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The Challenge of Mysticism: a Primer from a Christian Perspective

Daniel Spencer¹ 

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the relevance of the study of mysticism for Christian analytic theologians and philosophers of religion. I begin with a brief consideration of some reasons Christian academics might be reluctant to enter this field, and indicate that, somewhat surprisingly, the study of mysticism is something but seldom addressed in Christian analytic circles. With this background in place, I proceed to the primary two sections of the article. Section I deals with demarcating mysticism: for the purposes of this article alone, an experience will count as mystical if and only if it is strongly unitive, transcends everyday consciousness, and (allegedly) conveys epistemic certainty as to the veracity of the insights acquired. These three criteria are discussed in some depth. Section II turns to the challenge mysticism in this sense might present to the Christian philosopher or theologian. I argue that the phenomenon of mysticism might be seen plausibly to imply one of two conclusions, both of which appear to be unpalatable for the Christian. First, it might suggest certain metaphysical views which *prima facie* call key tenets of orthodox Christianity into question. Secondly, mystical experience might be understood as the ‘inner meaning’ of Christianity which renders the better part of orthodox Christian belief equally problematic (as evidenced in three Christian mystics I discuss). I then conclude with a reflection on how the discussion might proceed, suggesting once more that Christian analytic theologians and philosophers of religion have scarcely begun to ask the relevant questions, let alone answer them in any persuasive manner.

Keywords Mysticism · Philosophy of mysticism · Analytic theology · Philosophy of religion · Christian mysticism · Comparative mysticism · Comparative religion

✉ Daniel Spencer
dhs2@st-andrews.ac.uk

¹ St Mary’s College, The School of Divinity, University of St Andrews, South Street, St Andrews KY16 9JU, UK

Introduction

While it would certainly be incorrect to imply that the study of mystical experience has in recent years penetrated into the mainstream of academic consciousness, a noticeable surge of interest in the topic has made itself acutely felt nonetheless (Stoeber 2015). Such scholarly approaches to mysticism are by no means new: inasmuch as the investigation of mystical experience may be isolated as a distinct category open to the various fields of academic inquiry, it would be fair to say that research into this area began in earnest at the turn of the twentieth century with R. M. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901) and William James's timeless *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).¹ It would be difficult, indeed, to state with confidence precisely when, or if, scholarly interest in mysticism reached its zenith; it might be more accurate rather to view it as a continuous undercurrent in academic psychology, philosophy, and religious studies which looked poised to surface only in proportion to the eminence of the writer in question.² Whatever our judgement on this matter, however, two things at least are abundantly clear. First, mysticism as an object of serious scholarly investigation has been with us for some time now, and, secondly, it is here to stay.³

As it happens, and more immediately relevant to the primary purpose of this paper, a third item is equally clear which ought, at the very least, to give Christian analytic theologians and philosophers of religion pause. I am talking about the very plain fact that any survey of the recent literature surrounding mysticism will reveal that few such Christians are meaningfully engaging with or contributing to this vibrant conversation.⁴ This is all the more surprising given that there is, as we shall see, an obvious apologetic issue at play, namely, that non-Christian religious experience is often cited as a significant reason to call into question the finality of Christ, the uniqueness of the Christian faith, various Christian doctrines, and so on. At present, my own sense is that the reason behind this absence of Christian analytic engagement in the field is largely twofold. First, and most obviously, the sorts of things talked about here often fall distinctly outside the purview of historical orthodoxy. Thus, the

¹ Cf. Lewis and Griffiths 1984, 293. We might also keep in mind Dean Inge's 1899 Brampton Lectures, *Christian Mysticism*, as well as Evelyn Underhill's 1911 classic *Mysticism*.

² E.g., Carl Jung, W. T. Stace, Mircea Eliade, respectively (James notwithstanding). The extent to which Aldous Huxley's writings (1) may be considered 'academic' and (2) influenced academic writing on mysticism may be debated. As for (1), it would be difficult to sustain that his writings were *merely* popular, though, by the same token, it is clear that he is not writing as an academic for academics. (2) Certainly his influence in non-specialist circles was immense, and were it not for his impact on society at large, I doubt very much that Zaehner, for instance, would have ever felt himself compelled to venture into comparative mysticism to the extent that he did (cf. Zaehner 1980, ix). Similarly, Houston Smith's friendship with Huxley cannot have been of trifling significance (see Smith 2000, 5–7).

³ John Paul Reardon 2012 considers that scholarly approaches to mysticism found their impetus in two developments in particular, namely, the post-Enlightenment "turn to the subject" and the genesis of the formal discipline of religious studies (5–25).

⁴ Michael Stoeber is the primary active counterexample to this rule. The contributions of Nelson Pike deserve special mention, too, but his final work on mysticism was published nearly thirty years ago now (Pendergraft 2011). It would be remiss not to tip my hat in the direction of certain theological historians (e.g., Bernard McGinn) and comparative theologians (e.g., Francis X. Clooney), however the extent to which these might count as exercises in *analytic* philosophy or theology is far from clear. Similar questions may be asked of Leonard Hummel's (2014) somewhat tentative discussion of the use of entheogens and Ron Cole-Turner's (2014) introductory piece in the same issue, as well as John Paul Reardon's 2012 dissertation on R. C. Zaehner. In the philosophy of mysticism more generally an appreciable amount has been written, though, as Richard H. Jones laments, comprehensive treatments of the topic are still exceedingly hard to come by (see Jones 2016, ix–x).

trained analytic theologian, specializing as she does in some aspect of specifically Christian theology, will have little concern for, say, the extent to which religious or cultural prejudice might shape the phenomenological content of the Zen Buddhist's mystical experience. Whatever this mystic is doing, the thought might run, it is not Christian theology, and so we can safely disregard it and continue to pursue avenues of research which explicitly pertain to elements of the Christian tradition. Similarly for the Christian philosopher of religion, defending the intelligibility of the Trinity or responding to the problem of evil requires no critical engagement with non-Christian paradigms of spirituality. One corollary of such specialization is also worth mentioning: the Christian analytic theologian or philosopher might seldom feel she has the competence to enter the fray of comparative mysticism even if the interest is there.

