

A UNIVERSAL SENSE OF THE NUMINOUS

THE NATURE OF MYSTICISM

Jack Mongar

A renewed interest in mysticism is growing in many places, but is it by-passing the Religious Society of Friends? Have some of us uncritically accepted the popular notion of 'mystical' used in a derogatory way to indicate woolly thought; ideas that have not been tested scientifically or thought through logically? In this essay 'mysticism' will be used in its religious meaning to refer to immediate, intuitive knowledge of a God, or whatever is the equivalent in non-religious language. As a scientist I am sensitive to the problem of people seeking scientific respectability at all costs. Are we afraid to admit to anything but rational logical thought? I had some association with Bertrand Russell through the peace movement, and warmed to his *Mysticism and Logic* (1917). He realised that there is an intuitive way of knowing that cannot be achieved by mathematical or logical approaches. Even though direct mystical knowing cannot be analyzed, it appears to have a quality that is not matched by the most rigorous application of the scientific methods. I have never had a dramatic mystical experience but I feel spiritual resonance when reading other people's experiences. I now realise that there have been moments of spiritual illumination although I did not understand their nature at the time. With my rational scientific background I found them rather disturbing and did not cherish them. This pamphlet is written to encourage Friends to prepare themselves for mystical insights, and to share such experiences with others.

It is, of course, difficult to put into words the deep, transforming experience that we shall be investigating. Mystics are usually well aware that language is not adequate to describe their revelations but they know that they have been in deep and numinous places. Although inadequate for capturing the whole experience, their writings are treasured because they resonate with our own, perhaps less intense, religious experiences.

The writings of some great mystics such as Eckhart have been concerned with their own unique experiences. Others, such as William James, F.C.Happold, Ken Wilber, Aldous Huxley and Richard Bucke,

have prepared anthologies, and in a comparative framework have explored the fundamental characteristics of mystical experience. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*, written at the turn of the century, was one of the first comparative studies. He wrote of his own direct mystical experience, was profoundly influenced by a friendship with the mystic Walt Whitman, and his book in turn influenced William James. Bucke's perspective was universalist in that his anthology included among others : Jesus the Christ, Gautama the Buddha, Mohammed the Prophet, Paul the disciple and Walt Whitman the poet with a Quaker background. Extracts from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* are included in the present essay. F.C.Happold's *Mysticism* is both an anthology and a comparative study. It constitutes a marvellous handbook on mysticism that has not been equalled. He wrote that "this phenomenal world of matter and individual consciousness is only a partial reality and is the manifestation of a Divine Ground in which all partial realities have their being."

We can realise the Divine Ground by direct intuition in which the knower is somehow united with the known.

The work that I am most attached to is Rufus Jones's *Studies in Mystical Religion*. It was one of the first books that I read after meeting Quakers during the war. I became convinced that nothing in the world could approach in importance the study of the mystics. Alas, what with a new career and a young family I did not pursue the subject until I had retired and indulged in a term at Woodbrooke. Rufus Jones described mystical experience as "an immediate, intuitive knowledge of God ... or consciousness of a Beyond or of a Divine Presence".

Martin Israel, an Anglican priest and a doctor, describes the ineffable experience as "one of an all-embracing reality that pervades and transcends the world of phenomena in which we live our earthly lives. The mystic is one who has had this experience and whose life has been transformed by it".

William James, Abraham Maslow and Ken Wilber have explored the numinous in psychological rather than in religious language. All these approaches are compatible with a universalist perspective in which, as the Basis of the Quaker Universalist Group states, 'Spiritual awareness is accessible to men and women of any religion or none'. Surely people's capacity for experiencing the numinous is much greater than is generally realised, both within and outside organised religion.

SCIENCE AND MYSTICISM

The Scientific Approach

Perhaps scientific thought is now coming of age with the widespread recognition that impersonal, empirical measurement is not the ultimate quality of 'real' science and 'respectable' thought. The tide of logical positivism is ebbing but it is still entrenched among behaviourists, sociobiologists, and indeed is leading to useful works in some aspects of biology and medicine. The classical scientific world view of Newton and Descartes is not 'wrong'. To regard the world as a great machine is still a responsible basis for many aspects of science and technology. But those concepts now seem to have been embedded within a larger framework that is simultaneously scientific, philosophical and religious. For example, the 'new' physics, Rupert Sheldrake's ideas in biology, and complementary 'alternatives' in medicine and biology are helping to expand this framework.

