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Jung in Spirit

Cari Frus

“No definition could be both meaningful and sufficiently comprehensive to include all experiences that, at some point or other, have been described as ‘mystical’” (Eliade, 1987). This statement opens the section which discusses mysticism in the *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Despite this obvious ambiguity which surrounds the definition of mysticism, many men and women in many different religions and disciplines have been recognized as important figures in this area, including Gautama Buddha, Hildegard of Bingen, Abraham Heschel, and Dante Alighieri. But what about Carl Gustav Jung? Would he be considered a mystic? Are his visions and theories related in any way to the subject of mysticism? Certainly, Jung and his beliefs about the psyche have been viewed as mystical (and therefore impractical) by many people in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis (Schultz, 1992). While this opinion may be sufficient for these particular sciences to brand Jung as a mystic, however, it may not necessarily be true in the study of mysticism from a religious perspective. To examine the question of Jung’s place in the mystical tradition, the definitions and characteristics of mysticism must be explained and compared to Jung’s visions and experiences.

Merely defining the term “mysticism” in general is no easy task. No one definition has been applied consistently throughout the study of religion and mysticism (Harkness, 1973). Indeed, the personal, experiential aspect Eliade associates with mysticism did not even evolve until around the fifteenth century (1987). Prior to this time, mysticism was not regarded as private or subjective but was seen as the spiritual meaning (*mustikos*) of the Scriptures that Christians discovered through revelation. Even when these more personal, private characteristics were added to the definition of mysticism from the Greek *muein* (“to remain silent”), it was still used in reference to the Christian faith. Recently, though, the

word “mysticism” has been applied universally to all of the major faiths, with each interpreting the precise meaning in accordance to its own belief systems (Eliade, 1987).

This etymological background has yet, however, to provide a solid definition of “mysticism.” Georgia Harkness begins her definition of mysticism by explaining what it is not (1973). It is not the occult or some vague sense of mystery and magic. Evelyn Underhill agrees, saying that too often the separate paths of mysticism and magic have been seen as one phenomenon (1962). Quoting from Butler’s *Western Mysticism*, Harkness states that “mysticism” has mistakenly been applied to theosophy, spiritualism, witchcraft, revelations and even “mere dreaminess” (1973, p. 19). All of these activities do not constitute mysticism and reveal commonly held misconceptions. These false beliefs exist, Harkness feels, because “there is no single, universally agreed upon definition [sic]” (1973, p. 19).

To continue, however, some operational definition for “mysticism” must be assigned. In order to determine the best possible definition, it is essential to examine some of the different meanings which have been proposed for “mysticism.” For this purpose, we will look at the definitions used by Underhill, Harkness, and Fox. Underhill defines mysticism saying:

It is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality; for no personal gain, to satisfy no transcendental curiosity, to obtain no other-worldly joys, but purely from an instinct of love. (1962, p. 71)

For Underhill, the union with the Absolute is most important. This union is possible for everyone. She feels that mysticism is active (in the sense that the whole self is involved) and that its aims are transcendental. Mysticism is the formation of a conscious rela-

tionship with the Absolute (Underhill, 1962).

Harkness, by contrast, uses a definition provided by Inge from *Christian Mysticism* which states that mysticism “means communion with God, that is to say with a Being conceived as the supreme and ultimate reality” (1973). While Harkness and Underhill agree that the relationship between the Absolute and the individual is crucial, Harkness thinks that this meeting is a *communion* where both parties remain separate, rather than a *union* where they merge. She also questions whether mysticism implies the negation or affirmation of the self. Does mysticism mean that a person must strip themselves of their self-hood in order to attain a communion with the Absolute? Harkness concluded that it was a combination of the two positions which best answered this question. Mysticism does mean to deny certain aspects of self, yet through communion these are compensated for by the joys of relating to the Ultimate (1973).

Fox, in *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, explains the difficulty in presenting a single definition of mysticism. Since mysticism is a right-brain experience, it cannot be defined by the analytical, critical evaluation of the language-centered left brain (1988). Instead, he provides what he calls “twenty-one running, working, experiential definitions of mysticism” which, by “eliciting” the mystic in everyone, help to outline the many aspects of this tradition (Fox, 1988, p. 47). Together these twenty-one aspects form a unity of meaning. They are: experience, nondualism, compassion, connection making, radical amazement, affirmation of the world as a whole, right-brain orientation, being self-critical, knowledge from the heart, a return to the source, feminism, panentheism, the image of birth, silence, nothingness, darkness, childlike playfulness, psychic justice, being-with-being, an exploration of the individual’s true self, and finally, global ecumenism (Fox, 1988, pp. 48-66).