Secondly—and this is more speculative—I am inclined to think that a good number of Christian academics simply do not take certain types of mystical experience very seriously. Consider the claim Aldous Huxley famously made while under the influence of mescaline: ‘The Beatific Vision, Sat Chit Ananda, Being-Awareness-Bliss—for the first time I understood, not on the verbal level, not by inchoate hints or at a distance, but precisely and completely what those prodigious syllables referred to’ (1994a, 18). I may be wrong (I’m sure I am not), but my guess would be that many Christian philosophers would simply dismiss this as too fatuous to entertain for even a moment. However ingenious, however subtle the defence offered on Huxley’s behalf, the thought might run, the statement *prima facie* seems so preposterous and out of touch with standard theological convictions that one need not offer a serious response, nor, for that matter, deign to consider how a man of such humble pedigree might come to hold such a view. Or, as a highly distinguished Christian theologian once suggested to me, the proper response to such claims is to shrug the shoulders, say, ‘Some people believe crazy things,’ and move on. To be fair, it may be that in this case the involvement of a psychoactive chemical is largely responsible for the dismissive reaction; still, even the briefest of forays into the history of mysticism will reveal that Huxley is probably not too far from the norm—both in terms of the phenomenological content of his mystical experience and his use of an intoxicant to achieve his desired end (Smith 2000, 18–24; Jones 2019, 756–761).

Whether or not these remarks are on target, however, the fact of the matter remains: Christian philosophers and analytic theologians are not thinking much about mysticism.⁵ With this (I think necessary) background in place, we can proceed more explicitly to what I want to accomplish in this paper. My central aim will be to articulate in some depth why I think certain varieties of mysticism ought to be taken very seriously by Christian analytic theologians and philosophers of religion. I want to suggest that mysticism is, in fact, so significant an issue that their conspicuous lack of involvement in this area might be said to represent, as it were, a vocational failure on the part of Christian scholarship. In many ways, then, this paper is intended as a call for analytic theologians and philosophers of religion to join an ongoing conversation which could sorely benefit from their input. Alas, a more

⁵ This is so even when a detailed discussion of mysticism would be particularly apposite. For instance, in Tom McCall’s (2020) rejoinder to ‘apocalyptic’ interpreters of Gal. 2:20, there is an unmistakable sense throughout that a word on mysticism is on the horizon, but it never comes; likewise, Julianne Chung (2020) moves in a very mystical direction yet, when dealing with mysticism proper, confines herself to a footnote and passing remark about mystics’ emphasis on ‘the importance of aesthetic experiences of the divine’ (p. 117). In both cases, some engagement with the philosophical and comparative literature surrounding mysticism would surely prove useful.

constructive contribution of my own to serve as an example of what future Christian engagement with mysticism might look like will fall outside the scope of this paper; I do, however, hope that some hints in this direction will become manifest all the same. To keep this paper tolerably short, some of my comments are fated to be of a rather general nature; still, I expect that what I have to say will prove sufficient for demonstrating the importance of the present subject. It only remains to be stated (if it has not been made sufficiently clear already) that I shall be writing as a practising Christian. It is not my intention to offer a totally ‘unbiased’ appraisal of the current debates in the philosophy of mysticism (if such a feat is even possible), but only to begin to assess the situation as one with various Christian convictions which, I am afraid, cannot help but influence the general tendency of my arguments.⁶

Setting the Parameters

In order to see why the investigation of mystical experience might prove to be of importance to Christian philosophers and theologians, it would be helpful first to get clear on what we mean by mysticism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no single agreed upon definition of the term. Indeed, the words *mystic*, *mystical*, and *mysticism* are applied to such a wide variety of phenomena that it is hard to escape the impression that the exact nuances of meaning vary from person to person. Evelyn Underhill might have been writing today when she said that ‘mysticism’

applied to the performance of mediums and the ecstasies of saints, to ‘menticulture’ and sorcery, to dreamy poetry and mediaeval art, to prayer and palmistry, the doctrinal excesses of Gnosticism, and the tepid speculation of Cambridge Platonists—even, according to William James, to the higher branches of intoxication—soon ceases to have any useful meaning (Gellman 2018, 4).

Jerome Gellman is thus right to insist that our definition of ‘mysticism’ or ‘mystical experience’ needs to be largely stipulative—perhaps even somewhat arbitrary (Gellman 2019, §1; Gellman 2018, 3–4). In line with, it seems to me, a good many writers on mysticism (Jones 2016, 3–7), I will in this paper be using the word *mystical* (and related terms) to describe

Any state of consciousness which, phenomenologically, (a) is strongly unitive; (b) acquaints the subject with a ‘truth’ or reality unobtainable by ordinary sense perception, reasoning, or introspection; and (c) carries with it virtual certainty as to the veracity of the insight acquired.⁷

As it stands, this definition looks a little bare. Further elaboration on these three conditions will help to clear things up, however.

⁶ I am well aware that some may charge me with reintroducing ‘sectarian venom’ to the literature; I can only hope that my arguments are considered for their own merits rather than dismissed (or endorsed) for their conclusions alone (see Lewis and Griffiths 1984, 299 n. 1).

⁷ Cf. Gellman’s ‘narrow sense’ of ‘mystical experience’ (2019, §1.2). My criterion (c) is lacking from Gellman’s definition, but tallies with Stace’s “sense of objectivity or reality” (1961, 131) and William James’s ‘noetic quality’ (1985, 380), as well as with Jones’s ‘cognitive quality’ (2016, 6).

