

Some Varieties of Mystical Union

Upon the rise of medical psychiatry in the mid-nineteenth century, various Christian mystics—including several traditional saints—were diagnosed as morbid personalities. The diagnoses were challenged, firstly by Roman Catholic writers, and next by Anglicans, who simultaneously revived the practice of mysticism in their churches after a lapse of some two hundred years (Butler, 1922, pp. xiii–xiv; Knowles, 1967, pp. 9–10). Due to the discontinuity of the living practice throughout most of Western Christendom, modern knowledge of traditional Catholic mysticism depends on historical reconstructions. As may be expected, factual errors have not been few (for a critique, see: Arbman, 1963, pp. 418–515).

Comparative perspectives played an understandably large role in the Christian mystical revival. Living mystical traditions were investigated for insights that would elucidate the writings of Christian mystics. Due to the Romantics' fascination with India (Willson, 1964; Figueira, 1994), the Hindu Yogic emphasis on the Atman-Brahman equation and the Buddhist preoccupation with nirvana were compared with the emphases that some Christian mystics had placed on *unio mystica*. The problem of discerning spirits, that is, of deciding whether a vision or voice is divine, angelic, demonic, or a natural product of the body, has led to categorical avoidance of visions and voices at various times in Christian history, from the fourth-century Evagrius Ponticus (1981, pp. 71, 74) onward. Although apparitions and visions had been classified in Western Christianity since St. Augustine (1982) as corporeal and imaginative visions, the modern mystical revival endorsed the Eastern standard. Catholic and Anglican theologians privileged *unio mystica* but discourage the revival of other Christian mystical experiences because they were no longer prepared to defend their religious validity (Inge, 1899, pp. 15–19; Poulain, 1910, pp. 299, 320–48; Maréchal, 1927, p. 111).

Academic studies of comparative mysticism arose late in the nineteenth century in furtherance of Christian concerns and favored comparably restrictive definitions. In an influential formulation, Evelyn Underhill (1910) 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). Emphasis was placed on experience to the exclusion of ideology, but at the expense of a value judgment that denied spiritual authenticity to experiences other than union. The inherently theistic implications of the term *mystical union* were later avoided by references, for cross-cultural purposes, to "the mystical experience." The definite article perpetuates the assumption that only one variety of religious experience is properly termed *mystical*.

When Gershom Scholem (1954, pp. 4–7, 40–118) pioneered the academic study of Jewish mysticism, he adopted a contrary position, claiming that whatever the historical Jewish mystics experienced was, by definition, mystical. Scholem emphasized that visionary practices had dominated Jewish mysticism from its origins through the twelfth century. Comparable arguments may readily be mounted on the evidence of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist mysticism. In no culture have mystics been limited to unitive experiences. Neither have unitive experiences been limited to mystics. For example, although shamans favor visionary and/or auditory experiences that suit the needs of their séance practices (Hultkrantz, 1978; Merkur, 1992a, pp. 109–68), shamans occasionally have unitive experiences (Paper, 1980, 1982) and may even base part of their worldviews on them (Merkur, 1991b, pp. 41–71).

Academic research also inherited a second unearned premise from the Christian mystical revival: the assumption that mystics' writings about unitive experiences referred to an experience that is everywhere one and the same. In his classic but rudimentary account of mysticism, William James (1902) proposed six invariants of mystical experience: a sense of union (p. 321); a "consciousness of illumination [that] is . . . the essential mark of mystical states" (p. 313, n. 28); and the much-remarked subsidiary features of ineffability, noetic character, transiency, and passivity (pp. 292–94). By ineffability, James referred to mystics' claims that they cannot adequately explain their experiences in words. Because language is inherently contextual and referential, mystics are at least partially unable to explain their experiences to the initiated, but only in the same sense that the blue of the sky cannot be explained to the unsighted, nor the melody of a symphony to the deaf, nor the taste of a pear to a person who has never eaten the fruit.

James's claim that mystical experiences invariably have a noetic—in modern idiom, a cognitive—aspect has been much disputed; I shall return to the problem in the next section. Passivity is definitely a variable feature. It is found in Christian mysticism but not, for example, in Buddhist meditation (Gimello, 1978). As for transiency, most mystical experiences vary in duration from several minutes to perhaps as much as two hours; but a few mystics have known unitive states that were continuous during all of their waking hours for periods of years (e.g., Brother Lawrence, 1977, p. 56).

James (1902, pp. 387–88) maintained that mystical experiences were highly variable and contingent on what he termed *overbeliefs*: religious conceptions that

a person brings to a religious experience, not only postexperientially in the process of its interpretation and reportage, but also preexperientially as a contribution to the contents of the experiences.

The mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies, provided only they can find a place in the framework for its peculiar mood (p. 326).

All in all, James referred the “common core” of mysticism to the “subconscious.” Mystics’ conscious experiences were highly variable because their over-beliefs were integrated within “the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation” (pp. 316–17).

The older psychologists of religion fostered a debate between the uncommunicating positions of medical psychiatry and academic theology. James wrote in explicit refutation of the hysteria theory of mysticism, while George Albert Coe (1916), James Bissett Pratt (1921), Robert H. Thouless (1924), and J. Cyril Flower (1927) allowed that mysticism and hysteria sometimes overlapped. The psychological consensus arose in response to theologians’ emphasis of a neglected fact. Many Catholic mystics had actively engaged in detailed and protracted practices of meditation, in whose consequence they had experienced progressively increasing oblivion to both the perceptible world and the interior life of the mind. At the height of their meditations, the mystics passively experienced contemplations that subjectively seemed to “infuse” consciousness in spontaneous and involuntary fashions. The psychologists translated these findings into the language of their own discipline. They concluded that although mystical union is sometimes a spontaneous symptom of psychopathology (Boisen, 1936; Lowe & Braaten, 1966; Bradford, 1984), it is not necessarily pathological, because its occurrence can also be induced through meditation. Meditation was recognized as a religious form of autosuggestion. Mystics’ psychic state was identified as self-hypnosis, and passively experienced (“infused”) contemplations were comprehended as self-hypnotic automatisms.

