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# MYSTICISM AND EPISTEMOLOGY: ONE DEVIL OF A PROBLEM

D. Z. Phillips

St. Teresa worried over the genuineness of her mystical experience. Her worries have sense within a form of life. Pike argues that her claims must be downgraded if no justification of the form of life can be given. The Devil could deceive us about any justification, Mavrodes argues, but certain experiences can be self-authenticating. Treating forms of life as though they were interpretations, Katz concludes that we must be agnostic about their truth. The paper argues that confusions between forms of life and judgements within them lead these authors to conclusions which obscure the confessional character of truth in these contexts.

## I

Theologians in the Roman Catholic mystical tradition have distinguished between private and public revelations in religion; between, as Nelson Pike has put it, “a message communicated to some specific individual by way of a mystic vision or locution, and the body of truth revealed to the entire Christian community by way of Scripture” (p. 214).<sup>1</sup> Yet, as we shall see, there are important conceptual relations between them. Private revelations are often momentous occasions for the great mystics. The mystics’ doubts sometimes take the distinctive form of worrying over whether the revelations have come from the devil.<sup>2</sup> This was true of one of the greatest mystics, Saint Teresa of Avila. She described one of her most striking experiences as follows:

“I was at prayer on a festival of the glorious Saint Peter when I saw Christ at my side—or, to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for neither with the eyes of the body nor with those of the soul did I see anything. I thought He was quite close to me and I saw that it was He who, as I thought, was speaking to me. Being completely ignorant that visions of this kind could occur, I was at first very much afraid and did nothing but weep, though, as soon as He addressed a single word to me to reassure me, I became quiet again, as I had been before, and was quite happy and free from fear. All the time Jesus Christ seemed to be beside me, but as this was not an imaginary vision, I could not discern in what form: what I felt very clearly was that all the time He was at my right hand, and a witness of everything that I was doing, and that, whenever I became slightly recollected or was not greatly distracted, I could not but be aware of His nearness to me.”<sup>3</sup>



Saint Teresa was sorry to find that some questioned the truth of her experiences: "Many are the affronts and trials that I have suffered through telling this and many are the fears and persecutions that it has brought me. So sure were those whom I told of it that I had a devil that some of them wanted to exorcize me. This troubled me very little, but I was sorry when I found that my confessors were afraid to hear my confessions or when I heard that people were saying things to them against me."<sup>4</sup>

It is important to recognise that Saint Teresa is not objecting to this wider court of appeal. She recognises the need to make confession, to put her revelations to the test. She is simply sorry that, on this occasion, some doubted her revelations and attributed them to the devil, while she remained convinced that Christ has visited her. However, she did not rule out the possibility that the devil could deceive her about Christ's presence. She cites an occasion on which the devil led her to doubt precisely this: "It did me great harm not to know that it was possible to see anything otherwise than with the eyes of the body. It was the devil who encouraged me in this ignorance and made me think that anything else was impossible. He led me to believe that I had imagined it all, and that it might have been the work of the devil, and other things of that kind."<sup>5</sup> As Mavrodes points out, this contest with the Devil is one which Saint Teresa cannot withdraw from: "In fact, as is clear from the passage last quoted, she realized that the Devil might deceive her not only by making her take a delusive experience for a veridical one, but also by making her take a veridical experience for a delusive one. She believed that he had actually carried out this very deception in connection with the vision of Christ which she described there, and that the result involved serious damage to her spiritual life. She cannot, therefore, simply withdraw from the contest with the Devil and thus secure herself from the danger of his deceptions. For the suggestion that she do that might itself be one of his deceptions" (p. 240).

From this situation, an urgent problem arises: How can Saint Teresa ever know which experiences are of Christ and which are of the devil? Mavrodes notes that she advances a number of criteria by which this distinction can be drawn, but he concentrates on two. First, Saint Teresa emphasises that any revelation from God must be compatible or in conformity with Holy Scripture: "As far as I can see and learn by experience, the soul must be convinced that a thing comes from God only if it is in conformity with Holy Scripture; if it were to diverge from that in the very least, I think I should be incomparably more firmly convinced that it came from the devil than I previously was that it came from God, however sure I might have felt of this."<sup>6</sup> Second, Saint Teresa emphasises the relation between her experiences and spirituality: "When a locution comes from the devil it not only fails to leave behind good effects but leaves bad ones. This has happened to me, though only on two or

three occasions, and each time I have immediately been warned by the Lord that the locution came from the devil. Besides being left in a state of great aridity, the soul suffers a disquiet....”<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to misunderstand the significance of Saint Teresa’s elucidation of these criteria. When she says that experiences which diverge from Holy Scripture are of the devil and not of God, Saint Teresa is not simply producing a criterion for distinguishing one experience from another. She is also showing us the conceptual parameters within which talk of what is of God and what is of the devil has its sense. Personal convictions are insufficient. They have to be tested in a scriptural context. Without such a context, no sense could be attached to the convictions in question. Against the mediating background of Scripture space is allowed for degrees of indeterminacy and even for radical disagreements. But without the scriptural context, the indeterminacy and the disagreements themselves are empty and meaningless. The same point can be made about Saint Teresa’s discussion of religious experiences. We have already noted her remarks concerning experiences which are of the devil. She says that experiences of a divine origin generate love, a deepening faith, and so on. But in making these points, Saint Teresa is not noting consequences contingently related to the experiences in question. She is elucidating what it means to attribute an experience to the divine or to the demonic. It would not make sense to speak of *the same* experiences having different consequences, as though a demonic experience could lead to a deepening faith and a visitation by Christ could lead to meanness and deceit. The appearance of such traits would lead to the denial of the experiences. They could not be called experiences of the devil or of Christ. The connection between the experiences and the lack or presence of spirituality is not a contingent consequential one, but a matter of internal relations.

