

The Journal of Theological Studies

OCTOBER, 1912

MYSTICISM: ITS MEANING AND DANGER.

I ACCEPT entirely much of Father Kelly's profoundly interesting theory of Mysticism which he develops in the July number, and of his very kind and searching criticism of my own previous article on the same subject. My whole article was, I now believe, too much inclined to take a conventional and uncritical view of the merits of an experience which claims to make possible an immediate approach of the soul to God. Again, I agree with Father Kelly in regarding the pursuance of the *via negativa* as at least an essential characteristic of mystical religion. But for that very reason I cannot help with the greatest diffidence joining issue with him as to his description of what Mysticism actually is. He seems to me to include under the term several kinds of mental process which, as a matter of fact, have very little to do with each other.

(1) There is the process by which I combine differing and partial mental images of a collar-stud or a sheep into the notion of a whole. Father Kelly here seems not to recognize the distinction between concept and mental image or remembered percept. Unquestionably no image gives me the whole sheep or the whole collar-stud. But my notion of the whole, whether it takes me further from or nearer to 'reality', is a concept just because it is not imaginable. The formation of concepts is in fact the most fundamental activity of the intellect, and however mysterious from certain points of view it may appear, it is surely better for the sake of clearness not to call it mystical.

(2) There is the process of generalization by which my concept of a whole particular sheep passes into that of sheep in general. This is again only an essential process of the intellect. But the mind may meditate on general ideas in abstraction in such a way that they seem to have a reality of their own; and in that case

a mental attitude and a doctrine are generated which are properly known as Platonism.

(3) There is the intuition that none of my concepts does or can give me 'the actuality of things as they are or as I think them in their change, their movement, their potentiality'. Reality is always escaping the meshes of the conceptual net. There is in all things an *ἀπειρον*. To insist on the positive value of this intuition as the guide to truth is to follow M. Bergson. Now both Platonism and Bergsonism have from certain points of view been called mystical. But they present a fundamental contrast to the mysticism of the *via negativa*. For whereas the two philosophers seek to reach reality by starting from the observation of the external world and the criticisms of the mind thereon and therefore their path to truth lies through the world of sense, the teaching of the *via negativa* insists that the external and the temporal are only hindrances to the soul's desire for union with God, and as such are to be eschewed from the beginning. M. Bergson, it is true, appeals to inward intuition, but his intuitional knowledge is simply a datum of ordinary observation of movement and ordinary consciousness of life. It is no more mystical than the sight of a bird flying or the feeling of sitting down. Such things may be the mystery of mysteries, but to call them in this connexion mystical simply invites confusion. Plato comes much nearer to the mystic when at the end of the dialectical process *αὐτῆ ἢ ψυχῆ* approaches *αὐτὸ τὸ ὄν*. But the dialectical method itself is radically unmystical. It passes from the percept of physical sense to the concept of reason by a process of abstraction. The *via negativa* turns from the percept of physical sense to the percept of spiritual sense by a process of exclusion.

(4) Here then is the fourth mental process, and it is for this that I should prefer to reserve the term Mysticism. I still think my previous definition was correct in its essential meaning, though Father Kelly has pointed out that it was slipshod in expression. Mysticism, I should now say, is the claim made by the soul to the apprehension of a wider reality in no sense mediated by the data of sense-perception. I still maintain that the essence of mysticism is an immediate inner experience of reality as opposed to a meditation upon abstract ideas which have their concrete source in the external world. Father Kelly argues that expe-

