

MYSTICISM AND SOCIETY *

I

If we wish to discuss mysticism and society in their mutual relationship there is one astonishing fact which should be pointed out from the outset. In the infinite welter of literature on mysticism which, especially during the last two generations, has taken on quite extraordinary proportions, the problem of mysticism and society has received but scanty attention. The way of the mystic in trying to attain his goal of union or communion with God or however we may define his goal, the peculiar spiritual universe in which he lives, the intricacies of mystical theology, which has the formulation of mystical experience in a conceptual framework and the establishment of an acceptable connection between these experiences and traditional forms of theology—all these have been discussed in full detail. Even the history of such developments in different systems and religions has always aroused the interest of the historian. The social context of mysticism and its

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implications, however, have, as far as I am aware, only a marginal place in these discussions. On the contrary, we easily discern a tendency to take the phenomena of religious mysticism out of their social context, to isolate them and to stress their alleged basic difference from historical and social phenomena. In the literature on Christian mysticism there is indeed one notable exception, but it seems rather strange that it is rarely referred to in relevant discussions of the specialists. The exception I have in mind is the long chapter "Die Mystik und der Spiritualismus" in Ernst Troeltsch's comprehensive work *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (1912). Troeltsch, of course, was not motivated by an interest in mysticism as such, but wanted to bring out the social meaning of the teachings of the different Christian groups. Therefore, as a sociologist of Christianity, he was led to discuss mysticism, a discussion which to my mind is an extremely interesting and fruitful one, whatever we may think of several of his rather controversial distinctions. In passing, it may be said that long before the modern discussions of mysticism, much space and serious endeavor were devoted to the social connections and implications of Christian mysticism in Gottfried Arnold's revolutionary *Kirchen und Ketzer-Historie* which, although it appeared about 270 years ago, has lost neither its attraction nor its interest and value to this very day.

Outside the sphere of Christianity, I know of no effort comparable to these two, which certainly is a great pity given the tremendous social importance of mysticism in all other higher forms of organized religions. In introducing a general discussion of this character I cannot, of course, claim to speak with competence outside the phenomena of mysticism within the framework of Judaism to which I have devoted my lifework. But however important we may deem the differences between the forms mysticism has taken in various religions, we still should be able to formulate at least questions applicable to all of them.

There is, of course, small wonder that the situation is as I have tried to describe it. After all, however one defines mysticism, there is no denying that it takes its devotee out of traditional social contexts as far as his own original mystic impulse is concerned. In conformance with Troeltsch's usage of the term, I shall use "mysticism" here as meaning the striving for immediacy, inward-

ness and presence of religious experience, as an awareness of the living experience of the Divine, vouchsafed to individuals living in institutionalized and traditional forms of religion. I agree with those who see in mysticism a secondary state of religious development which evolves in visible tension to the traditional forms of religion, in ritual as well as in theology. Traditional religion and society are bound together by outward signs of institutional splendor, or, to quote an older author, "by the pomp of its worship, the heroism of its missionaries, the virtues of its preachers and elegance of its literary education." All these are essentially lacking in the relations of mysticism to society—if they appear, they do so only accidentally. The mystic is no longer satisfied with the kind of experience his own tradition brings home to him through its commandments and institutions. He sets out for a quest that is all his own. He seeks an illumination, a knowledge and, moreover, an experience that to him has all the signs of immediacy, of overwhelming certitude and evidence. He therefore starts as an individualist, on his own, unless accompanied by the advice of some initiate or guide who has trodden such lonely paths before him and may be able to enlighten him on its vicissitudes and dangers. There is a sense of adventure in all this which takes the mystic out of the company of ordinary men, sets him apart and, in very many cases, makes him an object of scorn and ridicule. The mystic life on which he starts is a life of inwardness to which, by its very nature, there is no end; rather there is an infinite progress from experience to ever-deeper experience. All this creates a distance between him and society because the center of his interest moves in an opposite direction; at the height of what is called the mystical experience, ecstasy, contemplation of God, communion with God or even union with Him, he as it were loses all contact with the society of men. It is this aspect of mysticism which is so intensely stressed in the theoretical literature of the mystics and, in its wake, in the contemporary discussions of mysticism where psychology rules supreme. Even after returning from those pinnacles of vision and experience, he maintains, as we are told by many sources, an essential distance from his social surroundings; his activities in the visible world of history and society are of only secondary importance to him. There is, moreover, the danger or, I should

rather say, the intrinsic necessity of a change of character on the mystic's return into the world of social relations. The intimacy, the singularity and the personal character of his experience may be lost in this new, or rather old, context; they may lose their original direction and the meaning they had for the mystic, and they may undergo a process of alienation.

