

### FAITH AND EXPERIENCE III:

#### EXPERIENCE AND ITS INTERPRETATION

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In some, perhaps most, cultures metaphysics and mysticism belong together. Even in our own society organizations which bear the name 'metaphysical' are likely, on examination, to be found to be concerned primarily with more or less mystical and esoteric doctrines and practices. But it is still typical of the Anglo-Saxon academic world that philosophers have, on the whole, not been frightfully eager to tangle with mystics, nor mystics with philosophers. As a result of this it has been lamentably easy for philosophers to assume that they know what mystics are saying, without bothering to verify their allegations, and for a whole trend of spirituality to thrive off a naive rejection of the 'God of philosophers' in favour of the 'God of Abraham, Isaac and God knows who else'.

*Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*<sup>1</sup> is an important symptom that this situation is changing.

Most of the contributions are not concerned directly with the philosophical issues posed for philosophers as such by mysticism. *Intuition and the Inexpressible* by Renford Bambrough tackles the logical problem of ineffability; Nelson Pike and George Mavrodes discuss the epistemological status of mystical experiences. But otherwise most of the essays are concerned with clarifying the methodology of investigation of mysticism, and with developing and studying the concepts needed for such investigation.

The ten contributors were left entirely free to choose their own topic and tactic; it is all the more impressive that a certain coherence definitely emerges from their various essays. Almost all the essays contain some kind of attack on two much loved doctrines: first, the belief that, underlying the diversity of expression to be found in mystical writings, there is either a single or at most a few varieties of essential mystical experience; and secondly, the belief that it is, in principle, fairly straightforward to disengage the essential experience or experiences from their interpretative garments. It is surely high time that both these views were exploded, and I doubt if either of them will be able easily to survive the assault of this book.

<sup>1</sup> *Mystics and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven T. Katz. Sheldon Press. 1978 pp. 264 £8.95

Another cherished doctrine which receives a knock, though not a sustained one, is the belief that mystical experience is the goal of all religious faith and practice. One article in particular, *Mysticism and Meditation* by Robert Gimello, undertakes to demonstrate that this is untrue at least of orthodox Buddhism, which systematically subordinates mystical experience to analytical meditation.

It is a pity that this last point is not taken up more thoroughly, as it evidently raises a point of considerable philosophical interest (in what sense can any "experience" be regarded as the goal of anything?), as well as suggesting an important methodological tool for the analysis of different religious systems. It should be obvious enough that Buddhism is unlikely to put any experience as its goal, as even mystical experience presupposes some kind of experiencing subject and, in the final analysis, according to Buddhism, there is no subject. Mystical experience, properly handled, can bring us to see more clearly the insubstantiality of ourselves and of the objectified world of *samsara*; but it is itself only a part of *samsara*.

In a different way, Christianity too can surely not regard any kind of mystical experience as its goal. In another essay in this book, St John of the Cross is quoted (without comment) as saying that a desire to receive a particular vision is evidence that that vision is false. In this I dare say St John was being faithful to his Thomist training. In opposition to the view that we should expect to experience a certainty of salvation (the view of Ambrosius Catharinus, inter alia), Thomists like Domingo de Soto had to insist that the certainty of faith far transcends any kind of subjective, experiential certainty about one's own spiritual condition. Any subjective experience is thus systematically subordinated to the objectivity of faith. The whole of the doctrine of St John of the Cross could be interpreted as an experiential account of what this doctrine feels like.

I would also infer from Keller's discussion of mystical literature (which is, incidentally, useful so far as it goes, but it leaves out much that might have been included, for instance the whole literature of doctrinal revelations, such as the Dialogue of St Catherine), that mystics in most religions are not particularly concerned with their own experiences. In particular the Sufi aphorisms he cites seem to indicate that the proper flowering of mystical experience is an ability to communicate doctrine, and not just doctrine about mystical experience. This ought not to surprise us in a religion which is based on the words of a Prophet. (Mackinnon too points out in his paper that the true philosopher, according to Plato, comes into his own only when he returns to the Cave to enlighten his fellows).