Fox feels that by applying this cumulative definition to claims of mysticism (from cults and the like), the trap of pseudo-mysticism can be avoided. Movements based on pseudo-mysticism include fundamentalism, asceticism, and psychologism, or the reduction of spiritual experiences into psychological categories and phenomena. He does not believe that mysticism implies any form of asceticism which would lead to an “initiation” into the secretive mysteries of the universe. For Fox the aspects of mysticism and, indeed, the essence of it, lie within every person when they awaken to the splendor and wonder of the universe. Further, he quotes Meister Eckhart and says that in mysticism “all things become for you nothing but God” (Fox, 1988, p. 66). Again, it is a direct interaction with the divine which illustrates mysticism.

At this point it is also important to note and examine the proposed characteristics of mysticism. These characteristics can be defined as the “side effects” or common traits an individual experiences after an encounter with mysticism (encounter with the Absolute) or a “mystical experience.” Both Eliade and Harkness refer to William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. For James, mysticism is marked by its ineffability, its noetic quality, its transiency (which Eliade calls rhythm), and its passivity. The ineffable characteristic of a mystical experience helps to explain why it is difficult to find an accurate definition for mysticism itself. How can one describe an experience for which there are no words?

The noetic quality also figures into the challenge of defining mysticism. Because such experiences occur deep within a person, they cannot be verified and calculated but can only be seen intuitively (Eliade, 1987; Harkness, 1973). Harkness adds to this list of characteristics the joy one feels after a mystical experience, though she feels it is important to recognize vast variations exist across people and situations (1973). Additionally, Eliade includes

integration since the “mystical consciousness” can overcome the initial separation from the Absolute reality (1987).

Underhill sees five major characteristics of mysticism and the mystical experience. First, true mysticism is practical in nature and calls the individual to the most intense, “difficult expression” of life which is possible to experience and is demonstrated through action. Mysticism is also seen as a purely spiritual activity; if a person is truly in union with the Absolute, then nothing else is needed. Materialistic needs and emotional desires have no place in this setting. Next, Underhill states, “the business and method of Mysticism is Love” (1962, p. 85); without love there would be no ends or means for mysticism and only visionaries would exist instead of the great mystics like St. John of the Cross. The psychological experience of mysticism is likewise very significant. The soul passes through many states in its motion toward the Absolute. These stages can be seen in the writings of the mystics. Finally, Underhill asserts that mysticism is never “self-seeking” (1962). The true mystic attains the Absolute not through desire for supreme happiness, but only because their drive for perfect love will not allow them anything less (Underhill, 1962).

Fox, too, describes four characteristics of mysticism. These characteristics are the four paths of what he calls creation spirituality. They are the *via positiva* (dealing with the awe experienced in the interaction with creation), the *via negativa* (dealing with the darkness and letting go in mysticism), the *via creativa* (where people can co-create alongside the Absolute), and the *via transformativa* (which is the relief of suffering and celebration). In each of these characteristics, it is possible for the individual to find the divine (Fox, 1991). Fox also categorizes mysticism as unselfconscious and dialectical in nature, accepting “both/and” instead of “either/or” (Fox, 1988, p. 66). These experiences are character-

ized as “unitive” and are based on trust in the encounter with the Absolute as well. Finally, a sense of balance is very integral in mysticism (Fox, 1988).

Now that several different perspectives have been examined, how do the combination of these views provide a definition of mysticism? Most importantly, all of the authors place the greatest emphasis on the encounter with the divine, regardless of where or how it is found. According to Underhill it is through love that one meets the Absolute, while Fox says it is through awe at creation. This direct experience of the Absolute is the most basic component of a definition for mysticism. Both Harkness and Fox, and to a lesser extent Underhill, also indicate that a strong sense of “letting go” of an empirical perspective is important to mysticism, though none of these authors support the need for asceticism.

The surrender of a purely rational mindset to a more intuitive one would belong to this aspect of mysticism. Important to this “letting go” is the shedding of material desires until only the true self remains (although, the authors do not agree whether this is an prerequisite for or result of mysticism). The positive effects of the mystical experience, including awe, joy, and love, were also significant to all of the different authors’ perspectives. Healing can be seen as a “side effect” of mysticism as well (Fox, 1988; Harkness, 1973; Underhill, 1962).

Another common factor found in these definitions is the inclusion of all peoples in the experience of mysticism. Every culture recognizes that individuals exist in a special relationship with the Absolute. These similarities lead to a general, working definition of mysticism. Mysticism, then, is a personal encounter with the Absolute which is available to all people, entails letting go of (or at least balancing the needs of) rationality and prior perceptions, and results in both a sense of awe and a revelation of “true self.”