The question therefore arises: can the mystical impulse still retain its vigor and meaning once it is directed towards the activity of the mystic within his group? In other words: if it is true that mysticism in its original appearance should be seen as a phenomenon of a strictly personal and individualistic nature, may it not be equally true that this phenomenon at the same time involves a dialectic of its own which the critical observer will quickly discover and which may or may not be separated from the phenomena of mysticism themselves? The theologian may deny such dialectic. To him, the way to God and to what the Christian mystics call the "unitive life" is all that counts; it is the phenomenon itself which has meaning for the understanding of mysticism, and if there is a social sequence to this, it is in the nature of an anticlimax. It constitutes a kind of weakness due to human nature, even though a lovable one, and to speak of it does not add to our understanding of the core of mysticism. In scholarly discussions this point is often reinforced by the statement that, since mystical experience is based on the annihilation of the dichotomy of object and subject, the return into the historical and social sphere which is based on this polarity and duality cannot be considered an essential part of the mystic's way. It is, at its best, an aftermath of the real thing, not part of it. But, we may ask, is this undialectical view a true picture of what we find? Is it not wrong to isolate what is happening in the recesses of the human soul from the totality of the mystical experience which involves the whole human being? Are not the two phases of ascent and descent through which the mystic passes but two aspects of *one* great human experience which should not be torn asunder? It seems to me that this is the first question we have to face, and I shall try to give my reasons for siding with those who take this dialectical view. It is true that the student of mysticism is confronted by not a few paradoxes when he tries to formulate its phenomena in the language of ordinary conceptions, a fact well

known to everybody who has ever studied this field. If, then, it is a paradox to speak of the social impact and function of a quasi anti-social phenomenon, at least it will stand revealed to us as a creative paradox, and this is what counts for our discussion.

II

A great master of sociology like Max Weber is credited with the saying: "Saintliness or holiness have no place in the life of the collective." Statements like this are often repeated. But are they true? The statements of the mystics, for the most part, do not bear them out, and I shall return to this point at a later state. It seems *a priori* improbable that the fullness and richness of a human personality which has come to it through mystical experience, should peter out in the infinite recesses of a so-called pure inwardness (*reine Innerlichkeit* as a favorite term of Protestant theology has it) and leave no trace in the visible world. In general it may be said that the richer the human personality and the higher the price it has paid for its development, the stronger will be its social radiation. The mystic, of course, does not "develop" his personality in the conventional sense. Rather does he concentrate all his powers in another direction: he does not build up his personality but tends to annihilate it, or at least to reduce progressively the multitude of forms and images which fill his soul, to devoid it of sensual content and to break through to a point (whether outside or inside of him is a matter of controversy) where he confronts the One, Oneness, the Divine root of Being. But this confrontation with the Divine, which tends to turn into communion or even into a state of union, does not leave him poorer for that; on the contrary, in this encounter he acquires a new quality of his being, whatever the different theological explanations of this new quality may be. This certainly now represents an insight he did not possess before and a unified strength with which he was infused in this encounter. Why, then, should such renewed strength not make itself felt, not be expressed even in externals? We shall have to discuss later the frankly contradictory forms which the impact of mystical experience on social life may create. They may be constructive or destructive from a traditional point of view, but unquestionably

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they are forms effective in the social sphere. There are many words in the various systems of oriental and occidental mysticism to denote that which man absorbs in his mystical encounter with the Divine, but there is extremely scant reason to assume that this something, *contemplatio infusa*, unitive life, or, as the Jewish mystics called it, *devequth* is of a purely inward character and does not turn outward and radiate into the community of men. It will be difficult to find many cases where such absence of social radiation is maintained. They are extremes and, paradoxically but understandably enough, are known to us only by the social consequences they produced in spite of all. The classical example for this may be Lao-tse, if ever there was such a person, a matter which has lately become highly controversial. There may have been other mystics who successfully concealed themselves, foregoing social recognition and effectiveness. But they would be unknown to the history of mysticism and we would know nothing of them. I grant there may have been some, but I doubt very much whether they represent the category from which the rules governing the working of mysticism should be derived.

The mystic is a human being even after his mystical experience. This means he must express himself—and this is a most fundamental point. His ecstasy or contemplation, inexpressible as it may be in itself, originates in him an overwhelming wish to communicate what cannot be communicated, to use human language—i.e., the most basic of social phenomena—to express what has happened to him. It is simply not true that this urge to communicate his experience can be separated from the totality of his experience. This, to my mind, is one of the central weaknesses of many purely psychological explanations of mysticism. Even when the mystic does not communicate with others and to others, he still will speak to himself. Even if unable to articulate his experience in literary language, he still translates the unspeakable into words, and it is but a matter of accident whether these words reach an audience or not. The history of oriental mysticism makes no distinction at all between solitary mystics or hermits who mumble to themselves about their experience and those who give vent to their feelings in the most splendid hymns like those of the Tibetan mystic Milarepa which were recently translated into English, between those who shy away from society and those

who make themselves available to pupils because they have the same general urge as everybody else to share life and experience with other human beings.

