceptics, and admit that our scepticism comes to bear upon all areas of experience, and not just the mystical. Indeed, the mystic might wish to go further, and say: I will doubt the ground upon which my feet stand, sooner than doubt the Ground upon which stands that ground.

To experience, to live through, something gives us a deeper and more convincing and more lasting knowledge of it than mere rational comprehension can. It is only in personal experience that something becomes truly real for us and is taken up into our life: only then do we truly understand. The most important aspect of mysticism is this personal experience, and not any inferences that might be drawn from it. Where experience is used as a basis for metaphysical inferences, it is obvious that such inferences cannot be 'proved' from within a philosophical framework different to that of the mystical tradition in question. But from within the framework of mystical philosophy itself (which has a high degree of internal coherence and comprehensiveness) the inferences seem, at the very least, altogether reasonable. Nothing to do with the nature of truth and reality -- not even the existence of the physical world -- can be proven by means of a logic which is divorced from its encompassing metaphysical system. Such a logic can only tell us whether a given argument is valid, granted certain premises which might or might not be true. The type of philosophy which looks at mystical experience from the outside and attempts to analyse it by means of a logic of this kind, sees it as something uncertain from which rational argument is unable to derive any 'proof' for the existence of metaphysical entities or realities. The mystic, on the other hand, knows the presence of the Divine as an immediately apprehended certainty: for at the height of his or her experience, there are not two things (the experience, and the object which it is supposed to reveal) separated by dualism, but one thing (the union of experience and object).

References

- (1) Frits Staal, Exploring Mysticism. Middlesex: Penguin, 1975, passim.
- (2) Eric J. Lott, God and the Universe in the Vedāntic Theology of Rāmānuja. Madras: Ramanuja Research Society, 1976, p.9.
- (3) See below, Pp.493-495.
- (4) On the 'inner logic' of mysticism, see below, Pp.495-499.
- (5) William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience. London: Collins, 1981 (10th edtn.), p.412.
- (6) John Hick, 'Mystical Experience as Cognition', in Mystics and Scholars: the Calgary Conference on Mysticism 1976, eds. Harold Coward & Terence Penelhum. Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1976.
- (7) Peter Moore, 'Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique', in Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, ed. Steven T. Katz. London: Sheldon Press, 1978, p.127.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p.126.
- (9) St. John of the Cross, The Ascent of Mount Carmel, in The Mystical Doctrine of Saint John of the Cross, ed. R.H.J. Steuart. London: Sheed & Ward, 1974, p.45.
- (10) Moore, *op. cit.*, Pp.124-125.
- (11) William J. Wainwright, Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981, Pp.106-107.



## MYSTICISM & EPISTEMOLOGY PART 2: THE REFERENT OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

I have indicated that at the height of mystical experience there are not two things (the experience, and that which it is supposed to reveal) but one thing (the union of experience and object). This is highly relevant to the Problem of Reference, which has been a perennial debate in the philosophy of religion. Briefly stated, this asks to what being or object religious language refers. Certain philosophers surveying the matter have attempted to specify an objective referent of religious discourse (i.e., God, Being, etc.); others have held that this referent cannot be exactly defined, but exists none the less. More recently, writers such as D. Z. Phillips have argued that religious language (when properly understood) is not referential at all: a statement of belief in God is to be understood not as a statement that somewhere there is to be found a being who is omniscient, omnipotent, etc.; it is rather a confession of our intention to hold to certain attitudes and ethical standards by which to live our lives. For Phillips, religious belief requires no external justification, for to attempt to provide such justification is to impose the standards and categories of one mode of discourse (e.g., the scientific, empirical, or rationalistic) onto another mode (the religious). To attempt to give a nonreligious account of the reality of God is on a par with giving a nonmusical account of the reality of music, or a nonscientific account of the reality of science (1) -- accounts which it would clearly be illegitimate to expect, and which could not in any case be satisfactorily provided. This part of Phillips' argument is similar to my own: I have argued above that mysticism cannot satisfactorily be explained or understood from within a framework alien to mystical philosophy.

The whole question of the Problem of Reference is intimately bound up with ideas as to what constitutes the 'subjective' and the 'objective', and with questions of ontology, questions regarding what we mean by the use of the adjective 'real', or what we mean when we say something 'exists'. I wish to argue that dualism has set up a false dichotomy between the inner self and the outer world, knowledge and being, 'I' and 'non-I', the so-called 'subjective' and 'objective'. Hence, it is assumed that if an experience has no outer referent able to be empirically located, it must be purely 'subjective', 'just psychological', a product, perhaps, of feeling, emotion or other inner drives. The empirically detectable objects of our everyday world are held to be 'objective', and where the existence of something cannot be empirically proven or logically demonstrated, it is regarded as 'subjective'. Descartes' dualism of mind and matter, knowledge and being, can be seen as a major factor contributing to the development of other dichotomies: reason/faith, science/religion, 'objectivity'/'subjectivity'.

In contrast to this position, which has influenced modern Western thought so strongly since the time of Descartes, I wish to suggest that the basic identification of the outward with the 'objective' (and hence 'real') and the inward with the 'subjective' (and hence, it is often held, in some measure 'unreal') is mistaken. Both the inner experiences of the self, and the outer world that we see around us, have an equal claim to reality and hence to objectivity. This does not mean that we no longer have any guidelines for determining the truth or falsity of our inner beliefs or our outer perceptions; either can be true or false, and mystics do for example have guidelines by which to evaluate the truth of visions and so on. Inspirations are real, mystical visions are real; hallucinations

are also 'real' after their own manner (real because they are experienced, like Śankara's snake), but we would not normally consider them to be 'true', for unlike mystical experience, they contradict the evidence of ordinary sense-perception and reason; and they do not tend to 'bear fruit' in philosophies of any profundity, in significantly inspired and dedicated action, or in psychic integration and inner peace. We have remarked in the course of our discussions of the teachings of the mystics, that their experiences suggest to us that there are many other realms of being in our universe, realms of being which are not recognised by materialistic philosophy, or, if they are recognised, they are seen as somehow not 'real' -- as completely 'subjective' -- for it is a basic premise or 'dogma' of materialism that there are no realms of being, no realities, other than the material. Nevertheless, to the mystic who has experienced these 'other worlds', they are just as real as the physical plane, if not more so. In the physical world, matter is real; in other realms of being, other types of reality obtain. For example, in the spiritual realm, the Spirit is seen as the ultimately real, and as that which gives all else reality; in the world of Ideas (of the Platonic type) the Ideal is the Real; in the world known to occultists such as Boehme as the astral, that which is generated by the creative imagination is real. Boehme in fact clearly illustrates the belief in other worlds which are not material, in his discussion of Heaven. He says that Heaven is not of time, place or space; it is a state of consciousness within ourselves. Nevertheless, he also speaks of Heaven as a sphere of being existing side by side with and interpenetrating the physical universe, but veiled from normal sight. (2) In other words, on levels of being/consciousness above the physical, beyond the dualistic division of mind and matter, a state of consciousness is a 'place' -- that is, a non-

physical sphere of being. Speaking in our usual language which we use to describe the world of empirical things, it is not quite correct either to say that Heaven is a 'place' nor that it is just a 'state'. It transcends the dualism of 'inner state'/'outer thing'. Heaven is a state of consciousness in that it is an ideal world; it is a place in that it is here and now if we can realise it. It is this world seen in the Light of the Divine; it is all other levels of consciousness and being seen in the same Light; it is everywhere, but usually veiled from us. A parallel to Boehme's ideas is found in Vaiṣṇavite bhakti. I have mentioned that in this mystical movement, Vṛndāvana (the cowherd village of Kṛṣṇa's youth) became metamorphosed into an Otherworldly Paradise: this Paradise was held to exist both in heaven and on earth, which we can interpret to mean, both as a Divine archetype and as a state which can be realised here and now.

The Problem of Reference, then, has its roots in dualism, in the rigid separation of the inner from the outer, and in the assumption that the outer world as apprehended by our senses has a greater claim to 'reality' than do these other 'worlds'. Hence the attempts to find an outward, so-called 'objective' referent to whom or which religious discourse refers. Since it is clear, however, that God, or the Absolute, is not one physical object amongst others which can be empirically detected, or proved to exist, such attempts fail; and, because of our dualistic heritage, it is then thought that if God, or the Absolute, is not an empirical fact, it must reflect something entirely psychological, inward, 'subjective', as Braithwaite argues for example. (3) The shackles of dualism are not easily shaken off, and this basic assumption seems to colour most of modern Western philosophy. Whether the 'reductionist' critic argues that religion is entirely a psychologically-generated product, an illusion or fancy; or

whether the modern philosopher of religion holds that since no 'objective referent' for religious discourse can be found, religion must therefore be a matter of human attitudes, inner beliefs, ethical standards; the same basic presupposition remains, i.e., that the inner and the outer form a rigid dualism. But is this necessarily so? May this attitude not rather represent the imposition of false categories and distinctions (based on personal preferences, dogma, etc.) onto the experiences of the mystics?

Indeed, we have seen that such a duality of the inner and the outer is precisely what the mystics do not espouse. Mystics insist that the absolute dualism of subject and object does not represent the highest truth. Boehme is, perhaps, the prime exponent of the interweaving of the inward and the outward -- an interweaving which is based on an essential unity between the two, and which issues in his philosophy of the 'Signature of all Things'. For Boehme, outward forms are expressions or manifestations of inner qualities, essences, or realities. All things are interlinked, all planes or levels of being are interrelated in an all-embracing unity which is the ground of all. Plotinus, following the Platonic tradition, holds to this same basic idea. For Wordsworth, again, each aspect of Nature is a "symbol of Eternity", part of the "workings of one mind" (4), each with its own inner significance; the splendour and glory of the outer world matches the radiance and light to be found within. For Śankara, the primal source of the Universe, which pervades everything (Brahman) is identical with the inmost spirit of humanity (ātman), and the world, when seen in its true spiritual aspect, is none other than Brahman. "The idea of ever-shining Brahman flashes upon us while contemplating the phenomenal world." (5) Even the devotionally-orientated mystics, who do not tend to deal with metaphysical questions in detail, and who often tend to lean

rather more towards dualism, stress that in the ultimate state of mystical attainment, we see the Divine in all things, including both the outer world and the inner self; even where there is a degree of dualism in mysticism, it is not a rigid dualism but a 'unity-with-difference'.

To attempt to evaluate such mystical tenets from within a philosophical framework based on dualism is to miss the point. It is to assume that the categories of meaning of one mode of discourse can be applied to all other philosophical or metaphysical systems. Mysticism must be investigated in terms of its own criteria of intelligibility and 'rationality' -- criteria which are certainly far from lacking in the writings of the mystics. Phillips' argument that religion requires no external justification can be seen to be relevant here, and mystical experience perhaps brings his point out especially well. This is illustrated by the fact that whilst one is actually undergoing a mystical experience, one makes no appeal to anything other than the experience to say why the experience is good, or why it is happening. As Ellwood has noted (6), one does not say to oneself, "This will be good for me later on", or "This will help me get ahead in my career", or "This will improve my mental health", or "This was caused by something I ate, or something I did as a child". The experience is so overwhelming that one simply does not think of such things at the time -- nor indeed even of more serious philosophical questions -- although, of course, various statements defining or explaining the experience may occur to the mystic later. But during the experience itself, one does not attempt to dissect it rationally -- one simply experiences it for what it is. It is dependent for meaning on no external criteria; it is revealed in its own fully coherent symbolic language. Any attempt to translate the tenets of mysticism into another 'language' or mode of

thought (such as those of formal logic, or empirical analysis), and thus to attempt to refute or justify the mystics' claims, will inevitably mean that we lose some of the essential significance or depth of the experience as portrayed in its own language. It must be understood on its own terms, and one simply either grasps the meaning, or not, as the case may be. (Of course, the problem for many people is that to grasp the full meaning means to reproduce the requisite experience.)

The mystics that we have encountered are unanimous in their declaration that insight into oneself gives simultaneous insight into the nature of the Divine and the Cosmos: "By the act of self-intellection he has the simultaneous intellection of all." (7) This is based (as we have remarked) on the Doctrine of Correspondences, the interlinking of different levels of being or reality. The Divine is manifest in all Nature, and is within the human soul, and yet is outside all this, for it cannot be confined to the dualistic strictures of 'within' and 'without'. We know ourselves, we know God, and we know all things, when we discover the one source or principle on which all is based: a discovery which entails becoming one with this principle, and hence transcending the duality of subject and object, knower and known. Inner experience and outer referent fuse. This is made possible because of our inherent oneness with the Divine, and because of the essential unity of all life. We are each of us a microcosm reflecting the macrocosm:

.....behold thyself, and consider what thou art, view what the outward world is, with its dominion; and thou wilt find that thou, with thy outward spirit and being, art the outward world. Thou art a little world out of the great world..... (8)

.....the Soul is many things, is all, is the Above and the Beneath to the totality of life: and each of us is an Intellectual Cosmos, linked to this world by what is lowest in us, but, by what is highest, to the Divine Intellect..... (9)

How exquisitely the individual Mind  
       .....to the external World  
 Is fitted: -- and how exquisitely, too,.....  
 The external World is fitted to the Mind. (10)

Within the innermost Temple of your heart shall you find the  
 seas and the heavens and all the illimitable cosmos; for the  
 space within this temple is as vast as all the manifest universe.  
 (11)

The admonition to look inward is persistent -- yet this does not imply total 'subjectivity' in the sense ordinarily understood, for in looking into our inmost selves we transcend our limited selves. Our usual categories of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' dissolve in the light of what we may call a state of pure consciousness. No longer can we divide experiences into the two mutually exclusive categories of (i) psychological subjective experience and (ii) experience with an objective referent. For example, understood from the point of view of the human microcosm, i.e., 'subjectively', the 'Temple of the Heart' mentioned in the final quotation above, the inner Temple within ourselves, is the central point of the Universe (the Source of all); from the macrocosmic point of view, i.e., 'objectively', the central principle or Source is God, or the Absolute, or the Philosophers' Stone, etc. But these two are ultimately one. Edith Schnapper speaks of the realisation of this truth as a transformation, an entrance into a new world with new dimensions, laws and values:

The limited field of ego-consciousness is taken up, as it were, into an enlarged field of awareness, whose pivotal point is no longer the ego but a new centre which appears as the fount of all life and power.... What is left behind is the one-level existence of an ego-centred life; what lies in front is a world of infinite dimensions, all revolving around the new centre like the planets around the sun.... The field of action of the new centre is all-inclusive. It addresses itself to the whole of man's being, body, soul and spirit, as also to the world, in all its manifestations. Its place of residence is both the within and the without and this is the great mystery which can only be unveiled in and through immediate realization. (12)

However, whilst the inner and the outer are ultimately one, and seen to



be such in mystical experience, this must obviously not be taken to imply that there is no difference of any kind between the two. The world seen in itself is clearly not the Divine; we have to view it with Boehme's "eye of eternity", Wordsworth's eye that "sees into the life of things". The point to be grasped is that the inner and the outer do not form a radical, antagonistic dichotomy. The practice of the mystical life awakens the inner self within us; following this, we begin slowly to establish an equilibrium between the inner and the outer, by determining the latter in accordance with the former. When we discover the self within, the outward world is transformed; and eventually, we discover that the two are one, and that we (as microcosm) may contain all things within ourselves, just as does God (as macrocosm). We "see the Self in all beings standing, all beings in the Self." (13)

I have remarked that the Problem of Reference hinges not only on the assumed dichotomy of the inner and the outer, but also on questions of ontology, questions regarding the acceptance or rejection of different levels of existence or realms of reality. The Ontological Argument for the existence of God, for example, can be seen as a rationalisation of mystical experience (Anselm, who was its first proponent, in fact conceived of the Argument in a sudden moment of illumination during Matins), as a metaphysical elucidation of a vision of God as Being or as Reality itself, the very mystery at the heart of all existence. Such a vision would involve rising above the duality of 'existence in the mind' (in intellectu) and 'existence in (so-called) reality' (in re), the duality of 'inner' and 'outer', so that the experiencer would proclaim that the idea of God entailed his necessary existence. In such a visionary state, the Ideal is the Real, knowledge and being are one. Since we are obviously not

concerned to prove the existence of God as an empirical being living up in the sky, what we in fact mean when we say 'God exists' is 'God is real', 'God has (or is) Being'.

Not by speech, not by thought,  
Not by sight does one grasp Him.  
He is: by this word and not otherwise  
Is He comprehended. (14)

If knowledge and being are one, then if we know a thing (in the fullest sense, by becoming one with it), it is, it is real. "Thou canst not know what is not -- that is impossible -- nor utter it; for it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be.....It needs must be that what can be thought and spoken of is." (15) To this extent, inasmuch as experience and referent fuse, mystical experience, in its claims to direct knowledge of Divine Reality, provides its own 'referent' or 'object'. One of the reasons why mystics insist that the Divine must be directly experienced is because only such direct experience is able to provide certain evidence of this reality. External justification, as we have remarked, is therefore both impossible and unnecessary.

While if, on the other hand, we deny the isomorphism of knowledge and being, we are of course faced with the problem of whether or not our ideas correspond to reality. Dualism has had to wrestle with this problem over many centuries. Post-Cartesian philosophy has been preoccupied with questions of epistemology, with the question of the validity of our knowledge: how can we be sure that our 'subjective' thoughts correspond to 'objective' reality? Kierkegaard expresses the dilemma most poignantly. The existing individual, says Kierkegaard, cannot realise the identity of knowledge and being; there are, then, for him or her two types of truth, the 'objective' (represented by rationalistic philosophy) and the 'subjective' (religion, Faith).

However, as I argue throughout this study, all knowledge of whatever sort depends upon certain assumptions, or first principles, around which its system of thought is built -- whether this system of thought be scientific, religious, magical, etc. All belief-systems rest on certain basic philosophical assumptions, and ultimately on personal commitment, belief, faith. When the commitment is unconscious (as in the case of common-sense beliefs for most of us most of the time; or as with scientific beliefs for many members of modern society) it goes unnoticed; the assumptions or presuppositions then become 'dogmas'. This unnoticed or unconscious commitment is a commitment to epistemological beliefs -- to beliefs regarding what constitutes a valid means of arriving at knowledge, and what constitutes meaningful knowledge in the first place. Hand in hand with this assumption, of course, go assumptions as to what is to count as 'evidence' for belief (e.g., experience, memory, reasoning, sense-perception). It will be seen, then, that all knowledge is 'subjective' in the sense that there is no one single criterion of objective meaningfulness yet discovered that will cover all these systems of thought; the systems are based on different implicit first principles. Science, for example, is based on the assumption that the universe has a natural order, a pattern of meaning, that will yield itself to rational and empirical investigation. But, as Demos comments, "Science, being the greatest intellectual power today, tends to overwhelm and to blind us to the fact that the 'evidences' for scientific ideas can be persuasive only for those who are already converted. All this, I think, will become more evident to human beings of a later and a metascientific epoch." (16) Mysticism, for its part, is based on the assumption that the universe has a natural and Divine order, a pattern of meaning; but does not assume that reason or empirical know-

ledge can reveal the ultimate meaning behind this pattern. Rather, mysticism holds that by becoming one with the pattern ourselves, we may come to apprehend it intuitively and experientially. It will be seen that we need to have faith in either one of these propositions, these first principles, of science and of mysticism, before we allow for the possibility of knowledge proceeding from either system. It is part of the bias of our age that science is considered a superior method of arriving at knowledge. If a particular fact is said to be scientifically proven, it is not challenged in popular thought, but the reaction is quite different if one tries to say that something is true because one feels, intuitively, or 'just knows' it.

'Belief that' and 'belief in', reason and faith, far from being mutually exclusive, in fact require and support each other. We have to have faith in, or believe in, the powers of reason, before we can deduce any truths about the world by means of it; for clearly, it would be an illicit procedure to attempt to prove reason's validity by means of reason. It will be seen therefore that there is really no such thing as 'absolute objectivity' and hence no 'absolute subjectivity' either. Knowledge of whatever kind is also always 'subjective' in the sense that it has to be made personal to oneself, or 'appropriated'; we have to be able to relate it to ourselves in a way in which we can understand it, a way in which it will have meaning for us as individuals in the total context of our life-experience. Or as the mystics say, we have to take knowledge into ourselves until it becomes a part of our very being. Furthermore, we are each of us limited beings and necessarily apprehend things in a limited way. We put our own interpretations on things, we apprehend one facet of the Whole more than another. In this sense it is true that we may not be able to escape from

our human subjectivity. The facts of mystical experience, however, suggest to us that it is possible for us to rise above our own limited, contingent, ego-centred, fragmentary viewpoints, so that we see not a facet of the Whole but the Whole itself. And if, as many mystics claim, this involves a transcendence of the duality of knower and known, subject and object, then mystical experience cannot properly be called either 'subjective' or 'objective'. But the mystics are insistent upon the 'objectivity' of their experience in another sense of the word: that is, that it has its own validity and reality, and furthermore that it refers to a Reality which exists independently of their experience of it (even if they were not experiencing it, it would still exist). Its validity cannot be judged by psychological analysis (the study of the 'subjective', inner life) or by empirical observation (the study of the 'objective', outer world). Its reality speaks for itself; it simply is.

I have spoken of the fusion of subject and object, experiencer and referent. In the following chapter I shall discuss the nature of what I have called the state of 'pure consciousness' which gives rise to this fusion and which often culminates in formless states of awareness. Since this is an important aspect of mystical apprehension, it is vital to understand its epistemological implications.

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### MYSTICISM & EPISTEMOLOGY PART 3: 'PURE CONSCIOUSNESS' AND FORMLESS AWARENESS

In the writings of the mystics we have come across a type of knowledge which is described as pure consciousness or pure awareness, and which is said to be the basis of all other knowledge. What is meant by this claim? First of all, what is meant is that this type of knowledge involves the whole of our beings. I have argued above that the common dichotomy between 'knowledge' and 'faith' is somewhat arbitrary, that all 'knowledge' requires 'faith'; and it seems to me that this typically mystical form of apprehension, 'pure consciousness', can be said to be the prime and cardinal synthesis of 'knowledge' and 'faith', the two being fused, as it were, and taken up into a higher unity. Or, as I have argued in the course of my discussion of Boehme (1), this type of knowledge should not only involve reason and faith, but also will, and actual practical action. In this sense, 'pure consciousness' can indeed be said to be the basis of all our other knowledge; it can be seen as the source of all other types of knowledge, before they become divided.

'Pure consciousness' also gives knowledge of all other things, for the mystic, in that other things are only really fully understood by relating them to 'pure consciousness' as a kind of central core; they derive the fullness of their meaning from it. For the mystic, what is known with any certainty of the world of 'becoming' is only what it reflects of the Eternal Realm. In this sense, too, mystical apprehension is the basis of all our knowledge. It is not a certain kind of knowledge amongst others, divorced from the rest of our lives; it is not so much a part of life, as life itself, the very basis for, the ground and goal of, our whole existence, promoting as it does self-knowledge, strength, serenity, and a

wonderful sense of wholeness, unity and integration. For one who lives in mystical consciousness, this consciousness becomes woven into the very fabric of one's life, characterising every thought and action.

But to return for a moment to mystical apprehension as the synthesis of 'knowledge' and 'faith'. The point to be stressed here is that mystical perception is an act of the whole person. It involves every aspect of our powers of knowledge, feeling, will and action, unified as higher intuition; it demands of us all that we can give. This is one reason why mystical intuitions so often seem to carry with them their own authoritativeness; there is no part of oneself left that could doubt, no part left that is not involved in the realisation. It is also one reason why realisation is characterised by unity -- for in the act of mystical apprehension, all our powers, our 'faculties', all our heights and depths, are united and integrated into a whole in what Eckhart calls the 'Ground of the Soul' -- the Ground which is the source of all our diverse ways of understanding and apprehending things, and through which mystical knowledge is brought about. Any approach to the attainment of knowledge which invokes the feelings of the heart at the expense of reason, or, vice versa, the use of reason to the neglect of the yearnings of the heart, may ultimately prove inadequate and unsatisfactory to us. If our whole being is to be satisfied, these two opposing tendencies, together with the other aspects of ourselves such as will and practical application, must be fused into a whole. As Underhill puts it, the total experience of the mystic transcends mere feeling, just as it transcends mere intellect; it is an act of perception of the whole person, inexpressible by 'departmental' words such as feeling or thought. (2) Psychologically, says Underhill, this fusion of the 'faculties' is ".....an induced state, in which the field of consciousness is



greatly contracted: the whole of the self, its conative powers, being sharply focussed, concentrated upon one thing." (3) This sharpening or heightening of consciousness is, of course, well known to many who practice meditation. It is a state beyond feeling just as it is beyond rational understanding, and is generated not by emotion or thought, but out of the very depths of the self, the 'Ground of the Soul'; that is, the core of our being that lies deep below the surface mentality, quiet and at rest beneath the changing thoughts and emotions of the conscious mind.

Concerning this 'Ground of the Soul', Otto says:

Here independent of and deeper than all surface intellect, lies that power of knowledge, of intuition, of valuation and of higher judgement which enters our consciousness through the verdicts of conscience -- the inner voice, the witness of the spirit within. Only here at the center springs the power and the unmediated certainty of all ideals, particularly of all religious convictions. Only what has penetrated to this ground of the soul and has here proved itself, becomes truth, unshakable truth for us. (4)

Otto's final remark here reflects my previous point that for the mystic, any certainty regarding the material world must somehow come through mystical values and mystical apprehensions, that is, it must be related to these as to the core or hub around which all else revolves. Mystical knowledge, for the mystic, becomes the basis of all knowledge, giving meaning and purpose to all else. This is 'pure consciousness', the consciousness of the integrity of the individual or of his or her centre, purified of the contingent and fluctuating thoughts and feelings of the surface mentality and of the states and conditions of the empirical self brought about through contact with the exterior world.

The penetration to the core or hub of the self and the plumbing of the pure state of consciousness beneath the surface mind does not in itself constitute a formless state, but meditative procedures such as these

may often give rise to formless states of awareness. Mystical experiences which are described as formless, undifferentiated, or nonconceptual give rise to a number of important philosophical considerations. Is it true that such experiences are literally, absolutely, devoid of any concepts and distinctions whatsoever? If so, can these states be called cognitive? Are they tantamount to empty consciousness? How are they related to lower stages of mystical experience? Does the attainment of such a state imply the loss of individuality or self-identity?

By way of introduction of the discussion, I shall refer to some of Wainwright's comments on the matter. Wainwright begins:

Special problems are created by the (alleged) fact that introvertive mystical consciousness is entirely devoid of conceptual content, and by the fact that one mode of introvertive mystical consciousness even seems to lack an object. It is difficult to see how a non-conceptual or objectless experience could be cognitive. (5)

Wainwright argues, however, that it may not be true that many forms of mysticism in fact involve the exclusion of all conceptual content. Firstly, he says, the fact that an experience is non-discursive (i.e., that it does not involve comparisons, analyses and inferences) does not entail that it is not conceptual. The contemplation of a seascape, for example, may be non-discursive, but the experience is not "a chaotic confusion of unrelated impressions, but is conceptually structured." (6) Secondly, the fact that introvertive mystical consciousness is (sometimes) devoid of imagery does not entail that it is devoid of conceptual content. Thirdly, the fact that specific contents are left behind, or even that more obscure general concepts are not being explicitly attended to in the experience, does not mean that the experience is entirely non-conceptual. (John of the Cross, for example, insists only on the absence of specific intellectual content.) Fourth, continues Wainwright, that all thoughts of creatures are forgotten

does not entail that all thoughts are forgotten. Fifth, the consciousness of the theistic mystic, at least, does have a content, that is, God.

Monistic experiences of absolutely undifferentiated unity Wainwright finds more problematic:

Westerners have usually assumed that consciousness is necessarily intentional, i.e. that the notion of empty consciousness or a consciousness without contents is self-contradictory. Thus, earlier students of mysticism ..... assumed that introvertive states either had some ordinary but very attenuated object (for example, a faint image) or were states of complete unconsciousness. There is little empirical support for this position, but they were forced to adopt it because of their a priori conviction that consciousness is always intentional. It would seem, however, that the cross-cultural occurrence of this type of introvertive experience, together with the fact that an entire culture (viz, that of India) has supposed that consciousness can exist without an object, casts doubt on both the necessity and the truth of this assumption. (7)

Elsewhere, Horne suggests that the assumption that a consciousness without specific content is self-contradictory or impossible, may stem from 'Hume's legacy' of empiricism. Horne gives the relevant passage from Hume:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. (8)

The mystics we have examined would strongly disagree with Hume that one cannot find one's pure Self without an accompanying state of pain or pleasure or some other particular perception. As Horne points out in his article, the point that mystics are trying to put across is that it is possible to reach a state of pure self-awareness or 'pure consciousness' by going beyond all the particular and fluctuating moods, images, thoughts, feelings, reactions to pain and pleasure, and so on, that usually occupy our consciousness. It is perfectly possible to think about nothing in particular and not to be aware of the lower self or personality,

without this being an unconscious state; the testimonies of mystics of both East and West point to this fact unequivocally, and it is only rationalist/empiricist 'conditioning' that causes most modern Westerners to think otherwise.

But to return to Wainwright, and the problem of absolutely undifferentiated monistic experiences. Wainwright thinks that if an experience has no object, it cannot be said to have cognitive value, although, he says, it could still be said to be "true", "valid", important, genuine. I think that this point could be questioned: why is it necessary for an experience to have an object in order for it to be 'cognitive' in the broad sense of the word? And what exactly does Wainwright see as the difference between an experience being 'cognitive' and its being 'true'? But perhaps, on the other hand, Wainwright continues (since the mystics in question do seem to regard their experiences as cognitive) the experience does have an object, but is described as having no object because it has no ordinary object (there are no images or clear concepts) and because the sense of "distance" (of being other than the object) is either minimal or non-existent (that is, subject and object have become one). Even the most rigidly monistic mystics do speak as if their experiences were experiences of something, says Wainwright (e.g., of Brahman) and to say that the experience has no object makes nonsense of the claim to an immediate knowledge of something. I am not sure that Wainwright is correct here: Śankara, for example, does not say that his experience is an experience of Brahman as an object, but says "I am Brahman". I would suggest that the monistic experience does in one sense have an 'object', if we can call it this, but that, as Wainwright says, it is no ordinary object, for at the height of the experience the subject/object distinction

is transcended. The 'object' here is not one thing among others, but rather the All, or the pure Self in which the All is also encountered: an imageless and nonconceptual 'object'. Furthermore, because of the merging of subject and object at the height of mystical experience, it becomes meaningless to talk of the object as an object any more. As Plotinus says, after the mystical vision (and, of course, we should add, before it has been attained) we speak of the Supreme as a separate 'object', but it is fully to be known only by becoming one with it, and in this state there is no duality. (9) When we talk of monistic mystical experience having an 'object', it is not, at the time of the experience, an object separate from ourselves. Plotinus speaks of the experience as "a knowing of the self restored to its purity" (10) and likewise Śankara emphasises that the 'object' or content of the experience is the true Self. This Self is undifferentiated, but this does not mean that the experience has no content or that it is an experience of 'nothing'; it is rather an experience of 'All'.