But how does Jung figure into this view of the mystical tradition? Before this question can be answered thoroughly, it is necessary to have a brief background into the life and work of Carl Gustav Jung. He was born in 1875 in Switzerland and was trained as a psychiatrist at the Psychiatric University Clinic of Burgholzli (Wehr, 1971). After breaking from his collaboration with Sigmund Freud, he taught as a professor for many years at various universities in Europe and the United States and also had a private practice. His greatest achievement was his theory of analytical psychology which dealt in great detail with the unconscious aspect of the human psyche (Wehr, 1971).

He wrote nearly twenty volumes and received many honorary doctorates. Though he was dedicated to his career as a psychiatrist, Jung had a life-long interest in religion and wrote several essays and books on the relation of psychology and religion, including *Answer to Job* and *Psychology and Religion* (Hanna, 1967). In fact, today Jung's influence is greater in the field of religion than in the areas of psychology and psychoanalysis (Schultz, 1992). Jung died in 1961 following the publication of his last book, *Approaching the Unconscious* (Wehr, 1971).

Two aspects of Jung and his life are crucial to understanding his place in the tradition of mysticism. They are Jung's own visions and experiences of the Absolute beginning from a very young age and the effect of his theory on the study of mysticism. Throughout his life, Jung credited many of his adult insights and works to the spiritual experiences of his youth (Wehr, 1971). From the time he was a boy attending school in Basel, Jung believed he was two different people, or two different "personalities," as he called it (Jung, 1973). The first was the "normal" individual who interacted with the environment and was interested in science. The second personality had visions and experiences of God and was interested in the

humanities (Wehr, 1971). He described some of these experiences in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:

Besides [this] world there existed another realm, like a temple in which anyone who entered was transformed and suddenly overpowered by a vision of the whole cosmos, so that he could only marvel and admire, forgetful of himself. Here nothing separated man from God; indeed, it was as though the human mind looked down upon Creation simultaneously with God.

(Jung, 1973, p. 45)

It was also this personality which realized that for Jung, “God was . . . one of the most certain and immediate of experiences” (Jung, 1973, p. 62). Beyond this realization came Jung’s belief that even the earth was a reality of God; he stated, “‘God,’ for me, was everything . . . ” (Wehr, 1971, p. 20). Jung also believed that he had little control over these visions; it was God who had led him to certain conclusions, and he was obedient in his passive acceptance of these experiences (Jung, 1973).

Jung found no solace from the church for the depression and distress his experiences caused him. Actually, he discovered that the more he dissociated himself from the doctrines of the church, the better he felt. Though his father was a pastor and Jung had been raised under the current theological beliefs, he felt that he had to abandon these convictions for the revelations which came to him through these visions (Jung, 1973). Jung thought that he no longer functioned in the world of humans when confronted with “crucial” matters, but instead was alone with God (Jung, 1973).

Another decisive revelation for Jung was his conclusion that it was God’s intention that sin existed in the world. Jung said that he struggled for days against this disclosure, afraid that he would be damned for such a realization. But after accepting it, he described a most intense feeling of bliss and illumination. He

directly experienced the grace of God and knew that sometimes God calls people to “renounce [their] own views and convictions in order to fulfill without reserve the command of God” (Jung, 1973, p. 40). Along with the acceptance of this experience came the understanding that there was also a darker side to God.

In fact, Jung felt that Christ was the revelation of the light side of God, while Satan was actually the dark aspect of God which was not included in most Christian definitions. The “Self,” a term he preferred to use for God, was the totality of the light and dark for one could not exist without the other (Hanna, 1967). Because the young Jung was troubled by these encounters with the Absolute, he did not speak of them until much later in his adult life when he finally wrote publicly about his second personality (Jung, 1973).

Though this second, spiritual personality retreated to the background when Jung decided to enter medicine, it remained the most important influence over his future decisions and theories. It was through the second personality that important dreams would come to Jung providing him with answers and insights into difficult problems (Jung, 1973). For example, one night in 1939, Jung awakened to find the figure of Christ on the Cross standing at the foot of his bed. He reported his reaction saying, “A vision as such is nothing unusual for me, for I frequently see extremely vivid hypnagogic images” (Jung, 1973, p. 210). As Jung interpreted it, this vision was an affirmation of his alchemical conception of Christ. He believed that such dreams (indeed all dreams) are not made or created by the dreamer, but come from “mana, from a daimon, a god, or the unconscious” (which in mythic terms he equated with God) (Jung, 1973, p. 336).

Then in 1944, Jung had what today would be called a “near-death experience.” In his unconscious state after a heart attack, he felt himself high in space and could see the earth far below him.

