

MYSTIC EXPERIENCE AND ITS COMMUNICABILITY

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Mysticism has two aspects. It is a special mode of cognition as well as a characteristic style of life. As a cognitive and personal experience of the Ultimate Reality it irresistibly generates a sentiment of affinity between various mystics, in particular, and among all human beings, in general, as the 'Ultimate Reality', despite the diversity of names by which we may choose to call it, must necessarily be the same for everyone. It is due to this magnanimity and cosmopolitanism inherent in its character that mysticism (or the mystical aspect of religion) has been a very popular reference with those who raise and positively answer the question: 'Is universal religion possible?' It is a patent and well-recognised fact that a mystic belonging to one particular religion would attract to his circle all kinds of people irrespective of their religions, casts and creeds.

What is mystic experience? Various marks of this experience have been enumerated by speculative mystics and philosophers of religion. The most prominent among these marks has invariably been its incommunicability. This experience, it is emphasized, is highly personal, private and subjective so that when the experient takes upon himself to describe it his language has to be, in the last analysis, monologic and entirely ineffable. The claim sometimes amounts to the declaration that it does not have any cognitive

content at all which may possibly be conveyed to others. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a well-known naturalist of the 19th century Indo-Pakistan sub-continent makes a very bold statement of this point of view in his essay entitled *Mukashafah*¹. He writes that the apparently confident position of various gnostics in regard to their pronouncements that they have seen something which is not open to ordinary observation or that they have known the secrets of creation or of heaven and hell or that they have identified themselves with one of the attributes of God is in every case the figments of their imagination and the result of their infatuation with, and a sustained attention to, what they suppose to have discovered. These experiences have no ontological significance whatsoever. Even the prophets, he says, are not an exception to this. Moses, who thought he heard God speaking to him, was simply working up his own imagination, an idea in his mind which he allowed to develop and mature in a particular direction. Mi'raj, the ascension of the Holy Prophet (peace be on him), which is generally considered to be the zenith of direct contact with God and of spiritual growth and expansion which human frailty is capable of attaining, was reduced by Sayyid Ahmad to the status of just an experience in dream. Similarly, beatific vision on which Ghazali and others laid so much emphasis as the Ideal *par excellence* of the moral agent is for him nothing but the reflection of the inner experience of the 'seer' and a projection of his own self². In western thought, Bertrand Russell, an indefatigable critic of religion, has extolled mysticism and mystic experience but has divested it of all cognitive content. The positive contribution of mysticism, he says in one of his essays, lies simply in a fine and noble emotional attitude which it lends to the truths already established on scientific grounds. Essentially, it is little more than a certain intensity and depth of feeling in regard to what is believed about the universe³. Now if one holds on to such a point of view, that would evidently mean reducing to hypocrisy and dissimulation the entire mystic literature of all religions and of all times which has invariably reported awareness of God, a living experiential knowledge of His presence,

and which has always claimed irrefutability for the reports of the mystics.

The mystic experience is, of course, not objective in the sense that its object is out there in space and time: no one will be so foolish as to believe this. But it is not subjective either. To begin with, if we ask the question 'what constitutes my subjectivity?' or 'what is the basis of my personal identity?', a layman's answer roughly would be that it comprises a particular set of ideas and attitudes, certain hereditary influences, a temperament, a particular class of habits and so on --- in fact, everything that I as an inhabitant of the spatio-temporal world have 'acquired' and 'learnt', in a very general sense of these terms. This is how my self has been made to be. However, this is not the essential 'I', the 'appreciative self, as Iqbal terms it⁴. The essence of I-ness would stand discovered only when the entire empirical mental content is suppressed and when everything personal and private to me in the social context is held in abeyance. Once again borrowing a phrase from Iqbal, this amounts to 'having contact with the roots of one's own being'. In the Quranic terminology it is 'the deliverance of one's self from the bounds of space and time', a kind of 'awareness of awareness' with its ordinary acquired content completely withdrawn. This is the transsubjective level of my existence in as much as its attainment qualifies me for my contact with the Supreme Being.