Not, indeed, does the teaching seek to expound Brahman as an object, as a "this". What then? It expounds (Brahman) as the inner Self, as non-object, and thus removes the difference consisting of the object of knowledge, the knowing subject, and the knowledge-process..... (11)

Wainwright points out that in ordinary awareness, our self-awareness is non-reflective: we are not 'objects' to ourselves. In mystical awareness of the true Self the same may apply: this Self is not an object separate from ourselves. But the heights of mystical attainment, which for monists entail the absolute merging of subject and object, can only be maintained for relatively short periods at a time: and thus it is that even strongly monistic mystics may speak of what they have apprehended as a separate object after the vision has faded: for at that moment, they are no longer

(consciously and fully) one with it, they recognise that they fall short of it. As Otto says with regard to Śāṅkara:

With a Śāṅkara two conditions are plainly discernible, that of Samādhi and that of ordinary consciousness. In Samādhi the Jīvanmukta realizes his moksha. Here he is really Brahman. The world of distinctions actually disappears in the moment of Samādhi from his gaze; Brahman is then in his experience One and All and he is himself Brahman. When he returns out of Samādhi again into ordinary consciousness the knowledge remains with him that Brahman alone is, and that he is himself Brahman, but it is then only knowledge and not knowledge in experience. The false appearance of multiplicity presses in upon him once more. In spite of his better knowledge that all is but the One, he again beholds the manifold ..... The false vision "persists in consequence of his Karma which must work itself out". Nevertheless such bedazzlement of vision does not disturb him in his assurance that, in spite of appearances, Brahman alone is, without a second, and that the appearance is only appearance, even when he cannot for the time being get beyond it. (12)

We may compare also the following passage from Plotinus:

In our self-seeing There, the self is seen as belonging to that order, or rather we are merged into that self in us which has the quality of that order. It is a knowing of the self restored to its purity. No doubt we should not speak of seeing; but we can not help talking in dualities, seen and seer, instead of, boldly, the achievement of unity. In this seeing, we neither hold an object nor trace distinction; there is no two..... centres of circles..... are one when they unite, and two when they separate; and it is in this sense that we now (after the vision) speak of the Supreme as separate. (13)

A further point is that, as Wainwright notes, even monistic mystics, while often saying that the object of their experience is an undifferentiated unity, also distinguish aspects and properties of that object. For example, Brahman is sat, cit, ānanda; Plotinus' One is also The Good. It is also held that the object of the experience is related in real and important ways to the world, the lower self and so on. (14) So however nonconceptual the highest state is, concepts soon come to be imposed upon it; nondifferentiation soon gives way to at least a degree of duality.

One picture that has emerged in the course of this cross-cultural study of mysticism is that of an intense and brief flash of ecstasy in

which specific mental contents, forms, images, ideas and so on are eliminated, followed by a descent to a lower (though still inspired and enlightened) form of consciousness in which the mystic is aware of himself or herself as a separate personality again and in which metaphysical concepts, realisations, interpretations, symbols, images and so on may become attached to the formless experience. This latter process is wholly necessary if the formless experience is to be brought through to everyday consciousness at all. Ellwood calls this latter period the 'afterglow'. This is not, it should be noted, the process of rational, detached reflection on the experience (which comes later), but the assimilation of archetypal forms to the experience -- forms derived from the mystic's cultural and religious background, present state of mind and surroundings, and other factors influencing the experience. Ellwood comments:

The matter of visual, audial or conceptual content in the ecstatic moment is..... problematical..... Possibly, since memory abhors a vacuum, it immediately reads back to the ecstatic moment ideas or images that really surfaced a few moments later as the afterglow stage began..... In many cases it [the afterglow] will seem to be the mystical experience. The ecstatic moment may pass so rapidly as to be virtually undetected, but it will leave an afterglow full of joyous ideas, associations, images, and feelings.  
(15)

Many mystics do indeed speak of ecstatic moments almost too intense to bear, which are followed by a descent to lower levels of mystical consciousness. Plotinus says that in knowledge of the One, there is no awareness of the lower self or personality; the ascent to the One is brought about by abandoning oneself to ecstasy (ἐκστασις). But the mystic cannot endure this experience for long; the soul ".....leaves that conjunction; it cannot suffer that unity; it falls in love with its own powers and possessions, and desires to stand apart....." (16) Elsewhere, he

says that the light and splendour of the divine realms overwhelm him and he has not the strength to endure the experience; and when he descends from those realms to lower levels of consciousness, the splendour is once again veiled from him. (17) Eckhart speaks of the highest state of mystical realisation as entailing momentary loss of consciousness (although this means only loss of consciousness of the lower self, as I shall later discuss); when we become self-aware again, this is "a retrogression, a quick retreat back to the upper level of the natural order of things." (18) Suso, a pupil of Eckhart, bears this opinion out. (19) St. Teresa speaks of rapture and ecstasy as brief states where the soul is transported into union with the Deity; the experience is so intense that the mystic has no power to think about what is happening. The rational mind cannot fathom the experience, but it entails great joy. When we descend to lower levels of consciousness, we feel enchained and imprisoned in this world, as if shut up in a cage; but we know beyond doubt that in the ecstatic moment, we were with God. Sometimes rapture or ecstasy for Teresa involves loss of normal consciousness (the "suspension of faculties"); at other times surface-consciousness is partially retained. (20) In my discussion of St. Teresa I have remarked that these experiences seem to indicate a state in which the surface-consciousness is inhibited, but in which a 'seed' is planted in the deeper consciousness of which the surface-consciousness later becomes aware, and which subsequently blossoms forth in the outward life and lower mentality of the mystic. Close parallels can be found in the East: Śāṅkara speaks of nirvikalpa samādhi, absolute absorption in Brahman in which self-consciousness is lost in a state of formless awareness, and savikalpa samādhi, where the mystic is still aware of the world of relativity and of his or her personality, although



also seeing Brahman quite clearly. Ramakrishna (21) and Mīrābāī (22) also speak of ecstatic states which entail loss of surface-consciousness.

Of course, the degree to which the higher reaches of mystical experience are absolutely contentless and formless varies from one mystic to another and from one tradition to another. Theistic mystics like Rolle and Rāmānuja, for example, do not speak of formless, undifferentiated experiences at all, and St. Teresa, while she knows them, grants them less importance than a theistic mysticism of loving relationship. Stace's argument that the essence of all mysticism is undifferentiated unity is now, I think, discredited. Even in those traditions which do speak of absolutely formless awareness, the experience involved may be far more complex than is often imagined, that is, it may not always be a simple 'void' or stillness. We have seen that bursts of ecstatic awareness involving loss of consciousness and of all specific content are typically brief, and that mystics incorporate such experiences into a broader framework of metaphysics which involves subject/object relationship, forms, images and concepts. Absolute transcendence and undifferentiated unity, while they are often held to constitute the highest mystical state, are not the sole basis of mystical teachings. Śankara is of course the most extreme monist we have encountered; at the other end of the polarity lie strictly theistic mystics like Rolle. In between these two extremes lie various degrees of 'modified monism' and 'monistic theism'. But we are not concerned here to discuss mystical traditions which do not speak of formless awareness, rather to disentangle what formless awareness is and what it entails.

It should be stressed, then, that this type of experience is not an 'unconscious' state but a superconscious one; and that it involves loss of

awareness of the lower self, but not therefore loss of 'individuality' or 'identity'. The formless 'unknowing' spoken of by John of the Cross, for example, is a state in which specific images and intellectual concepts are transcended; we rise above the surface-consciousness, but this does not mean that we lose all consciousness of whatever type. St. John's formless awareness is an absorption in God, in which he is known by direct perception, without the necessity of apprehensions being channelled through particular reflections, forms or images. Here God is no longer seen as an object outside of or other than oneself. The Divine is now the core of the mystic's inner life; God is not conceived, thought about, or reflected upon, but lived. A corollary to this formless awareness is the awareness of the continual presence of the Divine lived out in everyday life; this is a kind of ongoing daily formless awareness if one may so put it, expressed not in words but in a way of being and acting. But we are more concerned here with those brief ecstatic moments in which self-consciousness is lost. This amounts to a loss of surface-consciousness, a loss of awareness of the empirical self and personality, a loss of the powers of rational analysis and so on; but it does not entail a loss of what Eckhart calls the Ground of the Soul (the centre of the true Self), for it is precisely this centre that is at work in apprehending Divine Reality, it is this centre that enables us to have contact with the Divine at all. And if we agree that this Ground of the Soul is our true 'individuality', or what we really are, then in mystical apprehension our 'identity' is not lost but rather perfected. It may be objected that Śankara is an exception here. It is true that Śankara seems to allow for no individual self-awareness of whatever type in the final unity with Brahman; nevertheless it remains true that the ātman (the true Self) is

not lost in this merging, only the empirical jīva. Śāṅkara claims that his teachings are not annihilistic (although his statements to this effect may not convince everyone). In any case, annihilation of subject/object relationship need not be the same as annihilation of the self; nondifferentiation need not imply annihilism. The question in fact hinges on whether or not we find Śāṅkara's account of what really constitutes personal identity satisfactory. As a further example of a state described as a 'loss of consciousness' which in fact is only a loss of surface-consciousness, not of all consciousness, we may compare Ramakrishna's ecstasy described above (23). We may also turn to Plotinus as an additional case of a monistic mystic describing the highest state of awareness as entailing loss of surface-consciousness but not of the higher Self or of our true identity. In knowledge of the One, says Plotinus, our usual ego-consciousness no longer persists. These heights of attainment only last for brief periods at a time, and the experience is too intense for us to reflect upon who we are or what is happening. The self as we usually know it, then, seems momentarily to be lost; but our individuality is not annihilated. We 'lose our self to gain it', for we enter into a greater richness and fullness of true Life than we could ever have imagined. We retain our individuality in that we realise ourselves as unique expressions of the Divine Purpose, as conscious embodiments of aspects of Deity.

There will not even be memory of the personality; no thought that the contemplator is the self -- Socrates, for example -- or that it is Intellect or Soul ..... in contemplative vision, especially when it is vivid, we are not at the time aware of our own personality; we are in possession of ourselves, but the activity is towards the object of vision with which the thinker becomes identified; he has made himself over as matter to be shaped; he takes ideal form under the action of the vision while remaining, potentially, himself ..... by the act of self-intellection he has the simultaneous intellection of all: in such a case self-intellection by personal activity brings the intellection, not merely of the self, but also of the total therein embraced..... (24)

In other words, we see not ourselves as personalities, but the All -- which includes our true Self. But we always fall back from these heights of awareness, and so, at the time of union there seems to be no distinction between the mystic and the One, but differentiation in fact remains, at least for all practical purposes in our continuing life in the world. The One is transcendent to us as well as immanent, and remains transcendent insofar as we fall short of it, which even the most advanced mystic does some of the time.

To sum up our discussion so far, loss of awareness of the lower self is not the same as loss of all consciousness; and neither of them is the same as loss of individuality. In intense creative inspiration we may lose self-awareness but we do not lose consciousness. In sleep we lose our ordinary waking consciousness but we do not lose our identity. Formless awareness is not an 'unconscious' state but a state of pure, receptive, unified consciousness, quite different from our everyday forms of awareness, where we are not aware of our selfhood as being separate from the Divine, where there is no room for self-reflection, and where rational concepts, symbols and so on are excluded from the field of awareness. But this does not exclude all possible types of consciousness. Even Eckhart, the most monistic of all Christian mystics, holds that the mystic in that state is not literally "conscious of nothing" but rather "conscious of nothing but God":

Experience must always be an experience of something, but disinterest [abgescheidenheit, "detachment"] comes so close to zero that nothing but God is rarified enough to get into it ..... Pure disinterest is empty nothingness ..... if God is to write his message about the highest matters on my heart, everything to be referred to as "this and that" must first come out and I must be disinterested. (25)

The 'nothingness' here is an emptying of the self with regard to the 'this

and that' of particular things; the experience of God is clearly still an experience of something for Eckhart, even though he holds that God is not one being amongst others. The undifferentiated merging of object and subject which occurs in the highest mystical state does not alter Eckhart's conviction that "experience must be an experience of something". Likewise, it seems to me that monistic mysticism which does not involve the concept of 'God' at all in the Christian sense, such as the mysticism of Plotinus or Śankara, is not an experience of 'nothing' but of 'nothing but the true Self' -- which is actually 'All'.

Elsewhere, Eckhart says that in the highest state of mystical awareness, the soul is not conscious that it is knowing God: ".....when..... the soul is aware that it is looking at God, loving him and knowing him, that already is a retrogression, a quick retreat back to the upper level of the natural order of things....." (26) Indeed, in an experience where there is no awareness of the lower self, it is obvious that one could not be aware of oneself as ego experiencing God. But Eckhart insists that this is still not a case of literally knowing nothing. The soul in this state is

.....quite still in the essence of God, not knowing at all where it is, knowing nothing but God .... This much is certain: when a man is happy, happy to the core and root of beatitude, he is no longer conscious of himself or anything else. He is conscious only of God .... For a man must himself be One, seeking unity both in himself and in the One, experiencing it as the One, which means that he must see God and God only. And then he must "return", which is to say, he must have knowledge of God and be conscious of that knowledge. (27)

The distinction that Eckhart draws here between knowledge, and awareness of knowledge, may at first seem rather perplexing. Can it be said that we have knowledge if we are unaware of having it? We can understand this if we allow that we have knowledge of which we are not yet conscious, knowledge latent in the unconscious mind which is not yet

made actual. It seems that while the surface-consciousness is transcended in formless awareness, truths and realisations are being conveyed to the deeper consciousness, to the true Self, and that these realisations later come into our conscious, rational awareness when we descend to "the upper level of the natural order of things". In a similar vein, St. Teresa says that in the 'suspension of faculties' the soul does not know what is happening, but that on return to lower levels of consciousness we know beyond doubt that we have been with God. It is in retrospect that the mystic understands the significance of the loss of self-awareness, as he or she begins to relate the experience to the other aspects of the ongoing spiritual life. This seems to bear out Ellwood's argument regarding the 'afterglow' period of mystical experience, where archetypal forms, associations, images and concepts are associated with the formless ecstatic moment.

References

- (1) See above, Pp. 376-377.
- (2) Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism. London: Methuen, 1930 (12th edtn.), Pp. 335-336.
- (3) Ibid., p. 329.
- (4) Rudolf Otto, Mysticism East and West. New York: Meridian Books, 1957, p. 205.
- (5) William J. Wainwright, Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981, p. 117.
- (6) Ibid., p. 118.
- (7) Ibid., p. 120.
- (8) David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, in James R. Horne, 'Do Mystics Perceive Themselves?', Religious Studies, 13, (3), September 1977.
- (9) See above, p. 32.
- (10) See above, p. 32.
- (11) Śankara, Brahma-sutra-bhashya, I.i.4; see above, p. 166.
- (12) Otto, op. cit., p. 159.
- (13) Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.10; see above, p. 32.
- (14) Wainwright, op. cit., Pp. 141-142.
- (15) Robert S. Ellwood Jr., Mysticism and Religion. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1980, Pp. 69-70.
- (16) See above, Pp. 33-34.
- (17) Plotinus, Ennead IV.8.1, trans. Stephen MacKenna. London: Faber, 1956.
- (18) See above, p. 70.
- (19) See above, Pp. 100-101.
- (20) See above, Pp. 223-226.
- (21) See above, p. 282.
- (22) See above, p. 263.
- (23) See above, p. 282.
- (24) Plotinus, Ennead V.4.2-3; see above, p. 33; my emphasis.
- (25) Eckhart, in Blakney, Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation, Pp. 82-83, 88; see above, Pp. 58-59; my emphasis.
- (26) Eckhart, in Blakney, ibid., Pp. 79-81; see above, p. 70; my emphasis.
- (27) Eckhart, in Blakney, ibid., Pp. 79-81; see above, p. 70; my emphasis.

#### MYSTICISM & EPISTEMOLOGY PART 4: EPISTEMOLOGY, INEFFABILITY AND THE PROBLEM OF MYSTICAL EXPRESSION

I have discussed above the nature of 'pure consciousness' and formless awareness, both forms of cognition which are different from our usual rational-empirical forms of consciousness; and have argued for the worth and validity of these forms of apprehension. Intimately bound up with the reality of these forms of cognition are some important questions regarding epistemology and forms of expression or language. Forms of cognition different from our usual modes of knowledge will often require forms of expression different from our usual forms of expression. I shall shortly discuss the problem of ineffability in mystical experience, and later indicate a number of ways in which mystics get round this problem, finding ways of expressing their experiences by means of symbolism, paradox, metaphysical terminology and so on. First, however, a few general comments on epistemology and the problem of language or expression in mysticism may be in order.

I have previously argued that mysticism must be understood in terms of its own standards of reference, without an attempt being made to evaluate it by means of standards of verifiability derived from an alien philosophical framework (such as a scientific or empirical framework). Wittgensteinian-influenced philosophy and the 'Rationality Debate' have made a great contribution to religious thought in their insistence upon the necessity for evaluating religion from within, and in showing that there are different forms of discourse, different 'language-games', which are all equally valid and for which there is no one overriding criterion of 'intelligibility'. Wittgensteinian-influenced philosophers do, however, emphasise that the various 'language-games' are not completely cut off from or



isolated from each other; they are to be seen as interrelated, like members of one family. This is shown in an interesting light as regards mysticism, for mystical philosophy, too, has its own language which is interrelated with all other aspects of life and thought. Ideally, the mystical goal should come to embrace the whole of our lives, for when we come to see all the interconnections between the different levels of being and knowledge (an important aim in the more profound mystical philosophies) we see that these make up an organic whole. Or, as mystics put it, by knowing 'x', all is known -- 'x' being the centre or source of all, variously identified as the One, God, the Philosophers' Stone, Brahman, etc. It should not, however, be assumed that Wittgensteinian-influenced philosophy and mysticism are necessarily compatible; I have elsewhere elaborated on this point. (1)

The assumption of much modern philosophical debate regarding the nature of religious language, outside Wittgensteinian-influenced circles, is that religious expressions and statements derive their meaning from their use in nonreligious contexts -- that words used to describe God, for example, are used because they bear some relation to the use of these same words in everyday nonreligious discourse. In fact, for the mystic, the reverse is rather the case. For the mystic, the question concerning religious language is not so much what relation this language bears to ordinary language -- but rather what relation our ordinary language bears to the language of the Spirit, the metaphysical and mystical language which is primarily the language of direct perception and symbolic expression. Perhaps one reason why religious statements seem 'meaningless' to many people in modern society, is that both orthodox religious expression (the dogmatic statements of established religion) and our ordinary,

everyday forms of language, have drifted away from this 'mystical language'. As examples of this 'language', I would advance Boehme's 'Language of Nature', the language of the inner essence or spirit of things (2), Tagore's 'Language of Nature' (3), St. Teresa's interior spiritual language (4) and Plotinus' languages of the soul and Intellect (5). For the mystic, then, the question to be answered is not "What reality does religious language have?" but "What reality does language about everyday things have, if it is considered independent of its grounding in the language of the Spirit?" In any case, it seems to me that it is clearly misguided to ask that religious statements should be verifiable or justifiable according to canons of verifiability or justification derived from non-religious contexts. As Wainwright has argued, this is quite unreasonable, being on a par to asking us to prove that physical objects exist without having any recourse to the evidence of our senses as part of our argument. (6) (Perhaps extremely fundamentalist forms of religious belief may be subject to linguistic or philosophical attack on the matter of empirical verifiability, but a discussion of such forms of religion lies outside the scope of this study.)

Any account of religious or mystical knowledge that is to be metaphysically coherent demands a certain type of ontology and epistemology as its basis. It demands a certain approach to methods of knowledge and to types of human experience. For example, dualistic theologies raise problems in connection with mysticism because, positing an absolute divide between Creator and created, they deny the possibility of really knowing the Deity in the fullest mystical sense, and hence, in turn, create problems of expression and language, problems regarding how we can really speak about God's nature with any confidence. A coherent mystical

philosophy must hold that it is precisely because of our oneness with Deity that we are able to know, experience, and speak of it. The microcosm knows the macrocosm because the former is a reflection of the latter, and intimately connected to it. But of course there are degrees of monism, and the 'modified monism' of Rāmānuja, for example, might serve as well as the absolute monism of Śāṅkara here.

The consciousness of and experience of non-empirical or supra-rational reality demands for its understanding an epistemological framework far broader, far more complex, and far more subtle, than the type of epistemological framework with which most members of modern Western society are familiar. A broader view of life, of experience, of meaning, of language, of expression, is needed. Positivist, materialist and rationalist critiques of religious language are based on a preconceived metaphysical judgement regarding what is 'meaningful', what is 'real' or 'illusory', and so on. A phenomenological approach to knowledge, on the other hand (its advocates claim) involves investigating the data of immediate experience as it presents itself to the subject (in our case, the mystic); epistemological and metaphysical 'rules' or judgements follow from this enquiry into the experiential facts, rather than preceding it. In other words, mystical experience is judged on its own worth, not according to preconceived scientific criteria for example, nor according to preconceived theological criteria which the investigator supposes can be used to evaluate all forms of mysticism. This is a part of the method we have been advocating; but it is necessary also to see each example of mysticism in its cultural and religious context, and we have also to be careful to avoid the 'psychological reductionism' into which the phenomenological method often seems, no doubt unintentionally, to fall. Each

mode of consciousness, mystical consciousness included, has an irreducibility about it. We cannot explain mystical experience by anything other than mystical criteria, just as we cannot, for example, explain aesthetic appreciation in scientific terms, or by any means other than aesthetic criteria. In the sections of this study following we shall try to understand mysticism in terms of its own 'language'.

This irreducibility of mystical consciousness implies that the significance of mystical statements cannot be translated into rational or logical terms without loss of meaning (although it may happen that the original meaning can still be discerned through a logical statement by the mystic who has had the relevant experience, or by the philosopher who is sympathetic towards mysticism and who has some empathy for it. But to others, such a logical statement will often seem 'meaningless'.) However, the fact that mystical statements cannot be reduced to rationalism does not mean that they are 'meaningless' or 'devoid of cognitive content'. It is an unwarranted assumption of certain branches of modern philosophy that for a statement to be 'cognitively significant', it must be able to be expressed in logical language. This is just another reflection of the materialist assumption that only the material and the rational-empirical are real. The whole question is one of the denial or affirmation of the reality of 'Other Worlds', other realms of being and consciousness -- realities which the mystic believes in, and, indeed, claims to experience at first hand. As I have already argued, there is no reason why our experience of the physical world should be assumed to refer to reality, and mystical experience be assumed not to do so.

Mystics are themselves well aware of the problems inherent in trying to express spiritual experiences. This is one reason for their insistence

that the Divine is beyond dualities and dichotomies; they recognise that we cannot say what the Deity is. All our conceptions of the Divine, it seems, must perhaps be in some measure inadequate -- for we are each of us limited, finite beings, and apprehend truth in limited ways. Furthermore, to define is always to limit, and we cannot limit the Limitless. Hence arises the problem of ineffability. Moore offers some valuable reflections on this subject. He distinguishes between three main categories of mystical writings:

(i) Autobiographical reports of specific instances or types of mystical experience.

(ii) Impersonal accounts, not necessarily based exclusively on the writer's own experiences, in which mystical experience tends to be described in generalised and abstract terms.

(iii) Accounts of a mainly theological or liturgical kind which although referring to some mystical reality do not refer, unless obliquely, to mystical experience itself. (7)

Moore calls these categories first-order, second-order, and third-order classes of mystical writing respectively. His 'first-order' class would correspond to mystical experience proper, and his 'second-order' class, in many cases, to what I refer to as interpretation. His 'third-order' class of writings would not, on the whole, I think, correspond to the types of text I have used in this study. Moore claims that ".....a large proportion of the statements cited in support of the radical ineffability argument must in fact be discounted because they come from third-order writing." That is, Moore implies that radical ineffability is not found so much in the experience itself, as in attempts to describe it which are several steps removed from the experience. Of the supposed ineffable statements taken from

first-order and second-order writings, ".....many refer to types of ineffability which have no direct bearing on the argument that mystics are failing to communicate information about their experiences." For example, there is ".....what might be called the 'emotional' type of ineffability. Here the trivial and normally accepted sense in which no experience can be literally 'shared' with or 'conveyed' to another becomes an acutely frustrating limitation for one who wishes to communicate some deeply felt and profoundly valued experience." Secondly, there is 'causal ineffability', where a mystic says that he or she cannot understand whence or how some experience has arisen; but this does not necessarily affect his or her ability to describe the actual contents of the experience itself. Once these types of ineffability have been excluded, says Moore, we can begin to evaluate the problem of "the descriptive type of ineffability". I shall quote at length from his writings on this point:

.....it soon becomes clear that statements about descriptive ineffability do not support the argument that mystical experience is radically ineffable. Compared with third-order ineffability statements, which are typically comprehensive and uncompromising in their reference ("Brahman is not this, not that", etc.), descriptive ineffability statements are usually partial and qualified in their reference. For one thing, rarely is the experience as a whole said to be beyond description. Again, there are different aspects and -- at least in the case of cultivated mysticism -- different stages of experience, and these vary considerably in the degree to which they are communicable. Not only do mystics affirm that there is no difficulty about describing their experiences to fellow mystics; it is also clear that they believe that their experiences can be described in some measure even to non-mystics. Thus of one of the lower stages of her contemplative experience St Teresa of Avila writes: "This will be easily understood by anyone to whom Our Lord has granted it, but anyone else cannot fail to need a great many words and comparisons." This need for a great many words and comparisons is, one would have thought, a principal reason for the copiousness of much mystical writing. Of a higher stage of her experience, however, St Teresa writes: "I do not know if I have conveyed any impression of the nature of rapture: to give a full idea of it, as I have said, is impossible." If mystics in some contexts suggest that an experience is describable and in others that it is beyond description, this is evidence not of uncertainty

or inconsistency but very probably of the fact that a different stage or aspect of experience is being referred to (though doubtless it is true also that mystics differ in their skill with words and in their optimism regarding the ability of non-mystics to comprehend what they say). Furthermore, even those aspects or stages of mystical experience acknowledged as difficult or impossible to describe are not necessarily beyond all possibility of communication. For if mystics are using language at all responsibly then even what they say about the indescribable types or aspects of experience may at least serve to define them in relation to a known class of experiences. Thus when St John of the Cross calls ineffable the experience of "the touch of the substance of God in the substance of the soul", he is none the less communicating something of the experience by defining it in terms of the categories "substance", "touch", and so on. Similarly, his statement that the delicacy of delight felt in this experience is "impossible of description", in so far as it is not a case of "emotional" ineffability, at least defines the experience within the class of "delights impossible of description", which is far from being empty or meaningless to non-mystics. (8)

Moore makes a number of important points here. I think he is quite right in distinguishing between degrees of communicability corresponding to the different stages of mystical experience; the higher reaches of mystical experience tend to be more ineffable than the lower ones. It could also be added that the success or lack of it that one may have in communicating the content of a mystical experience to another person, will depend quite obviously on one's own skill with words (someone who has a poetic gift may well succeed where others fail). Other factors to be taken into account include the receptivity and sympathy of the other person, whether or not this person has had any mystical experiences, and if so whether they were the same type of mystical experiences or a different type, and so on. Mystical experiences can quite easily be conveyed to those who have had a similar experience themselves: indeed, in such a case, words are often not necessary; a mere smile, a glance in the eyes, or the presentation of a symbol, may suffice.

The argument that all mystical experience is radically ineffable has certainly been overstated. When all is said and done, though, it remains

true that the innermost core of mystical experience cannot be exhaustively defined in rational terms. Nevertheless, if we have the sense of having glimpsed some great spiritual reality or some ultimate truth, we feel we must try to express it even if we do not wholly succeed; the experience becomes a creative, dynamic force; we feel that we have a vitally important message to bear. Language may always be more or less inadequate; it confines and restricts, imposes limitations. To describe something is to simultaneously say what it is not. This is one reason why negatively descriptive modes of language, such as the Via Negativa, have been so popular with mystics; to describe in negative terms is to leave open infinite possibilities. It is also one reason why symbols are such an important form of communication in religious matters. There are many forms of communication, and in some of them words are not only inadequate but unnecessary. Sometimes experiences and realisations can be expressed more powerfully by actions than by words, at other times by symbols, and so on.

There are many experiences which are indescribable in exact and precise terms, but which are nonetheless very important and meaningful to us, and which seem to point up the limits of words as a form of expression. Imagine, for example, what it would be like to try to describe falling in love, with all the feelings and effects that this entails, to someone who has never been in love. T. S. Eliot laments the difficulty of expressing thoughts in words:

.....Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not sit still. (9)

On a more strictly mystical level, Plotinus says that our ordinary spoken



language is but a fragmentary image or derivation of the deeper inner language of the soul, of which I have spoken as the language of direct perception and symbolic expression. (10) Bambrough comments on the passage from Eliot above, as follows:

There is the risk here and in other passages of pining for what will have the stillness of the Chinese jar and still have the power of the slipping, sliding, perishing words to live and move and have a being that consists in and makes possible their expressing and communicating the shifting surfaces that are the depths and dimensions of the Word. (11)

Our everyday language is but a poor substitute for the inner language of the soul of which Plotinus and Boehme speak, the 'Word' with all its subtle intricacies of experience. Perhaps, as Bambrough intimates, to attempt to define Truth or Reality exhaustively, once and for all, is to rob it of a dynamic quality which keeps it alive; certainly this is what seems to happen where institutionalised forms of religion become ossified and over-formalised.

References

- (1) See below, Pp.487-499.
- (2) See above, Pp.354-355.
- (3) See above, Pp.340-341.
- (4) See above, p.223.
- (5) See above, Pp.34-35.
- (6) William J. Wainwright, Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981, p.105.
- (7) Peter Moore, 'Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique', in Steven T. Katz (ed.) Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis. London: Sheldon Press, 1978, p.103.
- (8) Ibid., Pp.104-105.
- (9) T. S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', in The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot. London: Faber, 1969.
- (10) See above, Pp.34-35.
- (11) Renford Bambrough, 'Intuition and the Inexpressible', in Katz, op. cit., p.200.

## MYSTICISM & EPISTEMOLOGY PART 5: MYSTICAL SYMBOLISM

Mystics, in an attempt to get round the problem of conveying their experiences to others, make use of a number of forms of expression, of which symbolism is perhaps the most important, and may therefore merit a detailed discussion. I intend here to explore the matter of symbolic truth and symbolic forms of expression in greater detail, attempting to elucidate the value and practical purpose of symbols and discussing certain philosophical points that arise in connection with their significance and use.

Generally speaking, it may be said that symbols are a means whereby the abstract and transcendent is represented to ourselves in a more concrete form, and hence made more readily understandable to us and related more firmly to our empirical existence. There are many types of symbolic expression which serve this purpose: myth, ritual, religious art and so on; but our concern here will be with the use of symbols in mystical endeavour, that is, as a means to express mystical experience, and also as a part of meditative or other mystical technique, by which experiences may be engendered.