While the possibility of death in ecstasy is theoretically envisaged by theologians of mysticism who (like some of the Kabbalists) sometimes marvel that there is after all a return from this highest state to normal conditions of life, this is indeed but a very theoretical consideration. In fact, the mystic keeps his life and body. Even in order to undergo what may be termed "the mystical death" as it is described in many sources of mystical literature, even if he wants to die to himself, he can accomplish this only by living on. If a mathematical image be allowed, the continuous curve of the mystic's temporal life reaches a singular point of discontinuity, but even this point is included in the general equation by which this life may be expressed. His ecstasy, his vision constitute, it is true, such a point of discontinuity, a turning point in his life, which is frequently interpreted by himself as a breakthrough into a sphere outside the temporal world. Yet just as the attainment of this turning point was made possible and nourished by his previous experience, so the consequences of his rapture will be felt again in his subsequent one. He may have attained some sort of ultimate freedom, but in living on, this freedom has to come to terms with the laws of human life. The world of images and of speech which he had left behind him rushes in again and tinges everything connected with his mystical experience. He gets involved in contradictory statements because of the particular character of his experience, but he is no longer free to avoid such contradictions, which are part and parcel of his attempt to face it squarely. Whether he chooses to lay an abyss between this central experience and its consequences or whether he binds them together largely depends, not on the nature of the experience itself, but on his special disposition for and inclination to social activity. The theories that try to explain this choice—I am going to discuss some of their Jewish forms—are but a reflection of this basic situation. There is, moreover, an interrelation between the mystic and his social group; however powerful a tension may develop between these two and however dramatic its consequences, this interrelation is maintained with the exception of marginal cases, where a real break occurs. It is

the nature of this interrelation that I wish to study here. Speaking of interrelation, I do not of course mean the impact of the mystic on society alone, but the impact of society on him at the same time. And this means that it is difficult to formulate general theses about this interrelation, since the ever-changing conditions of a society in a given historical context may play a decisive role in defining this relationship.

III

Mysticism, as I see it, is a phenomenon within a traditional context of organized religion. It may produce a crisis there, it may break away from it or create a new context of its own, but it is always dependent on such a traditional framework. Following the terminology of the late Dr. Leo Baeck, we may call it the romantic stage of religion, in contradistinction to its classical state, which saw the formation of the great religious systems and their crystallization in social forms, in rituals and in institutions. When these tend to become stale and worn out, mysticism sets in, borne by individuals who try to reestablish the immediate contact with the primary source on which institutional religion had based its authority. This statement contains in a nutshell all the problems which come up in a discussion of mysticism and society. Let me enumerate the most fundamental among them:

1. The assumption of the identity of the source of original revelation with that of the mystical one.
2. The role of traditional images in expressing mystical revelation.
3. The potential conflict between the authority of the mystic and traditional authority.
4. The conservative or revolutionary turn which the mystic's social activity may take.

All these must be considered if we wish to understand that interrelation of which I spoke. They are of course based on the mystic's becoming socially effective. Proceeding from the general to the particular, this can happen in three ways:

(a) if he speaks or writes at all and therefore makes public what before was only a private and possibly even esoteric knowledge vouchsafed to him. By expressing himself, however paradoxical

the means of expression to which he takes recourse may be, he sows a seed that consciously or inadvertently may ripen and produce social repercussions;

(*b*) if he attracts and accepts pupils, who open their minds to him and serve as a fertile ground for the transmission of his revelation, if he has something to transmit, and thus constitute the most elementary social unit through which he works;

(*c*) if he seeks to influence wider social circles with which he shares a traditional framework or, given a clash between him and them, strives to build up a new group to which henceforth he becomes a religious authority.

In all these ways he is an exceptional figure in his society. He is rooted in the same tradition, but he transcends it, widens it and may even outgrow it. The points of contact between him and his group are as obvious and powerful as they are apt to become a storm-center for their relations. It is here that the question of the mystical re-interpretation of religious tradition comes up. For the mystic speaks the language of tradition, but at the same time deeply transforms it, giving old terms a new meaning and producing new ones characterized by their strange quality and by their emotional appeal. Through all these, he may easily serve as a transformer or point of crystallization for new social forces seeking expression.

I said that the mystic is an exceptional figure in his society. I might as well say he is a dialectical figure. His relation from the outset is not a fullhearted one and is exposed to severe strains. The direction of his original quest leading to his mystical fulfillment took him out of society, created a distance and sometimes even an abyss between him and it. Even if he now turns, or is driven, to go back and to establish a fruitful relation to a group of men, this movement is of a dialectical character. It has built-in reservations because, even within the turmoil of social activity, the mystic remains conscious of that decidedly anti-social drive that enabled him in the first place to become what he is now. Every step in one direction has at the same time a barb pointing back into the opposite one. There can never be a naive or unbroken relationship between him and society, and this shows itself plainly when we consider those four basic problems which I enumerated before.