When philosophers discuss Saint Teresa’s observations, they fail to see the distinction between criteria which are meant to settle something, and criteria which show that which is already settled.<sup>8</sup> Criteria in the first sense determine whether a particular experience is of God. The criteria exclude that which is of the devil, self-deception, lies, pretence, etc. But everything *excluded* by criteria of the first kind is *included* in criteria of the second kind which elucidate that form of life within which *both* judgements as to what is of Christ and what is of the devil have their sense. The difference can be brought out if we ask what is an alternative to, or what lies outside the two kinds of criteria. What lies outside the criteria which determine what is of God or of Christ is what is of the devil or of false gods. But what of the second kind of criteria? What lies outside them would be something which lies outside the whole form of life in which talk of God, Christ, the devil and false gods has its sense. A mistake in the first context would be something like mistaking what is of the devil for what is of Christ. A mistake in the second context

would be something like thinking Saint Teresa was praying when, in fact, she is on her knees looking for something she has dropped.

In many philosophical discussions of mysticism the main confusions come from a failure to distinguish between these two kinds of criteria, and to ask questions of the second which belong to the first and *vice-versa*. The confusion may be expressed as a failure to distinguish between the grammar of concepts and their application, or between questions asked within a form of life and questions which may be asked of it. Until such distinctions are recognised, the relations between revelation, language and philosophical analysis are bound to remain, at best, obscure and, at worst, hopelessly confused.

## II

As we have seen, in distinguishing between which revelations are of God and which are of the devil, Saint Teresa appeals to the conformity or otherwise of the revelation with Holy Scripture, and to the spirituality involved in the experience or the lack of it. Pike calls these two criteria the 'Scripture-dogma test' and the 'spiritual-effects test,' respectively. He formulates the former as follows: "The revelations contained in apprehensions produced by God do not conflict with propositions affirmed in Scripture or with propositions included among the dogmas, doctrines, or teachings of the Church" (p. 220). He formulates the latter as follows: "Apprehensions produced by God result in positive affective states as well as dispositions conducive to spiritual development (including dispositions toward virtue) on the part of the apprehending mystic" (p. 219). On this reading, Saint Teresa becomes concerned about the truth-values we can assign to certain propositions or about the results and consequences of having certain experiences. I shall argue that Pike misses the significance of the distinction between a form of life and the judgements we make within it, and, by so doing, misses also what questions of truth come to when we talk of religious experience.

Pike wants to explore the sense, if any, in which a mystical experience can be accorded positive epistemic value. His exploration takes the philosophically familiar form of asking whether such an experience can serve as the source of support for belief in the existence of God. He comes to the equally familiar philosophical conclusion that it cannot. Attempts at appealing to experiences as sources of such support are involved in a hopeless circularity. Pike's expression of this point draws on points made in Alasdair MacIntyre's well-known article 'Visions.'<sup>9</sup> Pike says:

"The revelation contained in the apprehension is that God (i.e. 'the divine') exists. But in order to establish that the revelation is true, the mystic must first establish that the experience can be trusted as a source of knowledge. This he attempts to do by assuming (or in some way determining) that the

vision 'has the character of a message from the divine', i.e., that...the experience resulted from such action on the part of God.... It could serve in this capacity only had its reliability been successfully argued without presupposing the truth of the very proposition for which it is supposed to be supplying support" (p. 221).

In the same way, Pike argues, a circularity is involved in any appeal to the congruence of the mystic apprehension with theological doctrines, the Bible, or the teachings of the Church, since unless those doctrines, the Bible, or those teachings were assumed to be true, the appeal to congruence would be pointless. The pointlessness of such appeals can be extended beyond the examples Pike considers, if we accept his argument. Pike says: "A mystic apprehension contains a revelation if the meaning of what is seen or heard can be formulated in a proposition to which can be assigned a truth value. Commands, words of advice, words of encouragement and the like will not count as revelations. Apprehensions containing only commands, words of advice, etc., will thus be of no interest in the discussion" (p. 217). But even on Pike's reading of mystical apprehensions, it is difficult to understand these exclusions, since, on his own terms, each excluded apprehension may be rendered propositionally acceptable as with 'God commanded me to...' 'God advised me to...', 'God encouraged me to....' The targets of the charge of circularity, therefore, can be far more numerous than those Pike discusses.

This does not mean that I am condoning Pike's characterisation of our problem as that of assigning truth-values to propositions which can be formulated from mystical apprehensions, the Bible, theological doctrines, or the teachings of the Church. On the contrary. I shall argue that it is this characterisation which is the source of confusion. It is essential to Pike's argument that the propositions formed in *all* these contexts be accorded *the same* epistemological status; that is, for Pike, they are all propositions whose truth has to be established by appeal to some *further* criterion. Here, Pike ignores the distinction between the two senses of criteria outlined in the first section of this paper: criteria which operate within a form of life and criteria which show us the character of the form of life in question.

Running together these two senses of 'criteria' leads Pike to mischaracterise Saint Teresa's spiritual concerns. In the passage on p. 221, he begins with the claim that what is revealed in a mystical union is that God exists, but is soon discussing the mystic's concern over whether the vision is from God (Saint Teresa's concern). But why should we assume that the latter concern raises the prior question concerning the reality of God? On Pike's own admission, he has "yet to discover a mystic of consequence from within the Roman Catholic tradition who has claimed (or even suggested) that mystic apprehension can serve as a source of support for belief in the existence of God" (p. 230). When Saint Teresa worries over whether a given apprehension is of

Christ or the devil, she is not, in appealing to Scripture and the fruits of spirituality, appealing to a set of propositions which have equal status to a set of propositions said to be revealed in her mystic apprehensions. Rather, she is testing her experience, or reflecting on it, in a context which, for her, shows what is *meant* by something being from God or from the devil. For her, for example, the Church is not the contingent vehicle of a set of propositions which can be formulated in the abstract, but, rather, the Body of Christ. Take that away and we can no longer appreciate the seriousness of her concern over whether, in receiving her mystical revelations, she was being a faithful daughter of the Church. What is condemned as circularity, in the familiar philosophical argument, is no more than reflection within the conditions of the possibility of spiritual sense.

When philosophers, like Pike, ask for criteria epistemologically independent of mystical revelation, what are they looking for? Do they want revelations to be independent of the form of life in which they have their sense? What is independent in any *specific* revelation, is not this sense, but the claim being made that God or Christ has been revealed to *this person*. This claim cannot be settled by reference to Scripture or the teachings of the Church alone; the witness of the mystic's life is essential in this context. It is in this context, it might be thought, that Pike's 'spiritual-effects test' comes into its own.