Tillich speaks of the value of symbols in making the transcendent understandable and communicable; he writes that in symbolic forms of expression, material is taken from finite reality in order to give expression to the Infinite:

Religious symbols are double-edged. They are directed toward the infinite which they symbolise and toward the finite through which they symbolise it. They force the infinite down to finitude and the finite up to infinity .... If a segment of reality is used as a symbol for God, the realm of reality from which it is taken is, so to speak, elevated into the realm of the holy.... (1)

Thus not only do symbols serve the purpose of expressing abstract spiri-

tual ideas; in addition, the symbol itself becomes holy in the light of this vision. By way of example, Tillich says that "If God's work is called 'making whole' or 'healing', this not only says something about God but also emphasises the theonomous character of all healing. If God's self-manifestation is called 'the word', this not only symbolises God's relation to man but also emphasises the holiness of all words as an expression of the spirit." (2) We have commented, previously, on this theme in connection with nature-mysticism: different aspects of nature are seen as symbolic of various Divine qualities or attributes, while at the same time, Nature itself becomes divine because of its 'participation' in the reality which it symbolises. This, however, is not to say that the symbol seen in itself, in its purely material aspect, is divine, for this would be a case of what Tillich calls idolatry. The point is that symbols mediate between different levels of awareness and being: they relate the Above to the Below: they draw Spirit down into matter and relate matter to Spirit and take matter back up to Spirit.

Tillich holds that symbolic language alone is fully able to express ultimate religious truths. There is a great deal of truth in this statement, for symbols are an ancient and most essential form of language, expression and communication, and may speak to us on a level that is deeper than words. One of the functions of symbolism in mystical expression is precisely this: to express that which is felt to be beyond words, beyond the limits of empirical-logical thought. The deeper layers of meaning which a symbol may communicate to us cannot be exhaustively defined, but have to be experienced in direct, intuitive perception in order to be fully understood. Thus it is that, even if we should manage satisfactorily to 'de-code' a symbol and to express its meaning verbally, very often the

literal statement at which we will arrive will lack the power for insight that the original symbol possessed; it will lack the primal immediacy of expression and communication. Symbols "crumble and lose all power the moment they are imprisoned in the realm of intellectual reasoning." (3) For this reason it seems to me that symbolic forms of expression must be defended as a form of cognitive language in their own right, a form of language to which the higher, deeper or more spiritual levels of our beings respond: as one writer has said, "What words are to thought, symbols are to intuition." (4)

On one level, it can be said that in theory anything can serve as a symbol of Divine Reality, that is, that every aspect of reality is symbolic of something more, if we can only see its inner meaning. "All teems with symbol," says Plotinus, "the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another." (5) Nevertheless, it remains true that in the religious sphere some symbols are more appropriate and more efficacious than others: ".....some things are more open than others to the influence of exterior realities; some things mirror what lies outside them better than others do....." (6) All objects in the world bear the marks of the presence and power of the Divine Nature, but ".....some more readily reflect its nature or more readily allow one to move towards it than others do." (7) The crucial point here, I think, is that symbols intended to teach others, to awaken realisation, symbols that are embedded within a particular scheme of mystical or meditative practice, must be quite specific and must be appropriate to the task at hand, i.e., to the insight or level of awareness designed to be awakened; whereas, on the other hand, after attaining a certain degree of realisation, one may come to perceive the Divine made manifest in any and every thing, in each thing after its own

particular manner, and at this point, all teems with symbol, as Plotinus says. In the latter case, all is a symbol of the Divine Life, each thing manifesting a particular Divine attribute; in the former, only certain things serve in practice as efficacious and appropriate symbols. Furthermore, when we are speaking of representing specific Divine attributes or qualities, or specific aspects of the spiritual world, rather than seeking to induce a more diffuse or general mystical awareness, we cannot arbitrarily use whatever symbols we please. There are in this case precise methods of operation, specific to each mystical tradition, which make the use of symbolism quite a complex matter. This is connected with the intrinsic relationship between a symbol and its referent, which will be discussed later.

I shall later argue that the metaphysical 'superstructures' (to use Staal's terminology) or interpretative frameworks which accumulate around mystical experiences, interact with these experiences in a dual fashion: that is, they serve on the one hand as a means of expressing experience in a coherent, rational form, and on the other hand, as 'rungs' on the 'Ladder to Heaven', as methods or techniques by means of which the mystic may raise his or her awareness so as to intuit the truth encapsulated within the doctrinal 'superstructure'. Thus a complex interaction evolves between experience, and the doctrines and metaphysical interpretations around which it is orientated. The same may be said of symbols, that is, they also serve a dual purpose of expression and of technique. In their former role, as a means of expression, they are used to relate one's experience back to the world of everyday living; in their latter role they are used to evoke experience itself. (Thus, in mysticism, symbols are used both on the path of ascent, the mystic undergoing a

continual process of passing beyond a symbol to what is symbolised by it; and on the path of descent, of what I have called the 'return to the world', as the mystic attempts to teach others and to present his or her experience to these others in a readily understandable form.) The power of symbols in evoking mystical experience is recognised by mystical traditions worldwide; they serve as fixing-points for the mind in meditation, and also open, as it were, upwards and outwards to heightened levels of awareness. It seems to me that certain writers on mysticism (such as Stace) have tended to denigrate the value of symbols in an insistence on the key experience of mysticism being a passing beyond all form into formless awareness. It is certainly true that one of the prime functions of a symbol is to lead the mind beyond the symbol itself, but this does not negate the fact that we have to use forms to reach the formless, nor does it justify a denigration of the value of symbolic expression. In any case, not all forms of mysticism speak of a completely formless, undifferentiated awareness at all; it is interesting to compare here, for example, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, and Richard Rolle. St. John makes the importance of passing beyond all symbols and images, even the most spiritual types of image, to formless apprehension, a key part of his teachings. St. Teresa, as we have discussed, speaks of formless awareness, but seems to find it distasteful, or frightening, or inappropriate to incarnate human beings; she wishes to retain an awareness of Christ's form, in meditation upon him, even in her highest flights of mystical apprehension. "We are not angels and we have bodies," she remarks with humourous common sense. "To want to become angels while we are still on earth.....is ridiculous. As a rule, our thoughts must have something to lean upon....." (8) Teresa therefore seems to use the symbol

of Christ as a fixing-point for the mind in meditation (although of course, this is far from being the only role that Christ plays in her teachings). Rolle, for his part, seems never to have experienced formless states of awareness at all. Generally, it can be said that the more importance theism plays in a mystical doctrine, the less emphasis there will be on formless, undifferentiated states of consciousness; we will recall that Rāmānuja, in the East, finds Śankara's talk of completely undifferentiated awareness unintelligible. In any case, whatever the precise role of symbols and forms within the teachings of any particular mystic or mystical tradition, it can generally be said that symbols are most important as 'keys' which open 'doors' to other levels of reality. Even those mystics who do not speak of completely formless awareness, grant that certain levels of form must be transcended, to pass on to a direct perception where apprehensions are not channelled through images. It is a matter of where one puts the cut-off point, as it were; in a thoroughly monistic system such as that of Śankara, Īśvara is a kind of 'symbol' for the formless nirguṇa Brahman, whereas for Rolle, God is certainly not a symbol for anything else. But Rolle would certainly agree that in a meditation upon a symbol such as, say, a crucifix, we should pass beyond the physical cross itself to what it symbolises. Symbols, then, can act as foci by means of which we are able to effect a transition from one level of consciousness to another. As Tillich puts it, they "open up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us"; they "unlock dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality...." (9) It might also be added that another function of symbols is to mediate the power of experiences which might otherwise be of too great intensity to bear; sometimes we need to see in a mirror rather than



face to face.

In addition to their dual purpose of expression and technique, symbols disclose a dual structure of what I shall call contraction and expansion, of which contraction relates especially to the expressive role of a symbol, while expansion comes into play more typically when symbols are used as a part of meditative method. The contracting function of symbols is shown in their ability to condense or compress multifarious meanings, or multifarious levels of meaning, into one focal 'point' -- one single assimilable 'core' or notion. Symbols are especially valuable as forms of expression in this sense, because they can express very complex experiences, in particular certain mystical experiences which may seem to have many meanings and many connotations on different levels, or which may seem paradoxical. Where rational analysis would destroy a paradox, a symbol can readily express it, keeping it entire. An effective symbol is as multifaceted as a precious jewel; as we begin to unravel its many layers of meaning, more and more interrelationships and associations reveal themselves which are not usually manifest to the rational mentality, until it seems that, with the most potent symbols, one single symbol could almost be expanded into a discourse on the nature of the whole spiritual universe. When a 'contracted' symbol becomes 're-expanded' to us into its original wealth of meanings, as happens in meditation, it speaks to us of the connections between different levels of being, of the interweaving of all things in a pattern, which as we have noted on many occasions is an important characteristic of mystical philosophy. By means of the symbol, we are enabled to move in consciousness from one level to another, within the pattern. This is where the expansion of a symbol comes to the fore, as it is employed in mystical technique. Symbols, as many writers

have noted, relate to many levels of being or consciousness at once, and express the correspondences between these different orders of reality. Hence, used in meditation, they act as means whereby we can rise from one level to another:

Symbols.....are as many-levelled in their meaning as is the world they depict. They are like complicated locks which will only yield to the key of actual experience, each turn of the key revealing new vistas and dimensions. This must be borne in mind, for a one-level interpretation will not only ignore the hidden wealth of meaning but, if upheld as exclusive of all others, distort and even falsify the truth conveyed by the symbol. (10)

Each symbol.....admits of interpretation upon the different planes ..... thus opening up vast new fields of implication in which the mind ranges endlessly, symbol leading on to symbol in an unbroken chain of associations; symbol confirming symbol as the many-branching threads gather themselves into a synthetic glyph once more, and each symbol capable of interpretation in terms of whatever plane the mind may be functioning upon. (11)

This characteristic of symbols, as relating to many levels of being at once, which I shall refer to as their being multifaceted, means that a symbol of depth and richness is more or less inexhaustible; its wealth of meaning can never be neatly summed up once and for all, but reveals itself ever deeper to us when a symbol is meditated upon, and lived through in the experience of daily life. The symbol acts as a kind of bridge between the different levels of reality which it links together, and the aim of the mystic is to traverse all these different bridges to higher levels of consciousness, and eventually, in many mystical traditions, to cast aside each bridge once it has served its purpose, when the Divine Reality represented by the symbol is seen directly and without mediation. This is an ongoing process; as we apprehend the reality behind one symbol, we move on to another. We constantly have to move beyond the symbol, to the reality it symbolises. So what was once seen in a mirror for us, is seen face to face; and the symbol disappears, and another

symbol appears before our field of consciousness, which in its turn will become a living reality and dissolve as a symbol. Each symbol, as it were, stands at a certain point along the mystical Road and points the way further ahead. Each symbol stands for a reality, and each reality is a 'symbol' (or lower manifestation) of the next reality which we must encounter. Thus the mystic moves forever forward into new realities, new vistas of experience. Needless to say, this is a long and arduous process, for the development of the faculty of symbolic perception, the ability to truly understand and work with symbols, does not come easily. The mystic has to make each symbol which he or she would understand, an integral part of his or her existence in everyday life, as well as making use of it in meditation, ritual, study, or other mystical methods. In the process, not only will the mystic become aware of the connections between the various levels of being which the symbol elucidates; other benefits will be gained as well. When we relate to symbols, they help us to become aware of the qualities, drives and conflicts at work within ourselves. They are often thrown up spontaneously from inner depths, and present us with truths about ourselves that we might not before have appreciated. Used correctly, they can thus assist towards integration of our inner spiritual energies, and towards self-knowledge. They enable us to attune to our inner cycles and patterns; hence, according to mystical teachings, they also help us to attune to the cycles and patterns of the macrocosm, because of our being made 'in its image' -- for symbols are of the fabric and substance of life, reflecting the patterns which underlie existence on both microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. Strictly speaking, of course, it is not the symbols themselves, but the experiences engendered by use of them, which bring about these benefits. It is our awareness that is

all-important, not the physical form of the symbol; one has to bring something of oneself to the symbol in order to reap maximum benefit.

Concerning the nature of symbolic truth, it should be emphasised that the symbolic aspect of things is an independent reality with a complex inner dynamic of its own; thus, as Tillich has pointed out (12) it is perjorative to say that something is "only a symbol" or "just a symbol" as if symbolic meaning carried less weight or less truth than literal, empirical, or rational meaning; indeed, many might wish to argue that symbolic truth is of a higher order than empirical truth. Symbols, in their own realm, are equally as real as any kind of empirical or logical truth, and, like other forms of spiritual truth and expression, cannot be reduced either to the 'subjective', purely inner, psychological realm, or to the 'objective', outer, empirical level.

An important philosophical point concerns the relationship between a symbol and what it symbolises (its referent). Tillich holds that symbols are "intrinsically related to what they express; they have inherent qualities..... which make them adequate to their symbolic function....." (13) Perhaps Tillich would agree with Boehme's notion that outer forms have a vital relation to the inward essences, qualities or realities which they represent. Tillich argues that a symbol 'participates' in the power and reality of its referent, and hence is able to be a medium for the expression and manifestation of that referent. This could indeed be said to be an important aspect of mystical philosophy, vitally connected with the notion of the interlinking or essential unity of all aspects of reality; few mystics would disagree with Tillich when he says:

A symbol participates in the reality it symbolises; the knower participates in the known; the lover participates in the beloved; the existent participates in the essences which make it what it is..... (14)

Tillich's work on symbolism is worth exploring in more depth here. He enumerates the following characteristics of symbols, most of which have either been discussed in detail, or touched upon more lightly, in my own evaluation.

(i) Symbols point beyond themselves.

(ii) They participate in the reality of that which they represent.

(iii) They cannot be created at will; unlike a sign, they are not a matter of simple expediency; they are 'born' and 'die' as cultural groups accept or reject them.

(iv) They have the power to open up new dimensions of reality, to engender an experience of the Holy.

(v) They have both integrating and disintegrating power; they can 'heal', produce a sense of peace or heightened awareness, but can also produce anxiety, depression, frustration, etc. They have a "tremendous power of creation and destruction. By no means are they harmless semantic expressions." (15)

Discussing the criteria for the truth or validity of specific symbolic representations, Tillich holds that: "The negative quality which determines the truth of a religious symbol is its self-negation and transparency to the referent for which it stands. The positive quality which determines the truth of a religious symbol is the value of the symbolic material used in it." (16) That is, in the case of the first criterion, Tillich holds that if a symbol is not "self-negating and transparent", if it does not lead us beyond itself to its referent, we have a case of idolatry (of worshipping the symbol in and for itself), or else a case simply of an ineffective or incorrect symbol. In the case of the second, "positive" criterion, Tillich sees certain symbols as of more value than others; for example, person-

alities or people (he holds) are more important as symbols than trees, stones or animals, because "only in man are all dimensions of the encountered world united" (17) -- a point which might find agreement amongst mystics who adhere to the notion of Man as Microcosm, although Tillich himself does not seem to have this idea in mind, while I think also that many mystics would grant more importance than Tillich does to stones, trees, animals and so on as symbols. Tillich further argues that the criterion of the truth of a symbol cannot rest on the comparison of it with the reality to which it refers, because this reality is beyond human comprehension (18), and if by this is meant rational comprehension, this is quite true; but it must be stressed that the aim of mysticism is to pass beyond the symbol to an immediate and direct apprehension of its referent, regardless of whether or not this process eventually culminates in an awareness completely without form. As I have said, there are many different 'levels' of symbolism which the mystic must traverse in consciousness, and even mystics like Rolfe would agree that the lower levels of form must be left behind. Tillich advances two ways of clarifying what he supposes the referent of symbolic language might be (since it cannot be exhaustively defined), two ways which are not opposed to each other, but intimately bound up together:

(i) The phenomenological approach, which "concerns the quality of some encounters with reality". The referent of the symbol is here taken as a "quality of encounter" (a type of experience); it is not an object among objects, nor is it a mere emotional state without a referent, for the experience transcends subject/object duality; the subject is "drawn into the referent".

(ii) The ontological approach, which is concerned with the anxiety

connected with the awareness of one's finitude, and which gives rise to the question of "Being-itself". The referent of a symbol is here located in "the character of Being as such, in everything that is." (19)

Tillich in fact comes quite close to a mystical evaluation of symbols in speaking of a type of experience which transcends subject/object duality and in which the subject is "drawn into the referent", and in pointing out the connection of symbols with the nature of what he calls "Being-itself". Mystics would agree that the nature of "Being-itself" cannot be exhaustively defined, but they would insist that it can be directly known in immediate experience. Some writers have complained that Tillich does not specify the referent of symbols; he will not say anything directly about "Being-itself". It might be possible for Tillich to specify what "Being-itself" is by going through lengthy ontological analyses, and in fact many of the more metaphysically-inclined mystics attempt to do just this; but the main point of mysticism is not to define the ultimate referent of symbols, but to describe, elucidate and evaluate the nature of the experience of encounter with this referent, and most important of all, to attain this experience oneself and to attempt to engender it in others. Tillich hints at this possibility:

.....it might well be the highest aim of theology to find the point where reality speaks simultaneously of itself and of the Unconditioned in an unsymbolic fashion, to find the point where the unsymbolic reality itself becomes a symbol, where the contrast between reality and symbol is suspended..... (20)

Here Tillich seems to intimate that reality and symbol might eventually become one in direct perception of a symbol's referent, but rather disappointingly concludes that in this world, it is a fact that ".....reality as a whole is separated from what it ought to be, and is not transparent of its ultimate meaning." (21) He may not mean this statement to be taken

categorically, but I think there is a slight difference of focus between Tillich's approach and a fully developed mystical approach: mystics hold that every detail of reality can and does show its ultimate meaning to those who have eyes to see, and that direct perception of the final referent of symbols is an experiential reality. They make explicit what Tillich leaves implicit.

Furthermore, I would argue that the referent of a symbol can often be specified in addition to being experienced, for not all religious symbols refer directly to the highest, least definable aspect of Deity, Tillich's "Being-itself". In many mystical systems, the many different levels and types of symbolism refer to various aspects of Deity or of the spiritual life; to a wealth of different powers, potencies, energies, types of experience, levels of spiritual being, and so on. The Kabbalah, for example, is a prime example of a very complex and rich system of symbolism in which different symbols relate specifically to different manifestations of the Divine on various levels. To give just a few random examples, the symbol of a Crown relates to the highest, most ineffable aspect of Deity, the Sea to the Primordial Feminine or 'Great Mother' aspect, the equal-armed cross to God made manifest on earth; while a whole system of correspondences links symbols, images, parts of the body, colours, types of spiritual experience, names of God, orders of angels, and so on, to a number of very precise and specific 'emanations' or aspects of Deity, of which the ultimate referent of symbols, Tillich's "Being-itself", is only one aspect. Indeed, it is hard to see what sense there is in saying that "Being-itself" is the ultimate referent of all symbols, except insofar as it is the ultimate referent of everything. To take some other examples which illustrate my point, it is perfectly easy to specify that within Tantric



Buddhism, the symbol of the lotus refers to the feminine principle of wisdom (prajñā), and the symbol of the diamond jewel to the masculine principle of means (upāya); or that the hart in Christian symbolism refers to religious aspiration and fervour, or that the salmon in ancient Celtic tradition refers to wisdom.

Regarding the relationship between symbols and their referents, it is interesting to compare the very strongly monistic approach of Śāṅkara with the 'modified monism' of Rāmānuja. Śāṅkara holds that every symbol is Brahman, as indeed he must in accordance with the terms of his philosophy, which states that everything is (ultimately) Brahman; a symbol is Brahman onto which an image has been (falsely) superimposed by adhyāsa ('illegitimate transference'). For Śāṅkara, then, all symbols, all 'names and forms', are māyā (appearance); a position which does not seem to me to do justice to the mystery and wealth of symbolic truth. Rāmānuja, on the other hand, sees finite symbols as valuable objects of meditation, but only insofar as we see them as a 'means' for experience of God; he would presumably agree with Tillich that a symbol should be 'transparent' to its referent. (22) A rigidly dualistic approach might argue that no finite form or image can represent the utterly transcendent Deity; an approach which, from the point of view of mystical philosophy, brings about an unsatisfactory bifurcation between the earthly and the Divine. The approach of the more profound mystical philosophies is neither to deny the 'participation' of symbols in the reality which they represent, nor to attempt to refer all symbols to the highest, most ineffable aspect of Deity, nor to see symbols as mere 'appearance'. Because the many levels of reality are intimately interlinked, symbols are seen as participating in and reflecting the realities to which they point; in a sense they

are what they symbolise, but not in any 'idolatrous' sense; rather, what they symbolise is present in them, and they 'contain' or 'compress' its reality and its energies, whilst receiving holiness from it. Like the world of nature, symbols both conceal and reveal the Divine; the symbol and its referent are one, and yet two, in a relationship of unity-in-difference.

Our argument so far has been rather abstract, and it may be as well to illustrate it further with some concrete examples of symbolism as used by the mystics we have studied. A prime example of what I have called the power of 'contraction' of a symbol, its ability to compress many levels of meaning into one point which would later become 're-expanded' in meditation, is the symbol of the Sun as used by Plotinus. Here,

(a) The image of the Sun and its light-rays expresses the emanation of all things from the One, the Light and Life of All.

(b) The rays are likened to the ideal condition of souls, attached to the Sun which is their source, and shedding their Light on the material world below.

(c) The Sun's light, by which we see all things, including the Sun itself, is analogous to the faculty of mystical perception (noesis), the spiritual Light within ourselves, by which we 'see' all things in mystical insight, and by which we see the Source of all things itself.

(d) The Sun corresponds microcosmically to the heart as centre and life-source of the human body, contemplation of the 'Heart' in its turn giving rise to a whole new series of correspondences and meanings to do with the Divine Presence at our inmost centre, Love of the Divine, etc.

(e) The Sun might also suggest to the mystic in meditation numerous other related notions, e.g., the supreme Cosmic power, the Source of All, the all-seeing Deity, the Centre of Being; glory, splendour, enlightenment,

and so on.

(f) The Sun, for Plotinus, is inextricably bound up with the symbol of the circle with a central point, which is the astrological symbol for the Sun, with which Plotinus was familiar. Symbols, particularly when used in meditation, tend to lead into each other in a kind of chain of associations. This secondary symbol would give rise to still more associated meanings. The still point at the centre of the moving circumference represents the unmoved Source of the Cosmos on the macrocosmic level, and, on the microcosmic level, the still, quiet centre of the soul, into which the mystic must withdraw. In addition, the point within the circle signifies the first beginnings of manifestation from out of the Unmanifest, and the circle generally suggests to us totality, wholeness, self-containment, cyclic perfection, etc.

Even this is only a summary of the major meanings of the Sun-symbol according to Plotinus' usage, for as I have said, a good symbol is more or less inexhaustible, especially when seen within the metaphysical framework of which it is a part. Another example of a symbol rich in meanings, associations, and correspondences would be Boehme's use of the crucifixion as a mystical symbol:

(a) The crucifixion is identified with 'death on the elemental cross', i.e., the figure of a cross in which each arm represents one of the four elements, air, water, fire and earth, which stand respectively for rational knowledge, feeling, will, and practical action or application. In the 'death' on the elemental cross, the four elements are transformed or transmuted into the Quintessence, the fifth principle which is the source of the other four, and which Boehme identifies with the alchemical Philosophers' Stone, the one principle at the centre of all things. In other

words, the mystic must balance and purify the four elements (the above-mentioned functions) in himself or herself, to reattain unity and harmony and to find true insight. This by itself would give enough food for reflection, yet the symbol has other meanings also.

(b) This process of reattaining unity requires a 'death' -- represented of course by Christ on the cross -- a spiritual death, a death to the lower self and to terrestrial life (again represented by the four elements): that terrestrial life which 'crucifies' the mystic and yet which is the necessary ground and basis of our human development. The 'death' is, however, followed by 'resurrection': mystical rebirth into a new level of consciousness. The acceptance of the death of the ego, and the acceptance of suffering, brings regeneration.

(c) Christ, suffering on the cross, is seen as a mystical exemplar, the archetypal or ideal human being, the embodiment of perfection, and the mystic must follow the way of the 'imitation of Christ'.

(d) The cross is a symbol of mediation between heaven and earth -- it is a 'Cosmic Axis' -- while the vertical and horizontal arms express the spiritual and earthly polarities; it thus typifies the necessity for the reintegration of the earthly and spiritual levels of existence, the union of human and divine natures, which is of course shown also in the figure of Christ.

(e) In addition, for Boehme as a Christian (however unorthodox) the crucifixion would of course bear the meanings of salvation through Christ's sacrifice, redemption, atonement.

The more basic function of symbols as representing or expressing spiritual truths and mystical experiences in concrete, coherent form, can

be rather more simply illustrated: for example, by St. Teresa's simile of four ways of watering a garden to denote the fourfold subdivision of meditative prayer and the subtle differences of experience within these subdivisions (23). Other examples would be her description of rapture as a feeling of being carried away by an eagle or a cloud (24); Śankara's use of the analogy of the snake and the rope; or the symbol of a ladder from heaven to earth, the rungs denoting the various stages of spiritual progress, which is used by both Rolle and the Bhakti poets (as well as by many other mystics of whom we have not treated in this study).

Any of the symbols I have discussed could be used as a part of meditative technique, new levels of spiritual truth and experience thus becoming revealed to the mystic, with the ensuing benefits of greater integration, self-knowledge, etc. In addition, many mystical traditions have detailed systems of symbolic correspondences (varying from one tradition to another) which may be used to evoke experience: certain colours, types of music or sound, fragrances (usually provided by incense) and so on, as well as more intricate visual symbols, evoke definite and varied moods in us, and can be used to direct the mind towards the particular aspect of Deity or of the inner life which the mystic wishes to consider. For example, if a Kabbalistic mystic wished to meditate upon the Unmanifest, Ultimate Source of All, one set of correspondences would be used, involving colours, names of God and so on; if he or she wished to meditate upon God made manifest in the Heart, an entirely different set of correspondences would be employed.

A further interesting point which should be considered are the striking correspondences often encountered between symbols used by mystics of different traditions. It seems that the actual experiences from

different traditions, and the symbols used to express them, show much more profound similarities than the respective doctrines or metaphysical 'superstructures' around which mystical experience is orientated. Perhaps we can conclude from this that symbol is a more primal or basic form of expression of human experience than rational doctrines or metaphysical terminology, speaking from a deeper or more immediate level of consciousness, closer to the experience itself, and closer to the 'mystical language' of which I have spoken.

Obviously, some symbols are culturally specific; some are even to a degree personally specific, inasmuch as a symbol may acquire meanings personal to ourselves, through our own experience of its significance to us in meditation and in daily life. Other symbols, however, seem to have universal connotations. I have already commented on the thought-provoking parallel between Ramakrishna and St. Teresa, who both use the symbol of a seven-roomed Palace, the inmost room inhabited by the King, to denote their schemes of mystical progression; the same image is also found in Jewish Hekhalot and Kabbalistic mysticism. (25) The symbol of the Inner Palace, Castle or City is also used in a more generalised manner by Plotinus, Eckhart, and Śankara. The symbol of Dawn for enlightenment is used by John of the Cross, Boehme, Eckhart, Śankara and Ramakrishna. The Arrow or Spear of Love which pierces the soul, causing a bittersweet pain which is also delight, is spoken of by John of the Cross, St. Teresa, Boehme, Mahādēvī and Mīrābāī (the latter in particular affording an exceptionally close parallel to St. Teresa's experiences). The symbolism of the Inner Fire is used by Rolle, John of the Cross, St. Teresa, Eckhart, Boehme, Suso, Śankara, Ramakrishna, Mahādēvī, Mīrābāī, and many other mystics of both West and East. The

symbolism of the refinement of Gold, denoting the purification of the self, is employed by Rolle, John of the Cross, St. Teresa, Eckhart, Plotinus, Ramakrishna, Śankara, numerous Bhakti poets, and by Boehme, here in an explicitly alchemical sense. Of course, all the symbols mentioned above are also used by many other mystics; I have mentioned here only those who have been examined in depth in this study. Romantic and sexual symbolism is used by almost all devotional mystics in East and West. The images of Light and Darkness, and of the Sun, also seem to be universal. There are also numerous other symbols which are almost universal, or whose meanings in different cultures are very similar: the World Tree, the Ladder to Heaven, Water as the Primordial Source, to name but a few.

Now it would be true to say that some of these images are simply natural symbols for the experiences which they represent. As we look out upon the world of everyday experience, certain objects of nature, or certain human artefacts, immediately remind us of aspects of our inner experience and therefore become symbols of it. For example, the image of dawn is a symbol which might present itself quite naturally as representing enlightenment; we all make use of this image in common speech when we say that truth 'dawns' upon us. Again, the Sun is a fairly obvious symbol for the source of all Life, since it is literally so to our physical world. But not all the parallels of symbolism can be explained in this way. What, for example, are we to make of the seven-roomed Palace? It seems to me that there is a kind of common pool of symbols upon which mystics from different cultures can draw, and that certain symbols have an intrinsic connection with certain types of experience which are cross-cultural. When we enter deep into the inner self in meditation, certain

symbols will present themselves spontaneously as depicting certain inner processes. (Indeed, some symbols are not only symbols for an experience, but are somehow actual aspects of the experience itself; the Inner Fire and the Arrow of Love, for example, are given in the experience, and are not simply picturesque ways of depicting an experience which could have been depicted otherwise. As Tillich says, symbols are intrinsically connected with what they represent.) Even where there is a divergence of doctrine (of interpretation, metaphysics, theology) amongst different traditions, we may still be dealing with the same basic phenomenological experience (although this is not to say that all mystical experiences are identical: I shall later argue that there are a number of cross-cultural types, that, for example, the theistic experience seems to be different from the monistic). It seems to me that the use of strikingly similar symbols in different traditions (as, for example, the seven-roomed Palace) could well indicate the same experience on a phenomenological level, or at least a variation on the same basic experience. This is not to imply, of course, that the metaphysical teachings that become interwoven with mystical experience can be ignored or regarded as unimportant, for mysticism is not simply a matter of phenomenology. But what emerges from this study is that the linkage between mysticism in different times and places is a linkage of inner experience, suggesting a common spiritual life of humanity (but not 'One Religion') springing simply from the fact that as human beings we will tend to have similar spiritual experiences regardless of our race, creed or colour. Some writers, following C. G. Jung, have called this a contacting of the 'Collective Unconscious', but I personally dislike this terminology as it does not seem to do justice to the mystery of the spiritual life, and harbours the risk of reducing



religious experience to psychology. (Furthermore, it really only explains one unknown by means of another.) While symbols may well have a great deal to do with the workings of the Unconscious, they also operate on and relate to many other levels of consciousness and being. They are a natural and primal language through which human beings express their spiritual experiences, and have an intrinsic relation to these experiences.

