

THE UNITY OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

FIRST of all I must apologise for borrowing the striking title from Professor Gilson without intending to present the same pattern in the matter of mystical experience as he presented in that of the philosophical. In Gilson's deservedly famous work, the author traces the swing of the pendulum in the history of philosophy from the pure rationalism which is willing to admit 'two truths' rather than accept any tutelage from theology to that attractive over-simplification which he calls 'theologism' in which all human thought is made theological. The unity of such experience is to be found in the constant swing of the pendulum along the same path.

It would be possible to show some similar swing in the realm of mysticism from the moralism which leaves no room for passivity with God to the excessive passivity of quietism. We might begin with St Peter and St Paul or St Ambrose and St Augustine, where the seeds of such divergence might be unearthed. But such is not the plan of this paper; for the experience to be considered is not simply European, nor yet even exclusively Christian. And the unity which we hope to disclose is not the uniform motion of the pendulum, but the union of synthesis in the central point of reality.

There can be little doubt that there are men not Christian nor European whose experiences in the realms of religion, to say the least, bear a close resemblance to the experiences described by the greatest of Christian mystics. Writers—and many of them are not writers only for they have set out to taste the experience as well—such as Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, or even in another direction Ananda Coomaraswamy, have made this abundantly clear in the last twenty years. Whatever we may think of the 'philosophy' of the *Perennial Philosophy*, for which Aldous Huxley might have claimed Gilson's own title, the quotations are sufficient to disclose the problem, for they are taken from every sort of religious writer and they are selected to show a single pattern. Indeed the advertisement on the dust-jacket of this book all but coins the phrase we have chosen as title: 'Beneath the

revelations of the great world religions, the teaching of the wise and holy of all faiths and the mystical experiences of every race and age, there lies a basic unity of belief.'

Moreover there are many today who have inherited the Christian tradition and yet have discarded any specific creed on the ground of formalism, and who claim to share in the same basic unity of experience. We may instance Warner Allen's experience received during a performance of the Seventh Symphony and described in *The Timeless Moment*. Mr Allen penetrated into 'the heart of the Self' and there received an experience of union with the divine, union with the whole of Reality which he compares to the experiences of Pascal and St Teresa, but which can scarcely be called Christian in character.

In this paper therefore we wish to take up the challenge of modern experience regarding the common pattern of higher religions (or should we say spiritual religions?) to seek for an explanation of the phenomena, to hope for a common point of union between such religions and so incidentally to help towards providing a criterion by which we might be able to judge the genuine from the simulated experience. But first of all we must clarify our terms. 'Mystical' as a precise and accurate term has long been attacked for its failure. It still continues however to be used by a great variety of people for a great variety of things; and it is sometimes more convenient to use a familiar term, and then to attempt to invest it with a direct and clear meaning, rather than to invent a new one. That which is mystical is that which is beyond attainment by the intellectual powers of man, but beyond in the sense of above rather than beneath, an object of those powers which is too great for their active capacities, but which is granted them as a gift by the higher divine power. All divine teaching which is beyond reason is thus mysterious and therefore mystical, dealing with divine mysteries which can only be known through the passive acceptance of an act of faith. For this reason in the realms of practical teaching for leading the good life the mystical is distinguished from the ascetical. The self-discipline of a Sufi or a Father of the Desert lies within the reach of the will-power and mental energy of that Sufi or Desert Father. The detailed exercises of Yoga, the fasting and flagellation of the host of Christian saints are in themselves the natural activities of determined and powerful characters. They are in themselves neither mysterious nor mystical.

They may be supernatural in their origin as proceeding from virtues infused into the human faculties by special divine power, but even so the executive power lies within the realms of normal human living. Catharsis is reasonable, at least in so far as it is practised by man for his own perfection, though there is of course a divine catharsis imposed and carried through by God which is therefore mystical and incomprehensible. The crucifixion is mystical rather than ascetical; it is incomprehensible to reason. But the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises are principally ascetical, providing like all true asceticism a propædeutic to a mystical life.