rience is of the external, whereas mystical apprehension is of the inward and consequently must be a kind of meditation or reflexion. This position may well be right ; but it seems to me that it is equivalent to a simple rejection of mysticism and should be recognized as such. To say that experience is of the external is to say that experience must be mediated by the material, i. e. by the data of the senses. But it is the claim of the mystic that he can experience *a* or *the* reality other than himself by cutting himself off from the external world altogether and retiring into the hidden depths of his own soul. This experience is no meditation on abstractions ; it is as direct in its claim to give 'objective' reality as my apprehension of a blow on the body or of redness on a pillar-box—only it is not mediated by any bodily sense. The soul is here using no material organ and no powers of reflexion, but a specifically mystical sense. Father Kelly may be right in maintaining in effect that this sense is a kind of psychological Mrs Harris, but to do so is to assert categorically that mysticism is a delusion. Father Kelly would avoid this conclusion by emphasizing the fact that the mystics did not set much store by their 'experiences'. In this connexion, however, there is need, I now think, for a distinction between 'experiences' and 'experience'. Of experiences such as raptures, visions, and the like, the mystics were undoubtedly critical, and they bade their followers not to set their hopes on such 'consolations'. They were, indeed, often distressed by the importance attached to them in their own case by the more ignorant of their companions, and they sought as far as possible to avoid the notice attracted by the physical abnormalities which accompanied such visitations. But none the less they seem to represent the end and aim of their religion as an experience of the type I have tried to define, an experience of the soul alone with God in immediate contact and union, a union ineffable in nature, eternal in essence, and quite exclusive of the world. This union is apparently identical with Heaven, and the mystics are eager to admit that continued consciousness of it is impossible and even undesirable on earth. They do not therefore, while the soul is tabernacled in the flesh, altogether identify the sense of God's presence with its actuality. But they do believe that in mystic consciousness foretastes of the heavenly experience are bestowed,

and that it is in virtue of these foretastes alone that they have absolute knowledge of heaven and of God. The claim to this inward experience of God on earth is therefore the essence of mystical religion. And it does look as if the mystic suspiciousness of visions and raptures was due to the fact that they are too like hallucinations of the ordinary consciousness to be implicitly trusted. Such experiences are granted at early stages of the mystic journey and not only when the goal is reached. They are clearly distinguished from the final union and are at best only granted as helps and encouragements to perseverance on the road. Perhaps, therefore, it is not because they are too abnormal that the mystics do not rely on them, but rather because they are not abnormal enough to be ineffable.

If such a theory of religion as this exists, clearly some name should be given it to keep it distinct from Platonism and Hegelism on the one hand, which give us the apotheosis of the conceptual system, and from Bergsonism on the other, which relies on the intuition that that system misses the reality in the world. As a psychical fact mysticism differs from these infinitely more than the mental process which plans a burglary differs from that which plans a Sunday-school treat. 'Mysticism' may well be thought a term too wide to serve legitimately this purpose of distinction. If so, some other word is needed. Perhaps Father Kelly can make a suggestion. In any case I only advance my account of Mysticism in the most tentative way in order to make clear a possible point for discussion.

In conclusion I should like further to emphasize from a somewhat different point of view Father Kelly's warning as to the danger of esotericism always lurking in mystical belief. At the present time we seem threatened in certain quarters with a return to what he describes as 'the great test fruit of heathenism'. Recent years have, in fact, seen the development of an entirely new method in religious apologetic, which probably involves a greater breach with the past than many people suspect. The new line of argument takes its rise naturally from two characteristic tendencies of modern thought, on the one hand a profound distrust of intellectual criteria as a means of establishing objective verity, and on the other the growing importance attached to the comparatively new science of psychology. Theoretic demonstrations in connexion with

religion may or may not be dialectically flawless, they leave the modern mind cold and unconvinced. Reason is felt to be but a blind guide beyond the limits of actual experience. At the same time, the distrust of the intellect has issued in the liberation of the claims of experience in all its forms from the shackles of *a priori* reasoning. The opposed criticisms of experience connected with the metaphysics of idealism and materialism are alike felt to rest largely on assumptions which can no longer be regarded as more than the postulates of intellectualism ; and there is a growing refusal to accept their authority where they fail to satisfy the deeper needs and intuitions of our spiritual being. In so far as this conversion to what William James called a radical empiricism means a turning from an abstract Absolute or First Cause to the Divine Spirit in the human heart, the Christian philosopher can surely regard it with equanimity or even with favour. But when the new apologetic invokes the aid of scientific psychology in place of idealist metaphysic it may well be doubted whether the new alliance will prove any more satisfactory than the old. The psychologist in pursuance of his scientific method must first proceed to isolate the phenomena of religious experience in order to investigate them. He is therefore bound to assume at the start that the religious experience is a defined and specific form of experience separable from all other forms and that the best cases from which to generalize will naturally be those in which the specific experience is most highly developed. Looking at the facts from this point of view, he is immediately confronted by a vast number of cases in which persons of all times, countries, and persuasions, claim to have had an immediate *sui generis* experience or consciousness of a Divine reality beyond them. Here then apparently is the specifically religious experience. The persons referred to we have termed mystics ; and forthwith for the scientific mind religious experience in its purest form is identified with mysticism. The religious faith of the ordinary man who makes no mystical claims is only mysticism dilute or inchoate, or, more often still perhaps, it is mysticism known about instead of known.