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## MYSTICISM & EPISTEMOLOGY PART 6: MYSTICISM, METAPHYSICS, PARADOX

It seems that metaphysics, doctrines, and interpretative schemes, play a dual role in mysticism, as I have also argued above in connection with symbolism. This dual role is related to the two-way interaction between experience and interpretation, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Dogmas, metaphysical statements, and theological interpretations (when, that is, they have not become reduced to an arid, ossified and over-rationalistic form of expression, and are still related to mysticism) serve:

(i) as attempts to express mystical experience in coherent, logical form, in conceptual terminology (which does not, however, involve reducing the experience to logic);

(ii) as a part of mystical technique or method, as 'keys' through the use of which one may come to have the relevant experience oneself; as 'stepping stones' or 'rungs on the Ladder to Heaven'.

These two points relate to the dual role of symbols, which serve (to use the terminology I have adopted in my discussion of symbolism), on the one hand, to contract experience into a single assimilable core, and on the other, to re-expand this core into the original wealth of meaning in meditation.

Religious statements which take the form of more or less dogmatic utterances, may be understood in a new light once we have experienced that truth to which they refer; they may then take on a whole new meaning for us. "The letter kills, the Spirit gives Life" -- once we have had the requisite experience, the words in which spiritual truths are framed cease to be mere black marks on paper, and become genuine

representations of the experience itself, expressions of it in conceptual terms. This relates to (i) above. Of course, words still remain merely a way of expressing the experience, and can never replace the experience; but there seems to be a point at which metaphysical formulations become 'transparent' to the experience of which they are an expression, that is, when they serve as a 'key' to induce the experience itself (this relates to (ii) above) or an analogue of it by means of which we can come closer to understanding the experience itself. Eckhart, as I have shown, is particularly skilful at elucidating how theological dogmas are essentially related to personal experience in this way.

Thus, experience is translated into interpretation, and interpretation in its turn influences experience, giving rise to a complex two-way interaction, a dual interplay. (The Kabbalah brings this point out, as it speaks of constant interaction between theory and practice, and also between 'Force' and 'Form', that is, between the creative force of individual realisation or revelation, and the interpretation which 'structures' or gives form to this force.) This two-way interplay applies both to symbolic language and to logical or metaphysical expositions, although symbols, it seems to me, are often more effective than words in communicating the essence of an experience or in helping the aspiring mystic to attain the experience.

In their first role as I have outlined it above, the role of expression of experience, it is clear that metaphysical arguments will not provide any logical proof of (for example) the existence of God, or of Brahman, for one who has not experienced at least in some measure that to which they refer: "In the spiritual order a proof is of assistance only to the man who wishes to understand and who, by virtue of this wish, has already in

some measure understood." (1) In order to be convinced by such a metaphysical argument, we must either have experienced the reality of which the argument speaks, or we must be prepared to approach the proof in a meditative and intuitive manner rather than a rigidly logical one.

The way in which religious statements take on a whole new meaning for us as a result of experience, can be compared to a similar phenomenon which occurs with poetic statements. A poem can take on a whole new depth and intricacy of meaning for us if we ourselves experience that to which it refers. Previous to this experience, we might indeed understand the poem after a certain manner, but it would be an incomplete type of understanding, a theoretical understanding perhaps; and we later might look back and say, "I never really understood that poem until....." Similarly with mysticism: the non-mystic sees mysticism through a dark mirror, while the mystic insists that the important thing is to see face to face. Mystical traditions throughout the world have always insisted upon the importance of direct, personal insight as against scriptural learning or rational understanding. For the mystic, metaphysical arguments and formulations may well come to be seen as true expressions of experience; but the aim of mysticism is to experience the truths embodied in them intuitively; they can never express the fullness and richness and depth of the experience itself. As William James said:

The truth is that in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our immediate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion. Then, indeed, our intuitions and our reason work together ..... Our impulsive belief is here always what sets up the original body of truth, and our articulately verbalized philosophy is but its showy translation into formulas. The unreasoned and immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the reasoned argument is but a surface exhibition. (2)

There is always something of a gap between certitude of experience, and

the difficulty of expression of this experience in theoretical terms. We may be absolutely convinced that what we have experienced is real, valid and true, but abstract concepts always seem to fail to represent fully the realities which we have encountered.

As examples of metaphysical arguments as rationalisations of mystical experience, I would suggest that the Ontological Argument can be seen as a rationalisation of a vision of God as Being, as That Which Is (Anselm, as I have previously stated, first conceived of the argument in a sudden flash of illumination during Matins). The Argument from Design could be seen as a rationalisation of a panentheistic nature-mystical experience, that is, a vision in which the harmony, unity and beauty of nature seem to speak of a Power greater than nature itself.

The mystics also employ metaphysical or doctrinal terminology more explicitly to illustrate certain features of their inner experience. They expound what they see as the deeper spiritual meaning of scriptural passages or metaphysical statements. Boehme, for example, insists that the Bible is not to be understood primarily in its historical sense: "The acts of the Bible are not set down because men should see the life and deeds of the old holy men or saints ..... the visible figure continually pointeth at the invisible, which shall be manifested in the spiritual man....." (3) He comes to a complex method of esoteric scriptural exegesis which sees in the scriptures a guide to mystical understanding; I have given some examples of this in my discussion of his teachings. St. John of the Cross also offers some profound mystical insights into scripture: to give just one of many examples, he compares Jonah's anguish in the belly of the whale to the Night of the Spirit (historians of religion might see Jonah's story as a type of initiation myth). We could also mention

Eckhart's idiosyncratic use of the term 'Unmoved Mover' to indicate the still, quiet centre of the soul, itself at rest and at peace, from which springs all true creative activity and all integrated action. Eckhart implies that this is what the term 'Unmoved Mover' really means to the mystic, although he would certainly also allow that the realisation of this still point in the human microcosm is paralleled by a macrocosmic Divine Reality. Eckhart also interprets the Incarnation as representing the birth of the Divine Word (Logos) in the 'Virgin' soul, that is, the pure soul that has been stripped of all particular images and concepts. He continually translates his personal mystical experience into metaphysical terminology; the 'Ground of the Soul' is identified with the Godhead, the 'unknowing' in which we know 'all' is identified with the Godhead as 'Nothing and All'. Śankara, to give another example, sees creation myths as a means to produce in us realisation of Brahman; and many Christian mystics (Boehme being one example) interpret the crucifixion as referring to the inner, spiritual death/rebirth process, Christ being seen as a mystical exemplar (although they do, of course, also see the crucifixion as referring to Christ's actual passion). Doctrines of emanation involving a number of layers or realms of being which are manifested in turn, can be seen to correspond in reverse order to levels of consciousness experienced by the mystic, as I have commented in my discussions on Plotinus and Eckhart. It should not be necessary to multiply examples here; the mystics constantly stress that metaphysical, doctrinal or philosophical statements that have to be used to describe mystical experiences or entities, are a way of expressing in coherent form what is ultimately beyond form and beyond words. I have given many examples of this throughout this study. In seeing metaphysical statements as a means of making mystical experience

coherent on a rational level, I do not, however, mean to imply that metaphysical concepts formed about the spiritual world are simply 'projections' of so-called 'subjective' inner experience which finds no correspondence in the wider spiritual macrocosm.

Secondly, as I have said, metaphysics and doctrine play an important role as part of mystical technique. The aim of the mystic is to verify by immediate intuition the truth encapsulated within metaphysical statements, by meditation upon them and so forth. Thus a metaphysical argument or a doctrinal tenet can be regarded as a means of awakening insight or personal experience. In this respect, metaphysics functions rather like symbols, by drawing the mystic beyond the rational terminology itself, to the deeper layers of meaning represented by it. Doctrine and metaphysics can function as "a key or symbol, a means of drawing back a veil rather than of providing actual illumination". (4)

The use of mystical paradox, examples of which we have pointed out on many occasions in this study, can be seen, like metaphysics and symbols, both as an attempt to express mystical experience, and as a part of mystical technique or method. As regards the latter, Horne has suggested that: "Mystical use of contradictions [sic] is a self-cancelling operation, meant to present verbal formulas which will tell us that verbal formulas are relatively unimportant, and direct spiritual experience can teach us much more." (5) When expressed on the level of rational thought, mystical experiences may appear paradoxical to the discursive faculty. But this paradoxicality can be used as a rung on the Ladder by means of which the mystic ascends to the experience itself. Sometimes, paradoxical situations which life presents to us can jog us out of our everyday scheme of conceptualisations; and paradox is consciously used by many mystical



traditions for this purpose. Through reflection upon paradoxical statements, the aspiring mystic is led to transcend his or her usual dualistic, rationalistic structures of thought -- those structures of thought which prevent us from experiencing the mystical vision. This technique is central to Zen Buddhism in its use of the koan, one of the best-known of these being the admonition to the disciple to meditate upon the sound of one hand clapping. It is perhaps less well-known that paradoxical riddles and paradoxical mythological images were used to the same purpose in ancient Celtic religion. (6)

The former use of paradox, as a means of expression of experience, can be seen as an attempt to express what is in the last analysis ineffable, and only to be known by becoming one with it in intuitive knowledge. The realisation of many spiritual truths entails a union or transcendence of opposites, and hence, when the mystic tries to express such experiences in coherent language, all he or she can say is that (for example) the object of the experience is both Nothing and All, or that it is both peacefully still and dynamically creative. There is nothing 'illogical' about such statements; rather, they show us the limits of logic and rationalism. It is informative to note one of the dictionary definitions of 'paradox': "Person or thing conflicting with preconceived notions of the reasonable or possible." (7) Reason works in the realm of duality, and hence cannot fully express experiences which entail uniting or transcending dualities. Paradox, then, should not be confused with logical contradiction; Stace misses the mark, it seems to me, when he argues that the use of paradox is an indication of the fact that the mystic's experience is literally self-contradictory. (8) On the other hand, some writers have taken the opposite extreme and argued that mystical paradoxes are

never straightforwardly descriptive, never literally intended. (9) In fact it seems to me that, while paradox is often not literally intended (that is, it is an attempt to express a complex but not actually contradictory experience), on other occasions the mystical experience itself can actually be, or at least (perhaps because of our limited understanding) seem, paradoxical -- just as many of life's most interesting or moving experiences have a touch of paradoxicality about them. But this does not mean that the experience is self-contradictory, rather that it involves powers, forces and realisations that do not fit neatly into a rationalistic scheme of thought. As Wainwright notes, one may not be able to provide a literal paraphrase of a paradox, but this does not mean that the paradox as it stands is unintelligible. (10) There is a sense in which the human psyche needs paradox and ambiguity, a sense in which life deprived of paradox would be deprived of a certain depth and richness. On certain occasions, then, paradox has to stand simply as paradox, and to be understood as such.

On other occasions, paradoxical statements in mysticism can be resolved by the 'theory of double location', as Wainwright goes on to point out:

It is significant that mystics have sometimes attempted to resolve their own paradoxes by ascribing contradictory predicates to different subjects. For example, Śaṅkara and Eckhart attribute emptiness, rest and unity to the nirguṇa Brahman (the Brahman without attributes) or the Godhead, and fullness, movement and multiplicity to the saṅguṇa Brahman (the Brahman with attributes) or God. (11)

That is, the object of mystical experience can be at rest in one sense, full of movement in another; in relation to one thing it may be 'Nothing', in relation to something else it may be 'All'. In one sense it can be said that the Absolute is not other than the world, in another sense it is very

different from the world. In one sense the mystic 'loses' his or her self, in another sense he or she gains it. The inner dynamics of mystical experience are far more complex than is usually supposed; each realisation, or each aspect of Deity, has a number of subtly different facets or aspects when considered in relation to the mystical life as a whole. The 'double location theory' explains a number of apparent paradoxes which make perfect sense when seen in the broader context of this fact, and in the context of the life of the mystic in question, his or her philosophy, teachings and tradition.

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## MYSTICISM & EPISTEMOLOGY PART 7: MYSTICISM AND 'UNIVERSES OF MEANING'

In the first part of this study we have investigated the experiences, writings and teachings of various mystics on a phenomenological level. In this chapter I have argued so far that mysticism must be understood in terms of its own philosophy, its own standards of reference. I have attempted to elucidate the nature of typical mystical forms of apprehension, and to show the various forms of 'language' by which mystics express their experiences. There is a stream of modern philosophy which has been strongly influenced by Wittgenstein, which stresses that, as I have myself argued, religion should be evaluated in terms of its own standards of reference, its own 'language'. But as regards mysticism, there are problems inherent in this 'particularist' approach, problems which hinge upon the questions of idealism and realism, and of the whole matter of the philosophical postulation of Absolutes.

The crucial point here regards the value granted to different types of reality and knowledge. The particularist approach recognises different kinds of reality, intelligibility, and so on, all, it is held, equally real. Most mystics, on the other hand, work with a metaphysical system of degrees of reality, of which some are more real than others; not, of course, in the sense that some levels of reality exist more than others, but in the sense that some levels of reality have more value than others. (1) A similar situation is found with regard to degrees of knowledge: mystics do not just say that mystical consciousness is different from our everyday consciousness, from our usual means of acquiring knowledge; they also say that it is higher than these types of consciousness and knowledge. Of course, this does not mean that mystics deny the validity

of our usual types of knowledge and experience. Lower forms of knowledge are seen as valid and true as far as they go; but they do not acquire their full meaning, depth, and worth for us until seen in the light of the higher spiritual principle which informs them -- which is (as we have seen on so many occasions) the Source of all knowledge.

Mystics differ in their exact approach here. They all grant relative reality to empirical knowledge, to the world, and so on; all accept the validity of each type of knowledge on its respective level. But at one extreme of this position we have mystics like Śankara, who goes about as far as he possibly can towards saying that only Brahman is truly real, without actually saying that the world is not real at all. At the other extreme there are mystics like Boehme, Wordsworth and Tagore, who not only grant relative reality to the world, empirical knowledge and so on, but grant to these considerably more relative reality than does Śankara, considerably more value. Nevertheless, even the most world-affirming mystics still hold that the world seen in itself, or empirical knowledge considered simply by itself, etc., are not worthy of our ultimate, highest aims, attachments and aspirations. This is not because mystics hate the world, or wish to reject it out of hand, and certainly not because they believe it does not really exist, but because they have seen something of greater value that lies beyond it, something that they hold is more real; it is because they have experienced a type of knowledge which seems to have ultimate truth. And once having seen this, the mystic is prepared to put aside or to sacrifice whatever stands in the way of full attainment and realisation of that vision. It is not that mystics wish to reject the validity of other levels of knowledge, but that they see that they must concentrate their efforts on what seems to be the only level of know-

ledge which is worthy of their ultimate aims.

In order to further illustrate my argument, I shall draw on an article by Kristo on mysticism. (2) Kristo introduces his discussion by reference to the now well-known notion that we construct 'universes of meaning' out of the disparate elements of life's experiences; we have a need to integrate these elements into wholes that give order, purpose and orientation. Kristo claims that mystics always warn us that the moment we are satisfied with a particular 'universe of meaning', we have settled into an illusion. The path, argues Kristo, is endless and ever-changing, one should always be growing and moving forward; there is no attainment of any final, static state. In other words, no 'universe of meaning' should be considered ultimate; this is where the influence of particularist philosophy on Kristo's argument becomes apparent. Kristo sees the mystical admonition to strip oneself of all images, forms, ideas, and preconceptions, as indicative of a belief in the relativity of all 'universes of meaning'.

Kristo further argues that it still remains true that specific 'universes of meaning', in the form of cultural background or theological dogma, determine the nature of the mystical quest. Dogma is a set of propositions which embody a kind of concretisation of a particular vision. The mystic takes these propositions absolutely seriously, Kristo says, but at the same time knows that any statements about Truth are relative, and gives his or her heart unconditionally to the ultimate horizon that the vision itself indicates. The peak of the mystic's progression is to verify within oneself the truth of the vision embodied within the propositions.

Kristo also refers to the widespread mystical experience of seeing the same world in a new way -- seeing all things in a new light. Here selfish

or worldly horizons, the old orientation points around which one's life had been centred, have been abandoned for more spiritual horizons. Many mystics speak of a continual, serene awareness of the Divine, felt as being present in all their activities. This is an experience quite different from short-lived intense visions, raptures and so on, and most mystics hold it to be a higher or more valuable state than these. What has happened here, Kristo argues, is that God has become the mystic's horizon; the 'universe of meaning' of the mystic has become structured around Deity. There is a restructuring of every element in one's life in accordance with this, and the Divine becomes the centre of one's life; thus, mystical experience must always be seen in relation to the total life of the mystic in question.

I agree with the final part of Kristo's argument, as I have summarised it, that is, that the mystic restructures his or her whole life with the Divine as 'horizon' or 'centre'. I would also agree with Kristo regarding the nature of theological dogmas, that is, that as concretisations of a particular vision they influence the nature of the quest, and that the mystic's aim is to verify the truths embodied in this vision experientially. It is also doubtless true that mystics take the propositions of dogma seriously, but that at the same time they see them as pointing to something beyond themselves. That is, that the majority of mystics tend to see theological dogmas as true on their own level, but as incomplete -- perhaps too abstract, perhaps lacking depth. I have argued above for a similar approach to doctrine and metaphysics.

I am not, however, entirely in agreement with Kristo's argument that all mystics consider that no 'universe of meaning' should be considered ultimate. This, it seems to me, may be true of some forms of mysticism,



but is not true of those investigated in this study. It is, perhaps, illustrated especially well in the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of 'skilful means', according to which the various forms of Buddhist teaching and practice are no more than provisional means to enlightenment. One must not become attached to any means, or any dogmas or beliefs, for their own sake; none of them is ultimately true; they must be used, and then transcended once they have served their purpose. (3) But Christian and Platonic forms of mysticism, as well as most forms of Hindu mysticism, while agreeing that the mystic should not become attached to dogmas, etc., for their own sake, also conceive of an Eternal and Absolute Truth beyond all flux, to which the mystic may be led by various forms of meditative practice. In other words, these forms of mysticism follow the pattern of an Idealistic philosophy.

Russell, in his essay 'Mysticism and Logic' (4) seems to assess the situation rather more accurately when he says that in some forms of mysticism there is the idea that all is change -- the ideal, the aspiration, itself changes and develops. The goal is not fixed, but recedes as we advance, and constant reorientation is required as old beliefs are replaced by new ones. On the other hand, says Russell, in other types of mysticism we find the notion of a more static goal, although even here, I would add, it is important to note that all the stages, all the dogmas and symbols, leading up to this final goal will indeed be seen as temporary and as not indicating ultimate truth. It seems to me that the first pattern is more typical of Far Eastern thought (Buddhism and Taoism) than of the Western mystical tradition, although we do find traces of the former pattern in certain Western mystics, Eckhart's 'Pathless Way' (5) perhaps being a good example. But it seems unlikely to me that many Christian mystics

would wish to claim that there is no final goal, that even the unconditioned Godhead does not represent ultimate Truth. As I have argued in connection with the use of symbols in mysticism, whereas all mystics grant that the lower levels of knowledge and awareness must be transcended, they do not all by any means imply that the process of transcendence of relative truths goes on ad infinitum.

This question can be seen to relate to the relative status of Universals within different traditions, which will be discussed in more depth shortly. In Theravāda Buddhist philosophy Universals are not granted any real existence, and hence arises the notion that there is no fixed goal, no Absolute Truth. In mysticism that has been influenced by the Platonic or Vedāntic traditions, on the other hand, one of the aims of the mystic is to apprehend Universals directly; to experience 'Being Itself', 'Truth Itself', etc. In these types of mysticism, then, there is a fixed goal, even if, as most Christian mystics hold, it cannot be fully and completely attained in this life.

It seems to me, therefore, that the notion of the relativity of all 'universes of meaning', or of all types of 'intelligibility' or 'reality', cannot be applied to most forms of mysticism, that is, when we are attempting to see any one of the traditions discussed in this study from within, in terms of its own philosophy. In the context of a cross-cultural comparison of different forms of mysticism, it may sometimes be useful to see each mystical tradition as a 'universe of meaning'; this point will be further explored in Chapter VI. But the main point to be made here is that in most mystical teachings there is an ultimate Truth and a fixed goal, and there is a form of knowledge or a level of reality seen as higher than all other types of knowledge and reality, not just as different

from them. The only 'philosophy of mysticism' -- the only type of philosophical investigation of mysticism -- that can do mysticism justice, is mystical philosophy itself. (To elucidate what is meant by 'mystical philosophy', I would regard Plotinus as a 'mystical philosopher' and Kristo, on the other hand, as a 'philosopher of mysticism'.) That is, mysticism must be evaluated in terms of the philosophy particular to the tradition in question, not in terms of that branch of modern philosophy which expounds a plurality of 'universes of meaning' of which none is absolutely true.

Another point that should be mentioned in connection with the analysis of mysticism concerns the whole question of the postulation of absolute standards of reference of whatever type. It seems to me that this has not been discussed in sufficient depth in connection with philosophical studies of mysticism. I would argue that the search for Absolutes is inherent in human nature, and if one type of Absolute is not proposed, or not accepted, another will come in to take its place. Findlay (6) argues along similar lines, suggesting that all systems of thought involve the postulation of an absolute of some sort. "Even philosophies which repudiate absolutes in their logic, and have professedly built up radically contingent, value-free systems, generally smuggle in absolutes of some sort, matter, logical space, the totality of atomic states of affairs, etc. etc." Findlay notes that as a result of this inescapable tendency to postulate Absolutes, very often philosophical objections to mysticism may rest upon preconceived metaphysical frameworks: "....the difficulties raised are to a large extent question-begging; they rest on a metaphysic or ontology which lies securely ensconced behind the very forms of our common utterances, of our ordinary logic, and which so absolutely

commits us to a certain way of regarding the world and anticipating its contents, that it seems to commit us to nothing at all. The forms of our common utterance are by no means vacuous and innocuous: though they may not say that the world consists of certain types and ranges of elements and no others, they may be said to imply that this is the case, and what they imply may be open to question, it may not, on reflection, be the only nor the truest way of viewing the facts in the world." (7)

It seems to me that there is no way that we can get away from this inherent desire within human nature to advance Absolutes of some kind. Without some such Absolute -- however vague or unconscious it may be -- how could we guide our thinking, it might be asked, how could we even begin to think at all? As I have noted elsewhere, any form of philosophical activity, any system of thought, depends upon certain assumptions, certain first principles, certain more or less unproven 'dogmas'. There are no exceptions to this rule. How can we even begin to contemplate such complex questions as the nature of rationality, of intelligibility, of reality, unless we begin with some sort of idea of an Absolute rationality, intelligibility, or reality? It may be argued that some such Absolutes are implied in all philosophical activity, even if left implicit, or if held unconsciously and unrecognised for what they are. And unconscious, implicit Absolutes are far more dangerous than consciously-held, explicit Absolutes, for the former guide and influence our thinking in ways of which we are not aware (as Findlay says above, the forms of our common, everyday speech, for example, are by no means vacuous and innocuous, they imply that reality partakes of a certain kind of metaphysical structure). Such implicit, unconscious Absolutes have a hold on our minds, whereas in fact, ideally, we should have a hold on our Absolutes. The

human mind is unable to proceed in thought without some kind of working hypothesis. If we do not construct our own assumptions, including our own notions of what is 'Absolute', we will passively and unconsciously accept those which happen to be around us. The choice is not between having assumptions and not having assumptions. The choice is between (on the one hand) having our own freely chosen assumptions which we are able to criticise and modify and even reject if necessary, and (on the other) absorbing our assumptions through the pores, as it were, from the surrounding cultural atmosphere, and being unable to question them because we are not aware of their existence and their effect on us. We either assume our assumptions or are assumed by them. Findlay also argues in a similar vein, that our usual way of looking at the world in modern Western society implies the belief in "an atomism of wholly independent existences, quite contingently characterised and related" (8); such a world lacks unity and meaning. Findlay sees the mystical view of the world as more deeply revelatory of its true nature, "truer to its deep structure" (9). He continues: ".....the fact that our ordinary, unconsidered forms of utterances have little or nothing that is mystical about them, does not prove that the forms of utterance which will survive on the deepest and most careful reflection will not be entirely mystical. It is not a question of being inconsistent or illogical, but of deciding what form one's consistency or logicity may take. Ultimately there may prove to be only one such wholly satisfactory pattern of consistency or logicity, and that a mystical one." (10) It seems to me, then, that any philosophical system, even any type of everyday thought, implicitly or explicitly advances some form of 'Absolutism'.

There is a popular misconception that mysticism is somehow philo-

sophically vague, muddled, or lacking analytical drive; perhaps this has contributed to the belief that mysticism should be evaluated from outside itself, by means of other types of philosophy. I have argued, on the contrary, that mysticism only begins to make full sense when evaluated in terms of its own philosophical framework; a framework which, far from being vague, is in fact highly developed in precision, depth and complexity. Mysticism has its own inner logic, which embraces within itself the reasonable use of rational analysis, empirical observation, and so on. Findlay likewise argues that mysticism has its own logic, that mystical philosophy is an integrated, comprehensive whole, which rounds off and explains all our concepts and values, and provides the necessary background for all of them. (11) Against the common fallacy that mysticism is 'illogical', vague, or amorphous, Findlay argues that ".....mystical utterances reflect a very peculiar and important way of looking at things which is as definite and characteristic as any other, which, while it may override and sublimate ordinary ways of looking at things, and so have an appearance of senselessness and inconsistency, none the less has its own characteristic, higher-order consistency ..... while mysticism and its logic can be developed in an undisciplined chaotic or poetic way, in which no attempt is made to achieve genuine consistency, and contradictions are even revered as stigmata of higher truth, mysticism can also be developed in a manner which has complete logical viability, even if it involves many concepts strange to ordinary thought and reflection....." (12) I have attempted to show in my analysis of mystical experience that once a mystical system and its many ramifications and implications are understood, the whole can be deduced from any one part, and the part from the whole. There is a great beauty of inner coherence about this

inner logic of mysticism; each point in a coherent mystical philosophy is like one facet of a precious jewel. This is because mysticism is basically a 'wholistic' philosophy, relating to all levels of being and experience.

Thus Findlay says:

.....mystical unity at the limit or centre of things alone guarantees that coherence and continuity at the periphery which is involved in all our basic rational enterprises. Unmystical ways of viewing the world would see it as composed of a vast number of wholly independent entities and figures, and this, as is well known, raises a whole host of notional quandaries, of ontological and epistemological problems ..... whereas, on a mystical basis, the profound fit and mutual accommodation of alienated, peripheral things is precisely what is to be expected: it is the alienated expression of a mystical unity which, however much strained to breaking point, never ceases to be real and effective. (13)

We have noted Boehme's teaching that every microcosm is a reflection of the macrocosm, if we know how to read it, if its symbolic or inner meaning is understood. This is but one example of the theme that we have seen repeated over and over again by other mystics: everything is a part of the whole, and to start from any one point means that all other points (all other facets of the jewel) can eventually be brought in, and seen in their relation to that first point and in their interconnections with all others. This cannot be achieved unless and until one has found what Boehme calls the Philosophers' Stone -- that central principle at the heart of all -- that, by knowing which, everything becomes known. This can only be found through direct inner experience, and cannot be 'proved' by ratiocination; but once the mystic has gained this experience, the vision of unity comes to embrace all faculties, reason included; all aspects of life and experience, all types of knowledge and discipline: "Wisdom cometh and goeth through all things by reason of her purity." (14)

Thus Findlay argues that a satisfactory mystical philosophy must not

only explain the unitive aspects of our experience, but also the disunity and confusion which we see in the world around us, that is, it must offer an alternative and more satisfying explanation of contingency than do those forms of philosophy which see the world as an 'atomism' of unrelated existences bearing no interrelation to each other and no inherent meaning. Some forms of mysticism do not succeed in this task, but there are forms of mysticism which ".....make alienation and deep-identity mutually dependent: the absolute must alienate itself in limited, instancial forms so that it may steadily reduce and overcome their alienation, and in so doing truly possess and enjoy and recognise itself." (15) Findlay sees this metaphysical stance as typical of much of Christian mysticism, especially the German mysticism of Eckhart and his followers; I would suggest that it is found perhaps even better developed in Plotinus, in the Kabbalah, and in Boehme and other followers of the less orthodox, Western esoteric mysticism. In all these cases the essential unity and interlinking of all levels of being is stressed, and the notion of the absolute "alienating itself" in a process which in the long run brings about the richness and fulfilment of all life. Findlay also holds that a satisfactory mystical philosophy must postulate numerous levels or states of being which "mediate between the extreme of alienation characteristic of this world and the extreme of unity characteristic of a mystical ecstasy" (16); that is, a number of transitional states between ordinary experience and final unity must be recognised. I have myself argued for the notion of numerous levels of being. These are shown in the 'stages' of the mystical path and in the corresponding emanations of the mystical Absolute. I think that Findlay is quite justified in holding that a good mystical philosophy will bear these two traits, of explaining 'alienation' and of



postulating transitional states of being and existence. In addition, I would suggest, these two points are bound up together by mystical practice and method, for the transitional states recognised by the mystic provide a 'ladder' by means of which to ascend from the bottom extreme of 'alienation' to the highest unity and realisation. This is just one example of how all the different points of a good mystical philosophy tie up with logical consistency.

A good mystical philosophy, then, allows us to see meaning in every aspect of our lives; it grants validity and value to all levels of experience and knowledge, while also allowing us to see a unity between all these different aspects of life, because we see how the parts and the whole are interrelated. Diversity is not denied, but is taken up into unity. This is the way in which the mystic views life, and, I shall argue later, this may be a fruitful way in which the philosopher of mysticism can view mysticism; a view which, while it owes something to that branch of philosophy which holds to the notion of a plurality of relative 'universes of meaning', also differs from this approach in some important respects.

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(3) See Michael Pye, Skilful Means. London: Duckworth, 1978.

(4) Bertrand Russell, 'Mysticism and Logic', in his Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays. London: Allen & Unwin, 1959, p.24.

(5) See above, Pp. 54-55.

(6) John Findlay, 'The Logic of Mysticism', Religious Studies, II, (1-2), 1966-67.

(7) Ibid., p.156, original emphasis.

(8) Ibid., p.156.

(9) Ibid., p.157.

(10) Ibid., p.159, my emphasis.

(11) Ibid., p.153.

(12) Ibid., Pp.146, 159.

(13) Ibid., Pp.159-160.

(14) Wisdom 7:24.

(15) Findlay, op. cit., p.161.

(16) Ibid., p.161.

## MYSTICISM & EPISTEMOLOGY PART 8: UNIVERSALS: IDEALISM AND REALISM IN MYSTICISM

I have suggested above that the particularist approach to philosophy is not compatible with most forms of mysticism because they follow the pattern of an Idealistic philosophy. The question of the status of universals in mysticism, which is directly relevant to this point, has already been implicitly touched upon in 'The Referent of Mystical Experience'. Here the question whether or not religious language has an 'objective' referent was discussed. It was argued that in order to answer this question we needed first of all to re-examine the dichotomy of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', of 'outer' and 'inner' realities, and also that we needed to reconsider questions of ontology, questions regarding the meaning of the terms 'reality', 'existence', and so on. My argument posited the existence of spheres of being other than the physical, and the transcendence of subject/object (knower/known) duality in mystical apprehension. I argued that since inner experience and outer referent fuse in mystical apprehension, we could no longer at this point divide human experience into two mutually exclusive categories of (a) psychological subjective experience and (b) experience with an objective referent.

