

The Psychology of Religious Mysticism

By

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NEW YORK

HARCOURT, BRACE & COMPANY, INC.

LONDON: KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, TRUBNER & CO., LTD.

1926

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY HEADLEY BROTHERS,
13, DEVONSHIRE STREET, E.C.2; AND ASHFORD, KENT

PREFACE

EXPERIENCES named "mystical" have played a conspicuous rôle at almost every level of culture; and yet, despite the vast literature devoted to them, the subject has remained until recently as dark as it is fascinating. Little could be expected of writers who, neglecting a close and dispassionate study of the facts, devoted themselves to religious edification or to the defence of the traditional theories. The hortatory, apologetic, and romantic character of most of the literature on religious mysticism accounts for its scientific insignificance.

Mysticism has suffered as much at the hands of its admirers as at the hands of its materialistic enemies. If the latter have been unable to see in mysticism anything else than aberrations and abnormalities, the former have gone to the other and equally fatal extreme; no descriptive adjective short of "sublime," "infinite," "divine" has seemed to them at all sufficient.

The best among the prominent mystics are persons of pure heart and stout will from whom it is not possible to withhold admiration. Their beliefs and practices—whatever we may have to say in condemnation of them—have been to these mystics a refuge against the conflicts and the loneliness of life, and a source of strength and courage in the pursuit of worthy purposes.

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This book is a psychological study of human nature. It includes, it is true, a philosophical chapter and also one in which are set forth the practical consequences to religion of some of its conclusions. But, whatever may be the importance of these two chapters, the book is to be judged primarily as a psychological study of aspects of human nature conspicuous in mystical religion. It represents an effort to remove that part of "inner life" from the domain of the occult, in which it has too long been permitted to remain, in order to incorporate it in that body of facts of which psychology takes cognizance. If we may not expect to have succeeded in producing a satisfactory answer to all the scientific problems raised by the mystical life, we may at least hope to have convinced the reader that there is in principle no satisfactory reason for leaving any of them outside the range of scientific research, and that, on the contrary, they are all explicable *in the same sense, to the same extent, and by the same general scientific principles* as any other fact of consciousness.

In this book, as in the preceding ones, we have proceeded according to the genetic method, i.e., we have begun with mystical

experiences in early societies where they are simpler and, therefore, more easily understood, and we have followed them up in their main modifications and complications. We have, moreover, made use of the comparative method, for it is quite impossible to come to adequate conclusions in this field by remaining within the pale of religious life. Such phenomena, for instance, as ecstatic trance and the impression of illumination become comprehensible only when they are considered under the diverse conditions in which they appear, i.e., out of, as well as in, religious life.

The terms, "tendency," "impulse," "instinct," "motive," and the like, recur with great frequency in the following pages. This fact may serve to indicate the point of view from which the book is written. It proceeds from a dynamic conception of human nature; it is interested in behaviour and its springs, and it gives a large place to the non-rational, and to the not-conscious.

In these directions this work falls in line with the recent trends of psychological science. The author does not, however, accept the Freudian conceptions in the form in which they are found in the books of the Viennese physician. The terms of his vocabulary, libido, introversion, extraversion, complex, psychical compensation, subconscious activity, conflict, repression, substitution, etc., are rarely used in these pages, and yet the discerning reader will not fail to realize that the facts they designate are among the conspicuous facts discussed here.

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This book has been long in the making. My first studies in religious mysticism were embodied in an essay published in two parts under the titles, *Les Tendances Fondamentales des Mystiques Chrétiens* and *Les Tendances Religieuses chez les Mystiques Chrétiens* (*Rev. Philos.*, vol. LIV., 1902, pp. 1-36, 441-87).

Since that time our knowledge has been enriched by a number of contributions of which I shall mention only those which have been of particular value to me. First in date and brilliance came the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, by William James, 1902; then H. Delacroix's penetrating *Etudes d'Histoire et de Psychologie du Mysticisme*, 1908; Friedrich von Hügel's conscientious and sympathetic *Mystical Element of Religion as studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa*, 2 vols, 1909. A little later appeared *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, by William E. Hocking, 1912, a remarkable expression of spiritual discernment served by a rare literary talent; and, quite recently, five excellent chapters in James B. Pratt's *The Religious Consciousness*, 1920. Little of value on Christian mysticism from the point of view of psychology has been published in Germany. The book of Joseph Zahn, *Einführung in die Christliche Mystik* (*Wissenschaftliche Handbibliothek*, 1908) may be mentioned as of general interest.