- (a) By *strongly unitive*, I mean that in the mystical experience there is a ‘phenomenological de-emphasis, blurring, or eradication of multiplicity’ (Gellman 2019, §1.2). While in normal waking consciousness a person experiences phenomenal objects as being other than oneself—a book, a mental state, or another’s presence, say—in a strongly unitive experience the subject-object distinction appears to collapse entirely. The multiplicity which seems so basic a feature of reality gives way to a state of awareness in which the ‘bonds of the personal nature of life seem to have fallen away from us and we experience an undivided unity,’ as Martin Buber was to express his ‘unforgettable experience’ (Buber 2002, 28). This narrows the semantic scope of the term *mysticism* considerably: assuming, for the moment, the legitimacy of the distinction between extrovertive mysticism, introvertive mysticism, and theistic mysticism, it will be noted that this strict ‘unity’ condition disqualifies many paradigmatic illustrations of theistic mysticism from counting as properly mystical *in this sense*. When Blossius writes of the soul ‘immersed in God and absorbed into him, [swimming], as it were, to and fro in the Godhead,’ while our conditions (b) and (probably) (c) are met, there is no indication that the mystic loses his sense of self or that the God/soul distinction becomes in any way blurred (Pike 1992, 8).⁸ This is, again, by no means to say that such an experience is not *in any way* mystical; it is only being ruled out of consideration here, working as we are with a quite restricted definition of mysticism. This qualification should be borne in mind throughout, as I categorically do not intend to suggest that every sort of unitive experience might pose problems for the Christian theologian. It is only those unitive experiences which involve the phenomenal evaporation of multiplicity I have in mind here.⁹
- (b) In the *Mundaka Upanishad*, we are told of two levels of knowledge, one higher and the other lower. The lower deals with the scriptures, as well as ‘phonetics, ritual, grammar, etymology, metre and astronomy’ (1.1.5).¹⁰ The higher, however, concerns mystic knowledge of Brahman, the ‘Imperishable’. ‘The one way,’ Zaehner explains, ‘is that of discursive reason—book learning, including the study of Scripture: the other is the intuitive apperception of what Scripture *really* means’ (1974, 116).¹¹ As the author of the *Mundaka Upanishad* sees it, through the *yoga* of self-surrender, detachment, and meditation, the seer may become acquainted with a truth which cannot be known simply by utilizing the faculties of sense or powers of reason and introspection—viz., the (strict) identity of the individual with the Absolute. ‘With senses and the mind withdrawn into the heart, let a wise man on Brahman’s raft cross over,’ the *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad* says (2.8): to behold Truth, everyday consciousness must be laid aside, our ‘lower’ ways of knowing jettisoned completely. It is due to this abandonment of ordinary modes of perception that mystical experience as we have characterized it always bears what James called a sense of *ineffability*. The experience is such that ‘no adequate report of its contents can be given in words.’ Its sense cannot

⁸ See Pike’s commentary on pp. 8–11, and compare with his section on ‘union without distinction’ (28–40).

⁹ An anonymous reviewer has helpfully pointed out in this connection Bernard McGinn’s distinction between ‘union of spirits’ and ‘union of indistinction.’ Needless to say, the union of spirits in which the soul is drawn ‘to friendship with God and fellowship with Jesus [in] a union that preserves the distinction between Creator and creature’ is not the sort of mystical experience I am concerned with here, and, in any case, is not likely to be objectionable from a Christian standpoint (McGinn 2012, 202).

¹⁰ For all Upanishadic references I have used Zaehner (ed.) (1992).

¹¹ See in this connection section II of the *Sāṅkhya Kārikā* (Krishna 1837).

- be ‘imparted or transferred to others’ but must, rather, be ‘directly experienced’ (James 1985, 380). This is only to be expected of an experience which language has not been equipped to address, operating as it does within the realm of ‘everyday’ consciousness (Jones 2016, 18; Newberg and Waldman 2006, 180). And so we are unsurprised by the frequent recurrence of adjectives like ‘secret’, ‘hidden’, or ‘esoteric’.
- (c) This final criterion is more straightforward. In mystic consciousness, the subject is ‘utterly convinced of the absolute truth of his experience as against the relative truth of our day-to-day knowledge’ (Zaehner 1974, 205). He simply ‘*knows* or *sees* that [the insight gained] is and must be true,’ and there will be very little anyone can say or do to convince the mystic otherwise (Zaehner 1972, 92).¹² Thus, of his own unanticipated experience of ‘cosmic consciousness’, R. M. Bucke (2002, 12) was able to say, ‘Among other things I did not come to believe, I *saw and knew* that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal,’ and so forth. As self-styled mystics of the Californian variety never tire of parroting, ‘Those who know don’t speak; those who speak don’t know’ (Lao-Tzu 2007, 56).¹³ Once enlightenment is hit, ‘you just know’—regardless, apparently, of the type of enlightenment under discussion.¹⁴

As we are using the term, then, we will count as *mystical* any state of consciousness which is (phenomenologically) strongly unitive, preternatural, and conveys epistemic certainty in the senses outlined briefly above.¹⁵ Keep in mind, too, the crucial word ‘phenomenologically’. This is so as not to assume from the outset that such experiences necessarily communicate *metaphysical* truth. While these mystical states of consciousness doubtless *appear* to be unitive, preternatural, and to impart noetic certainty, it may be appearance only (Pike 1992, 156). To return to Buber, phenomenologically the ‘ego’ really *does* dissolve into an ‘undivided unity.’ And, phenomenologically speaking, it is true that he ‘attained to a union with the primal being or the godhead,’ and that he believed this with every fibre of his being. But from this it does not follow that Buber and the ‘godhead’ are metaphysically identical—indeed, Buber tells us himself that to suggest this would be ‘an exaggeration no longer permitted to the responsible understanding’ (2002, 28).¹⁶ Nor, of course, does it follow that the ‘godhead’ really exists. The qualifier ‘phenomenologically’, then, will simultaneously ensure full justice is done to the mystic’s experience and allow for a sharp distinction between appearance and reality. And it will do so, moreover, without ruling out the possibility that mystical appearance *is* reality.

¹² Compare with James (1985, 423–24).

¹³ Cf. Lieh-Tzu (1990, 4.5 [p. 80]).

¹⁴ Cf. Zaehner 1972, 92: ‘mystical “certainties” do not always coincide.’

¹⁵ The last few lines of the first book of Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* may serve as a pithy illustration of a mystical experience in this sense (sūtras 47–51): “When pure perception without judicial action of the mind is reached (b), there follows the gracious peace of the inner self. In that peace, perception is unfailingly true (c). The object of this perception is other than what is learned from the sacred books, or by sound inference, since this perception is particular (b). The impress on the consciousness springing from this perception supersedes all previous impressions (b). When this impression ceases, then, since all impressions have ceased, there arises pure spiritual consciousness, with no seed of separateness left” (a). See Johnston (2014, 6).

¹⁶ For the whole of this remarkable passage, see the section titled ‘The Wordless Depths’ in *Between Man and Man* (in my edition pp. 28–29).

Mysticism and Christian Confession

With this characterization in hand, we can proceed to ask why a Christian theologian or philosopher might find mysticism in this sense to be of more than passing interest. To this end, I would like to take a closer look at two components of mystical experience in particular which were only hinted at above.