He saw a temple and approached the steps to the entrance. As he moved forward, he said:

Everything I aimed at or wished for or thought, the whole phantasmagoria of earthly existence, fell away or was stripped from me—an extremely painful process. Nevertheless, something remained. I consisted of my own history, and I felt with great certainty: this is what I am. There was no longer anything which I wanted or desired. (Jung, 1973, pp. 290-91)

Though Jung recovered and eventually regained consciousness, for the next few weeks he continued to have visions. These were the “most tremendous things” he would ever experience in his life; never did he feel that he could explain the “beauty and intensity of emotion during those visions” (Jung, 1973, p. 295). He continued his description of these events by stating that this occurrence “was not the product of imagination. The visions and experiences were utterly real” (Jung, 1973, p. 295). They were an experience of wholeness. With these visions and the ecstasy which followed in their course, Jung also said that the experience gave him an “affirmation of things as they are: an unconditional ‘yes’ to that which is. . . .” (Jung, 1973, p. 297).

Could these experiences, dreams, and visions be considered mystical in nature? Do they conform to the operational definition of mysticism? Some of Jung’s experiences would certainly be characterized as mystical. Both the quotes from his youth and from his near-death experience indicate the traits inherent in the mystical encounter. They dealt with a personal encounter with the Absolute, though in the vision from 1944 this was much more subliminal. From his statement that “nothing separated man from God,” he evidently experienced a union with God which Underhill would classify as mysticism. In addition, Jung’s affirmation that “God . . . was everything” coincides perfectly with Fox’s panenthe-

ism.

Meeting with the Absolute figured greatly in many of Jung's visions and experiences and was essential to his personal life and morality (Jung, 1973). His decisions were greatly influenced by, and sometimes even based on, what he underwent during these moments. All of his "spiritual" events were totally personal, to the extent that they even isolated him from his family and peers (Jung, 1973). The visions related specifically to him and his work only.

It is also evident that these visions required a "suspension of disbelief" from Jung's first, science-oriented personality. They all took place within his second, spiritual personality. He understood from his previous studies in parapsychology that some facets of the intuitive, inner life could not be reconciled to a purely empirical, rational outlook (Jung, 1973). Other aspects of the "letting go" (or the *via negativa*) of mysticism played a large and important role in his vision from 1944. He mentioned how everything was stripped away from him until only the bare essence of his self was left. This loss of materialism is important to the definition of mysticism; however, the event itself was obviously not an easy task (he called it "an extremely painful process") which recalls Underhill's assertion that mysticism is the most "difficult expression" of life. Jung was even willing to let go of his soul and face damnation when confronted with the vision of God's intentional creation of sin just so he could experience the direct encounter with the Absolute.

But these encounters with the Absolute did give Jung a sense of awe as well. Jung's direct, personal experience of God's grace filled him with extreme bliss. For weeks after his heart attack, Jung again was in a constant state of amazement from his visions. His attitude towards his life and his work was radically altered after his experience at the steps of the temple, and he was able to embrace

his self from a more integrated, positive perspective (like the *via transformativa*) (Jung, 1973). These events could also be considered as a typical mystical experience, because they were from Jung's own descriptions ineffable occurrences. He could not truly express the beauty and meaning of his visions. In addition to this characteristic, through all of Jung's encounters, the passivity of mysticism was apparent as well, since the events were not sought after on his own volition, but instead "came" to him from some other source.

While some of these visions may be considered the experience of true mysticism, many other of Jung's revelations were merely that—revelations. The dreams of his second personality do not always report any sort of mysticism. Though they were influential in his life and decisions, many were not mystical experiences. His vision of Christ at the foot of his bed, for instance, did not include any direct contact with the Absolute. Nor did he have any experience of the *via positiva* or *via negativa* in any part of this dream. However much they seem to transcend the normal conception of dreams or visions, these revelations which occurred throughout his life did not have the quality or characteristics of true mysticism. Claiming they were created by the "unconscious" or by what he calls "God" in a mythic sense is not enough to prove that his dreams were mystical rather than just "extremely vivid hypnagogic images."

Regardless of the non-mystical quality of these other dreams, however, Jung can still indeed be classified as a mystic. His visions may not have had the same ramifications as those of Meister Eckhart or Buddha, but some of them (though not all) were experiences of mysticism nonetheless. His three major revelations (the existence of another realm, God's intentional creation of sin, and his near-death experience), meet with the required qualifications of a mystical experience. They were all personal encounters with the

Absolute, since he did come into a direct relationship with God. Each encounter entailed letting go of prior attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs, which as he stated was not easy and separated him from other people. Jung was also very much aware of a sense of awe and bliss that is characteristic of mysticism. Finally, he believed that these encounters touched and revealed his true self in a manner which no other experience previously had (Jung, 1973). For these reasons, Jung definitely experienced mysticism and could himself be considered a mystic.