These not unnatural assumptions form the common basis of two of the most typically modern books written in English, which defend the religious view of life, William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and Miss Underhill's *Mysticism*. Miss

Underhill indeed does not expressly start from science, but her whole method of defending religious knowledge involves, whether consciously or not, the presupposition just described, that religion consists in a specific separable kind of experience. In Prof. James's case this scientific hypothesis forms practically the sole assumption of his enquiry and completely determines his method. Apart from the pragmatic test of value which in his view cannot differentiate between any of the more respectable theologies, he preserves a strictly impartial attitude towards all conditions, Christian, Buddhist, Mohammedan, and others, under which mystical experiences may occur and through which their character may be influenced. He conceives his task to lie in discounting the peculiar contributions of each religion and then formulating the highest common factor of agreement as the sum of religious knowledge ascertainable up to date. The mystical form of the experience is recognized as constituting the chief claim to consideration, and its abnormality thus becomes the measure of its importance. As must inevitably be the case, the positive result of this enquiry amounts to little more than the assertion that there probably is something in a hypothetical mysticism of a strictly undenominational and cosmopolitan character.

Miss Underhill's method represents a considerable advance, for practical purposes, on that of James. For her also the mystic is the sole religious authority. But the important distinction between mysticism and magic enables her to limit the variety of data to be considered and so to reach a clearer and more imposing result. Mysticism for her is the union of the soul with the Absolute, sought simply for its own sake out of the pure desire and love for Absolute Truth and Being. In magic also the soul seeks to enter into relations with supernatural power, but always with a view to the attainment of some ulterior purpose. Magic is not necessarily wrong—the end it has in view may even be a noble one—but the element of interestedness contained in it vitiates any claim on its part to reach the ultimate truth of the universe. This distinction cleverly worked out enables Miss Underhill to reject claims to teach ultimate truth on the part of all the less dignified phenomena of religious mysticism to which more strictly psychological enquirers such as James and Starbuck devote so much anxious attention. Revivalism, ecstatic conversion, the Mind-cure Movement, Christian Science, may all be classed as

magic ; and forthwith their crude appeals, confused theology, and noisy emotions, cease to trouble the serene atmosphere of contemplation in which alone the soul can enter the clear light and true knowledge of God. For Miss Underhill the really normative type of religion is that of the orthodox school of Catholic mystics.

Neither James nor Miss Underhill, however, seems at all to realize the very serious, and by no means wholly welcome, consequences to religion in general which their notion of religious empiricism involves. The most obvious objection to it from a Christian point of view lies in the inevitable consequence that where the inner certainty of a specific experience is made the one authoritative channel of religious truth, the external evidence of historic fact becomes secondary and even logically superfluous. If the Absolute can be known directly in immediate experience, what need is there to worry and argue about historic events 2,000 years old? 'When the mystic has found God', to use Herrmann's telling phrase, 'he has left Christ behind.' This objection would no doubt weigh powerfully with the orthodox, but to many liberal thinkers it might appear to lend an additional support to the view against which it is directed. A frank acceptance of the unimportance of mere historic fact would free the educated mind once for all from all the perplexities of Biblical criticism ; and it has been very plausibly argued that belief in the historic fact is after all only the husk serving to protect a profound truth of spiritual experience until its fuller growth can dispense with outward covering. The story of Christ's Life is for the spiritual infant ; direct mystical experience for the man. Intellectual and modernizing persons, however, who reason in this fashion seldom grasp the real issues at stake. One supreme value of the historic fact is that it makes possible a spiritual democracy. As long as the actual events of Christ's Life, Death, and Resurrection are recognized as the essential basis of all faith, those who occupy their business in other than directly religious matters, the van-boy in the East End, the commercial churchwarden in the suburbs, have a definite assurance that they too may possess a firm grasp of all that is really needful of religious knowledge. They can feel that through their lives not less, in a sense, than through the life of the contemplative, the Divine Life of the Spirit may find expression, that their point of view has an equal

