

MYSTICISM AND MEDIATION

Jerry H. Gill

In his excellent essay in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*,¹ Steven Katz strikes a bold posture with regard to the epistemological implications of mysticism, and in so doing he raises a number of important issues. On the following pages I should like to explore several of these issues with an eye to shaping a more comprehensive understanding of religious knowing in general and of the role of mediation in particular. The notion of mediation has come to play an important part in my own theorizing about religious experience and truth², and I am grateful to Professor Katz for focusing certain issues in the way that he does.

I

Katz begins his essay with some general remarks about mystical experience and religious epistemology that seem to me to be extremely right-headed. He immediately goes beyond the shortsighted restrictions of various versions of “verificationism” and intellectualist reductionism which have plagued discussions of mysticism far too long. This done, Katz wastes no time in stating his most fundamental assumption, namely that “there are *no* pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty.”³

In some ways this statement raises the most important epistemological issue connected with mysticism. I must admit that I am strongly inclined, putting it mildly, to agree with Katz’ fundamental assumption. Over the past ten years or so my own work in religious epistemology has increasingly focused on the strategic significance of mediation, both in relation to the structure of experience and in relation to the patterns of knowledge. The contextual and relational character of human existence so shapes the nature of meaning and understanding that it seems impossible to do without the notion of mediation at the heart of one’s epistemology. Moreover, if this is the case then the standard way of speaking about mystical experience as direct or unmediated encounter with the divine is seriously misguided.



However, as several friendly critics have recently pointed out, there seems to be a conceptual difficulty involved in this way of speaking. For, to claim that all experience is *mediated* is to suggest that the notion of *immediate* experience (or at least immediate something) is logically (formally) viable, though empirically (materially) useless. The difficulty here is in deciding on what basis this claim can be made, and it is frequently focused by asking the question, "What would be an example of an *un* mediated experience?" The implication is that in order for the concept of mediated experience to be meaningful, its opposite must also be meaningful.

Katz' answer, as noted above, is simply to say that the idea of unmediated experience is at worst self-contradictory and at best empty. While this move may suffice, I think some clarification is needed in order to show why this is so. Katz himself offers no substantiation of this move, other than reiterating the basic mediational quality of all human experience. What remains unclear is whether this move is strictly a *conceptual* one, wherein experience is defined in terms of its mediational character, or whether it is an *empirical* move, wherein one says that as a matter of fact there is no such thing as an unmediated human experience. In the one case, immediate experience *cannot* take place, while in the other it simply *does* not take place. While I take it that Katz is affirming the former, a stronger and clearer case can and needs to be made.

Perhaps some help can be derived from noting that the depth grammar of the terms involved places the burden of proof on those who would affirm the viability of *unmediated* or *immediate* human experience. As J. L. Austin has pointed out, too often we are tyrannized by the negative form of expressions—we allow them to wear the "trousers"—and are forced into a defensive posture with respect to the positive form. In actuality, the burden of proof lies with the one who affirms the negative position, in this case the position that some experience can be and is *un*-mediated.

A parallel case is that of the skeptic who would seek to place the burden of proof on those who affirm that knowledge is possible, when in reality the burden lies with the one who denies that knowledge is possible. For in both of these cases the positive form of expression embodies the standard point of view, while the negative form actually trades on this point of view in order to make itself understood. Just as the skeptic must rely on the meaningfulness of the notion of knowledge in order to deny its reality (and the denial itself is a knowledge claim!), so too the person who *denies* that all experience is mediated must nonetheless explain *immediate* experience in contradistinction to mediation.

To come at this whole issue from a different angle, it is helpful to point out that the need for an emphasis on the mediated character of experience arises because of the lengthy and dominant epistemological debate over incorrigibility. Empiricist philosophers of the "foundationalist" school, like the rationalists before them,

have long sought to ground experiential knowledge in some form of awareness that is epistemologically certain, such as sense-data reports. In its own way, mysticism represents a form of foundationalism in that it seeks to ground religious awareness in an incorrigible experience. By speaking of the mystical encounter as unmediated, it appears possible to avoid the potential for error that is built into the notion of experience as mediated. If there is no "epistemic distance" between the knower and the known, the knower cannot be mistaken about the nature of his or her awareness.