The importance ascribed to mystical experience must surely

depend on the view one has of the finality of human life. It cannot be assumed without further ado that mystical experience is going to be the target. Buddhism aims at *nirvana*, which is perhaps rather an impersonal state of affairs (if we are to call it anything) than an experience. On the other hand Hinduism, at least in some forms, does seem to aim rather at a particular kind of consciousness of the Self, which makes it more plausible to regard mystical experience as at least a crucial factor in the attainment of man's end. And in so far as the desired condition is one of awareness of the Self without any 'second', a subject without any object, it is at least not absurd to stress subjective experience rather than any kind of objectivity. More theistic systems, such as Christianity and Islam, have sometimes been regarded as falling essentially into the category of 'numinous' rather than 'mystical' religions precisely because they are concerned with a divine Object, rather than with the Self. But I am not sure that this distinction, useful though it is in some ways, is adequate to the complexity of the situation. It would be difficult to make sense of a considerable amount of important Christian and Muslim literature simply in terms of the 'Wholly Other'. But equally it would be a distortion to force it into the class 'mysticism', if mysticism is taken to mean an overwhelming interest in subjective experience. Christianity and Islam are concerned with God, rather than with our experience of God, and so have an inevitable bias in favour of doctrine, and stress doctrine, if need be, at the expense of individual experience. Where experience is counted systematically important, as in the writings of Symeon the New Theologian, for instance, it is because the essential opposition is not between experience and faith, but between experience (or rather, awareness) and insensitivity. It does not mean that sensitivity is valued for its own sake; it is a necessary quality in our response to the objectivity of God. Insensitivity to God will lead to some kind of idolatry, to a wrong identification of man's proper goal.

Apart from Gimello, the contributors to this volume seem in general to take it for granted that mysticism is primarily about 'religious experience' as an end in itself, and I wonder whether this does not unnecessarily distort the issue. Keller's analysis of different kinds of mystical literature shows how little of it is actually about mystical experience, but this does not, apparently, make him wonder whether it is therefore mistaken to suppose that experience is what it is all about. If we take Julian of Norwich, for instance, we surely want to call her a mystic, yet her mysticism is not at all about her own experience, it is about 'shewings of divine love'. It is about doctrine. The same must be said about St Catherine, whose Dialogue is said to have been composed in a state of mystical absorption, and which must surely therefore be reckoned some kind of mystical phenomenon in itself; yet it is a sublimely

doctrinal, theological work.

Indeed, it is because of the heavily doctrinal insistence in Christian mysticism that, as is pointed out in Pike's essay (which is in part an answer to MacIntyre's paper in Flew and MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*), the epistemological question raised by the mystics is not that of the existence of God, but that of their reliability as sources of theological doctrine. Their experience is not simply experience of God, but experience of God teaching them something.

And even in writings which are concerned simply with the apprehension of God as he really is, such as the *Mystical Theology* of the pseudo-Dionysius, the emphasis is not on the subjective experience, but on the conditions for *knowledge* of God. Interest in Christian subjectivity is minimal. The author of the *Cloud* was quite correct to translate "Mystical Theology" as "Hid Divinity". It has almost nothing at all to do with the fascinating material assembled by Poulain.

Evidently 'mysticism' means different things to different people, even within one religious system. It is one of the major merits of this book to demonstrate this and to take it seriously. As Katz points out, the attempts to abstract certain universal characteristics of all mystical experience have led to conclusions which signify almost nothing. Stace's list of universal qualities, for instance, appears to achieve more than it really does; for, as Katz says, just because experience A is ineffable and paradoxical, and experience B is ineffable and paradoxical, it does not follow that experience A and experience B are the same or even remotely similar. As Keller concludes, mysticism is at most a "purely formal concept", and even about that one might wish to entertain some hesitation, as it seems probable that what is normally regarded as "mysticism" will enter into the formal structure of different systems in different ways.

One of the basic tactics used by such scholars as Stace and Zaehner to reduce mysticism to one or two basic types is to disregard most of what mystical writers actually say, as being "interpretation" (which is regarded as being hopelessly conditioned by doctrinal prejudice and so on, and all of this is regarded as being totally irrelevant to actual "experience"). It is hoped that this procedure will leave bare a kernel of raw experience, which will prove to be far more homogeneous than the diversity of mystical doctrines would lead us to suppose. As I have already indicated, this tactic comes under heavy fire from several of Katz's contributors. Peter Moore, for instance, says that looking for the "essential experience" by peeling off the doctrine is like looking for the "real chicken" by stripping off its feathers. Katz is surely quite correct in his assertion that "there are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences" devoid of all conceptual organization. He points out use-