An example of the type of experience that the “common core” hypothesis addressed may be observed in the following self-report by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

I have never had any revelations through anaesthetics, but a kind of waking trance—this for lack of a better word—I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has come upon me, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words—where death was an almost laughable impossibility—the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no

extinction, but the only true life. I am ashamed of my feeble description. Have I not said the state is utterly beyond words? (as cited by James, 1902, p. 295, n. 3).

Tennyson induced his experience through monotonous, repetitive meditation—a classic technique for the induction of both hypnotic trances and mystical experiences. During his experience, consciousness of both external reality and personal identity disappeared. What remained was a sense of “boundless being.” It was an experience of existing, an experience not that “I am,” but simply of “am.” All else was forgotten.

The Phenomenological Approach

The rise of the phenomenological school of the history of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) ruled out of court all references to the unconscious and returned academic research to the status quo ante James. Serious attention was accorded, however, to the varieties of mystical experiences.

Friedrich Heiler (1932) understood mysticism as an introvertive experience during which the body is fixed in “cataleptic rigidity and complete anaesthesia” (p. 140). There is “a perfect cessation of the normal conscious life” (p. 139). Neither the world of external sense perception, nor the mystic’s “human personality” are experienced. The soul is wholly “absorbed in the infinite unity of the Godhead” or, in Buddhism, nirvana (p. 136). Heiler distinguished between two major types of mysticism on the criterion of the absence or presence of emotional content during the experiences.

Ecstasy is the highest pitch of emotion. Although the suppression of the normal emotional life is its presupposition . . . it shares with the normal emotional experience the element of spontaneity, passivity, involuntariness, impersonality, brevity, and lasting effect. . . . Nirvana, on the contrary, is complete disappearance of emotion, a continuous, permanent state of profound quiet and perfect solitariness, a blessedness without excitement, transport, or storm, not a being possessed, but a being utterly self-absorbed (p. 140).

As an illustration of what Heiler meant by “nirvana,” let us consider a self-report by Agehananda Bharati (1976), a Viennese-born social anthropologist and a Hindu tantric monk.

One night when I was about twelve, it happened for the first time. I was falling asleep, when the whole world turned into one: one entity, one indivisible certainty. No euphoria, no colors, just a deadeningly sure oneness of which I was the center—and everything else was just this, and nothing else. For a fraction of a minute, perhaps, I saw nothing, felt nothing, but was that oneness, empty

of content and feeling. Then, for another five minutes or so the wall with the *kitschy* flowers reappeared, and the fire crackled in the large brick stove. But I knew it was One, and I knew that this was the meaning of what I had been reading for a year or so—the Upanisadic dictum of oneness, and the literature around and about it. I did not think in terms of God, *atman*, *brahman*, nor, strangely enough, in terms of having found fulfillment—I was just struck by the fact that I had not known this oneness before, and that I had kept reading about it very much as I read about Gaul being divided into three parts, or elementary Sanskrit grammar. Then after some time, no longer than half an hour I would think, things returned to whatever had been normal before (p. 39).

Although he appears to have stated that he felt an ultimate oneness or unity at the climax of his experience, Bharati (personal communication, 1986) denied that his published self-report is so to be understood. The climactic moments of his “zero experience” consisted of a conscious state that was entirely lacking in cognitive contents. His published account asserts that the moments of zero experience were “oneness” and “One,” not because they were so experienced, but because Bharati so understood their significance. His understanding arose immediately after the moments of zero experience, during the waning phases of the experience, when he resumed cognitive thinking and external sense perception.

Bharati (1976, pp. 40–41) also had a second zero experience in which euphoria was present. It was Heiler’s contention that the difference is significant. A conscious state that lacks both cognitions and affects is not the same experience as a conscious state that lacks cognitions but involves euphoria. As an example of the purely affective experience that Heiler meant by “Ecstasy,” let us consider a self-report by the German Dominican, the Blessed Henry Suso (d. 1366).

He went into an ecstasy and saw and heard what is ineffable. It was without form or shape, and yet it bore within itself all forms and shapes of joyous delight. His heart was hungry and yet satisfied, his mind joyous and happy, his wishes were calmed and his desires had died out. He did nothing but gaze into the brilliant light, in which he had forgotten himself and all things. He did not know whether it was day or night. It was a sweetness flowing out of eternal life, with present, unchanging peaceful feeling. He said then: “If this is not heaven, I do not know what heaven is, for all the suffering that can ever be put into words, could not enable anyone to earn such a reward and for ever possess it.” This blissful ecstasy lasted perhaps an hour, perhaps only half an hour; whether his soul remained in his body, or was separated from his body, he did not know. When he came to himself he felt just like a man who has come from another world (1952, pp. 19–20).

During its climactic phase, Suso’s experience lacked all cognitions, but had an intensely positive affect. Cognitive thought resumed before the experience ended.

Rudolf Otto (1950), to whom a Buddhist monk had described Nirvana as an experience of “bliss—unspeakable” (p. 39), treated both of Heiler’s categories together as “the Inward Way” or as “Mysticism of Introspection.” He contrasted

introspective mystical experiences with “the Outward Way” whose “unifying Vision” apprehends the perceptible world (1932a, pp. 57–88). The following self-report from James’s (1902) collection is an instance of Otto’s “Outward Way.”

I felt myself one with the grass, the trees, birds, insects, everything in Nature. I exulted in the mere fact of existence, of being a part of it all—the drizzling rain, the shadows of the clouds, the tree-trunks, and so on (p. 310, n. 12).