By emphasizing the contextuality and relationality of all human experience, Katz joins forces with all those thinkers, representing wide diversity of allegiance, who have sought in recent years to establish both the impossibility and the non-necessity of foundationalism. Both Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophers on the one hand⁴ and Merleau-Ponty and phenomenologists on the other hand⁵ have marshalled highly impressive cases against traditional foundationalist epistemologies. Even in the philosophy of science, such thinkers as P. Feyerabend, N. R. Hanson, and Thomas Kuhn have fairly well stripped away the viability of the notion of "objective" or incorrigible sense-data observations and reports, each in his own way emphasizing the role that contextual and relational factors play in any and all experiencing and thinking.⁶

Perhaps the most significant feature of Katz' approach to this issue is his discussion of the concept of intentionality at the close of his essay. He draws upon the work of early phenomenologists F. Brentano and F. Husserl by way of pointing out that human experience is vectorial in nature; that is to say, our awareness of the world is not that of passive observation, but is rather a function of the fact that we come into and at the world seeking *meaning*. Our consciousness is always consciousness *of* some concrete aspect of the world, of some particular aspect whose reality for us is constituted by our intentional activity in relation to it. This intentionality is clearly a mediational factor which undercuts the possibility of unmediated experience. The vectorial character of consciousness gives it a thrust or flow that provides the ever-present and necessary interpretive framework within which all experience is possible and understood.

It is in this sense, then, that the claim that all experience is mediational in nature is to be taken: as a form of conceptual clarification of what is *meant* by the concept of experience itself. This is not to say that it is impossible or meaningless to acknowledge that human life could, in fact, be different from what it is; but it is to deny that any concrete meaning can be given to such an acknowledgment, in the sense of a description of such an experience that is still commensurable with our present form of life. This, after all, is what the claim for unmediated experience seeks to do. It implies that our human experience remains what it is, for this is necessary to its being *our* experience (and to its being *experience* at all), while *at the same time* affirming that in certain instances (mystical encounter) our experi-

ence is fundamentally altered. However, human experience, as we know it, is mediated. This is what the term *means*! Experience cannot both be what it is and at the same time be other than what it is.

II

As I have said, I am very much in agreement with Katz' overall approach to religious epistemology in terms of contextuality and relationality. Perhaps the single, most thorough statement of Katz' position is the following quotation:

This means that the mystic *even* in his state of reconditioned consciousness is also a shaper of his experience; that he is not a *tabula rasa* on which the 'ultimate' or the 'given' simply impinges itself—whatever ultimate he happens to be seeking and happens to find. This much is certain: the mystical experience must be mediated by the kind of beings we are. And the kind of beings we are require that experience be not only instantaneous and discontinuous, but that it also involve memory, apprehension, expectation, language, accumulation of prior experience, concepts, and expectations, with each experience being built on the back of all these elements and being shaped anew by each fresh experience. Thus experience of x —be x God or *nirvana*—is conditioned both linguistically and cognitively by a variety of factors, *including the expectation of what will be experienced*. Related to these expectations are also future directed activities such as meditation, fasting, ritual ablutions, self-mortification, and so on, which create further expectations about what the future and future states of consciousness will be like. There is obviously a self-fulfilling prophetic aspect to this sort of activity.⁷