fully that we must distinguish between post-experiential interpretation (which is, in principle, at least partly detachable from the experience) and pre-experiential factors which condition experience. However, he surely goes too far when he suggests that "the experience that the mystic or yogi has is the experience he seeks as a consequence of the shared beliefs he holds through his metaphysical doctrinal commitments". If doctrinal factors totally conditioned mystical experience in this way, it would be impossible for anyone to have original or heretical experiences, and it would be difficult to know what to make of conversion or initiatory experiences. What should we have to say about the Buddha or St Paul or Luther? In each case it would seem that a religious experience came as a radical shock to their previously held beliefs.

This does not necessarily mean that we could or should speak of the experience of such people as coming out of the blue, with no preparation at all. St Paul was, we may say, more likely to have a vision of Christ than of Krishna. His mind was occupied with Christ. His experience of Christ was in some way conditioned by pre-existing concepts and conceptual possibilities, but it drew on them in a way which was surprising, contrary to expectation. Presumably something of the same kind may occur in all or most experiences which involve some kind of conversion: something previously entertained as untrue (the existence of God, the Messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth) is experienced as true after all.

But this is not going to deal with what we may call "heretical" experiences: that is to say, experiences which do not result in the acceptance of something previously known but rejected, but in the acceptance and development of previously unconsidered doctrines, which are not compatible with previously held beliefs. We may feel that we want to say that it was precisely the experience of the Buddha that led him to formulate the doctrine of *anatta*, or the experience of Luther that led him to develop his view of justification. We are tempted to say that they developed their respective doctrines because they had *experienced* in the one case the unreality of the self and in the other the utterly free grace of God. It is as if there was something there, simply waiting for them to discover it, as independent of their concepts and theories as is the unexpected treasure a man finds in a field. But is this really the case? Both Luther and the Buddha were wrestling with problems which they could not solve in the terms which were previously available to them. Their experience, whatever else it may have been, was an experience of the solution to a problem. However radical and new the solution may have been, it could not have been experienced as a solution unless it was in some way related to the situation that had been experienced as a problem. In fact it is not uncommon that radically new insight occurs precisely when a previous synthetic understanding breaks down, when it ceases to

deliver the goods, when it becomes a problem rather than a help. The new solution may use new terms, but its shape is in some way determined by the problem it has to solve. And so it is far from clear that anything would be gained by postulating an entirely unconditioned experience as the source of the new beliefs. Much less is it necessary to regard the new beliefs as being no more than post-experiential interpretation. The experience itself is an experience of new interpretation, inseparable from the whole development of understanding. It can only very artificially be abstracted from the doctrines that surround it, both those previously held and those held subsequently.

As Moore brings out in his analysis, the relationship between experience and interpretation is vastly more complex than has been supposed. Katz goes too far in effectively ruling out the possibility of novelty and surprise in religious and mystical experience, but his basic contention is surely quite correct that there is no such thing as entirely “raw” experience. And Moore’s point too is correct that doctrinal preparation leads to fuller and richer experience. The less doctrine there is beforehand, the less interesting and valuable will be the experience. The relative vacuousness of many of the experiences related in the RERU volumes strongly supports this.

Moore and Mavrodes bring out well the ‘intentional’ element in at least some mystical experience: it is experience *of* something. A certain metaphysical claim is built into it. Interpretation is, in Moore’s phrase, “incorporated” into the experience. This is indubitably correct, and it raises a variety of problems. Evidently it raises epistemological questions (which are tackled especially by Pike and Mavrodes in our volume). I shall return to some of these later. It also raises problems for anyone who is concerned with a cross-cultural study of mysticism, and this is tackled especially by Moore and Katz. And I do not think that either of them follows through their argument to its logical conclusion. Moore acknowledges that we have to reckon with metaphysical claims being built into at least some kinds of mystical experience, but he still thinks that it is, in principle, possible to undertake some kind of classification of mystical experiences from a position of metaphysical neutrality. Katz is much less optimistic, and in fact seems to be unduly gloomy about the possibility of any kind of cross-cultural encounter or comparison, as if translation were not just difficult (as everyone must allow) but actually impossible. But he too at least sometimes talks as if it were in principle possible to abstract an experience from its intentionality.

