II.—ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF A GROUP OF CHRISTIAN MYSTICS.¹

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I.—THE RELIGIOUS TENDENCIES OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTICS.

FROM the psychological point of view the most characteristic trait of the Christian Mystics is what may be called their 'inward-mindedness,' i.e., the preponderance in their consciousness of the sensations, ideas and feelings of subjective origin, to the detriment of the sensations, ideas and feelings determined more or less directly by, or referring to, the outside world. Prof. Royce has said of the Mystics that "they are the only thoroughgoing empiricists," and quite correctly, provided it be understood that the field of their empiricism does not include the objective world. Inner experiences hold their attention first and last. They are thus at the opposite pole from those persons whose stolid substance is rarely disturbed except by the impact of the external world.

The rare possibilities of an unusual sensitiveness to what goes on within that portion of ourselves correlated with the sensations, feelings and ideas referring to the self rather than to the physical outer world, are obvious. It is to this temperamental disposition that the Mystics owe their most noteworthy peculiarities. Those to which I desire to draw your attention during the first part of this paper take the

¹ A paper read in part before the American Psychological Association at its annual meeting, Washington, D. C., 1902. The first part of it is little more than a series of notes upon the tendencies of the Christian Mystics. The second part—the one dealing with the interpretation of the mystical experiences—is a little fuller. Let the reader bear in mind that I deal here with only a few of the most important Christian Mystics: Mme. Guyon, François de Sales, St. Theresa, Ruysbroeck, Suzo and Tauler. I do not inquire how far the statements referring to them are also applicable to the other varieties of Mystics.

For a more complete and detailed study of these Mystics see my two articles in the *Revue Philosophique* for July and October of 1902.

form of a deepening, an intensifying of four of the needs or tendencies found everywhere among civilised peoples. Two of these are of very great interest to the student of human development. I have called them, respectively, the tendency to organic enjoyment and the tendency to the universalisation of action.

I am going to pass these four tendencies in review, beginning with the two less significant ones.

1. *The Need of Mental Peace, of Intellectual Unity.*

Among the Christian Mystics this need finds at all times some satisfaction in the control exercised by the idea of God upon the stream of consciousness. But it is chiefly in the daily exercises of Meditation and above all in the rarer moments of Ecstasy that the unification of the mental contents is obtained, and then not by the reconciliation of opposed elements, the gaining of more general principles, but by the simpler method of elimination. The simplification of the mental life frequently ends for the Mystics in a monoideism, or even in the total absence of all ideational contents. The person is then in a state of trance.

2. *The Need of an Effective Support.*

The intense need of moral help, of loving support, felt by the Christian Mystics, generates in them a keen and persistent sense of the presence of the *Great Comforter*, as Romanes called Him. Their particular sensitiveness makes it possible for them to *feel* Him and not only to conceive of Him or to see Him in visions. In the higher degrees of the *orison*, God is no longer thought of, He is owned by the devout soul; He comes to her, dwells with her and fills her with a surpassingly sweet sense of security and peace. The intenser feeling of a wider, more powerful, more loving Presence supplants father and mother, wife or husband. The consciousness of the presence of God is to the Christian Mystic what the control exercised by the hypnotiser is to his subjects, with an unbounded measure of confidence, admiration and love added to it.

3. *Tendency to Organic Enjoyment.*

In renouncing the work of the flesh—as most of the great Christian Mystics have done—they do not give up the passionate enjoyment which it yields. They are still ready, nay eager, to secure carnal delights, provided it may be obtained otherwise than through the ordinary channels of sexual

gratification. One of the greatest attractions of Mystical ecstasy is the presence in it of those voluptuous feelings.

Ecstasy is, as we shall see, a love trance, as far as our Mystics are concerned. Saint Theresa tells us that she usually enjoyed intoxicating delights in the company of Jesus. Ruysbroeck declares that "the pleasure is greater, more voluptuous, *for the body* and for the soul, than all those the world may give". This experience is not peculiar to one or another of the Christian Mystics; it is a trait common to them all. The voluptuous excitement in which they are at times plunged may be paralleled only by the most passionate physical love. Mme. Guyon, frigid towards her husband, wrote of Jesus Christ, with whom she had contracted a so-called mystical marriage: "I love Him so that I can love no one but Him. I have lost every other inclination or appetite." Speaking later on of that period of her life, she said: "I was like one of those drunkards, or one of those lovers who think only of the object of their passion".

