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Book Review: Mystic Union: An Essay In The Phenomenology Of Mysticism

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of us, in rare moments of total honesty, have at least glimpsed. Any solution to this problem comes at a price. Any solution commits one to saying things that, other things being equal, one would rather not say. One may eventually convince oneself that they're worth saying, and perhaps even that they are, on reflection, not as implausible as one initially thought. But few of us ever escape entirely from the penumbra of that initial implausibility. Zagzebski does a fairly good job of pointing to the shadows of doubt which beset her competitors' stances. My fear is that her solutions are accompanied by shadows at least as deep.

Mystic Union: An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism, by Nelson Pike. (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion) Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992. Pp. xiv & 224. N.p.

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An apter subtitle of this excellent volume would be "an essay in the phenomenology of *Christian* mysticism." Pike's book is divided into two parts. Its first four chapters gather the data. The last four are "more critical" and "provide a phenomenological account that fits the data assembled in the first half of the book" (xiii). It concludes with three supplementary studies. The first argues that (contrary to the standard interpretation) R.C. Zaehner didn't think that monistic and theistic mystical experiences are phenomenologically distinct. Monistic and theistic mystics interpret their states differently, and react to them differently, but their experiences are the same. The second criticizes Steven Katz's account of Christian mysticism, and the third attacks Stace's contention that theistic mystics are irrational in not accepting the monistic implications of their experiences of undifferentiated unity. I will summarize Pike's argument and conclude with three critical comments.

The first two chapters describe the three principal forms of mystical prayer. The soul is directly aware of God in each but the degree of intimacy and the place of encounter differ. In the Prayer of Quiet, "God and the soul are close to each other" (5). In Full Union and (the culmination of) Rapture, however, they penetrate each other; God and the soul are held in mutual embrace. In the Prayer of Quiet and Full Union, the encounter between self and God takes place *within* the soul of the mystic. In Rapture, it transpires outside the mystic's soul. Quiet and Union thus differ with respect to the nature of the encounter but are alike with respect to its domain. In Full Union and Rapture, the *nature* of the encounter is the same but its *place* differs.

Full Union and Rapture sometimes culminate in Union without Distinction. In this state, the mystic no longer distinguishes between herself and God; God is not experienced as a "not-me." Yet "the awareness of self can emerge

only in the case where I am aware of...something experienced as not-me." Hence, "the experience as a whole is...bereft of a sense of self" (32). "Phenomenologically, where there is no object, the self is 'naughted', does not exist" (33). Although the Christian mystic believes that "*metaphysically* there is duality," "*phenomenologically* there is identity" (37). Pike thinks that Union without Distinction shouldn't "be thought of as a distinct kind of mystical experience. It is, rather, the climax moment — seldom achieved — of...Full Union and Rapture" (40).

Chapter 3 discusses the doctrine of the spiritual senses. According to this doctrine there are "five spiritual sense faculties" bearing "some likeness to the exterior senses" (Teresa) "by which God's presence in the various states of union is detected" (42). As Pike understands it, when the Christian mystic "claims to have 'seen' God, or to have 'smelled' or 'tasted'" Him, she "means to be affirming that God was detected in the encounter via actual sensations that are at least similar...to the bodily perceptions usually identified with these terms" (44).

Sight, hearing, and smell are distance senses. (I not only see things at a distance, I hear what is going on in the next room, and smell what is cooking in the kitchen when I am in the hall. Touch typically requires contact but I *can* feel the fire while standing at some distance from it.) In the Prayer of Quiet, God and the soul "are close but not so close as to preclude them coming closer." "In Full Union and...Rapture, God and the soul are in double embrace" (49). One would therefore expect God to be detected by analogues of the distance senses in the Prayer of Quiet, and to be detected by analogues of taste and touch in Full Union and Rapture.

According to Pike this is exactly what we find. In the Prayer of Quiet, God is "heard," "smelled," and "touched" "in the restricted sense appropriate when the object perceived is still at some distance from the perceiver" (51). (Thus "Teresa says that the soul *feels the heat* coming from the 'interior depths'" (50)). In Full Union and Rapture, God is touched and tasted.

There are, however, anomalies. (1) Although sight is the paradigmatic distance sense, spiritual sight is seldom if ever associated with the Prayer of Quiet. It is, however, frequently mentioned in connection with Full Union, and is especially associated with Rapture. (2) The object of (for example) spiritual taste is God's "sweetness," and the object of spiritual touch is His "caress" or "touch." But while the object of spiritual sight is sometimes God or the Trinity, it is often a divine attribute like power, justice, or wisdom. At this point the analogy breaks down, for "their counterparts in the mundane world...are simply not the *kinds* of things that one *sees*" (60f).

Pike concludes his review of the data (chapter 4) with an excellent discussion of the Christian mystic's use of bridal and mother-child imagery, and a defense of its appropriateness.