As it is to miss the point to ask whether the object of mystical experience 'really exists' outside the mind of the mystic (this attitude being based on dualism), so the mystic might argue that it is to miss the point to ask whether universals 'really exist' apart from our abstraction of them from particulars. I would suggest that from the microcosmic point of view, and from the point of view of everyday knowledge, we abstract universals from particulars; from the macrocosmic point of view they are 'there' (although obviously, I do not mean to imply that they exist in time

and space) to be discovered. In other words, we have to consider the distinction between our means of arriving at knowledge of universals, and the nature of universals themselves; and also the distinction between our usual means of knowledge, and the type of knowledge typical of mystical apprehension. Basic to the whole question is the type of knowledge we are able to have of (for example) 'Being Itself', and how such knowledge is attained (by virtue of what power or 'faculty' in ourselves). On these points, Schuon says:

In the medieval controversy about universals, the Nominalists were not wrong in looking on general ideas as abstractions or points of reference for thought, because from the point of view of reason they do indeed play this part; they were wrong however, in blaming the Realists for seeing concrete realities in the universals, since from the standpoint of their intrinsic nature general qualities coincide no less really with the "ideas" or the principal roots of things.

But whereas with the medieval Nominalists only the general qualities as such were regarded as abstract, one finds in modern thinking a significant abuse of both the idea of the abstract and the idea of the concrete .... All reality not physically or psychologically tangible, although perfectly accessible to pure intellection, is described as being "abstract" with a more or less disparaging intention .... Substance, that which exists of itself, is regarded as "abstract" and the accidental as "concrete"; it is imagined that an idea of the suprasensible is obtainable exclusively through abstraction, by discounting contingencies, a notion not devoid of meaning on the logical plane, but which is false on the level of direct intellection.....

The question whether Being is or is not an abstraction poses an artificial alternative, since the one thing does not exclude the other: if, on the one hand, Being appears to the mind and in relation to things as an abstraction, it nevertheless constitutes the objective and concrete reality which inspires the abstract notion, or, in other words, it is the most concrete reality possible. The notion of Being is either a relatively direct reflection of Being in pure intelligence, or else it is an indirect trace of Being in the reason; in the latter case one may say that Being is "abstract", because the thinking subject takes as its point of departure things which "are" or, more precisely, which "exist", and that without these things abstraction would be inconceivable; but for direct Intellection .... consciousness of Being is "something of Being itself", inasmuch as it grasps a ray proceeding from it; this Intellection is therefore quite different from a rational operation. (1)

As Schuon argues here, in mystical apprehension, as distinct from ratio-

ination, we know universals directly and not through abstraction. Ramakrishna says: "So long as one does not realise God, one has to eliminate finite things by a process of discrimination. Those who have realised Him know that He has become the All." (2) Eckhart insists that in mystical vision, universals are apprehended directly, and not through the mediation of the senses or by a process of mental abstraction:

St. Augustine says that to apprehend apart from thought, apart from spatial forms and imagination, without (depending on) abstracting what is seen, is to know the truth of things. Those who do not know this way will laugh and mock at me and I shall pity them. They like to look at eternal things and consider divine works and to stand still in the light of eternity, while their hearts still flutter about in yesterday and today, in space and time. (3)

The way in which mystics in the Thomist tradition view direct apprehension of universals will be discussed shortly; for the moment we will simply note that the typical mystical claim is to have encountered 'Being Itself', 'Absolute Truth', etc., by immediate apprehension. The mystics hold that universals are the basis of our knowledge of particulars, rather than being abstracted from particulars. For example, for Śankara, Sat is the basis of all being, Cit is the basis of all knowledge.

The Aristotelian account of universals is appealing in many ways, and is highly compatible with the idea of the Divine being immanent in the material world, the Infinite being seen in the finite (or universals apprehended in particulars). Nevertheless, the typical mystical view is that the One is found both in and beyond the many; the finite things of the world must be seen not in themselves, limited and in opposition to each other, but in their relationship to the Whole. Platonic philosophy, in any case, includes within itself the idea of the Infinite being seen in the finite: the notion of the things of sense leading to the supersensible is a basic part of the Platonic theory of knowledge.

Until around the 13th century, Platonism (or Neoplatonism) dominated Christian thought. As Aristotle became better known, attempts were made to reconcile his philosophy with Christian theology. It is informative to note that the solution of some theologians (such as Alexander of Hales, and Bonaventure) was to argue that reason may explore the universe and support belief in God by arguments, as did Aristotle; but as regards the knowledge of the soul and God, the truth (these thinkers held) lies with Platonism. Since that time, Aristotelianism has been the backbone of the orthodox Church, but Christian mystics, by contrast, have tended to be either Platonists, or at least influenced by Plato. (A similar phenomenon occurred in Islam, the orthodox theology being dominated by Aristotelianism, and the Sufis absorbing Neoplatonic influences.) Platonism does seem to be more compatible with the facts of mystical experience than does Aristotelian philosophy. Otto notes that Catholic theology (in spite of its professed Aristotelianism) has absorbed Platonic and Neoplatonic influences; Aristotelianism subjected orthodox dogma to a strong rationalising influence, whereas Otto sees the Platonic influences, by contrast, as more "numinous". (4) Underhill believes that "Platonism is the reaction of the intellectualist upon mystical truth" (5); she sees the notion of the Platonic Ideas as resting probably upon mystical intuition rather than reason, and notes that Plato says that the consciousness which apprehends the world of Ideas (universals) is different from ordinary rational consciousness. In fact many Christian mystics show a synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian influences; but they do not appear to see the two as irreconcilable. It could be said that Aristotle is included in Plato, or that Plato is 'Aristotle plus' -- plus the admission of the possibility of direct, immediate apprehension of universals in mystical vision. The synthesis of

Aristotle and Plato is seen, for example, in St. John of the Cross, who as a Thomist theologian holds that our usual knowledge (or what he calls 'natural' knowledge) comes through the senses. But mystical knowledge, from the Illuminative stage onwards, is quite a different matter. It is not apprehended by means of the senses, nor is human effort a sufficient criterion to bring it about; ultimately, it can only be given by God's grace. This is what St. John calls 'supernatural' knowledge. Whereas Platonists hold that knowledge of universals is innate in the mind, the Scholastics located the Platonic Ideas in the Mind of God, and got around the problem of mystical apprehension of universals by dividing knowledge into 'natural' and 'supernatural' types and stressing the operation of grace. The influence of the Platonic tradition is also seen in St. John's writings in his adherence to the Via Negativa and his stress on 'unknowing'; he was influenced by both Dionysius and Augustine.

With less metaphysically-inclined mystics, it is difficult to assess the attitude to the apprehension of universals; those mystics who are not philosophical writers do not make explicit statements about such intricacies.

I am arguing here, not that it is impossible to be a mystic and an Aristotelian, but that it is difficult to be a mystic and to be fully metaphysically coherent without either being a Platonist, or at least absorbing strong Platonic influence. Platonism provides a far more satisfying and coherent orientation for mystical experience than does the Aristotelian position regarding universals. A number of facets of mystical philosophy seem to present problems if set within an Aristotelian framework. For example:

(a) The Deity is 'Being Itself', the basis of all other forms of contin-

gent being. Rather than Being being abstracted from particular examples of contingent existence, it would be more correct to say that for the mystic, particular examples of existence are individualised, crystallised or manifested out of 'Being Itself'.

(b) The Divine is known through experience, not ratiocination. Similarly, universals are directly apprehended, not abstracted from particulars by the operation of reason.

(c) There is no rigid soul/God dualism; we know the Divine by becoming one with it. This was denied by the Aristotelian strand of Christian theology from Aquinas onwards.

(d) There is no 'faith'/'knowledge' dichotomy. Mystical apprehension is seen as a synthesis of the two, a state of pure consciousness, which, the mystics say, is the basis of all other knowledge (not abstracted from various examples of knowledge). Again, the faith/knowledge dichotomy was explicitly developed by Aquinas.

Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy both grant to universals some sort of existence; both are agreed that awareness of universals is implicit in ordinary sense experience, and that we are aware of them not by sense but by intellect. The two approaches differ, though, regarding the nature of existence, or the status, ascribed to universals. Aristotle held that the human mind discovered in the particulars an intelligible order of abstract essences; we abstract from the particulars, an intelligible species or likeness, by which we apprehend the common nature of individual things apart from their individuating conditions. When a number of individual things share a predicate, this is not because of any relation to something of the same kind as themselves, but more ideal. "By the term 'universal',"



said Aristotle, "I mean that which is of such a nature as to be predicated of many subjects." (6) That is, a universal cannot exist by itself, but only in particular things; it has no independent existence or reality. This is not really compatible with mysticism; what mystic would say, for example, that there would be no Being if there were nothing in manifest existence?

Plato, for his part, believed that his rather different account of universals was required both ontologically and epistemologically (although it is worth noting that he was never fully satisfied with his own theory, and was deeply conscious of the problems which it raised). The Platonic search was for the single and essential form common to all things of the same kind, by virtue of which they are things of the same kind. The Platonic universals are aspects of Being, not examples of existence; they are not 'things' and are not to be found in time and space. The theory of Forms or Ideas was an attempt to explain the relationship between a universal and its manifestations, and to explain the nature of the universal in question. Each universal was seen as a single archetypal essence, existing timelessly and independent of its manifestations, having reality independently of them, and apprehended not by sense nor by abstraction, but by 'intellectual intuition' (which approximates to mystical insight). The Forms are spiritual archetypes or ultimate essences denoting the true reality of a transcendent Realm, and underlying all particular manifestations. The nonsensible realm of unchanging stability was opposed to the material world of change and flux, and particulars, it was held, were only truly real to the extent that they manifested the Forms. Plato did not, however, see the material world as completely unreal, but rather as an 'appearance' in the state of 'becoming', intermediate between Being and non-being. The Forms are perfect patterns of which particulars are

imperfect manifestations. The Demiurge employs the Forms as models after which he creates the material world. (7) Plato, then, could not say that we become aware of universals by abstraction from particulars, because the universals are only ever imperfectly manifested: if our concept of x were only what we could abstract from imperfect examples of it, how could we apprehend 'x itself'? There must, then (Plato argued) be some other mode of apprehension whereby we perceive universals directly. This is recollection (ἀνάμνησις): the human soul has innate prenatal knowledge of universals, and this knowledge may, by applying the correct methods, be remembered in (but not from) experience. (8) A number of the characteristics of Plato's account of universals that I have outlined here are typical tenets of mystical philosophy.

There are certain aspects of the Aristotelian account of universals that I agree with wholeheartedly. Aristotle stresses that apprehension of a universal is not a sudden, once-and-for-all business, given in a single experience, but a gradual process, becoming clearer and more explicit with the growth and variety of experience. This, it seems to me, is quite true. By inference from particulars, says Aristotle, the initial awareness of a universal becomes stabilised in the mind, leading ultimately to a clear and articulated concept of it. Thus for Aristotle, grasp of universals is by the intellect gradually working on what it is at first only dimly conscious of. We have the power to intuit the universal in the particular, and this power becomes actualised in experience. However, none of this is incompatible with Platonic philosophy. Plato would agree that we can intuit the universal in the particular, in experience; this indeed was a part of his theory of knowledge. We get beyond and above the things of the world not by denying them but by working through them. Mystics do

not hold that the apprehension of a universal is a sudden, once-and-for-all process; indeed, they stress the years of effort needed to arrive at such apprehension, and agree that our apprehension becomes clearer as we progress along the Way and as we assimilate our experience of life. We may have sudden flashes of heightened consciousness when we apprehend a universal in itself; but this is not a 'once-and-for-all' experience, for we cannot sustain this consciousness indefinitely; we have to work at it.

The main problem with the Aristotelian account of universals, as regards mysticism, can be summed up as follows. The logical outcome of holding both that universals have some sort of 'real' existence (whether in the Aristotelian or Platonic sense, i.e., as distinct from Nominalism), and that we apprehend universals only by abstraction from particulars, is to create a dualism between the soul and God, and this position is not reconcilable with a metaphysically coherent mysticism. Scholastic mystics get around this problem by introducing the concept of 'supernatural' knowledge and grace; but to introduce the concept of 'supernatural' knowledge is to bring Platonic universals implicitly back into the picture. I conclude therefore that a coherent mystical metaphysics must be Idealistic, and that it must work with different degrees of reality, not simply with different kinds of reality as does particularism. Some types of Buddhism, however, are an exception to the rule, as I have granted; but Buddhism has been seen as a rather problematic anomaly by many writers on mysticism.

Our discussion so far has been concerned with universals such as 'Being Itself', 'Absolute Truth', and so on. To anticipate the final part of our study, we should perhaps point out that the question of a universal world-wide 'essence' of mysticism is a rather different one. Universals,

for the mystic, are known by direct experience, but I shall later argue that we would be justified in regarding with some scepticism the claim to have experienced a universal essence of all mysticism which is outside any particular mystical tradition. To accept the Platonic doctrine of universals as regards 'Being Itself' and so on, does not necessarily commit us to the idea that all mysticism is essentially the same. In a cross-cultural investigation of mysticism, it may be wiser to begin by looking for similarities and parallels, and eventually perhaps we might come to an idea of the 'essence' of mysticism by abstracting from particulars. Any preconceived, a priori idea of a worldwide 'essence' of mysticism, must itself be to some extent conditioned by or specific to our particular culture or religious tradition. A fully coherent mystical philosophy, it seems to me, should be Platonic in the sense of believing in preexistent universals which have independent reality and which can be encountered by direct apprehension; but the idea that mysticism everywhere is basically the same is not a logical corollary of this standpoint. Plotinus is a Platonist and yet devotes a whole tractate of one of his Enneads to the refutation of the doctrines of the Gnostics. One could likewise be a Platonist and yet hold that theistic mysticism and monistic mysticism were different experiences (thus they would not share the same Form), or that Hindu or Christian mysticism were different from Platonism.

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## CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER V

In this chapter I have argued that mysticism is largely an experiential reality, to be understood in terms of its own philosophy, but that philosophical analysis may nonetheless play an important role in the clarification of mystical experience, its nature, forms of expression and epistemological value. I have indicated that our own experience can generally be regarded as a valid means of attaining knowledge, and that the inner spiritual experiences of mysticism should be regarded as experiences of 'other realms of being', often involving the transcendence of the duality of subject and object, which are equally as real as the world of physical reality. I have attempted to elucidate the nature of typical mystical modes of apprehension such as 'pure consciousness' and formless awareness, and have argued that following brief flashes of ecstasy in which specific concepts, images and so on are eliminated, there begins a descent to a lower form of consciousness in which metaphysical concepts, symbols, and interpretations are advanced as means of expression of mystical experiences. These experiences are felt to be to a large extent ineffable, in that the concepts and symbols used never seem to adequately describe the reality revealed directly in the experience. But the forms of expression used by mystics -- of which I have discussed symbolism, metaphysics, and paradox in detail -- serve a dual purpose. Not only do they 'contract' the truths perceived in experience into an assimilable core or notion, expressing them in coherent form, but they serve also as methods by means of which the mystic may raise his or her awareness so as to intuit the original truth encapsulated within them, by 're-expanding' them into their original wealth of meaning. The experience is contracted into a

'seed' which, when the right soil is provided for its growth, may again take root and blossom. This dual role of mystical modes of expression relates to the interaction between experience and interpretation, to be discussed in the next chapter.

Following on from my argument that mysticism should be understood in terms of its own philosophy and its own forms of 'language' or expression, I have pointed out what I see as certain problems inherent in the 'particularist' approach of modern philosophy with regard to the analysis of mystical experience. I have argued that most forms of mysticism work from within an Idealistic philosophical framework, and that the type of philosophical analysis which proceeds along the lines of a presupposition of a number of 'universes of meaning', all relatively true, is not in accord with the metaphysical structure of mystical philosophy. This metaphysical structure has a high degree of internal coherence or 'inner logic', and I have argued that mysticism should be evaluated from within the framework of this internal metaphysical structure. I have discussed the approach to Universals in mystical philosophy and have pointed out some problems inherent in the attempt to evaluate mysticism in terms of the Aristotelian account of Universals, arguing that a fully coherent mystical philosophy posits preexistent Universals which can be encountered by direct apprehension in mystical experience, and which have reality independent of our experience of them. The notion of the relativity of all 'universes of meaning', then, I have argued, cannot be applied to mystical experience when we are engaged in the attempt to understand any one of the mystical traditions discussed here in the terms of its own philosophical framework. Nonetheless, I have indicated that in the context of a cross-cultural comparison of different forms of mystical experience, it

may be useful to see each mystical tradition or each category of mysticism as a 'universe of meaning', rather than assume an a priori 'essence' of mysticism. It is to this final point, and the questions attendant upon it, that we shall now turn.



CHAPTER VI

UNITY OR DIVERSITY?

## UNITY OR DIVERSITY PART 1 : METHODOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF MYSTICISM

Our final chapter will discuss the question of the unity or diversity of examples of mysticism from different cultures, the question of whether or not the experiences of the various mystics from different times and places which we have investigated can be regarded as essentially the same. Many of the most important points to be discussed in this final section are summarised in my article 'Unity in Diversity'. (1) The central point to be considered in this context is: to what extent is it legitimate to apply heuristic concepts derived from one mystical tradition, to the mystical experience of other traditions or cultures? Before coming to any conclusions here, we shall summarise by way of introduction to the discussion some basic points of relevance, and comment on the various positions that can be adopted regarding the cross-cultural study of mysticism. The problems inherent in the methodologies of certain writers on mysticism will be discussed, and an attempt will be made to suggest a more satisfactory approach.

I have already argued that the thought-processes and philosophical presuppositions of our own modern Western culture may not be adequate processes for explaining mystical experience and mystical types of thought. Similarly, many social scientists have recently recognised that the methodological tools and standards of 'rationality' used to investigate alien cultural groups may make "an implicit judgement of the inadequacy of the explanations which these groups offer about their own beliefs and activities." (2) In other words, to attempt to adopt a supposedly 'objective' position, which is seen in an entirely ethnocentric manner as being the position of Western analytical methodology, implies (at least to some

degree) an assumed 'superiority' on the part of the observer. The thought-processes of other cultures which are subjected to such a method of analysis do have their own interpretative constructs, but these are not usually concerned with purely rationalistic explanation divorced from other aspects of life; and here many social scientists could take a lesson from the cultures they study.

If we hold that our own Western analytical thought-processes are not adequate for understanding another culture, how can we understand another culture and its beliefs at all? Do we have to step outside our own thought-processes and philosophical assumptions? Do we have to learn to think within the framework of alternative thought-processes? To what extent are we really able to do this? And if we adopt such a method, do we still have 'objectivity' in our research? It is often claimed that the use of 'empathic understanding', involving thinking within a different thought-process or metaphysical framework from that of modern Western society, implies a loss of 'value-freeness' or 'objectivity'. I cannot agree with this attitude, as it implicitly assumes that Western analytical methods of understanding, the supposed 'objectivity' that one is leaving behind, are value-free. In an attempt to argue against this assumption, questions have been raised regarding the culture-boundedness or context-dependence of meaning in general. Winch, for example, argues that rationality itself is context- or culture-dependent, and we cannot therefore pass judgement as to what is 'rational' for members of an alien culture or belief-system. There is no one standard of 'absolute objectivity' which will explain all systems of thought and conviction; all belief-systems, all structures of thought, all philosophical theories, rest upon certain epistemological assumptions. Unless we are to avoid thinking and

drawing conclusions at all, then, we have at some point to accept a set of more or less 'dogmatic' axioms, that is, a set of presuppositions or first principles, and Western scientific thought rests on such axioms just as much as mystical, magical or ritual beliefs do, for example. As I have said, we should not assume that Western analytical methods of thought are the only valid system of 'rationality', or that they are necessarily a test for what constitutes 'reality'.

If 'rationality' is context-dependent, then in order to appreciate other cultures or belief-systems we have to leave behind analytical Western thought, and so, for example, to understand the mystical experiences of other traditions we have to enter into the inner dynamic of the mystical tradition in question. Thus Winch has argued that 'understanding' involves grasping the meaning of what is being said and done, which is far removed from statistics and causal laws. (3) Elsewhere Winch suggests that:

....we have to create a new unity for the concept of intelligibility, having a certain relation to our old one and perhaps requiring a considerable realignment of our categories .... we must, if you like, be open to new possibilities of what could be invoked and accepted under the rubric of "rationality" -- possibilities which are perhaps suggested and limited by what we have hitherto so accepted, but not uniquely determined thereby.  
(4)

I agree wholeheartedly with Winch here, and would in fact go further in suggesting that most members of modern Western society need to greatly extend their conceptions of 'intelligibility' and 'reality': the experiences of the mystics that we have examined point to this fact unequivocally.

A prime example of a failure to recognise such methodological guidelines in the social sciences is the seemingly endless anthropological debate as to whether magical practices are simply symbolic, or alternatively attempts to explain or control the natural order. It seems to me that both these theories are inadequate. The point to be grasped is that

whereas tribal peoples do, of course, differentiate between the symbolically expressive, the literally explanatory, and the causally efficacious, they do not rigidly dichotomise these in the way that modern Western thought tends to do. We need to recognise that the symbolic is real and can be an explanation in its own right, of a different kind from, but equally as valid as, a literal explanation; while the whole problem of the Western dichotomy between the symbolic and the causally efficacious is based on an implicit premise that the symbolic is not real, that symbolic actions, such as those found in ritual for example, do not have any effect. It may be that anthropologists still have to discover that magical forces might be real forces, in the sense that they have effects on a spiritual level. This point may merit a short digression, for magical beliefs have in fact been interrelated with mystical doctrines from ancient times to the present day, although very often mystics, while admitting the reality of magic, will hold that mysticism goes beyond it to realms of more ultimate spiritual value. Several great mystics, however, have also been involved in occultism; one such, Boehme, has been discussed in detail in this study, and it may be as well therefore to append here some additional comments on the philosophy behind magical beliefs.

Magical beliefs are based on the premise of the Law of Correspondences (discussed in my chapter on Boehme) (5), which is also vital to many schemes of mystical philosophy. Plotinus, in fact, discusses this doctrine with regard to magic and astrology. All things are part of one great Whole, he says, in which every part is intimately bound up with and effected by every other part. Changes in one part of the Whole may therefore reflect changes in the corresponding parts elsewhere. The Law of Correspondences gives rise to 'sympathies' with which the magician

can work. It is analogous, says Plotinus, to the fact that when one end of a musical string is plucked, the string vibrates at the other end; different parts of the Universe are, as it were, "tuned to the same tone". Plotinus, however, holds that the enlightened sage is unconcerned with magic and immune to its effects, because he or she perceives the Unity which is itself the source of all the various Correspondences, and therefore is not swayed this way and that by changes in the parts that make up the Unity. (6) (This is simply another expression of the idea that the mystic, having seen the world as a Divine Whole, remains impervious to the flux of pleasure and pain and of all the opposites that go to make up mundane existence.)

C. G. Jung has restated the Law of Correspondences in modern form by the notion of what he calls 'synchronicity'. (Synchronicity, Princeton University Press, 1973) According to this notion, certain meaningful events which defy ordinary causal explanation are seen as the outcome or manifestation of a pattern of order or harmony which dominates the Whole. By understanding the laws of 'synchronicity', one could, it might be assumed, thus both effect changes in the part (as does the magician) and perhaps eventually come to see the Whole itself (as does the mystic).

Modern Western attitudes to magic are also based on an assumed dichotomy between the 'subjective' and the 'objective', which is connected with the dichotomy between the 'symbolic' and the 'causally efficacious' referred to above. That is, it is assumed that 'subjective' symbolic actions cannot have 'objective' physical effects. But once the philosophy behind the Law of Correspondences is grasped, it will be understood that it is quite possible for the inner world, the mind, to have an influence on the outer world, matter. If we accept that the things which we see

around us are a part of a greater Whole, a Whole which has a pattern and an order to it and within which all things are interconnected, then the rationale of magic can be seen to lie in the attempt to attune oneself to this Whole by aligning oneself with an order of correspondences, of symbolic truths. The symbolic and ritual actions of magic are simply a means of attuning oneself to one specific facet of the Whole rather than another, of concentrating attention upon one specific group of Correspondences.

Thus it is obvious that in order to understand magical or ritual action, we have to step outside the preconceived dichotomies of modern Western society. As Winch says in connection with Zande magic, the important fact to emphasise is that we do not have a category of understanding and of action that corresponds to the Zande category of magic, and: "Since it is we who want to understand the Zande category, it appears that the onus is on us to extend our understanding so as to make room for the Zande category, rather than to insist on seeing it in terms of our own ready-made distinction between science and non-science." (7) Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between magical beliefs as held by the Zande or other tribal peoples, and the systems of magical-mystical philosophy advanced by Boehme or Plotinus or by modern mystics and occultists of our own time. The philosophies behind the two types exhibit certain similarities, but the two are often quite different in practice, and it is hardly to be doubted, for example, that Boehme would have looked askance at the Zande Poison Oracle!

It will be seen that the question of an assumed dichotomy between the 'real' and the 'symbolic', such as I have discussed above, is of great significance for the study of religion, and I would argue that the study of

mysticism, in particular, has been hindered by the application of a number of dichotomies which are peculiar to modern Western culture. With this in mind, we may turn to the implications of the foregoing considerations in the context of the study of mysticism.

We find that there are problems regarding definitions of what constitutes a mystical experience, and regarding interpretations of mystical experience. Writers have often tended to define mysticism according to their own intellectual prejudices or religious leanings, holding that one characteristic experience expresses the essence of mysticism. Any example of religious experience that does not show this characteristic is regarded as not being an instance of 'true' mysticism -- it is seen as being in some way inferior, or even delusive. Writers who adopt such an approach may also tend at times to misinterpret certain mystics of alien cultures, imagining that the accounts of their experiences must necessarily fit within a preconceived theological framework. I have advocated in this study that rather than attempting to analyse and understand mystical experience forearmed with a set of preconceived theological notions, we must pay attention first and foremost to what the mystics themselves say about their experiences, and to how they themselves interpret them. In addition, as Staal has argued, the investigator of mysticism should himself or herself have at least some practical knowledge of mystical experience at first-hand. The armchair academic who neglects to gain such practical experience, says Staal, is "like a blind man studying vision." (8) Comparing the situation to that of a scientist who formulates theories without ever doing any experimentation, Staal comments: "Students of mysticism ..... content with mere speculation and talking ..... have not even considered the possibility of travelling themselves that part of the road that appears to be within reach ..... This must be the outcome of some deep-seated



prejudice, for such a negative attitude has in no domain of knowledge been taken seriously or expected to lead to any results." (9) I am greatly in sympathy with Staal's argument, and in accordance with this view have in the course of this study drawn on certain of my own mystical experiences and on my own involvement with mysticism as an aid to understanding mystical phenomena.

There are a number of problems inherent in the methodologies of earlier writers on mysticism, who draw distinctions between 'true' mysticism and other forms of religious or mystical experiences. Doubtless there are certain types of experience which are popularly thought of as 'mystical' (the word being used in a loose sense) but which are not strictly speaking so (such as psychic experiences, for example), but this is not the point at issue, which is rather a matter of holding that one type of mystical experience is superior to other types. This attitude is shown, for example, in the writings of Underhill. Underhill does have a great deal of insight into the nature of mystical consciousness; her major work, Mysticism, is certainly a landmark in the study of the subject, combining scholarship and sympathetic understanding in a way which is essential for any worthwhile study. Nevertheless, her account of mystical experience contains a good deal of doctrinal interpretation; her Christian faith, it seems, gives her a preconceived idea as to what it is that is experienced. She analyses the various stages through which the mystic passes, according to standard Catholic mystical terminology: Awakening, Purgation, Illumination, the Dark Night of the Soul, and the Unitive Life. Underhill draws the bulk of her illustrations from the Christian mystics, with occasional references to Islam and Neoplatonism; but she implies that the conclusions which she draws from her study can be said to reflect the

nature of 'true' mysticism per se. She gives little consideration to Eastern mysticism, and appears to misunderstand it:

The tendency of Indian mysticism to regard the Unitive Life wholly in its passive aspect, as a total self-annihilation, a disappearance into the substance of the Godhead, results, I believe, from ..... a distortion of truth. The Oriental mystic "presses on to lose his life upon the heights"; but he does not come back and bring to his fellow-men the life-giving news that he has transcended mortality in the interests of the race. The temperamental bias of Western mystics towards activity has saved them as a rule from such one-sided achievement as this; and hence it is in them that the Unitive Life, with its "dual character of activity and rest", has assumed its richest and noblest forms. (10)

Underhill here accuses the Indian mystic of a type of 'passivity' which she is so careful to stress is not a 'true' feature of Christian mysticism. Where it does occasionally surface in Christian mysticism, she attempts to apologise for it or explain it away. That her accusation is unjustified is evidenced by the teachings on detached action as found in the Bhagavad-Gītā; in Śankara's ideal of the jīvanmukta; and in the teachings of many other Eastern mystics, many of whom have been examined here. The characterisation of the goal of Indian mysticism as "total self-annihilation" also represents a severe misunderstanding. The main point, anyway, is that quietism, regardless of whether we disapprove of it or condone it as valid, can occur within any theological scheme; it has occurred in Christian monastic settings as well as in some branches of Indian mysticism.

Underhill defines mysticism as "the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood." (11) This would seem to be an acceptable definition, but Underhill does appear to understand the "transcendental order" under a specific "theological formula". Her presentation of mysticism entails the

use of a number of dichotomies which are peculiar to orthodox Christianity: such dichotomies as humanity/God, world/God, faith/knowledge. In other words, mysticism is here seen as fitting into a theologically dualistic framework; an approach which represents the fallacy which we have argued against, that is, the application of one type of 'rationality' across the board. Underhill claims that the mystical consciousness has "..... a twofold character which could hardly be reconciled with the requirements of monism" because "It embraces a Reality which seems from the human standpoint at once static and dynamic, transcendent and immanent, eternal and temporal: accepts both the absolute World of Pure Being and the unresting World of Becoming as integral parts of its vision of Truth." (12) This obviously constitutes a misunderstanding of monism, that is, of the possibility of there being various degrees of absolute and relative being which are nevertheless manifested from the same ontological principle. Monism can embrace both the transcendent and immanent, eternal and temporal, etc; to differentiate between transcendent and immanent, eternal and temporal, does not imply that we necessarily need to establish a rigid dichotomy between these pairs of opposites, as is found in dualism. The dynamic play of complementary opposites can be an important part of monistic philosophy, both sides of the opposition being seen as valid and necessary to the mystical life; yet the opposites are seen here as being ultimately one, and so the mystic endeavours to bring about an equilibrium between the two sides of each duality. By contrast, as one writer says of Christianity in its orthodox forms of expression, "Its dualisms are antagonistic instead of equilibrating, and therefore can never issue in the functional third in which power is in equilibrium." (13) One could also argue against Underhill, that mysticism becomes more coherent

when viewed from within a monistic framework, as within dualistic traditions the gulf fixed between the Creator and the creature raises the problem of how we can truly know God in the fullest mystical sense, of how the finite can experience the Infinite.