Placing Jung in the tradition of mystics, how would his remarks about religion impact on mysticism itself? From the outset it is necessary to realize that for the Jung, God's existence was certain; it was a psychic fact which had as much validity as scientific and historical facts (Hanna, 1967). He believed that many people shut themselves off from the experience of God. He mentioned that most of his patients who were middle-aged focused on issues which dealt with a religious outlook on life. It was Jung's assertion (which was based on a lifetime of psychiatric practice) that these people were best cured by accepting the irrational, mysterious experiences in life (Hanna, 1967). By trying to help his patients establish an awareness of God, it would seem that Jung was attempting "to open their minds" to receive mystical experiences. Jung approached these "spiritual problems" using his analytical psychology and theory about the unconscious (Hanna, 1967).

Jung divided the human psyche into three levels: the conscious, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious (Schultz, 1992). The first level includes all of the memories and sensations of which the individual is aware. The personal unconscious holds all of the memories and experiences which the person has forgotten but can still recall into the conscious level. Finally, the collective unconscious contains the whole of human experience

and everyone's psyche emerges from this communal base. Jung likened these levels to an iceberg, where the visible top of the iceberg is the conscious, the level which stands just below the surface is the personal unconscious, and the earth, or land, on which all icebergs are grounded is the collective unconscious (Schultz, 1992). Within the collective unconscious there exist archetypes which are patterns of experiences or behavior which have a profound influence on a person's personal development and inner awareness (Schultz, 1992).

For Jung dream analysis was the key technique in tapping into the events occurring in the unconscious. This technique becomes important to mysticism when one realizes the connection Jung made between God and the unconscious. Hanna quotes Jung as saying:

It is only through the psyche that we can establish that God acts upon us, but we are unable to distinguish whether these actions come from God or from the unconscious. We cannot tell whether God and the unconscious are two different entities. (1967, p. 29)

Jung believed that there was a definite, if indefinable, relationship between God and the unconscious. Because scientifically such statements required empirical proof, however, Jung could only go so far as to say that "God was an autonomous factor in the unconscious" (Hanna, 1967, p. 29). He did postulate, though, that within every individual's unconscious there existed an "archetypal predisposition toward the infinite"; this "archetype of wholeness," as Jung called it, would look beyond normal, conscious experience of the world to a greater, infinite power (Hanna, 1967, p. 22).

It was through dreams, then, that Jung believed the interplay between God and the unconscious became apparent. In dreams, Jung felt the archetype of wholeness produced symbols for, or asso-

ciated with, God. Jung called these symbols “God-images” (Hanna, 1967). Yet, simultaneously, “he who created this image [God-image], the one who is striving to bring wholeness . . . by means of the God-image is God himself, indefinable and imageless [sic]” (Hanna, 1967, p. 34). To elucidate, according to Jung, the interaction between God and the human unconscious (specifically, the archetype of wholeness) manifested itself as the God-image which can be found in dreams. For this reason, Jung said, “Dreams are the voice of the unknown . . .” and “the dream is the divine voice and messenger . . .” (Jung, 1938, p. 21).

Using Jung’s theories and beliefs, it is possible now to add dreams to the experience of mysticism. According to Jung’s technique of dream analysis, dreams can be interpreted as direct encounters with the Absolute. Both the Absolute (God) and the individual’s unconscious (personal as well as collective) contribute directly in the God-image. This type of experience fulfills the basic component of mysticism—a personal encounter with the Absolute. Further, because these encounters occur during dreams, the consciousness which deals with the rational, empirical world is “extinguished,” or let go (Jung, 1938, p. 31). Dreams, he said, are “uncontaminated by our superior wisdom and conscious planning” (Hanna, 1967, p. 24). Because Jung believed dreams were connected with the unconscious, which itself was the basis for a person’s psyche, he also felt that dreams were important in revealing an individual’s true self, another characteristic of mysticism (Gonzalez-Wippler, 1993).

All of these qualities Jung saw in dreams coincide with the definition and characteristics of mysticism. Though Jung did not consider himself a mystic, he has had an impact on mystics and mysticism; Matthew Fox, for example, quotes Jung throughout *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. Archetypes and dream analysis are

still popular today and can be found in many books which deal with mysticism. So while Jung may never have intended to deal specifically with mysticism, his work and life experiences have had a great impact in this field of inquiry.

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