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Introduction

AN EVENT

In 1972, the most momentous event of my life took place on a perfect summer day at an ideal summer occasion, a weekend folk music/jazz festival on the beautiful park-island that forms the outer boundary of Toronto's harbor. I was assisting a newly befriended couple who crafted leather bags and were selling them from their pushcart, and had met through them that morning a female artist who, with her husband, have remained my closest friends since. It was early afternoon and, having finished a light lunch, I lay down alone on the grass under the shade of an old tree.

I was lying on my side and directly in my vision across a sunlit, mown field I perceived an attractive woman. Without moving my head or eyes, I focused on her, enjoying the vision with little or no thought, save a pleasant erotic feeling. At first she slowly filled my vision, as if I were floating toward her or her toward me. Then with increasing speed she came closer and closer, followed by trees, rocks, the field, then the entire universe, whirling in a giant vortex that funneled into me. As everything literally became one with me, I perceived a bright light inside rather than outside of me. This light can best be described as white, but it was all colors simultaneously, and it was bright beyond the brightest light imaginable. I, the universe, began to fly faster and faster toward this light. At that moment, I comprehended that I had to make an instantaneous decision: I could enter the light into which I would merge and be gone or stop and end the experience. Somehow, I recognized what was happening; I sped into the light and dissolved in an immense flood tide of joy.

Later—it could have been a quarter of an hour or an hour or more—I regained awareness. At first I was but aware of a blissful nothingness; that is,

the first awareness was simply of being aware while awash in the afterglow of bliss. Then there was an awareness of a somethingness, which I began to perceive as composed of things: sensations of sights and sounds. Slowly these components took on specific qualities, took on names and meanings. The world was again around me; there was an “I” that was again in a remembered world. But it was not the same “I” as before. It was an “I” that knew with absolute certitude that the state of being an “I” was less true than the state of being not “I,” that the only reality is a blissful, utterly undifferentiated nothingness in which there is no “I.”

As soon as I was again, that is, existing as a self-conscious, distinct entity, still not having moved, my readings of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Daodejing*, and of various Chan Buddhist texts came to the forefront of my consciousness. I realized I had just experienced the primordial nothingness becoming a oneness; the oneness distinguished into a twoness; the twoness becoming the myriad things. I truly understood *ziran* (spontaneity/nature), for I had just recreated myself and the world around me. Death could never again be a mystery, for I had experienced not-being. From the second perspective, I had just experienced *wuxin* (no-mind) or *śūnyatā* (emptiness). Echoes of Meister Eckhart and the extant writings of other well-known mystics, unbidden, reverberated in my head.

As I begin the initial chapter of this book, this is the first time I have ever put this memory into writing. But this memory is different from all other memories that I have, save the few related ones, for it always remained far more than a vivid memory, or nonmemory to be precise. The experience is perpetually alive for me as if it has just happened.

Soon after, I began to reflect on the factors of my life that, if they did not generate the experience, at least created the circumstances that allowed for it to happen. This was important to know, if the experience were to be repeated. And after that experience, there was none other worth repeating.

Indeed, my circumstances were unusual. I had moved to Toronto from a small southern Indiana city a month previous to take up a new university post. I had gone from an area where I was a despised minority—in several ways—to what is still considered one of the finest and most metropolitan cities in the world. I had left behind a place into which I could not fit, a dead marriage, and a deadening scholarly direction for a vibrant artistic world, new social opportunities, and a return to the only scholarly direction that excited me—religious studies. I was physically fit, taking up again in Toronto *kendo* and *iaido* (Japanese swordsmanship of two types) in

which I had not been able to engage since leaving Kyoto years before. I had returned to a simple semivegetarian diet. I had no emotional entanglements. I had not yet begun to teach or do research in my new intellectual direction. I had just bought a small island with a one-room cabin a few hours north of Toronto that was to remain my home for the next sixteen years and was but awaiting the paperwork to be completed so I could move in. It was a still point in a life.