Metaphysical Implications

First, it strikes me that, once combined, (a), (b), and (c) together are almost certain to carry profound metaphysical import in the eyes of the mystic. To encounter a new mode of perception in which multiplicity utterly dissolves, accompanied by an overwhelming sense that ‘the experience is infinitely more real than anything that everyday experience has to offer’—the mystic would feel herself all but *forced* to accept that she had seen reality ‘as it really is’ (Zaehner 1972, 92). William James, hardly the first modern intellectual privileged enough to experience the ‘anesthetic revelation’, put it like this after ‘stimulating [his] mystical consciousness’ with ‘nitrous oxide and ether, especially nitrous oxide’:

Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity (James 1985, 387–88).¹⁷

Long after his experience, James tells us he still could not ‘wholly escape from its authority’ (Ibid., 388). Let me also quote from a (two-page-long) footnote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, as it is almost too perfect an illustration of the inevitability of drawing extravagant metaphysical conclusions from mystical experience:

Repetition of the experience finds it ever the same, and as if it could not possibly be otherwise. The subject resumes his normal consciousness only to partially and fitfully remember its occurrence, and to try to formulate its baffling import,—with only this consolatory afterthought: that he has known the oldest truth, and that he has done with human theories as to the origin, meaning, or destiny of the race. He is beyond instruction in ‘spiritual things.’...I know—as having known—the meaning of Existence (Ibid., 390–91).¹⁸

¹⁷ He also informs us that he knows ‘more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation.’ It would appear that more than just alcohol can make a man ‘one with truth’ (387).

¹⁸ The whole of footnote [2] spans from pp. 389–391. The quote is from one Benjamin Paul Blood’s pamphlet entitled *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*. Also of interest is James’s 1874 review of this pamphlet in *The Atlantic Monthly* (see reference list for details). In the same vein we may adduce the rather comical case of an acquaintance of George Orwell who at long last managed to put on paper his opium-induced insight into the ‘secret of the universe’: ‘The banana is big, but its skin is even bigger’ (quoted in Jones 2019, n38).

In many ways, this claim could scarcely be stronger. A moment of preternatural insight grants a sure vision of ‘the Open Secret of Being, (Ibid., 390)’ revealing that the entire history of human speculation, whether philosophical or theological, has ultimately been nothing more than a hollow attempt to approximate a truth which cannot be thought, but must rather be *experienced* first-hand. ‘Self-wise, puffed up with learning,’ the *Katha Upanishad* cautions, ‘some turn round and round imprisoned in unwisdom’s realm....For than all subtleties of reason He’s more subtle,—logic He defies. No reasoning, no logic can attain to this Idea’ (2.5, 8–9). But the ‘knot of ignorance’ *can* be cut—once the ‘Idea’ is realized, no room for doubt remains (*Mundaka Upanishad*, 2.1.10). One way or another, then, we are confronted with noetic certainty of a metaphysical ‘truth’ which makes a mockery of all ordinary human concepts and any theories that might stem therefrom. In mystic awareness, ‘there is no I, no you, no time, no space, no cause, no effect, no God, no devil, no good, no evil. If you must say anything at all, say *it is*’ (Zaehner 1974, 35).¹⁹ The problem with human existence, the root of ‘all our difficulties and troubles,’ as James put it, is not sin, death, or separation from the creator God. It is, rather, the *dualistic seeing* of everyday consciousness which mars our vision of Paradise and the possession of final beatitude—and that alone.

This is one reason the Christian might take mysticism seriously, or at least the beginnings of one. For if a mystical experience does, after all, give one genuine insight into the nature of reality, and if this insight proves to be monistic or pantheistic, then some basic assumptions the Christian faith takes for granted will have to be reassessed. At best, much Christian ‘truth’ will only be true according to what Parmenides somewhat condescendingly called ‘the opinions of mortals’ (Reale 1987, 87ff.), that is, the ‘lower knowledge’ of the *Mundaka Upanishad*. But from the perspective of absolute truth, orthodox Christianity would just be plain silly. More to the point, if some form of esoteric, mystical enlightenment or spiritual liberation is ‘the last end of every human being’ (Huxley 1994b, 2), then salvation in Christ *is not*—that is, so long as our understanding of Christ is informed by responsible New Testament exegesis.²⁰ Indeed, there is really no need for God at all, for ‘enlightenment does not come from without, but only from within. *The self is delivered through its own effort*’ (Zaehner 1964, 84).²¹ If the human *telos* is simply to enjoy a non-dual, mystic contemplation in the ‘eternal now’, what sense would it make to speak to or worship a personal God? At best, religious devotion could be of value only insofar as it helped one on to enlightenment.²²

Mysticism as Christian *Telos*?

But what if mystical knowing is precisely what the Christian faith is aimed at, what it is ‘really’ talking about? That is, in other words, might mysticism not be the hidden, inner meaning of Christianity which worship, scripture, and theology merely hint at as outward symbols or allegories? I now want to consider in some depth a few mystical experiences which have professing Christians as their subjects and seem to signal in precisely this direction. The hope is that if my foregoing remarks have left the Christian reader unmoved as to the necessity of

¹⁹ The original quotation has Parmenides in mind, so I have substituted ‘it is’ for Zaehner’s ‘*esti*’.

²⁰ For a recent case of what I take to be seriously irresponsible exegesis being used to substantiate a mystical interpretation of early Christianity, see Hunt 2019, 139–143.

²¹ Here Zaehner is quoting Heinrich Dumoulin’s *A History of Zen Buddhism*.

²² Hence, for instance, the slogan of the Theosophical Society: ‘There is no religion higher than Truth.’

engaging mysticism, this section will help to reify what exactly might be at stake: the ‘everyday’ understanding of the Christian faith itself.