Unfortunately, given the way Pike speaks of assigning truth-values to propositions formed from mystical experiences, the Bible, and teachings of the Church, the characteristic worries of Saint Teresa cannot be captured. He offers a more restricted context in which her claims could be understood. The mystic's claim could be said to amount to no more than saying that the revelation is *consistent* with Scripture and the teachings of the Church; "i.e. that it *not conflict with*, any such item. Put another way, what is required is that the *negation* of the private revelation *not* be entailed by some proposition included in Scripture-dogma" (p. 228). The cost of such a restriction is a high one. The mystic may say that the received revelation is consistent with the proposition that Christ died for our sins, but this, Pike says "entails nothing whatever as regards the actual truth-value of the proposition in question" (p. 229). But we get no indication from Pike what assigning a truth-value in this context would amount to. It is doubtful whether he could give any account, since it is at this very point that we need to pay attention to the distinction between criteria which settle religious questions within a form of life, and criteria which show what is meant by settling such matters. In Pike's restricted context no light is thrown on either matter. On the one hand, it leaves the question of what justifying basic beliefs within world-pictures would amount to hanging in the air. On the other hand, it does less than justice to the mystic's claims. Saint Teresa would not be content to say that the appeals

to Holy Scripture and spiritual fruits establish the consistency of her revelations while leaving their truth in abeyance. On the contrary, for the mystic, such appeals are some of the major ways in which truth and falsity in such matters are arrived at. Pike himself says that although he thinks he has discovered a genuine restriction, he suspects, "it is one that will not be felt as such by those engaged in the actual practice of mystical theology" (p. 230).

It may be thought that my accusation that Pike ignores the distinction between forms of life and judgements made within them is unfair since he makes specific reference to the distinction. Does he not tell us that the 'Scripture-dogma test' and the 'spiritual effects test' are effective "only if one assumes at the outset that the basic, theistic world-picture is correct"? (p. 230). Such tests, he argues are "designed to appeal only to those who are antecedently committed not only to the basic, theistic world-picture but to the more detailed articles of doctrine professed in the Roman Catholic community" (p. 230). He concludes: "I suspect it is this, and not the detection of logical deficiency, that ultimately accounts for the dissatisfaction expressed by those (such as MacIntyre) who approach the mystical literature in a sceptical posture" (p. 230-31). Despite these remarks, my point is that Pike does not appreciate the conceptual significance of the distinction he is alluding to. His treatment will not lead, as he hopes, to those elements of epistemological theory which, in this context, "require most immediate critical attention" (p. 232).

It is true that what Pike calls antecedent commitments need urgent attention before we can appreciate what it means to assign positive epistemic values to mystic apprehensions. Such considerations, however, should not emerge at the end of a story. We need to discuss the difference between rejecting or accepting a claim within a form of life, and rejecting or accepting a form of life as such. Such a discussion, as we shall see, has a far-reaching effect on the view that our epistemological task is one in which we engage in something we think we understand, independent of all contexts, namely, assigning truth-values to propositions.

The hints Pike gives of the kind of direction in which he would look for justifications of tests such as "the Scripture-dogma test" are not encouraging. He thinks one direction in which people hope to find them is in the third of Descartes' *Meditations*, in the idea that God is no deceiver. One immediate problem with such an appeal as an external justification of Holy Scripture is that the idea appealed to owes its sense to the very scriptural source it is meant to justify. Ignoring this fact, Pike becomes entangled in another worry, namely, the possibility that God may allow us to embrace falsehoods for our own good. On this argument, we need an independent check on the existence of God and God's qualities which we simply do not possess. If that is the case, however, how can we be sure about the source of the revelations we



are sent? Given Pike's epistemological presuppositions there is no answer to this question, nor could there be. Once we give ourselves to this context-free speculation, although we may begin with Descartes' God, we may well end up with Descartes' devil. When we look at Mavrodes' treatment of the kind of problem Pike bequeaths to us, that turns out to be, in fact, what happens.

### III

As we have seen, there were times when Saint Teresa worried over whether her revelations were from God or the devil. For her, the matter was resolved by appeal to what we have called the 'Scripture-dogma test' and the 'spiritual effects test.' Mavrodes calls these tests principles. He denies that they are any safeguard against the devil's deceptions, since the devising of these principles may be one of them. "After all," Mavrodes tells us, "the mere fact that something is presented as a principle does not at all guarantee that it is true. People make mistakes about principles all the time, with or without the assistance of the Devil, and this fact can hardly have escaped an astute observer like Teresa. And so, must she not have a doubt as to whether this principle itself is not one of his devilish deceptions, and thus be in need of a further criterion by which to judge whether this is indeed a true principle?" (p. 243).

What can we make of this suggestion? Clearly, Mavrodes assumes that the devil he invokes is the same devil that Saint Teresa is worried about, but is he right in his assumption? There is the following difficulty: Saint Teresa learns what is meant by the devil and his deceptions in the context of Scripture and the teachings of the Church. These are the conceptual parameters within which these terms have their meaning. To say that these parameters may themselves be the product of the devil's deceptions would be an attempt to divorce the notion of the devil from its meaning. This is not to deny that one can be mistaken about what is of God and what is of the devil. Reflection on these matters may well be necessary. But such reflection is itself religious. Radical disagreements and deep mistakes may occur. One person says to another, 'Your God is my Devil.' Simone Weil has said that one of the deepest conceptions of hell is thinking one is in paradise when one is not. None of this is denied, but Mavrodes' devil is placed outside any religious contexts and so cannot account for the kind of deception attributed to the devil within them. Indeed, as far as Mavrodes' philosophical strategy is concerned, the devil could deceive us all the time about what we take to be the devil's deceptions. Once again, what is missing in Mavrodes' discussion is a distinction between a criterion which settles something and those criteria which elucidate the form of life within which what is already settled is shown. Mavrodes says: "I believe that there are interesting and important questions about how we do, or should, adopt principles, especially basic principles.

These questions apply to Teresa's principle here, but also to those other principles which many would find more basic and attractive, principles of logic, perhaps, or of rationality, and so on. In this paper I will not, however, pursue those questions" (p. 243). That is precisely the trouble.