Experience is a far more difficult term to tie down with the threads of definition or description. For many people it stands in general for consciousness or awareness—the subjective reaction to some objective reality which is perceived in some way by the subject. But the same people speak of a ‘conscious experience’, thereby, in fact, distinguishing two conceptions. For the experience is not conscious; it is the subject that is conscious of an experience, which is therefore in itself some objective reality, objective at least in so far as it stands outside the self. More than this, however, it is generally taken to mean awareness in which the whole man is engaged, not simply an intellectual awareness of some object of thought, but an awareness which is involved in sensation as well as causing some (however slight) psychological reaction. Aquinas, who is a sure guide where the ‘common-sense view’ is concerned, speaks of experience as being properly a matter of sensation, the action of an object on the senses and only derivatively to be applied to the spiritual world where the corporeal and sensible do not enter; so that angels and devils can only be said to have experience in a secondary or derived sense of the term (I, 55, 8). This first idea of experience does not of course exclude the awareness of the spiritual faculties where man is concerned, for human experience is of a sort where the object is presented to a man with body and soul whose faculties are both spiritual and sensible. Thus a human experience as opposed to that of an animal is one in which the intellectual part of man combines with his corporeal faculties to perceive the object presented.

It might seem, then, that first of all we have not to consider a purely spiritual reality in which the soul alone is involved leaving the lower faculties of man unaffected, but rather with the complete ‘body-soul’ reaction to a mystical reality. For we are

considering the approach of the divine to man. But we must avoid the idea that mystical experience has anything to do with emotional feelings except in so far as the spiritual reaction of mind and will have some subsequent effect on the emotions. Thus for example the senses may be completely overwhelmed by what the mind and will are aware of, the object being too closely present to the soul itself and remote from the sphere of sensation to allow the senses to function. In this way the senses are suspended and the mystic suffers that type of mystical experience known as ecstasy. But ecstasy is an extraordinary and abnormal experience, and in the more perfect and therefore more normal experience of the mystic the senses may derive some sense of peace and tranquillity, some sweetness or satisfaction from what is happening to the soul itself, as the intellectual faculties shed the radiance derived from the divine object over the whole man, constituted as he is of these two elements.

But mystical experience cannot be expected until the emotions have been mastered, at least to some extent, and the centre or essence of the experience lies not in any sense-object, but in something which is mystical or mysterious because it is not only beyond all sense-knowledge but beyond even the light of human reason. Thus St John of the Cross describes one of the highest of these experiences:

‘This feast of the Holy Spirit takes place in the substance of the soul, where neither the devil nor the world nor sense can enter; and therefore the more interior it is, the more it is secure, substantial and delectable; for the more interior it is, the purer it is. . . . Thus the delight and rejoicing of the soul and the spirit is the greater herein because it is God that works all this and the soul of its own power does naught therein; for the soul can do naught of itself, save through the bodily senses, and by their help, from which, in this case, the soul is very free and very far removed, its only business being the reception of God, who alone can work in the depth of the soul, without the aid of the senses, and can move the soul therein’. (*Living Flame*, I, 9. Peers iii, 122). The same sort of experience though seen in reverse may perhaps lie behind realisation of the Two Loves described by the Arab woman, the Sufi Saint Rabi’a:—

I have loved Thee with two loves, a selfish love and a love that
is worthy

As for the love that is selfish, I occupy therein with remembrance of Thee to the exclusion of all others,

As for that which is worthy of Thee, therein thou raisest the veil that I may see Thee.

Yet there is no praise to me in this or that.

But the praise is to Thee whether in this or that. (Quoted by Christopher Dawson, *Enquiries*, p. 166).

