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THE MEANING OF MYSTICISM.

Is there at the present day any religious term so much in men's mouths, handled with such easy-going dogmatism and confidence, and yet involved in so much ambiguity and obscurity as 'Mysticism'? I hardly think I should have ventured to write on it if Mr Quick's exceptionally sane and lucid article in the January number had not opened what seems, at least to me, a plain road to its true interpretation, theory, explanation. For any attempt to suggest an explanation is blocked by two preliminary difficulties.

In the first place 'mysticism' shares with 'socialism' the modern weakness of being an undefined subject. The strongest advocates of both have very definite ideas of what they are advocating, but the great mass of sympathizers, while they repudiate the legitimacy of its extreme forms, have no clear or consistent position of their own to put forward.

In the second place, just as people urge socialism as a principle without explaining how it is to be related to the ordinary principles of free commercial life, so many urge the important place of the 'mystical sense' without offering any account of its relation to ordinary common-sense knowledge.

I called Mr Quick's paper lucid in so far as he has for readers of this JOURNAL gathered the different senses of the word together into one view. I venture to call it sane because he has insisted that such relations must exist, and has marked off the lines on which the different human operations co-operate with and check off one another. I am prepared to accept his statement as a basis to work from. I am in entire accord with his view of its relation to intellectual theology.

If I quote the article it is because I value it. I venture in places

to criticize, because I want, if I can, to go beyond it. There is a third question, on which Mr Quick hardly touches, and which lies at the back of both the difficulties referred to. What after all is this mystical sense, power, instinct, by whatever name we call it? Is it a mental faculty, something like telepathy or second sight, possessed only by certain gifted people, altogether different from the common faculties of observation, generalization, and inference with which we are familiar? Or is it nothing more than a somewhat special application of those common powers? A discussion of the relation between the results attained by one method and those attained by another will be necessarily inconclusive till we have made clear what the two methods are. I want to apply an analytic method to the descriptive materials Mr Quick has provided.

Let us grant that mysticism or mystical apprehension does stand for a group of real phenomena in the mental life, though we admit it is a group somewhat difficult to define. It is at least distinguishable from the group Mr Quick calls intellectual—though I should prefer the older term rational. We will try to approach it through the distinction.

The intellect or reason begins from and builds upon direct sense-perceptions. By comparison and reflexion it groups them in species and genera. By further reflexion we trace laws of connexion between these or between phenomena. But the essential character of the process is shewn in the result, which is a single thought-abstraction, clear of outline, capable of being defined, and therefore at once limited and fixed—a static concept.

This process has very obvious defects. I am trying to get into my mind some conception of a real thing. I am rather apt to think I am doing it, but as a matter of fact I am only gaining concepts of certain qualities, aspects, and relations of the thing taken separately. 'Personality transcends the intellect,—is a more ultimate reality than the abstractions (of reflexion).' I agree, and yet I think this sentence misses the point. The comparison should lie not between the personality which abstracts and the abstractions, but rather between the abstractions and the things from which they are abstracted. My notions of a personality are inadequate. So are my notions of a collar-stud. The thing itself—be it big or little—is a single whole, very imperfectly

approximated to by a number of diverse concepts, about its shape, its hardness, its whiteness, its usefulness, its capacity-for-disappearingness, and so on.

My concepts fail therefore first, because they do not render the thing to me as a whole unity in which qualities are grounded, but only as a bundle of qualities which I must tie together as I can. Secondly, they give me only the actuality of the thing as it is, or as I think it. They will not give me its change, its movement, its potentiality. That also I have to build up for myself out of the various successive states in which I have viewed it. The collar-stud has very little capacity for change, so I am not much troubled; but personality, or a voyage, or a machine, or my digestion, are always changing. Change or movement constitutes a large part of their being, and my concepts are sore put to it to make the ideas intelligible.

Here, then, mysticism steps in. 'Mystical experience claims to tell us (*or*, to give a certain knowledge) of some wider reality beyond ourselves which is not directly apprehensible by or through the senses.' On this I am going to make three criticisms. The first is connected with the words 'tell' and 'knowledge', but for the moment I will leave that as too big. Secondly, the words 'beyond ourselves' are not wanted, for we are also told that mysticism 'claims to deal with the deepest mysteries of personal life'. Thirdly, I thought it was recognized by all modern writers that no knowledge whatever was *directly* apprehensible through the senses; it was always constructed by mental process and by means of mental categories working upon sensible data.

I am afraid I have not left much of the definition standing, but then definitions are notoriously pesky things, and a definition of mysticism—well, we had better get back to our description, but we will carry off the two surviving words 'wider reality'. They may serve as a text for the two different aspects of mysticism.