The waning phase of Bharati’s experience, when he saw the phenomenal world in all its multiplicity but understood it to be One, is a further example of the “Outward Way.”

W. T. Stace (1960) proposed the terms *introvertive* and *extrovertive* mysticism, respectively, for Otto’s two categories. He explained that “the introvertive [experience] looks inward into the mind . . . from which all the multiplicity of sensuous or conceptual or other empirical content has been excluded,” while “the extrovertive experience looks outward through the senses” (pp. 61, 110).

As varieties of introspective mysticism, Scholem (1971) distinguished mystical union and communion. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1962, II, pp. 99–104) expressed the same distinction by contrasting *unio mystica* with *unio sympathetica* (see also: Corbin, 1969). Johannes Lindblom (1962) rephrased the distinction by contrasting the impersonal and personal character of the two experiences. The goal of “*mysticism of unity or impersonal mysticism* . . . is complete oneness with the divine conceived of as a more or less impersonal substance.” In personal mysticism, however, “the personality is preserved, both the personality of the divine and the personality of the religious man” (p. 302). What is at stake in Lindblom’s formulation is personality, not personhood. Mysticism is not personal simply because the divine is conceived theologically as a personal being. Martin Buber (1958) observed that our experience of another person in the second person as a “Thou” differs from an experience of the same person in the third person. The failure to be engaged with another person’s personality denies much of his or her personhood, reducing “Him” or “Her” to an “It.” The converse is also true. Through their treatment in the second person, inanimate phenomena can be accorded personality, personalized, or personified. So understood, mysticism is personal whenever it involves both an “I” and a “Thou,” but impersonal whenever an “I-It” relationship occurs.

The following self-report is an instance of personal mysticism.

I was reading the words telling of the ever-present and all-pervading quality of Brahman, when suddenly my whole being was seized by an acute state of awareness, and immediately the words assumed a great significance. I knew somehow that they were true, that Brahman (at the time I suppose I translated it as God) *was* all about me, and through me, and in me. The knowledge did

not come from without, unmistakably it came from within. The state was one of extraordinary joy; I realised happiness was within me. (I believe I also felt that I controlled great power, so that I could have stopped the train just by willing it, but in writing of this afterwards as I do, I cannot be certain of this.) I can remember looking out at the countryside passing by, and everything, the trees, meadows and hedges, were all part of me, and I of them, and all were in a great unity through which was God. Everything was a whole.

The experience lasted a few minutes, and very gradually it ebbed away. But I *knew* with completely unshakable conviction that I had been in touch with Reality in those few minutes (Johnson, 1959, p. 24).

The sense of being united with all physical reality, which as a whole was united with God by being within God, preserved the distinction between self and God, even at the moments of most profound unity.

In some experiences of personal mysticism, the personalities not only remain distinct, but engage in interpersonal communications. F. C. Happold (1970) reported:

If I say that Christ came to me I should be using conventional words which would carry no precise meaning; for Christ comes to men and women in different ways. . . . There was . . . no sensible vision. There was just the room, with its shabby furniture and the fire burning in the grate and the red-shaded lamp on the table. But the room was filled by a Presence, which in a strange way was both about me and within me, like light or warmth. I was overwhelmingly possessed by Someone who was not myself, and yet I felt I was more myself than I had ever been before. I was filled with an intense happiness, and almost unbearable joy, such as I had never known before and have never known since. And over all was a deep sense of peace and security and certainty. . . .

The other experience of which I must tell, happened a little later in the same room. I have always thought of it as a continuation and completion of that I have described; it "felt" the same. This time, however, it seemed that a voice was speaking to me. It was not sensibly audible; it spoke within me. The words were strange: "Those who sought the city found the wood: and those who sought the wood found the city." Put into cold print they sound nonsensical. Yet I felt vividly that they meant something very important, that they were the key to a secret (pp. 133-34).

Personal mysticism may also occur as a vision in which unitive ideas are manifested in vivid pictorial forms. The Indian Sadhu Sundar Singh, who converted from Hinduism to Christianity in 1904, generalized about several such visions.

Christ on His throne is always in the centre, a figure ineffable and indescribable. The face as I see it in Ecstasy, with my spiritual eyes, . . . has scars with

blood flowing from them. The scars are not ugly, but glowing and beautiful. He has a beard on His face. The long hair of His head is like gold, like glowing light. His face is like the sun, but its light does not dazzle me. It is a sweet face, always smiling—a loving glorious smile. Christ is not terrifying at all.

And all around the throne of Christ, extending to infinite distances, are multitudes of glorious spiritual Beings. Some of them are saints, some of them angels. . . . When they speak to me they put their thoughts into my heart in a single moment; just as on earth one sometimes knows what a person is going to say before he says it. . . .

In these visions we have most wonderful talks. . . .

Any one who has been there [in Heaven] for one second says to himself, "This is the place on which I have set my heart, here I am completely satisfied. No sorrow, no pain, only love, waves of love, perfect happiness. . . .

Streaming out from Christ I saw, as it were, waves shining and peace-giving, and going through and among the Saints and Angels and everywhere bringing refreshment, just as in hot weather water refreshes trees. And this I understood to be the Holy Spirit (Streeter & Appasamy, 1922, pp. 117–18, 120, 55).

In unitive visions of this type, the identities of the mystic and God remain distinct. Union proceeds through a bond of love, emanating from God, which thoroughly permeates the mystic.

Although the typological observations of phenomenologists were empirical and valid, they were rarely treated as a reason to acknowledge the historical diversity of mystical experiences. The complexity of the historical evidence was seen as a reason to adjust the common core hypothesis. It was not treated as a reason to abandon it. Perhaps because most scholars disbelieved that any experience could lack both cognitions and affects, they ignored the difference between zero and purely affective experiences, lumped their literary evidence together, and identified the resultant scholarly category as "the mystical experience" (Stace, 1960, p. 110; Bharati, 1976, pp. 32–61; Smart 1968, p. 42; 1983). The maneuver, which shifted the common core hypothesis from a Hindu standard of ultimate Selfhood to a Buddhist standard of ultimate nothingness, had a superficial plausibility. Mystical experiences had everywhere to be one and the same because, it was reasoned, complete absences of cognition cannot differ from experience to experience.