At the risk of sounding picky, there is a slight ambiguity in this statement which interests and troubles me. Katz seems to distinguish fairly markedly between the conceptual factors and the affective or behavioral factors that mediate and shape experience. He speaks of "linguistic and cognitive" factors which condition our experience, and then he mentions "related...directed activities" which also create certain experiential expectations. In an earlier summary of his view he says that we must acknowledge "that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by *concepts* which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience"⁸ (my emphasis). A bit further on,⁹ he mentions both images, beliefs, and symbols on the one hand *and* rituals on the other hand as definitive of the mystic's experiential expectations, but he also summarizes the results of these conditioning factors by listing a set of *beliefs that* a person growing up in a given cultural milieu will acquire.¹⁰

What concerns me here is the subtle manner in which this way of speaking plays

into the standard cognitivist vs. non-cognitivist dichotomy that has plagued Western philosophy for so long and has been so sharply focused in recent decades by the positivist/existentialist debates. Through both ordinary language philosophy and phenomenology we have begun to get past this traditional dichotomy, but the price for such liberation is eternal vigilance. I do not think Katz wants to fall victim to this dualistic plague, but I fear his way of speaking sometimes tends in this direction. Much of my own work has been aimed at overcoming this dichotomy between fact and value (objective/subjective, etc.), especially with regard to its implications for religious epistemology.

There has always been a tendency in the West to over-emphasize the role of the intellect, as distinguished from the affective and behavioral dimensions of existence, in defining cognitivity. In fact, it is largely this overemphasis, together with the resultant objective/subjective dichotomy, that has led to the familiar stalemates in the discussions over the nature of mystical experience. Finding the notions of cognitivity and rationality already taken over by a narrow, intellectualist definition, those who wished to promote and understand religious experience have frequently been obliged to adopt a vocabulary that commits them to an "irrationalist" posture. Thus the encounter with the divine is often spoken of as direct or unmediated.

What is needed at this juncture is a way of redefining rationality so as not to allow this dichotomized way of thinking to get off the ground in the first place. Katz' treatment of mystical experience in terms of contextuality and relationality makes an excellent contribution toward this redefinition. For the concept of mediation entails a holistic understanding, both of the epistemological subject and of the epistemological process. That which is acknowledged as being known *in and through* other factors is not likely to be construed as "uncontaminated" by "subjective" considerations. More specifically, if these mediating factors are understood as including the affective and behavioral dimensions of experience, then the very notion of cognitivity itself will take on a more holistic and integrated quality, thereby resonating with the actual character of human experience. This is why it is important to avoid even the slightest dualistic tendency in the development of Katz' case.

One of the more effective ways of undercutting the sort of dualism warned against above, and thereby avoiding the drift toward speaking of experience of the divine as unmediated, is to accentuate the importance of the body in the epistemological dimension of human life. The Western philosophical and theological tradition has systematically spoken of knowledge as a mental or spiritual experience, as something that happens to disembodied intellects or souls. This emphasis leads to thinking of the highest form of knowledge as devoid of any "somatic contamination," such as in mathematics and religious encounter. But the Judeo-Chris-

tian scriptures, if not consistently at least primarily, stress the importance of bodily existence. Also, recent phenomenological thought has come to place increasing emphasis on embodiment as the fulcrum for understanding the human way of being-in-the-world. It is our body which gears us into the world and which mediates our personhood to others.¹¹

The significance of the body for religious epistemology is that it enables us to stress the *continuity* between our knowledge of the world and persons on the one hand and our knowledge of God on the other. Revelation itself can be understood as mediated in and through nature and moral experience, as well as in and through historical event and community. The interpretation which focuses on a *discontinuity* between our common human experience and our encounter with the divine relies upon a dualistic anthropology and ontology, and it seems to lead to an emphasis on unmediated experience. A mediational understanding of revelation is more in line with the Judeo-Christian interpretation and it takes into account the contextual and relational aspects of fundamental human experience.