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There is, first of all, the mystic's claim that he has known God through experience. This, however, was precisely the claim on which institutional religion and its demands were based. Its founders, the bearers of its decisive revelation, and its prophets had claimed an experience of God, not in the form of a mystical rapture but in the form of a clear-cut and distinct message they had received in this actual encounter with the source of revelation. It was the special character of this revelation which determined the social character of the religious system and tradition founded by them. The strong social and emotional appeal of the institutions inaugurated by these respective traditions came now to serve as mediator of religious experience and largely supplanted the direct contact with its source. But now, when mysticism sets in, it becomes clear that this mediated character of a given traditional form of religion is no longer enough. The religious urge does not stop at a given time and hour; it comes up again and again; and, if it does not immediately take on the form of a new message and a new system but strives to maintain itself within the traditional framework, it tends to become an internalization of the older system and becomes mysticism. The mystic no longer claims to have received a revelation competing with the older one, but he still claims to have been where it all came from. The mystical revelation granted to him, that experience of mystical union or communion with God, is no longer a circumscribed and well-defined one; on the contrary, being completely internalized, it has become an amorphous, inexpressible and unspeakable one. Nevertheless, it is assumed that its source is identical with that of historical revelation. This, to me, seems a rather far-reaching assumption, and the question may be asked if this assumption is not fictitious. I am not a mystic, and I am not in a position to decide on this problem of identity. My qualms in this respect are based only on the pronouncements of the mystics themselves and their descriptions. It takes a tremendous effort, indeed, to identify the source of revelation received by Moses or Mohammed with that received by the Kabbalists, by Rabbi Isaac the Blind or Rabbi Isaac Luria, or by Ibn Arabi and Hallaj. Still, without this assumption the mystics could never dream of maintaining themselves within their religious community, not to speak of influencing it. Otherwise, their pretense to continuity of revelation

would be voided from the start. In fact, this is what the enemies and adversaries of the mystics have frequently argued. We have a document from the beginnings of Kabbalism, in the first part of the 13th century, a circular letter emanating from a great rabbinical authority in Provence, which makes this point with great emphasis. The enemies of the mystics poured scorn on their assertions in this respect. The mystics, of course, replied that their detractors spoke as the blind speak of color. It appears that both parties could adduce very good reasons for their respective stands. The mystics' point was that there were many, nay infinite facets to this underlying identity, and from there it was only a step to the further assertion, of a more dialectical character, that this identity expressed itself in ever new and changing aspects through the course of history and with regard to the changing forms of society. This assumption gave strength to the claims of the mystics that eventually it was this one and central source of divine revelation which they sought to express and to make predominant, each in his own way and in his own surroundings.

Once this point is understood, we can discuss the second question: the role of traditional images in expressing mystical revelation. No interrelation between the mystic and his society would be possible if the tradition of his group did not supply him with a large treasure of religious images. They are supplied by the holy books, by the language of ritual, and by the specific imagery of his theology before the mystic tries to divest himself of all this and to reach a point where no images are left. Mystical experience, according to the unanimous testimony of those concerned, knows of no images, having left them behind or destroyed them. This, however, is only a fleeting moment of amorphous illumination; the social heritage of language and imagery comes back in full force once this moment has passed. These images were crystallized in a religious society and are considered by it as a legitimate means of expressing its experience. They appealed to the imagination and, at the same time, conveyed a more-or-less definite meaning fixed by tradition (the same image may have quite different meanings in different groups—the identical images of redemption, for example, have very different meanings in Jewish or Christian contexts). The Jewish mystic, in speaking of his experience or in attempting to translate it, however imperfect-

ly, into his own language, will therefore use the traditional images of Judaism. He will talk of the unity of God in Biblical or rabbinical symbols; he will try to connect his vision with the Torah and its meaning and so on. Similarly, for that matter, the Christian mystic will use the images of his own tradition. In this process it is reasonable to assume that he will instill new meanings or at least considerable variations of the old meanings into these images and will give them a new lease on life. If he were to use new images, which did not originate within his own group tradition, they would likely be ineffective, enigmatic or misunderstood. They would therefore, arouse opposition and generate conflict.

The psychological impetus of the mystic and his social impact are thus interdependent. His own impetus is conditioned by social factors which he, in turn, may influence to the extent that he can make it socially acceptable. I have often marvelled at how lightly the psychologists of mysticism take the fact—and this is a *social* fact—that the mystics on their way encounter only figures from their own tradition. The Buddhist mystic does not encounter Christ nor does the Christian mystic encounter one of the Buddhas. The Jewish Kabbalist encounters neither of them, but on the threshold of mystical revelation he encounters the prophet Elijah, a figure of tremendous social importance in Jewish tradition.

There exist in addition some important social means of communication by which mystical experience can be transmitted and be made understandable without the use of articulate language. I am speaking of symbolical gestures (including for instance the famous smile of the Buddha, when he was asked about the meaning of illumination or Nirvana), and, beyond the sphere of the individual, of dance and song. Their tremendous importance in almost every mystical group is generally recognized. Avoiding conceptual formulation and consequently possibly hostile reactions, they reduce the area of social conflict. The specific forms of expression and articulation they adopt are at the same time less definite and of greater social appeal. They can be used to induce ecstasy as a group phenomenon, but can also serve to translate an ecstasy that has been reached before, and to give it visible expression. Some of the great mystics of the Hassidic movement have spoken

at length about this double role of the “world of melody” in the mystic’s life. While for the outsider the literary heritage of mysticism is more impressive, because easier to transmit, for the devotees of mysticism itself, those other forms frequently have a more vital importance. They do not require that intellectual effort which after all is inseparable from absorbing the theoretical teachings of the mystics, and they cater to the frankly emotional element, giving it social and widely understandable and acceptable expression. It is no accident that sectarian organizations born of mystical experience and recruited mainly from the lower social strata are frequently inclined to stress these means of social expression.