David Hume, we are reminded here, once made an earnest search for 'I' but failed to find it because the hold of efficient self was too strong on him. His naturalism and sensory empiricism tied him down to phenomenal existence only. "When I enter most intimately into what I call myself", he wrote, 'I always stumble on some particular perception, i.e. some particular mental content or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time without a perception'. He thus concluded that there is no such thing as self or ego and that a

person is "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions"⁵. What Hume is denying here is 'self' considered as an individual substance. Hume's supposition is that all knowledge must come through sense experience alone and sense experience being a temporal affair and thus reducible to 'states in succession' left no scope for a permanent, non-successional being. Hume emphasised the passivity of perception. He could not rise to the stage of, what we have called, 'awareness of awareness' and hence could not confirm the self which he had mistakenly reduced to sense-content.

It is verily against a context of this kind that we can understand the true significance of the 'renunciation of the world' to which even a genuine mystic like Ghazali gave great importance rejecting an exclusive attachment with the world as the source of all evils. In a mundane frame of reference this may be a negative virtue only. But it is of immense positive value for the attainment of the mystic experience. When a mystic starts shedding off everything worldly and, correspondingly, inculcates in himself 'a feeling of absolute dependence', he thereby develops 'a sense and taste for the Infinite'. He thus gradually approaches the ideal of pure consciousness or pure ego—an ego without any characterisations, without any qualifications, neither here nor there nor nowhere and still everywhere. The emptier, the purer, thus he is, the nearer is he to God, 'the Universal self *par excellence*', 'the Great I am'. This prepares him for the Supreme Encounter which can take place only when a person realizes the Divine within himself and like Him dispenses with all determiners. "The adherents of mystical religions feel compelled to empty their psychical life...in order to achieve by personality-denying techniques an emptiness that will prepare the way for the incoming of the divine"⁶. The Prophet of Islam on the occasion of 'the Ascension' left off the world in a big way and so he was, according to the Quran, 'in the highest part of the horizon. Then he drew near, drew nearer yet, so he was the measure of two bows or closer still'. And when God, according to a popular hadith,

asked him as to what gift he had brought to present to Him, he said: 'humility'. This virtue understood in its absoluteness symbolizes emptiness, nothingness pure and simple.

Mystic experience, thus, is neither purely subjective nor purely objective. It is trans-subjective. It is subjective in a very special sense of the term, that is, it eventualizes when one realizes one's appreciative self, the self that is eternal and lives in pure duration.

The objectivity/subjectivity of religious experience and its cognitive character have been referred to here in some detail as these are relevant to the communicability/incommunicability of this experience as will be shown in the sequel. To begin with, there is no validity in the argument that because religious experience is subjective—which, in a way, it of course is — it does not have any objective content. Subjectivity of an experience cannot be the sufficient ground for denying the existence of its objective referent. This is because, in the last analysis, all experience is subjective. This we have learnt from the logic of Humean thinking. 'I cannot experience anything', W.T. Stace observes, 'except my own experience. I can see my red but I can never see yours. I can feel a pain in my leg. But I can never feel the pain in your leg. I can feel my emotion but not yours. Even if your anger infects me, so that I feel it in sympathy with you, it is yet, in so far as I feel it, my anger, not yours. I can never be you nor you, me. I cannot see through your eyes, nor you through mine. Even if you can telepathically transfer a mental state, say an image, from your mind to mine, yet when I become aware of it, it is then my image and not yours. Even if, as some think, I can directly perceive your mind without having to infer it from your body, still this perception of your mind will then be to me my perception, my experience.'⁷

However, in spite of this subjectivity of all experience, how is it that I do successfully communicate some of my experiences while others remain private with me or, at least, very difficult to communicate to others. I deliver a lecture on the nature of electrons

and protons, on the phenomenon of headache or on the various qualities of a table that is lying here in my room and, in all these cases, I am understood by the audience more or less. But, on the other hand, one is generally unable to comprehend the terminology employed by a mystic when he describes his characteristic experiences. If the account of Stace given above is accepted in letter and spirit, then how to differentiate between these two sorts of experiences. How are we able to communicate some of our subjective experiences and not others? The conditions which make mutual understanding possible are, Professor K.G. Sadiq significantly observes in one of his articles,⁸ "partly intra-linguistic and partly extra-linguistic". Elaborating the term 'intra-linguistic', he says that "agreement must be reached about the rules, according to which we use the words of our language i.e. we must speak the same "language". The extra-linguistic condition he defines as follows: "We should be so constituted that we can speak the same language and this depends partly on the fact that our bodies are similarly constituted and have the same sense organs and reactions to stimuli and partly on the fact that our subjective experiences and our bodily experiences regularly go together". The first condition is evidently fulfilled in our normal every-day verbal communications. As to the second, i.e. the extra-linguistic condition, Prof. Sadiq takes the example of telling someone what it means to feel cold: "I can teach the meaning of feeling cold to a person by taking him into a cold room and telling him that he is feeling cold...the bodily expression of cold, shivering, contraction of blood vessels, paleness etc. go with the subjective experience of feeling cold. It is this correlation between bodily expression and the subjective experience which makes it possible to learn the words which describe experience".