The great difficulty in all this lies in the fact that the language has to be that of physical sensations of beauty or of love, while the contact with the object is in itself far removed from the senses; and at the same time the senses are sometimes granted a share in the experience as the joy floods the whole person. Walter Hilton continually uses the word 'feeling' where he means experience; for the soul is first reformed in faith in which there is no immediate *realisation* or awareness of union with God, whereas the reformation in faith and feeling implies a realisation which is that of experience. He does not, however, understand by the word 'feeling' a sensible, emotional reaction to sense phenomena.

It should be clear from all this that mystical experience is principally and essentially a matter of an awareness of a divine object, or better an awareness of the presence of God himself in a manner unperceived by those who approach God by reason or by an undeveloped faith. It is a question of a knowledge which is not merely the exercise of the human faculty of the intellect or a fact of ordinary human perception, but is a new type of knowledge which is an immediate contact with the inexplicable divinity; sensation, feeling, emotion, psychological reaction—all these are essentially irrelevant though often present. Maritain has set this down in an acceptable and clarified manner: "The phrase "mystical experience" I take . . . not in the more or less vague sense (applicable to all kinds of facts more or less mysterious or preternatural or even to simple religiosity) but in the sense of an experimental knowledge of the depths of God, or of the suffering of divine things, leading the soul, by a series of states and transformations to the point of realising in the depths of Self the touch of the deity'. (*Les Degrés du Savoir*, p. 490). This description stands for what is central and essential in the idea of mystical experience and all the other aspects of the question, such as ecstasies, visions, dreams and the like which are commonly regarded as coming under this general heading will be seen to fit into this interpretation. Finally

it must be constantly borne in mind that this experimental knowledge is derived from the contact of love, that sort of instinctive and direct understanding that exists between those who love each other with the love of friendship. The experience is the immediate fruit of the loving union of the soul with God. We find this well described by Plotinus who first speaks of 'spiritual intuition' in the apprehension of which the soul has not the power to reason, and then goes on to say: 'We must not be surprised that that which excites the keenest of longings is without any form, even spiritual form, since the soul itself, when inflamed with love for it, puts off all the form it had, even that which belongs to the spiritual world The Spirit has two powers. By one of them it has a spiritual perception of what is within itself, the other is the receptive intuition by which it perceives what is above itself. The former is the vision of the thinking Spirit, the latter is the Spirit in love. (5, 3, 17: 6, 7, 34; 6, 9, 7. Quoted by Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus* ii, 134-6).

Having thus at length arrived at a general idea of what we are talking about, it is time to consider more analytically the actual experience. Perhaps it will not, however, be out of place to continue the discussion on *a priori* grounds so that we may have a general scheme into which the facts may be placed. It is necessary to clear this tangled tract of land called mysticism and to plough it before the seed of experimental facts can be accepted with any hope of a constructive fertility. It is clear that if we accept the above description of mystical experience there is a vast field of religious or even 'philosophical' knowledge which remains outside the realms of true mysticism and yet bears the mark of direct and intuitive awareness. It is possible for a man to induce certain states of mind by various spiritual exercises, which at least in the abstract need be no more than natural phenomena, the results rather of human action than of divine action, working on the passive human intelligence. The innumerable methods of the ascent of mount Carmel, the intricate Yoga practices, the austere asceticism of the Sufi, all such self-denial and withdrawal from transient goods and seeking after the higher permanent things of the spirit could lead to a mastery of the flesh and its distracting interests so as to enable the mind to work with far greater intellectual directness. This indeed can be brought about even within certain limited fields, so that an artist who disciplines himself in

his own field can acquire not only a skill by which he makes things well, but even an inspiration by which he sees the beauty of line or of sound in an instantaneous and intuitive manner, and yet all the time his general moral behaviour may not fit in at all with the standards set by human nature itself. And this is still truer when a man disciplines himself not only as an artist but as a man. It is possible for him to induce a state of sublimation. Thus we may take Professor Jung's description of the *Sutra* of the Meditation on *Amitayus*. Having quoted from the sixteen meditations of this Yoga he begins to comment:

'The exercise begins with the concentration on the setting sun. In southern latitudes the intensity of the radiation of the setting sun is so strong that a few moments of gazing at it suffice to create an intense after-impression. . . . As is well-known there is one method of hypnosis which consists in fixating a shining object. . . . On the other hand (*this* fixation) should not have a soporific effect, inasmuch as a "meditation" of the sun must accompany the fixation. This meditation consists in a reflective thinking, a "making clear", in fact in a *realisation* of the sun, its form, its characteristics, its meanings.' ('On the Psychology of Eastern Meditation' in *Art and Thought*, p. 173). And so Professor Jung continues to expound this method of intensifying meditation, 'which culminates in *Samadhi*, the highest ecstasy and enlightenment'. Now according to our definition of mystical experience it is not a thing to be obtained by human exercises however intense and however concentrated upon the one divine object, but it is a suffering, an acceptance of a divine object, the acceptance of a gift which hangs far beyond the human reach and towards which a man must be lifted by divine power before it can be his. And this principle must be applied to all ascetic practice.

Nevertheless it is possible that a man having induced by his own activity a receptive state may be given a direct and experimental knowledge of the divine object, for asceticism in itself is designed to prepare the way for the possibility of a divine activity. But here again, looking at the experience in the rarified atmosphere of abstraction it is possible that a man should have a natural experience of some aspect of God in so far as the object of which he becomes immediately aware is a *mysterium naturale*. God as the Creator, or as the author of all Beauty or the source of all Goodness could present himself to the intellectual faculties of man in

such a way that he would suffer divine things without being aware of the essence of divine things. It would be possible to interpret the philosophic ecstasy of Socrates as that of a 'natural mystic', and history is full of figures whom we might be tempted to call 'mystics of nature'. By 'natural mystic', therefore, I do not mean one who, by temperament and psychological formation, is disposed in himself to be passive and receptive and so more naturally apt to receive these experiences. This indeed must be taken into account, for it is an evident and undisputed fact. But by 'natural mystic' in this context I mean one who receives some immediate and experimental 'illumination' from a source which is still within the created sphere of reality.

'Sometimes', writes Père de Grandmaison, 'during the contemplation of a work of art, or while listening to a melody, the effort to understand relaxes, and the soul simply delights itself in the beauty which it divines. . . . or merely a memory, a word, a line of Dante or Racine shooting up from the obscure depths of our soul, seizes hold of us, "recollects" and penetrates us. After this experience we know no more than we did, but we have the impression of understanding a little something that before we hardly knew, of tasting a fruit at the rind of which we have scarcely nibbled'. (Quoted by Abbé Bremond, in *Prayer and Poetry*, pp. 89-90).

In contradistinction to all such natural experiences there is the supernatural cause which comes with grace, the soul having been raised to a higher level altogether in which alone the heights of true and integral mysticism are to be found. God in himself, in his intimate life, touches the soul; and the soul, which can only be aware of such a contact in its intellective faculties which are the seat of awareness, is given a new and experimental knowledge of the divine, is gathered into a unity where God is known not by reason and discussion nor yet by vision but by this mysterious touch of his presence. Such a soul cannot achieve this state, he cannot stretch forth his faculties and seize God in this way. God seizes the soul which knows it is captive and recognises the divine passio—*patiens divina*. There is, of course, a wide realm of supernatural activity in which the man who has received the new life is not in any specifically mystical state or receiving any mystical experiences. All his ordinary moral life is changed by grace so that his virtues are not merely acquired by the exercise of his own

power but are infused by the direct action of God. His whole ascetic life will therefore be gracious, with the exception of the sins which are certain to appear from time to time—but this is not necessarily mystical.

‘Therefore’, says Hilton, ‘it is speedful that we know the gifts that are given us of God, that we may work in them, for by these we shall be saved: as some by bodily works and by deeds of mercy, some by great bodily penance, some by sorrow and weeping for their sins all their lifetime, some by preaching and teaching, some by divers graces and gifts of devotion shall be saved and come to bliss.’ (*Scale* 1, 41).