Perhaps a pleasant, positive, vacuous life is conducive to an experience of the void. After all, this is the environment that many Buddhist and Christian contemplative monasteries seek to create. For myself, I hoped to eventually remarry and was looking forward to the challenges of creative teaching and research, as well as an active academic career, all of which would inevitably engender frustration and other negative factors, along with positive ones. Although I knew that this experience was the only utterly meaningful (or meaningless) experience of my life, and I would certainly welcome absolute joy were it to occur again, I would not reorder my life to encourage its reoccurrence. I chose to plunge back into the world of illusion; to have had the experience once is sufficient for a lifetime.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE "EVENT"

A perusal of similar self-reports (see chapter 2) allows a listing of common features of the previously described event, a list compatible with similar listings by other sympathetic scholars. These features in turn can be utilized to describe an experience that can be named. The common characteristics include the following:

- I. Sequence of events:
 - A. Person prior to experience, either
 1. still
 2. or moving in routinized movements/tasks that do not require conscious attention
 - B. Feeling of merging/unity in several modes:
 1. feeling of slow to rapid expansion and joining with all
 2. or feeling of slow to rapid drawing of everything into oneself
 - a. difference may be one of explanation rather than experiential

- C. Feeling of merging with light (common but not essential) with following usual characteristics:
 1. light either comes down to one or one rises to it
 2. light is deemed colorless or white
 3. light is intensely bright but not painful or uncomfortable
 4. there is full awareness that this is not physical light
 5. merging with light, at first slow, becoming rapid
 - D. Self disappears with full merging/unity with all and/or light;
 1. *complete disappearance of self primary characteristic of experience*
 - E. Awareness of being able to stop sequence before self disappears;
 1. hence, loss of self voluntary:
 - a. experience understood to be highly positive and desirable
 - b. events may or may not be interpreted prior to loss of self
 - F. Slow, becoming rapid, reawareness after disappearance of self, usually in following order:
 1. reawareness of regaining of self
 2. reawareness of end of unity
 3. reawareness of distinction of things
 - G. Interpretation of events immediately preceding experience
 1. tends to be based on previously learned/enculturated understandings
 2. and tends to reinforce these understandings
 - H. Understanding that self disappeared due to following:
 1. memory of events just prior to experience
 2. and consciousness of regaining awareness from state of lack of awareness
- II. Effects of experience are universally as follows:
- A. An understanding that what was experienced was more real/important than any prior experience
 - B. An understanding that what was experienced either
 1. brings into question all that was known before
 2. or confirms theological or metaphysical/epistemological understandings

III. The experience lacks the following effects:

- A. there is no *necessary* change in personality or behavior
- B. the majority of those who have the experience do not communicate it to others, at least immediately
 - 1. hence, the experience does not usually lead to religious leadership and so forth
- C. the experience is not necessarily understood as religious or spiritual but it is understood as utterly profound

A NAME FOR THE EXPERIENCE

The experience discussed in this study has been termed by an anthropologist as the “zero-experience” and by some psychologists as the “void-experience.” Both descriptive names are meaningful to those who have some understanding of the experience, but can be confusing to those unaware of it. A more direct term specific to the experience would be advantageous.

The Greek word *mustikos* and the Latin word *mysticus*, from which the English word “mystic” is derived, designate a person initiated into the Hellenistic (the generalized Greek-speaking culture prevalent among the educated throughout the eastern Mediterranean area from nineteen to twenty-three hundred years ago) esoteric religious cults into which most of the educated of the time were initiated. These initiations, although never directly revealed, suggest that the initiates had visions of the relevant deity after ingesting psychoactive substances (see Wasson et al.; Merkur, *The Mystery*), which is not the ecstasy previously delineated.

In contemporary popular parlance, the word “mystic” is used in manifold ways; for example, some large North American cities have an annual “Mystics and Seers Fair,” or an equivalent, at an exhibition hall. Commercial ventures designed to part gullible individuals from their money are not the subject of this study either. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* provides a more specific contemporary definition of “mystic.” As a noun, the word is given the following meanings: “a person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain unity or identity with or absorption into the Deity or the ultimate reality, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the understanding.”

Clearly, the modern meanings of “mystic” are rather different from their Hellenistic precursors. Focusing on the first aspect of the *Oxford* definition, I

have termed the above described event as the “mystic experience,” that is, that experience, as described in detail and outlined either, which mystics have or seek to have, regardless of method or lack of one. Avoiding the more all-encompassing term, “mysticism,” this book is about the *mystic experience*.