It was in theoretical physics that the challenge to scientific orthodoxy first came, at the turn of the century. At the same time higher criticism challenged the orthodoxies of Biblical interpretation. The foundations of Victorian over-confidence were shaken and the way opened for less dogmatic thought. Within the Society of Friends, Victorian Quakers were often in the vanguard of Darwinian and other liberal scientific thought. Today many Friends are also in the forefront of scientific thought but find a certain inertia and resistance still embedded within some Quaker constituencies that remain comfortable, or even evangelical, about their certainties. Religious and scientific fundamentalism are still clung to as a life raft by many. However, some Quaker informal groups appear to be rediscovering the perennial philosophy which no longer seems at odds with science.

The New Physics

Einstein's relativity theory led to a combination of space with time as a fourth dimension. The rate of a clock, or the length of a rod, were seen to be dependent on the speed of the observer relative to them. Matter itself is closely related to energy by the well-known equation $e=mc^2$. The trinity of particles - electron, proton and neutron - conceptually exploded into a myriad of packets of energy, most of them with a duration around a

billionth of a second. Quantum theory continued the exploration of new explanatory concepts; the observer became inseparable from the observations, and experiments performed within this decade have demonstrated that the process of instantaneous communication between particles (and people?) is highly probable. These esoteric findings have an abstract mathematical basis but some scientists are making them accessible in the everyday language of visual and other experimental analogy. One of the better interpreters is Paul Davies. In 1984 he wrote: "the world must now be seen as an inseparable web of vibrating energy patterns in which no one component has reality independent of the entirety and included in this entirety is the observer".

Some are attempting to formulate grand unified theories to explain all these new facts. The theories are highly mathematical and employ up to eleven dimensions. Within this complexity, we may have to learn to live with many models of the universe, none excluding any other. It is not an either/or situation: creation appears as a jewel with many facets, each revealing a different aspect of reality. This seems to be a good model for the nature of the spiritual world. We must be prepared to abandon the secure, rigid framework of orthodoxy, as indeed Fox did, and accept the varied insights we get from tuning in to the Divine within our own souls. The language we are now using in describing the new physics is as imaginative and rich as language used to talk about our deepest and widest religious experience.

Stephen Hawking's best seller *A Brief History of Time* (1988) also gives a good sample of the kind of imaginative and revolutionary thinking that is being done: space-time may be infinite, so, with no boundaries, how can we talk about the beginning of time? *Superstrings: a Theory of Everything* (1988), edited by P.C.W. Davies and J. Brown, is another example of scientific thinking that describes forces, matter, space and time in a radically new way. Are there any foundations at all left on which to build? The overall reaction to these findings by the theoretical physicists themselves has been, on the whole, one of awe and humility, not one of despair. Quite amazingly, along with this new scientific awareness, many developed a mystical sensitivity. That development is central to my thesis: it is the normal response of mature people. It is part of human nature and is more basic than the particular religious or philosophical form in which it is expressed.

Bertrand Russell, a brilliant mathematician and logician, about as far from the mystical approach to life as one might imagine, wrote in *Mysticism and Logic*, "I yet believe that, by sufficient restraint, there is an element of wisdom to be learned from the mystical way of feeling, which does not seem to be attainable in any other manner. If this is the truth, mysticism is to be commended as an attitude to life ... this emotion, as colouring all other thoughts and feelings, is the inspirer of whatever is best in Man. Even the cautious and patient investigation of truth by science, which seems the very antithesis if the mystics certainty, may be fostered and nourished by that very spirit of reverence in which the mystic lives and moves".

Mystical Scientist

Most people in the forefront of the new physics developed this mystical sensitivity: Einstein, Heisenberg, Schroedinger, de Broglie, Jeans, Planck, Bohr and Eddington. Some of their mystical writings have been collected by Ken Wilber in *Quantum Questions* (1984). (Strangely, Bohr's were left out of the collection although we know from the fact that he had the ying/yang symbol incorporated into his family's crest that he too was touched by spiritual insights, especially from Eastern thought.) Wilber's anthology suggests that "the seminal thoughts of virtually every major physicist involved in the discovery of quantum physics and relativity ... show that each of these remarkable men came to believe in a mystical or transcendental world view as a spiritual, rather than a material, phenomenon".

