

The Briefing

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Bob Marley's song is simple and haunting, with all the unique beauty of the best slow reggae¹. The famous rock star and Jamaican national hero, best known to Western media for his open use of marijuana, was a deeply religious man. His religion, Rastafarianism, is very small and idiosyncratic, a strange mixture of African and Christian ideas and the worship of the god 'Jah'. Yet Bob Marley speaks for a religious attitude, or theory, which is virtually universal

among religions outside the theistic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) and which has also found a place within those theistic religions. He's singing about the 'god-buzz'. "Feel them spirit" expresses the essence of mysticism. For the Rastafarians, the music, the dope, and the religion all meet in the focal point of the mystical experience.

The god-buzz is an alleged personal experience of the supernatural of a particularly strong kind. It's what the psychologists call *dissociation*. Others call it an 'altered mental state'. Something happens to the mind producing an overwhelming emotional sensation of one sort or another. It's more than feeling something—it's feeling like the whole world is different, that the whole of reality has changed. The experience may be brought on in various ways: ecstatic dancing and singing, self mutilation, meditation, solitude, fasting or externally administered drugs (marijuana, in the case of Rastafarianism). This desire for an altered mental state is the first feature of mysticism.

But in each case, the experience is given a *religious interpretation*. It is seen as a momentary contact point with the supernatural. The god-buzz is a major goal in many religions. It has various functions: to find enlightenment, release, union with God or initiation as a priest or witchdoctor (often called a *shaman*). But the common feature is that the altered mental state is interpreted as contact with the divine. This second feature is the key to understanding mysticism.

Of course, one may seek such an experience without ever giving it a religious interpretation; that is not mysticism. Westerners seeking pleasure hanker after altered mental states (by getting drunk or taking drugs) without giving this any mystical interpretation. But whenever there is seeking after altered mental states by whatever technique *and* the accompanying belief that this is putting the person in touch with God, there you have mysticism.

¹ 'Put It On', on 'Bob Marley and the Wailers' issued by Magnum Records Inc., 1981.

Two forms of mysticism

Ecstatic mysticism

This is commonplace in religions outside the major institutional religions. It involves frantic, energetic behaviour (dancing, singing, clapping, self mutilation) and is often mixed with drug taking. It is surprising how many of the world's tribal religions have such ceremonies. In these religions, the theological interpretation of the experience is usually animistic, involving the local spirits and demons. A bizarre range of drugs and potents—cactus, mushrooms, hashish—are used to enhance the effect. Ceremonies are sometimes associated with the most outrageous behaviour—self mutilation, handling dangerous spiders or snakes, speaking in tongues, walking on hot coals. Sometimes it's a solo affair, with the shaman or witchdoctor embarking on the trance alone, or watched by non-participants. Other times it is a group affair. The experiences serve to justify the shaman's position of authority in the tribe.

Quietist mysticism

In contrast to ecstatic mysticism, quietist mystics seek to achieve the mystical state by methods such as meditation, stillness or shutting out the world. It has been more common than ecstatic behaviour in the European tradition. In his classic text, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, American philosopher William James describes a wide variety of cases of quietist mysticism from Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam². For example, here is what the Indian yogi learns:

That the mind itself has a higher state of existence, beyond reason, a superconscious state, and that when the mind gets to that higher state, then this knowledge beyond reasoning comes... All the different steps in yoga are intended to bring us scientifically to the superconscious state or Samadhi... [Then] we truly are free, immortal, omnipotent, loosed from the finite and its contrasts of good and evil altogether, and identical with the Atman or Universal Soul. (p. 386)

² Lectures given 1901-2, reissued by Collins, 1960.

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This example has a well developed interpretation (in terms of Hindu theology) and highly developed methods for its attainment. Other instances of mysticism are less developed. Such a case is the experience of an Englishman under chloroform:

After the choking and stifling had passed away, I seemed at first in a state of utter blankness; then came flashes of intense light, alternating with blackness, and with a keen vision of what was going on in the room around me, but with no sensation of touch. I thought that I was near death; when, suddenly, my soul became aware of God, who was manifestly dealing with me, handling me, so to speak, in an intense personal present reality. I felt him streaming in like light upon me... I cannot describe the ecstasy I felt. (pp. 376-377)

This experience is remarkably similar to cases which occur without the help of drugs. Despite the mention of a 'personal' presence, the interpretation of the experiences tends to be pantheistic.