THE MYSTIC EXPERIENCE IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Ever since I have been teaching university courses on ecstatic religious experience, I have been approached by students who have had such experiences, particularly the mystic experience. (There are nuances to the experience that make it quite clear to one who has had the experience whether an experience being described is, indeed, the mystic experience.) At least 10 percent of students who have taken my course, “Mysticism,” over the last two decades have had the experience, although it must be noted that the very nature of the course is to a degree self-selecting. Hence, it has become clear to me that such an experience is far from unusual. It has been argued that human beings by their very nature seek ecstatic experience—a viewpoint with which I am sympathetic—and everyone has ecstatic experiences, although they may not recognize or may deny them. Although an experience of the kind previously described is not universal to all humans, all humans do have nonordinary consciousness experiences, which, of course, include dreams. Chapter 2 will provide a number of self-descriptions of the mystic experience.

Some of these descriptions will be from major figures in religious traditions, some from the literature, and some from nonpublished self-reports. Although the mystic experience is universally acknowledged as ineffable, as with my own experience, descriptions of the experiences immediately preceding and following the mystic experience are available. The material in chapter 2 will focus on descriptions rather than interpretations, or, where feasible, will attempt to extract description from interpretation.

With a very few exceptions, the voluminous literature concerning the mystic experience renders its understanding extremely difficult. One problem is the tendency to conflate all ecstatic religious experiences under the rubric of “mysticism.” The Greek word *musterion* and the Latin word *mysterium* specifically refer to the secret initiation rituals of the Hellenistic cults mentioned earlier. Although over the centuries perhaps hundreds of thousands of individuals were initiated into these cults, and many were initiated into several, the experiences were so profound that not a single description of any of these secret rituals has come down to us.

In contrast, nowadays, “mysticism” has come to mean simply anything that is mysterious (which also derives from the Greek and Latin words), particularly any mode of nonordinary mental functioning, as well as anything considered strange or unusual. Hence, the experience of no-self is lumped together with shamanistic and mediumistic (spirit possession) experiences, visions, lucid dreaming, prophecy, and the many modes of unitive experiences. In the contemporary understanding, legendary locales, such as Atlantis, and alien abduction and related phenomena are also subsumed under the term “mysticism.” The many types of ecstatic religious experiences will be discussed, delineated, and compared in chapter 3.

Since the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, nonconscious modes of thinking, as well as any thoughts derived from religious experiences, have been disparaged. Deemed irrational, such forms of mental behavior are to be avoided by all right-thinking persons. Yet most major breakthroughs in the sciences are due, as in the creative arts, to inspiration, that is subconscious mental processing. As humans, it is most unlikely that we have changed in the last several hundred years. Rather, what we have done in Western European culture (the Enlightenment did not strongly influence Eastern European culture, given Eastern Orthodoxy’s stress on ecstatic religious experiences) is reduce what had been a variety of useful mental modes of functioning to a single acceptable one, that is, conscious reasoning. Accordingly, we have sharply curtailed culturally accepted mental behaviors, including several considered important, if not essential, in virtually all other cultures. Given the nature of the previously described experience, the Enlightenment could be understood as indicating the opposite, in that it denies the “light,” the focus of the original meaning of “enlightenment,” deriving from being “enlightened”: one who receives or experiences the “light.”

The contemporary manifestation of the Enlightenment’s discomfort with nonordinary consciousness is found in most Western philosophical analyses of the experience under discussion. Many contemporary philosophers of religion have taken the position that an ineffable (indescribable) experience, that is, the mystic experience, is impossible, since we think in words, and a human experience that cannot be readily discussed could not happen. Moreover, all experiences whatsoever are culturally mediated; therefore, a universal human experience is also impossible. According to this line of reasoning, no one has had the mystic experience, and I and all others who claim to have had such an experience are either liars or deluded. Of course, for those who have had such an experience, this intellectual position is simply ridiculous. It is the equivalent of someone who is congenitally blind

denying the existence of color. One can feel sorry for such an individual's limited experience, but how can one use that limited experience to determine that one's own experience never took place or is false? The history of studies of the experience will be the subject of chapter 4.