Einstein was probably the world's greatest physicist, but he was more! His mysticism was expressed mainly in non-religious language. Perhaps the only time he used overt God language was in a discussion of the Uncertainty Principle; "God does not play at dice", he maintained (but here he was wrong!). He believed that although there is a central order to the cosmos, an order that can be directly apprehended by the soul in mystical union, and that although science, art, religion and ethics are necessarily distinct endeavours, it is wonderment in the face of the mystery of the sublime that properly motivates them all. He called his own reaction to the sublime a cosmic religious feeling.

Eddington's approach to mysticism was much more philosophical than Einstein's and as a Quaker we would expect his style of writing to be

more familiar. Wilber considers him to be the most eloquent writer, the most accomplished philosopher and the most penetrating of the lot! In addition he had a dry sense of humour that makes some of the most concentrated philosophical discussions of the nature of reality a joy to read. Eddington was deeply involved in the scientific and religious debates of the nineteen thirties and his insights are still valid. Scientists struggle with ideas about (1) the fundamental forces that move the universe, and (2) the potential of human beings to tune into these forces and thus to gain a new significance and power - nothing could be more basic and exciting. Does mysticism give us a greater knowledge of reality than does science? Eddington did not know; both are important. "In the mystic's sense of the creation around us, in the expression of art, in a yearning towards God, the soul grows upward and finds a fulfilment of something implanted in it's nature. The sanction for this development is within us, a striving born with our consciousness of an Inner Light proceeding from a greater power than ours ... Whether in the intellectual pursuits of science or in the mystical pursuits of the spirit, the light beckons ahead and the purpose surging in our nature responds".

Eddington wanted to emphasize personal aspects of the search for elusive reality. He wrote that "The world of experience is primary. The joy that we experience in communing with nature and the peace that comes from periods of steady meditation - these are their own validation ... We have to build the spiritual world out of symbols taken from our personality, as we build the scientific world out of the metrical symbols of the mathematician. For the study of the relationship of the human soul with a divine spirit no kind of analytical approach is adequate".

Both a poet and a physicist, Eddington questioned whether material forces have been the most potent factors in history. He warns us not to underrate the power of the mystic.

We are the music makers
And we are the dreamers of dreams
Wandering by lone sea-breakers
And sitting by desolate streams;
World-losers and world-forsakers
On whom the pale moon gleams;
Yet we are the movers and the shakers
Of the world forever, it seems. (Arthur O'Shaughnessy)

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

We must now go back to the turn of the [twentieth-]century to when relativity theory was only an idea flickering in Einstein's mind. It was a time of William James's Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), of Richard Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901) and Rufus Jones' *Social Law and the Spiritual World* (1903), and, a little later, his *Studies in Mystical Religion* (1909). The influence of the scientific attitude may have made it possible to consider religious experience seriously from a standpoint outside religious institutions, to enquire into the transforming effects it had on people's live and to relate contemporary illuminations to those experienced by the great mystics of the past.

William James

William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) is a great book by a great man and it has deservedly remained a classic for nearly a century. The author, brother of the writer Henry James, studied medicine at Harvard and then became a philosopher and a psychologist. He was asked to give the Gifford Lectures in 1896 but put it off for five years! By then he had at his disposal the pioneering work of his pupil Edwin Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion* (1899), which is a detailed study of large numbers of accounts of religious experiences. James wrote in a letter to a friend that his purpose in writing the lectures was to defend experience against philosophy - "I mean prayer, guidance and all that sort of thing, immediately and privately felt as against high and noble and general views of our destiny and the world's meaning." As a philosopher he knew that the theorizing mind tends to oversimplify. This practice is the root of all the absolutism and one-sided dogmatism by which religion and philosophy have been infected. So the lectures were to be concerned only with personal religion, leaving out theology and ecclesiasticism. James defined religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of people in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatsoever they consider the divine". There must be a sense of seriousness but joy also comes in; the cheerful and positive acceptance of one's lot. The lecture's sub-title, *A Study of Human Nature*, show that James, as a psychologist, considered religious apprehension to be an integral part of human nature. He was conceptually close to Quaker

religious insights but, in fact, he made scant reference to the Quakers. However, Howard Brinton, some seventy years later, filled the gap with his *Quaker Journals* (1972) and sub-titled *Varieties of Religious Experience among Friends*.