right to be considered in the councils of the whole society, that even through their very absorption in secular tasks they may have their own special contribution to make to a Church whose Founder came to consecrate all human life in His service. This is the only basis for democracy in the church, and a historic faith is the key-stone on which the structure rests. For where faith is grounded on an external fact and its meaning and value for life—a fact which all can grasp and verify—the development of a specific form of inward experience is no longer made the test of religiousness. Take away the historic fact, and the specific inward experience is almost bound to be identified with religion. This experience the van-boy and the business man, however earnest their attachment to religion, have no time and probably no capacity to cultivate. They are therefore relegated to an exoteric circle of belief. By diligence according to their lights they may attain an ultimate salvation. But meanwhile their business is only to do and believe what they are told is good for them by the mystic expert, and their demands and opinions are worth no more consideration than those of the amateur and the dabbler in any other branch of knowledge. At once a highly scientific and a rigidly aristocratic position. For science must ever be ruled by the expert and cannot believe in the wisdom of babes. And the tyranny becomes more pronounced in proportion as the distinctness of the specific experience called religious is emphasized. There is always a certain universality about a metaphysical argument. For its appeal is to universal reason which it assumes to be common to all men. All men therefore are potentially capable of appreciating the truths it would establish. Mystical experience is usually thought to be the gift of the few, and those few usually insist on its ineffability. Hence the many who have it not, can at best be amused or edified with the roughest representations of its meaning which are bound to be widely misunderstood. Something of this inevitable consequence Miss Underhill has the courage to admit ; but it would be a strange irony if pragmatism, whose self-appointed mission is to proclaim the democracy of thought, should in its scientific zeal hand over religion to an obscurantism in principle more exclusive than that of German philosopher or Spanish priest. If religion has felt the whips of metaphysic let her beware the scorpions of psychology.

The consideration of this danger suggests the wider question

whether a religious empiricism of the kind we have been discussing is not in fact alien to the whole *ἡθoς* of Christianity. It is very hard to find traces of mysticism in the New Testament, except perhaps in St Paul in whom it is abundantly corrected by other influences. Does not the profound democracy of the Gospels depend largely on their suggestion that man approaches God in and through his dealings with his fellow-men, at least as much as in the isolation of prayer? Even in prayer itself we are taught to ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. We are to be perfect as our Father is perfect through acting on the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. The similes from natural growth in the mustard-seed and the lily seem to suggest a radically different conception of faith from that which inspired the inward journey through the Dark Night of the Soul and up the Ascent of Mount Carmel. The whole theory of Incarnation is apparently understood by St John to imply that the Christian's inward relations to God must be mediated by his outward relations to his brethren and the material world. Mr Burkitt in a review in the last number of the JOURNAL quotes a passage from Schweitzer which represents the Johannine theology as resting on the dogma that the Spirit can only act on man in conjunction with matter. Such discussions would take us too far afield. But perhaps it may be suggested that there is imperative need for care in the use of that simple phrase 'religious experience'. One has only to read in succession a little of such books as James's *Varieties* and Herrmann's *Communion with God* to realize the fatal ambiguity of which such a commonplace expression is capable.

The main purpose of my previous article was to shew that Mysticism, while it had been and might still be the invaluable handmaid of Christianity, was also capable of becoming its most evil mistress. The extraordinary difficulty of bringing the two into satisfactory relation lies in the nature of the essential claims made by Mysticism, which seem to exclude it from all positions except the chief. My own attempt at reconciliation made in the last six pages of my previous article is no doubt not satisfying. But Father Kelly's solution of the problem seems to me to involve the rejection of Mysticism altogether in the sense in which the mystics have understood the word.

O. C. QUICK.