Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 2 | Issue 3

Article 10

7-1-1985

Steven T. Katz, ed., MYSTICISM AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Nelson Pike

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Pike, Nelson (1985) "Steven T. Katz, ed., MYSTICISM AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil19852334

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol2/iss3/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

After a lengthy exposition concerning what he considers the dogmatism and lack of critical attitude in traditional religion, O'Hear wraps up his discussion by saying "My thesis in this chapter has been that religion is essentially dogmatic, fetishistic, and authoritarian; that this aspect of religion is what religion derives its strength from" (249), by, as he has suggested, pandering to the emotional and psychological needs of people. And, not to miss a way of dismissing religion, he adds to his characterization of it as rationally indefensible the claim that in addition "religion (at least in any traditional form) cannot be a force for good at the present" (244), a claim which has in this book just as little argumentative support.

Mysticism and Religious Traditions, ed. by **Steven T. Katz**. Oxford University Press, 1983.

Reviewed by NELSON PIKE, University of California, Irvine.

Professor Katz begins the "Editor's Introduction" to this text with a sketch of what he calls "the predominant scholarly view" concerning the relation between the mystic of a given culture and "the socio-historical, Philosophical-theological" environment provided by the culture in question. According to this view, the mystic is one who has something called "*the* mystical experience" and who then "soars above dogma and community, leaving the sober majority behind to its mechanical, if irrelevant, religious teachings and practices". The mystic's contact with the religious community of which he is a part comes only at the point where he "...must descend from his height and then, caught up again in the fetters of tradition and history, space and time, he must express what is truly inexpressible in the inadequate symbols and syntax of his particular faith community". Given this "common image" (what Katz calls "the 'regnant scholarly orthodoxy'"), the question arises as to whether it may not be in error. And (Katz tell us) it is this possibility—the possibility that it may be fundamentally mistaken—that (in his words) "has brought the present symposium into being". Speaking of the relation between the mystic and cultural milieu in which the mystic exists, Katz identifies the issue to which the ten essays contained in this volume are (presumably) addressed as follows:

The essays in this volume have been written in order to reconsider this relational issue afresh with the hope that a more adequate schematization of this dialectical encounter can be arrived at. This is to say, the present essays are attempts to reconsider, in various ways, the question: "What relation(s) does obtain between mystics and the religious com-

munities out of which they emerge and of which they are a part?"

However, Katz then goes on to say that the question with which this passage ends can be framed more concretely so: "

Does Christian mysticism represent a universal religious experience or is it necessarily related to Christian dogma, especially in its christological character? In other words, can one be a Christian mystic if one denies classical christological claims? Is Nirvana attainable without subscribing to the Buddhist teaching of no-self? Can Enlightenment be won without holding to the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence?

Katz adds that the advantage of formulating the generative question of the symposium in this second, more concrete way, is that it...

...helps bring to the surface the essential concern involved in discussing the relationship of mystic to established religious communities, to wit: do Muslims have essentially pre-formed Muslim experiences, Jews specially Jewish experiences, Christians christological experiences, Buddhists Buddhist Enlightenment experiences and so on. And if so what does it mean?

Those familiar with Katz' first collection of essays on mysticism (*viz.*, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, London, 1978), will recall that in his own contribution to that volume (an essay entitled "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism"), Katz spent considerable time arguing against a view that he claimed to find in the writings of R. C. Zaehner as well as in the work of Walter Stace and Ninian Smart. According to the view in question, there are, at best, a few limited kinds of mystical experiences; mysticism generally (cross-culturally) is based on experiences of these sorts; and, thirdly, though the experiences had by mystics of all cultures are basically the same, mystics *interpret* their mystical experiences in accordance with the doctrines peculiar to their respective religious traditions. What mystics experience is the same; what mystics *believe* and thus *say* they have experienced differs according to extra-mystical religious convictions. Katz argued that this is not right. What the mystics experience is, in part, determined by his pre-mystical beliefs. The experiences, themselves, are thus (as he put it) "pre-figured" by theological convictions. There are thus as many kinds of mystical experiences as there are kinds of pre-figuring belief-patterns; Christians have Christian experiences, Jews have Jewish experiences, etc. Of course, this is the thesis-form of the idea posed in question-form at the end of the last paragraph. The question articulating what Katz refers to as the "essential concern" of the present volume is precisely the one he supposes himself to have already answered affirmatively in the 1978 paper. Thus, assuming (as I think

Katz is) that the views of Zaehner, Stace and Smart can be taken as "the regnant scholarly orthodoxy" in the area of comparative mysticism, the description in the "Editor's Introduction" of the present volume would lead us to suppose that the essays included will all be devoted to probing the thesis advanced by Katz in his earlier paper.