The Gifford Lectures, twenty in all, were delivered in Edinburgh in 1901-2 and were well received. In these lectures James distinguished religious thought from religious feeling. There was much variety in religious thought, but religious feelings of mystics and the conduct they inspire are almost always the same. "Stoic, Christian and Buddhist saints are practically indistinguishable in their lives." But when a religious experience becomes linked with a tenet of religious doctrine (such as the uniqueness of Jesus) it "gets invincibly stamped upon belief and this explains the passionate loyalty of religious persons everywhere to the minutest details of their so widely differing creeds."

James went on to explore the whole range of religious temperaments, dwelling on the extreme cases where, he said, we would find the purest forms of religious experience, albeit many of them being tinged with psychotic overtones. Writing on different states of consciousness he observed that "our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, separated from it by the flimsiest of screens there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. How to regard them; they are so different from normal consciousness? They are important for they determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas. Looking back over my own experiences the key note is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict which makes all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity". Many of James's friends also experienced an illumination: a monistic insight in which the OTHER in its various forms became absorbed into the ONE.

James characterises the mystical experience as involving states of feeling, such as love of music or of another person, rather than intellect. Such feeling states are ineffable. The mystical experience is at such a level of intense feeling that one experiences insights into depths of truth unplumbed by discursive intellect. There are illuminations and revelations full of significance with a sense of authority afterwards. The experience is usually quite transient, lasting only a second or so and rarely more than an

hour. When faded, its quality is difficult to remember but it is recognised when it is repeated. Some memory of it always remains with a profound sense of its importance. Finally, there is a passivity involved; preparation may help but when a mystical experience comes one feels as if one's own will were in abeyance - perhaps held by a superior power.

In his final chapter James looks at the whole field of religious experience and, summing up in the broadest possible way, concludes that personal religious life includes the belief that the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance and so the union, or harmonious relation, with that higher universe is our true end. In this religious life, prayer or inner communion with the spirit of that universe, is a process where work is really done and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological and material, within the phenomenal world. Certain characteristics are generally present in the religious person. They have a new zest which adds itself, like a gift, to life and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of an appeal to earnestness or heroism. Added to all this is an assurance of safety, a temper of peace, and a preponderance of loving affections.

Mystical and Conversion Experiences Compared

James's views of mysticism appear throughout the book as well as in the two chapters specifically devoted to this subject. But he also had to consider, at even greater length, conversion or salvation experiences of all kinds which were important, considering his New England Puritan background. The distinction between mystical and conversion experiences is quite clear in terms of the different effects they produce. Eddington, however, has warned us that the analytical approach to our spiritual stirrings, or as he puts it, "the relation between a human soul and a divine spirit", is not a very adequate approach. We shall see later that it can even be misleading. However, let us look at the circumstances usually attending a personal conversion or salvation experience typically in the fundamentalist types of Protestantism. People often have a vivid sense of their own inadequacy. They feel that they may be heading towards eternal damnation. 'Am I saved?' is the dominant question in their lives. They may be in a disturbed psychological state and acutely aware of sins which may range from sexual excesses to religious laxity. Suddenly, often in the presence of an evangelist or at a revivalist meeting, they feel a change of

heart and an influx of emotional warmth which they attribute to the entry of the Holy Spirit into their fallen soul. In this way they are saved but must dedicate their lives to the particular message, and even the particular person, who facilitated their conversion. A great deal of the conversion experience is probably due to the release of repressed material from the unconscious, much of which is attached to feelings of guilt for past actions, so the assurance of forgiveness by the evangelist produces great emotional release.