Though he is very critical of Stace’s attempt to isolate a fundamental experience underlying all the different interpretations expressed by mystical writers, Katz accepts Stace’s interpretation of the American visitor trying to shake hands with a policeman at



Madame Tussaud's and then realizing that it was a waxwork, as two successive interpretations of the same experience ("sense experience").

Now evidently it is possible to talk this way. There is a "sense experience" of a visible object, taken at first to be a man, then to be a waxwork. But (as Stace concedes) at no point is the American visitor *just* having a sense experience. At no point is it devoid of "interpretation". And this means that at no point is the American visitor *conscious* of an uninterrupted "sense experience".

There is a perfectly respectable use of the word "experience" which does not involve any reference to conscious awareness. For instance, an article in the Qantas in-flight magazine for July and August, 1978, begins: "regular passengers on Qanta 747B aircraft will probably have *experienced, without being in any way aware*, one of the greatest gifts of technology to the aviation industry . . . an approach and touchdown conducted solely by electronic means. . . . The Automatic Landing".

But if we are using the word "experience" in this sense in our analysis of mysticism, we must be very careful to avoid equivocating. In the context of mysticism, "experience" normally refers to a *conscious* apprehension of some ultimate reality. If Stace's American visitor is to shed any light on mysticism, we must insist that at no point is he consciously apprehending *something*; at one point he is consciously (and wrongly) apprehending a policeman, at the next he is apprehending (rightly) a waxwork.

This means that the common view (assumed by Pike, for instance) that in some way experience as such is "infallible", only its interpretation being fallible, needs closer scrutiny. If it means simply that, whatever I may think or feel or be aware of, *something* is genuinely going on, then that is presumably true, but it is not terribly interesting or informative. But if it means that some kind of *conscious* experience is being claimed as immune to error, then that is surely itself erroneous.

1a I saw a snake.

1b What you really saw was a piece of rope. You did not really see a snake.

This seems straightforward enough. I may now be tempted to withdraw 1a in favour of:

2a I experienced seeing a snake.

2b Yes, you experienced seeing a snake, but you did not really see a snake.

At first sight this seems to be in order. But is it? What if I infer from 2 "Oh yes, I've had the experience of seeing a snake!"? Why shouldn't I make such an inference?

3a I thought I saw a snake, but I didn't really.

4a I saw something and thought it was a snake.

5a I experienced seeing something, and thought it was a snake.

All of these are tricky, and we must not be bamboozled by them. From 3a it looks as if we could abstract something infallible: whether or not there was a snake there, I thought there was. True enough. But 3a covers two possibilities which must not be confused. When I actually thought I saw the snake, I may indeed have said to myself “I think I see a snake”, and, if so, nobody would be entitled to query it (“You think you think you see a snake, but you don’t really think you see a snake”). On the other hand, I may have said to myself “I see a snake”, in which case “I thought I saw a snake” is not simply a move from present tense to past tense, not simply a description of what was going on in my mind, it is an implicit correction of an account I might have given at the time.

Similarly 4 and 5 cover two possibilities: I may have thought to myself “there’s something there; I think it is a snake”; or I may have thought simply “That’s a snake!”, and only afterwards retracted by saying “Well, I saw something”. In this latter case, to say “I saw” (or “experienced seeing”—it makes no difference) “something” is not to isolate the “experience” from its incorporated interpretation, it is precisely to offer a retrospective interpretation. It involves a retraction. The “actual experience” was that of seeing a snake. And, though it seems odd language to say so, it was an “untrue experience” (or in Mavrodes’ terminology, it was “not veridical”).

6a “I thought I was experiencing the presence of a snake, but I wasn’t”.

I do not have to claim any infallibility for experience.

7a I experience a feeling of sickness.

7b I am feeling sick.

If 7a seems to be “infallible” (if true at all), it is only because 7b is also infallible (if true at all).

So we cannot even in principle hope to abstract from accounts of experience some kernel of “pure” experience exempt from metaphysical suspicion, whether for epistemological or for comparative purposes.