It turns out, however, that of the ten papers contained in this volume, only five have any real connection with the announced topic. In order of their appearance in the text, the five in question are: (1) Katz' own contribution—a paper entitled "The 'Conservative' Character of Mysticism", (2) a paper by Robert Gimello called "Mysticism in its Contexts", (3) "The Mystical Illusion" by Hans Penner, (4) a study by Annemarie Schimmel entitled "Sufism and the Islamic Tradition", and (5) an essay called "Experience and Dogma in the English Mystics" by H. P. Owen. Let me say that while all five of these papers are intelligently presented and of more or less substance, the one by Professor Gimello seems to me to be of special interest. Unlike some of the others, Gimello's essay is nicely focused—a steady and penetrating analysis of data connected with what he refers to as "the Buddhist master-concept of 'selflessness' ". His claim is that this concept is (as he says) "formative" not only of Buddhist mystical practices (including linguistic practices) but of Buddhist mystical experiences as well. Of course, whether (and if so to what extent) this Katz-like thesis can be generalized is another matter. I (for one) am glad that Gimello did not dwell too long on this second question. What makes his essay valuable is not that it supports (if it does) some general speculative thesis about mysticism as such, but that it makes close and meaningful contact with a really interesting piece of the actual mystical literature.

As regards the remaining five essays in the collection, they range over a mix of topics. Ninian Smart's paper on the *via negativa* and allied items is a well focused, well reasoned and genuinely interesting piece. Smart's maturity as a thinker is well displayed. His comments on the notion of ineffability seem to me to be especially insightful. Then, too, there is a study by Julia Ching on the use of the (so called) "mirror symbol" in Confucian and Taoist mysticism. This paper is small of scope but particularly well executed. In my opinion, however, the most important paper in this group—for that matter, the most impressive paper in the collection as a whole—is the essay by Ewert Cousins entitled "Francis of Assisi: Christian Mysticism at the Crossroads". This is a large and ambitious study of the mysticism of St. Francis and its theological interpretation in the writings of Bonaventura. In the course of the discussion the reader is treated to a host of well centered though broadly ranging historical observations and theological reflections that reveal their author to be a man of unusual depth. This piece belongs on the "must read" list for anyone seriously interested in the study of Christian mysticism.

On the whole, I think that Katz' second volume of essays on mysticism, is a success. If there is to be a third, I would suggest that Katz continue to solicit papers such as those of Gimello and Cousins—papers that really show us, rather than only tell us, how the mystical literature should be understood.

Creative Interchange, ed. by **John A. Broyer** and **William S. Minor**. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982. 566 pages. \$27.50.

Reviewed by STEPHEN H. PHILLIPS, University of Texas at Austin.

This *Festschrift* in memory of Henry Nelson Wiemann, 1884-1975, shows above all Wiemann's influence upon contemporary theology and religious inquiry. The contributions range in topic from Wiemann's biography through philosophic and social dimensions of his thought to aesthetics and comparative religion.

The biographical contributions present Wiemann as a philosophic mystic who is certain of the reality of "God," and who throughout his life strives to find concepts adequate to his religious experience. Lewis Hahn's essay emphasizes the change and development in Wiemann's thought in regard to the content of his concept of God, as he reflected upon the nature of mystical experience.

Many contributors point out that Wiemann understands the term 'God' to designate the source of human value. This Wiemann's "formal" definition of the term apparently derives from his understanding of the relevant intellectual history. It remains a fixed point in all the theological reformulations.

Marvin Shaw discerns another constant. This is that Wiemann sees mystical experience not as supernaturalistic, but rather as a special dimension of ordinary experience which compels personal growth. Often Wiemann identifies personal growth as the "human good." Gary Kessler stresses that mystical or religious experience, according to Wiemann, brings a person to transcend inherited dispositions of belief and behavior.

Echoing the vitalism of Bergson and the phenomenology of Husserl, Wiemann later in his life found "creative interchange" to be the least inadequate way to conceptualize the source of human good. (That he expresses his views in this manner, as converging on theoretical adequacy asymptotically, is another indication of Wiemann's empiricism—many contributors see the empiricism as the most prominent feature of his theology.) Michael Lazarin shows that the precursors of "creative interchange" extend to Plato's concept of *eros* in the *Symposium* as well as to Socratic *elenchus*.

In enunciating the importance of creative interchange, Wiemann comes to