Conversion is personal and conditional, unlike the mystical illumination where the experience is universal and unconditional. The difference in outlook between the two experiences is very important. The evangelical experience leads to devotion to a particular faith, and the person may become an ardent missionary. The enthusiasm often leads to fanaticism and an inability to see another point of view. The mystical experience, on the other hand, brings with it an assurance of a love that pervades the whole of creation, and the mission of the mystic is to spread the gospel of love to all people. The mystic is an agent of healing to everyone, and he or she makes no demands or conditions. In both conversion and mystical experiences there are some common strands. There may be an increase in awareness so that conversion has a mystical element added to it. This was certainly the case with Paul on the road to Damascus. It was also true of Fox's finding that when all hope of help from priests and preachers had gone, he heard a voice saying "there is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition", and when he heard it his heart did leap for joy. And true also for Woolman when he saw a radiance in his bedroom and heard a voice saying "Certain evidence of Divine Truth", though in the case of the two Quakers the emphasis in the experience is much more on the mystical element.

In the light of the foregoing analysis it is instructive to look at an article in *The Friends Quarterly* (1989); 'My Lord and my God' by Tony Brown. He was baptized in his late 'teens upon profession of faith in Jesus Christ. It was an impressive experience. It was followed some years later by the appearance of Jesus, as the resurrected Christ, walking with him down a suburban road in London. This led to his leaving the army and becoming a missionary. He explained that although his resulting faith brought him close to people of other denominations who confess Jesus as Lord, it also means that he finds himself out of fellowship with some of

his own Society who are not able to make the same confession of faith. It is this kind of divisive element in religious experience that has dogged organised religion over the centuries and which Quakers have generally had the inspiration to avoid.

Abraham Maslow

Although half a century separated James from Maslow they seem contemporaries. Maslow developed the idea of the naturalness of religious experience without using the word 'religious'. Those special moments of illumination he describes as 'peak-experiences'. In his review of a biography of Maslow (1989), Ralph Hetherington called him a 'mystical atheist', and concluded that "we have still fully to appreciate the legacy of this gentle, kindly man, and the contribution he has made to our psychological thinking ... Friends have rightly come to regard Jung as their psychological mentor. Now it is time that we paid more attention to Maslow."

Maslow's work transcends the two central preoccupations of conventional psychology: sick people, and behavioural data obtained from 'desperate rats'. He reacted against the behavioristic, objectivistic studies then in vogue and developed a branch of humanistic psychology based on the behaviour of normal, well-adjusted people. His ideas are developed in *Toward a Psychology of Being* (1962) and *Religions, Values and Peak-Experiences* (1964). In the former, material from 80 personal interviews and 190 written responses from university students and 50 unsolicited letters is analyzed. Those people were asked to think of the most wonderful experiences of their lives. Maslow attempted to generalize some of the basic characteristics of their love experience, parental experience, aesthetic perception, creative moments, intellectual insight, orgasmic experience and mystic, oceanic or nature experience; that is, all kinds of peak experiences. Peak experiences tend to be seen as a whole, as a complete unit. Things are not boxed off in categories, nor in I-it utilitarian relationships. For example, a person is seen uniquely as if he or she were the sole member of his or her class. The person or the experience becomes for the moment the whole of Being. Peak experiences are felt as self-justifying; they carry their own intrinsic value with them. They are an end in themselves; always good and desirable, delightful, amusing and yet sacred. Finally, there is a kind of absoluteness

in them. They reflect a reality independent of the person who is experiencing them and persisting beyond his or her life. The overall impression of this description is strikingly similar to James's and indeed to the mystic experience described in almost every religion, era and culture. Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) brings out these common strands of the experience: "the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with divine reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being".

David Hay

Insights from mystical scientists of outstanding creative genius which we looked at earlier are paralleled by those of creative artists of all periods in our history. But how frequent is such a sensitivity among less gifted people? In 1969 Alister Hardy set up the Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford. His *The Divine Flame* (1968) preceded the unit's founding, and the *Spiritual Nature of Man* (1979) gives the results of the first ten years of its operation. David Hay was a successor to Alister Hardy at the Research Unit. His contribution (1987) to this field of religious experience has been by far the most quantitative and objective. Hardy had received over 5000 affirmative replies to the question 'Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by, a presence or power, whether you all it God or not, which was different from your everyday self?' The 'sample' of replies was, of course, entirely self-selected and gave no indication of the proportion of people in Britain who would answer 'yes' to the question. David Hay used public opinion polls to find this out. In pilot studies, the terms 'mystical' and 'numinous' were not generally understood, so Hardy's original question was used along with another question, 'Have you ever felt as though you were very close to a powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?' The positive responses were 35% in the US and 31% in the UK. Other surveys produced higher responses: 44% were sure they once had a feeling that they were somehow in the presence of God, and a further 25% thought it probable that they had such an experience, giving a combined proportion of 69%. Researchers found that the more time they took over the interview the higher the positive responses. It was necessary to build up a measure of trust between interviewer and interviewed before this sensitive

subject could be focused. Maslow also found that the time and skill with which the subject was raised influenced the results. When sufficient trust was established, 80% of the people with whom he spoke described such experiences. Taken together this work forms an impressive body of evidence that the spiritual faculty in people is alive and flourishing, much of it outside organised religion. Quakers are in a unique position to form a focal point for such a body of 'seekers'.

