

MYSTICISM AND RELIGION: A PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

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Certainly no one who has dealt with the concepts of either mysticism or religion will find anything very startling in the suggestion that these two terms are difficult to define satisfactorily, even though he may be quite satisfied with his own definition. But in an age like ours--an age of growing new religions which often propagate their views under the claim that they are philosophies, rather than religions--it seems proper to look at the problem of definition again. Certainly the general public needs help in distinguishing between the two. Unfortunately, it seems that some of us who are considered professionals in the area of philosophy are also not clear about the distinctions.

But I have no intention to try to define either term as such. Such a task is far too extensive for such a time as this. What interests me, however, is the distinction between religion and mysticism--something that is, I think, one small but significant aspect of the larger problem of developing an adequate definition of religion. I am troubled by the way many writers confuse religion and mysticism. Some people see them as identical. For example, Andrew M. Greeley, in his book, Ecstasy: A Way of Knowing, says ". . .the mystical experience. . .is the religious experience par excellence. . ." ¹ This, it seems to me, is clearly a major confusion, and one which shows a serious deficiency in knowledge--knowledge, that is, of the distinctions between various religions.

I have suggested (although indirectly) that there exist distinctions which must be taken into account if we are to have any hope of defining religion clearly enough to make a reasonably fair difference between it and philosophy. I have no intention, however, of trying to make that distinction. I only wish to point to one problem in the paper which, it seems to me, makes the problem more difficult--that is, seeing a distinction where there may not be one. I believe Greeley and others are guilty of this when they see mysticism as a vital, defining characteristic of all religion. My task requires that I first make some remarks about mysticism.

Anyone even superficially acquainted with the literature about mysticism that has been produced in the last fifty years will be aware that the term has no clear definition. There are those who wish to use it as a synonym for any set of ideas which depend upon

belief in the Supernatural. For them the term is a pejorative term, since being convinced of Naturalism, they have no patience with anything else. Others, while not quite so broad in their usage, want the term to designate all those superstitious and occult views which they find not quite respectable, although they may not wish to rule out all belief in some supernatural order--at least not without a hearing. Both of these views see mysticism as something undesirable, and both are, in my view, unfortunately and unjustifiably narrow. They fail to be very helpful since they spring largely from prejudice rather than from good reasons.

Another group of people choose to define the term by concentrating totally on the beliefs which mystics hold. Thus, certain beliefs, such as belief in the possibility of experiencing "union with reality" is mystical, or belief in those forms of pantheism generally associated with Hinduism or Buddhism are mystical. The defining characteristics are all beliefs or doctrines. While this attitude may have some merit, it misses, I believe, a crucial element. That element is the epistemological source from which the doctrines are said to spring.

Viewed from this perspective, what are the characteristics of mysticism? Greeley points out that according to the mystic ". . . the experience is more one of knowing than of feeling."² Thus, according to the mystic, he gains knowledge through the mystical experience. This experience is, of course, not like our normal ways of gaining knowledge, even though mystics often speak of it as a kind of "seeing". Greeley says of the work that he and his partner are doing, "We are assuming that ecstasy is basically a cognitive phenomenon, that the mystic is describing precisely what happens when he says that for the first time he 'sees things the way they really are.'"³

So the experience is not only described as a way of knowing similar to seeing, but it also seems to be self-authenticating. The mystic is totally convinced that what he thinks he has learned is true beyond question. He has seen things as they are. Rev. William Ralph Inge, in Mysticism in Religion, speaking of the mystics says, "They are not interested in states of consciousness as such; rightly or wrongly they are convinced that they have seen. Rightly or wrongly they are convinced that they are or have been in contact with objective reality. . ."⁴

I am belaboring the point merely to emphasize something that I suppose all of us know--namely that the mystic makes a claim to having a unique way of knowing which results in something which he claims merits the term "knowledge" in its fullest sense. The problem is, of course, that this experience is totally subjective in

this sense that there are no public aspects of it which could allow another person to verify in any sense that the mystic's experience is what he says it is. Thus, his claim to gaining knowledge by means of his totally subjective experience cannot be verified by anyone else.

It is, of course, possible I suppose, that some mystic might claim to come to know something through his mystical experience which we might be able to verify later through some normal way of knowing--that is, we might be able to prove the information true--but this would not of itself prove the mystical experience a legitimate means of gaining knowledge. It should be noted, however, that I am not claiming that some way of proving it a proper way of knowing might not be possible--only that the nature of the experience is such that this is a serious difficulty for any mystic who, as most mystics seem to do, claims to gain knowledge by means of his experience.

Let us, then, summarize what we have seen thus far. First, the mystic claims to gain true knowledge through an experience which is totally subjective in the sense that there is no aspect integral to that experience which is public in such a way that others can share, and therefore verify, the claims of the mystic. I would therefore suggest that one of the defining characteristics of mystical experience is that it is totally subjective in the way described.

The second characteristic which seems to me to be defining is that the experience itself is non-cognitive. By this I mean that the experience itself is just that--a "raw" experience which must be interpreted if it is to be seen as meaning anything. The meaning which the mystic attributes to it is his interpretation, and did not come from within the experience itself. Therefore, any interpretation put upon an experience can be mistaken. In fact, nothing in the event demands that the experience means anything at all--unless we wish to say that it indicates something about the mystic's psychological state. In The Highest State of Consciousness, Kenneth Walker says,

"In these moments we see rather than think and it is only afterwards that we start to fumble for words in which we try to express what was revealed to us. There is nothing 'personal' or even individual in the direct knowledge which comes to us in a Supra-Conscious state. Our individual consciousness merged with a much wider consciousness, which we felt to be Universal. So also we were aware of the presence

within us of something much higher than ourselves, of something which, for lack of any other name, we were forced to call God."⁵

The mystics only basis on which to claim that his interpretation is true is how he felt. This is hardly an adequate ground for someone else to grant the mystic's claim to knowledge.