My complaint is that Mavrodes does not take the devil seriously. One way of putting the matter is to say that Mavrodes' devil is not the devil of religion, but a theoretical construct, although he borrows features from religious contexts when convenient. This being so, Mavrodes applies the theoretical construct to any certitudes we are to consider. If Saint Teresa asks a bishop to judge whether her revelation is in accordance with Scripture, Mavrodes advances the possibility that the devil is impersonating the bishop. After all, Mavrodes asks, "if there is a danger that the Devil may impersonate Jesus Christ in a vision is there not a danger that he may impersonate the bishop in his study?" (p. 244). Again, although the bishop tells Saint Teresa that her vision is heretical and incompatible with Scripture, all the devil has to do is to cause Saint Teresa to hear the word 'orthodox' instead of 'heretical,' and to hear the word 'compatible' instead of 'incompatible.'

The trouble with these suggestions is that they trade on the notion of unfavourable circumstances. The notion of one person impersonating another trades on a conception of true identity. Similarly, mishearing what is said trades on a conception of hearing correctly. Misunderstandings in our discourse with each other trade on a conception of real understandings. But, for Mavrodes, not even normal discourse is beyond the devil's wiles:

"In a normal conversation such as we imagine here for Teresa and the bishop, of course, people quite naturally rely upon the intentionality of their auditory experience. Their hearing presents itself to them as a hearing of what other people are saying—what they really are saying—and by and large that is how they take it. Furthermore, people in such an ordinary conversation (in contrast, perhaps, with people seeing a vision or hearing a locution) do not normally think at all about the possibility that the Devil is deceiving them. But the fact that we do not think about the Devil seems unlikely to have much to contribute to our safety from the Devil.

"Would not such a situation, indeed, be close to the ideal from the Devil's point of view? Where could he better practice his demonic wiles than in those contexts in which his victims are accustomed to give him no thought at all? Teresa may be confident when she reads the Bible in the library or talks to the bishop in his study, more confident than when she is seeing visions and hearing locutions in her cell. But how is that confidence to be justified?" (p. 244-45).

On his own admission, Mavrodes attributes powers without limit to his devil, but with what effect? I shall argue that it robs the notions of the devil and of doubt of their intelligibility. First, the notion of the devil. We have

already advanced good reasons for saying that Mavrodes' devil is not the devil Saint Teresa learned to be wary of. This can be illustrated further in Mavrodes' treatment of what Pike called the 'spiritual-effects test.' Whatever Saint Teresa appeals to as spiritual fruits, the devil may be working his deceptions there. The only defense would be a state where, if one thought one was in it, it would be logically impossible for one not to be in it in fact. At this point, Mavrodes' problem becomes a problem concerning certitude, the reference to the devil becoming superfluous.

This much should have been obvious from the start. Early in his paper Mavrodes says, "My intent is primarily theoretical and analytic, not historical or exegetical. No part of my argument depends in any important way on a proper understanding of what any particular mystic has claimed" (p. 238). Therefore, it does not depend on any proper understanding of a mystic's worries about the devil. When asked what reason he has for thinking that a devil can impersonate a bishop or interfere with what people hear in an ordinary conversation, he replies, "And the answer to that is, no special reason" (p. 245). But he thinks that this answer is of no use to Saint Teresa, since this leaves the issue of the limits on the devil's powers to deceive entirely open. What this shows, in fact, is that Mavrodes has an empty notion of the devil, since he cannot say what it does or does not make sense to attribute to him. The devil is a philosophical device in Mavrodes' argument, not the devil of Saint Teresa's religious experience. Again, early on, saying that he will utilize this device, Mavrodes acknowledges "that the arguments and conclusions to be deduced will apply equally to every form in which this problem can be cast" (p. 238). Thus, when the problem of the devil becomes explicitly the problem of certitude, it is no surprise to hear Mavrodes say: "in the entire body of the argument, and on both sides of the argument, the references to the Devil are dispensable. I do not mean that Teresa was not serious about him. She was. And so may we be. But in the argument which I present, and in the objections and counter-arguments which I consider, he plays no essential role. Whenever there is a reference to the deceptions of the Devil we can simply replace them with references to our being mistaken...Teresa's problem, then, is a fundamental one in epistemology. She casts it, indeed, in a special form, and perhaps the problem does really arise for her in this special form. But even if *we* are not troubled by the Devil—even, for that matter, if there were no Devil—the fundamental form of Teresa's problem remains. We undertake to separate truth from error, and occasionally to distinguish the veridical from the non-veridical, by reference to what we already take to be true. But what if our mistake is really occurring at that point?" (p. 255). If certitude depends on discovering a criterion of certitude, Mavrodes' argument is that since its application will always involve judgement, such judgements cannot guarantee freedom from deception.

What we need to ask at this point is whether we can doubt at will. Sometimes, we would not know what it means to doubt. Doubt has no hold on us, not because we refuse to entertain it, but because we would not know what it would mean to do so. Mavrodes, too, wants to allow for this possibility, but in a way which is misleading. He refers to experiences Saint Teresa had against which doubt had no force. That this was so, Mavrodes argues, was not due to the experience having a certain characteristic (certainty, etc.), but due to the fact that "as this experience presented itself to her, its veridicality—the fact that it laid hold of a truth and delivered that truth to her understanding—was so plain and open upon the face of that experience itself that its purpose was accomplished. The truth was 'engraved upon the understanding,' and doubt was banished. And it is this sort of experience, I think, and not the use of criteria, which is basic in Teresa's mystical knowledge" (p. 256). We may not have mystical experiences, but Mavrodes argues that we have experiences and convictions of which similar comments can be made. We have sense experiences which admit of no doubt. But not all our convictions are of this kind. Mavrodes claims that when he appreciates the validity of deriving one proposition from another, "I *see*, somehow or other, that these propositions match the form I know as *modus ponens*, and that seeing seems to me to have no room in it for error. This is the sort of thing which I may use in checking something else; it is not now something which I think of checking" (p. 257).