Among authors in fields other than the psychology of religion, I owe most to Pierre Janet, of the Collège de France, who from

the *Automatisme Psychologique*, 1894, to the *Médications Psychologiques*, 1919, has not ceased to make valuable contributions to our understanding of human nature.

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The present volume completes the execution of a plan for a somewhat systematic study of religious life, sketched out after the publication of my Doctor's Dissertation on Conversion (*Studies in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena—Conversion*, *Amer. Journal of Psychol.*, vol. VII, 1896)—a plan which, unfortunately, I was unable to follow closely either with regard to content or with regard to order.

In two earlier books (*A Psychological Study of Religion: its Origin, Function, and Future*, New York, Macmillan, 1912; and *The Belief in God and Immortality: a Psychological, Anthropological, and Statistical Study*, 1st ed., 1916; 2nd. ed., Chicago, The Open Court, 1921) and in the present volume I have considered the origin, the nature, and the function of the god-ideas, of the belief in personal immortality, and of the mystical beliefs and practices. The discussion of the origin and nature of the god-ideas and of religion involved a discussion of the origin and nature of the primitive philosophy of man and of magic, and the separation of magic from religion (Parts I and II of *A Psychological Study*).

Interest in the present status of the cardinal beliefs of Christianity led me to carry out a statistical investigation of contemporary belief in personal immortality and in the kind of god implied in the worship of the existing religions (Part II, pp. 172-287 of *Belief in God and Immortality*). This investigation provides the first definite and exact information regarding the number of believers, doubters, and disbelievers in a number of classes of intellectual leaders, namely, physicists, biologists, historians, sociologists, and psychologists, and also among college students of non-technical departments. Among the important facts brought out by these statistics are regular correlations between disbelief and distinction attained in the branches of science named above.

On the basis of these studies of origin and function, I was, moreover, led to write on the *Latest Forms and the Future of Religion* (Part IV of *A Psychological Study*), on the *Present Utility of the Beliefs in God and Immortality* (Part III of *Belief in God and Immortality*) and finally, on the *Disappearance of the Belief in a Personal Superhuman Cause and the Welfare of Humanity* (last chapter of the present book).

The relation of Theology to Psychology is considered in Chapter XI of *A Psychological Study*. The conclusion is reached that in so far as the present form of the belief in God among the Christian people is maintained by facts of the "inner life," i.e., psychical experiences regarded as requiring a personal God as causal Agent, it is a belief dependent not upon metaphysics but

upon psychological science. This problem reappears in Chapter XII of the present volume.

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Any one interested in the relation of my work to that of other writers, notably Wm. James and H. Delacroix, should bear in mind that my study of Christian conversion appeared in 1896 (E. Starbuck's *Psychology of Religion* was published in 1899. It was preceded by an article, *A Study of Conversion*, Amer. Jr. of Psychol., vol. VIII, 1897) and the essay on the Christian mystics in 1902, the year in which *Varieties of Religious Experience* was published. In so far as that book is a psychological work it is based upon a study of Christian conversion and of mysticism. In my two early essays just referred to on Conversion and on Christian Mystics, numerous facts are set forth, analyzed, compared, and classified. The method followed was, therefore, as in my later work, the inductive method of the descriptive sciences.

My conception of magic and of its relation to religion appeared first in print in *The Psychological Origin and the Nature of Religion* (1909), a volume of the series of little books published by Messrs. Constable, under the name, "Religions Ancient and Modern." The substance of that booklet was incorporated, with some elaboration, in *A Psychological Study of Religion*.

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The substance of several chapters of this book was used in a series of lectures delivered in the winter 1921-2 at Cambridge University, St. John's College (London), the Sorbonne, and at the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland).

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I wish to express my indebtedness and appreciation to E. H., L. D., and M. G. for their valuable assistance in preparing this book for the press.

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CHAPTER I

MYSTICISM AND RELIGION—AN INTRODUCTION

THE term "mysticism" comes from a Greek word which designated those who had been initiated into the esoteric rites of the Greek religion. At present, however, it has at least two meanings. The wider and less definite of them signifies anything marvellous or weird, anything which seems to reach beyond human reason. We shall take the term "mystical" in a narrower sense; it will mean for us any experience taken by the experiencer to be a contact (not through the senses, but "immediate," "intuitive") or union of the self with a larger-than-self, be it called the World-Spirit, God, the Absolute, or otherwise¹.