As Katz makes clear throughout his essay, the Judaeo-Christian understanding of the human encounter with the divine accentuates its relational character. God is known as an agent with whom we *interact*, rather than as a static Being whom we contemplate or with whom we unite. Such an understanding clearly fits hand-in-glove with a mediational interpretation of the general structure of human experience. I also think Katz is correct to seek to place mystical experience *within* this overall mediational-relational schema rather than outside it. For such a move is at once more realistic epistemologically and more fruitful religiously. To emphasize a discontinuity between common human experience and our encounter with God is either to place the latter beyond the reach of the vast majority of believers or to make it difficult (if not impossible) to integrate its insights and values into the work-a-day world.

Another way of undercutting the pernicious effects of the dualism that has dominated Western epistemological thought is to make the most of the notion of *tacit knowing*.¹² Once again the dualistic tradition has worked against a holistic understanding of knowledge, dividing between a narrow definition of what is rational on the one hand and the realm of values, feelings, and intuitions on the other. Whatever can be focused and clearly conceptualized about, made *explicit*, was said to be "knowledge", while all else was deemed "subjective" or "non-cognitive". Thus if one is to claim to know something, *what* is known must be specified analytically and *how* it is known must be spelled out inferentially.

The implications of this conception of knowledge for religious epistemology have been either to encourage a rationalistic (whether liberal or fundamentalist) approach to the reality of the divine, or to force an irrationalist posture, *à la* Kierkegaard (or at least Johannes Climacus). In more classical times, the focus on explicit knowledge gave rise to the various and dubious "proofs" of God's exist-

tence, or to the mystical stance wherein God is said to be known directly without the aid of reason, nature, or community. The end result of this epistemological dualism has been a long series of stand-offs in which believers and nonbelievers are left no common ground for further discussion.

An alternative to this stagnant dualism is provided by exploration of the role of *tacit knowing* in our epistemological experience. Tacit knowing arises out of the interaction between our subsidiary or subliminal awareness and our embodied activity. Subsidiary awareness provides the context from which we attend to that of which we are focally aware, whether perceptually or conceptually. For example, the reader is subsidiarily aware, until by mentioning it I make him or her focally aware, of the chair pressing against his or her backside. Likewise, the reader is attending, focally, to the meaning of these sentences, while being aware of the vocabulary and grammatical structure subsidiarily. In parallel fashion, the activity dimension of our existence operates between the conceptual pole and the bodily pole. Every act involves both aspects, but some center more in one than the other depending on the activity and the context.

Explicit knowing is a function of focal awareness and predominantly conceptual activity, whereas tacit knowing arises when and as we indwell those realities of which we are subsidiarily aware by means of our bodily activity. Skill knowledge is an excellent example of tacit knowing. We become skilled at such things as walking, swimming, driving, reading x-rays, and the like not primarily by formalized, explicit instruction, but by *practice*. Through our bodies, both perceptually and kinesthetically, we respond to and integrate diverse subliminal stimuli into unified, meaningful wholes. Through physically indwelling these as yet unrelated particulars we “get a feel” for them, integrating them and storing them, if you will, in our bodies.

This same tacit pattern applies to other, more comprehensive and mediated dimensions of our experience, as well. Such things as personal, social, and moral knowledge can profitably be explored as instances of tacit knowing, acquired indirectly through behavioral interaction with largely undifferentiated features of our human condition and situation. Aesthetic awareness also can be seen to follow this pattern. More importantly for our present purposes, however, is the possibility of understanding religious experience in terms of the perspective provided by the notion of tacit knowledge. This is not the place to launch into an exploration of this possibility. Suffice it to say that there is a great deal to be gained epistemologically from shifting the axis of discussion of religious experience and knowledge away from an intellectualist understanding of cognitivity and relocating it in relation to a more holistic, integrated, and somatic axis.¹³