Pike's last four chapters are an extended defense of the claim that Christian mystical experiences are phenomenologically *of God* and are therefore distinct from the states reported by nontheistic mystics.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss Walter Stace. Pike distinguishes between "expanded and unexpanded," and "extended and non-extended," descriptions of an experience. An expanded description refers to items not included in the experience itself. An extended description implies that the experienced items really exist. Pike suggests that pure descriptions in Stace's sense are unexpanded and non-extended. Expanded or extended descriptions are interpretations. Stace believes that Christians who claim to experience union with God are *interpreting* and not describing their experiences. Their "descriptions" are obviously extended. They are also expanded. Their experiences are in fact introvertive (by which Stace means radically unitary, devoid of subject-object structure and intentional content). Yet they are "described as having a subject-object structure, and the [object] in question is understood to possess all the identifying attributes of the Christian God" (103). Stace concludes that Christian mystical experiences aren't phenomenologically of God; there are no essentially theistic mystical experiences. Christian or Muslim mystics are simply (mis)interpreting experiences they share with Buddhists, Yogins and Advaitins. Stace supports his thesis by (1) citing texts which describe Union without Distinction, (2) calling attention to the use of "emptiness" metaphors ("desert," "nakedness," "silence," "darkness," and so on), (3) contending that the writings of most Christian mystics exhibit a "definite 'drift towards monism'" (104) which is inhibited by ecclesiastical pressure, and (4) arguing that "it is natural to suppose" that mystics like Tauler or Eckhart and mystics like Teresa who don't explicitly mention Union without Distinction, habitually employ emptiness metaphors, or exhibit a drift towards monism "all mean the same thing" by "union with God" "unless given positive evidence to the contrary" (105).

Pike rightly finds this unconvincing. (1) Stace has no explanation of the fact that Christian mystics employ three *different* descriptions (Quiet, Union, and Rapture) to refer to what (on Stace's view) is the same experience. (2) While metaphysical dualism is "an item of orthodox faith," "that God is sometimes close to the soul in its own domain...and at other times enwraps and penetrates the soul either in its own domain...or in... 'another world'" is not (110). The mystics' use of these descriptions can't be plausibly explained as the result of ecclesiastical pressure. (3) Nor can Stace account for the fact that Christian mystics insist that their experiences of union "are amply supplied with experiential elements explicitly said to be *like* bodily sensations—the (so called) 'spiritual sensations'" (111). Pike concludes that it is more natural to suppose that Christian mystics are describing three distinct (though related) states each of which is phenomenologically of God, and that Stace's

introvertive experience can at best only be identified with Union without Distinction in which Full Union and Rapture sometimes culminate.

Chapter 7 defends the possibility of phenomenologically theistic experiences against the objections of William Forgie. According to Pike, that one's experience is phenomenologically of God can be "an immediate datum of the experience" (just as that the unseen person beside me is the president can be an immediate datum of my dream) (120). Forgie, on the other hand, thinks that "it is implausible to suppose that one and only one individual could appear in some particular way" (122). If he is right, that one's experience is of that individual is never part of the phenomenological content of one's experience. The core of Pike's reply appears to be this. (1) There are many perceptual experiences in which "the identification element" is "not the product of an inference or a judgment based on perception." That one is perceiving so and so is "directly or immediately presented" (142). Examples are perceiving one's coffee maker on the counter as one enters the kitchen on a sunny morning, and Teresa's intellectual vision of Christ in which she perceived His presence at her side although her experience was devoid of sensory imagery. (2) Criticisms like Forgie's confuse phenomenological and epistemological issues. "To *justify* my claim that the object I see in the kitchen is a coffee maker," I may be forced to appeal to the object's look, feel, etc (141). Certain aspects of the phenomenological given may, then, be *epistemologically* prior to others. It doesn't follow that these are the only aspects *directly presented*. (Whether this distinction can be drawn in the case of Teresa's intellectual vision is doubtful. For, in this case, nothing clearly corresponds to the object on my kitchen counter's look and feel. By the same token, though, there is no "appearance," and therefore no appearance which could have been produced by an individual other than Christ. But Pike would disagree. For he not only distinguishes the "'its Jesus' identification element" in her experience from her "awareness of a presence" (145f); he also insists that although the "identification element was not accompanied by the kinds of sensory data ordinarily constitutive of perceptions of a person standing at one's side" (149), spiritual analogues of these data were.)

Pike's concluding chapter summarizes his results and offers comments on method. Its most interesting feature is an ingenious defense of the claim that Unity without Distinction is phenomenologically of God. (More on this in a moment.)

Pike's argument throughout *Mystic Union* is lucid, invariably interesting and, for the most part, persuasive. Yet questions can be raised about his discussion of the spiritual senses, his defense of the claim that Union without Distinction is phenomenologically of God, and his treatment of Zaehner.