The Transformed Personality

Ralph Hetherington's Swarthmore Lecture (1975) further developed Maslow's thinking, applying it to Quaker concepts of the 'Inward Light'. He related it to Friends' way of worship. What is it like to have a religious experience? How does it differ from other kinds of experience? Do such experiences lead anywhere? Do they have any practical results? These are the kind of questions he tackled. He explored how we become aware of our external environment and of the inner world of thoughts, memories, dreams, emotions and desires. But spiritual living is focusing on an element of experience that is more than these. There is another dimension to experience, another aspect of the world of reality; it is usually hidden, but the glimpses we get of it make it seem infinitely more true and beautiful than the rest of experience, both internal and external. It has a quality that has been labelled 'transcendent ecstasies' by Marghanita Laski, 'superliminal awareness' by Adam Curle, 'peak-experience' by Abraham Maslow, and 'timeless moments' by F.C.Happold. Although most people felt that their illumination came to them suddenly and unexpectedly so that they appeared to be passive recipients of the blessing, Hetherington considered that there is also an active element in the process. He said: "By paying attention to sense data plus the inner world of thoughts in a special way we enter a new dimension of experience". Moreover it is more likely to be the experience of a satisfied, mature person. It is only after the satisfaction of physical needs (food, clothing and shelter) plus psychological needs (love and significance) that we can become a mature person. The process, which Maslow calls self-actualization, is the realization of our full potential.

It is perhaps worthwhile to spend a little more time looking at the qualities of these mature people. Martin Israel, writing on mysticism, was influenced by Maslow's work, especially his *Toward a Psychology of*

Being. Israel noted the qualities in people who live on a spiritual plateau but whom Maslow merely called self-actualized. They are independent of the fads, fashions and prejudices of those around them. They lead individual lives, yet work efficiently and harmoniously with others. In other words they know when to conform and when not to. They are able to avoid the polarities of a life-style based on mass-culture or anarchy. Furthermore, they are truly democratic, taking people for what they really are in themselves, rather than for what their colour, race or class is. They have a delightful sense of humour, being able to laugh philosophically at the vicissitudes of life and the absurdities inherent in it, including their own foibles. They possess considerable powers of discrimination and perception, can detect humbug and cant, and are merely amused by pomposity and self-importance. They live in the moment and have a splendid awareness of present things. Thus they are able to concentrate on the work at hand, and they dwell less on past regrets and future fears than others do. They also can form deep relationships because they can communicate easily. This is due to their self-awareness, freedom from personal fears, and philosophic sense of humour. The mature person has good friends, but he or she is not interested in those superficial acquaintances that pass as friends in indiscriminating company. Such people are a joy to know because they are creative, harmonious, intelligent and understanding. They have little need to project emotional needs on others, nor do they need to assert themselves to gain significance. This is indeed to live on a high plateau. And all this potential appears to be within mature people who are not self-consciously religious.