My overall point is that I think Katz' effort to establish the contextual and relational foundation of religious experience in general and of mystical encounter in particular would be greatly enhanced by giving a more prominent place to the role

of non-conceptual dimensions of human existence. Rather than add the affective and behavioural aspects of mediation on, as a kind of addition, I would recommend placing them more at the center of things, stressing the logical priority of the tacit dimension over the explicit. In fact, the notions of mediation and tacit knowing would seem to be made for each other, to require each other. For whatever is known mediationally is not known focally and explicitly, while that which is known tacitly is necessarily known indirectly. I am reminded of Pascal's remark to those who would seek the experience and knowledge of those who believe:

Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc.¹⁴

III

There is one more immensely significant issue raised in Katz' essay to which I wish to speak. In the process of building his case for the necessity and centrality of a relational view of the structure of religious experience, Katz draws a marked contrast between Jewish mystics and Christian mystics. He contends that the former hardly ever, if at all, speak of their encounter with God in terms of *union*, but rather in terms of *communion* or relationship. Christian mystics, on the other hand, are said to speak frequently in terms of union with or absorption into God. By way of explanation of this phenomenon, Katz focuses on the concept of *incarnation* and on *Neoplatonic* influence. He says:

What permits, perhaps even encourages, this unitive, absorptive mysticism, though absent from its Jewish counterpart, is, I believe, the formative influence of the essential incarnational theology of Christianity which is predicated upon an admixing of human and divine elements in the person of Jesus which is outside the limits of the Judaic consciousness. Thus, an essential element of the model of Christian spirituality is one of divine-human interpenetration on the ontological level which allows for a unity of divine and human which Judaism rules out. Essential here too is the Neoplatonic influence on Christian thought, especially for Christian mysticism as represented by the greatest of all Neoplatonic mystics, Plotinus.¹⁵

My concern is with Katz' placement of the Christian notion of incarnation along side of Plotinus and his ilk *over against* the Hebrew emphasis on a relational and mediational theology. I am in agreement that the Hebrew way of thinking is vastly superior to that of Greek dualism, because it fits better with the general character of religious experience and because it makes better Biblical theology. A mediational view of religious experience— and thus a relational understanding of encounter

with the divine—does negate the sort of absorption or unity motif that is properly associated with the influence of Neoplatonism. But to my way of thinking, an incarnational theology is much more akin to the former, Hebrew motif than it is to the latter. Much depends here, of course, on what sort of reading one gives to the notion of incarnation. Let's take a closer look.

There has always been a tendency among some Christian theologians to view the doctrine of incarnation as a kind of divine emanation or overflow into human life.¹⁶ When given logical extension this view would seem to lead to an interpretation of the incarnation that *unites* the human and the divine, or absorbs the one into the other. Coming from a different angle, there are those thinkers who would say that Jesus so opened his life and will to God that the divine spirit which exists in all humans (indeed, in all creation) was liberated and fulfilled, even as ours would be were we to open ourselves to God as Jesus did.¹⁷ This view, too, when carried to its logical extreme implies a basic unity between God and humanity, as actualized in Jesus.

The New Testament view, as I understand it and as I think the historic Christian church has for the most part understood it, is quite distinct from these interpretations. For, to begin with, the enfleshment of God in Jesus is regarded by the New Testament writers as a primordial mystery, as a unity which still incorporates diversity. This diversity is essentially a *relational* one in which individual persons remain distinct from one another and interact with one another. This is true both on the divine level, as is witnessed to by the church's doctrine of the Trinity, and on the historical level, as Jesus' prayer life and struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane make amply clear. In the Gospels Jesus is depicted, not as one who is one with God in the absorptive sense, but as one united with God through personal, relational commitment.

In addition, Paul's doctrine of the pre-existent, cosmic Christ clearly distinguishes between Christ and God the creator on the one hand and between Christ and humankind on the other. God creates the world *through* Christ and Christ is our *representative*—both roles are relational and mediational in character. In fact, in the crucial kenotic passage (Philippians 2) it is specifically stated that Christ set aside the divine prerogatives in order to bring God's love to humankind, in order to *serve* us in our need. Here, too, it should be clear that the reality under discussion, the incarnation, is a relational and mediational one, not one of absorptive union. Christ *mediates* between God and humanity, serving as the agent that reconciles the latter to the former. Likewise, the believer's relationship with Christ—what Paul calls being “in Christ”—is a union of commitment and faith, not one of absorption. As members of the “body of Christ”, the church, individuals maintain a separate existence from one another—much as the parts of the physical body do—and from Christ, as the head of the Church, while at the same time *participating* (relationally) in a common life source and purpose.