IV

But let us return to our starting point, the dialectic of traditional speech and its images in the service of mysticism. Religion in its classical forms is based on revelation that guided its founders. Its written or spoken records constitute its authority for the group. In this sense, even the speeches of the Buddha constitute documents of revelation and are cornerstones of a crystallizing religious tradition. But here we come to the third of the questions raised. An authority has been duly constituted governing the social life of the community. Now the mystic who, as we have seen, claims to have retraced his steps to the source of it all, has to choose whether to accept this traditional authority and to conform to it or to devalue or even to deny it. The potential conflict is obvious. Having claimed immediate contact with the divine, through some overwhelming experience, will he set up his own experience as a source of authority or will he submit to the established one? I shall discuss the second alternative first. The choice to submit to the authority of historical revelation is made possible only by identifying his own experience with that of the founding fathers, difficult as this may be. For theirs was an articulate experience, while his is an amorphous one. He translates it, as we have seen, into the language of tradition, but it is never quite the same. It has a new meaning shaped by what he went through; but he maintains that the new meaning is nothing but the original one. How can he maintain such a

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thesis? It is here that one of the most significant factors comes in, namely mystical exegesis of the ancient records, of the holy books. Without it, it may be doubted whether mysticism could have played the social role it did. I have taken up this point at great length elsewhere, speaking of the meaning of the Torah in Jewish mysticism.¹ By assuming that the Word of God shines with many lights, reflected in infinite mirrors of meaning, the mystics could manage to read the old texts as speaking of their own innermost experience and vision. The rigid text that had become invested with the authority of revelation is, if I may put it this way, smelted down and recast in new forms. Also new dimensions are opened up in it. This metamorphosis of the Word of God into a living organism, the hard shell of which (the literal meaning) hides a whole universe of ever-new spiritual meanings, is of central importance to our discussion. It enabled the mystics to read their own world into the holy books; by spiritualizing them, they could overcome the frequently only too obvious contradictions. And they could do so by means of a method of undeniable immanent logic. They could argue: if indeed a word of God exists, must it not perforce be of infinite power, reflecting the inexhaustible richness of his being which must come through even in revelation? The literature of Christian, Moslem and Jewish mysticism bears overwhelming witness to the power of this argument. Sometimes, as with the Jewish mystics or the more conservative type of Christian mystics, the authority of the outward shell of revelation remained inviolate; and in this case a bridge could be built between the world of the community based on tradition and the spiritual world of the mystics. But there were of course those radicals, who went to extremes, who dissolved the historical and traditional shell altogether and were left with nothing but the absolute, spiritual element in revelation. This then becomes what now is called the Inward Word or Inward Light that reveals itself in the soul of man, and it is well-known what tremendous consequences this thesis had in the history of Christian mysticism, in Anabaptism, Quakerism and related phenomena. There is in everybody, according to them, a divine spark, that is set free through the contact with the Biblical word,

¹ In *Diogenes*, No. 15, and in my book, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, New York, 1965, pp. 32-86.

which then acquires a life and authority of its own. The social character of the mystic's activity is largely determined by the stand he takes on these alternatives. Mystical exegesis reduces in some measure the area of conflict between the older authority of revelation and that claimed by the mystic, though it is unlikely to relieve the immanent tension between them altogether.

Through this discussion, then, we have proceeded to arrive at the last question I raised. All mysticism has two contradictory and at the same time complementary aspects, a conservative and revolutionary one. It depends on the character, perhaps I should say, personality, of the mystic and on the historical circumstances which confront him, whether he gives preeminence to one aspect or the other. It should now be clear that both elements are always present in him. He may want to conform, but is driven by his experience towards originality and independence. Operating in a concrete social context and saturated with tradition, his mystical upsurge may confirm his tradition and turn him into its protagonist and defender. When he becomes socially active, his spiritual energy released by a great encounter will be consciously devoted to the preservation and intensification of his community and its life. His mind is not set on change albeit quite frequently on reform. Bent on restoring the spiritual element to its proper place in a society, where it only too often had lost its dynamic quality, he will try to infuse the social body with it. There is no end to the variety of such basically conservative activity of the mystic. Some will refrain from the building up of a group of their own, but will act within the accepted social forms, unless they encounter opposition which forces their activity into other channels. They then join those who from the start try to form some particular organization of kindred spirits through which they will work. This is what happened with most of the conservative mystics in Islam and Christianity. Some of the most important orders within the Catholic church owe their existence to the drive of outstanding mystics who then became centers of intense social activity, like Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa de Avila. The mystic life, says Evelyn Underhill, "is the agent of a fresh outbirth of spiritual vitality into the world, the mother of a spiritual progeny. The great unitive mystics are each of them

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the founders of spiritual families... The 'flowing light of the Godhead' is focused on them as in a lens, only that it may pass through them to spread out on every side."

There are forms of mysticism which *a priori* seem to encourage an organized effort of the mystic spirit in a social context. This seems eminently true of Islamic mysticism. Gustav von Grunebaum has made this point succinctly: once you recognize ecstasy as a legitimate aim of religious life and once you admit that this aim should be open not only to an élite but to the masses, this attitude necessarily leads to forms of organized mysticism such as crystallized in Sufism. An ever-larger number of the faithful can attain the ultimate experience of the divine union by participating in an association where such experience is facilitated by technical means, by a certain mode of life of the community or the order.