Thomas Merton

Consider first this celebrated passage from Thomas Merton’s *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

Contemplation is not and cannot be a function of the external self. There is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular. We must remember that this superficial ‘I’ is not our real self. It is our ‘individuality’ and our ‘empirical self’ but it is not truly the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God. The ‘I’ that works in the world, thinks about itself, observes its own reactions and talks about itself is not the true ‘I’ that has been united to God in Christ. It is at best the vesture, the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown ‘self’ whom most of us never discover until we are dead. Our external, superficial self is not eternal, not spiritual. Far from it. This self is doomed to disappear as completely as smoke from a chimney. It is utterly frail and evanescent. Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this ‘I’ is really ‘not I’ and the awakening of the unknown ‘I’ that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself. It cannot even say ‘I’ with the assurance and the impertinence of the other one, for its very nature is to be hidden, unnamed, unidentified in the society where men talk about themselves and about one another. In such a world the true ‘I’ remains both inarticulate and invisible, because it has altogether too much to say—not one word of which is about itself (Merton 2007, 7–8).

There is a lot in this passage. Let us try to unpack some of the main points and draw out some potential implications.

- (α) We each have a self which is ‘external’, ‘superficial’, ‘not real’. This false self, it seems clear, is what we might call the ‘ego’: the self which ‘works in the world, thinks about itself, observes its own reactions and talks about itself.’²³ It is, Merton is good enough to tell us, the Cartesian self which thinks and concludes that it must therefore exist (Ibid., 8). This is the ‘biographical self’ whom Jung called ‘personality No. 1’, ‘the son of my parents who went to school’ (Jung 1993, 61). When I meet somebody new and tell her, ‘I am the parent of two children; I am a divinity student and I come from America,’ it is my false self speaking about itself. The true ‘I’ is something else entirely.
- (β) We each have a ‘real self’ that is quite distinct from the ego, a ‘deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation.’ It is hidden, mysterious, and it is *beyond observation and reflection*. It cannot say ‘I’ or comment upon

²³ Indeed, Merton later explicitly calls the ‘false self’ the ‘ego’: it is “the psychological individuality who forms a kind of mask for the inner and hidden self” (2007, 279ff.).

itself—it cannot ‘amass experiences, reflect on them, reflect on [it]self’ (Merton 2007, 279). Hence, it is unable to say “I want,” ‘I love,’ ‘I know,’ ‘I feel’ (Ibid., 282). ‘That is the Self: that is what should be known’ (*Māndūkya Upanishad*, 7).²⁴

- (γ) The ego has not been, nor ever will be, ‘united to God in Christ’ (i). It does not ‘subsist before the eyes of God’ (ii). Nor is it ultimately of much importance, for it is mortal, ‘unspiritual’, ‘doomed to disappear’ (iii). ‘The only true joy on earth,’ we are later told, ‘is to escape from the prison of our own false self (Merton 2007, 25). Coming from a Christian, these sayings might well appear baffling. Concerning (i), we can only imagine Jesus to have been a master of irony when he said, for example, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! ...I tell you, you are Peter...’ (Matt 16:17–18). For Peter *qua* ‘son of Jonah’, fisherman, and disciple of Christ is a ‘false self’, a self that ‘works in the world, thinks about itself,’ etc. As such, he is not, contrary to appearances, ‘united to God in Christ’—to be so united Peter must ‘return to [his] inviolate and eternal reality’ and ‘awaken as [his] true self’ (Merton 2007, 38–40). Moreover, (ii) it is only the ‘true Peter’ within that can ‘subsist before the eyes of God’: unless Merton is deeply confused about something,²⁵ it would appear to follow that God has no notion of what we non-contemplatives would erroneously and naively call the ‘real world’, that is, ‘the society where men talk about themselves and about one another.’ Poor, deluded Jesus, weeping at the tomb of his dear friend Lazarus! Didn’t he know that that ‘self-constructed illusion’ was always bound to sink into oblivion? (Ibid., 280) Surely the more appropriate response would have been to say to the mourners, with Zhuangzi, ‘Shoo! Get back! Don’t disturb the process of change!’ (2013, 6.3 [p. 48]). (iii) If Merton is right here, it seems probable that self-conscious, personal identity is a farce, and that therefore personal immortality is, too. The real self might remain an individual ontologically, but phenomenologically? If there is no self-awareness at all, and no string of experiences upon which to reflect, it is difficult to see how *otherness* might persist (Pike 1992, 30–32). Phenomenologically, there is only the One beyond all multiplicity (Merton 2007, 227; 279–89).²⁶

If, then, we take Merton in this passage at his word, we could easily construct the following argument (among sundry others):

²⁴ Of course I do not mean to suggest that Merton and this Upanishad are *necessarily* talking about the same thing—it was simply too tempting a quotation to omit (then again, I suspect the phenomenological content of both experiences is probably the same).

²⁵ And he *is*, I think, deeply confused. More precisely, his ‘false self’, or ego, is confused: the ‘true’ Merton is, of course, beyond confusion, since it (he?) is beyond reflection and is, rather, an empty ‘existential altar which simply “is”’ (13), a self without a ‘*cogito*’ but only a bare “*SUM*, I AM” (9). That point notwithstanding, it seems to me that Merton equivocates on what he means by ‘ego’. As we have seen, there are very many passages in which Merton explicitly identifies the ‘false self’ with the first person singular *per se*; in others, however, he appears to have *egotism* in mind rather than selfhood (e.g., ‘The obstacle is in our “self”, that is to say in the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external, egotistic will’ [21]; the ‘false self’ is ‘the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires’ [34]. Cf. 27, 32, 60, 158–59, 210, et. al.). Conflating as he does the ego with egotism, Merton ends up throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

²⁶ In this respect, it is difficult to see how Merton might differ from the Sāmkhya Yoga. That each *purusha* (‘real self’) remains a discrete individual ontologically is totally irrelevant. In practical terms—that is, phenomenologically—there is only the non-dual ‘*SUM*’, the ‘pure consciousness which stands behind or apart from all these dimensions of man and the world.’ See Larson 1998, 204.

- (1) Assumption: We are saved by being ‘united to God in Christ.’
- (2) The ego is not united to God in Christ.
- (3) Therefore, the ego is not saved (from 1 and 2).
- (4) But the ego is that by virtue of which an individual is capable of self-reflection and self-understanding—it is what makes an individual a *person*.
- (5) Therefore, individuals are not saved *qua* persons (from 3 and 4).

In the eschaton, then, there will be no ‘first person singular’—no ‘I’, no ‘you’, just billions upon billions of ‘not Is’ through which—not through *whom*—the Creator lives ‘as my other and true self’ (Ibid., 41). For Merton the goal of Christianity is mystic contemplation: there is no longer ‘a created subject, so much as God living in God and identifying a created life with His own Life so that there is nothing left of any significance but God living in God’ (Ibid., 284). And this is phenomenological monism with a vengeance—and if not that, then it is consummate imprecision.