In what does mystical experience reach something wider than the intellect? Mr Quick's citations make it evident. God, Eternity, Immortality, Personality, but here again I demur. Certainly these are very wide, very solemn and awful subjects, but their solemnity rather paralyses my thinking. I have a very strong objection to the latent supposition in some folk's minds that we have one set of faculties for doing big things and another for doing

little things. We do not use one eye for Mont Blanc and another for a mole-hill. It is one and the same mind which thinks out Kant (if it can) and Bernard Shaw (if it wants to). Wickedness and philanthropy, burglary and a Sunday-school treat are planned by the same mental processes. I want to know what my mind is actually doing, and it is much easier to follow it on less exacting topics.

A collar-stud is a very small matter. I grant that looking for an infinite wholeness among the definable properties on that scale rather strains one's mental sight, but it is there all the same. There is a mystery about all and every reality—a collar-stud, a box of matches, a sheep's tail, or a boy's soul—which is strictly an unspeakable mystery, for each sentence with its finite meaning, and whole strings of sentences, can only state particular concepts appertaining thereto; the reality to which they appertain is not capable of statement.

Nevertheless, I can say 'whole sheep', and therefore I suppose I can in some fashion think of it in spite of its infinity. Let me study the process. First I think of a sheep, its image rises clear before me, in profile, feeding. But sheep are not always broad-side on nor always feeding. Other images succeed—a sheep head on, a sheep looking at me over his left shoulder, a little Lakes' sheep rushing a five-foot wall. Sheep are not all pictures. I must think of wool, mutton, gregariety, comparative anatomy, graminivorousness. Now I want to reach the whole mighty reality. I fix my gaze on vacancy, dream all these alternating (particular) images and concepts to their lowest point. I cannot get rid of them altogether or I should not be thinking of infinite (unlimited) *sheep* which is itself a limited kind, but of an infinite nothing.

I never took a sheep so seriously before, and I do not suppose I shall again. But let us try the mathematical infinity of number. Once more I begin with the finite, 1, 2, 3, 4, . . . 17 . . . 527—thousands, 'ah'—millions, 'oh'—and more and more and more and —ETC. Finally I end on that; I do not imagine infinite number; I substitute for it the consciousness of I-could-go-on-if-I-wanted-to. It is still a single conception—the conception of the 'etc.'

Now if we compare this with the various accounts Mr Quick gives of mysticism as it is commonly recognized, we shall see that

it exactly corresponds to one aspect of what he and other writers are describing. I take three prominent features.

(1) I venture to maintain that the *Via Negativa* is the only true definable form of Mysticism, just as Communism is the only definable theory of Socialism. I am aware that all good mystics, e. g. Dr Inge and Mr Quick, deny that, but only, as it seems to me, because no good mystic is ever a pure mystic. He realizes that mysticism is only one method, and that it cannot be worked by itself.

(2) The library of the s.s. *Celtic* does not contain Dr Inge's book so I only speak from memory, but Mr Quick makes the failing very clear. The mystical attitude is a generalized view gained by exclusion of the particulars. I do not give this as exactly Mr Quick's own view, but he does point out how the mystic sense of God was felt to exclude the memory of individual people, and that it ignored the particularity of Christ's life. I will return to this point presently.

(3) The clearest affinity to my theory of mysticism as the generalized conception is given by William James—'the mystical feeling of enlargement, a peculiar emotional mood'—easily absorbing very various philosophies or theologies just because (the *because* is mine) 'it has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own', i. e. we have negated all its intension.

A little above I demurred to the definition (or explanation) of mysticism as 'giving knowledge' or 'telling us', for the moment we use those terms we must be ready to answer the question—What does it tell us? And the answer can only be in terms of a definable intellectual concept, expressed in a conceptual proposition. This Mr Quick virtually admits.

In the same way, I demur to the phrase 'mystical experience'. No doubt it is a possible phrase, and yet I think it is misleading. If I choose to ponder the 'Law of the Attraction of Masses', the notions which float through my mind are an object of consciousness, and so far experienced.

Similarly, I can speak of having experienced some queer dreams. But in general use 'experience' is kept for something external. If I use it of purely internal thoughts, it is always by taking them as external.

An experience is then in common use an experience of some-

thing. If I meditate on Gravitation, its universality and so on, it is a meditation. If some one drops a brick on my foot, I should say I had had experience of gravitation, but I should hardly say that of the meditation. The exact meaning of the term may not be very important, but it is very important that we should not use it in two different senses. My meditation on gravitation may well fill me with a sense of awe, a sense of the greatness and wonder of things, but, even if I call that meditative effort a mental experience, I am not supposing that it was anything more than a meditation, or that gravitation itself (whatever that may be) came into my mind. If I meditate upon God, I do it in just the same way, universalizing my thought from the particular operations with which I am familiar. Certainly this thought of God does fill me with awe and wonder, but to call it an experience implies to many people that God Himself actually came near us. I do not say that that may not take place in meditation, I only do say that it is no more necessarily to be assumed than in the case of gravitation.