For information as to the physical seat of this pleasure we may go to Saint Theresa herself. She had at times angelic visitors. Once the vision of a very small and very beautiful angel was granted her. He held in his hand a long golden shaft tipped with fire. Every once in a while he would plunge it into her heart and push it down into the bowels. As he withdrew it, it was, says she, "as if my bowels would be torn away and I was left burning with the love of God".

Take in connexion with the preceding the interesting case quoted by Havelock Ellis in his *Psychological Study on Auto-Erotism*. A woman physician, a disciple of the 'Brotherhood of the New Life' founded by T. L. Harris, described thus one of her religious experiences. "One morning, I awoke with a strange new feeling in the womb, which lasted for a day or two; I was so very happy, but the joy was in my womb, not in my heart." The difference between these two experiences, as far as the point at issue is concerned, is that the woman physician says womb and the Spanish saint says bowels.

The sexual origin of at least the most intense and highest (according to their own valuation) of the divine raptures cannot be denied. They result from the setting into activity of at least some of the organs of the sexual life, to an extent varying with each person, and always without his knowledge. It is a distinct form of erotomania.¹

¹ There are other possible sources of intense organic enjoyment, independent of the sexual life. See the *Revue Philosophique*, Oct., 1902:

Concerning this tendency and the satisfaction given to it by the Mystics three points must be briefly noted.

(a) If the Mystics refuse their body the ordinary satisfaction it craves, it is not because of the unholiness of the pleasure itself, but because sexual passion, even when within legitimate bounds, places one so frequently and, usually, so irresistibly, in opposition to the finer moral promptings. Therefore it is their chief enemy. Observe that in this they do no more than carry out consistently, but to an extravagant issue, a struggle the appearance of which marks the dawn of civilisation. They are the champions gone mad of the civilised world in its great, and mostly secret, battle against the evils of the flesh.

(b) Erotomania—we need not shrink from using the term—is here in the service of lofty ideal ends. As the enjoyment does not come from practices guilty in their eyes, but, on the contrary, from the vivid realisation of the surpassingly great love to them of an absolutely good God, its effect is elevating rather than debasing; it becomes a strengthener of holy resolves; it cements together the tendencies according to the will of God and increases their power. Allow me to recall in this connexion the opinion held by many among those who have paid serious attention to the relation of the sexual function to psychic life, that the irradiation of sexual energy when deviated from its ordinary channel of discharge accounts for much of the growth of the higher mental life.

(c) The physiological mechanism of sexual life is, of course, too solidly established and, moreover, the yearning for the rapturous thrill of the flesh, is too strong and in itself too innocent to permit of the sudden elimination of that part of our nature. But the Christian Mystics have found a way of gratifying both the needs of the body and of the soul, and at the same time of avoiding the moral danger lurking in the ordinary way of giving them satisfaction. This course is erotomania with the idea of Jesus, the Virgin Mary or God as respondent.¹

I like to look upon this phase of the life of the Christian Mystic as an experiment tried by human nature to bring the sexual life more completely under the control of the higher nervous centres and thus to make it serve for the furtherance of that to which the individual ascribes greatest worth. I need hardly add that this is not 'a re-interpretation of Religion as perverted sexuality'; it is merely a singling out of *one of the factors* prominent in the religiosity

¹ I am not now concerned with the physiological disorders to which such a practice as this might give rise.

of a group of *Christian Mystics*, coupled with an attempt to interpret its effects.¹

4. *Tendency to the Universalisation of Action to Ethical Unity.*

Whatever importance may attach to the preceding motive, the chief significance of Christian Mysticism belongs, it seems to me, to the heroism of their unremitting efforts in favour of universalised conduct, i.e., of action proceeding from generalised motives. Their own habit is to designate such conduct as the performance of God's will.