Underhill's dualistic stance goes hand in hand with her relegation of nature-mysticism to the Illuminative period of experience and her assertion that 'true' mysticism goes beyond this to the union of the soul with God. I do not here intend to pass comment on whether union with God is a higher form of mysticism than union with Nature; the point is that Underhill's argument assumes that 'God' and 'the World' can be rigidly separated, rejecting monism out of hand. In my discussion of nature-mysticism I have attempted to outline a more satisfactory approach to this matter. Underhill's approach contains presuppositions as to what constitutes 'true' mystical experience, and contains implicit within it the idea that there is an 'essence' of mysticism which is expressed in Christianity.

A corollary of Underhill's dichotomy between 'God' and 'the World' is her humanity/God dualism:

The great mystics are anxious above all things to establish and force on us the truth that by deification they intend no arrogant claim to identification with God, but as it were a transfusion of their lives by His Self. (14)

This dualism of the mystic and God would clearly not apply, for example, to Śankara or to Buddhism, and so mystics following these traditions are by definition not classed among the "great mystics". Furthermore, Eckhart, as I have shown, does claim that in the final state of union the mystic becomes absolutely one with the Godhead; and yet Underhill certainly wishes to include Eckhart among the "great mystics"! Another reflection of dualism may be seen in Underhill's stress on love or faith, as

against knowledge, as the most essential ingredient of the mystical path. The faith/knowledge dichotomy, as I have argued, is somewhat arbitrary, but in any case, Underhill also excludes Plato from the rank of the "great mystics" by claiming that his contemplative methods concern knowledge to the exclusion of love. (15) She also claims that:

The Mysteries of the antique world appear to have been attempts -- often by way of a merely magical initiation -- to "open the immortal eyes of man inwards": exalt his powers of perception until they could receive the messages of a higher degree of reality ..... To those who had a natural genius for the Infinite, symbols and rituals which were doubtless charged with ecstatic suggestions, and often dramatized the actual course of the Mystic Way, may well have brought about some enhancement of consciousness; though hardly that complete rearrangement of character which is an essential of the mystic's entrance on the true Illuminated state. (16)

In this almost evolutionist passage, Underhill certainly underestimates the ancient Mystery traditions (from which Plotinus, to name but one great mystic, derived much inspiration). Her reference to a "merely magical initiation" shows that ethnocentric attitude towards magic which we have already observed to be prevalent amongst some anthropologists and amongst many members of modern Western society; she rejects occult philosophy, likewise, as a spurious and arrogant heresy. (17)

A similar attitude to that of Underhill is found in W. R. Inge's Christian Mysticism. He begins by stating that he wishes his book to be seen as a "..... contribution to apologetics, rather than as a historical sketch of Christian Mysticism" (18) but later claims that he is attempting "to delineate the general characteristics of Mysticism" which means confining himself to "those developments which I consider normal and genuine, excluding the numerous aberrant types which we shall encounter in the course of our survey." (19) What constitute "normal", "genuine", and "aberrant" forms of mysticism are decided beforehand; what this

amounts to is that for Inge, the only valid form of mysticism is the Christian, and he rejects the mystical experience of other traditions and even claims that the Via Negativa is not a 'true' characteristic of Christian mysticism, but is derived from Indian sources. He regards it as "the great accident of Christian mysticism" and holds that it is beset by "grave moral dangers". (20) He also, of course, rejects pantheism, which he calls "a pitfall for Mysticism to avoid" (21) seeing it as leading into pessimism, nihilism and amorality (22). Like Underhill, Inge misunderstands Indian mysticism, although here one should allow that the lectures which are incorporated into this book were given as early as 1899; it should be added that Inge modifies his approach in his later works, and indeed his work on Plotinus, in particular, contains a good deal of insight.

The dogmatic approach is less to be expected in the works of R. C. Zaehner, himself a scholar of Indian religion and writing in our own times. Zaehner, in Mysticism Sacred and Profane, argues against the thesis that all mysticism of whatever type is the expression of the same Universal Reality, concluding that there are three basic types of mysticism. That is, there is theistic mysticism, of which Zaehner clearly approves; then there is monistic mysticism, which he sees as an inferior type of mystical consciousness to the theistic; and finally, there is nature-mysticism, which as we have seen Zaehner identifies with drug-induced experiences and even with forms of mental disorder. A few quotations from Zaehner's work will serve to illustrate his point of view:

.....the apparent reconciliation of the opposites, the conviction that one is a god and able to do all things, is, as the Sufis rightly saw, akin to intoxication; it is a not uncommon effect of alcohol and is very commonly produced by drugs. The ecstatic's conviction has no permanence and is always liable to give way to its opposite, depression or "contraction". Such a state will often be accompanied by the blissful feeling that somehow the external world is not really distinct from the percipient subject,

that "without and within are one". These feelings often coincide with a blunting of the moral sense or in its distortion. The mediaevals attributed such states to the Devil ..... because, though bringing with them absolute conviction, they were transitory and, like ordinary intoxication, were followed by depression. (23)

It must be said that Zaehner's prejudices are getting in the way of objective scholarship here. Oscillation between blissful feelings of union and a painful sense of isolation from the Divine is characteristic of a number of different kinds of mysticism, and in fact particularly of the theistic types. It is not true to say that the vision of 'without and within being one' is accompanied by a distortion of morality, nor is it fair to compare deification with drunkenness or with drug experiences; the 'divine intoxication' of the Sufis (the same basic state is also mentioned by Plotinus and other mystics) is about as far removed from alcoholic intoxication as it could be. Zaehner's attitude to nature-mysticism, as I have already shown (24) is condescending and derogatory, and belied by the writings of Wordsworth and Tagore. His attitude to monistic mysticism is hardly any more charitable:

So far non-theistic mysticism may take us: it can polish the mirror by the practice of total detachment from created things in order that the reflection of the One Reality may be seen. The real [my emphasis] mystical experience in which God takes over from His own image, begins only when the rust and the dirt have been removed. The dirt and the rust are called upadhis or "illusory adjuncts" in the Vedanta system; but whereas the Vedanta leaves off when the mirror is clean, it is only at this point that the *via mystica* proper of the Christian begins. Moreover, the mirrors, which are our souls, are more often than not distorting mirrors, and they are bound to be so if the doctrine of original sin is both meaningful and true: and such distortions are liable to be taken for the truth by anyone who has not had actual experience of the truth ..... Thus it is that the experience of so-called mystics, though they always reflect the truth of the oneness of Being, reflect it falsely, for even a perfect mirror cannot exactly reproduce the reality. A reflection of the sun remains a reflection and can never be the sun. (25)

Here Zaehner analyses monistic mysticism in an entirely ethnocentric

manner, working from the presupposition that the doctrine of original sin is true and that our souls are bound to be "distorting mirrors". (In a similarly ethnocentric manner, he elsewhere attempts to explain monistic mysticism through the Christian doctrine of the Fall.) (26) According to monistic mysticism, which works from within a different metaphysical framework, the soul is essentially one with the Absolute; if the mirror is truly clean it can no longer distort the image of the Oneness of Being, and the Divine and its image, or the Sun and its reflection, are ultimately one. Zaehner's analysis simply does not apply to monistic mysticism, for it involves analysing it from within a different philosophical framework, that is, a theologically dualistic framework; it involves attempting to see one type of 'rationality' in terms of another type.

The main problem with the methodologies of Underhill, Inge, Zaehner, and other similarly-orientated writers, is that they attempt, in their different ways, to analyse the mystical experience of all cultures from within an orthodox Christian framework; and this involves the use of concepts and beliefs, and in particular of certain dichotomies, which are not regarded as true by other mystical traditions. To analyse Christian mysticism by Christian standards is fair enough (but even here, it should be noted that Christian mysticism is very different from Christian orthodoxy); to write apologetics is fair enough if the writer states his or her intention, and the presuppositions of the study, beforehand. But it is another thing to attempt to give theistic mysticism a special place in the scheme of things by allowing theological bias to intrude into what should be an impartial study. In fact, I would myself see the 'rationality debate' and the questions raised by it as leading us back towards monism rather than rigid dualism, monism of subjectivity/objectivity, knowledge/faith,



knowledge/being, and so on; I have touched on these points throughout this study. I have also indicated that various types of mystical experience which dogmatically-inclined writers reject -- nature-mysticism, magical or occultist mysticism, and visionary mysticism -- should be regarded as valid and valuable and should be assessed on their own merits. An accurate assessment of the phenomenology and significance of mystical experience has been hindered by the attitude of writers who disregard certain types of mysticism as not worthy of attention, or as not being examples of 'true' mysticism.

What are the alternatives to the dogmatic approach? In a very interesting article (27) Penelhum discusses the argument that (unless we are to dismiss all mystical experience as delusory) there are only two ways to resolve the points of divergence between the different mystical traditions:

(a) To work from within a doctrinal framework, and hold that the experience of mystics in other traditions is incomplete, misleading, etc. This view presupposes the primacy of doctrine over mystical experience. (This, of course, is the view adopted by Underhill, Inge and Zaehner, and as we have seen may involve fallacies shown up by the rationality debate, in the attempt to use heuristic concepts derived from one religious tradition, to analyse the experiences found within other traditions.)

(b) To hold that the common features of mystical experience override the differences; the various apparently incompatible doctrines are then seen as expressions of the varying ways in which people have experienced one Transcendent Reality. Here doctrine is subordinated to the common features of mystical experience.

Penelhum, however, argues that the idea that mystical experience can

only be defended as real (not delusory, having cognitive force) if we can reconcile the differences between what one mystic says and what another says, is an unrealistic assumption and may itself be culturally conditioned. We do not really need to attempt to resolve the points of divergence. Would we claim, he asks, that the differences in the metaphysics of Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza and Leibniz are all superficial differences masking a deeper identity? "If you say that the differences between Spinoza and Leibniz are in some way not real differences, this is a way of rejecting both, not of accepting either," says Penelhum, and goes on to claim that to attempt to find a common ontological reality which is behind or beyond all forms of mysticism, means that all the different interpretations can only be partially right, "an advantage only from the point of view of considerations other than that of truth." (28) We may agree that there is a single, distinct mode of mystical consciousness or of spiritual experience; but in order to claim that it is not delusory, we do not need to say that all mystical experience is an experience of "a reality to which the varying doctrinal responses are somehow ultimately equivalent." The reason we want to reject the possibility of a plurality of mysticisms, Penelhum argues, is because of our own cultural conditioning, which "makes us a little too ecumenical for our own good":

In our day and age we are apt to be struck primarily by the difference there is between those who are willing to participate in the mystical (or for that matter, any other) form of religious consciousness, and those who reject it altogether ..... the temptation to make the equations is a natural response to an era in which adherents of all religious traditions are faced with the spread of secularity, and want to believe that the doctrinal differences that separate them can be put aside to enable them to face a common enemy. (29)

I think Penelhum may well be right in equating the growth of ecumenism and syncretism with the rise of secularisation (a correspondence which

has also been drawn by the sociologists Berger and Luckmann). But it is here that we need to distinguish very carefully between the mystical experience itself as a form of spiritual consciousness, and the interpretations given to this experience or the epistemological and theological claims made as a result of it. This important distinction between experience and interpretation will be explored in more depth shortly. Penelhum points out that an "agreed abstraction from a diverse set of differing interpretations" (an 'essence', or a set of 'family resemblances', derived by abstraction from examples) is not the same as a common object to which all the interpretations are supposed to refer (an 'essence' assumed a priori). We may find the same (or a similar) experience within different mystical traditions, but this does not by itself necessarily imply that these experiences all come from a common source, from the same ontological reality (God, the Absolute). On the other hand, other writers have argued, we may find that there are a number of divergences and differences in the interpretations of mystical experience, but that these are due to doctrinal and cultural factors, and that the seemingly different experiences do refer to the same Reality. Thus it is argued that what is experienced by mystics of different cultures is one and the same reality, interpreted in varying ways in accordance with religious and cultural conditioning.

If we were to adopt this approach, we might argue that the various forms of established religion are culturally determined. This would not amount to reducing them to cultural factors, for it is only right and necessary that our religious leanings should express themselves in harmony with our cultural environment. This environment is the main source upon which we draw in searching for symbols and language to express our

spiritual experiences. We might further argue that the Absolute itself lay beyond cultural determination, but that it was expressed in different ways, given varying symbolic representations, by different cultures. The question that arises in connection with this argument is: how do we realise this Absolute if not through the mediation of cultural symbols of some sort? According to this viewpoint, the Absolute is made totally transcendent, and we need to ask if we could ever know such an Absolute as it is in itself. Furthermore, if the Absolute is beyond all its particular manifestations, then each of these manifestations must be partial and imperfect. But how can we express this Absolute, or say anything at all about it, except in terms drawn from one culture or mystical tradition or another? Hick adopts an essentialist viewpoint of the type outlined above:

Religious experience is experience of the Transcendent, not however as divine noumenon but as divine phenomenon. The Transcendent as phenomenal object of man's religious experience is a joint product of the divine noumenon itself and the various human concepts of the Transcendent which have developed within different human cultures. These concepts have a common source in man's innate religiousness -- that is, in our tendency to experience religiously, or in terms of the Transcendent; and the specific forms taken by the generic concept of the Transcendent arise from the manifold influences which have produced the varied ways of thinking and feeling that are characteristic of different human cultures. (30)

Obviously, when we are considering personal religious experience rather than established religion, the interpretation of an experience will be influenced not only by theological and cultural factors, but by personal and psychological factors as well. One is tempted to ask in passing, however, whether cultural, theological or psychological determinism really explains anything: one wants to ask, by what is culture (or theology, or psychology) determined?

Some writers have pointed out an inherent contradiction in the relativism into which the 'cultural determination' argument leads us, if we

do not hold that there is at least something (e.g., Hick's divine noumenon above) that is beyond cultural determination. Schuon, for example, says:

Relativism sets out to reduce every element of absoluteness to a relativity, while making a quite illogical exception in favor of this reduction itself. In effect, relativism consists in declaring it to be true that there is no such thing as truth, or in declaring it to be absolutely true that nothing but the relatively true exists; one might just as well say that language does not exist, or write that there is no such thing as writing. In short, every idea is reduced to a relativity of some sort, whether psychological, historical, or social; but the assertion nullifies itself by the fact that it too presents itself as a psychological, historical or social relativity. The assertion nullifies itself if it is true, and by nullifying itself logically proves thereby that it is false; its initial absurdity lies in the implicit claim to be unique in escaping, as if by enchantment, from a relativity that is declared alone to be possible.

The axiom of relativism is that "one can never escape from human subjectivity"; if such be the case, then this statement itself possesses no objective value, it falls under its own verdict. It is abundantly evident that man can perfectly well escape from subjectivity, otherwise he would not be man; the proof of this lies in the fact that we are able to conceive both of the subjective as such and of a passing beyond it. For a man who was totally enclosed in his own subjectivity, that subjectivity would not even be conceivable..... (31)

Throughout the rest of his writings, Schuon argues that the various religious traditions are relatively true and are each conditioned by, or rather accommodated to, the culture in which they exist; but that absolute truth may be experienced by the mystic, who is able to rise above his or her own cultural conditioning and to see the transcendent unity of religions behind the divergences. Whatever we think of this argument, Schuon certainly has a point that the relativist assertion nullifies itself by being a social relativity. The whole problem here seems to be that we have no real way of telling how our attitudes are determined by our culture, in what ways and to what degree. Hence, our desire to claim that all mystical experiences refer to the same Reality may be culturally conditioned, as Penelhum argues. The fact that something is culturally conditioned, however, does not prevent it from being true; one

could argue that the discovery or realisation of an underlying unity beneath the different forms of religion is an essential factor of the consciousness of our age and culture. Schuon, on the other hand, would argue that 'absolute relativism' is culturally determined (and again, this does not prevent it from being true): he believes that the 'fragmented' state of consciousness, brought about by the collapse of traditional ways of life and the rise of secular ways of thought, is unable to see the unity behind apparently divergent modes of religious thought. Certainly, 'moderate relativism', or what some like to call 'particularism', does not imply that there are no 'family resemblances' between the different religious traditions; the question is whether there is something Absolute beyond the various cultural manifestations of religion, to which all these manifestations refer, and which is not itself specific to any culture. If we deny this, three alternative positions are open to us:

(a) the dogmatic type of approach as exemplified by Underhill, Inge and Zaehner -- an approach which is certainly theologically conditioned;

(b) an approach which remains agnostic as to whether mystical experience is delusory, i.e., as to whether it can be reduced entirely to cultural and sociological considerations -- an attitude which again, may well also be culturally conditioned, and which is entirely unsatisfactory for a sympathetic appreciation of mysticism;

(c) an approach which holds that we cannot have a concept of the Absolute which is not context-dependent, but which does not amount to reducing religious consciousness to cultural considerations in any pejorative sense.

In what follows, the questions outlined above will be explored in greater detail, and an attempt will be made to suggest an approach to the study

of mysticism which remains sensitive to both the divergences, and the points of contact, between different traditions.

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## UNITY OR DIVERSITY PART 2 : EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETATION

I have indicated that in order to examine the question of similarities and differences between the various examples of mysticism that we have considered, we need to examine the distinction between experience and interpretation. All mystical writings point to a number of facts of experience whose reality taken simply as experience cannot be questioned. The interpretation of mystical experience is, however, coloured by theological and cultural factors. In many cases this fact is recognised by the mystics themselves, and it is often here that they tend to run into problems with the orthodox, as they advance interpretations of their experiences which do not necessarily tally with orthodox doctrine.

In any study of mysticism, it is imperative to examine this distinction between experience itself, and ontological or epistemological claims made as a result of the experience. Certain passages in mystical writings describe mystical experience in a fairly straightforward phenomenological manner, while others put forward metaphysical interpretations of experiences. This may be simply illustrated by reference to two passages from Plotinus. The first passage would be what Smart has called a relatively "unramified" (or phenomenological) account of experience, while the second would be "ramified", that is, a large number of the concepts used in the description occur as part of a metaphysical scheme and take their meaning partly from predetermined metaphysical propositions. (1)

.....when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature ..... when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step -- you need a guide no longer -- strain, and see. (2)

The Intellectual-Principle is the first Act of the Good and the first Existence; The Good remains stationary within itself, but the Intellectual-Principle acts in relation to It and, as it were, lives about It.

And the Soul, outside, circles around the Intellectual-Principle, and by gazing upon it, seeing into the depths of It, through It sees God. (3)

The all-important question here is: to what extent is the 'interpretation' of a mystical experience given in the experience itself? Where lies the dividing line between experience and interpretation? It seems, for example, that the predominantly monistic experience of the one Source from which all things spring is not 'postulated' in a detached, rational manner after the experience is over, but is a part of the experience; but ontological and metaphysical systems soon come to be grafted onto the phenomenology of the experience. Similarly, it seems that the experience of communion with a loving personal Presence is a part of the actual experience of theistic mysticism; but to call this Presence 'God', with all that this term implies within the framework of a particular theistic tradition, is to add interpretation onto the nucleus of experience. I do not wish to imply that the interpretations and metaphysical claims of either monistic or theistic mysticism can be disregarded as not constituting an important aspect of mystical teachings. It seems to me that it may be intrinsic to us as human beings that we wish to interpret our experiences, to understand them by setting them in as wide a context as possible, relating them to our beliefs, ideas, previous experiences, and daily lives. Few mystics would be content to note, "Yesterday I was enveloped in a blinding flash of light", and to leave it at that, without enquiring as to the significance and implications of the experience. The interrelationship between experience and interpretation is complex; furthermore, it is often 'two-way' in that not only is experience translated into interpretation,

but also beliefs or doctrines already held by the mystic may influence the nature of experience itself. But for the purposes of our immediate discussion, we must attempt to elucidate the distinction between experience and interpretation.

Until recently, many students of mysticism assumed that the relationship between experience and interpretation was relatively simple, and that the 'pure' experience could easily be isolated from its interpretation. Thus Stace defines interpretation as ".... anything which the conceptual intellect adds to the experience for the purpose of understanding it, whether what is added is only classificatory concepts, or a logical inference, or an explanatory hypothesis." (4) He assumes that it is possible to strip aside the interpretations to discover the 'universal core' of mysticism in all times and places. Stace proposes a twofold typology of 'extrovertive' and 'introvertive' mysticism. The former involves a perception of unity found through looking outward at the multiplicity of external objects of nature, which are transfigured in mystical vision so that the One unity shines through them (nature-mysticism). The latter shuts off external sense-impressions and looks into the depths of the self, to be united with the One within. Stace thus finds that the apprehension of unity is the universal 'common core' of mysticism, and he holds that the introvertive experience, whether monistic or theistic, is phenomenologically the same in all mystical traditions, but is variously interpreted according to cultural and doctrinal factors. The problem is that Stace sets out with a preconceived idea of what constitutes 'true' mysticism, as do Underhill, Zaehner and Inge, and organises and interprets his material accordingly. Whereas Underhill, Inge and Zaehner see Christian theistic mysticism as the 'true' mysticism, however, for Stace mysticism is 'really'

monistic. He excludes out of hand all visions, raptures, trances, and sexual imagery; he regards 'extrovertive' mysticism as a less well-developed or inferior form of the 'introvertive'. He claims that all introvertive mystical experience is an experience of 'undifferentiated unity', of pure consciousness like a vacuum or void, with no particular mental contents, involving the transcendence of subject/object duality. Even strongly theistic mystics are said to have this same experience, but to interpret it as 'union with God', which is held by Stace to be a concrete metaphor denoting an abstract state of pure awareness. Stace therefore implies that theistic mystics misinterpret or misunderstand their own experiences; his claim that theistic mystics are 'really' experiencing undifferentiated unity will be seen to be simply a mirror-image of the more commonly encountered theological claim that monistic mystics are 'really' experiencing union with God, or that they should be experiencing union with God if their experiences were fully developed. We have seen a theological bias of this type in the works of Zaehner.

At the opposite extreme to the essentialist position of Stace are writers like Katz, who implies that experience and interpretation cannot be separated, that we cannot isolate a type of 'pure' or unmediated mystical experience which the mystic subsequently interprets in terms of his or her religious heritage. Rather, the tradition to which the mystic belongs, the concepts, symbols and values which the mystic brings to experience, shape this experience from the beginning. Claiming that essentialist theories force "multifarious and extremely variegated forms of mystical experience into improper interpretative categories which lose sight of the fundamentally important differences" (5), Katz claims that "....the forms of consciousness which the mystic brings to experience set

structured and limiting parameters on what the experience will be ..... and rule out in advance what is 'inexperienceable' in the particular given, concrete, context." (6) Thus, for example, the Christian mystic experiences mystical reality in terms of Jesus or a personal God, not in terms of nirvāna. Katz advances that there is no evidence but a priori theorising in the face of evidence to the contrary, to support the view that cross-culturally, mystical experiences are really all identical and their differing interpretations merely necessitated by social or religious orthodoxies. Rather, each mystical tradition teaches a specific path and a specific goal: "..... classical mystics do not talk about the abstraction 'mysticism'; they talk only about their tradition, their 'way', their 'goal'..... The ecumenical overtones associated with mysticism have come primarily from non-mystics of recent vintage for their own purposes." (7) What appear to be similar-sounding descriptions do not indicate the same experience: for example, mystics of many different cultures claim to experience 'ultimate Reality' but different traditions have widely divergent definitions of exactly what constitutes ultimate Reality. Or again, the fact that different mystics claim that their experience is 'ineffable' does not show that they have had the same experience (and if the mystic simply says that his or her experience is ineffable and leaves it at that, the experience in question is actually removed from all possibility of description, and therefore of comparability with other possibly similar experiences). Katz argues that to take descriptions of mystical experience out of their total context does not provide grounds for their comparability, but empties them of definite meaning, for it is from this context that they gain the fullness of their meaning. Lists of phenomenologically common elements in mystical experience, while

appearing to describe concrete phenomena, do not in fact give definite descriptions of any specific phenomena, for different metaphysical entities can be described by the same phrases if these phrases are sufficiently indefinite, general and abstract. Different mystical paths involve different epistemological constructs, different ontological and metaphysical superstructures; they begin from different analyses of the human situation and aim at different goals in accordance with this. For example, the Kabbalistic mystic performs mystical exercises in order to purify his or her soul and to liberate it for its spiritual ascent culminating in adhesion to the Sephiroth, God's emanations. The Buddhist, by contrast, performs meditative practices not in order to purify and liberate the soul, but to annihilate suffering by overcoming any notion of a substantial 'self', and ultimately to attain nirvāna, which is not a state in which the self encounters an infinite Being, for in Buddhism there is no real self and no transcendental Divine Being. Katz concludes: "If mystical experience is always the same or similar in essence, as is so often claimed, then this has to be demonstrated by recourse to, and accurate handling of, the evidence, convincing logical argument, and coherent epistemological procedures" (8) -- not by unsupported assertions or a priori assumptions. He therefore argues for the recognition of a variety or plurality of types of mystical experience; this (he claims) is able to do more justice than previous approaches to the inherent distinctions found within the evidence, respecting the richness of the data. It does not attempt to simplify the evidence to make it fit into preconceived categories, nor does it begin with any a priori theological or metaphysical bias in favour of the nature of ultimate reality.

Katz, therefore, stresses the interrelationship between experience and

doctrine to the extent of implying that the two cannot be separated. I would agree with Katz that there is a complex two-way interaction between experience and interpretation, that is, that doctrine, in addition to being a means of expression of experience, may affect the substance of experience itself; but this does not necessarily imply that experience and interpretation cannot be separated for the purpose of philosophical discussion. As Wainwright notes, even if the experience is partially or even largely determined by beliefs, conceptual structures, and theological commitments, this does not mean that we cannot in theory isolate experience from interpretation. Furthermore, Wainwright argues, it remains to be shown just what sort of contribution the religious tradition makes to the mystic's experience -- it might be a small contribution; other factors might be more important. (9)

Smart recognises that "the distinction between experience and interpretation is not clear-cut" (10) for "experiences are always in some degree interpreted: they as it were contain interpretation within them. No perception can be quite neutral." (11) But, Smart continues, there are differing degrees of interpretation (or of what he calls "ramification") and so the distinction between experience and interpretation remains heuristically useful. I would agree with Smart, as against Katz, that the distinction can be drawn, even though it is not a simple matter, in practice, of a clear-cut dividing line. It is in this connection that Smart introduces his notion of high and low ramification, and suggests that the degree of ramification in a description of an experience can be crudely estimated by asking how many propositions are presupposed as true by the description in question:

....the concepts used in describing and explaining an experience vary in their degree of ramification. That is to say, where a

concept occurs as part of a doctrinal scheme it gains its meaning in part from a range of doctrinal statements taken to be true. For example, the term 'God' in the Christian context gains part at least of its characteristic meaning from such doctrinal statements as: "God created the universe", "Jesus Christ is God", "God acted in history", etc.

Thus when Suso writes "In this merging of itself in God the spirit passes away", he is describing a contemplative experience by means of the highly ramified concept God, the less ramified concept spirit and the still less ramified concept pass away. In order to understand the statement it is necessary to bear in mind the doctrinal ramifications contained in it. Thus it follows, for Suso as a Christian, that in this merging of itself in the Creator of the universe, the spirit passes away; and so on.

By contrast, some descriptions of mystical experience do not involve such wide ramifications. For instance "When the spirit by the loss of its self-consciousness has in very truth established its abode in this glorious and dazzling obscurity" -- here something of the nature of the experience is conveyed without any doctrine's being presupposed as true (except in so far as the concept spirit may involve some belief in an eternal element within man). This, then, is a relatively unramified description. Thus descriptions of mystical experience range from the highly ramified to those which have a very low degree of ramification.

It is to be noted that ramifications may enter into the descriptions either because of the intentional nature of the experience or through reflection upon it. Thus a person brought up in a Christian environment and strenuously practising the Christian life may have a contemplative experience which he sees as a union with God. The whole spirit of his interior quest will affect the way he sees his experience; or, to put it another way, the whole spirit of his quest will enter into the experience. On the other hand, a person might only come to see the experience in this way after the event, as it were: upon reflection he interprets his experience in theological categories. (12)

Smart's final point here is particularly important, that is, that doctrine ("ramifications", or "the whole spirit of the interior quest") may affect the nature of experience, but on the other hand, doctrine may in other cases be seen as a later interpretation of the experience ("upon reflection he interprets his experience in theological categories"). This second role of doctrine has perhaps been overlooked by Katz. I have argued that theological or metaphysical terminology may be used by the mystic as part of an attempt to understand an experience, or as a means of representing the experience in conceptual terms. The nature of experience may



change as a result of change in belief; but also, doctrinal beliefs may be changed as a result of experience. It cannot be stressed too strongly, then, that the relation between experience and interpretation is two-way. Katz seems to lose sight of the fact that many mystical experiences come upon the mystic spontaneously, that their content is often not immediately understood (still less expected by the mystic, or recognisably 'conditioned' by theological criteria), that many experiences are felt to be a dynamic, creative, individual revelation. This applies not only to spontaneous experiences of the nature-mystical type, but also to many of the experiences of mystics embedded within a particular religious tradition. Consider, for example, the following passage from Suso's autobiography (which is expressed in the third person), which illustrates the dividing line between experience and interpretation at work in the personal experience of a mystic:

.....of a sudden his soul was rapt in his body, or out of his body. Then did he see and hear that which no tongue can express. That which the Servitor saw had no form neither any manner of being; yet he had of it a joy such as he might have known in the seeing of the shapes and substances of all joyful things ..... It was, as it were, a manifestation of the sweetness of Eternal Life in the sensations of silence and of rest. Then he said, "If that which I see and feel be not the Kingdom of Heaven, I know not what it can be....." (13)

Suso clearly interprets his experience here within the terms of his own religious tradition (calling it an experience of "the Kingdom of Heaven"); but could one plausibly argue here (as would Katz) that the doctrinal background of Suso (a 'natural' mystic, a born visionary) had conditioned him to expect formless, ineffable raptures such as the one described here? Or may it not be that this experience was more or less spontaneous as to its content, and was identified by Suso as an experience of "the Kingdom of Heaven" precisely because, as he says, "he knew not what

else it could be" -- because he had no other available theological framework than the Christian around which to orientate it, by means of which to understand it? In another time and culture, would Suso have described or interpreted his experience differently?