I maintain that this mystical intuition of things is nothing more than a highly abstract, highly generalized or universalized way of contemplating them apart from particular or specific *differentiae* or manifestations. I can apply it to my friend Tom or my horse Bill—by excluding particular actions or appearances. I can apply it to friendship or horsiness, more generically. I can apply it to force or animal or any other subject. In such case, the bigger the idea, or the further I carry the process, the vaguer, the more dream-like, the more 'mystic' the meditation becomes.

I am afraid that to many people I may seem to be attacking one of the strongest, perhaps the only strong, ground of Christian or Theistic belief. Strictly speaking, that is no concern of mine here. I have only attempted to make an analysis of certain mental phenomena, to trace their analogies, to shew how and whence they arise.

Still, I ought to face the question: Is this conclusion un-Christian or anti-Theistic? I think it certainly helps to shew that no basis for a solid Theism exists outside Christianity. In the first place, it must be noted that the idea of a mystic approach to God, although Christians have made much use of it, is not itself Christian. The evidence on that side is conclusive. I even venture to affirm that it is based on a non-Christian principle.

It is an approach to God by way of a certain human state or effort of ecstasy, abstraction, exclusion—by throwing the human soul in upon itself. Now if there is any fundamental principle in Christianity more clear than another, it is that man cannot come to God, that for the soul to go in upon itself is to go into sin. The beginning of salvation is that God comes to man, and the salvation of the soul is salvation *from* itself.

Mr Quick rightly insists on the test 'by their fruits ye shall know them' (with the Vedantists). But by what fruits? I answer unhesitatingly—if rashly—that the great test fruit of heathenism is its religious 'aristocraticism', or esotericism. Its religious methods and achievements are always those of select souls, people of peculiar capacities. Its highest methods and achievements are not open to the vulgar and commonplace.

This same character is claimed for and on behalf of mysticism by all. Certainly Mr Quick and all Mr Quick's authorities admit it. If my analysis is correct the reason is obvious. It always is the few who love the (mystic) twilight of the generalization and the abstract. The *profanum vulgus*—for whom Christ came on earth and died—feel most at home over simple concrete things, definite ideas, the matter-of-fact duties that want doing.

All this is a very one-sided view I fully admit. It applies only to the *Via Negativa*, to the pure abstraction, or excluding generalization. To reach the 'wider reality' is not so easy, for the wider we make our ideas the further they get from reality. And I maintain that these mystic 'intuitions' are ideas, concepts, the most highly conceptualized of all concepts.

Mr Quick puts the other side also, and it is a startlingly different one. Mysticism 'gives life to theological doctrine,—enables us to keep the eternal before us', makes realization of it. I fully accept this as a fact, puzzling as the contradiction may seem.

On my interpretation, however, I do not think there is any contradiction. I have maintained that the mystical method is not an intuition, but a meditation or reflexion, merely carried to a high point of abstraction. Mr Quick puts the point in saying 'It is intensely difficult to realize eternal truths in the midst of actual life,—to feel oneself constantly in the presence of God'.

I should go much further. I should say it was fundamentally

impossible. And for a very good psychological reason. Every concept is one concept, limited, defined to this or that. That is why all human conceptions are so inadequate,—conceptions, as I said at the beginning, not of a thing, but of some part, quality, or aspect of the thing,—and the thing is a whole or unity, which underlies and transcends the parts and so forth taken in separate number, or even the mere numerical total of them, if that ever could be reached.

But this inherent defect of the human mind applies equally to the concept of the whole. When I think of the whole, I have to make of that a separate and defined concept which negatives or excludes the parts. When I think of catching my steamer, or getting to Liverpool, or writing an article on Mysticism—these are parts or events in my life, and I am thinking of them and not of God or of eternity. I may learn—I trust I have learnt—to intermingle or alternate the thought of God with them. But steamers, Liverpool, theories of Mysticism, and Eternity are all different concepts. They only can be alternated.

This is the meaning of prayer and worship, which are essentially mystical acts. And this is why prayer and worship are to most of us a bore. What we are doing is concrete, limited, and very interesting by virtue of its intense actuality. To pray about it is possible and easy, if it does not take too long, and if we can feel that it is useful, which we have a sneaking idea it may be. But worship, prayer in the full sense is not concerned with an IT. It is a stilling of the soul before the Infinity of God, a realizing of our own nothingness, and it is very difficult and very trying indeed. The measure of its difficulty and of our boredom is just the measure of its importance. We are bits, and the things we do are bits. Concerned as we are with them it is vitally necessary that we should do our mystic turn, that we should bring the vastness of God before our minds. A necessary part of the way and means thereto is the process of negating the littleness of ourselves and our own doings.

