

# MYSTICISM, SACRED AND PROFANE

R. C. Zaehner, professor of oriental religions and ethics at the University of Oxford, is well-known for his researches in the field of Iranian traditions, Zurvanism, Manicheism etc. By these researches he has been led to discriminate real spiritual communion from its outward appearances and its accompanying human sensations, so as to raise the moral issue of transcendental experience vs. its counterfeit, i.e. all human attempts at a travesty of the real thing under false pretences.

In his recent work *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane: An inquiry into some varieties of Praternatural Experience* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1957, pp. XVIII-256) Zaehner probes deep into some items of modern psychologic experience in the light of the comparative history of religions. The immediate occasion for his book has been provided by Aldous Huxley's well-known work *The doors of perception*, which Zaehner seems to take as the standard of human faking of supersensible experience. He looks at it as one of the outstanding documents of our age and weighs it on the scales of critical thought and mystical Christianity.

Aldous Huxley is one of those typically modern intellectuals who, unwilling to give up either trying to understand Man's fundamental problems or applying agnosticism's peculiar methods in doing so, are going to any lengths to bring about a solution to them in keeping with the times — that is, positivistic, oversimplified and untraditional. He is certainly known to the reader not only as a writer of celebrated novels but also (*Time must have a stop*) as a thinker ready to grapple with such problems as survival after death and the pattern of a mystical life adapted to our times — and all this with the spirit of a child of his own age, unwilling to forfeit any of the whims, any of the vitalistic, naturalistic and materialistic fads of today's mentality. Obviously a self-contradictory attitude.

Zaehner remarks in this connection that mysticism cannot be aimed at with an essentially anti-mystical mentality. Self-discipline in inner life may be rooted in self-consciousness, Man's present achievement, and be the more intense and creative. But then this self-consciousness must consist in inner freedom, in spiritual activity in which man is independent of any support of a sensible nature.

In *The doors of perception* Aldous Huxley shows the typical attitude of a spirit substantially bound to the outward awareness of

things, though bent on the research of a supersensible experience. During his recent journey to Central America the sight of the ancient Mexican monuments suggested to him the imprint of something akin to a longing for the mystery of death, that he terms « death-appeal ». For a while he was the pupil of Gerald Heard, a journalist seemingly turned ascetic, and practised the mental exercises this latter suggested. Later on he subjected himself to a peculiar experiment by swallowing a certain amount of mescaline, a dope extracted from a kind of cactus and supposed to lead automatically to supersensible experiences.

Huxley shut himself into a quiet room, took his drug and waited for developments. He was deeply convinced he would shortly be in the spiritual world or at least not too far away from it. But reality did not quite come up to his expectations. His wife and his physician were at hand to question him and his answers were registered on a gramophone record. For a few hours his sense perceptions altered and acquired a keener grasp of things. A bunch of flowers shimmered in an unusual harmony of hues. From the shelves on the walls of his room the books seemed to beckon to him, sparkling with peculiar colours, suggestive of their different inner meanings. The wicker chair nearly assumed an archetypal reality, as if it had been the essential or universal chair, the thing in itself. Those were his experiences in a nutshell.

To call that « an experience of the spiritual world », Zaehner remarks, would be much too easy; but its technique reveals the bias of present-day materialism, i.e. the temptation to satisfy Man's urge towards a supersensible world while sparing him the trouble of inner training and the gradual spiritual discipline implied, which are the only guarantees of an actual supersensible experience. Here is again a quick and comfortable way of becoming an ascetic, reminding us somehow of a recent attempt to teach Yoga by correspondence, in keeping with a practical — we might even say pragmatistic — style peculiar to our age.

The experiences due to mescaline cannot but be a delusion. Even if a certain dissociation of daily human consciousness takes place, no active inner reality can vouch for its independence from outer bodily perceptions; only those become more subtle, more refined, more pleasant, and the soul surrenders in its deepest layers to the bodily conditions, or, according to the Hindu terminology, remains in the state of *avidyā* coupled with the delusion (*moha*) of its overcoming.