TWO DESCRIPTIONS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Birch Trees

Edward Robinson, in one of the publications of the Alister Hardy Research Unit, described his conversation with two young women in Maine. When they were in their late teens one came to stay the night with the other. They noticed the full moon on the mid-winter landscape, and although it was late at night they put on snow-shoes and skis and went out. "It was very quiet; we'd had an enormous snowstorm, the trees were just laden, the snow was waist-deep". It was very cold. They went through orchards and pasture. "I felt as we were going along, isn't it wonderful! I felt it was some kind of a gift". They took the old logging road into the wood, came upon a stand of birches with the moonlight shining through the thin branches. "We just stood there together looking and I don't know how long we stood there. And then we just started laughing and hugging the birch trees ... I felt so much, standing there, that I had to hug the birch tree. I had to make it physical ... It was the nearest you could get to wrapping your arms around the whole world and giving it a big hug". Both young women had the same experience. When the intensity began to fade they silently turned homeward, without a feeling that they were losing the experience; "It didn't leave at all. It wasn't like I felt it was gone, you know, like I'd lost something; I never felt that way. I never felt like I'd lost it". Their leaving the birch grove "was like acknowledging whatever gift had been given to us. Leaving didn't damage that relationship, or whatever had been established." Four years later the experience was still with them: "It makes me feel more alive". Before that snowy night both girls had questioned childhood religious teaching and been "avowed atheists at that time ... and we were very vocal about it too". They were also anti-war and anti-pollution activists: "We were never so happy as when we found something to get really wild about". They had read and thought and talked their way toward those positions. After the experiences in the birch grove they went to university and read political philosophy, theology and other literature, but they were no longer impressed by the authority of great writers. The experience had "given me a reference point ... If I read something by a great theologian, or even if I read the Bible, I don't have to take that as fact, as *the* revelation or whatever. I can say, "that's interesting as the way it happened to you but not the way it seems

to me ... I don't have to think that that's the way God is because someone else experienced Him that way."

Leaves of Grass

Although not from a Quaker background, the simple plain-speaking of those two young women has great authenticity. Walt Whitman, from a Quaker background, described a mystical experience with great art in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) :

Loaf with me on the grass ... loose the stop from your throat
Not words, nor music or rhyme I want ... not custom or lecture,
not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my
barestript heart,
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.

Swiftly rose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all
the art and argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers ...
and the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love; (p.28-29).

Whitman's life was transformed by direct mystical experience, his poetry electric with life and inclusive lovingness :

I am enamoured of growing outdoors,
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,
Of the builders and steerers of ships, of the wielders of axes
and mauls, of the drivers of horses ... (p.36)

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man.
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men ... (p.44)

I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals ... they are
so placid and self-contained,
I stand and look at them sometimes half the day long ... (p.56)

In common with the two young women in Maine, Whitman could not be contained by theological orthodoxy especially with the Richmond Declaration of Faith looming in the near future :

I have no chair, nor church nor philosophy;
I lead no man to a dinner-table or library or exchange,
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
My left hand hooks you round the waist,
My right hand points to landscapes of continents, and a plain public road ... (p.80)

And I call to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God,
No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death.

I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God not in the least,
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass;
I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one is signed by God's
name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that others will punctually come
forever and ever. (p.83)

MYSTICISM AND QUAKERISM

We must now consider how Friends have fared in regard to mysticism. In the nineteenth century they had become rather fundamentalist (Hetherington, 1985). For example, the London Yearly Meeting Epistle of 1836 quite clearly gave absolute authority to the Holy Scriptures. This epistle was taken to a conference at Richmond, Indiana in 1887 by Bevan Braithwaite and incorporated in the Richmond Declaration of Faith to which so many Yearly Meetings in the USA still adhere. However, when Bevan Braithwaite took the Richmond Declaration to London Yearly Meeting for endorsement it refused to do so. This refusal ended the fundamentalists' domination of London Yearly Meeting and paved the way for the Manchester Conference of 1885. This meeting marked the beginnings of a renewal among Quakers and led to a new openness to the liberal and mystical elements in religion. Woodbrooke College (Settlement) was founded shortly afterwards and provided a base for pursuing liberal religious studies. Rufus Jones and John Wilhelm Rowntree were very active in Woodbrooke's early days and in exploratory Summer Schools. All seemed set fair for a vigorous period of growth in the Society, Quakers appeared well placed to lead the synthesis of experimental religion and post-Newtonian science. No doubt many of them did, but it is an historical paradox that half a century later some Friends were still committed to the academic analytical approach to religious thought and had expunged acknowledgments of our mystical tradition from some of our central literature.