These cases are different, but in none of them should we look in the direction Mavrodes would have us look. In the case of the mode of inference we call *modus ponens* we may well make a mistake in identifying a form of argument as *modus ponens*. No appeal to any kind of *seeing* would constitute an appeal against the mistake. This is because what we are appealing to is not an experience, but a *practice*. What Mavrodes refers to as seeing "somehow or other that propositions match the form *modus ponens*" is nothing other than the mastery of a mode of arguing. In a given case, the 'matching' may be seen in a flash, but whether what is seen is the case depends on its correspondence to the mode of argument in question. The correctness of such intuitions can only be established by reference to something independent of the intuitions themselves. Again, the sense of saying that an experience is of God does not depend simply on the fact that the experience leaves no room for doubt in the person who has the experience. This is shown by the fact that if spiritual fruits were absent or if the experience diverged from Scripture, Christians, Saint Teresa included, would not say the experience is of God. Suppose that someone else named Teresa says that she has had an experience which leaves her in no doubt that it is Christ's presence, but her thoughts and actions in relation to others are shabby and inconsiderate. We would not say that *the same* experience in the two Teresas had different

imports. Rather, we would deny that the second Teresa had had an experience of Christ.

What is fundamental is our practices. Within these practices certain things, facts among them, stand firm and are not questioned. But they are not questioned, not because of their form, or because of an experience we have with respect to them. Their certainty is held fast by what surrounds them in the practice.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, since our practices vary, as do the certainties which may be a feature of them, no *general* epistemological account can be given of all of them. Teresa's problems cannot be assimilated to issues concerning certainties in mathematics or concerning empirical facts. That is why, unsurprisingly, further problems await us when we turn to the contexts in which revelations from God are spoken of.

#### IV

In our discussion of Mavrodes' paper, we saw that much of his argument turned on his view that what he calls principles must always admit of doubt and therefore stand in need of a further criterion to determine whether, in fact, the principle is a true one. Mavrodes applied this argument even to the most basic teachings of Scripture and the Church. In other words, he argues that such justifications never come to an end. For him, we reach bedrock in having certain experiences which rule out the possibility of doubt. He is rightly impressed by the fact that within our procedures there is much that we know without procedures. As Renford Bambrough points out, "Sometimes we may claim to know the truth of a logical or mathematical proposition and to be able to establish the truth of a proposition by a proof. But when we take somebody over the steps of the proof, we expect him to understand the steps of the proof, one by one, without asking for a *proof* that each step is valid. If he does challenge a particular step, and we are able to offer some further explanation or demonstration of the soundness of the step, the procedure must nevertheless come to an end at some point at which he either recognises that there is a valid step or cannot follow the proof. At the point at which the procedures of proof and explanation come to an end we are still disposed to ask 'How do we know this? How do we know that there is a valid step when there is no proof that the step is valid?' It is then natural to answer that it is by *intuition* that we know this."<sup>11</sup> Mavrodes would appeal to a certain kind of *experience*, a certain kind of *seeing*. But we can call such an appeal what Wittgenstein called the appeal to intuition: "an unnecessary shuffle."<sup>12</sup> The remark comes in a discussion of following a rule. It shows that the appeal to intuition must be in the context of the mastery of a skill, or the ability to go on in the same way. What constitutes going on in the same way shows itself in our agreement in practice. It is not a personal matter. Failure to grasp the practice would have obvious consequences for the life of the individuals

concerned: for example, they would not be able to count, and no appeal to private intuition would save them.

In another example, Bambrough says: "I could measure the wavelength of the light reflected by the surface of the pillar-box, and could then determine its colour by making use of the known correlations between the wavelengths of light reflected from the surfaces of objects and the perceived colours of the objects. But I ordinarily know that a pillar-box is red without the use of such a procedure. What is more, I can only use that or any other procedure for establishing that the pillar-box is red if, and because, I can know the same thing without the use of any procedure" (p. 203). Once again, however, an appeal to the isolated experience of the individual casts no illumination on how this is possible. The possibility of distinguishing between red and other colours depends on our *common* reactions, reactions in which we find we agree. There is no procedure by which such agreement is reached. It is an agreement which shows itself in our shared reactions, in our practice. Failure to participate in the practice has obvious consequences as in the case of mathematics. There, failure to follow the rule meant that a person would be unable to count. In the case of colours, failure results in calling a person colour-blind. In both cases, the possibility of knowing something with or without a procedure only makes sense in the contexts of our practice. The final epistemological appeal is to practice, not to isolated experience.

The temptation to think that atomistic experiences are the final court of appeal is, as we have seen, a strong one. It is not surprising, therefore, to see it feature prominently in discussions of comparative mystical revelations in different religions. For various religious motives it has been claimed that all mystical experiences, no matter to what religion they belong, refer, ultimately, to the same undifferentiated reality. My interest is not in such religious motivations but in the epistemological issues raised by the claims made. In one way or another, these concern the relation of language to mystical experience.

In the first section of the paper we emphasised that our understanding of spirituality gets its sense in the context of Scripture and the teachings of the Church. The connection between Saint Teresa's experiences and this context is not contingent. In other words, it is only in the context of considerations of spirituality that it makes sense to speak of her experiences as mystical. The idea of an experience which is free from all such contexts is not a notion of a religious experience at all, but a product of philosophical confusion. A typical example of such confusion is expressed by W. T. Stace when he says: "It is probably impossible...to isolate 'pure' experience. Yet although we may never be able to find sense experience completely free of any interpretation, it can hardly be doubted that a sensation is one thing and its conceptual interpretation is another thing."<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Stace does not give an exam-

ple of a sensation which does not fall under any description, nor could he find one since the idea is incoherent. The confusion persists in his remark about the probable impossibility of finding a 'pure' experience. A thesis which involves searching for the unintelligible is presented as though it were the results of testing an intelligible hypothesis. Why is 'pure' in inverted commas? The normal use of the word would call up its opposite 'impure,' which, in the context under discussion, would concern the distinction between purity and impurity in claims to have had mystical experiences, a distinction which only makes sense within the context of religious mystical traditions.

Katz, in his extremely interesting essay, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," while recognising these conceptual issues at times, often falls into the same trap of presenting his logical thesis about the unintelligibility of 'pure experiences,' as though it were the result of a quasi-empirical enquiry. First, here is Katz propounding what appears to be a conceptual, that is, logical thesis: "To get a clearer conception of what this paper is after when it speaks of the issue of 'Why mystical experiences are the experiences they are,' let me state the single epistemological assumption that has exercised my thinking and which has forced me to undertake the present investigation: *There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences*" (pp. 25-26). Second, he goes on immediately as though he had arrived at his thesis by some kind of empirical survey of experiences: "Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary form of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways" (p. 26). Third, his conclusion shows the unresolved tension in his thinking: "The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty" (pp. 25-26). The last sentence shows why Katz has not pressed the epistemological issues far enough. The conclusion is not reached by testing two possibilities, either of which could be true, but by a philosophical reflection which reveals the inherent confusion in a certain suggestion. It is extremely important to note that the notion of 'pure experience' being rejected is itself a philosophical conception of 'purity.'