The Current Debate

Few scholars appreciated the irony that defining the *mystical experience* as an experience devoid of cognitions made the term mutually exclusive with unitive

experiences, which involve cognitions of union. The common core hypothesis retained general subscription until Aldous Huxley (1954, 1956) claimed psychedelic experiences to be mystical. Although most writers on the topic agreed with Huxley, several theological writers responded prejudicially by abandoning the ecumenicism that had informed the common core hypothesis. Religious intolerance has since played an important role in shaping academic discussions of mysticism.

The current debate takes its point of departure from R. C. Zaehner's (1957, 1970, 1972) claim that differences among mystics' doctrines reflect actual differences in the phenomenologies of their experiences. Scholars had previously treated mystical experiences and religious doctrines as independent variables, with single types of experience accommodating several doctrinal interpretations, and vice versa. Zaehner's (1957) first category encompassed mystical experiences of the unity of external physical reality. Not content to characterize the experiences as extrovertive, Zaehner specified that "nature mysticism" in which "all creaturely existence is experienced as one and one as all" is a "pan-en-hen-ism," meaning "all-in-one-ism." It has no theistic content, is improperly termed *pantheism*, cannot constitute mystical union, but does account for psychedelic experiences (pp. 28, 168). Zaehner next distinguished as "monism" all experiences of "the soul contemplating itself in its essence." Monistic mystical experiences involve a "state of pure isolation of . . . the uncreated soul or spirit from all that is other than itself." These experiences of "detachment . . . from all purely physical and psychic, and . . . temporal elements" contain no theistic element (pp. 128, 168, 29). Theistic mystical experiences, by contrast, entail "the simultaneous loss of the purely human personality, the 'ego,' and the absorption of the uncreate spirit, the 'self,' into the essence of God, in Whom both the individual personality and the whole objective world are or seem to be entirely obliterated." In theistic mysticism, "the soul feels itself to be united with God in love." Zaehner reserved the term *unio mystica*, "mystical union," to theistic mystical experiences, for they alone entail "the return of the 'self' to God" (pp. 29, 168).

Zaehner's methodology, to invent psychological categories on the basis of doctrinal evidence, led him to err on all three counts. Extrovertive mysticism can indeed be theistic, as in the following self-report from the eighteenth century. Thomas Oliver (1779) had been asked at a meeting to join the society of Methodists and had been delighted to accept the invitation. The following experience occurred to him as he was walking home.

A ray of light, resembling the shining of a star, descended through a small opening in the heavens, and instantaneously shone upon me. In that instance, my burden fell off, and I was so elevated, that I felt as if I could literally fly away to heaven. . . . I truly lived by faith. I saw God in everything: the heavens, the earth, and all therein, showed me something of him; yea, even from a drop of water, a blade of grass, or a grain of sand, I often received instruction (pp. 86-87).

Oliver perceived the perceptible environment but simultaneously enjoyed a faith that disclosed something of God in everything that he beheld.

The following self-report of extrovertive mysticism was offered by a contemporary Roman Catholic priest. The experience occurred while he was engaged in missionary work in Africa, "helping a medical team deal with a sudden epidemic that involved risking their lives to get people onto boats and down a dangerously swollen river" (Needleman, 1980, p. 70).

I remember a broken-down boat—it would have been risky floating it in a swimming pool—charging down that river, people screaming and weeping; the crew—meaning myself and three other priests whose knowledge of how to handle a boat added up to half of nothing—managing somehow to pilot it to the neighboring village where the people not yet infected could be taken care of. We did that a dozen or so times within a forty-eight hour span, carrying the boat back on our shoulders through the jungle each time.

Toward the end of the second night, there was a moment just before dawn when the river was quiet and the people were all quiet. Suddenly, everything in myself became still, including my body, which had been in agony from stress and exhaustion. I felt the presence of God. The smells of the jungle and the river, the night sounds, the sensation of heat in the air—everything seemed part of the Oneness of God. Everything was motionless in eternity. All the things I had been afraid of—the sickness, the danger of drowning, of failing; all my personal revulsions and resentments—and there were plenty of them—everything appeared before me also as part of God. I felt an overwhelming gratitude toward God that He had given me this work to do. I prayed in a way that I had never before prayed; I knew it was the Son praying to the Father through myself (pp. 70–71).

The perceptible world was united in God. "Everything seemed part of the Oneness of God." Fears, revulsions, and resentments were reconciled within the divine unity and replaced with "an overwhelming gratitude."

These examples of unitive experiences that were simultaneously theistic and extrovertive establish that Zaehner was mistaken to claim that extrovertive and theistic mysticism are mutually exclusive. His category of "monistic" mysticism was no less misinformed. The category is fairly applied to experiences of "boundless being." However, Ninian Smart (1965) rightly criticized Zaehner for treating both Hindu and Buddhist doctrines as "monistic" when the differences between the two are as great as those between "monistic" and "theistic" doctrines (pp. 75–87). Hindu doctrines can accommodate a variety of experiences, for instance, those of Tennyson, Bharati, and Suso. Buddhism is more restrictive and has historically debated whether nirvana is void of both cognitions and affects, or cognitions alone (compare: Conze, 1962).

As for "theistic" mysticism, Zaehner's methodology did not do justice to the complexity and subtlety of the mystics' accounts. A more convincing analy-

sis of impersonal theistic mysticism was established by Ernst Arbman in a magisterial study of religious trance that is unfortunately marred by an extremely difficult English translation.