Abhishiktananda

I now want to consider another Catholic monk—this time a Benedictine—who, like Merton, would become instrumental in fostering Christian dialogue with eastern forms of spirituality in the twentieth century.²⁷ Henri Le Saux initially travelled to India from France with ‘a desire to bring Christianity to India and to enter into dialogue with Hinduism so that once and for all Indians would understand the nature of Christianity’ (Aguilar 2016, 45). Adopting the new name Abhishiktananda, he took up the life of a Hindu *sannyāsi* and devoted himself in particular to the study of the *Advaita Vedānta*, falling under the influence of such prominent sages as Gnanananda and Ramana Maharshi. For our purposes, we can content ourselves with noting two things in particular. First, prior to arriving in India and during his first few years there, Abhishiktananda expressed a keen awareness of the ‘tension between Christianity and Hinduism’ (Ibid., 52). In the words of Aguilar, he

realized that there was a great problem to be confronted: he was a Catholic priest, a Christian, who was trying to live the Hindu ways of spiritual life, and that both ways of life and belief were intellectually incompatible. He also realized that a Hindu who became a better Hindu would distance himself completely from the beliefs and tenets of Christianity, because from creation to eschatology the two belief systems were completely different (Ibid., 46).

This is very well said; our first data point, then, is Abhishiktananda’s original conviction that many aspects of Hinduism and Christianity are fundamentally irreconcilable—for instance, the ‘new creation’ spoken of in the New Testament and the timeless contemplation of ‘a perfect and absolute blank,’ the *moksha* which is the end goal of Hindu ascetic striving (Zaehner 1980, 164).

The second data point comes from the end of Abhishiktananda’s 25-year pilgrimage in India. It would be idle to tell here of the travels, visits, and intellectual developments

²⁷ For further reading, I would direct the reader’s attention to chapters 2–4 of Aguilar’s excellent *Christian Ashrams, Hindu Caves and Sacred Rivers* (2016).

which kept him occupied over the years. For it was, as it is for every mystic, a momentary *experience* which above all would transform Abhishiktananda's understanding of reality. After he and his disciple had an initial experience of 'the mystery of Being' and 'realized that "there are not-two",' there began a marked change in the way Abhishiktananda articulated himself. Theology could no longer be written, but only, in a sense, experienced (Aguilar 2016, 77–78). The true awakening, however, came a year and a half later. The occasion was a sudden heart attack, and the remaining five months of his life enabled him to share what he had seen:

I have found the Grail. ... The quest for the Grail is basically nothing else than the quest for the Self. A single quest, that is the meaning of all the myths and symbols. It is yourself that you are seeking through everything. And in this quest you run about everywhere, whereas the Grail is here, close at hand, you only have to open your eyes. ... [This awakening] was so clear: *Uttishta, purusha*, Arise, Purusha! [*Katha Upanishad* 3.14], discover the Grail. Look, it is in the depth of yourself, it is the very 'I' that you are saying every moment of your conscious life (Abhishiktananda 2018, 8).

Or, again,

If at all I had to give a message, it would be the message of 'Wake up, arise, remain aware' of the *Katha Upanishad*. The coloration might vary according to the audience, but the essential goes beyond. The discovery of Christ's I AM is the ruin of any Christian theology, for all notions are burnt within the fires of experience (Kearney 2015, 186 n. 4).

Commentary is scarcely necessary; the monk is perfectly clear. All that claptrap about the hypostatic union, the Three in One, the utterly unique Son of God made flesh 'for us men and for our salvation'—and most of all, that diabolical fiction about the 'nasty little ego' (Zaehner 1974, 99) and the loving creator speaking to his creatures as an I to a Thou, 'I give you yourselves' (Lewis 2015, 109)—cast them all into the fires of Gehenna, for something greater than the parochial Christ of the New Testament is here: 'Whoever, in his personal experience... has discovered the Self, has no need of faith in Christ, of prayer, of the communion of the Church' (Aguilar 2016, 75). Just so. But how does Abhishiktananda know this? Because he has had a mystical experience. He sees with 'the self-validating certainty of direct awareness' that it is so, and that is all there is to it (Huxley 1994b, vi).

A Contemporary Evangelical

We may now proceed to the final of our three case studies in 'Christian mysticism'.²⁸ Upon completion of this section, we will be in an ideal position to wrap up our discussion and offer some concluding reflections. The following account of a mystical experience was given to me by an acquaintance with considerable theological training.

²⁸ I have used scare quotes here because, again, much of what is typically considered Christian mysticism would not fit our definition here.

He considers himself to be ‘broadly evangelical’ and, I don’t think he would mind me saying, skews quite conservative in his theology. It is not, I imagine, especially easy to find mystical experiences (in our sense of the term) among evangelicals today, and so I feel all but compelled to include it here. This is how he describes what in his correspondence he calls his ‘re-enlightenment’, as it was not his first time having this kind of experience:

There is a ‘real me’ (the self separated from the lies, the pretending, the fronting), and there is the ‘false me’ which tries to combat it. And this is what I found [in the first ‘enlightenment’]: what is *really* there comes out. Not something new, but something that is there already. This is it: my heart is pumping quickly now. It is all about the self and losing it. ...[This is] the one who is always there at the deepest level of our being. The one we were always created to be (Anonymous correspondence).²⁹

He goes on to say this of the ‘climax’ which he ‘could see but not grasp’:

This is the deepest truth, and everyone else must learn this. ‘Lose the self’. Not the real self, but the construction we create. ...I am a not-self who now can (barely) touch self. ...A sure ‘this is the meaning of life’ experience. As ever, it cannot be put into words. It is as if stepping out of a game and entering reality for the first time.

It is hard to avoid the impression that my acquaintance’s ‘real/false me’ corresponds almost exactly to Merton’s ‘real/false self’. Though he assures me he was not familiar with Merton’s book at the time, he might well have quoted him: ‘Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this “I” is really “not I” and the awakening of the unknown “I” that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself’ (Merton 2007, 7). My colleague’s ‘false self’ is characterized by ‘pretending’ and engaging in combat with the ‘true self’ which is ‘always there at the deepest level of our being.’ In the awakening of this true self (as Merton would put it), my colleague sees the ‘deepest truth,’ the ‘meaning of life.’ Thus does he emerge from the cave and behold the Real once again.