We can find the two key features in each of the cases James describes. There are various methods (meditation, drugs, fasting, or a completely unsought experience) but there is always the religious interpretation.

James' description

According to William James, the mystical experience has four important characteristics.

Firstly, a mystical state is *ineffable*, which means that it cannot be described or communicated. The only way to know what a mystical experience is like is to have one yourself. Explaining a mystical state to an outsider is like describing colour to a person blind from birth, or good music to a deaf person. It is impossible.

Secondly, mystical states are *noetic*. This means that they impart knowledge, although it is of a non-rational, non-intellectual kind. This could be described as greater understanding or insight, or 'enlightenment'.

Then there are two lesser but still important features. Mystical states are *transient* (they don't last beyond about half an hour), and they give the impression of *passivity*, which means that they happen to you rather than

you cause them. This impression of passivity exists despite the fact that most states occur under a particular set of conditions such as fasting, meditation and solitude and, in cases where there is no such condition, the person is often one given to such practices. Even when the participant wilfully takes measures to induce the experience, there is still this sense of passivity.

Mystics give a wide variety of interpretations to their experiences. It may be trinitarian, as in the case of St Ignatius, or Mary-orientated, as in the case of St Teresa of Avila. Or it may be Hindu or Buddhist. Mysticism can be associated with any theology, or view of God. Although he notes that the majority of mystics tend towards pantheism of some sort, William James concludes:

The fact is that 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 their framework for its particular emotional mood. (p. 410)

The Christian Mystic

In the past, Evangelical Protestants have been the group least tolerant of mysticism, even denying that it is a legitimate expression of Christianity. William James comments that, since all religions including Christianity have cultivated methods for achieving mystical states, "It is odd that Protestantism, especially Evangelical Protestantism, should seemingly have abandoned everything methodical in this line" (p. 392). Not so today. Christians today are being widely encouraged to draw on the rich mystical tradition. Today you don't have to look far to find a professed Christian mystic.

One Christian who is also a mystic is John White. His mysticism comes out most clearly in his book *The Shattered Mirror*. He argues that there is an important place within Christianity for "close encounters of the holy kind". A close encounter of the holy kind is where God reveals himself directly to a person, mak-

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ing known his holiness and his forgiveness. This will be an intensely emotional experience, which will have a permanent uplifting effect in the person's Christian life. This close encounter is more than simply understanding and appreciating God's holiness and love. It is a visit from God. God, of course, does not come to us literally in physical form, but in symbol. And there may be a psychological and physical explanation for the event, but God can and does use such physical processes for his purposes.

White gives some examples from the Bible of such close encounters. Abraham had a close encounter with God when God himself passed by the sacrificial animals which God had told Abraham to place out. What Abraham saw was smoke and a flaming torch, and "an horror of great darkness came on him" (Gen 15:12, KJV). According to John White, the smoke and fire were the symbols of God in Abraham's close encounter. Other examples of close encounters include John on the island of Patmos, Daniel falling to the ground in a trance (Dan 10:8-12), Job getting caught up in a whirlwind (Job 42:3-6), Isaiah's vision of the throne of God (Is 6:1-4), and Jacob wrestling with God.

Mystics claim that these close encounters can happen to Christians. John White himself had a close encounter. He writes,

That evening I happened to be praying with some of my friends in the living room of my home. My eyes were open, and I was fully aware of my surroundings when suddenly in three dimensions and in full colour I saw the arms and hands of Christ extended towards me. The effect was overwhelming. All my strength left me, so that it was with difficulty that I remained kneeling. I began to sweat profusely and to tremble uncontrollably.

Strange as it may seem, I was fully aware that what I was seeing was a product of my own brain. I felt that God was, as it were, using my mind as a projectionist uses a projector. The hands I saw were not the real hands of Christ: They were weak and effeminate, whereas I knew that the hands should have shown the evidence of manual toil.... I was moved in my depths.

It was hard for me to speak coherently for I

wept and shook... Brokenly I begged Christ to break down the walls I had built around me to protect me from the love I feared so much. And somehow the knowledge came to me that there would be no need for the walls to be broken down, but that little by little I would open myself to this terrifying love. And thus it has proved to be. (pp. 87-88)

According to John White, God had revealed himself through the symbolic hands of Christ. Such symbols are the presence of God, or at least, "the nearest expression of his presence we can know in our fallen condition".