Arbman (1968) emphasized that mystical union has a gradual onset. The experience may commence quite early in the path to contemplation, while the mystic is still able to perceive external reality. It invariably climaxes in a deep trance, when both external perception of the sensible world and internal perception of the mind have been inhibited (p. 339). The process commences with the mystic experiencing a faint sense of the invisible presence of God. As the experience progresses, the divine presence becomes increasingly intense and compelling, until, at climax, it is the exclusive content of consciousness (pp. 310, 334). Concurrent with this intellectual and, to some extent, kinesthetic dimension to mystical union is its emotional side. Both the mystic's emotional devotion to God and God's love for the mystic increase until, at climax, God's love alone is experienced (p. 319). A self-report by Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210–97) will illustrate.

My body is in long torment, my soul in high delight, for she has seen and embraced her Beloved. Through Him, alas for her! she suffers torment. As He draws her to Himself, she gives herself to Him. She cannot hold back and so He takes her to Himself. Gladly would she speak but dares not. She is engulfed in the glorious Trinity in high union. He gives her a brief respite that she may long for Him. She would fain sing His praises but cannot. She would that He might send her to Hell, if only He might be loved above all measure by all creatures. She looks at Him and says, "Lord! Give me Thy blessing!" He looks at her and draws her to Him with a greeting the body may not know (1953, p. 9).

Mechthild described an initial phase during which she experienced a process of being attracted to God. She cooperated in this process by remaining passive, giving herself to God, and avoiding speech. An impersonal union followed, but then ceased. During the "respite," she experienced not God's love for her, but her own for God. She was now sufficiently introverted that she was unable to sing. She was able, however, to conceptualize a wish, and then mentally to request God's blessing. Impersonal union then resumed.

The great systematizers of Roman Catholic mysticism developed generalizations which, as generalizations, are necessarily idealizing accounts. They attest, however, to similar transitions from personal to impersonal union, as the experiences proceeded from onset to climax. The following account is by Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173).

The Beloved is forced to wait a moment and a moment in all of these places. . . . He is heard by memory; seen by understanding; kissed warmly by affection; embraced by applause. He is heard by recollection; seen by wonder; kissed warmly by love; embraced by delight. Or if this pleases you better, He is heard

by a showing; seen by contemplation; kissed warmly by devotion; drawn close for the infusion of His sweetness. He is heard by a showing when the whole tumult of those who make noise is quieted down and His voice only is heard as it grows stronger. At last that whole crowd of those who make a disturbance is dispersed and He alone remains with her [the soul] alone and she alone looks at Him alone by contemplation. He is seen by contemplation when on account of the sight of an unexpected vision and wonder at the beauty of it, the soul gradually glows, burns more and more, finally at last catches fire completely until it is thoroughly reformed to true purity and internal beauty . . . she melts completely in desire for Him with a kind of ineffable infusion of divine sweetness and that spirit which clings to the Lord is made one spirit (1979, pp. 285–86).

The differences between the beginning and the climax of mystical union were such that St. Teresa of Avila (1515–82) referred separately to the “Spiritual Betrothal” and the “Spiritual Marriage,” respectively.

In the union of the Spiritual Marriage. . . . The Lord appears in the centre of the soul, not through an imaginary, but through an intellectual vision. . . . This instantaneous communication of God to the soul is so great a secret and so sublime a favour, and such delight is felt by the soul, that I do not know with what to compare it. . . . It is impossible to say more than that, as far as one can understand, the soul (I mean the spirit of this soul) is made one with God, Who, being likewise a Spirit, has been pleased to reveal the love that He has for us by showing to certain persons the extent of that love, so that we may praise His greatness. For He has been pleased to unite Himself with His creature in such a way that they have become like two who cannot be separated from one another: even so He will not separate Himself from her.

The Spiritual Betrothal is different: here the two persons are frequently separated, as is the case with union, for, although by union is meant the joining of two things into one, each of the two, as is a matter of common observation, can be separated and remain a thing by itself. This favour of the Lord passes quickly and afterwards the soul is deprived of that companionship—I mean so far as it can understand. In this other favour of the Lord it is not so: the soul remains all the time in that centre with its God (1946, II, pp. 334–35).

Teresa’s Spiritual Betrothal was a personal mysticism that had intermittent moments of impersonal union. The Spiritual Marriage was a sustained impersonal experience.

The climactic moments of mystical union consist of a loss, not of consciousness, but of self-consciousness. It is this process that mystics have described, metaphorically, as death or annihilation (Arbman, 1968, pp. 371–73). As in a dream, or when absorbed in a book or a drama, the idea that one is having an experience is forgotten, and the whole of conscious attention is devoted to the experience itself. In mystical union, the experience happens to be the presence

of God (1968, pp. 384–85, 390–92). Coinciding with the absorption of attention by the experience, so I suggest, is an identification with its contents. Just as, in a dream, one may observe one's image and feel it to be the locus of one's consciousness and self, so too, in mystical union, there is both an external observation of an experience and an identification with its content. Because the content happens to be the presence of God, the mystic feels at one with God.

Arbman emphasized that the union is invariably experienced as the mystic's own deification (Arbman, 1968, pp. 359–62, 370). St. John of the Cross referred explicitly to the soul's deification through experiences of mystical union (Butler, 1922, p. 151). St. John of the Cross (1973) wrote:

They are indeed encounters, by which He ever penetrates and deifies the substance of the soul, absorbing it above all being into His own being (p. 594).