But that does not by any means oblige us to give up the attempt to make sense of mysticism as a cross-cultural phenomenon. What it does entail, so far as I can see, is that it is hopeless to wish to classify “experiences” simply as such, from a standpoint of metaphysical neutrality. Or at least we must recognise that neutrality is a metaphysical *judgment*. “I’m seeing a snake, but maybe there isn’t a snake there” is a perfectly coherent thing to say, but it implies a different state of affairs from that of the man who simply says, with conviction, “I see a snake”. The fact that we would normally have to use different forms of the present tense reflects this. Of course my declaring that I see a snake does not oblige you to believe that there really is a snake there. But there is



no way for you to record my declaration, with a view to classifying my "experience", without making some kind of judgment. I could perfectly well express myself by saying "There's a snake there!". That is a good account of my experience. My experience includes a truth-claim. However you choose to record it, you will be making some kind of judgment on the validity of that truth-claim, whether to endorse it, to reject it, or to query it and suspend judgment. There is no possibility of real neutrality, because even to suspend judgment is to make a judgment (that my truth-claim *may* not be justified).

This means that it is somewhat disingenuous to blame people like Zaehner and Stace for bringing theological or metaphysical presuppositions to bear on their analyses of mysticism. It is impossible to do otherwise. It is pursuing a chimaera to desiderate an absolutely impartial phenomenological survey. The pretended impartiality itself makes what is in fact an unacknowledged metaphysical judgment.

This means that it is always from within some kind of metaphysical view that the analysis and evaluation of any claimed mystical experience will take place. And it ought not to be considered a priori impossible or wicked to want to make some kind of interpretation within one system, of mystical experiences alleged within one another. It is clearly a different and more hazardous operation than commenting on mystical experiences that arise within one's own system, but the alternative is to declare all systems entirely self-enclosed and mutually unintelligible.

We thus have to recognise not two, but three elements entering into any attempt to make a cross-cultural study of mysticism: there is not only the interaction between the mystical experiences produced within any religious or philosophical system and the doctrines, practices and so on of that system; there is also the interaction between these two elements and the beliefs of the person undertaking the study.

The difficulty can be illustrated with reference to an observation made by Katz that it would be impossible ever to substantiate the claim that all mystical experiences, however they may be interpreted, are really just different ways of experiencing the same objective reality. He makes a telling point against Stace by showing that he has wrongly assimilated the apparently identical concepts of *Mu* in Chinese Buddhism and the kabbalistic *Ayin*, an assimilation only made possible by a complete failure to appreciate the technical significance of *Ayin* in kabbalism.

But Katz's proposal simply to say that different mystics experience different objective realities runs into one immense difficulty which he seems not to notice: many at least of the world's different mystical systems make a claim to apprehend ultimate reality. Now if the mystics of different religions are all

experiencing different objective realities, they cannot all be apprehending different ultimate realities. Katz's position requires at least one metaphysical judgment, which cannot be accepted as an impartial phenomenological observation: it requires the judgment that not all mystical systems can be making a true claim. They may all be wrong, but they cannot all be right.

Katz, I suspect, is of the opinion that they are all wrong (and if so, he is guilty of a metaphysical assumption every bit as arbitrary as Stace's). He at least denies one claim which is frequently made by mystics, the claim to attain to or to aspire to "unconditioned awareness" (which of course does not mean "unconditioned" in the sense of "devoid of all conceptualization or epistemic organization", but in the sense of "undistorted in any way by the instruments of perception or intellection"). Now it is evident that no system can demonstrate *for all systems* that it possesses, or even that it is possible to possess, such a complete coincidence of the mind with truth, of the knower with the known. But equally no system can demonstrate for all systems that such unconditioned awareness is impossible. Katz is perfectly entitled to say that he, as "detached observer", cannot choose between the various claims, but such a comment is no more "detached" (or "unconditioned") than would be, say, a Buddhist comment that the claims made by St John of the Cross, or Shankara indicate that they are still in bondage to samsara. The student of mysticism, however oecumenical or sceptical his interest, cannot help making some kind of metaphysical response to his subject matter, if he is to make contact with it at all. To assert that he is only interested in "experience", not in ontology or truth-claims, is simply an evasion of responsibility.