It seems to me that both Stace and Katz are somewhat one-sided in their views. Stace posits the existence of one world-wide type of 'pure' introvertive mystical experience subsequently interpreted in terms of theological and cultural background; Katz argues that experience and interpretation are inseparable, and stresses that theological and cultural context influence the nature of experience itself. I would wish to argue that mystical experience involves both individual, creative revelation, and the metaphysical or theological interpretations which give the experience a form and structure. There is always an intricate interplay between the unstructured, dynamic force of realisation, and the structure of interpretative doctrinal frameworks which give form to this force, as I have argued in connection with the role of metaphysics in mysticism. In theory, it should be possible to isolate experience from interpretation, to study the creative force without the form that gives it structure. But there is some truth in the possibility that, as Moore points out, it is doubtful whether we are then left with "pure" experience, so much as with experience that is "shapeless and undeveloped". (14) The full richness of a mystical experience reveals itself when mysticism is studied contextually, paying attention to the form as well as to the force. Nevertheless, it is important to try to isolate experience from interpretation if we are to be able to consider whether there is one type of mysticism on the phenomenological level, or a number of types. We shall now attempt to unravel this problem further:

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- (13) Suso, in Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism. London: Methuen, 1942, p.187.
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### UNITY OR DIVERSITY PART 3: CATEGORIES OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

I have already argued that mysticism is incompatible with a rigidly dualistic theology: where there is an absolute divide between humanity and the Divine, there can be no room for an intimate or immediate contact of the finite self with the Infinite. Mysticism is a philosophy of wholeness, stressing the unity of all things under the integrating principle of the ultimate Spiritual Reality. Dualistic philosophies, on the other hand, see all opposites as mutually exclusive. The concept of duality of course plays a very important part in mysticism, but generally dualities are not reified, not seen as eternally opposing aspects of life, but as opposites to be resolved either by being balanced or by being transcended. (Consider, for example, the interrelationship of the Night and the Light in John of the Cross; the coincidentia oppositorum in Boehme and Tantra; the goal of union of Śiva and Śakti in Śaivite bhakti; and Śankara's teaching on the necessity of tearing the veil of māyā which projects dualities of pleasure/pain, life/death, etc., onto the one eternal truth.) Many scholarly considerations of mysticism have missed the implications of this, and have become entangled in a process of trying to analyse mysticism from within a rationalistic 'either/or' framework: for example, it may be argued that the various different forms of mysticism must be either ways of love or ways of knowledge. While such distinctions can certainly be drawn for the purposes of classification, it is important not to forget that very often, in practice, mysticism is not a case of 'either/or' but of 'all this and more'.

Nevertheless, while mysticism cannot be metaphysically coherent if an attempt is made to attach it to a thorough-going dualistic theology, there

are of course various degrees of monism and 'modified monism', of unity and 'unity-in-diversity', around which mystical experience can be orientated. I am not, therefore, arguing that monistic mysticism is superior to theistic mysticism. (Theistic mysticism is in any case generally much more monistic in its leanings than is orthodox theology.)

What should be noted is that the distinctions that have been drawn for the purposes of classification should not be artificially reified. We can divide and subdivide mystical experience by means of many different typologies, arranging the material into different categories to suit specific purposes of analysis; but any such categories are important only inasmuch as they serve to help in understanding mysticism, including the interrelationships that there may be between the various types of experience. I have in this study divided mysticism into metaphysical, devotional, nature-mystical, and occultist types, but this classificatory scheme should not prevent us from seeing the common elements underlying all these types, nor from seeing the differences between Śankara's metaphysics and Plotinus' metaphysics, or between Rolle's devotional mysticism and that of Mīrā Bāī.

It is hardly necessary to argue at length that nature-mysticism is a different type of experience from 'introvertive' monistic or theistic mysticism; this has been recognised by all serious writers on mysticism, many of whom in fact reject nature-mysticism as being not only different from, but inferior to, introvertive mystical consciousness. For the immediate present I shall leave on one side nature-mysticism, and the occultist-mysticism of Boehme and Tantra; I shall offer some comments on these later. My other two categories, metaphysical and devotional types of mysticism, may however merit a more lengthy discussion, as some

writers have attempted to argue that these are in fact the same experience, but differently interpreted.

Smart suggests that we can distinguish two basic types of 'introvertive' mysticism:

(i) Metaphysical mysticism, which is a way of 'knowledge' and leads to unity without distinction with an impersonal Absolute. This type of mysticism tends to be expressed in negative ontological terms of the 'Via Negativa' type.

(ii) Devotional mysticism, which is a way of 'love' and leads to union with a personal Deity where some distinction is retained (known in Christian mystical theology as the Mystical Marriage). The language used here is often more positively descriptive. (1)

We should note first of all that this classificatory scheme does not correspond to a division between East and West (as is sometimes popularly assumed): in the West, Eckhart, John of the Cross and others are of the 'metaphysical' type, as well as Plotinus, and in the East, Rāmānuja and most of the bhakti poets are of the 'devotional' type. It is also important to note, as Smart points out, that there will always be found borderline cases; as with most classificatory schemes, the categories overlap to a certain degree. Indeed, I have suggested that we should see the categories as forming a continuum rather than two opposing tendencies: a given mystic might hold a position between the extremes on certain points (as I have said above, in practice mysticism is not often a case of 'either/or'). John of the Cross, for example, is a fairly balanced blend of 'knowledge' and 'love', but nevertheless expresses himself very much in the language of 'negative theology'. Plotinus advances a way of 'knowledge' leading to union with an impersonal Absolute, but possibly not to

absolute unity without any distinction whatsoever. Some theistic mystics, as I have shown (such as St. Teresa, and the bhakti mystics) speak of formless experiences which take them very close phenomenologically to monism. I have also pointed out in the course of this study various other aspects of the experiences of the mystics examined which suggest that we should not lose sight of the fact that classificatory categories overlap. Even the distinction between nature-mysticism, and types of mysticism which centre around an interior or 'introvertive' quest, is not quite as clear-cut as it may seem. The two need not be mutually exclusive, and in the writings of many mystics imply each other; when we realise the Divine within, we see it also revealed in the phenomenal world, and vice versa. Other continuums could be suggested which might interrelate with those above and shed more light on the parallels and differences between the various forms of mysticism: for example, the interrelationship between personal effort and Divine grace, and whether an experience is spontaneous or induced. It is important also to pay attention to the various stages of attainment by which mystics subdivide their experiences. Too often, definitions and typologies of mysticism have concentrated only on the final stage of union with God or absorption into the Absolute. A consideration of the stages leading up to final attainment may yield a wider variety of types of experience than is suspected.

But for the purposes of our immediate discussion, we shall continue to look at this distinction between the two broad types of introvertive mysticism, the metaphysical/monistic and the devotional/theistic. Many writers have attempted to argue that one or other of these types is superior. Theists typically argue that monistic mysticism is a lower stage of experience than union with God; the 'pure Self' that is discovered by

the monistic mystic is seen by the theist as the achievement of a release from the contingencies of the individual personality, a discovery of the inherent divinity of the soul, which is merely a preparatory stage for a loving relationship with the personal Divine Being. Zaehner adopts this position in Mysticism Sacred and Profane, and Rāmānuja employs this argument as part of his ammunition against Śāṅkara. Monists, on the other hand, hold that a theistic mysticism of relationship is a lower stage of experience than the realisation of absolute Oneness; when the mystic still has a 'God' seen as separate from the Self, when any duality of experiencer and experienced remains, the ultimate final Unity is yet to be attained. Śāṅkara and Eckhart are examples of this position. Now obviously each of these arguments entails evaluating one type of mysticism from within the framework of another type, which may be fair enough if one is writing apologetics, but which is not desirable in a comparative study of mysticism. Other writers have attempted to reconcile this problem by arguing that monistic and theistic mysticism are really the same phenomenological experience, but interpreted in different ways. Stace, for example, as we have seen, holds that all mysticism is an experience of undifferentiated unity, and that theistic mystics interpret this unity as 'union with God'. It seems to me that this standpoint is rather unrealistic. While it is certainly possible for a mystic to misinterpret his or her experience, is it not doing a great injustice to the intelligence of mystics to suppose that all theistic mystics misinterpret their experiences, and that this supposed misinterpretation can be corrected by setting the experiences within the context of a monistic philosophy? Or to suppose on the other hand, as Zaehner would wish to argue, that all monistic mystics misunderstand the true significance of their experiences, on every occa-



sion? Wainwright argues along similar lines to those which I am proposing here. If, he says, all introvertive mystical experience is the same as experience, then ".... either theists have read an impression of loving mutuality into an experience (of blissful emptiness) which simply does not contain it or, alternatively, monistic mystics like Śaṅkara have failed to notice that the passion of love is an integral part of their experience. Both of these alternatives are implausible." (2) Wainwright holds that Zaehner may therefore be correct in distinguishing monistic from theistic mysticism, and I would agree with this, although there is certainly much to be said against Zaehner's theological bias and his condescending attitude towards monists and nature-mystics.

Smart (as Wainwright notes) suggests that Theravāda Buddhism gives us a relatively interpretation-free account of the nature of all introvertive mystical experience. He argues that Theravāda Buddhism is 'pure' mysticism in that it does not interpret meditative experiences along the lines of union with God or unity with the Universal Self. This 'pure' mysticism Smart sees as a part of theistic mysticism: the experience itself does not require belief in God, which is an 'interpretation'. (3) I find this argument rather perplexing: it could be questioned whether there is any one largely 'interpretation-free' form of mysticism, even indeed whether it is possible to construct any kind of philosophy or way of life around an experience without interpreting it in one way or another. If an experience is not interpreted in one way, it will be interpreted in another, and 'nirvāna' seems to me to be as much of an interpretation as 'God' (although it perhaps involves less thorny philosophical problems) while to explain mystical experience in modern psychological terms is equally an 'interpretation'; all of these entail the postulation of metaphysical or

philosophical frameworks not given in the experience itself. As Moore says:

If an experience is not conditioned by one set of cultural factors then it will be conditioned by another, while if it were (or could be) free of all cultural conditioning whatsoever it might not be "pure" so much as shapeless and undeveloped. In such a case, moreover, the subject of the experience would not only lack the means to communicate his experience coherently to others, but also find it difficult to represent it, reflexively or retrospectively, to his own understanding. (4)

Moore therefore argues that the mystic's doctrinal background should be seen as "a key to his experience rather than a door which shuts us off from it." (5) Wainwright goes on to argue that if Smart is correct that Theravāda Buddhism gives us a relatively interpretation-free account of introvertive mystical experience, then "a Buddhist's hetero-account of a Christian experience may be freer from interpretation than the auto-account which is offered by the Christian who had the experience." (6) ('Auto' and 'hetero' interpretation are terms coined by Smart to indicate, respectively, a mystic's own interpretation of his or her experience, and an alternative interpretation which may be placed upon it by others, particularly by those of a different religious tradition.) I find it rather improbable that this might be the case, that a Buddhist's interpretation of a Christian mystical experience would be somehow closer to the experience itself, closer to the phenomenological facts, than the interpretation of the Christian having the experience. Along with his distinction between 'auto' and 'hetero' interpretation, Smart also distinguishes between 'high' and 'low' ramification, where (as I have discussed) high ramification entails that a large number of the concepts used in describing an experience occur as part of a doctrinal scheme, and gain their meaning partly from certain doctrinal statements presupposed as true. The concept 'God' used in describing a mystical experience, with all that it

implies, is for example highly ramified. Smart holds that if descriptions of both monistic and theistic mystical experience could be provided which had only a low degree of ramification, it might well turn out that monistic and theistic mysticism were identical from a purely phenomenological point of view. (7) Again, I think it is rather unlikely that any description could be provided which would satisfy both monists and theists as regards the phenomenological content of their experience, unless, of course, it were merely a broad general statement such as "I encountered Truth" or "I rose above contingencies". All mystics would doubtless agree that they rise above contingencies to discover Truth, but differ in precisely how they conceive of this Truth and these contingencies. If we were to attempt to provide a relatively unramified account of a theistic experience which actually described the central or essential aspect of theistic mysticism (union with or immediate contact with a loving personal Presence) and another similar account for monistic mysticism, I am not sure that we would be left with an identical phenomenological experience, although doubtless monistic and theistic mysticism show many close similarities. Wainwright argues against Smart that, for example, we can provide an account of a theistic mystical experience which is relatively unramified in that it does not presuppose any doctrine, but which still has theistic implications:

.....there are less ramified accounts of the same experiences [i.e., theistic experiences accompanied by high ramification] which theistic mystics would undoubtedly find acceptable, for example, "the experience appears to involve a union with something which is personal and loving but cannot be seen, heard, smelled, touched, or tasted." It should be noted that none of the terms employed in this description is theological, abstruse, or specialised. Given that the theistic mystic would find this account accurate (although excessively abstract and incomplete) it can be regarded as a relatively unramified auto-account of his experience. Since it is a relatively unramified auto-account, it should, on the basis of Smart's own criteria, be classified as

"description" rather than "interpretation". It is a description, however, which is theistic rather than monistic in its implications. There are, therefore, relatively unramified auto-accounts of the experiences of theistic mystics which have theistic implications. This suggests that Smart is mistaken, and that the experiences of these mystics, and not merely their interpretations, are theistic. (8)

It is clear that the low-ramification description of theistic mystical experience offered by Wainwright in this passage would not satisfy a monistic mystic as a description of his or her experience, and I doubt too that a low-ramification account of a monistic experience would, to the theistic mystic, express the essence of his or her experience. It seems to me that monistic and theistic mysticism are two different experiences (not two different modes of interpretation of one experience) -- encounters with two aspects of one Reality, or two distinct Realities that are none the less related to each other. In theistic mysticism, the awareness of an 'other' (a presence 'outside' oneself) seems to be a part of the experience itself. In stating this conclusion, we need not be forced into any decision as to whether one or other type of experience is 'superior' or more 'true', still less that one is delusory or misunderstood in its significance. Might there not perhaps exist both an undifferentiated Absolute and a personal Deity, as two aspects of a Reality, of which each mystic experiences (in the main) only one?

As I have previously pointed out in the course of this study, it seems certain that some mystics have in fact experienced both the nondual Absolute and the personal God. These mystics who have undergone both monistic and theistic types of experience, do in fact recognise them as different experiences, which bears out my argument. Certain mystical traditions, such as Neovedānta, and certain branches of Kabbalah, also recognise the validity and worth of both types of experience, without

claiming that they are the same. The best examples from the mystics that we have studied are Eckhart, Ramakrishna and St. Teresa. It can certainly be convincingly argued that Śankara, Suso, St. John of the Cross, Boehme, Lalleśwarī and Mahādēvī also had both monistic and theistic experiences, but I shall confine myself to the former three mystics mentioned.

Eckhart's mysticism, as we have seen, centres around the distinction between God and the Godhead, the latter being undifferentiated, formless, "neither this nor that", and in no way a personal Being. The aim of the mystic is eventually to pass beyond God to the Godhead:

Back in the Womb from which I came, I had no god and merely was, myself. I did not will or desire anything, for I was pure being, a knower of myself by divine truth ..... And what I wanted, I was and what I was, I wanted, and thus, I existed untrammelled by god or anything else. But when I parted from my free will and received my created being, then I had a god. For before there were creatures, God was not god, but, rather, he was what he was ..... Therefore, we pray that we may be rid of god, and taking the truth, break into eternity ..... I pray God that he may quit me of god, for (his) unconditioned being is above god and all distinctions ..... then I shall rise above all creature kind, and I shall be neither god nor creature, but I shall be what I was once, now, and forevermore ..... I receive wealth so great that I could never again be satisfied with a god, or anything that is a god's, nor with any divine activities, for in bursting forth I discover that God and I are One. Now I am what I was and I neither add to nor subtract from anything, for I am the unmoved Mover, that moves all things..... (9)

In this experience, the mystic becomes one with the Godhead without distinction. Yet Eckhart also warmly acknowledges the value of theism and theistic experiences. He clearly sees the union of likeness, and the absolute unity without distinction, as two different experiences, and elevates the latter above the former:

.....when turning away from creatures we get on the track of truth, which is Jesus Christ, we are not wholly blessed, even though we are looking at divine truth; for while we are still looking at it, we are not in it. As long as a man has an object under consideration, he is not one with it. Where there is nothing but the One, nothing but One is to be seen. (10)

Ramakrishna, for his part, does not elevate either monistic or theistic mystical experiences to a position of preeminence, but sees them as equally valid and as two sides of the same coin, as the same reality represented in different ways. While he sees the formless Absolute and the personal Deity as ultimately one, however, he certainly does not imply that the nature of the experience of each is identical. Like many mystics, he speaks of various levels of reality which one may encounter, and of a number of different experiences corresponding to these levels, as we have seen. (11) "To a Bhakta," he says, "the Lord manifests himself in various forms. To one who reaches the height of Brahma-Jñāna in Samādhi, He is the Nirguna Brahman once more, Formless, Unconditioned." (12)

St. Teresa, as we have seen, also appears to have undergone both theistic and formless, undifferentiated experiences (the latter in what she calls the "suspension of faculties"). She clearly does not regard the two types of experience as phenomenologically identical, and has a marked preference for theistic experiences. The following passage from the writings of the mystic Angela of Foligno (1248-1309) also describes quite clearly some of the most important differences between a theistic experience of loving relationship and the formless, ineffable, 'dark' unknowing of monism:

There was a time ..... when my soul was exalted to behold God with so much clearness that never before had I beheld Him so distinctly. But love did I not see here so fully; rather did I lose that which before I had and was left without love ..... Here ..... do I see all Good; and seeing it, the soul cannot think that it will depart from it ..... or that in future it will ever leave the Good. The soul delighteth unspeakably therein, yet it beholdeth naught which can be related by the tongue or imagined by the heart. It seeth nothing, yet seeth all things, because it beholdeth this Good darkly -- and the more darkly and secretly the Good is seen, the more certain is it and excellent above all things ..... When I behold and am in that Good, I remember nothing of the humanity of Christ, of God inasmuch as He was man, nor of aught else that had shape or form; and albeit I seem to see

nothing, yet do I see all things.

When however I am separated from that Good, then is it given to me to see Christ ..... I see those eyes and that face so gracious and pleasing, which embraceth and draweth my soul unto itself with infinite assurance..... (13)

It seems to me that the most satisfactory approach to a cross-cultural study of mysticism is one that recognises the validity and worth of both monistic and theistic experiences and that sees both the similarities between them and their points of divergence, not attempting to 'reduce' either one of them to the other. I have also argued that nature-mysticism and occultist-mysticism should be regarded as valid and valuable experiences, and that an attempt should be made to understand them in their own terms without automatically seeing them as potential, undeveloped, or distorted examples of monistic or theistic mysticism. Nature-mysticism has been recognised as a different type of experience from 'introvertive' mysticism in all serious studies of mystical phenomenology. The nature-mystic looks out at the world, at Nature seen in a state of heightened awareness and transfiguration; the monistic or theistic mystic looks into the depths of the self, detaching himself or herself from the messages of the senses. Underhill, as I have discussed, relegates nature-mysticism to the 'Illuminative' stage of mystical experience; Zaehner rejects it as being identical with drug experiences and certain forms of psychiatric disorder; Stace, who unlike Zaehner and Underhill has no theological axe to grind, still distinguishes the 'extrovertive' vision of nature-mysticism, in which unity is seen in the multiplicity of natural objects, from the inward-looking vision of monistic and theistic mysticism, where unity is perceived in the darkness and silence of the mystic's own self. (14)

Broadly speaking, metaphysically-orientated mystics attempt to rise above or to detach themselves from sense-perception, emotion, concrete

thought, and eventually any symbols, forms or particular ideas. Devotional mystics attempt to transcend sense-perception and concrete thought, but not all emotion, and not (usually) all symbols, forms or particular concepts. Nature-mystics, in contrast to both the above, use sense-perception in a constructive way as a part of their mystical 'technique'; they attempt to rise above concrete thought, but do not detach themselves from forms or symbols, nor from all emotion or all particular ideas.

I have also suggested that occultist-mysticism, of which I have taken Boehme as the main representative, should possibly be regarded as a fourth category of mysticism. I think there is at least some plausibility in arguing that Boehme's experience is a different type of experience from the other three types discussed in this study, or at any rate that the occult elements that are interwoven with his mystical philosophy represent a different type of experience. As in the case of nature-mysticism, perhaps the best evidence for this supposition comes from the fact that many theological writers not only see occultism as a separate type of experience from introvertive mysticism, but reject it; just as nature-mysticism is relegated to an undeveloped form of mystical experience, so occultism is regarded as heretical, erroneous, illegitimate, etc. This rejection of a particular form of experience by certain writers is perhaps one of the surest indications we have that we are dealing with a separate type of experience. As regards Boehme, Christian writers who consider him worthy of discussion tend to ignore the occult elements in his writings, disregarding his involvement in alchemy, astrology and so on. Attempts may be made to fit him into a more or less orthodox theological scheme, resulting in a distortion of his writings and an evaluation of them from within an alien philosophical framework.



I have suggested that Boehme's mysticism combines elements from both 'introvertive' mysticism and nature-mysticism, whilst also adding other elements which are not present in any of the other three types. I have pointed out throughout this study a large number of parallels between Boehme's experiences and nature-mysticism (15) and between his experiences and introvertive mysticism (16). The combination of these two types of experience in Boehme's philosophy is expressed in his ideal of penetrating the secrets of both God and Nature, that is, of the one Power which is the source and basis of all, together with the details of its manifestation and unfoldment on all levels of being. (17) But to investigate the secrets of Nature, for Boehme, involves quasi-scientific speculations (shown in particular in his involvement with alchemy) and excursions into the metaphysics of science. Boehme seems to have seen himself in part as a metaphysician of the quasi-scientific, quasi-mystical endeavours which characterised the Renaissance/Hermetic worldview of his lifetime. (18) He was strongly influenced by Paracelsus, the German physician (1492-1541) (who was also an alchemist, theologian, philosopher, and Kabbalist); his vision of spiritual regeneration embraces the ideal of a reformation of science. In addition, the occult factors in Boehme's philosophy (the astrology, alchemy, and dense occult symbolism) represent a new element, different from the forms of expression of introvertive or nature-mystics; and certain teachings found in his writings (for example, the stress on the coincidentia oppositorum and androgyny), while they may be implicit within other forms of mysticism, are only fully and explicitly developed in Boehme's type of self-expression and in Tantra as an Eastern counterpart to Boehme.

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- (3) Ninian Smart, Beyond Ideology. London: Collins, 1981, Pp.122-123.
- (4) Peter Moore, 'Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique', in Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, ed. Steven T. Katz. London: Sheldon Press, 1978, p.116.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p.111.
- (6) Wainwright, *op. cit.*, Pp.28-29.
- (7) Ninian Smart, 'Interpretation and Mystical Experience', Religious Studies, I, 1965-66.
- (8) Wainwright, *op. cit.*, p.31. (Original emphasis)
- (9) Eckhart, in Blakney, Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation, Pp.228, 229, 231-232; see above, p.61.
- (10) Eckhart, in Blakney, *ibid.*, p.200; see above, p.73.
- (11) See above, Pp.287-288.
- (12) Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, p.150; see above, p.304.
- (13) Angela of Foligno, in Lucy Menzies, Mirrors of the Holy. London: Mowbray, 1928, p.80.
- (14) W. T. Stace, Mysticism and Philosophy. London: Macmillan, 1961, Pp.61-62.
- (15) See above, Pp.319-320, 327, 334, 337, 341, and Chaps. III & IV *passim*.
- (16) See above, Pp.349-351, 352, 364, 365-366, 368, 371, 379, 380, 382, 385, and Chapter IV *passim*; also Pp. 15, 67, 70.
- (17) See above, Pp.355-356.
- (18) See Russell H. Hvolbek, 'Was Jacob Boehme a Paracelsian?', The Hermetic Journal, 19, Spring 1983.

#### UNITY OR DIVERSITY PART 4 : UNITY-IN-DIVERSITY

"I shouldn't know you again if we did meet," Humpty Dumpty replied in a discontented tone, giving her one of his fingers to shake; you're so exactly like other people." "The face is what one goes by, generally," Alice remarked in a thoughtful tone. "That's just what I complain of," said Humpty Dumpty. "Your face is the same as everybody has -- the two eyes, so -- " (marking their places in the air with his thumb) "nose in the middle, mouth under. It's always the same. Now if you had the two eyes on the same side of the nose, for instance -- or the mouth at the top -- that would be some help." (1)

Humpty Dumpty's understanding of people is reminiscent of the writings of some authors on mysticism in which the problems of methodology entailed in drawing comparisons between different traditions or types of mysticism are not got to grips with. Loose, general comparisons are drawn, and vague assertions made, without adequate attention being paid to the differences between traditions and types which also present themselves on a careful study of the relevant texts. On the other hand, we have seen that some more recent scholarly approaches, such as that of Katz, go to the opposite extreme in focussing all attention on the cultural context of mysticism and on the differences attendant upon this, ignoring the profound similarities and parallels which cannot be missed by anyone who undertakes an in-depth study of cross-cultural mystical phenomenology without bias. I intend to indicate here what, as a result of this study, has emerged as the unity (the parallels, correspondences and similarities) and what I see as the diversity, between different forms of mysticism, and to offer some concluding comments on the implications of these.

I have already indicated that mysticism should be studied in the light of its cultural and religious context. Mystical experiences must be seen in relation to the techniques used to induce them, to the mystical goal as it is defined by the tradition in question, to the metaphysical interpretations

surrounding them, to the symbols by means of which they are expressed. The wider life of each mystic in question should also be taken into account, as should the place that each distinct type of mystical experience (for example, visions; the Dark Night of the Soul; formless awareness; etc.) plays with regard to the overall scheme of 'stages' of mystical advancement. When mystical experiences are set within this total context, we are guarded against the temptation to draw facile, loose and general comparisons between mystical experiences from different traditions which, when taken out of their context, might indeed appear more similar than the full evidence warrants.

When approached in this way, each mystical tradition reveals its own uniqueness and its own inner dynamic spirit. Each one shows a complexity and richness; a complexity and richness which sometimes seem to be denied by those writers who seek to reduce all forms of mysticism to a common factor, or to claim that they are all the same. The type of essentialism which takes the form of extreme syncretism seems eventually to deprive each tradition of its uniqueness and authenticity, of the specific flavour and tone, the specific archetypes and symbols, peculiar to it. This attitude is not found (with a few exceptions) amongst the mystics themselves, who, on the contrary, exercise a good deal of discrimination with regard to different types of mystical experience, their respective validity and significance. Indeed, we come to wonder whether we should not be talking about 'mystical Christianity' and 'mystical Hinduism' rather than 'Christian mysticism' or 'Hindu mysticism'. There is another, rather more subtle, type of essentialism, however, which we have seen for example in the work of Underhill: the theologically biased approach, which uses one religious tradition as a paradigm by means of which

another tradition or another type of experience is explained. Writers who adopt this approach hold that the religious experience of those in other traditions is incomplete or delusive, that one type of mysticism is superior to all others and is the ideal or true interpretation of experiences that appear on the surface to differ from it. The assumption of this approach is that there is one 'true essence' of mysticism which is manifested in, for example, Christianity: as Katz notes, the underlying assumption is that "..... all religions, even if appearing different, really teach x -- the definition of x being variously supplied on the basis of the particular dogmatic beliefs the given interpreter happens to hold, e.g. the Christian finds the x to be the Christian God." (2)

It is sometimes supposed that to assert the existence of a diversity of types of mystical experience somehow sheds doubt on the claim that mysticism reveals to us spiritual reality; that is, that if we can show that all mystics everywhere have basically the same experience, the 'argument from unanimity' can be used to show that the reality encountered by mystics must exist independently of their experiences. But to recognise a number of different types of mystical experience need not impute the reality of any of them. As Wainwright says:

It is true that nature mysticism, monistic mysticism, theistic mysticism and numinous experience (immediately?) support different claims -- that nature is one and sacred, that there is an undifferentiated unity transcending space and time, that an overwhelming loving consciousness exists, that there is a holy Other. But it is not clear that these claims conflict. (Monistic and theistic experiences might be experiences of different objects, for example.) (3)

I do not see that there is any contradiction in holding that nature is one and sacred, and that there is a nondifferentiated Absolute, and that there is a personal Deity. These can be seen as experiences of different aspects of Divine Reality, not necessarily incompatible with each other. Very

often, a mystic or a mystical tradition will be aware of and even grant validity to one type of experience, whilst concentrating on another. For example, Śankara knows theistic union yet concentrates on unity of absorption in Brahman; Eckhart knows devotional feeling yet concentrates on metaphysical forms of expression; St. Teresa knows formless awareness yet concentrates on loving union. The spiritual realm may have a complexity comparable to that of the material world; or, to put it another way, there are a number of different 'Other Worlds' which the mystic may encounter, a number of different types of experience. This was anticipated by William James, who, speaking of mystical states as "windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world", concluded his lecture on mysticism by saying that:

The difference of the views seen from the different mystical windows need not prevent us from entertaining this supposition [i.e., that mystical states give us a wider vision of reality]. The wider world would in that case prove to have a mixed constitution like that of this world, that is all. It would have its celestial and its infernal regions, its tempting and its saving moments, its valid experiences and its counterfeit ones, just as our world has them; but it would be a wider world all the same. We should have to use its experiences by selecting and subordinating and substituting just as is our custom in this ordinary world; we should be liable to error just as we are now; yet the counting in of that wider world of meanings, and the serious dealing with it, might, in spite of all the perplexity, be indispensable stages in our approach to the final fullness of the truth. (4)

What has emerged from our study is that there are three basic levels on which the question of the unity or diversity of mystical experience can be considered, i.e., the unity or diversity of:

- (a) ontological source of the experience
- (b) phenomenological experience
- (c) interpretation.

I have argued that there may be a number of cross-cultural types of mystical experience; that is, that while monistic and theistic mysticism,

for example, seem to be different experiences, the monistic mysticism of Plotinus and the monistic mysticism of Śāṅkara, or the theistic mysticism of St. Teresa and the theistic mysticism of MĪRĀBĀĪ, might embody the same experience, or at least very similar experiences, on the phenomenological level, but that these experiences are differently interpreted. Thus in a cross-cultural study of mysticism we find that there is a unity of experience (b) (that is, a unity of a number of different types of experience), and a diversity of interpretation (c). It is not often appreciated that the question of ontological source (a) is distinct from the question of unity or diversity of experience at (b). Two mystics could have different experiences of the same Absolute Reality (if this Reality is Infinite, it could be revealed in an infinite diversity of forms), or could have what appear to be phenomenologically identical experiences of different Realities. Hence any attempt to show that all mystical experience is phenomenologically the same is not an apologetic for the existence of an a priori Absolute in the essentialist sense; conversely, the claim that there are many varieties of mystical experience does not automatically exclude the existence of such an Absolute. I have argued that the unity of experience, and the very close parallels of symbolism and so on, found in different mystical traditions, reflect a common spiritual life of humanity, but that this does not necessarily involve a common ontological source or referent for all mysticism, nor on the other hand can it be reduced to a common psychological factor.