In Judaism the classical forms of Kabbalism decidedly belong to this conservative type. I shall not enlarge here on the question of whether there is a difference between the type of mysticism that seeks mystical union as its aim and that which seeks "only" communion with God. I am not at all convinced that this distinction is of such far-reaching importance as is often claimed (especially in treatises on Christian mysticism), and particularly with regard to the impact of mysticism on society. I maintain that the definition of the ultimate aim of mysticism is largely a matter of interpretation and already tinged by historical and theological considerations. The Jewish mystics used the term *devequth* to denote this ultimate aim. The term, meaning literally "cleaving" or "adhering" to God, conveys a markedly cautious tone while it still can embrace very different shades of meaning. The necessity to compromise with medieval Jewish theology dictated this terminology, not the act itself, which may or may not include a state of mystical union. I rather doubt whether this has any bearing on the social implications of the teaching of *devequth*. I should like to explain this point in some more detail.²

Devequth is as near to the concept of communion with God as can be imagined. It is originally a constant being-with-God

² For a more detailed discussion of these points, see my article on *Devequth* in the *Journal of Religion*, New York, 1950, pp. 115-139.

of the individual and certainly not a social experience. The mystic who takes the "Path of the Upright" eventually reaches a state where God himself takes over his guidance and infuses him with holiness. The Kabbalist Moses Hayim Luzzatto describes the state of *devequth* as the last stage of the Path. Without leaving it, the mystic may progress within it to ever-higher degrees of grace which may include states of mind where communion imperceptibly passes into a mystical union with the divine. The stress laid on the distance between the creator and his creature even in this intimate state of *devequth* is due to the acute consciousness of divine transcendence which played such an outstanding role in Judaism. At the same time, the cautious terminology now and then covers more radical shades in describing this supreme state. This applies equally to Kabbalistic texts describing mystical contemplation and to Hasidic texts where this doctrine occupies a central position. But in contradistinction to the Kabbalists, for whom *devequth* was entirely a part of the ascent to God and therefore essentially incommunicable, the Hasidim knew of two stages of *devequth* comprising both ascent and descent. It is not only acquired by the contemplative mind, divesting itself of all corporeal bonds, but as it ascends in ecstasy toward the Infinite, it continues to permeate the mystic's being after the hour of ecstasy. A significant dialectic sets in. The power of *devequth* flows over and no longer determines the devotee's relation to God alone but also that to his fellow men, that is to say, to society. There is a *devequth* of a metaphysical nature and one of a social nature. He who was bound to God and has succeeded in being alone with God, binds himself to the Hasidic group and achieves a communion with its members that reflects the mystical one. *Devequth* develops a social meaning and its propounders did not spurn rather extravagant statements of their position. As a classic example of such social coloring of *devequth*, the Baalshem himself, the founder and central figure of the Hasidic movement, used to point to Talmudic anecdote, of which he apparently was very fond. Rabbi Beroqa frequented the market of his town and the prophet Elijah used to visit him there. Once he asked him: are there any "children of the world to come" in this marketplace, i.e., people deserving of eternal bliss? While he asked, two brothers passed by, and Elijah said: "These

two.” The rabbi went and asked them: “What is your business?” They said: “We are jesters. If people are sad, we cheer them up, and if we see people quarrel, we try to make peace between them.” These jesters are Zadikim, ideal representatives of the Hasidic scale of values, after the Baalshem’s heart. They do not sit at home and think of their own salvation. They work in the marketplace, as he himself liked to do. They are seen as true embodiments of *devequth* who stand the test: to permeate matter and to raise it to spirit. The lowest occupation serves them as a vehicle for the highest achievement.

When the Hasidic mystic had reached his highest goal, he faced a choice: to remain hidden to the world, to renounce its sweep and whirl and to cultivate the bond between him and God in solitude, or to turn to the world, to become active in society and to fulfill his spiritual vocation there. The one is called a Zadik to himself, and the second a Zadik to others, and there is little doubt to whom the Baalshem’s sympathy went. The social sphere was introduced as a legitimate medium for the display of the power of the Hasidic Zadik who is the true mystic. The saintly man, the mystic, starts by entering the social sphere in order to spiritualize it, to reduce active life to its contemplative roots, but while striving to do so, he himself is changed. The true friend of God becomes the true friend of man, and imperceptibly the emphasis tends to shift. Instead of lifting up the holy sparks dispersed in the material sphere, as Kabbalistic parlance has it, instead of drawing out the vital force from this sphere, the Zadik adds to it. It overflows from his own vitality and from that supernal one which has come to him through his *devequth*. “If the leader makes himself a vehicle for the Divine Presence, the Shekhinah, then it expands from him to his contemporaries,” said the Baalshem in a succinct formulation of the social task of the mystic.