The following definitions, selected from a large number of the same tenor, indicate that this use of the term is in substantial agreement with the generally accepted understanding of it in Protestantism: "Mysticism is a deification of man," it is "a merging of the individual will with the universal Will," "a consciousness of immediate relation with the Divine," "an intuitive certainty of contact with the supersensual world," etc. In this view, whatever tends to sharpen the demarcation between the self and the not-self, whatever leads to an isolation of the subject from the Principle of Life, is anti-mystical.

Among Roman Catholics, however, the emphasis is not placed upon the union of the soul with the divine Principle, but upon a superhuman knowledge. They say for instance: "We give the name of mystic to supernatural states containing a knowledge of a kind that our own efforts and our own exertions could never succeed in producing²." Mysticism is "the final outcome of a congenital desire for knowledge," in particular of a knowledge "which lies beyond the sphere of things and of the senses by which things are

¹ In the German language the word *Mystik* has the meaning in which we use the term in this book, while *Mysticismus* possesses the wider and vaguer meaning.

In an appendix to *Christian Mysticism*, William R. Inge has published twenty-six definitions of mysticism.

² A. Poulain, S.J., *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, 2nd ed., 1912, p.3.

perceived¹." This emphasis upon superhuman knowledge is probably in agreement with the early Greek meaning of the term, but the experience regarded both by Roman Catholics and Protestants as mystical is, as we shall see, far too complex to be satisfactorily defined in terms of acquired knowledge. It includes, it is true, an impression of illumination or revelation, but that does not constitute the only significant part of the experience.

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No one doubts that mysticism as defined in both these classes of definitions is included in the meaning of the term religion. But disagreement exists as to whether religion is always mystical; whether, as some put it, mysticism is at the root of every religion, so that in its absence no religion could have come into existence, and with its withdrawal all religions would die². It seems to us that a reference to the facts establishes the existence of two types of religious relation: in the one, it consists in objective, business-like transactions with God; in the other, it consists in communion or union with God or even in an absorption in the divine Substance. These two different attitudes, and the different methods of worship they involve, are observable throughout the history of religion, both in private and in public worship. We find them among uncivilized races as clearly as among ourselves. Miss Kingsley gives us an instance of objective religion in the uncivilized when she relates how the chief of a West African tribe, Anyambie, met his god. "The great man," she writes, "stood alone, conscious of the weight of responsibility on him of the lives and happiness of his people. He talked calmly, proudly, respectfully to the great god who, he knew, rules the spirit world. It was like a great diplomat talking to another great diplomat³."

¹ A. B. Sharpe, S.J., *Mysticism; its True Nature and Value*, London, Sands & Co., 1910, pp. 1-3.

² William James, for instance, affirms, that "personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical consciousness," *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 379. Similarly, William Hocking writes of the mystics, "their technique which is the refinement of worship, often the exaggeration of worship, is at the same time the essence of all worship," *Mind*, vol. XXI, N. S., p. 39. Delacroix, who in the preface to *Etudes d'Histoire et de Psychologie du Mysticisme* says that mysticism, understood as the immediate apprehension of the divine, is "at the origin of all religion," recognizes nevertheless, on p. 306, that "The Christianity of Bossuet excludes the Christian mysticism of Mme. Guyon. One cannot deny that there are here two different forms of Christianity." He opens a more recent article on *Le Mysticisme et la Religion* with the words, "There exist religions without mysticism." *Scientia*, vol. XXI, 1917.

³ Mary H. Kingsley, *The Forms of Apparitions in West Africa*, *Proc. Soc. for Psychical Research*, vol. XIV, 1898, pp. 334-5.

Under other circumstances this same Anyambie might have behaved in a totally different way toward a less clearly defined superhuman Power, if not this same god. He might, in a sacred ceremony, have imbibed some narcotic beverage in company with men of his tribe, and have regarded the wonderful feelings, the hallucinations, the sense of enlargement and power he would have enjoyed, as participation in divine nature. For the uncivilised maintain not only the objective, business-like religious relation, they are usually familiar also with the mystical type of worship. "The negroes of the Niger had their 'fetish water,' the Creek Indians of Florida, their 'Black Drink.' In many parts of the United States the natives smoked stramonium, the Mexican tribes swallowed the *peyotl* and the snake plant, the tribes of California and the Samoyeds of Siberia had found a poisonous toadstool—all to bring about communication with the Divine and to induce ecstatic visions¹." Mescal is one of the plants venerated by the Indians in certain parts of Mexico and in neighbouring regions. The Kiowa Indians use it at night, usually in front of a camp-fire, to the constant beating of drums. The men swallow at intervals from ten to twelve buttons of mescal between sundown and 3 a.m. They sit quietly until noon of the following day, when the effect of the drug has worn off. It is regarded as the food of the soul. It has tutelary deities and a special goddess. "Its psychic manifestations are considered as supernatural grace bringing men into relation with the gods²."