There are close parallels between the methods and techniques used to induce mystical experience in different traditions (i.e., between different forms of meditative discipline and so on, which usually comprise purification, the cultivation of detachment and ethical virtues, study, and

meditation). There are close parallels of certain symbols, as I have discussed elsewhere; and there is a unity of certain basic or general spiritual truths, such as the distinction between the true Self and the empirical self, and the belief in our essential oneness with spiritual reality. It may be said that all introvertive mysticism is concerned with the passage from the world of multiplicity and relativity to the world of the eternal and absolute, while extrovertive mysticism is concerned with seeing the world of relativity in the light of the eternal values and principles which inform it. Mysticism is a quest for spiritual illumination in which the lower self (the ego or personality) is transcended, giving rise to a realisation of the true Self and of the essential connection of this true Self with God or the Absolute or with Nature seen as the manifestation of the Divine. (Some forms of Buddhist experience would have to be excluded from this definition, but Buddhism has not been dealt with in this study.) Humanity is seen as a microcosm made in the image of the wider spiritual macrocosm, and hence mystical apprehension is made possible through "like knowing like". The mystical journey involves the revelation of a type of apprehension which is a direct, intuitive, immediate awareness, and which is attained by penetration to the still, pure, inmost core of the self. Certain levels of imagery and symbolism, certain attachments, certain limited modes of understanding, have to be transcended. The exact levels of symbolism and types of understanding that this applies to vary from one type of mysticism to another, but the importance of rising above an excessive rationalism is always stressed; personal experience is all-important. It is also always held to be of great importance to rise above selfish or hedonistic desires, and excessive attachment to the things of the senses; but the world and the lower faculties are nonethe-



less not to be rejected. As the mystic progresses, he or she is rewarded by greater self-knowledge, and with this self-knowledge comes knowledge of Divine Reality. New levels of consciousness or being are encountered. The mystical path culminates in union with, or absorption into, the absolute spiritual principle of which all particular things are manifestations or creations. (In nature-mysticism this may be seen either as a Divine Being, or as the 'Life-Force' informing all phenomena.) The mystic "sees into the heart of all things", understanding the one source from which all reality proceeds, and comes to see all things in the Light of the Divine. As a result of this, he or she usually realises that the spiritual truths that have now been revealed can and must be made manifest in the material world, and proceeds to execute this task. There are a number of practical psychological benefits gained by the mystic which are also common to all forms of mysticism: increased self-knowledge, serenity, psychological balance, strength; and equanimity, as the opposites are reconciled and seen as not ultimately conflicting.

In many cases the differences between different categories of mysticism can be seen to be differences of emphasis only. For example, the theme of each aspect of nature being seen to have a symbolic meaning is predominant in nature-mysticism, but also found in introvertive mysticism. (5) The experience of the Inner Fire is predominant in devotional mysticism, but also found in metaphysical mysticism. Macrocosmic and microcosmic correspondences are found in all forms of mysticism, but are most explicitly developed in the occultist-mysticism of Boehme and his like. The coincidentia oppositorum, too, whilst found in particular in the occultist-mysticism of Boehme and Tantra, is in many cases implicit in other forms of mysticism. In the course of the discussions of the pheno-

menological experiences of the mystics in the first part of this study, I have pointed out a large number of specific parallels between different types of mysticism, particularly between the phenomenological experiences themselves and their psychological benefits, and have stressed that categories overlap.

A number of other common characteristics of mysticism could also be mentioned, which have been enumerated by writers like James and Stace. For example, there is the feeling of oneness and unity, that all things are part of a Whole; the sense of objectivity or reality of what is experienced; the noetic quality; the element of transcending dualities; the feelings of joy and peace; the paradoxicality and ineffability; the sense of the presence of some great spiritual Power. (These apply to both extrovertive and introvertive mysticism.) Not all these elements may be present in any one experience; they may combine in different permutations to form a variety of types of mystical experience. Furthermore, there are of course other elements which may enter into an experience. Perhaps some writers have tended to emphasise the joy and peace ultimately found by the mystic to the extent of ignoring the very profound sufferings, conflicts and confusions through which the mystic has to pass; as James says in the quotation above, the wider world encountered by the mystic has its infernal regions as well as its celestial ones. One mystic may have a vivid vision which brings great joy and peace; another may be overwhelmed by a sense of his or her shortcomings and unworthiness; another may feel that he or she is transcending time as we know it, to be swept away beyond all concepts and images to an ineffable state of oneness. In a world as wide as the mystical world, the possibilities are almost endless.

The common characteristics outlined above are drawn by means of

abstraction from the various examples of mysticism in different traditions that we have investigated. Such an essence derived from philosophical abstraction is not, it should be noted, the same as postulating a common ontological reality to which all these experiences are supposed to refer. It is possible to argue that such a reality may exist a priori, in view of the close phenomenological correspondences between different forms of mysticism; we have no good reason to suppose that our thought (our abstraction) may not correspond to reality here. But this can be neither proved nor disproved, and I do not see that anyone is qualified to pass either positive or negative judgement on the matter, for reasons to be elucidated shortly.

Doubtless mystics of most traditions would regard the common characteristics I have outlined as true, but as too abstract or incomplete as descriptions of their experiences. For example, St. Teresa would agree that at the height of her mystical experience she is united with spiritual reality and has feelings of great joy and peace; yet she would wish to add to this description certain things about the nature of this spiritual reality, assertions which would bring us back to the cultural and religious context of her experiences. Different forms of mysticism show a convergence of a large number of details, but each preserves a different qualitative spirit. There are important differences between Boehme's dense symbolism, Śankara's uncompromising stark purity, the peaceful yet inspired knowledge of Eckhart, and the impassioned cries of the Bhakti mystics. Thus in spite of the parallels of certain aspects of experience, technique, symbolism, and basic spiritual ideas, there is also a diversity of precise theological or metaphysical interpretation, of cultural influence, and of forms of expression peculiar to the temperament of each mystic.

Some of the differences between mystical traditions can be seen to be a direct result of cultural influence, and in some cases it is not difficult to see a common factor obtaining behind different cultural forms. Mysticism always eventually has to be related to the world of everyday living. Social and cultural forms arise and pass away; the life that was appropriate for the medieval monk is not likely to be realistic -- even if it is possible -- for a member of modern society. As cultural forms change, so do the symbols and other forms of language used to express experience. New forms of mysticism arise through contact with the changing world around us; the different interpretations of experience can be related to the relationship obtaining between the temporal world, and the eternal realm encountered by the mystic. It should not, for example, surprise us that Suso, born of a noble family in 14th century Germany, uses the imagery of Courtly Love and Knighthood to express an ideal of 'Spiritual Chivalry'. In a different age, no doubt he would have used different imagery to express the same experiences. This having been said, however, it remains true that there is limited value in stripping mystical experience of its total cultural context, which should be seen as an important aspect of the experience.

It is also important in this connection to distinguish between theories of mysticism and mysticism in practice. Theoretically all forms of mysticism might be subsumed under some kind of greater whole; but in practice the mystic follows one particular path with exercises tailored towards a certain defined end. And since mysticism is primarily a matter of practice rather than theory, the differences become all-important. Since mysticism is a matter of experience, not of philosophical analysis, in order to be qualified to pass judgement on the question of whether one Reality to

which all mystical experience can be referred exists a priori, one would have had to have undergone countless different types of mystical experience. One would have to have had a genuine Christian experience of union with Christ, a genuine Vedāntic experience of absolute oneness with Brahman, a genuine nature-mystical experience, and so on, to include all possible shades of mystical experience within all traditions. This would include different types of experience pertaining to different schools or denominations within the same religion, to different stages of each mystical path, etc. If anyone claimed to have had such experiences, we would, I think, be justified in doubting whether certain of his or her experiences were genuine, in the sense of truly belonging to the authentic mystical tradition of the stated religion. It is more likely that his or her interpretation of certain of the experiences would be born out of an ill-defined and romantic syncretism. Ramakrishna is a case in point here: as we have seen, he tried out a number of different mystical paths, and on the basis of his experiences claimed that all these paths led to the same goal. There are a number of problems connected with his claim, however, which I have enumerated in my discussion of his teachings. (6)

To summarise what has been an important thread running throughout this study, I have said that Wittgensteinian-influenced philosophy and the 'rationality debate' have made a great contribution to religious thought in the insistence upon the need to evaluate the religious experience of other cultures or times in terms of their own inherent standards of reference; in showing us the illegitimacy of imposing upon them preconceived theological notions derived from our own cultural heritage, or preconceived modern Western ideas of 'rationality' which involve seeing it in terms of logical analysis and empirical verifiability. Applied specifically to mysti-

cism, these guidelines have prompted the following observations. Examination of the experiences of the mystics has suggested to us that the Universe is full of other realms of being and consciousness, determined by other laws; other realities, from which we are blinded unless we can question and put in abeyance the basic premises, first principles, or 'dogmas' upon which modern materialistic thought is built. This does not, of course, mean that we have to abandon formal logic, science, and so on, altogether, merely that we no longer consider them to be means of revealing all types of reality. Mystical experience involves seeing things in a manner which is to a large extent free from the interpretations of our usual concepts, categories and distinctions by which we order and interpret the world: we cannot understand the other realms of being in our Universe unless we step outside the realm of modern Western logical and materialistic thought. There are different categories of reality, different types of intelligibility, meaning or logic, obeying different laws: one such is mystical consciousness.

Having argued for the existence of this form of consciousness, we have seen that, considering it as a form of experience, profound similarities can be found between the same type or category of experience in different mystical traditions, and to a lesser extent between the different types or categories; but this does not necessarily imply that the ontological source of this form of consciousness is one and the same in all traditions, within the same category of experience or between different categories. Two separate questions have become entangled in the heated debate between essentialists and relativists. One is the question whether there is any one system of 'rationality' which can be applied across the board to action and belief in all cultures. The other is the problem of

whether there is one Absolute to which all mystical experience refers. These two questions, although interrelated, are logically distinct. The 'rationality debate' has shown us that modern Western scientific and analytical modes of thought should not be considered paradigmatic of 'rationality'. It has not shown us whether there is or is not one mystical Absolute. In this study we have attempted to consider the phenomenological characteristics of mysticism on their own ground, and to understand them in terms of their own 'language', without attempting to fit them beforehand into preconceived philosophical or theological frameworks. We have observed the similarities, and the differences, between the different mystical traditions and the different categories of experience. One conclusion that emerges is that if there is one mystical Reality to which the experiences of all traditions and categories of mysticism refer, we can say nothing about it, for the very language which we might use to describe it would itself be specific to one or another stream of mysticism or form of expression. If there is one 'mystical World' of which mystics of different traditions or categories experience different 'mystical countries', we can in any case only talk of the mystical World in the terms of one or another mystical country; and this has its dangers, for it can so easily result in explaining one country by means of another, often to the point of explaining it out of existence. We can only talk of the mystical Absolute in terms of one of the many modes of mystical consciousness, whether Christian or Hindu, monistic or theistic, etc. There is nothing to prevent anyone who wishes to do so from advancing the existence of an a priori Absolute as a postulate, or holding to it as a tenet of faith; but there can be no firm philosophical conclusion here, that is to say, the matter can be neither proved nor disproved. (The idea that there may be

one mystical Absolute has fallen into disfavour in recent philosophical evaluations of mysticism, but I have argued elsewhere that the search for Absolutes is inherent in human nature, and that if one Absolute is not accepted, another will take its place.) The question of the existence of such an Absolute is, in any case, largely a theoretical one and of little practical concern to the mystic following his or her chosen path. (It seems to me that it would be rather implausible to argue that all mysticism -- monistic, theistic, nature-mystical, occultist -- comes immediately from the same source. We might feel that Eckhart's experience comes from the same ontological source as Suso's, or as Plotinus', whilst doubting whether Eckhart's experience could be said to come from the same source as Wordsworth's or Rolle's. But one could argue that the experiences found in different categories of mysticism come from different immediate sources which are aspects of one Reality. It seems unlikely that the different immediate sources would be totally unrelated to each other, since as we have seen, categories overlap to a large extent, and there are many parallels between the different types of experience. But these speculations could not be resolved without assuming that we can proceed from experience to source, which is not the case: as I have pointed out, the question of ontological source is distinct from the question of unity or diversity of phenomenological experience.)

The variety and diversity of types of mystical experience contribute to their richness, fullness and colour. There are many profound and thought-inspiring parallels and correspondences that can be drawn between the different traditions, but the mystic must follow one tradition, one Path. This is not to say that insights of great value cannot be obtained from the study of other streams of mysticism; but to study, and



learn from, other mystical traditions is not to advocate syncretism. Our investigation of the writings of the mystics, undertaken without prior theological assumptions as to what constitutes 'true' mysticism, has suggested to us that there are a number of types of mystical experience, which show certain similarities and certain differences from each other. That is, there are a number of different experiences (not just different interpretations of the same experience) each of which is found within each religious tradition, and coloured in each case by the specific interpretation given by the tradition's metaphysical or theological framework.

When all has been taken into account, it seems to me that the most satisfactory approach to mysticism involves remaining sensitive to both the points of divergence, and the similarities, between different traditions and different categories of mysticism. We need to make use of both discrimination and sympathetic understanding, to see both the unity and the diversity. Whereas earlier writers on mysticism have tended to miss the diversity, scholars such as Katz lose sight of the unity (and in focusing attention on theological context, perhaps on occasion ignore the evidence that differences between categories of experience may be greater than differences between traditions. The differences between Eckhart and Rolle, for example, are surely greater than the differences between Eckhart and Plotinus.) Wainwright comments:

There are differences between Tristan's love for Iseult, Romeo's love for Juliet, and Werther's love for Lotte, but it is not a mistake to suppose that these loves exhibit important similarities, and that the concept of romantic love is a useful concept with a basis in reality ..... The mistake is to suppose that the existence of significant dissimilarities is incompatible with the existence of significant similarities, or that two things which are significantly different (for example, whales and kangaroos) cannot be the same type of thing (for example, mammals). (7)

The whole question is much more complex than a simple matter of either

'unity' or 'diversity'. The two are not mutually exclusive; distinction need not imply absolute division. Two examples of mysticism may show important parallels, even identities in some respects, when looked at in one way, on one level or with respect to one aspect of their makeup; looked at from another perspective they will exhibit differences. To draw a parallel between the philosophical investigation of mysticism, and mysticism itself, we could say that to see the similarities only, ignoring the differences, and claiming that all mysticism is the same, is like retreating into a hazy cosmic Oneness and rejecting or ignoring the material world in all its diversity. It is to ignore the richness of variety and difference. On the other hand, to see the differences and points of divergence only, ignoring the points of contact, is to remain tied to the phenomenal world of duality. The satisfactory mystical position, it seems to me, is to see the connections between the two worlds -- the finite and the Infinite -- and to see the unity-in-diversity obtaining between them. Similarly, the satisfactory philosophical position is to see the unity-in-diversity of different forms of mystical experience. In this study I have attempted to find the point where "uniqueness and universality fuse" (8), where oneness and difference become unity-in-diversity.

References

- (1) Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass. London: Purnell, n.d., Pp.146-147.
- (2) Steven T. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism', in Katz (ed.) Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis. London: Sheldon Press, 1978, p.24.
- (3) William J. Wainwright, Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981, p.110. Numinous experience has not been discussed in this study, but, briefly, can be described as the awareness of the Divine as 'Wholly Other', differing from mysticism in that there is a gulf felt between the experiencer and the Divine.
- (4) William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience. London: Collins, 10th edtn., 1981, p.412.
- (5) See, for example, above p.251.
- (6) See above, Pp.291-292, 296-299.
- (7) Wainwright, op. cit., Pp.22, 26-27.
- (8) Edith B. Schnapper, The Inward Odyssey. London: Allen & Unwin, 1965, p.14.

## CONCLUSION

In this study I have commenced with an investigation of the experiences and teachings of a number of mystics from both East and West on a phenomenological level. I have attempted to understand these writings from within the terms of their own philosophy, elucidating the nature of mystical experience and its forms of expression. In the course of the opening chapters I have noted a number of philosophical points which are discussed in more detail in Chapters V and VI. I have classified the mystics examined into four broad types, whilst noting that categories overlap and should not be artificially reified. I have outlined the major characteristics of these four types as follows:

(1) In metaphysical mysticism, the spiritual Absolute is seen as the Source and Ground of All, and is itself beyond all opposites, transcendent, "neither this nor that". The mystic, following the path of 'knowledge' (mystical intuition; noesis, jñāna, or unknowing) must pass beyond all symbols, beyond all limited human conceptions of Divine Reality, to become one with the formless Absolute.

(2) In devotional mysticism, the personal Deity is the object of the mystic's longings, although very often, as we have seen, these mystics speak of formless experiences which take them very close phenomenologically to the more strictly monistic experiences of the metaphysical mystics. The devotional mystics express themselves in romantic, emotional, and often intensely passionate language. They follow a way of 'love' leading to union with the Deity (the 'Mystical Marriage'), rather than an absolute absorption into the formless Source of All, and correspondingly do not often insist upon the transcendence of all particular ideas and

images.

(3) In nature-mysticism the mystic strives for an apprehension of the one life-force permeating all nature, including the human soul; for an awareness of the unity of Divine Life. The mystic attempts to see the transcendent meaning of the Divine order of nature, viewing the finite world and the Infinite spiritual principle as two essential aspects of the universal harmony. The world of nature is transfigured, seen as being permeated by vital power and ethereal beauty. By means of the mode of apprehension which Wordsworth calls 'imagination' (which should not be limited to the modern connotations of this word as used in everyday discourse, for it is a synthetic faculty which corresponds to mystical intuition) (1), the mystic may attain a state of union with nature, that is, with the all-pervading life-force seen as an expression of Divine Reality.

(4) I have suggested that occultist-mysticism should be regarded as a fourth category of mysticism, combining as it does elements from both 'introvertive' mysticism and nature-mysticism, and adding other elements which are not present in any of the other categories of mysticism (astrological, alchemical and magical doctrines, and excursions into quasi-scientific realms). The goal of occultist-mysticism is to penetrate the secrets of both God and Nature (as Boehme puts it), that is, to understand the one Principle at the Heart of All together with the details of its manifestation and unfoldment on all levels of being (in particular, to investigate the correspondences that the lower levels of being bear to the higher). Another important aspect of this goal is the attainment of the coincidentia oppositorum, given such detailed expression in both Boehme and Tantra. A variety of techniques are employed to these ends, including not only more usual mystical methods such as meditation, but also ritual,

quasi-scientific speculation and experimentation, and use of astrological portents.

In the course of my descriptions of the teachings and experiences of the various mystics examined, I have pointed out a large number of parallels between different mystics within the same category, between mystics of East and West, and to a lesser extent between mystics classified under different categories. We have also seen, however, that a number of differences are apparent: most markedly between the different categories of mysticism, but also between different mystics within one category. (For example, as I have shown, Plotinus' teachings and experiences are very similar to those of Śankara in a number of important and revealing ways, but their attitudes to the material world differ quite considerably.) (2) All these considerations have led us to the conclusion that the question of the unity or diversity of mysticism in different times and places may be far more complex than some previous writers have realised.

Following on from my discussions of the experiences and teachings of the mystics, the final two chapters of this study have been devoted to the discussion of a number of philosophical points which arise out of the results of the phenomenological investigations. In Chapter V I have discussed various questions concerning the nature of mystical awareness and its epistemological value. I have argued that mysticism is an experiential reality, equally as real as our other types of experience, which should be understood in terms of its own philosophy. I have attempted to clarify the nature of mystical modes of apprehension such as 'pure consciousness' and formless awareness, and have attempted to show the links

between these forms of experience and the forms of expression used to convey them (symbolism, metaphysics, paradox). I have indicated that these forms of language serve a dual role, in that (a) they are means of expression of mystical truths revealed in experience, and that (b) the former experiences may again become evoked when these forms of language are used as a part of mystical technique. That is, the forms of expression of mysticism 'contract' experiences into a central 'seed' which may again become 're-expanded' and actualised in experience. This two-way interaction between expression and technique relates to the two-way interaction between experience and interpretation, which is further discussed in Chapter VI. In the concluding sections of Chapter V I have examined the role of Universals in mysticism and have argued that most forms of mystical philosophy are essentially Idealistic and that they should be evaluated from within their own Idealistic framework (that is, in terms of their own philosophy and forms of expression) rather than from within the framework of 'particularist' philosophy which recognises a number of 'universes of meaning', all relatively true. This leads us on to the question of methodology in the study of mysticism, discussed in Chapter VI. In the concluding sections of Chapter V I have argued that the notion of the relativity of all 'universes of meaning' cannot be applied to mystical experience when we are seeking to understand any one of the mystical traditions discussed here in terms of its own inherent metaphysical structure (its own philosophical framework). Nevertheless, I have indicated that in the context of a comparison of mystical experience from different times and cultures, it may be useful for heuristic or analytical purposes to see each mystical tradition or each category of mysticism as a 'universe of meaning', rather than assume an a priori

'essence' of mysticism.

In Chapter VI I have discussed the problems inherent in the methodologies of a number of former writers on mysticism, and have indicated the various positions which can be adopted. To extend our previous discussions on the role of Universals in particular mystical traditions, to the role of Universals in philosophical evaluations of mysticism, these positions could conveniently be summarised as falling into four basic types:

(1) Dogmatic Essentialism (e.g., Underhill). Here the writer assumes that all mystical experience can be referred to one transcendent reality, that is that all mysticism, so to speak, shares the same Platonic Form. The writer takes it for granted that there is an ideal essence of mysticism, and therefore asks, "Which of the various examples of mysticism (i.e., particulars) manifests the Form most perfectly?" That is, which mystical tradition is the 'true' one? In the case of most writers of this type with whom we are familiar in the Western world, the answer is usually Christianity; that is, Dogmatic Essentialism is usually in practice Christian Essentialism.

(2) Dogmatic Nonessentialism (e.g., Zaehner). The writer here does not espouse the view that all mystical experience comes from the same source or that it can be referred to one Ideal essence. Dogmatism is shown in the belief that some types of mystical experience are simply delusory or undeveloped; for example, Zaehner, as we have seen, rejects nature-mysticism as delusory and sees monistic mysticism as a less developed type of mysticism than the theistic.

(3) Nondogmatic Nonessentialism (e.g., Katz). This is the 'particularist', Wittgensteinian-influenced approach, which sees each type of mysticism as a 'universe of meaning' and holds that it is important to



evaluate each tradition in terms of its own 'language'. This approach, however, I have argued, in spite of its emphasis on 'family resemblances', often misses the profound and thought-provoking similarities between different types of mysticism in focussing all attention on the cultural and theological context of mysticism, and in holding that experience and interpretation cannot be separated.

(4) Nondogmatic Essentialism (e.g., Schuon; Ramakrishna is also a good example of this position). Here it is held that all mysticism can be referred to one transcendent reality or 'essence'. All mysticism, then, shares the same Eternal Ground or Platonic Form, but, it is held, none of the particulars (types of mysticism or mystical traditions) really manifests the Ideal essence better than any of the others; they are all 'really the same' and the Truth is held to be beyond all particulars. The problem with this approach is that we need to ask what we can say about this wholly transcendent Truth, how we can realise it if not through one of its particular manifestations, how we can form any idea of what it might be in itself.

In my discussions of these various positions I have pointed out the drawbacks and the advantages of each. I have argued that types of mysticism which dogmatically-inclined writers of types (1) or (2) reject (such as nature-mysticism, occultist-mysticism, and sometimes visionary mysticism) should be regarded as valid and valuable and should be assessed from within their own standards of 'rationality', rather than being rejected as delusory or seen as inferior or undeveloped forms of potentially theistic mysticism. Another basic problem found in the writings of dogmatically-inclined authors is that they attempt to analyse

the mystical experience of other cultures from within the framework of their own (i.e., the writer's) theological tradition. For example, Zaehner and Underhill both impose dualisms derived from orthodox Christianity onto the experiences of mystics from traditions which do not recognise such dichotomies. (3) Generally, I have attempted to mediate between positions (3) and (4) above, holding that it is important to remain sensitive both to the close parallels and to the divergences between different examples of mystical experience. I have argued that whereas within each mystical tradition, Universals (such as 'Being Itself', etc.) are known by direct apprehension in mystical insight, we would be justified in regarding with some scepticism the claim to have apprehended 'mysticism itself', that is, an a priori essence of mysticism which is independent of any particular mystical tradition. In the context of a cross-cultural study of mysticism, then, it may be wiser to begin by looking at the parallels and differences between the different mystical traditions and the different types of mystical experience, eventually to arrive at an 'essence' of mysticism derived from particulars.

I have further indicated in Chapter VI that in order to examine the question of similarities and differences between various examples of mysticism, we need to examine the distinction between mystical experience itself as a form of consciousness, and the interpretations placed upon it, the theological and metaphysical claims made. I have discussed this important distinction between experience and interpretation with reference to the writings of Smart, Stace and Katz, and have argued that both Stace and Katz are somewhat one-sided in their views. Stace holds that the various interpretations that accumulate around mystical experiences can easily be stripped away to reveal a 'universal core' of mystical

experience (which for him is monistic); Katz on the other hand argues that experience and interpretation are inseparable. I have argued that there is an intricate two-way interplay between experience and interpretation (which relates to the dual roles of 'contraction' and 'expansion', or 'expression' and 'technique', served by mystical forms of expression). (4) Experience, I have argued, is translated into interpretation, and interpretation in its turn influences experience, giving rise to a complex dual interaction.

In my next section of this final chapter I have indicated that it seems to me that monistic and theistic mysticism are not (as some writers have argued) the same experience differently interpreted, but two different types of experience. In stating this conclusion I have drawn on evidence from the writings of a number of mystics examined in this study who appear to have undergone both monistic and theistic experiences, and who do not regard them as the same type of experience (5), as well as discussing a number of philosophical points which seem to add weight to this conclusion. I have, however, argued that in drawing this conclusion we need not be forced into any decision as to whether one or other type of experience is 'superior' or more 'true', still less that one is delusory or that its significance is misunderstood by the mystic. I have argued that the most satisfactory approach here is one that recognises the validity and worth of both monistic and theistic experiences and that remains sensitive both to their similarities and to their points of divergence, without attempting to 'reduce' either one of them to the other.

I have further advanced the view that nature-mysticism and occultist-mysticism should likewise be regarded as valid and valuable experiences, and that an attempt should be made to understand them in

their own terms, and I have indicated some of the differences between these two types of mysticism and 'introvertive' monistic and theistic mysticism.

As I have said, however, my four categories of mystical experience (metaphysical, devotional, nature-mystical, and occultist-mystical) should not be regarded as rigidly separate. I have given many examples of the way in which categories overlap. (6) The very richness and complexity of mystical experience means that it is impossible to generalise too broadly about any aspect of it, or to sum it up once and for all; indeed, this complexity and richness is one of the reasons for the length of this study.

In the final section of Chapter VI I have attempted to draw together my observations on methodology in the study of mysticism, on experience and interpretation, and on the parallels and differences shown between the various mystics discussed herein. I have indicated that some writers on mysticism have tended to draw loose, general and facile comparisons between different examples of mystical experience, without paying adequate attention to the differences between mystical traditions and types of mysticism, resulting in a situation where each tradition is deprived of its uniqueness and complexity of symbol, tone and qualitative spirit. On the other hand, I have argued, writers such as Katz go to the opposite extreme in focussing all attention on the cultural context of mysticism and the differences attendant upon this, missing the profound parallels between traditions and types of mysticism. I have indicated that the question of the unity or diversity of different examples of mysticism must be considered on three separate levels: the ontological source of the experience, the phenomenological experience itself, and the interpretations placed upon this experience. I have argued that there appear to be

a number of basic but overlapping types of mystical experience, each of which is found within a number of cultures, variously interpreted according to different theological or metaphysical frameworks. I have suggested that the unity of experience, and the close parallels of symbolism which I have pointed out earlier in this study, appear to reflect a common spiritual life of humanity, but that this does not necessarily imply a common ontological source for all mysticism.

I have indicated what, as a result of the phenomenological investigations undertaken in the first part of this study, has emerged as the unity between different forms of mysticism, and what I see as the diversity. I have outlined various common characteristics of mysticism which I have derived by abstraction from the particular examples studied (7); common characteristics of experience, modes of apprehension, technique or method, symbolic expression, attitudes to life, and certain basic or general spiritual truths. I have indicated that in spite of these parallels there remains a diversity of the qualitative spirit peculiar to each form of mysticism, of theological or metaphysical interpretation, and of cultural influence. I have argued that the question of whether there exists one independent ontological reality to which all mystical experience can be referred cannot, from a philosophical point of view, be answered either positively or negatively. We have seen the various problems inherent in the postulation of an a priori Absolute, while to derive an 'essence' by means of abstraction from various particular examples of mysticism (such as I have done in the section under discussion) proves neither that such an 'essence' exists a priori nor that it does not.

At the outset of this study I discussed Plotinus' vision of the realm of

the Divine Mind, where there is distinction, or differentiation, between things, but no rigid dichotomies or opposing dualities; and I suggested that this might prove a fruitful guideline in the cross-cultural study of mysticism. In connection with this I referred to a passage from Inge's writings on Plotinus where it is suggested that "In the spiritual world ..... Identity and Difference are not mutually exclusive." (8) Sharp distinctions and rigid dichotomies, I commented here, belong for Plotinus to the logical faculty, to discursive reason, whereas in the spiritual world of unity-in-diversity there is distinction without division. Likewise, I have concluded this study by reiterating that we need to remain aware of both the points of divergence, and the profound parallels, between different traditions and different types of mystical experience, to see both the unity and the diversity. Mysticism (both as a form of consciousness, and as a subject for cross-cultural comparison) is, as I have said, an immensely rich and complex subject, and I have advanced the view that we cannot reduce the parallels and differences between various examples of mystical experience to either unity or diversity, since mysticism is not a simple matter of 'either/or'. Thus I have concluded this study with an indication that we need to try to mediate between unity and diversity in the study of mysticism, in the same way as the mystic attempts to mediate between the Infinite and the finite in his or her own life.

References

- (1) See above, Pp. 333-334.
- (2) See above, Pp. 175-181.
- (3) See above, Pp. 524-527, 530.
- (4) See above, Pp. 477-478.
- (5) See above, Pp. 558-561.
- (6) See above, Pp. 551-553.
- (7) See above, Pp. 569-573.
- (8) See above, p. 12.

## APPENDIX

Certain sections of this study have been published as articles, while others are submitted for publication at the time of writing. My article 'Unity-in-Diversity', published in the Scottish Journal of Religious Studies, summarises many of the most important points made in Chapter VI of the present study. My article 'St. John of the Cross and Mystical "Unknowing"' is submitted to Religious Studies, and the points made in this article have been included in the present discussion of St. John of the Cross in Chapter I. Two further articles, of which brief summaries are given herein, discuss the symbol of the Inner Castle in St. Teresa of Avila, Jewish Hekhalot and Kabbalistic mysticism, and other contexts; these are 'Saint Teresa of Avila and Hekhalot Mysticism', currently submitted for publication to Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses, and 'Light on the Castle Path', already published in The Hermetic Journal. Of less direct relevance to this study are my article 'Jacob Boehme and Rosicrucianism', currently submitted to The Journal of Rosicrucian Studies, and a number of articles already published on early Celtic religious symbolism, to which I have referred in passing from time to time. Full publication details for all these articles may be found in the Bibliography following.



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