As further instances, Arbman cited *Sister Katrei*, Angela of Foligno, Madame Guyon, and Janet's patient Madeleine (Arbman, 1968, pp. 357–59). The evidence may readily be augmented. The Greek Fathers of Christianity conventionally spoke of the mystic's "divinization" (Bouyer, 1963, pp. 417–21). Symeon the New Theologian claimed that "by grace I am God." St. Catherine of Genoa spoke of being "changed completely into pure God." Maria Maddalena de'Pazzi saw herself "wholly united with God, transformed into God." Antoinette Bourguignon wrote that "the purified soul transforms itself into him" (Buber, 1985, pp. 41, 109, 110, 121). The "Brethren of the Free Spirit" of the fourteenth century, were said to have laid claim to deification through mystical union (Lerner, 1972, pp. 16, 18, 126, 144, 240, 241). Again, the Kabbalah and Hasidism speak literally and not euphemistically of the mystic's "divine soul." *Yehidah*, "union" or "unification," is considered an experience of the mere "comprehension" of the then self-evident fact (Dobh Baer, 1963, pp. 62–64, 94–97, 128, 130, 135–39).

The monotheistic religions have regularly interpreted the mystical experience of deification as falling short of identity with God. Christian mystics have spoken of "divinization by grace" and denied the reality of "divinization by nature." Kabbalists accept an identity of the soul with the *Sefirot*, the emanations of the divine within the creation, while categorically rejecting the possibility of an identity with the *En Sof*, the uncreated Godhead. It is important to emphasize, however, that mystics experience very little of a cognitive character during the moments of union. There is an unelaborated intuitive idea of deification, but sustained reasoning or discursive reflection forms no part of the experiential moment. St. Teresa (1946) explained that "the soul is wholly in the power of another, and during that period, which is very short, I do not think that the Lord leaves it freedom for anything" (I, p. 158). For this reason, the Sufi mystics of Islam distinguish between the soul's intoxication during union and its subsequent reassertion of sobriety. Catholic mystics speak of the soul's death during

union and its rebirth upon God's withdrawal, and so forth (Arbman 1968, pp. 133–44, 371–73). It is only after the moments of deifying union, during the waning phase of the ecstasies, that measured intellectual observations become possible and theological interpretations begin to consider the sense in which deification took place.

For present purposes, it is not the claimants of mystical deification, but the apologists who most command attention. In polemic against the Free Spirit movement, Suso (1953) argued that because the self is experienced both before and after union, it cannot be destroyed, but must instead persist during the experience of Nothing (p. 184). The subjective experience and its objective reality consequently differ. "The powerful transport into the Nothing casts out all difference in the ground, not according to our essence, but according to our perception" (p. 192). Although the soul does not perceive itself, it is nonetheless present, as is proved by its capacity to perceive the experience. "Man can, in some measure, if he is rapt into God, be one in losing himself, and yet externally be enjoying, contemplating, and so on" (p. 194). For Nothing to be experienced, there must be a soul, an observing self, which experiences the Nothing.

Suso (1953) further denied that "the creative Nothing that is called God" (p. 192) is the same Nothing that the soul experiences in mystical union.

A man may in this life reach the point at which he understands himself to be one with that which is nothing as compared with all the things that one can imagine or express in words. By common agreement, men call this Nothing "God," and it is itself a most essential Something. . . . But there is something more deeply hidden in Him. . . . As long as one understands thereby a unity, or such a thing as can be explained by words, one has to go farther inwards. The Nothing, however, cannot penetrate deeper into itself, but we can, as far as our understanding allows (pp. 191–92)

The soul may experience Nothing, but this Nothing is necessarily an essential Something. Hidden within it is what alone truly cannot be described in words: the hidden Godhead. Union with the essential Nothing is possible in this life, but union with the hidden and utterly Indescribable is not (Suso, 1953, pp. 195–96). During its absorption in the Nothing, the soul fails, however, to appreciate the distinction.

The soul always remains a creature, but in the Nothing in which it is lost, it does not consider at all in what way it is then a creature, or what the Nothing is, or whether it is a creature or not, or whether it is united or not. But when one is able to reflect, one understands this, and it remains in us unimpaired (p. 194).

In addition to his extended discussion of impersonal mysticism, Suso also remarked briefly on personal mysticism, when self-perception persists.

These men who are rapt into eternity, consider themselves and all things for ever as everlasting and eternal, because of their surpassing indwelling unity.

Question: Is there no otherness there?

Answer: Yes, he has it more than ever who knows it, and recognizes himself as a creature, not as sinful, but as united (pp. 193–94).

Suso's account of mystical union was intended to explain experiences of both impersonal and personal types. Because he had himself experienced purely affective mysticism, he was not prepared to deny the actual phenomenon of impersonal mystical experiences, but he was adamant in rejecting its apparent philosophical significance.

The Sufi mystics of Islam have similarly gone to the trouble of denying the reality of mystical deification. The following passage is from Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), the philosopher and mystic who first secured the public respectability of Sufism.

The mystics, after their ascent to the heavens of Reality, agree that they saw nothing in existence except God the One. Some of them attained this state through discursive reasoning, others reached it by savouring it and experiencing it. From these all plurality entirely fell away. They were drowned in pure solitude: their reason was lost in it, and they became as if dazed in it. They no longer had the capacity to recollect aught but God, nor could they in any wise remember themselves. Nothing was left to them but God. They became drunk with a drunkenness in which their reason collapsed. One of them said, "I am God (the Truth)." Another said, "Glory be to me! How great is my glory", while another said, "Within my robe is naught but God." But the words of lovers when in a state of drunkenness must be hidden away and not broadcast. However, when their drunkenness abates and the sovereignty of their reason is restored,—and reason is God's scale on earth,—they know that this was not actual identity, but that it resembled identity as when lovers say at the height of their passion:

"I am he whom I desire and he whom I desire is I;

We are two souls inhabiting one body" (as cited by Zaehner, 1957, pp. 157–58).

The testimony of Martin Buber (1965) provides further and unequivocal evidence of the experience of deification.