They differ with reference to this point from the ordinary well-intentioned man, in that to the Mystic compromises are intolerable where the will of God is concerned. The life of all of them is for most of its duration a fierce struggle against the tendencies of the so-called *Natural* man; not that these primitive tendencies are in them stronger than in other persons, but that the yielding to them is never sanctioned by the higher self. The strife between the lower and the higher motives assumes in the Christian Mystics a keenness rarely equalled in other classes of men.

In respect to this fourth tendency the Mystics mark, on the whole, a step in advance, since what distinguishes them is the greater motive power of those altruistic, those universalised, ideas more and more generally recognised, in civilised societies, as the desirable guides of action. What is usually mere limp desire or impotent inclination has become in them unconquerable, if not always victorious, impulse. The highest good they recognise has at its service a psycho-physiological imperative mechanism; the 'ought' is backed in them by a compelling motor force. This is probably the most valuable fruit of their particular sensitiveness to inner events.

II.—MYSTICAL ECSTASY.

Urged by these four tendencies the Christian Mystics have come to practise a peculiar religious exercise called *Orison*.

¹ See a long footnote on sex in Religion, pp. 10-12 of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

On the whole I find myself in agreement with the opinion of Prof. James on the relation of Neurology to Religion. I believe, however, that he has not ascribed to the amatory desires the place which belongs to them in the religious consciousness of those Mystics with whom he is chiefly concerned in the chapter on Mysticism. If sex does not make religion it often gives it its particular form. It is, for instance, chiefly to the predominance of the love passion that Suso, Ruysbroeck, Mme. Guyon differ so markedly from the cold, objective type so impressively represented by Calvin.

It is, in its lower degree, a meditation upon God and, in its higher, a trance looked upon by them as union with Him.

I do not think that a more remarkably effective way of giving satisfaction to the four tendencies we have enumerated could have been devised than this one, although it is merely the result of empirical wisdom. Let me put before you in a rapid sketch the changes which take place in consciousness during the journey of the soul to God. Several great Mystics have left minute and subtle descriptions of it, and, however they may differ in points of detail, they are at one as to those larger features with which I am going to deal. I shall follow St. François de Sales (*Traité de l'Amour de Dieu*) and Mme. Guyon (*Moyen Court et Facile de faire Oraison*).

In Meditation, with which *Orison* begins, the soul seeks motives of love and takes delight in them, says St. Francis, and Mme. Guyon adds that the end is not to analyse and reason, but "merely to hold the attention" upon the subject of the meditation. When this is secured the soul passes to the second degree: *Contemplation*. It is defined as "nothing more than a simple and permanent attention of the mind to divine things; a consideration of the loved object as a whole," in a lump as it were. Mme. Guyon emphasises the importance of holding the attention upon God, not by the understanding, but by the affections. They all agree in saying that whereas Meditation requires some effort and mental activity, in Contemplation the soul has become passive. There is in it greater pleasure, since God and His great love have been found. "The soul is so quietly attentive," says St. Francis, "to the kindness of her Beloved, that she seems hardly attentive at all."

This mental quiescence and the amorous enjoyment grow as the *Orison* becomes deeper. A little farther on, when the state called by St. Francis "Amorous quietude" is reached, "the soul remains, as it were, deprived of life; it is only with difficulty that she can speak and answer; all her senses are benumbed". Nevertheless, although she can hardly answer, she still hears God speaking to her. On certain occasions it happens that the trance goes as far as absolute unconsciousness: "The soul," to quote again from St. Francis, "ceases even to hear her beloved; she does not even feel any sign of His presence. Then, the soul on awakening, may well say: 'Truly, I have slept with my God, in the arms of His divine presence and I knew it not'."

In this progress of the soul, the two great periods observed in hypnosis are clearly marked: the loss of muscular

control and later the loss of sensory perceptions. It differs from the ordinarily induced hypnosis in that it is dominated throughout by the feeling of love. This is because the person upon whom the attention is concentrated is first of all an object of love. The mystical ecstasy is then a love trance, more or less profound, in which the idea of God, or of Jesus, or of the Virgin, takes the place of the hypnotiser.