In other words Huxley brought about certain physiopathic reactions by means of something he swallowed, without actually performing any inner activity. He simply sat down and took it easy, watching for any changes which might take place in himself. By this standard anybody, whatever the degree of his moral development, provided he is supplied with a certain amount of dope, has a right to tell us about his spiritual experiences. But the real thing, as Zaehner remarks, rests on something quite different and points elsewhere, as it never starts with a particular condition of the body, but springs from an activity of consciousness, i.e. from the movements of that inner being which, in any sane individual exclusively rests on itself and does not experience the body as its foundation.

The Author looks upon Huxley's position as a travesty of *unio mystica* and proposes to find out the subtle reasons why Huxley, in spite of the blatantly unholy features of his mescaline spree, should go out of his way to compare it with the Christian beatific vision or the Hindu Sacchidananda. Such distortions, he points out, though less conspicuous and less subject to coarse material processes, have been

known to happen in the past; he terms them « natural mysticism » and thinks that their common feature consists in a lack of distinction of the individual from the universal, or more exactly, of the soul from its bodily garment below and its relation to God above. Such a distinction is markedly absent in the several forms of monism, whether Eastern or Western: they are different shades of pantheism anyhow.

Though largely borrowing from the metaphysical style of the *Upaniṣads* and *Vedānta* and claiming his views are based on a « philosophia perennis », Huxley ultimately mixes up a refined kind of sensation with the ascent towards God, i.e. the natural with the supernatural. Such views, Zaehner says, expose us to the double danger of misunderstanding the true history of human spirit as something subordinate to the data of senses and of nature; and of misleading Man, in this materialistic age, to seek a spiritual ascent through purely mechanical means. He rightly remarks that it would be the height of perversion to claim to supersensible experiences while remaining within the narrow confines of one's ego, thus making all results of those alleged experiences subservient to it.

This leads Zaehner to unmask the current fallacy that any experience leading out of the usual waking consciousness should be considered as mystical in the sense of a union with the really supernatural world. Present-day scientific research feels too often entitled to look upon the saint, the mystic and the neurotic as cast in the same mould. A concrete example of this is supplied by the personalities of Proust, Rimbaud and John Custance, and particularly by their works *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Proust), where in spite of their poetic haze some sensual descriptions of evasion from time and space strangely recall some of Huxley's mescaline induced day-dreams; and *Une saison en enfer* (Rimbaud) where the spiritual projection of a state of « delirium » rooted in physical nature can easily be retraced. John Custance's case is more complex. Zaehner hints at the two movements of « expansion » (bast) and « contraction » (qabḍ) to which the Muslim mystic Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī refers as the two natural poles of any however subtle and baffling mystical experience — and which modern psychology compares to the ups and downs in mood induced by manic-depressive psychosis. John Custance, the author of *Adventure into the Unconscious* and of *Wisdom, Madness and Folly, The Philosophy of a Lunatic* is currently known as a genuine manic-depressive type, especially remarkable because the manic periods alternate with long spells of utter normalcy in his life, in which he is able to look back upon those phases with detachment. The paranormal psychology Custance describes recalls to the author Kundalini's awakening in Vivekananda's *Rajayoga*. But traditional Yoga, Zaehner observes, is not based on a monistic system like Vedānta: it rather rests on a dualistic system, Sāṃkhya, its two principles being *Puruṣa* (a being detached from nature) and *Prakṛti* (nature itself). Still bound to *Prakṛti* are, in Zaehner's mind, all those who, though laying claim to transcendent communion, actually stop at a pantheistic experience, or, as Z. puts it, to a « pan-en-henic » one (from Neoplatonism's ἐν τὸ πᾶν).

The misunderstanding arises from the fact that pseudo-mystics speak the same language as real mystics; these latter, like Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius among the Christians, Abū Yazīd, Hallāj, Abū Sa'īd ibn Abī'l Khayr, Ibn al-ʿArabī and Jīlī among the Muslims, often referring to their communion with God in terms of identity with Him. In other words « enstasy », as Mircea Eliade and Louis Gardet describe it, ought to be distinguished from « ecstasy ». The unreleased,