Now, do the experiences of the mystics fulfil intra-linguistic and extra-linguistic conditions as defined above. My answer is 'yes'. That is why mystics have been reported to have understood each

other's language. There is ample evidence of this fact in the mystic literature of all religions of all times.

Thus it is natural to conclude that the language of the sufis is not wholly monologic. However, it is undeniably a technical language and can be understood by technical people only i.e. by the sufis alone. To say that a non-mystic is at all capable of understanding the language which describes a mystic experience would be to admit, in the final analysis, that this experience can be communicated without extra-linguistic conditions being fulfilled. This would be like explaining to a blind man as to how does a picture lying by his side look like. "You can no more explain the knowledge revealed by a mystical experience to a person who has not gone through the experience", says Ibn Arabi, 'than you can explain what red means to a blind man'.¹⁰ Professor Glassgow is right when he says that if mystics "were supplied with a greater number of words or a larger vocabulary, (they) could no longer think of the experience as ineffable and incommunicable for it could be described and the language could be understood by those who have had a similar experience and who have troubled to learn the language".¹¹ It is, however, not so much a matter of learning the language or increasing the vocabulary as it is a matter of sharing the experience of which the language, being a system of symbols, is a part and parcel and from which it almost irresistibly grows. On this score, thoroughly unjustified are the observations made by Freud who is of the opinion that it is not binding on all to acknowledge the truthfulness of mystic experience because of the fact that it is available only to a minority of mankind. "If the truth of religious doctrines' he says, 'is dependent on an inner experience which bears witness to that truth, what is one to make of the many people who do not have that rare experience? One may expect all men to use the gift of reason that they possess but one cannot set up an obligation that shall apply to all on a basis that only exists for quite a few. Of what significance is it for other people that you have won from a state of ecstasy which has deeply moved you to an imperturbable

conviction of the real truth of the doctriⁿess of religion".¹² It may incidentally be pointed out here that the characteristic of availability to only a selected few is not peculiar to the mystic experience. Being dependent on an exceptional sensitivity and aptitude and a sharp vision, all higher forms of knowlege and experience like aesthetic, moral and even scientific are attainable at first hand only by a very small number of technical experts who are, as if, specially made for the attainments that they acquire in their respective spheres. The majority have only a second-hand information regarding them.

Further, we can point out that, because of the fact that the language of a mystic describes directly or indirectly a Being Who is absolutely unique, Who has no parallels, no associates and no likeness unto Him, it has to be highly symbolic in character. No doubt all language is symbolic but there is a difference of degrees. The words of our conventional language have many shades of meaning which are variously generated in accordance with the nature of the object of our description. We talk of 'solid' stones as well as of 'solid' personalities, of 'bright' sun as well as of 'bright' intelligence. A person who does not know by himself as to what is meant by personality or intelligence would picture to 'himself' 'solid personality' and 'bright intelligence' very awkwardly and of course in a way very much different from the way in which we normally understand these phrases. Similarly a mystic describes his experience of supersensible realities in a language fashioned after our sensible existence. This gives the impression that they should be understandable even by the non-mystics. This is, however, not at all the case. Mystic experience--because it is an experience of a personal encounter with God and not simply the observaation of an it--makes a difference with the experient himself so that he acquires a particular orientation of mind and a readiness to spiritualize and to understand symbols in a 'rarefied' form. The laymen and the scientists, on the other hand, have an altogether different orientation of mind. They have rather a readiness to interpret symbols in a concretised form. With such a difference in their

respective approaches, how can they have a mutual intercourse. Unless two persons are more or less on the same mental level, there can be little communication between them.

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