What I desire particularly to point out is that the so-called 'higher,' most excellent, religious exercise of the Mystics gives them at once mental peace, a vivid feeling of the presence of the Great Comforter, the delights of passionate love and, moreover, brings with it a strengthening of all the tendencies that are believed to be in accordance with God's will.

When we want ineffective desires to triumph there is no more powerful means at the command of science than to induce hypnosis and then to suggest the wished for victory. Now the Mystics have developed, in their endeavour to satisfy their needs, a method of worship which places them, while under the control of the God-idea, in a condition of increased suggestibility. They become clay in the hands of the potter. The value of this control depends, of course, upon the contents of their consciousness of God.

Allow me to add, that in all religions the attitude looked upon as most divine is one of increased suggestibility, induced either by drugs, by violent physical exercise, by concentration of the attention upon some point of space, or otherwise. So that the most general and, in my opinion, the most significant statement which the psychologist can make regarding the religious attitude *par excellence* is that, among all peoples and at every degree of their development, it is a trance dominated by tendential ideas, not everywhere the same, but expressing always the needs accounted highest by the individual or by the society to which he belongs.

The more ordinary religious consciousness, as, for instance, the one characteristic of ordinary worship, is an approach towards the seldom realised perfect religious attitude.

III.—THE MYSTICAL ECSTASY AS REVELATION AND AS UNION WITH GOD.

Let us ask now, in the third and final part of this paper, what meaning the Mystics give to the religious ecstasy, and how far, or in what sense, their opinion is justifiable. The interest of what I have to say here will be much increased if you happen to have present in mind the views of Prof.

William James on this point. I regret that time has not permitted me to refer more particularly in the course of this paper to this author's illuminating analyses and perplexing conclusions.¹

Regarding their trance the Mystics make two affirmations of the highest consequence. It is, they say, (a) *a revelation*, (b) *a union with God, or an identification of the individual with the Absolute Essence*. It is to these interpretations that they owe a large part of their celebrity.

First, concerning the revelation, there are at least four different kinds of experiences entering as part-explanation of the belief in the transcendent, unutterable revelations received by the divine lover during his ecstasies.

1. In the love trance the feelings and the will of the individual come into unison with the feelings and the will attributed by him to God. As mental activity decreases with the deepening of the trance, the feelings and desires belonging to the subject and those ascribed to God, are no more held separate; they necessarily fuse together, leaving but one being: man and God in one. This is well described by St. Theresa. "My *Orison* did not take place in my head; it was an *Orison of enjoyment and of possession in the will* . . . all distinctions disappeared, there was nothing but a desire for deeper love, without the presence of any motive or ground for loving." Mme. Guyon wrote, speaking of one of her *Retreats*: "*là tous les entre deux furent consumés, il se fit un vrai mélange de l'Amant et de l'Amante de telle sorte qu'ils furent faits une même chose*". Parallel passages are to be found in the writings of all the Christian Mystics.

The impression of intimacy resulting from the fusion of one's own feeling and will with those ascribed to the divine would be in itself quite sufficient to lead most people to the belief that there had been an intellectual penetration of the divine mystery, even though they should be aware of the fact that in the higher degrees of *Orison* the mind is inactive. St. Theresa is a good illustration in point. She actually attempts a description of God; she tries to give intellectual form to the very revelation she has declared to be entirely in the realm of the feeling and of the will. Her most successful attempt is ludicrous enough. Here it is: "I shall say then that the Divinity is like a diamond superlatively clear and much larger than the world; or like a

¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. See especially Lectures xvi., xvii., xx. The articles of the *Revue Philosophique* to which I have referred were written and the first of them published before Prof. James's book appeared.

mirror similar to the one in which the soul was shown me in the preceding vision; only so much more sublime that I have no words to describe it".

2. The love feeling and the god-like attitude of the subject persist for a certain length of time after the trance. This may legitimately be described as an *inspiration* and an *illumination* since, on recovering, the understanding sees more clearly the will of God and the will performs it more readily. It is no doubt in this light that many passages, apparently claiming something more, should be interpreted, as, for instance, the following statements of Eckhart: "I have in my soul a power that enables me to perceive God . . . nothing is so near to me as God. He is nearer to me than I am to myself."