John White's close encounter is a clear case of a mystical experience. There is the altered mental state, and there is the theological interpretation of the experience. The encounter has William James' defining features. It is ineffable, since these symbols are "an expression of that which cannot be expressed" (p. 90), and it is noetic, as it is a non-intellectual learning experience. Further, its transience and the strong sense of passivity ("the encounter came unsought, unbidden", p. 92) also fit James' characterization.

John White's close encounters of the holy kind are mystical in every sense. That they are given an interpretation in terms of Christian theology, rather than non-Christian theology, does not stop them being mystical. Given William James' claim that mystical experiences are in themselves empty of content, it is not surprising, from a sociological point of view, that Christian interpretations of mystical experiences are given.

According to John White, not all Christians will have such an experience. But we can all be awakened to his presence deep within the human heart. In other words, all Christians can and should have mystical experience of God, although not necessarily the more violent type. Thus the book concludes,

Let us go to him in stillness, seeking that mirror in the deepest depths of our being, behind which this same God is waiting for us. (p. 93)

Examples of contemporary Christian mystics could easily be multiplied. (John White is in fact one of the more conservative, more careful Christian mystics.) The most obvious example is the Charismatic Movement. Its de-

sire for marked experiences in group and personal worship, and its usual interpretation of these experiences as the visitation of the Holy Spirit clearly identifies it as mystical. Charismatics typically recognize the similarities between their own experiences and those of the mystics, and normally hold that non-Christian mysticism is a demonic counterfeit spirituality.

A Two-way Challenge

In one of his more prophetic moments, Francis Schaeffer, in 1978, warned of a new movement which could come to dominate Christianity. Under the influence of a continuing move back to mysticism which he perceived in the New Age movement, Schaeffer warned that the church would adopt a 'new super-spirituality', a Christian version of the New Age³.

This super-spirituality refers to mystical versions of Christianity which we can see, 20 years later, have taken hold of the church. It can be seen not only in the Charismatic movement, but also increasingly in liberal and high church Christianity. But Schaeffer was explicitly talking about Evangelicals. Yet even there his prophecy seems to be coming true: there is a current trend for Evangelicals to accept those versions of the Charismatic Movement which avoid the more obvious theological and exegetical errors of previous generations. John White is a case in point. Evangelicals are confused about the careful mystic.

Mysticism is a theology without a theology. As we have seen, it can be found associated with any view about God. Yet mysticism itself *is* a theological claim. Its essence is the theological claim that the divine visits humans through altered mental states. That is theology. It has been said, for example, that the Charismatic Movement has no essential theology, because it is essentially an experience⁴. And many Evangelicals know the frustration

of seeing Charismatics change their theology, yet not seeming to change in any real way. But there *is* an essential theology—the theology of mysticism. I don't mean to imply here that all Charismatics are mystics first and Christians second. Fortunately, this is not the case. But I am claiming that the distinctive, essential theological tenet of the Charismatic Movement is mysticism; an interest in altered mental states and the belief that they put people in touch with the divine. At least, it is this tenet which divides Charismatics from Evangelicals.

The challenge that mystics normally present to Evangelicals is that Christians are only getting half the story if they deny mystical experiences. They argue that there is a whole additional dimension to Christian faith compatible with, but additional to, trust in God through his Word. We should not deny this aspect; we should not 'rationalize our faith', 'intellectualize the gospel' or restrict Christianity to a 'cerebral religion'.

It is true that our faith should not be merely of the mind, but also of the will. We need to know, *and obey*. It will also inevitably involve the emotions. But this is not usually what people mean by these phrases. They mean to say that we must allow a place for mysticism. This is the mystic's challenge to the Evangelical.

I believe that just as the reformers wrestled with Catholicism, and Evangelicals a hundred years ago wrestled with Liberalism, so now we face an enormous theological question that *we* need to wrestle with. What is the relation between mysticism and biblical Christianity? Can a Christian be a mystic? *Should* a Christian be a mystic? This, I believe, is *the* great question for the church as we approach the twenty-first century. As Schaeffer said,

I wonder if this new change, paralleling the change in the secular world, isn't going to be the battlefield of the next years.⁵

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³F. Schaeffer, 'The New Super-Spirituality' in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, pp.383-401.

⁴ Cited in F. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Eerdmans, 1970, p. 12.

⁵ 'The New Super-Spirituality', p. 389.