The ancient worship of the Hebrew was altogether of the objective type. Yahweh did not even maintain a relation with individuals, his dealings were with the nation as a whole. When, later, personal relations appeared, they remained for a long time external. Certain Psalms and the later Prophets contain the earliest expressions of mysticism in the religion of Yahweh³. Among the Greeks the worship of the Olympian divinities was altogether non-mystical, and it is still an open question how much mysticism is to be found in the mysteries.

Perhaps no semi-civilized people was ever more free from mysticism, in our sense of the term, than the old Romans. "These

¹ Daniel Brinton, *The Religion of Primitive Peoples*, p. 67.

² Havelock Ellis, "Mescal, a Study of a Divine Plant," *Popular Science Monthly*, vol. LXI, 1902, pp. 52-71.

³ The mystical practices and theories before that time did not belong to the religion of Yahweh. They were remnants of other and older cults. We refer, for instance, to the excitement, reaching a contagious frenzy, generated among bands of "prophets" and regarded as a mark of divine possession. See 1 Sam. x, 5,ff; xix, 20,ff.

people," says J. B. Carter, "could know nothing of their gods, beyond the activity which the gods manifested in their behalf; nor did they desire to know anything. The essence of religion was the establishment of a definite legal status between these powers and man, and the scrupulous observance of those things involved in the contractual relation, into which man entered with the gods. As in any legal matter, it was essential that this contract should be drawn up with a careful guarding of definition, and an especial regard to the proper address. Hence the great importance of the name of the god, and failing that, the address to the 'Unknown God.' A prayer was therefore a vow (*votum*), in which man, the party of the first part, agreed to perform certain acts to the god, the party of the second part, in return for certain specified services to be rendered. Were these services rendered, man, the party of the first part, was *compos voti*, bound to perform what he had promised. Were these services not rendered, the contract was void. In the great majority of cases the gods did not receive their payment until their work had been accomplished, for their worshippers were guided in this by the natural shrewdness of primitive man, and experience showed that in many cases the gods did not fulfil their portion of the contract which was thrust upon them by the worshippers. There were, however, other occasions, when a slightly different set of considerations entered in. In a moment of battle it might not seem sufficient to propose the ordinary contract, and an attempt was sometimes made to compel the god's action by performing the promised return in advance, and thus placing the deity in the delicate position of having received something for which he ought properly to make return¹." That is the objective religious relation in all its nakedness.

Among Christian nations both the objective and the mystical type of religion are usually found side by side. In the controversy about Quietism, in which Bossuet and Fénelon were the great protagonists and Mme. Guyon the victim, Bossuet represents rational Christianity, a Christianity in which man and God—the creature and the Creator, the sinner and the Judge—remain face to face with each other. While Mme. Guyon represents Christian mysticism in a form with which common sense could have nothing to do. It is a relation in which the self dissolves in God.

The Christian mystics themselves realize clearly enough this dualism. They say that these two attitudes are "diametrically contrary to one another." "There are," they tell us, "two sorts

¹ *Religious Life of Ancient Rome*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1911, pp. 12-3.

of spiritual persons, internal and external : these seek God without, by discourse, by imagination, and consideration : they endeavour mainly to get virtues by many abstinences, maceration of body, and mortification of the senses ; bear the presence of God, forming Him present to themselves in their idea of Him, or their imagination, sometimes as a Pastor, sometimes as a Physician, and sometimes as a Father and Lord.

“ But none of these ever arrives by that only to the mystical, way, or to the excellence of union, as he doth who is brought by the Divine grace, by the mystical way of contemplation. These men of learning, who are merely scholastical, don’t know what the spirit is, nor what it is to be lost in God¹. ”

Christianity as expressed in its official creeds and books of worship is clearly an objective religion. According to the ritual the worshipper comes into the presence of his God to acknowledge his sins and to be cleansed from them, to receive protection from bodily and moral harm, to return thanks for God’s goodness, to praise him, and to rejoice in the assurance of his favour. But, just as intercourse between sympathetic persons constantly tends to pass from externality to the intimacy of united feeling and will, so, in the Christian religion, the objective worship of a loving God tends ever to glide into the trustful, self-surrendering attitude which constitutes the first step towards complete mystical union.