W.T. Stace, in Mysticism and Religion, has examined the issues involved in this distinction between experience and the interpretation of that experience. Anyone wishing to examine the issues farther is urged to consider his arguments.

Both of the authors I have quoted make reference to "seeing". Walker also describes the experience in terms that imply communication between two conscious beings. However, here again the situation is not similar to having someone tell one something in his native language. One might argue that a kind of interpretation is necessary in all verbal communication, but that kind of interpretation is vastly different from what the mystic must do, for in being told something there normally is conceptual content which is supplied by the other person in the conversation. No such content exists in the mystic experience.

Nor is the situation like that of seeing in our normal seeing of the world around us. In normal seeing we operate in the context of a long history of seeing and interpreting what we see in a social situation. We communicate about what we see in language which is reasonably adequate for such communication. The mystic has none of these advantages. He experiences something that most people do not experience. He insists that his experience is ineffable, thereby agreeing that the language he has available to him is inadequate to express the event.

Finally, even for most mystics, mystical experience is not the standard, everyday events that seeing is for most of us. He has relatively little experience in interpreting such events. Thus, we would expect that the possibility of making an error is vastly increased. And, if this were not enough of a problem, we must keep in mind that even in those former cases where he has interpreted some past experience, the situation is not at all like that of ordinary ways of knowing, since there are no external, objective constants by which the correctness of any former interpretation could have been established.

The second defining characteristic, then, which I wish to suggest, is its lack of conceptual content. It is a non-rational event in the sense explained--that is, in the raw experience no conceptual aspects are present. Rational content is given to it by the mystic as

he interprets it.

There may well be other characteristics of a similar nature. In fact, I suspect that there are--some which may be even more significant. My purpose for examining these characteristics concerns our larger task--that is, the distinction between religion and mysticism--to which we must now pay some attention.

I began this paper by objecting to those who wish to equate all religious experience with mystical experience. It seems to me that this either interprets some religions which are not mystical as though they were, or else it insists that some sets of beliefs are not religions when they obviously are. In either case we have a confusion.

In order to clarify the issues as quickly as possible, I should like to make some broad statements which will, no doubt, be somewhat inaccurate because of their breadth, but I ask your indulgence due to the necessary limitations of this paper. First, if we examine the bases which each religion acknowledges as its source, we will notice that some claim mystical experience as the source of their doctrines while others claim a conceptual basis. Broadly speaking, the three major Western religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, in their historic forms, claimed to be conceptually based, while most others have a mystical basis. Even this is not quite accurate, since Islam seems to have had strong mystical elements from the very first.

Please notice the claim I am making is merely that there exists a clear difference between the claims that some religions historically made about their origins and those made by others. The claim in Judaism and Christianity clearly was that God had spoken to certain men in their languages. His statements were said to be of various kinds, among them commands, instructions, information about Himself and other things, and (not insignificantly) interpretations of past and future events. Thus the claim was that these religions are based on historic events, not on mere myth, and on information directly from God which was rational and conceptual in content, not on a mystical experience that might be variously interpreted.

I can almost hear someone say, "But isn't it true that those events themselves were mystical experiences?" The answer is clearly No, if we take the claims of the religion at face value. We can, of course, insist that we know on some independent ground--such as our Naturalistic presuppositions--that what the original authors said could not possibly have been as they claimed. But the records of those events are not descriptions of mystical experience, in spite of what one often hears or reads. For example, the stories of Moses and the burning bush, or of Paul on the road to

Damascus, which are often given as examples of mystical experiences, have none of the defining characteristics we have described. In both cases the claim is that there were objective events--that is, events in the objective world--and that there was verbal communication between the person and God--events and conversation which in the case of the Apostle Paul, were shared by those in his party, although we are told that the others, while hearing a voice, did not understand the words of God.

What is true in these two cases is equally true in every Biblical event which I have found any author describing as mystical. I have only discovered two events which Biblical writers describe in such a way that they might be seen as mystical, but in neither case are we forced to do so. More importantly, in neither case is any doctrine or belief structure based upon them. They are merely described.

The point here is that both Christianity and Judaism in their historic form describe their origin as being based on events in the objective world--not on mystical experience. Nor did these religions as a whole see their essential nature as being defined by mystical experience. Rather, the body of beliefs, along with the practices that resulted from these beliefs, was taken to constitute the religion. If, then, we insist in making mystical experience either the defining characteristic of all religion, or else one essential defining characteristic, we face a problem. We must either claim that we have knowledge about the nature and origins of these religions superior to that of those who founded them and those who practiced them for centuries, or else these are not religions--at least not in their original and historic forms. Either attitude seems to me to present rather serious problems--problems that would need to be addressed before an adequate definition of 'religion' can be formulated. This, in turn, must be done if we are to clarify farther the distinction between religion and philosophy.

NOTES

1. Andrew M. Greeley, Ecstasy: A Way of Knowing, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974) p. 46.
2. Ibid, p. 4.
3. Ibid
4. William Ralph Inge, Mysticism in Religion, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1948), p. 22.
5. John White, Ed., The Highest State of Consciousness (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 16.