Here are some other examples of Katz presenting conceptual issues as though they are the results of some kind of empirical enquiry on the basis of which hypotheses are formed: "The absence of the kinds of experience of unity one often, but mistakenly, associates with mysticism, even as the 'essence of mysticism,' in the Jewish mystical context, is *very* strong evidence that pre-experiential conditioning affects the nature of the experience one actually has" (pp. 34-35). The trouble surrounding the previous use of 'pure' here reoccurs with the use of 'conditioning.' If that word is not to be used with a generality which would render it meaningless, there must be some purchase to a distinction between 'conditioned' and 'free.' Katz is calling the conditions for the possibility of discourse a matter of conditioning and thus

robbing this distinction of its meaning. On such a view, learning to speak at all would be a matter of conditioning. As a result a new word would have to be found for a distinction we want to draw between speakers who are conditioned or pressured in certain respects and those who are not.

At other times Katz wants to resist the appeal of such catch-all explanations as 'social pressure.' But his critical response to them still does not press the logical issues involved. He asks: "is it not more reasonable to relate the formative milieu to the experience itself and then read the available evidences as confirmation of the milieu-affecting character of the totality of the experience, rather than accounting for the material in more artificial ways?" (p. 36). The reference to 'formative milieu' as a factor *relating* to experience is question-begging, since no account could be given of what 'experience' means here without presupposing the very 'formative milieu' with which the experiences are to be contingently related. Again and again, these loose formulations of the problem are repeated. Thus Katz: "The evidence we have considered to this point [shows that] mystical experience is 'over-determined' by its socio-religious milieu: as a result of his process of intellectual acculturation in its broadest sense, the mystic brings to his experience a world of concepts, images, symbols, and values which shape as well as colour the experience he eventually and actually has" (p. 46). These remarks perpetuate the very dualism between experience and concepts which Katz takes himself to be fighting against. Again: "There is no substantive evidence to suggest that there is any pure consciousness *per se* achieved by these various common mystical practices, e.g., fasting, yoga, and the like" (p. 57). As we shall see, there is a proper place for the comparison of experiences to determine whether we can talk of *the same* experiences in apparently different religious contexts. Katz's paper ably demonstrates the importance of such comparisons. But *these* comparisons have nothing to do with trying to discover cases of pure consciousness. I am arguing that nothing *could* count as the discovery of *that*. So it will not do simply to say "there is no evidence that there is any 'given' which can be disclosed without the imposition of the mediating conditions of the knower" (p. 59).

At other places, regrettably fewer, Katz recognises that what is at issue is not a matter of relating language to experience as though they were separate categories, but, rather, a matter of seeing the conditions under which it makes sense to speak of mystical experiences at all. It would not make sense to attribute mystical experiences to animals because they do not engage in ways of life in which such experiences have their sense. As Katz says, "This failure to investigate or to consider in one's investigation of mystical experience the *conditions of experience* in general and the specific conditions of religious/mystical experience in particular is a deficiency which skews the entire discussion in ways which distort any and all conclusions or suggestions made" (p. 32).



When we turn to what Katz says of these conditions of experience, however, further problems await us. The conditions, by which is often meant the language in which the mystical experience is expressed, are said to be an *interpretation* of the experience. So far, it may be said, Katz is rejecting the notion of a 'preinterpretative' experience. Such a notion has been described by Peter Moore in his essay "Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique" as follows: "References to features of experience unaffected by the mystic's prior beliefs, expectations, or intentions. These constitute raw experience (a less tendentious term than 'pure' experience)" (p. 109). As we have seen, for much of the time, Katz thinks that we dismiss the possibility of 'raw experience' as the result of amassing evidence, whereas I think we come to see by philosophical reflection that the notion is a confused one. But, given that the notion is put aside, Katz thinks that what has to be recognised is that religious experience is always mediated via some interpretation or other. Interpretation can occur, he argues, in at least four different contexts: "(a) the first-person report of the mystic; (b) the mystic's 'interpretation' of his own experience at some later, more reflective, and mediated, stage; (c) the 'interpretation' of third persons within the same tradition (Christians on Christian mysticism); (d) the process of interpretation by third persons in other traditions (Buddhists on Christianity); and so on" (p. 23). These contexts raise questions peculiar to each one, but, for the moment, let us consider Katz's assumption that the only alternative to the unintelligibility or absence of pure or raw experience, is *interpreted* experience. This assumption, it seems to me, is confused. Interpretations are something which are called for, but they are not called for in all circumstances. In a television game, contestants were shown photographs of objects from unusual angles. They had to interpret the photographs to identify the objects photographed. But when I pick up a cup or a knife and fork I am not interpreting anything. I simply pick up a cup, a knife and a fork. There is no doubt, no difficulty, nothing which calls for an interpretation. The same is true in religious contexts, including those concerning the revelations of mystical experiences. Unless something counts as being a cup, a knife, a fork, nothing could count as an interpretation of a photograph as being one of a cup, knife or fork. Despite important differences, unless there is something which counts as being 'of Christ,' there could be no interpretations of whether something is of Christ or not. Sometimes interpretations will be called for and sometimes not. To say that interpretations are *always* involved is to rob the term 'interpretation' of its meaning. Katz's assumption has far-reaching consequences which need exploring.