3. Here is how Tauler describes in his sermon for Whit Sunday another of the experiences which contribute to the belief in a revelation: "When all the powers of the soul are collected and turned inwards, it often happens that some eternal truth presents itself with irresistible clearness. This happens not unfrequently in morning sleep just before awakening." This last remark is perfectly correct, as psychologists well know. But, at least in the case of the Mystics we are studying, nothing remains on awakening but the *feeling* of a glory that is no more, the *feeling* of having entered the Holy of Holies or the *feeling* of having encompassed the deepest philosophical mysteries. Nothing but the after-taste of glorious dreams remains when the intellect returns to its task.

The psychology of this illusion is not doubtful. Three things only are necessary to produce it: (1) The inhibition of the ideas which, in waking life, ordinarily oppose themselves to a too summary solution of the problem considered; (2) A feeling of ease and of power which may, in part, and perhaps in entirety, be due to the just mentioned inhibition; (3) An affective condition compounded of the tender feelings and of awe. The first and the second of these three conditions occur commonly in sleep, and the third is the unfailing accompaniment of the mystical trance and this for reasons now well understood.

4. The Mystic is at times favoured with auditory or even visual hallucinations. God speaks to him comforting or guiding words. Here we have no doubt an intellectual revelation. But if the moral guidance they receive constitutes the whole of the mystical revelation, little fuss need be made about it. God can glean no glory from having anything so completely common-place (in as far as its in-

tellectual aspect is concerned), so entirely within the possibilities of ordinary mortals, attributed to Him. As a matter of fact, their claim soars far above what could be granted on that score and this on account of the other non-intellectual experiences already mentioned. The conception of sub-conscious brain activities or of subliminal personalities may easily be turned into account in an explanation of guiding hallucinations.

The matter, then, stands thus for our Mystics: On the one hand, they are convinced that God reveals Himself to them, and, on the other, they find themselves unable to give definite verbal form to the supposed revelations. It is an easy step from this to the well-known conception of a mysterious faculty above reason to which the Revealer addresses Himself. Ruysbroeck, for instance, affirms in the *Spiegel der Ewigher Salicheit* that "when manifesting Himself the Father elevates the soul above the reason, in the Void without image. There the soul is simple, pure and without any content, and in this pure vacuity the Father brings forth His divine light. In this light neither the reason, nor the senses, nor observation have any share."

The belief in the mysterious, unutterable, *knowledge* obtained in ecstasy is shared not only by the Christian Mystics but more or less by all those to whom the name Mystic is applicable. It is one of the most deeply rooted of religious superstitions. Its fourfold root is, as I have tried to make it out:—

(1) The feeling of intimacy with God arising from the bond of love and from the disappearance of all desire or tendencies opposed to His will, as understood by the subject.

(2) The clearer understanding of God's will *after* the ecstasy, and the greater ability to perform it.

(3) The illusory intellectual illumination resulting from inhibitions in the ordinary antagonistic developments of associations, and from a feeling of ease, of power.

(4) The visual and, especially, the auditory hallucinations.

I pass now to the second claim which is at the same time the fundamental philosophical doctrine of Mysticism. The 'sleep of the powers' is, they tell us, a Union with God,¹ a synthesis of the individual spirit with the Absolute. This doctrinal statement is, of course, not a mere description of their bare experience; it is an interpretation. The question before us is, in what sense is this construction admissible,

¹ Pfleiderer somewhere defines Mysticism as the feeling of the union of the self with God..

or, if you prefer, why should they interpret thus a particular experience?

A full answer to this query would require a careful study of the mystic trance and an examination of the notion these people have of God. I shall for brevity leave the first part of the inquiry as it stood at the conclusion of the section on ecstasy and address myself directly to the second.

The Primordial Being is, according to Eckhart¹—the most speculative of our group of Mystics—the simplest substance. He calls it *Grund, Boden, Wurzel*. It is neither this, nor that, it is the Being without being—*das Wessen ohne Wesen*,—above all existence. Nothing may be predicated of Him because that to which a predicate may be attached is, in so far, determined and therefore is not yet God. As to God's creations, they have no real existence as individuals; they exist only in as far as they are integral parts of the *Grund*.