These various activities are divine gifts, coming down from heaven; they are gracious, but they do not bring a new experimental knowledge of the intimate being of God. It is only when all the barriers are broken down and the soul is left naked and exposed to the direct activity of God that the truly supernatural mystical experience can take place. The gracious ascetic practices are ruled by the choice and determination of man, for God’s gifts of virtue are habits which a man can exercise at will. But the gracious and direct acceptance of the divine presence depends entirely upon the immediate choice and determination of God. Perhaps this is suggested by this Persian gem:

‘The lover knocks at the door of the Beloved, and a voice replies from within: “Who is there”? “It is I”, he said; and the voice replied: “There is no room for thee and me in this house”. And the door remained shut. Then the lover returned to the desert, and fasted and prayed in solitude. After a year he came back, and knocked once more at the door. Once more the voice asked: “Who is there”? He replied: “It is thyself”. And the door opened to him.’ (Quoted by Bremond, *Prayer and Poetry*, p. 141).

When the door does open and the soul is presented to the Infinite Presence, then all the rest of man is supernaturalised from the centre outward. The *phenomena* of the experience, the redolence of the sweet Presence pouring out from the inner cell of the divine nuptials and pervading the entire man, all this is natural in itself, but supernatural as the schoolmen say *quoad modum*. The individual’s psyche which is the centre of so many of his more personal characteristics is now tinged with the divine, revealed perhaps in dreams or visions of which we read so frequently in the prophets of the Bible and the greatest spiritual writers. But it is

also possible that the phenomena and the movements of the psyche and the sensitive soul are natural in origin as well as in essence. Thus we find many supposed miracles at Lourdes being subjected to the test as to whether they are naturally explicable since they are all natural in essence. A miracle of healing is supernatural only *quoad modum*. Similarly all the accessories of mysticism are at best supernatural *quoad modum*.

How then can we discover whether a mystic is genuine and whether by genuine we should mean supernatural or whether a genuine mystical experience can also be merely natural—a new form of natural knowledge? This is the crux of the whole matter and without an answer to this it is not much use considering the facts of similarity of Christian mystical experience, be it Protestant or Catholic, with the mysticism of Sufi or Brahma.

We have been speaking mostly in the abstract in which the possibility of a natural mysticism can be maintained with at least a certain show of reason. But in the concrete the situation alters entirely. Abbé Bremond has already suggested this and his words are worth quoting at some length.

‘Strictly speaking, in the historic order in which we are placed, the order of redemption, there is no “natural mysticism”. All men have the same supernatural end, the beatific vision. A pagan of the days before Christ, or of our own, if saved—and he can be saved—has the same essential recompense as the canonised saints. From which it follows that all the help God gives us has for its supreme end to lead us to the beatific vision. On the other hand, how can we fail to recognise in authentic inspirations so many helps foreseen and willed by God from all eternity, so many “means of salvation”—in fact so many “graces”? We know, moreover, that Christ having died for all, the grace of conversion is denied to no one.’ (*Prayer and Poetry*, pp. 104-5, n. 3).

The Church commonly teaches that God does not deny his grace to those who do what good they can, who do what in them lies. So that it is a concrete impossibility for a man on this earth to be purely *naturally* good. He will either be a sinner turned away from God, immersed in nature in a way, but corrupting the good things of nature in his aversion from the Creator of nature—good only in bits, moral as it were by accident. Or he will be in a state of grace, having sought to do good and having thus been made lovable by the divine act which descends upon him unsolicited and

entirely unmerited to give him the gift of divine life and supernatural activity. There is a strange article in the *Summa* of St Thomas in which he shows that the first human act of a non-baptised child reaching the age of reason is either a choice of the good in which he is justified, i.e. to say God co-operates in bestowing grace on the child, or the action is a mortal sin, a complete *aversio a Deo* flowing from the state of original sin.