Of special interest in this case, for our purposes as we begin to wind down our discussion, is not so much its content as much as the metaphysical reflections that follow once the ego (and/or discursive intellect) has resumed its normal operations. What did the subject see in his experience? He tells us that ‘a type, perhaps, of “eternal now”’ would not be inapt as an expression of what was phenomenologically present. But he also says: ‘That “moment” of contemplation is not eternal life, only a momentary anticipation (*if true*)’—he is, in other words, drawing a potential distinction between appearance and reality, something we shall say a word about presently. Also noteworthy is his attempt to identify what the ‘real self’ is: while he says that in his first ‘enlightenment’ experience he was ‘strongly inclined to identify [himself] with God,’ on this occasion it seems he wanted to invert the picture:

²⁹ Compare Jones 2016, 7, where uncannily similar language is used: ‘In introvertive mystical experiences, the transcendent ground that is already present within us appears while the meditator is passive’ (emphasis mine).

Was it God I found, or just my self? If I say ‘they are one’, it would be, in line with the experience, to bring God down to a merely human level (ontologically, not metaphorically): ‘The Christian God is unreal. The God of the Bible they don’t see *is* [real]’. This ‘God’ [of the Bible] is merely the subconscious or ‘pre-biographical unity’ [of Martin Buber]. I don’t think I found God—I only found my ‘real self’. I am not ‘all things’. To the extent the experience suggests anything at all, it would say that God is just our real self’s projection. We think it is God, but it is only us.

The phenomenological *content* of the experience, then, was simply a ‘touching’ of the ‘real self’ and the dissolution of what we have been calling the ego. But it was evidently wordless—a bare apperception *of* nothing in particular, a contentless, ‘eternal now’ in which the subject simply ‘is’.³⁰ Knowing this, it seems, my acquaintance went on to *interpret* what he had ‘touched’; he proceeded to choose from a number of possibilities what he considered the most likely account of what ‘really’ happened—that is, metaphysically speaking. Upon reflection, he considered he had little reason to suppose the reality encountered was truly what he calls ‘God’; if anything, he seems to suggest, Feuerbach was probably nearer the mark than Merton. Having read, apparently, Buber’s description of his own monistic mystical experience, he deemed it most likely that he had experienced ‘the unity of this soul of mine, whose “ground” I have reached, so much so, beneath all formations and contents, that my spirit has no choice but to understand it as the groundless’ (Buber 2002, 28). This ‘ground’ is, certainly, ‘beyond the reach of all the multiplicity it has hitherto received from life,’ but that does not make it beyond individuation (Ibid., 28). Nor, as my colleague indicates, does this necessarily mean we ought to be constantly seeking this ‘real me’: ‘Why privilege the “enlightened” state?’ he wonders. This is a question which all too often has gone unasked—and understandably so. For ‘the mystic indeed does not argue’: he simply sees and knows, and that is enough for him (Stace 1961, 7).

Final Remarks

We now have before us the mystical experiences of three very different Christians. Yet they all are one inasmuch as they each meet the three criteria discussed above: They are (a) strongly unitive—with the ‘I AM’, the ‘Self’, the ‘pre-biographical unity’; they (b) acquaint the subject first-hand with a ‘truth’ or reality unobtainable by ordinary sense perception, reason, or introspection (i.e., that the ego is an illusion); and (c) they carry with them certainty as to the veracity of the insight in question. Moreover—and this should be apparent—what is known is known on the basis of ‘mystical experience, and not from any of the ‘lower’ modes of knowledge which, alas, include scripture, theology, and (merely analytic) philosophy.’³¹ These latter are all transcended

³⁰ This conclusion, it seems to me, is necessitated by the author’s employment of Buber’s ‘pre-biographical unity’ (see below).

³¹ Of course, as we know from the *Phaedo*, the philosopher *par excellence*—the only one worthy of the name—must also be a mystic (Plato 2002, e.g., 66–67, 80e–81b, 82c–84b). It is well worth noting, too, that Plato explicitly considers the mystics involved in the entheogenic Dionysian Mysteries to be ‘no other than those who have practiced philosophy in the right way’ (69c–d).

(‘fulfilled’ is often the preferred word) ‘in the sure grasp of a deep and penetrating experience’ (Merton 2007, 231). *This* is what life is all about. ‘The greatest of all sins is indeed the sin of ignorance. Throw this sin away, O man, and become pure from sin’ (*Dhammapada* 2015, 18.243). ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ.

Concluding Reflections

What have we learned? First and foremost, it should be abundantly clear that mysticism needs to be taken seriously, if only for the sake of the mystics themselves. For those who have had a mystical experience, the latter cannot but be viewed as having been of supreme existential and metaphysical importance. It is, then, only fair to engage the mystic on her own terms. Thus, even if an individual Christian is not inclined to see mysticism as a challenge to her faith, she ought at the very least to respect those who draw pluralistic or esoteric conclusions on that basis. Secondly, it has been demonstrated that there is evidently a strong mystical current running through the human psyche which, when applied to the Christian faith, threatens to displace certain aspects of orthodox theology. As, for instance, the Jerusalem temple was merely a signpost pointing on to Christ, so also is the orthodox Christ a mere figure for the mystical death of ego and resurrection to a higher self (or something along those lines). And, once more, the proof of this is said to reside in the mystical experience itself. Finally, I think I have rather unintentionally shown that in the primary source material there is perhaps not enough in the way of linguistic precision or even clarity of thought. Terms are not readily disambiguated, logical entailments are left to be deduced by the reader (or more likely not at all), and, in general, there are quite a few questions that are simply left unaddressed. This is not, of course, particularly surprising given that the experience purportedly carries its own guarantee of authenticity. But it is at least *possible* that these guarantees are ill-founded—and, if possible, then further questions must be asked, if only by we sorry mortals who can make out only shadows on the squalid cave wall. What, then, are the possibilities as to what mystical experience amounts to?