The danger of mysticism to which I am so sensitive—perhaps hyper-sensitive—is that it treats this realization of God as an approach to God, and thereby it makes the *sense* of God's presence the same as the presence, which I take leave to call a very horrible doctrine. The next step is to take the feeling

of God for God Himself. That reaches its climax in the idea of identification with the Infinite, against which Mr Quick rightly protests. We find men of the deepest religiousness—all the more because they are religious—hunting feelings, nursing feelings, smoothing them out, chuckling and pleased with themselves under the notion that they are getting God by hands-full.

No doubt the Saint in meditation enjoys the Presence of God in a way we common folk never or very seldom do. But then once more that is the *enjoyment* of it. And the butcher's boy skimming the corner on one wheel is not enjoying that Presence (his mind being too full of the joy of a different excitement), but the really vital question is whether God is present with him. The answer to that depends on whether he is a good boy, and even a marked capacity for religious abstraction will not by itself settle the point.

Many mystics have been good Christians. St John of the Cross was one. I know that—not by his being a great mystic, but because he was sure that his brother (who was a gardener and thought a great deal of his cabbages) was a better Christian than himself. As Mr Quick has pointed out, the greatest of the mystics attached little importance to their 'experiences'. They were very far from giving them the weight assigned to them in modern writings.

I am afraid I am not quite at an end. We must admit that the intellectual formlessness of mysticism, implied in Mr James's 'it has no intellectual content of its own', is an exaggeration. I pointed out that however much we generalize or universalize a concept, we must keep in it some of its particular or specific meaning, however shadowy, or it will cease to be a concept at all. Mr Quick shews on his side how the mystical 'experiences' are shaped by the theology from which they start.

But we must go further. The mystic state does not normally give knowledge, but it cannot be denied that certain intuitions arise out of it. I call them intuitions in the sense that they appear more or less as sudden ideas, not as reasoned conclusions. I shrink from dealing with this aspect because it involves my opening up another tremendous field of discussion. I will try to give my own view as shortly as possible.

I contend in the first place that it can be psychologically

demonstrated that the senses receive, the brain stores, the mind uses, enormously more, and more delicate, impressions than one's consciousness recognizes. Everybody will have had experience of identifying a friend 'by instinct' at a distance so great that he could not name or see any of the signs by which the identification was made. One could only say 'I felt it was he'.

I maintain further that the whole of all thinking processes is unconscious. It is only conclusions at different stages—for I do not mean only final conclusions—which come before the mind as static concepts. Here is some one's thought,—'I believe in Mr Lloyd George.' Why? There follow an immense number of arguments, good or bad,—and being political they are probably mostly bad. My immediate point is that these are only arguments. If I press the question, how did that man actually come to that opinion?,—I think we shall all of us begin to recognize that how any of us come by our opinions is an exceedingly difficult thing to learn. We can only trace bits of the road we came by if we can remember what influences affected us at one time or other. Our actual line of thought is a matter of inference. We have no direct knowledge of it.

Our conscious ideas therefore bear the same relation to our unconscious ideas that the coals in the cellar do to a coal seam. They merely represent such fragments as we have been able to extricate and box up for practical use. One can 'feel' a thing to be right or wrong long before one can get at or express in black and white the reasons on which that feeling is based.

I do not mean therefore to place the sub-conscious in dominance over the conscious. The domination should be very much the other way. I have a feeling that that is my friend in the distance, but I shall not run into the road and wave my arms lest I make a fool of myself. It may be that the superior delicacy of the sub-conscious perception has identified him aright, but it may be also nothing more than a suggestion of my impatience for his coming. My conscious faculties are slow, but much less liable to blunder.

Now that state of reserved abstraction when my mind is fixed on the somewhat bare Infinity of things is very favourable to the suggestion of ideas which find it difficult to make themselves heard when my mind is fully occupied with the more concrete and

hard-edged concepts. Daisies can push up through the grass, but hardly through a concrete walk. In the state technically described as 'ecstasy' there is a complete cessation of all external impressions. Visual images or word images are then thrown up very freely as in dreams, their exact nature being determined by previous habit, or by surviving indications of the reflexions under which the state was initiated. There are generally no recoverable ideas.

This complete state is very rare, but most people can gain something of it in prayer and above all in the practice of 'meditation'. Ideas which are both definite and analysable, then recur very freely. Some of these ideas may be new, some may be the results of thought processes. I believe all new ideas, if right, to be the gift of God, i.e. however they come, but we are not justified in taking all ideas as God-given illuminations merely because we cannot trace their origin. It is foolish and rash to set them aside because we cannot give a logical and reasoned account of them. I think it still more foolish and rash to trust ourselves to them unreservedly till we can.

HERBERT KELLY.