Thirdly, there is the resurrection theme. The New Testament teaching on Jesus' resurrection is that after dying (which is not something which, strictly speaking, a God *can* do!), he was brought back to life by the power of God, his personhood being reconstituted and reintegrated in a new body, one which seems to have been both similar to and yet different from his former one. He was both recognizable and located in space and time, while also able to appear and disappear at will, as well as keep his identity from those whom he wished. Moreover, the hope is that he will come again, in recognizable bodily form, ushering in a new order that involves physically resurrected ("spiritual bodies") persons and a new heaven and earth.

The point of mentioning all this is simply to stress the individual and relational character of the Christian eschatological hope. The hope is not for a mystical absorption, but a state of communion and interaction in which there is *continuity* between our present existence and that which is to come. The resurrection theme, as an integral aspect of incarnational theology, does not entail a unitive or absorptive view of divine-human encounter. Rather, it is specifically relational and mediational in its implications. Moreover, it seems every bit as *concrete* and *somatic* as does the Hebrew understanding of the divine-human relationship.

My own conclusion is that the absorptive motif in the Christian mystical tradition is far more a result of Neoplatonic emphasis than it is a result of incarnational theology. I would agree with Katz that this motif is based on an unfruitful view of human nature and experience, but I would submit, as well, that the historic Christian view of religious experience is itself squarely in support of the very mediational, contextual, and relational understanding Katz is advocating.

Overall, I think Professor Katz has done an excellent job in establishing some important ground rules for future discussion of religious experience in general and the notion of mystical encounter in particular. The cruciality of the concept of mediation, both for our understanding of the broad scope of human experience and knowledge, and for the question of religious epistemology as well, can hardly be exaggerated. For it seems to be the most viable alternative to traditional dualisms on the right modernistic reductionisms on the left. The stalemates resulting from the on-going confrontation between these two postures have become particularly discouraging of late. The notion of mediation opens the way for fresh conversation, a conversation in which Professor Katz will undoubtedly play an important part.

Barrington College

NOTES

1. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
2. Cf. especially my book, *On Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

3. *Op. cit.*, Katz, p. 26.
4. Cf. especially Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), and John Wisdom's *Paradox and Discovery* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), and J. L. Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Univ. Press, 1964).
5. Cf. especially Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962) and H. G. Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1976).
6. Here see especially Hanson's *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958) and Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).
7. *Op. cit.*, Katz, p. 59.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
11. Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*
12. At this juncture I am drawing heavily on the insights of Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) and *Knowing and Being* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969).
13. I have sought to contribute to this exploration in the following articles: "The Tacit Structure of Religious Knowing," *International Philosophical Quarterly* (Dec., 1969); "Through A Glass, Darkly," *Christian Scholar's Review* (Dec., 1975); and "Saying and Showing," *Religious Studies* (Fall, 1974); "Tacit Knowing and Religious Belief," *Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* (Dec., 1975).
14. *Pensées*, No. 233.
15. *Op. cit.*, Katz, p. 41.
16. This is what might be called the Hegelian tradition, although it clearly has Neoplatonic roots as well. There is a decided Pantheist flavor to this approach. In contemporary times this view is expressed by Thomas J. J. Altizer, e.g. *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Phila.: Westminster, 1966) and Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Chicago: Chicago University, 1951).
17. This is essentially a gnostic view. See Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979). The liberal tradition carries on this emphasis, from F. Schleiermacher through Adolf Harnack to "process theologians" like John Cobb and Shubert Ogden.