unpurified soul can only be identified with nature, whereas only the essential soul can come into relation with God. Returning to Sāṃkhya Zaehner observes that its concept of *Kaivalya* (final emancipation of the unfettered soul) is certainly a better approach to genuine mystic experience, as it tends to isolate the pure principle of consciousness from any sensible or psychic object. But it does not quite lead up to a real spiritual union, as Patañjali's *Īśvara* is but an enhanced *Puruṣa*, and no real God, and Yoga's *Iṣṭadevatā* but an image meant to facilitate mental concentration. On equal terms Zaehner judges such scholars as Ānanda Coomaraswamy, René Guenon and Frithjof Schuon, propounders of a *philosophia perennis* intellectually articulate, but failing to measure up to God through a spiritually active element. Those modern metaphysicians, whose stand reminds one of medieval Arab Aristotelean philosophy, lack that pure Christian element which can be looked upon as the supreme touchstone of spiritual experience. « If there is a God, and if it is true that our relations with Him will be very much more intimate after death, then 'it is not enough to know only that He exists, but one must know His nature and His will' (*Škand-Gumānīk Vičar*). This is even more important for the mystic than it is for the ordinary man, for the mystic is in fact the man who has a foretaste in this life of life after death; and just as the experiences of those who have taken mescaline have, to a certain extent, varied according to their beliefs, so will the experiences of persons who tame their senses and discipline their minds with a view to reaching them. Indian religion is right in describing the object of religious disciplines as being *mokṣa* or liberation. By this is meant liberation from what St. Paul calls 'the flesh', that is the life of blind instinct, the animal in man. Beyond this they also seek liberation from the third of Avicenna's three components of the lower soul, 'imagination' or distracting thought. As their final goal the Sāṃkhya-Yogins seek their own immortal soul in its nakedness and isolation: having no clear idea of God, they cannot seek union with Him, nor do they claim to. The Vedāntins are in a different case. The *Upaniṣads* teach that Brahman is both the source of all things and that He includes all things. Greater than all the universe, He is yet the fine point without magnitude which is the deep centre of the human heart. In so far as they teach this, they are fully at one with the mystical teaching of the Catholic Church. However, they also teach that Brahman is the universe and that he is the human soul. Rāmānuja and his followers interpret this as being a metaphor and as meaning that the universe and human souls are what he calls the 'body' of God whereas God or Brahman remains distinct from them though they are wholly dependent on Him. Here again there is full agreement between Rāmānuja and Catholic mystical tradition » (pp. 203-4).

In his two chapters *Monism Versus Theism* and *Theism Versus Monism* Zaehner specifies his own outlook on mystic experience as something outside any natural category. Monistic schools, whether western or eastern, always run the risk of dragging the divine and cosmic elements down to the level of human subjectivism. As Rāmānuja and other Indian theists found fault with Śankara's and his followers' extreme monism so did Ruysbroeck and Suso attack the German and French Beghards in the Middle Ages. The experience of « higher quietude » or of emptiness can but be a stepping stone to *unio mystica*, not its final consummation: means to an end, not the end itself. If not recognized as such it can only lead to quietism, immobility, annihilation. « Emptiness is the prelude to holiness ». Picking his way among the rows of the several traditions and scriptures, Zaehner points to

some striking correspondences between some passages of Ruysbroeck's *The Spiritual Espousals* and some passages of Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*.

Islamic mysticism is also against monistic immobility. If we refer to the « self » in the way Jung does, as the centre of integrated personality, as the tongue of the balance between the « conscious self » and the « unconscious », i.e. as the centre and the periphery at the same time, it is clear that the aim of the Sūfī and that of the monistic Sannyāsi radically differ. The former, according to Zaehner, gives himself away in order to find himself again. He is the wise who recognizes the source of his light and wants to go back to it. The latter tends to cast off his human condition in order to enjoy a state of subjective release, mistaking his own isolated personality for the Absolute.

Though often employing the terms of Jung's psychology in his researches, the Author takes a reserved attitude towards the Swiss scholar's views on transcendency, as the rigorous lines of his study prevent him from countenancing some of the muddles analytical psychology leads to when trying to approach the supersensible sphere.

The work ends with two appendixes, the first being a report of some mescaline experiments (account by Mrs. Rosalind Heywood published in the *Manchester Guardian* on 29 May 1954, and account of his experiences under mescaline by Mr. Raymond Mortimer published in *The Sunday Times* on 14 August 1955) and the second the narrative of a similar venture which Zaehner, with scientific consistency, undertook himself by swallowing some grains of the same drug (3 December, 1955). The result confirms the Author's thesis. The Divine World cannot be attained through material substances, nor can it be reduced to a bodily experience.

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