We shall return later to the epistemological question involved in all of this. For the moment, let us take stock of where we have got to. It seems that we have arrived at a position where we must choose one of two options: either we simply say that each system has to be judged strictly within its own terms, in which case we must rest content with a particularly naive kind of fideism and abandon any attempt to investigate mysticism (or anything else) on a cross-cultural basis: or we must suppose that in some way it is legitimate and possible to engage in some kind of dialogue with systems other than one's own and even to offer some kind of critique of other systems. The latter would seem to be at least the more interesting option, and it is probably in fact the only option which is possible for most of us, as it requires a superhumanly disciplined and abstemious mind to maintain a consistently agnostic view of the feasibility of penetrating through the diversity of human speech and thought to at least some grip on actual truth. But if we are going to take this option, we must be honest about it, and be aware that we shall always be operating with some kind of

principles deriving in some way or another from some kind of system, so that some kind of confrontation is inevitable (which need not be a hostile one: arguments can be fierce and friendly at the same time). And conceivably, the outcome might be some kind of conversion, one way or the other.

One important conclusion from this would seem to be that we should not feel ourselves to be debarred from any critique of some system just because we have not experienced it from within. The contention "You cannot understand, because you have not experienced what we experience" is not logically compelling. (I think Ninian Smart is too timid in making this point in his essay; I shall return to this later). The reason for this is that the experiential claims made by any system are not totally divorced from its metaphysical claims, and these, in principle, are public property.

If we reckon that it is at all possible for us to attempt to make sense of the claims made from within a system of belief not our own, then we are thrown back on the distinction between experience and interpretation in a new way. Our attempt will not be to determine what a man *really experienced*, as distinct from the interpretation he put on it—at least not if by "experience" we mean something that the man was consciously aware of. We will be trying to determine what was really there (if anything), what was actually going on, to cause the man's experience. And that is a question which may often be difficult to answer in practice, but which is not obscure in principle—though of course any answer we attempt to give will itself involve some kind of "interpretation". And, of course, the attempt to answer such a question will involve a consideration of doctrine, far more than an assessment of experience as such. The kind of question sometimes asked as if it were the all-important question, of the form "Was Meister Eckhart a mystic, did he have mystical experience?", turns out then not to be terribly important or interesting, except perhaps for biographers.

This brings me to a problem raised by Smart. He points out that there are "experiences which may have religious significance, but which are not *necessarily* religious in character". Thus a pious Christian may do his daily work "to the glory of God", but this religious quality is not intrinsic to the work itself; it is in Smart's terminology, "superimposed". It is helpful to draw our attention to this and to warn us that it is one of many complicating factors in our attempt to understand religious experience. But once again, it surely forces it upon us that there can be no metaphysically neutral assessment or analysis of religious experience. Because surely it makes a difference whether daily work *is really* the kind of thing that can be done to the glory of God, or whether it is only a pious sentimentality that makes it so. A clearer case would be that of seeing the Creator in his creation. Someone who bel-

ieved that this whole visible order was created by a mad or wicked demiurge would regard it as objectively wrong to see God in a buttercup. On the other hand a naive idolater might consider it to be a perfectly obvious statement of fact that when he sees a buttercup (or, more likely, the sun or something equally imposing) he sees God. Someone who thought that the world just “happened”, without there being a creator at all, would not necessarily think it wrong to see God in a mangelwurz, but he would have to regard it as fanciful; maybe a beautiful and harmless fancy, but never more than a fancy. One who believes that God is really present in all his works, as St Thomas says he is, would surely have to say that in some sense it is correct to see God in his works, and that it is an incorrect or inadequate vision that does not see God in his works. (I take it that this is the basic point of what some of the Greek patristic theologians call “natural contemplation”).

But if it is, in fact, correct to see creatures in such a way that we see God in them, seeing a buttercup “religiously” is not, strictly, superimposing anything on a harmless plant. The plant is not harmless. It *is* a manifestation of God. St Paul considers himself entitled to *blame* people who remain ignorant of God in spite of all the evidence available to them in the visible world.

But does this mean that seeing God in a buttercup is anything different from seeing a buttercup? What happens if someone sees a buttercup and experiences some vague sense of a presence or senses some vague aura of wonder? He might not want to say that he has seen God. But we might want to say that he has seen God. Perhaps this is one of the ways in which the cosmological argument works. It does not ask them to *deduce* the existence of God from the mere fact of there being (secular) buttercups; it asks people whether they have ever really *seen* a buttercup. If they have, it will explain to them *what* they have seen. (If I understand him rightly, this is what Dom Illtyd Trethowan means by urging that we cannot prove the existence of God by a merely logical process of argumentation; we can only explicitate what is already implicit in *experience*. We *experience* God in our experience of things and of ourselves. Dom Illtyd insists that he is not talking about *peculiar* experiences).