Now from my own unforgettable experience I know well that there is a state in which the bonds of the personal nature of life seem to have fallen away from us and we experience an undivided unity. But I do not know—what the soul willingly imagines and indeed is bound to imagine (mine too once did it)—that in this I had attained to a union with the primal being or the god-

head. That is an exaggeration no longer permitted to the responsible understanding. Responsibly—that is, as a man holding his ground before reality—I can elicit from those experiences only that in them I reached an undifferentiable unity of myself without form or content. I may call this an original prebiographical unity and suppose that it is hidden unchanged beneath all biographical change, all development of the soul . . . existing but once, single, unique, irreducible, this creaturely one: one of the human souls and not the “soul of the All”; a defined and particular being and not “Being”; the creaturely basic unity of a creature (p. 24).

The very fact that Catholic, Sufi, and Jewish mystics have apologized for experiences that they did not wish to experience, indicates that the experiences were real. Deification is not an overestimation but the actual phenomenon or experience of impersonal theistic unions. Indeed, it cannot be otherwise. Impersonal theistic mysticism is invariably a conjunction of the senses of self and God. The experience commences as an interpersonal encounter, but God ceases to be felt as a distinct “Thou” when, at climax, one’s normal or realistic sense of oneself is replaced by an ideal self who is seemingly God.

Arbman (1968) further established that any or all of three subsidiary features of unitive experiences may coincide with the climactic moments of deifying union: an emotional experience of intense love (pp. 373–75), a visual experience of brightness or light (p. 376), and an intellectual experience of ideas that seem to the mystic to be thoughts of God that have now become his or her own (p. 377). These ideas, which may have either verbal form or nonverbal form, impart an extensive cognitive content to the total experience, but should not be confused with the extremely limited cognitive contents of the actual moments of union. St. Teresa (1946) stated that “we never . . . hear these words at a time when the soul is in union . . . when this short period has passed, and the soul is still enraptured. . . . Divine locutions” (I, p. 158). The ideas, which are highly variable in content, may pertain to any topic of religious or theological interest. Arbman emphasized that they frequently have moral content. St. Teresa wrote: “They make us tremble if they are words of reproof and if they are words of love fill us with a love that is all consuming” (*ibid.*).

Mystics who have written of the union of wills with God refer to their acceptance of moral values. Their own wills become one with, because subservient to, the will of God. “Rebirth” and “passive transformation” are metaphors for this moral regeneration (Arbman, 1968, pp. 372–73). This union of wills occurs after the climactic moments of deification, during the waning, cognitively rich phase of the total experience. Angela of Foligno (1966) stated:

When the soul is transformed in God and is in God, and hath that perfect union and fulness of vision, it is quiet and worketh nothing whatsoever. But

when it cometh again to itself it striveth to transform itself into the will of God (p. 129).

Arbman emphasized that at no time during mystical experiences does the mystic's ego disappear. The conscious idea of self is forgotten, but the subjective experience of being an observer—the basic core of self—persists throughout. Nor is its experience vague or amorphous. Union is vivid, coherent, and completely memorable. It has been claimed to be vague and amorphous, but only by writers who have vague and amorphous understandings of the experience (Arbman, 1968, pp. 381–84).

Impersonal theistic union may also occur in the pictorial form of a vision. The following self-report is by Hadewijch (1980), a Flemish Beguine of the thirteenth century.

The eagle, who had previously spoken to me, said: "Now see through the Countenance, and become the veritable bride of the great Bridegroom, and behold yourself in this state!" And in that very instant I saw myself received in union by the One who sat there in the abyss upon the circling disk, and there I became one with him in the certainty of unity. Then the eagle said, when I was received: "Now, behold, all-powerful one, whom I previously called the loved one, that you did not know all you should become, and what your highest way was, and what the great kingdom was that you as a bride should receive from your Bridegroom" (p. 296).

In the following self-report, Angela of Foligno (1966) described a vision of the same impersonal unitive type.

Upon another occasion, as I was gazing at the Cross with the Crucified, and was looking at the Crucified with my bodily eyes, such a fervent love was suddenly kindled in my soul that even the members of my body felt it with great joy and delight. I saw and felt that Christ embraced my soul with the arm wherewith He was crucified, wherefore I rejoiced with a joy greater than I had ever had before.

From this time forth there hath remained unto me a certain joy and clear enlightenment, whereby the soul knoweth and understandeth how it is that we see our flesh made one company with God (pp. 220–21).

Experiences of this type consist of a vivid vision that commences with the mystic beholding both himself or herself and God as discrete personal beings. As the vision proceeds, however, the two figures merge into one. What begins as personal mysticism thus ends as an impersonal union. God's personality abides but, in seemingly becoming an addition to the mystic's personality, ceases to be experienced in a personal manner as a "Thou."

Patanjali's Experiential Alternatives

Because Zaehner linked the psychological analysis of mystical union to the philosophical problem of mystics' truth claims, he sparked a heated debate among philosophers and theologians. The common core hypothesis had assumed that conflicting theological claims regarding mystical experiences had to be reconciled with one and the same experience. Zaehner instead suggested that there were several different types of mystical experiences. Each supported a different religious doctrine that was consistent with its own category of experience. Panenhenic and monistic mysticism differed both as experiences and as doctrines from the theistic mysticism that Zaehner privileged.

The ensuing debate did not proceed, as I have done, by citing empirical data in order to refute Zaehner. Rather, it addressed methodological innovation at a theoretical level. In the process, methodological issues were brought to the fore. Smart (1965) sought to invalidate Zaehner's conclusions by emphasizing that mystical experiences differ from the interpretations that mystics place on them, both during and after their occurrence. H. P. Owen (1971) added that the mystics' beliefs, practices, and expectations contribute interpretive content to the experiences themselves. James (1902) had made these points long before.