There are of course many ways to join the contemporaries, and direct social contact is not always so favorably judged as it was by the Baalshem. It all depends, of course, on the personality of the Zadik. Sometimes it is precisely the retreat from society by which the leaders achieve its “ascent.” But loneliness and solitude are mostly interpreted as a first step, as a precondition of later social activity, not because the mystic plans it this way from

the outset, but because of the dynamics inherent in his experience. Within the state of *devequth*, the classical Hasidic writers knew of two phases, its major phase, called *gadluth*, where *devequth* is developed to its highest form of mystical rapture, and its minor phase called *katnuth*, where it is still retained but in a mode of imperfection. They are like the taking in of the vital breath and the exhaling of it. He who has been vouchsafed communion with God, breathes it into all his activities directed towards the external world and society. It is therefore small wonder that the minor state should often (if not always) be connected with social action, with the mystic serving as the living center of his community.

The Hasidim embraced a social theory upheld by earlier Jewish writers but applying it to their own teaching on the social mission of the mystic. Like everything, society too has form and matter and both are dependent on each other. The form, represented by the man of spirit living in *devequth*, seeks to imprint itself on the matter, represented by the masses bent on their material interests but inherently longing to be raised to the state of form. There is no static balance between the two; rather it is an ongoing process, in the course of which the "matter" of the social body is constantly transformed. The man of spirit is seen as a mystic who devotes himself to external action, but even then continues to meditate on the spiritual side of what may seem to be a purely material undertaking. Hasidism became a social phenomenon of great importance in its time precisely because it attempted to define the place of the mystic in an organic body of the Jewish community. All the paradoxes about the Zadik talking on profane matters and acting in a worldly way and thereby performing an act of spiritual elevation are significant because of their obvious bearing on the social task of the mystic. That the mystic is now called the Zadik, that is to say the just man, a term that traditionally has no mystical connotation, may still seem strange, but it has a logic of its own. The just person in Jewish tradition is seen as the man who puts everything in its proper place and gives everything its due and thereby represents a social ideal of Judaism.

In becoming identified with an ideal type of Jewish mystic who undertakes the rather adventurous task of maintaining the contem-

plative life in a social context, the two spheres, mysticism and society, come together and meet in a very notable encounter. Few mystical movements have had a social impact of such intensity as Hasidism had on East European Judaism. It is only fair to say that in this encounter the relation between the social and the mystical factor was after all an uneasy one; they were attracted to each other by some inner drive and tried to come to terms. The most fascinating of Hasidic writing, like the *Toledoth Jacob Joseph* by Jacob Joseph of Polnoye (1780) and *No'am Elimelekh* by Elimelekh of Lizensk (1788), fully reflects the precarious balance between the two forces. Where a struggle between them ensues the social element, even in theory, is likely to get the upper hand. The passion for social activity, which stands out in the *No'am Elimelekh*, demands its tribute. The mystic drive becomes institutionalized in the organization of the Hasidic group and especially in the figure of its leader, the Zadik. Even here, however, at the threshold of a far-reaching metamorphosis of Hasidism, the awareness of the interrelation between the mystic and his social group is acute. It is frequently emphasized by the early Hasidic authors that the Zadik does not only give, an idea that might have formed in our mind by the metaphoric use of matter and form in this connection. He takes no less than he gives. In seeking to raise the people, he himself is raised, and the more he succeeds in his social task, the more he gains in spiritual stature. The social influence of the Zadik depends on what is called his "stepping down a little" from the major forms of *devequth* in order to be nearer to his community; but the sacrifice has its own reward, for the intensity of his own life is enormously enhanced by the stream of life flowing through him to the whole community, not only to himself.

In developing their theory of *devequth* on both levels, the mystical and the social one, and in going to great length to connect it with rabbinical tradition, the founders of Hasidism basically followed the conservative line, the existence of a more radical branch notwithstanding. They were basically conservative reformers to whom their own mystical experience dictated a decidedly positive attitude to their society. Jewish society to them was not the narrow frame of their own local group but the all-comprising structure of the Jewish people. In setting up their own

group they thought of it as a nucleus for a renewal of Jewish society in its wider meaning. The previously-made points about the social conditioning of mysticism are fully valid for any analysis of the factors that determine the character of the Hasidic movement. There is no discrepancy between traditional Jewish religion and the vision of the Hasidic leaders; and as far as a conflict arose, they did not will it, but it was forced upon them. For to their opponents among the “unreconstructed” rabbinic leadership they did not appear at all in the light in which they saw themselves. To their opponents they were no traditionalists, but heretics and revolutionaries who used the religious language of Jewish tradition to subvert Jewish society.