But what of a man who does not feel any special sense of presence or of transcendence, but just sees a buttercup and likes it and thinks to himself “How splendid that there should be buttercups in the world!”. Has he “seen God”? Why should he not have seen God? Does religious experience necessarily have to be experienced religiously? When Origen tried to lead his students from irrational to rational wonder as part of their initiation into theological contemplation, was he trying to change their *experience* into something that would *feel* more spiritual? Or was he trying to get them to *understand* the spiritual significance of what they

already experienced?

When St Ignatius of Antioch writes to the Ephesians “Everything you do in the flesh is spiritual, because you do it in Christ Jesus”, is he suggesting that somehow everything they do ought to *feel* different?

I once heard an evangelical preacher give an account of how he was converted by “meeting the Lord in a bus”. What seems to have occurred is that he felt something funny going on in himself, and could not make out what it was. A friend he went to visit then said to him something like “You know what, Fred? You’ve been reborn”.

Cynical Roman Catholics may feel inclined to resist a story like this. We may feel that it would be appropriate to talk about “superimposition” here. But that is because we *disagree* with something in the story. And our disagreement does not stop at wishing to say that the man’s experience has been unsuitably labelled—as if we could find a better way of labelling it. We are unhappy about a whole system of language, a whole interpretation of life. We are not convinced that there is any special point in finding *any* experience to fit that particular bit of jargon. We may concede that something happened to the man in the bus, but we are not interested in finding *any* label for it.

To call a religious interpretation “superimposed” is not just to make a phenomenological comment; it is to express dissent. It strikes us as superimposed, non-intrinsic, because our whole view of life is different.

I suspect that this brings us back to Qantas airlines. The important thing is that the aeroplane lands, not that the passengers know how it lands. In religion, what matters most is that someone is in fact being confronted with God, whether or not he is at the time aware of it. Theological and metaphysical doctrine may make us believe that God is in fact related to the phenomenal order in certain ways, that he is in fact present and active in certain ways in certain circumstances; if someone has *some* awareness of what is going on, even if he is not conscious of it as religious awareness, even a minimal convergence between his awareness of something and our belief that God is in fact present and active in that something will incline us to suspect that there may be some as it were objective religious significance lurking there, waiting to be explicitated and brought to consciousness. Just how important it is that it should be brought to full consciousness will depend on other doctrinal considerations, and different religious systems will give different answers. Systems that rate personal consciousness very highly will normally provide some kind of procedure to make people conscious; and the kind of consciousness they wish to produce will determine the kind of procedures they adopt. If it is primarily a mental consciousness that is desired, then intellectual

procedures will be to the fore, as in traditional Catholic apologetics. If it is rather an emotional awareness that is required, then different procedures will be appropriate.

Several of the essays in Katz are concerned to remind us that experience does not necessarily just turn up, it may often be deliberately induced. Streng's rather badly written paper, for instance, makes the point that one of the functions of language in mystical systems is to recondition our expectations, to make it more likely that we shall experience things in one way rather than another.

It would be a mistake to exaggerate the importance of this, but it does confirm the likelihood which is already suggested by the points we have been considering in this article, that though religious experience may be of value within a given system, it probably cannot be expected to give value to a system. It is the system as a whole, complete with its experiences, which must be examined and assessed.

*(To be continued).*

## **Catholic** **Herald** *Morale* *Booster*

### **RHODESIA**

A priest writes:

"Once again it is my duty, and a pleasant duty to say, through you, a great Thank you to the kind friend who is making the Catholic Herald available to our Mission Stations. That we are worthy of such a service is doubtful—that we appreciate it is without doubt. That the situation in our country is so noticed and reported deserves our thanks and is a morale-booster in what is a confusing and difficult situation for all of us. We long for the day when the much longed for peace will mean the same for all the people. May the day of peace be soon."

### **FROM PAPUA:**

"From the days of my conversion I have always particularly liked the Catholic Herald. Now on this isolated Bush Station, quite alone, it means more than I can say to me. They come in batches."

*Letters like this reach us every week. Please will you send the Catholic Herald to a Missionary abroad?*

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