It could certainly be the case that the mystics are right after all: there is one form of religion for the masses and another for the sages, the one involving certain rituals, dogmas, scriptures, and so on, the other advancing beyond all this to the inner, esoteric essence which is a mystical beholding of the Absolute. Whether we understand this claim in perennialist terms—i.e., all such religions and mystical experiences ultimately share the same referent—or in contextualist terms, wherein the unique cultural and religious setting of the experience is stressed, seems to make little difference: either way, only the mystics would truly know what their religion is about.³² On the opposite

³² For an outstanding overview of perennialism and contextualism both in terms of content and brevity, see Jones 2020, 24–29. Perennialism, or the Perennial Philosophy, is often associated with figures in the so-called ‘Traditionalist School’ such as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Huston Smith, and, perhaps, Aldous Huxley himself. It is also worth noting that, despite its widespread appeal in popular culture, perennialism is generally rejected in academic religious studies today (Jones 2020, 27). Whether this rejection is for good reason is, of course, a debate for another time.

end of the spectrum, it is quite possible that mystical experience has no bearing on reality whatsoever: perhaps it is a simple (or not-so-simple) mania or madness³³ which only manages to create a convincing illusion of its own;³⁴ or else, as Bertrand Russell supposed, a wondrous ‘inspirer of whatever is best in man’ which nevertheless ‘yields no truths at all’ (Stace 1961, 13–15). In between these two extremities, we might find a variety of other options. For instance, it may be that while mystical experience serves some religious end and communicates some truth which cannot be known by other means, it is not in itself the *summum bonum*, this accolade being reserved for, say, an embodied beatitude in the general resurrection or an entire life devoted to the cultivation of virtue.³⁵ A related point arises from the need to consider various types of mystical experience. To take but one example, while nature mysticism and introvertive mysticism are both robustly monist, the phenomenal content of each experience could hardly be more divergent (Gellman 2019, §2.1). It is therefore entirely possible that, say, the ‘monistic’ mystic advances farther than does the nature mystic; contrariwise, it may be that the nature mystic has arrived at a truth more sublime, or, indeed, that the theistic mystic has surpassed them both.³⁶ Nor may we omit mention of the constructivist critique of typological approaches to mysticism: perhaps all mystical experiences are necessarily unique, informed in their entirety by one’s prior sociocultural and linguistic context ‘such that the lived experience conforms to a preexistent pattern that has been learned, then intended, and then actualized in the experiential reality of the mystic’ (Katz 1992, 5). Such a view would render any argument for the cognitivity of a mystical experience problematic to say the very least (Jones 2020, 8–9; Jones 2016, 60).³⁷ And, finally, the truth may well be a subtle combination of several of these possibilities—no doubt much of the excitement in the philosophy of mysticism owes to the fact that no one view stands out as obviously more compelling than any other.

Ultimately, however, we are still left to grapple with one absolutely non-negotiable piece of information: *something* significant is clearly going on in mystical experience. The

³³ Of course, it might be that madness itself gives us access to the Real. See Algis Uždavinys’s brief discussion of the four varieties of ‘divine’ madness in the thought of Plato (2011), 1–5.

³⁴ This possibility can scarcely be ruled out *a priori*; as Zaehner has masterfully shown, there are marked similarities between the experiences of those suffering from acute cases of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and those within certain traditional schools of mysticism. Couple this with the fact that mescaline was formerly used to induce such psychoses in clinical settings and the beginnings of a strong defence of this second possibility are in place. See Zaehner 1980, e.g., x, 28, 44, and esp. ch. 5; cf. Jones 2016, 10 n.15 (p. 349): ‘mystical experiences may be opening the same territory trod by schizophrenics and psychotics.’

³⁵ As Jones 2016 points out, mystical traditions often deny that a fleeting enlightenment experience is sufficient in itself—a transformed life centred upon the insights gained must follow (11–12).

³⁶ The latter is, of course, Zaehner’s view.

³⁷ For my part, I find Jones’s critique of (strong) constructivism compelling (2016, 60–70). In the first place, there does seem to be neuroscientific evidence for unconstructed ‘pure consciousness events’ at least. Moreover, strong constructivists will have considerable difficulty accounting for mystical experiences which come as a surprise to the subject, and the existence of heretical mystics, too, seems strange on constructivism. Finally, the nonconstructivist is in a better position, it seems, to explain why mystics feel compelled to offer mystical readings of presumably non-mystical texts: the straightforward explanation is that mystical experience is driving the oftentimes strained interpretations, and not the other way round. Stoerber concurs that strong constructivism is unable adequately to account for heretical mystics and similar mystical experiences across very dissimilar contexts (1992, 112); in the end, however, he opts for a nuanced *via media* between constructivism and nonconstructivism. For the classic statement of the constructivist approach, see Katz 1978. A useful overview of Katz’s influential proposal and some early critiques may be consulted in Janz 1995; Jones 2020, however, is both exceptional *and* hot off the press.

challenge for the Christian analytic theologian or philosopher of religion, then, is to give a credible account of what that ‘something’ might be. What is the Christian to make of the phenomenon of mysticism in general? How should he respond to the mystic’s claim to have reached the true, inner ‘meaning of all the myths and symbols’ outwardly expressed in scripture, theology and philosophy? (Abhishiktananda 2018, 8) And what, according to the Christian, might account for the mystic’s utter certainty that it is so? Mystical experience may be summarily dismissed, it is true, on the simple grounds that if it displaces orthodoxy, it cannot be cognitive. But this is not good enough for Christian philosophers of religion—serious questions demand serious answers.³⁸ And here it is that we come back full circle to the opening remarks of this paper. For the very unfortunate fact is that, by and large, there are *not* good answers to these final questions in the Christian analytic literature—indeed, they are questions that have scarcely begun to be *asked*, let alone persuasively answered. In a forthcoming paper, I shall be venturing a first step of my own in addressing some of these thorny issues; but as for my purposes here, their course has been run. If this paper can help generate any amount of future discussion among analytic theologians and philosophers of religion, then I will not have laboured in vain.

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³⁸ To be sure, I think it perfectly legitimate in theory to run a modus tollens to the effect that (1) If mystical experience is cognitive, then orthodox Christianity is false; (2) But orthodox Christianity is true; (3) Therefore, mystical experience is not cognitive. But this can be done vis-à-vis virtually any claim in the philosophy of religion which might pose a threat to the Christian faith: I know no Christian philosopher, for instance, who would consider it sufficient to proffer the same sort of response to the problem of evil—why suppose it is any better here?

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