Mysticism, in its incipient stages at least, is encouraged in the Christian Church², but when it assumes the amazing aspects with which the famous mystics have made us familiar, the Church becomes uneasy and watchful. For, in his search for God, the mystic goes his own way. He is ready to brush aside rites and formulae—even the priest who would serve him as mediator—and

¹ Molinos, *The Spiritual Guide*, John Thomson, Glasgow, 1885, Part I, chap. I, 54, 65 ; Part II, chap. XVIII, pp. 126-7.

² In recent times, Ritschl has altogether rejected mysticism. He “ will hear nothing of direct spiritual communion of the soul with God. Pietism in all its forms is an abomination to him. The one way of communion of the soul with God is through His historical manifestation in Jesus Christ, and experience due to a supposed immediate action of the Spirit in the soul can be regarded as an illusion. This is the side of Ritschl’s teaching that has been specially taken up and developed by his disciple, Hermann.” Professor Orr, as quoted by Garvie in the *Ritschlian Theology*, p. 143.

Of Ritschl’s main disciples, Garvie writes : “ Kaftan, with Ritschl and Hermann, condemns mysticism in the two types which they describe, both as an attempt to secure union with God conceived as the Absolute, and as an endeavour to be joined through the imagination and the affections to Christ in His glorified state. But in his antagonism to mysticism he is not led, as Ritschl is, to deny there is in Christian experience a mystical element, a real communion of the soul with Christ.” *Ibid.*, p. 157. See also Hermann’s work, *Verkehr des Christen mit Gott*.

he issues from the divine union with a sense of superior, of divine, knowledge. Persons of this kind may obviously be dangerous to the stability of old institutions which have come to regard their truths as the only truths. But these god-intoxicated persons may also perform the invaluable function of innovators, revelators, and inspirers.

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Types of behaviour so general and so persistent as those expressed in the objective and the subjective types of worship must, it seems, have their bases in different and fundamental traits of human nature. These traits are not very difficult to discover. Most of the specific tendencies and instincts with which man is endowed are roughly classifiable in two groups. In the one there is fear and the various expressions of aggression and aversion. In the other there is curiosity and the expressions of liking and affection. The former finds satisfaction by the disregard, or at the expense, of other selves ; it leads to methods of life which would separate the individual from the rest of the world and sharpen self-consciousness. The latter seeks co-operation with other selves ; its method is that of association, co-operation, and union.

Animal life began, it seems, with an endowment of conflict-instincts. The appearance of the parental instincts marked probably the introduction of the other type of endowment : the animal family became the cradle of the co-operative method of life. In humanity, the aggressive, self-sharpening attitude was for a long initial period the conspicuous one ; the other attitude was called forth mainly, or only, in the narrower circles of family and tribe. Even there, its expression was easily inhibited by the dividing, destructive instincts. Only very slowly did men discover the objective value of good-will and the subjective delight of spiritual union.

The powerful instinctive tendencies which incline man to seek union of will and feeling with other selves receive assistance from another quarter : striving with resisting other selves and inanimate objects brings recurrent moments of weariness when the zest for the strife disappears. How delightful it is then to close one's eyes to the multiplicity of things, to ignore the challenge of other wills, to renounce effort, and to lose oneself in the silent, peaceful current of undifferentiated life ! Both physical and moral causes bring on this inclination to self-surrender. The pace has been too fast and the jaded nerves demand rest, or dispiriting queries have arisen : " What matter gains and conquests ; what boot fortune, knowledge, human loves ? Nothing is perfect and nothing endures. Would

that I could overcome my spiritual isolation, destroy the barriers which separate me from my fellow men, be one with them, instead of struggling against them¹." In this mood the will-to-union is given full career.

¹ The roots out of which the two types of relation with the Invisible World have developed penetrate so deep into human nature that their growth may be traced in other directions, in particular in the processes of thought. Thinking includes a double movement. Consider the man of science or the philosopher; they do their work by alternating analyses and syntheses; they cannot do it by one of these alone. There must be observation and discrimination; but when objects have multiplied under the analysing activity of the mind, the severed things must somehow be united again; they must be seen in their connections. And, at least for some men, a unification of all things must be reached; a universe must be built out of the discreet objects. Completed thinking implies these two movements: sundering and uniting.