## V

What follows from the claim that all religious experiences are interpretations? Peter Moore is unable to give a satisfactory account of religious truth. It

appears, sometimes, that he recognises the distinction between experiences which need interpreting within a religion and those which do not. He says, "the mystic is not like one who infers the existence of fire from the appearance of smoke when he has no independent rule of inference justifying the link between the two, but like one who 'infers' smoke from the visual seeing of smoke—that is, like one who sees the smoke directly. While it is certainly the case that some mystical claims are presented as inferences (valid or invalid as the case may be), others no less certainly refer to perceptions of objects or realities immediately apprehended" (p. 125). But, then, Moore goes on to say: "Now to affirm this sense of immediacy or objectivity does not amount to a claim that mystical experience is self-authenticating; it does not imply certainty regarding the true status or correct interpretation of the experience" (p. 125). Moore is running different issues together at this point. To say that an experience is not self-authenticating is not to say that all language concerning an experience is an interpretation. It is to claim that the sense of Saint Teresa's experience, for example, is unintelligible apart from the wider religious context in which it occurs, something which Saint Teresa recognised and Katz acknowledges. But it does not follow from this that any language which Saint Teresa uses in testifying to her experience must be called an interpretation of that experience. This would be like arguing that because any statement has its sense from the language in which it is made, it follows that every statement is an interpretation of something. In Katz's argument this confusion is compounded by the fact that he refers to the whole language as though it is itself an interpretation of something. Within a language, interpretations may be called for on different occasions, but the language itself is not an interpretation.

At this point, it is essential to remember the two senses of criteria outlined in the first section of the paper: criteria which settle something, and criteria which elucidate that which is already settled. The obvious difference between mathematics and colours on the one hand, and religious issues, on the other hand, is that what is meant by 'already settled' in the latter context does not have the generality so characteristic of our dealings with mathematics and colours. This does not mean, however, that there are no paradigms within different religions which, for their adherents, are the touchstones of truth. To forsake these would not be to correct a mistake within the faith, but to lose the faith. Such would be the case in Christianity with the belief that Christ has died for our sins. Even here it has to be admitted that there are different conceptions of what saying that amounts to. In some cases, these differences may be called different interpretations which can live with each other. In other cases, the clashes are between different conceptions of what religious truth comes to in this context. Embracing one of these conceptions as true is itself a religious act. We speak of confessing the truth, bearing witness to the

truth, and so on. To ask for a determination of religious truth which will be non-confessional in character is to ask for an illusion.

As we have seen, mystics may revise what they say about an experience they have had as a result of their own further reflections about it. Others in the Church may also bring them to think differently about what has happened to them. Katz emphasizes the importance of teachers who help one not to follow false paths. They feature prominently in any religion of note (see p. 42f). Reflectiveness is a sign of seriousness. This reflectiveness, though it occurs in a religious context, will include what is known about human affairs, what has been established in other contexts of human endeavour, and so on. Yet, the very complexity of the religious scene leads Katz, in a Kantian manner, to divorce the very possibility of truth from it. This is because the conceptual parameters of the various religions are treated by him as though they were categories which must be distinguished from something called 'ultimate reality.' At the very outset of his paper he says: "it is *not* being argued either that mystical experiences do not happen, or that what they claim may not be true, only that there can be no grounds for deciding this question, i.e., of showing that they are true *even* if they are, in fact, true" (p. 22).

For whom is Katz speaking in this remark? If he is saying that philosophy cannot determine matters of religious truth within or between religions, I agree. But he seems to be making a more ambitious claim than that; a sceptical claim concerning the impossibility of showing what is true in these contexts. Various believers, however, claim to be showing just that. If philosophy denies this, then, after all, it is claiming to be able to determine such matters to this extent, at least. Philosophy has the task of exploring what talk of truth comes to in such contexts. I have argued that this is a confessional matter. This must not be identified with the confused thesis I have never held, but which is often attributed to me, namely, that only those who confess understand. Nevertheless, to confess is to appropriate.<sup>14</sup> I may understand something of what a mystic tells me, but not appropriate it. I do not confess it as the truth. (Notice how more natural it is to speak of confessing the truth here, than to speak of assigning truth-values to propositions). In Katz's argument, which combines pluralism with Kant's metaphysical categories, truth drops out as unknowable. But, then, as we have seen, something of immense importance to the mystics drops out of consideration. Saint Teresa's faith is not a second-best to some philosophical paradigm of knowledge. To say she had faith in Christ is not to say that she was not certain that Christ had visited her. Philosophers have to pay attention to such concepts of certitude in confessional contexts.

What prevents Katz from doing this is his Kantian assumption that there are "ontological claims that lie beneath and are necessary correlates of language" (p. 52). What needs reiterating is that language gives the sense of

distinctions between the real and the unreal in various contexts of discourse. It is not itself a hypothesis about some so-called ontological realm. Given his metaphysical assumptions all Katz can say is that different sets of conditions which make certain experiences possible leave us with no way of knowing whether these conditions refer successfully or not to reality. On my argument, this metaphysical notion of reference has no context of application.

Given Katz's Kantian pluralism, certain critical work which should be done is hampered. For example, he quite rightly wants to combat the assumption that every time the word 'reality' is used people mean the same thing. Among conceptions of reality propounded, Katz mentions those of Plato, Neoplatonism, Jewish mysticism, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Richard Jefferies, Marxism and Freudianism. This list runs together religions with philosophical and other kinds of theory. This simply compounds the difficulties. The theories are open to philosophical criticisms of various kinds. For example, while Marxism and Freudianism may capture, critically, certain aspects of religion, their reductionist aspirations with respect to it can be shown to be conceptually confused.<sup>15</sup> One may want to question the far-reaching assumption that religions should be treated as though they were theories, of a metaphysical or any other kind.

Furthermore, Katz's Kantian pluralism is inconsistent with his claim that his enquiry is not normative. He says: "Hopefully it has been made clear that we do not hold one mystical tradition to be superior or 'normative' as, for example, did Stace and Zaehner (and in opposite directions, one might add, with Stace favouring monism and Zaehner theism). Nor have we any particular dogmatic position to defend in this discussion" (p. 65). Can this claim be sustained? On the other hand, Katz makes what would be an important grammatical remark if it could be divorced from its Kantian associations: "These constructive conditions of consciousness produce the grounds on which mystical experience is possible at all" (p. 63). In other words, it is only in religious contexts that we can see what is meant by 'contact with the divine.' But, then, Katz goes on to say, "We must heed the warning that linguistic intentionality does not generate or guarantee the existence of the 'intentional object' (p. 63). But, as we have seen, Saint Teresa and others like her, *do* claim to be in contact with the divine. If we agree, then that shows, in a confessional context, where we stand in relation to them. Katz's pluralism seems to want to prohibit such testimony. If this is true, his pluralistic agnosticism is indeed a normative imposition on the world's religions. Because the truth of a religion is not something philosophy can settle, this does not mean that philosophy is absolved from enquiring what 'truth' comes to in such contexts.

