

One

The Oceanic Feeling

During most of the history of psychoanalysis, academic students of mysticism shared the unearned and, as we now know, mistaken assumption that mystical experiences were all one and the same. William James (1902) had proposed six invariants of mystical experiences: a sense of union (p. 321); a “consciousness of illumination”; and the subsidiary features of ineffability, noetic character, transiency, and passivity (pp. 292-94). In another influential formulation, Evelyn Underhill (1910) had suggested that “mysticism, in its pure form, is...the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else, and...the mystic is the person who attains this union” (p. 72). These and similar definitions were taken for granted by Freud and almost all psychoanalytic writers; but we now know them to have been errors. The world’s religions do not have a common core in mystical experiences that are everywhere one and the same (Katz, 1978, 1983; Almond, 1982). Mystical experiences do not provide a transcendent unity for global spirituality. The experiences are as individual as the dreams of sleep; their contents are shaped both by the particulars of individual mystics’ lives and by shared cultural materials (Pike, 1965, pp. 147-48; Garside, 1972, pp. 101-2; Almond, 1982, pp. 162, 173-74).

The failure of the common core hypothesis has led some scholars to abandon the concept of “mysticism” as a mistaken scholarly construct. The popular use of the term is not as easily corrected, however; and ecumenically minded scholars continue to see the value of comparative studies of religious experiences. Recent cross-cultural studies count as mystical not only the unitive and nothingness experiences of Christian contemplatives, Jewish Kabbalists, Muslim Sufis, Hindu yogins, and Buddhist meditators, but also the interior dialogues of prophets, the visionary states of vision questers, shamans, Taoists, and others, and the motor compulsions of spirit mediums and the possessed. To reflect the current trend in comparative surveys, mysticism may be defined as a practice of religious ecstasies (that is, of religious experiences during alternate states of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, magics, and so forth, are related to the ecstasies (Merkur, 2002, 2009).

Many mystical traditions regard mystical experiences as transformative, but they refer to changes that are metaphysical. A mystical experience

may be thought to integrate the mystic within God, the Way, or another metaphysical reality, or to confer magical or theurgical powers, salvation, justification, liberation, perfection, or another metaphysical attainment. Mystical transformations presumably boost self-esteem and possibly facilitate success in coping with stressful realities (Pargament, 1997). Mystical experiences may happen spontaneously or be cultivated through prayer, meditation, rituals, and/or psychoactive drugs. Importantly, mystical experiences are neither rare nor abnormal. In repeated surveys of adults in Britain, Australia, and America, one-third or more reported one or more experiences that were variously called mystical, spiritual, transcendent, or numinous (Spilka et al., 2003, p. 311). In double-blind experiments, mystical experiences were induced with 99% probability in normals, using a combination of the psychedelic drug psilocybin, positive expectations, and a supportive environment (Pahnke, 1966; Doblin, 1991; Griffiths et al., 2008). The uses of prayer and meditation to induce mystical states are, by contrast, more arduous and less reliable. They are nevertheless more accessible and effective than is often supposed (Deikman, 1963). In some religious traditions, a person is expected to pursue ethical and moral excellence in advance of mystical experience. Where meditation is performed, the procedures must be learned and practiced. Meditation is a generic term for thousands of different mental disciplines that manipulate attention and thinking, each to its own distinctive end. Because success in meditation requires the cultivation of a cognitive skill set (Brown, 1977), it neither requires nor causes character development (Brown & Engler, 1984). Richard Sterba (1968, p. 79) noted, however, that “every mystic experience of lasting effect is a...*tour-de-force* conflict solution.” Like dreams, free associations, and some styles of meditation, mystical experiences are psychological events that can be conducive to the attainment and manifestation of conflict solutions; but they are by no means intrinsically or necessarily therapeutic.

The world’s religions regularly consider mystical experiences discontinuous with normal waking sobriety. They are sacred moments, lasting seconds, minutes, or hours, that interrupt otherwise experiences of reality. Mystical experiences provide transient glimpses of ordinarily imperceptible spiritual phenomena. The sense of the discontinuity with the commonplace is often heightened by highly positive emotions that may attend mystical experiences: bliss, ecstasy, euphoria, love, innocence, absolute, esteem. Horrific, nightmarish episodes also occur. The psychoanalytic mainstream has regularly secularized this understanding of mysticism, but it has otherwise left the traditional religious paradigm unchallenged. Mystical experiences are called regressive episodes rather than sacred moments, but they are nevertheless allocated to a special category of anomalous