Boehme, Suzo and Tauler are, in a general way, in agreement with Eckhart. Boehme, for instance, uses the term *Urgrund* to name the Essence; he describes it as without form, absolutely indeterminate; it is unity and perfect identity; it is nothing; it is the abyss, the infinite.²

Now, the condition of a person in a mystical trance comes very near this negative definition of God. You remember that as the ecstasy deepens, the intellectually apprehended distinctions lose their sharpness of outline and finally disappear in an undifferentiated homogeneity. The multiplicity of existences is replaced by a Great All, simple, without attribute, mysterious, infinite. Why then should they not identify the trance state with God?

But we find ourselves here face to face with a monstrous absurdity. In itself the *completed* mystical trance is nothing (since in it the loss of consciousness is absolute). It is not even that substantial Nothing which in certain metaphysical jugglery is made into the Essence of Being, but a Nothing which has no existence. How comes it, then, that this state of non-existence is identified with God; through what magical art can enough reality be injected into it to make it synonymous with the fulness of the divinity? The entranced soul described by our Mystics as naked, absolutely empty, etc., is to them, nevertheless, not the equivalent of non-

¹ *Prædigten* and Stoeckl's *Philosophie des Mittelalters*.

² See a chapter on Boehme in Boutroux' *Études d'histoire de la Philosophie*.

It is impossible to say how far this conception of God is modelled upon the trance state itself.

existence. It is after all something more because of the following circumstances. When, self-consciousness having returned, the soul thinks of the preceding moments it becomes aware of a break in its life, of a void, of a nothing. This nothing is transformed into an existent something by the very fact that it has become an object of thought. It is henceforth the non-existent which nevertheless exists: the unconscious trance has come to enjoy that particular kind of reality which the mind gives to all its objects. Only—and here is the error of our Mystics—this nothing-thought-of is by no means the same as the absence of consciousness constituting the void.

But this is not yet the most potent reason accounting for the identification of a something of which nothing may be predicated, with the Divine Substance. An observant reader is struck, even in the most philosophical of the Mystics, with the anomalous presence in their definition of God of certain significant words. Eckhart, for instance, occasionally uses the expression Eternal Silence, to designate the *Grund*. He speaks of the Eternal Silence reposing in himself, and Boehme affirms that the *Urgrund* is all silence, repose, eternal peace; more than that, it is free from suffering; yet more than that, it is "the Eternal Good, eternal sweetness, eternal love".¹ Here is indeed a Nothing sufficiently well filled with positive qualities to make of it a legitimate object of desire! If, then, the Mystics desire union with God it is not, as might have seemed at first glance, because He is the All of which nothing can be affirmed; not in the least. Mystical philosophers are no fonder of emptiness than other men. If they woo the Absolute it is after all because in Him some of the deepest human tendencies find their satisfaction. For the Christian Mystics God is, philosophical utterances to the contrary, at least *peace bathed in love*. And what is that but a love trance? They assimilate God with the most blessed experience with which they are acquainted; they make Him in the image of the divine moments which precede and follow the loss of consciousness in ecstasy.

Allow me, in conclusion, to quote a short passage from the *Journal* of the Genevese Philosopher, from which appears clearly enough what 'possessing God' really meant to him. "For an hour past I have been the prey of a vague anxiety. I recognise my old enemy. . . . It is a sense of void and anguish; a sense of something lacking: what?

¹ Boutroux, *loc. cit.*

Love, peace,—God, perhaps. . . . Of all the hours of the day, in fine weather, the afternoon about three o'clock is the time, which to me is most difficult to bear. I never feel more strongly than I do then 'le vide effrayant de la vie'". The passage is dated 31st March, 4 P.M., i.e., about the hour of lowest vitality.¹

¹The utterances of St. Augustine upon the Divine Substance are quite interesting in this connexion. Récéjac has gathered them together in a note to page 188 of his *Fondements de la Connaissance Mystique*.

See also how Maine de Biran describes the presence of God. *Maine de Biran, sa Vie et ses Pensées*, by Ernest Naville, 1857, pp. 316, 324.