‘When the child begins to have the use of his reason’, St Thomas says, ‘he is no longer altogether excused from venial and mortal sin. But first of all what comes to one to think about is to deliberate concerning himself; and if he sets himself in order towards his proper end, through grace there follows the remission of original sin.’ (I-II, 89, 6).

Although this passage offers psychological difficulties regarding the initial rational act, the first truly intellectual awareness of the child, in its positive doctrine it quite clearly supports the teaching that God gives his grace to anyone who does the good he can.

From the very first moment of reason, therefore, every rational being has a chance of grace and salvation. If he misses his opportunity he falls into sin, having turned away from God. In the latter case there is evidently no opportunity for any true mystical experience, however many incidentally good actions that man may perform. But as regards the man who had been justified by this first infusion of sanctifying grace there is no reason why he should not co-operate with the gift and thus growing in grace and wisdom attain to gracious heights of prayer and union. By grace he has been put into direct touch with the intimate life of God—*quia gratia secundum sui rationem conjungit hominem summo bono, quod est Deus* (I-II, 112, 4)—he has received the *semen gloriae*. Moreover if the man thus justified adopts an ascetical way of life such as we read of in the lives of the Arabian mystics or practices himself in the spiritual exercises of the Yogi, there are many reasons why he should be able to reach the threshold of divine illumination and be ready for that divine touch which is essentially supernatural. His ascetic practices themselves will have been gracious, that is to say non-attachment will have been no empty human vacuum but the result of divine virtue—and he will be freed from the fleshly entanglements of the passions and emotions which raise a heavy barrier against divine action. The man who has mastered himself with the assistance of divine grace will be

ready for God to master him in the closest union, the perfection of divine grace.

For the Christian the conclusion to this line of reasoning is obvious and unavoidable, for Christ the Incarnate Word of God is the redeemer of all mankind and God never deals with any individual soul except through Christ. The New Testament dispensation clearly acknowledges the source of all the graces and of the entire organisation of men in respect to God as in the Incarnate Word. He is the one and only mediator, and the Father bestows grace on an individual man because the nature of man has been ennobled by the hypostatic union. And if grace comes to man through Christ, all gracious prayers and activities return to God through Christ. The soul is drawn into the embrace of God *per Christum Dominum nostrum*. This is clearly the Christian teaching:

‘Therefore as by the offence of one, unto all men to condemnation: so also by the justice of one, unto all men to justification of life.’ (*Romans*, 5, 18). ‘This is the stone which was rejected by you the builders: which is become the head of the corner: Neither is there salvation in any other. For there is no other name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved.’ (*Acts* 4, 11-12).

And if this is so, then the unity of which we speak, the unity of mystical experience, is unity in Christ, a unique Christian mysticism. For the source of grace in the perfection of which the mystic receives the divine touch is one and unique, achieved by the redemption in the incarnate Word of God. The origin is one. But also the end is one, for each and every mystic in so far as he is living in grace is directed towards the beatific vision, which is the fulfilment of these moments of union while still on earth. Yet he is approaching that goal in Christ—*per ipsum, cum ipso, et in ipso*.

One source *per Christum*—and one end—*per Christum*—that makes a perfect pattern and reveals a perfect unity. Perhaps it is a little unfair to choose as an example to support this claim the final scene in the life of great mystic al-Hallaj; for al-Hallaj must at least unconsciously have been indebted to the New Testament for a great deal of experience. But at least he was not a baptised Christian or a member of a Christian Church. Yet we find him at the moment before he is actually crucified in Bagdad (A.D.922) uttering this beautiful prayer:

‘O Lord, I beseech thee to make me thankful for the grace that thou hast bestowed upon me in concealing from the eyes of other

men what thou hast revealed to me of the splendours of thy radiant countenance which is without a form, and in making it lawful for me to behold the mysteries of thy inmost conscience which thou hast made unlawful to other men. And these thy servants who are gathered to slay me, in zeal for thy religion and in desire to win thy favour, pardon them and have mercy upon them; for verily if thou hadst revealed to them that which thou hast revealed to me, they would not have done what they had done; and if thou hadst hidden from me that which thou hadst hidden from them I should not have suffered this tribulation. Glory unto thee in whatsoever thou doest, and glory unto thee in whatsoever thou willest.' (Quoted by Dawson. *Enquiries* p. 162-3). The common criticism that non-Christian mysticism does not take into account the Cross of Christ could not be levelled against al-Hallaj. The authentic mark of the cross seems to mark his experiences, not merely in the factual identity of death by crucifixion but also in the spirit of sacrificial abandonment to the divine will of which the crucifixion was the fulfilment.

From the Christian point of view, therefore, the unity discernable in the writings of the greatest lights of the world religions is not one which lies *behind* the various religions; the same thing to be reached either by way of Christ or by way of Buddha or in the Sufi interpretation of the Prophet. That is where we must differ vigorously from Heard's *Eternal Gospel* or Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*. These modern mystics would challenge the uniqueness of the Christian way. But if they would look at the facts objectively and think of mystical experience less in terms of what happens to the subject of the experience and more in terms of the unique object of that experience they might understand the claims of Christ, the Way, the Truth, the Life. Granted that Christ taught a true religion, then it must be the only religion, and the experiences if genuine in any other religion must come from him the revealer of the One God. The Christian is not dismayed at finding so much similarity among the other great world-religions. That similarity is what he would expect, for God is unique and his will is changeless. In this changeless will he has fashioned the whole universe round the Incarnation and the Redemption; the whole of nature is groaning and travailing, waiting for the redemption and that expectancy and instinctive understanding of the Way of God is inevitable in human nature fashioned by the Father in

terms of the Incarnate Son. The Christian claims that the other religions can only show in fragmentary and uncertain fashion the grains of Truth they have received by devious means from the Word, who is made flesh. And an objective comparison of the various mystical writings and experiences outside Christianity seems to suggest that the true heights of divine love and union are but fitfully and dimly experienced. This seems to be borne out by Christopher Dawson in his study on *Islamic Mysticism (Enquiries, pp. 159-190)*; and as a rule the western reader needs to use very dexterously and vigorously the spiritual interpretation to be able to discover any true mysticism in the most elevated writings of the other great world religions. The Catholic of course would go further and say that the Catholic Church as the Mystical Body of Christ from whom all mystical graces emanate and in whom the Catholic is fully—externally and internally—incorporated, reveals the most unmistakable marks of genuine mysticism. The sustained and integrated 'mystical systems', if we may so term them, of St John of the Cross or Walter Hilton do not seem to exist in other religions and if we compare the great variety of texts cited by Huxley in *Perennial Philosophy* we are struck by the predominance and the clarity of the Catholic writers.

I would not in any way belittle the great Protestant and non-Christian writers and their contribution to spiritual literature, I am not implying that their experience of union with the divine is a false experience. But I would say that *if* their experiences are genuine then they derive from the grace of Christ obtained for mankind on the Cross and they lead the mystic to the one and only heaven of the beatific vision, enveloped by the Church triumphant, the Mystical Body of Christ, whole and unspotted, without wrinkle or blemish. The matter is one of hypothesis—if they are genuine. How to discover whether this condition is realised or no is difficult, for as we have seen all the phenomena attached to an experience of this sort are of themselves natural. The facts can be tested by the psychologist or the prophet, but these facts are only the outpourings into the rest of a man's being of the loving contact with God in the apex of his soul which all mystics admit is of itself indescribable. It is gracious, it is beyond words, it is the infinite Godhead himself embracing the soul. Criteria for judging of the genuineness of an experience are therefore difficult to come by. It requires a special revelation from

God to convince any man that he is certainly in a state of grace. For St Thomas the mystical experience itself is not sufficient to give the mystic himself a certain knowledge of his gracious state. The statement is interesting in particular to the present subject:

'Things are known conjecturally by signs; and thus anyone may know he has grace when he is conscious of delighting in God, and of despising worldly things, and inasmuch as a man is not conscious of any mortal sin . . . whoever receives (the hidden manna) knows by experiencing a certain sweetness, which he who does not receive it does not experience' ? (I-II, 112, 5).