Criticism of the mystical approach began in the mid-fifties, especially in *Quaker Religious Thought* (1965 and 1978). In both years there is a statement that "Rufus Jones' interpretation of Quakerism [with its emphasis on the mystical mode] which did so much to revive and reshape a moribund Society of Friends earlier this century, was mistaken in its central thesis: the very life of contemporary Quakerism is therefore founded on an egregious misunderstanding". An article by Daniel Bassuk, criticises Rufus Jones for scholarly inconsistency and ends with the statement that "Rufus Jones' affirmation mysticism is not mysticism at all ... [it] glorifies the mystical experiences of men and rejects the metaphysical type of mysticism of Clement, Eckhart ..." If we use the word mysticism for a very basic and vivid experience on the one hand and

for a theological concept on the other, we are bound to create difficulties for ourselves - and for our readers. (For further discussion see Mongar, 1988,)

The criticism of Rufus Jones has been going on for many years and even led, as Richard Allen records in his *Growing Points in Quaker Tradition* (1982), to the expurgation of Jones's introductory chapters in the two volumes by Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (1955) and *The Second Period of Quakerism* (1961), when they were reprinted. Two volumes of Rufus Jones's own works in the series, *The Later Periods of Quakerism*, were not reprinted at all. In the second of the substitute introductions there is a misrepresentation of the mystical position by contrasting it with the prophetic one: "the mystic is passive and contemplative, the prophet active and ethical; the mystic regards God as the unfathomable Abyss ... The prophet sees Him as a living energising Will ...". This is another example of a misplaced analytical approach to religious experience. It labels and sets in opposition aspects of a unitary experience. The encounter with the Divine does not necessarily isolate people from the world. It often energises the recipients, changes their lives and heightens their sensitivity to the needs of the world, as when Rufus Jones founded and directed the American Friends Service Committee.

Of course, the visions of mystics are always clothed in the costumes of the times - naked experience is so difficult to share! But abstract theological generalisation, concepts, doctrines and creeds tend to create misplaced concreteness of ideas and result in divisiveness.

What impact did Rufus' Jones writings have on the Society of Friends? The quotation which appears at the head of the critical article in *Quaker Religious Thought* states that Jones did much to revive and reshape a moribund Society (albeit allegedly on a false basis). The question that now concerns us is whether the mystical strand (mistaken or not) is still flourishing. There are ten extracts from Rufus Jones in *Christian Faith and Practice* (1960) but there is no reference to mysticism in the index [in *Quaker Faith and Practice* (1995) there are seven extracts and still no mention of 'mysticism' in the index]. Clearly some Friends are not happy in acknowledging our mystical tradition. Within the more doctrinally guided religious denominations there has always been a tendency to regard mystics antagonistically. Matthew Fox's silencing by the Vatican

would seem to be a contemporary example. Direct mystical knowing tended to undermine the ecclesiastical establishment. Hence it is primarily among the heretics of every religion that we find mysticism flourishing. It is surprising to meet this antagonism among Quakers. However, a mystical strand persists in Quakerism, and the traditions in which Rufus Jones stood continues in the writings of Howard Brinton, Douglas Steere, Thomas Kelly and many others.

John Yungblut takes up the question of Quaker mysticism in his Pendle Hill pamphlet, *Speaking as One Friend to Another* (1983). After twenty years in the Episcopal ministry he became a Quaker and has focused on the evolutionary potential of the Society of Friends as it rediscovers its mystical roots. He pointed out that Jesus of Nazareth was certainly a Jewish mystic, and the mystical perspective is clear in the *Gospel of John*. The pamphlet is an important contribution to Friends' thinking, but it is interesting that John Yungblut saw the Quaker universalist movement as distinct from the Quaker mystical tradition. He considered it to be a distraction as threatening as fundamentalism, "for it is not rooted and grounded in the organic historical continuity of one of the living faiths ... it is experimentalism run riot". This over-reaction, probably evoked by John Linton's *Quakerism as Forerunner* (1979), must be taken as a salutary warning of how difficult it is to break new ground in the pursuit of ancient universal truths. Later universalist writings have emphasised and developed the idea that Quaker Universalism must necessarily have a mystical basis (Horace Alexander (1980); Ralph Hetherington (1983); Dan Seeger (1986); Lorna Marsden (1986); Jean Hardy (1988); Carol MacCormack (1988).

This pamphlet has gathered together some perennial thoughts on the nature of human spirituality and tried to relate them to new scientific thinking. It may not be long before there grows up a unitary view of the world and our place in it. Then the categories of 'scientific' and 'religious' will fall into disuse and the term 'universalism' itself will no longer be needed.

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