This brings us back to the alternative which the mystic faces: will he submit to the traditional authority and the social forms it has taken on or will he draw from his own experience a new claim to authority and set it up in conflict with the traditional one? I have spoken of the conservative attitude he may embrace and of its implications. It remains to discuss the revolutionary aspect of this alternative. If we are to follow the train of thought of those who see mysticism as an essentially a-social or even anti-social phenomenon, where all and everything is centered around an experience the very nature of which implies a dissolution of all natural forms and, even more so, of all historical forms in order to bring about the act of mystical union, then it would be only reasonable to expect a definite preponderance of the revolutionary, nay, the anarchic, aspect of mysticism as a social phenomenon. There is nothing to guarantee that out of this amorphous, shapeless and inexpressible upsurge of the mind a confirmation of traditional values and forms should spring. Why should the mystic not follow the call to absolute freedom from form which he has experienced in that decisive hour where all forms fell from him? We have seen, of course, that this is not so and that the dialectic of the mystic brings him back to the world of form. He is encouraged in this by his use of traditional symbols and by the spiritual mentor who shows him what to expect and therefore in many ways prepares him for social conformity even after the great event. All these conservative factors notwithstanding, there remains that element of independence and consciousness of his own standing with regard to the source of inspiration that makes

for conflict. Returning to the world of speech and form, he may no longer accept all of it as it was, by giving it a symbolic and spiritualizing reinterpretation. He will easily emerge as a critic of tradition and its social embodiments, rejecting part of it or even, in the most radical cases, all of it. He substitutes new forms for the old ones or he holds up the ideal of mystical destruction of all external forms.

It is a matter of temperament on the mystic's part, as well as a matter of historical circumstance, how far he will go or be driven once he appears as a critic. In the terminology of so many of the mystics, they, as it were, "stood in nothingness," and highly dramatic and emotionally loaded as this image is, it holds an inherent element of destruction. Once the mystical nothing is conceived to be at the center or the apex of the mystic's life, why should it not be projected as an ideal that governs the devotee's future steps? The conservatives, of course, abhorred this, if I may say so, naive and undialectical insistence on a metaphor, however useful it may have seemed. It cannot be denied that there was explosive force in it. The road to mystical nihilism opens this way, where the destruction of all visible forms of religious life becomes the aim, and where their intrinsic valuelessness is emphasized again and again. The outward forms, that is to say social conformity, have no meaning; you may use them or not as circumstances or inclination may dictate; you may even make a point of it to go through them in order to experience their essentially negative and obstructive character. What counts is the inner freedom and the urge to arrive at that utopian point where this inner freedom manifests itself in the unfettered spiritual life of a community of anarchic character. There are the extreme cases where mysticism became a driving force for nihilism, as in some gnostic sects, as in the late medieval Brethren of the Free Spirit, in the sect of David Joris and in Jewish Frankism in the 18th century. Some of them imply an element of revolt, of trampling established authority underfoot and of enjoyment of the process of destruction that was seen as the final emancipation of the spiritual element in man. A study of the Frankist movement in Judaism could provide us with a deeper understanding of such mystical nihilism and its impact on the social level.

But not all forms of mystical extremism have this element. It was equally possible for the mystic to glide into an attitude of indifference to religious organization and its ritual, to turn his back on all visible forms and to set up the enthusiastic ideal of an "invisible church," to use the Christian term, which is realized not by any outward action, but by the mystic community of kindred spirits. It would be mistaken to underestimate the social meaning even of such "anarchic organizations" for their own members. The history of Christian mysticism knows them as radical "spiritualists," enthusiasts or indifferentists. They reject all external worship because it obstructs the spiritual communion rather than enhancing it. But they still retain their own means of expression and communication. There is no better example of this than the group of Johann Georg Gichtel (d. 1710) which was kept together by a very intensive correspondence which we possess, and by nothing else. They did not even join sects of radical leanings like the Quakers. They contented themselves with their passively anarchic state, but their rejection of social organizations of religion was in itself a visible sign of social protest.

The extremist cases, however, are not the most typical ones. The revolutionary propensities of mysticism come to the fore mainly in mystical sects which try to follow the call based on mystical experience, even after having clashed with those who would not harken to it. No doubt these sects were of particularly social impact when mysticism combined with Messianism. In many relevant cases it would be difficult to say which element had the stronger social impact. In the history of Judaism and Christianity, for instance, the combination of both elements has proved very effective, intrinsically independent from each other as they are. When Messianism entered the scene, the chances for a social clash were at a maximum. In Judaism, for instance, the mystical tendencies of the Kabbalists found a clearly conservative outlet by reinterpreting rabbinical Judaism as a system of mystical symbolism. Only when Messianism reappeared at its center and exploded, set into motion by its combination with mystical aspirations, did it become a revolutionary force in the Sabbataian movement of the 17th century. The many facets of Anabaptism and its later ramifications present the student with instructive

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examples of the revolutionary turn of mystical teachings. Social forces which at the outset had nothing to do with mysticism used slogans borrowed from mystical teachings, as in the case of Thomas Münzer, and decidedly mystical inspiration entered the social sphere in Quakerism. The mystical sects rejected only part of conventional religion; they set up ideals and ideas of their own, but they tried to connect them as much as possible with older forms. The simpler their language and slogans were and the stronger their appeal to unsophisticated sectors of society, the more they took on the character of revolt. They tended to emphasize the spirit that gives life as against the letter that destroys it, but in most cases the attempt was made to preserve the letter as a repository of the spirit. There is no end to the variety of social compromise nor to the degree of criticism directed against the socio-religious establishment. The paradox of the mystic in society has not one solution but an endless number of solutions. But, by the sheer paradox of his claim, the mystic has never failed to stir society to its depths, and I would like to close these remarks by quoting one of the historians of Christian mysticism who asked: "Who has done more to create historical movement than those who seek and proclaim the immovable."