He cannot know with surety without God's telling him. His feelings may indicate that he loves God supernaturally, but his feelings are no sure guide in the matters of the spirit. The nearest we can reach to a standard of judgment in this matter, is that of the effects on the man's life of the experiences which he claims. If he shows in his behaviour a very high, a supernatural and possibly heroic form of love for God and for other men, then we are led to suppose that the great union of love of his soul with God is bearing fruit in loving actions. We have seen this manifestly portrayed in the life and death of al-Hallaj. The same mark is to be found a little less clearly in the life of Plotinus, while the whole organisation of the Buddhist eight-fold path to Nirvana suggests that when carried out fully, it must lead to an heroic form of love, though Nirvana itself is by definition beyond experience and really outside the subject of this paper.

But though we cannot with certainty judge the graces or their absence in the soul of anyone, be he Catholic, Protestant or Mohammedan, we can, to a certain extent, (*conjecturaliter* is St Thomas's word) discern this gift through the fruits of their outward action, as Ruysbroek says:—

'Pure love frees a man from himself and from his acts. If we would know this in ourselves, we must yield to the divine, the innermost sanctuary of ourselves . . . Hence comes the impulse and urgency towards active righteousness and virtue, for "love cannot be idle". The spirit of God, moving within the power of man, urges them outward in just and wise activity.' (*Flowers of a Mystic Garden*. Quoted by Inge, *Plotinus* ii, 182).

Such criteria should help considerably in judging of the origin of the experiences of any mystic. But it is not the purpose of this paper to try to apply the criteria to any individual mystic. I

would merely strengthen that *a posteriori* approach by insisting on the *a priori* principles which I have already stated—particularly that of the possibility of divine, sanctifying grace for every single individual from the age of reason onwards. And before concluding it will be as well to recall the Christian teaching that every man is made in the image of the Trinity, so that the foundations of true mysticism are laid from the first moment of his creation. Moreover, the well-worn tag that the soul is *naturally* Christian (*anima naturaliter Christiana*) contains a metaphysical truth if we relate the individual soul actually in existence with the concrete will of God, changeless and all love, which has fashioned and is fashioning the soul in the image of his incarnate Word, in whom all things are made. The soul, naturally Christian, begins to choose the natural good it perceives and God rejoins by imparting Christian grace which justifies the soul and establishes the actual, supernatural image of Christ—and this even if the soul knows not Christ and perhaps by a paradox attacks the outward showing of Christ.

It will not be unfair to apply some of the final words of Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* to this universality of Christian mysticism. He had in mind only those who were externally members of the Church. But on the principles we have tried to establish these words may apply to all who have grace.

'He that hath this grace in prayer asketh not whereupon he shall set the point of his thought. For the soul is turned into the eyes and sharply beholdeth the face of Jesus, and is made sure that it is Jesus that it feeleth and seeth. I mean not Jesus as he is in himself in fulness of his blessed Godhead; but I mean Jesus as he will show him to a clean soul holden in body, after the cleanness that it hath.' (*Scale* ii, 42, p. 375).

And: 'For each and every gracious knowing of soothfastness felt with inly savour and ghostly delight, is a privy whisper of Jesus to the ear of a clean soul.' (*id. id.* 46, p. 397).

This is the genuine illumination flowing from the gift of divine love, stripped of all its accessories, independent of the senses, though often graciously condescending to shed its lustre on them as well, the illumination of the Word inhabiting the soul, in whom it is to be sought the only secure unity of mystical experience.