The issue of the truth of a religion or the genuineness of an experience is often closely linked to the issue of whether believers within the same religion or believers in different religions share *the same* experience. Katz's essay is

a valuable warning against an easy acquiescence in establishing similarities wherever similar forms of words are used. For example, whenever we see different religions speak of 'losing the self' or of 'nothingness,' we cannot take it for granted that they mean the same by these words. Katz makes a strong case for important differences between Christianity and Buddhism in these contexts (see pp. 38-39). He brings out these differences by showing how the uses which these words have are different. Given these differences, what we mean by religious experiences in these contexts is correspondingly different.

The argument, however, is a two-edged sword. If it is by appeal to *practice* that the sameness or difference between experiences is to be determined, it follows that if the same words can be used in different ways, so different words can be used in the same way. Thus, if, despite surface linguistic similarities, the religious experiences may turn out to be different, so, despite surface linguistic differences, the religious experiences may turn out to be the same. It was this latter possibility, rightly or wrongly, which enabled Simone Weil to claim intimations of Christianity among the Greeks and which enables others to speak of Christ in the Buddha or of the Buddha in Christ. A Christian, discerning a spiritual equivalence in a different religion identifies it with Christ, even if it occurred before Jesus was born. After all, Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am." When genuine spiritual differences are discerned, some may say that there is something to learn from them, so extending their notions of spirituality, while others may deny this. While philosophy cannot resolve such matters, it tries to clarify what 'resolution' comes to in such matters. We can see that whether religious experiences are the same is itself a religious question, and whether those who receive them are worshipping the same God is itself a matter for religious judgement. To embrace Katz's Kantian pluralism with its agnostic implications obscures these facts.

Of course, the religious scene is far more varied than I have suggested. Outside the major world religions are the innumerable cults which are offshoots of them, along with highly individualistic visions of transcendental truth. One visit to the Bodhi Tree Bookstore in Hollywood will confirm the fact beyond argument. I say this in order to comment on Ninian Smart's observation that "it ought to be noted that there is a lot of evidence about experiences which hit people out of the blue, even though they do not belong to a given tradition. In the case of conversions, often the experiences occur at the frontier between non-belonging and the belonging to a given tradition. So the first conclusion we can draw is that, though we should start with traditions in pinning down religious experience, we should not confine religious experience to this area" (p. 11). It is important to note that although a person may not belong to a tradition, the assessment of the experience that

person claims to have will be, normally, from the perspective of some tradition, ranging from the world-wide to the esoteric. If I may allow myself one judgement: the more cut-off the experience is likely to be from any religious context, the more bizarre the testimony is likely to be. Hence the plenitude among the seers of the transcendental of raconteurs of the staggeringly banal. The fact that I must speak for myself on such matters is an indication of what religious responsibility in the search for truth involves.

Looking at Katz's Kantian pluralistic conclusions, we can commend him for his determination not to overlook evidence or to force it into preconceived categories. On the other hand, he says that his approach does not begin with "*a priori* assumptions about the nature of ultimate reality—whatever particular traditional theological form this metaphysical assumption takes (such *a priori* assumptions are common to almost all non-pluralistic accounts)" (p. 66). But Saint Teresa is certain that she was visited by Christ. Philosophy may not be able to confirm this claim, but neither can it show that it is in some way improper for her to say it.

Katz's pluralism is based on the far-reaching assumption that religious beliefs are like metaphysical beliefs in that there is no way of knowing which of them is true. But this view is itself a metaphysical thesis which Katz holds. Meantime, rival religious judgements continue to be made regarding true and false ways. There are worries about what is of God and what is of the devil; worries within religion and between religions in this respect. Take away the concern for testing the truth of revelations and we take away the seriousness of the religious search at the same time. Katz's pluralism threatens to obscure this important aspect of religion. Other philosophical views obscure it even more. As if the devils of which religions speak were not enough, they invent a devil of their own. No method of assessment can be used in religious reflection, since it will be attributed to the work of this new devil. Worse, we cannot know what is his work and what is not.

If this is how philosophers are to understand the complex relations within and between religions where the truth of revelations is concerned, it is little wonder that, for them, the question of the relation of language and revelation does indeed become one devil of a problem.

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#### NOTES

1. Nelson Pike, "On Mystic Visions as Sources of Knowledge" in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* edited by Steven T. Katz, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. All the essays discussed and the page numbers quoted are from this collection unless otherwise indicated.

2. I am not entering the dispute about whether anything from the devil should be called a revelation. This avoids the necessity of speaking of 'alleged' revelations without, I think, affecting the substance of my argument.

3. *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, translated and edited by E. Allison Peers, Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960, Chapter 27, p. 249. Quoted by George Mavrodes, "Real v. Deceptive Mystical Experiences," pp. 238-39.

4. *Ibid.*, Chapter 29, pp. 269-70. Quoted by Mavrodes on pp. 239-40.

5. *Ibid.*, Chapter 7, p. 100. Quoted by Mavrodes on p. 240.

6. *Ibid.*, Chapter 25, p. 239. Quoted by Mavrodes on p. 241.

7. *Ibid.*, Chapter 25, p. 237. Quoted by Mavrodes on p. 242.

8. I owe this distinction between 'settling something' and the elucidation of what is 'already settled' to Stanley Cavell. See *The Claim of Reason*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York, Oxford University Press, 1979.

9. For MacIntyre's article 'Visions' see *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. G. N. Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, London: SCM Press, 1955.

10. This central contention is not argued at length in the context of this paper, but see Part One, pp. 38-93 of my *Faith After Foundationalism*, London: Routledge, 1988.

11. Renford Bambrough, "Intuition and the Inexplicable," p. 202. Bambrough develops his argument in ways I would not follow, but I cannot discuss them here.

12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1988, Pt. I, par. 213.

13. W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, Philadelphia, 1960; London: MacMillan, 1961, p. 31. Quoted by Steven T. Katz in "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," pp. 27-28.

14. I think there is the danger of this confusion in Ninian Smart's essay, "Understanding Religious Experience," see p. 1.

15. For such criticisms see my *Religion Without Explanation*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976.