When I was an undergraduate psychology major in the late 1950s at the University of Chicago, I participated, in a most minor way, in the initial experiments on dream research. This research led to the realization of the commonality and universality of nonordinary mental states and decades of research by psychologists and neurologists on the workings of the brain in these regards. More recently, the term "neuroscience" has come into common parlance, indicating acceptance of mental functioning as neurophysiologically derived. Neuroscientists do not usually have a background in comparative religion and most of the interpretations in this regard to date have reflected either a confused understanding of ecstatic religious experiences or a tendency to posit Christian theological dogma as a neurophysiological reality. Chapter 4 will also explore the relevance of contemporary brain research, as well as research on near-death experiences, which tend to incorporate many features of the mystic experience.

The mystic experience is found in all religious traditions and in some is considered central to the religion, while in others, attempts are made to limit the experience to those within particular institutions because the experience is understood to threaten religious hierarchies. Chapters 5 and 6 will explore how a number of different traditions have interpreted and otherwise dealt with the experience.

The methodologies of chapters 5 and 6 will be that of ethnohermeneutics, the study of significance and meaning central to cultures, and religio-ecology, the analysis of religious phenomena with regard to all of the factors that impinge on a culture: inter and intracultural social and political relations, economic and technological development, geography, climate, and so forth. One of the fascinating aspects of the mystic experience within culture is the many ways in which the experience has been interpreted and understood. At times the understanding is so removed from the actual experience that it may actually be contrary to the experience itself. We will find not only theological interpretations but political ones as well; subsets of large religious traditions may take very different, if not opposite, attitudes toward the experience.

All of these studies will be brought together in chapter 7. In the concluding chapter, the interrelationships between different types of ecstatic experiences, as well as the history of the mystic experience in culture in

general will be discussed. At the end, suggestions will be made regarding ways of understanding and relating oneself to the mystic experience.

A CAUTION TO READERS

As any human being, I can best understand experiences that I myself have experienced. Second best understood are the experiences of those whom I personally know and trust and who have shared their memories and realizations with me. Yet there is a tendency in the academic world to disparage self-referencing by scholars, particularly with regard to religious experience.

Scholarly objectivity is often understood to require distance from the studied topic. But does this make any sense? Why would an analysis of the mystic experience by someone who admittedly not only does not understand it but is doubtful about its actuality be more reliable than an analysis by someone who does know the experience? We do not expect scholars of the visual arts to be blind or of music to be deaf; indeed, we assume that a scholar of art enjoys the subject. I suggest there is a bias remaining from the Enlightenment in this regard, for it is only religious experience and no other that is handicapped by expectations of studies to be from those with no such experiences.

The first recognized Western scholar to openly describe and discuss his own experiences is Aghananda Bharati (see chapter 4). His example allowed others to come out of the closet. In previous publications, stimulated by Bharati, I have but hinted at my own experiences with regard to shamanism and the mystic experience. In this publication, for the first time, I fully follow Bharati's example and begin and end the study with reference to my own experiences. Only now, as I approach retirement, do I feel I have the scholarly maturity to deal with the subject in this manner. If self-reference, however, is found to be annoying, then this is not the book for you. Moreover, I am not neutral regarding these experiences. A reader of this manuscript suggested I read a recent study by Kripal, where I found an apt description of my own approach: "These are types of understandings that are at once passionate and critical, personal and objective, religious and academic"(5). Thus, the reader is forewarned.

Furthermore, as pointed out by reviewers of my previous books relating to the topic, my method of argument is to rely on anecdotal examples. Even a single case can at least indicate the possibility of some facet of the human experience or cultural understanding. The reader will find little in these pages

regarding the results of formal surveys or statistical analyses, exceedingly few of which are highly useful given that the subject matter is found in all the world's cultures and languages. Those who must base their recognition of truth on numbers will not be happy with this study.

Finally in these regards, ethnohermeneutics demands analyses that are as free from cultural biases as is consciously possible. Hence, in these studies I posit no reality beyond the experience analyzed itself, an experience understood to be a human one. In the comparative analysis of cultural interpretations, a variety of theological and nontheological understandings will be discussed. None will be considered more valid than any other, as no culture will be considered superior to any other. For those who insist that only a particular culture's truth, their own, is valid, again, this is not a book that will please you.

This work is designed for those who wish to gain an understanding of ecstatic religious experiences, particularly the mystic experience, in a variety of cultural traditions and the many ways in which they are understood. Moreover, this work does not go beyond such understandings. Unlike many popular books on ecstatic religious experiences, this is not a work of fiction.