Once scholars began to distinguish between mystical experiences and their interpretations, it became possible to make sense of historical teachings in which mystics themselves discussed the issues at stake. Consider, for example, the *Yōga Aphorisms* of Patanjali. Its classical formulations of Hindu Yoga have been much discussed; but because they were seen through the lens of the common core hypothesis, the teachings could not be accurately understood. Patanjali based his practice of Yoga on the three elements of *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*.

Dharana Is The Mind's (Chitta's) Fixation On A Particular Point In Space.

In That (Dharana) The Continuous Flow Of Similar Mental Modifications Is Called Dhyana Or Meditation.

When The Object of Meditation Only Shines Forth In The Mind, As Though Devoid Of The Thought Of Even The Self (Who Is Meditating), That State Is Called Samadhi Or Concentration (Sutra III, 1-3; Aranya, 1981, pp. 249, 251, 252).

Dharana, "fixation," refers to the focusing of attention on an object, to the exclusion of other mentation. *Dhyana*, "meditation," refers to the subsequent maintenance of attention that is focused exclusively on the object. *Samadhi*, "concentration" or "absorption," refers to a loss of the sense of self, which causes the object of attention to occupy the place of self in the experience of the yogin. *Samadhi* is a term for the experiences that Western scholars have described as in-

rospective unions. Patanjali characterized *samadhi* as a state of object-consciousness, to the exclusion of self-awareness, because he recognized that its further features are highly variable.

Patanjali stated that a yogin may achieve concentration in either of two manners: directly through personal action, or with the benefit of devotion to a transcendent deity named Isvara.

Yogins With Intense Ardour Achieve Concentration And The Result Thereof Quickly.

From Special Devotion To Isvara Also (Concentration Becomes Imminent).

Isvara Is A Particular Purusa Unaffected By Affliction, Deed, Result Of Action Or The Latent Impressions Thereof (Sutra I, 21, 23–24; pp. 54, 56, 57).

A voluntaristic approach to Yoga, involving personal initiatives alone, is an effective alternative to a devotional approach that seeks the intervention of Isvara. Both types of meditation lead successfully to mystical experiences. Patanjali consequently asserted the functional equivalence of self and God in the performance of meditation.

Like the inductive meditations, the objects of *samadhi* are variable. A yogin has mastered the practice of *samadhi* when he is able to achieve object-consciousness of anything that he chooses. “When The Mind Develops The Power Of Stabilising On The Smallest Size As Well As On The Greatest One, Then The Mind Comes Under Control” (Sutra I, 40; p. 87).

Regardless of what a yogin chooses as the object of meditation, union is achieved with it.

When The Fluctuations Of The Mind Are Weakened The Mind Appears To Take On The Features Of The Object Of Meditation—Whether It Be The Cogniser (Grahita), The Instrument Of Cognition (Grahana) Or The Object Cognised (Grahya)—As Does A Transparent Jewel, And This Identification Is Called Samapatti Or Engrossment (Sutra I, 41; p. 89).

Once again, Patanjali outlined practices by which yogins might experientially verify classical Hindu doctrines. When meditations on object after object consistently result in experiences in which the object comes to be experienced as timeless, infinite being, each object is revealed as an aspect of timeless, infinite being. For the yogin, discovery of unity behind plurality calls into question the nature of diversity, and the Hindu doctrine of *maya*, “illusion,” is confirmed.

Among all possible unitive experiences, Patanjali distinguished *samadhi* in which verbal thoughts about the object persist, and *samadhi* that is limited to the object alone. In both cases, the objects of *samadhi* may be either gross or subtle.

The Engrossment, In Which There Is The Mixture Of Word, Its Meaning (i.e., The Object) And Its Knowledge, Is Known As Savitarka Samapatti.

When The Memory Is Purified, The Mind Appears To Be Devoid Of Its Own Nature (i.e., Of Reflective Consciousness) And Only the Object (On Which It is Contemplating) Remains Illuminated. This Kind of Engrossment Is Called Nirvitarka Samapatti.

By This (Foregoing) The Savichara and Nirvichara Engrossments Whose Objects Are Subtle Are Also Explained (Sutra I, 42–44; pp. 92, 94, 98).

Patanjali stated that the experience of Nirvichara Samadhi culminates in the Unmanifested: “Subtlety Pertaining To Objects Culminates In A-Linga Or The Unmanifested” (Sutra I, 45; p. 102). Repeated experience of *samadhi* in and through all manner of different things verified the doctrine of maya. It also pointed beyond the manifest maya to an underlying or transcendent constant. The Unmanifested did not become manifest. Rather, the culmination consisted of the intellectual realization that there was a logical need to postulate a Latent or Unmanifested. The latter remained latent and unmanifest.

Scholars working with the common core hypothesis have regularly missed the significance of Patanjali’s argument. It is because each and every meditation may result in a *samadhi* that discloses a different phenomenon as all-being, that experience of all-being must be recognized as maya. At the same time, explanation of the commonalities of different *samadhis* logically necessitates the postulation of the Unmanifested. If all mystical experiences were one and the same, there would be no reason to question the experience of all-being nor to entertain the idea of the Unmanifested.

Patanjali regarded the outcome of Nirvichara Samadhi as a point of departure for further attainments. Once an intellectual distinction between the manifest and the Unmanifested had been attained, a yogin was to meditate fixedly on the concept of the Unmanifested.

By The Stoppage of That Too (On Account Of The Elimination of the Latent Impressions of Samprajnana) Objectless Concentration Takes Place Through Suppression Of All Modifications (Sutra I, 51; p. 110).

Patanjali maintained that meditation regarding the Unmanifested leads to a *samadhi* with the Unmanifested, in whose course the Unmanifested paradoxically becomes manifest. In this teaching, Patanjali took for granted the validity of the doctrine of maya. Having found that meditation may cause any idea to develop into a unitive experience, Patanjali did not theorize that meditation on a concept leads to *samadhi* with the concept rather than with what the concept represents. A Western solution to the logical problem did not appeal to him. The doctrine of