1. The fact that the paradigmatic distance sense (sight) comes into play only in Full Union and Rapture in which God and the soul indwell one another

and are therefore *not* at a distance, and that there are no divine analogues of the objects of ordinary visual experience (color, shape, etc.) suggests that the doctrine of the spiritual senses imposes an overly rigid conceptual scheme on a somewhat unsystematic and fluid use of perceptual metaphors.

It would be useful to pursue the following questions: (a) Does the frequent use of a pair of perceptual metaphors (e.g., touch and taste) by a mystic always consistently reflect a phenomenological difference in that mystic's experience? (b) Do different mystics using the same perceptual term invariably refer to the same phenomenological feature of mystical experience? (c) Is the systematic use of all five perceptual terms typical of Christian mystics generally? (Pike's discussion of the spiritual senses reflects his heavy reliance on John of the Cross and especially Teresa. The weight he assigns them isn't unreasonable given the fullness of their descriptions and their clarity, their standing in the Roman Catholic community [both are "doctors of the church"], and their importance in the history of Christian mysticism. Their paradigmatic status in Pike's book also has important precedents in the work of Poulain, Farges, Maritain, and others [Farges and Poulain, too, stress the doctrine of the spiritual senses.] One nonetheless wonders whether Pike's account would have looked the same had he instead focused on Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus, Gregory Palamas, and other mystical luminaries of the Eastern church, or on medieval English mystics like Walter Hilton and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, or on Rhineland mystics like Eckart, Tauler, and the author of the *Theologia Germanica*.) (d) Does the doctrine occur in other theistic mystical traditions which contain analogues of Quiet, Union, and Rapture?

Unless the answer to most of these questions is clearly "Yes," I suggest that the notion of the spiritual senses shouldn't be taken too literally. The metaphors may only be designed to express intimacy (touch, taste), delight (sweetness, fragrance), and varying degrees of perceptual clarity. (One could then explain why sight isn't used in association with the Prayer of Quiet. Vision has been traditionally regarded as the most intellectual of the senses and one's awareness of God at this stage is relatively obscure.) One should consider the possibility, in other words, that expressions like "sight," "smell," "taste," and so forth refer to only a few phenomenal qualities (the ones I have mentioned or others) each of which can perhaps be indifferently picked out by more than one perceptual metaphor.

2. Pike claims that even though Union without Distinction is "a monistic interval lacking subject-object structure as well as all sensory and sensory-like content" (160), it is "phenomenologically theistic" (162). Pike employs two analogies to explain how this can be true. (a) Imagine two cases. In the first, "I am sitting on a park bench reading a magazine when I am unexpectedly hit on the forehead with a baseball. Upon awakening" I describe my

experience as “stun-stars and fading consciousness....I am later told what happened” and “thereafter...describe the experience as one of being hit on the head by a baseball.” In the second, I am playing second base, follow the ball as it leaves the plate, move under it “but...I misjudge the catch and the ball hits me on the forehead. Again, I experience stun-stars and fading consciousness. Upon awakening I do not have to be told what happened. I describe the experience as one of being hit on the head with a baseball.” “Being hit with a baseball” describes something I perceive in the second case but not in the first. Because of its “phenomenological ancestry”, stun-stars and fading consciousness in case two is “*phenomenologically* [an experience] of being hit with a ball.” While the two occurrences of stun-stars and fading consciousness are “phenomenologically indistinguishable in that they involved the same kind of stun, the same kind of stars, [etc.]..., they are phenomenologically distinct. ‘Hit with a baseball’ describes the phenomenological content of the second experience. It does not do so with respect to the first” (162-3). (b) Again imagine two cases. In the first, a spot of light is projected on a screen. In the second, two spots are projected and “come closer and closer together until they merge into a single...spot” “having the same spatial dimensions, brightness, and so on.” My awareness in the second case “is not just a perception of *unity* but a perception of *identity*—not just a perception of *one* but of *two* that have become *one*....With respect to this final moment of awareness..., its phenomenological ancestry has survived as an ingredient in its phenomenological content” (164). The implication is clear. Union without Distinction is “empty.” Yet, in virtue of its phenomenological ancestry, it can be described as, phenomenologically, “an awareness of *God-soul identity*.... ‘God-soul identity’ expresses a *lack* of experiential content. But....it is a very specific lack,” namely, a lack of the previously “felt distinction between oneself and God.” (164-5) Pike concludes that whether or not Stace’s experience of undifferentiated unity is phenomenologically theistic or not is determined by its phenomenological history.

I find Pike’s claim puzzling. It is true that the experiential *sequences* in each pair of cases are phenomenologically distinct. It is also true that, because of its phenomenological ancestry, the second instance of stun-stars and fading consciousness (for example) can be described as being phenomenologically an experience of being hit by a baseball while the first cannot. (I am *phenomenologically aware* of being hit by a baseball in the second case but not in the first.) But Pike wants to say more than this, namely, that the *phenomenological content of the climax moment* (stun-stars and fading consciousness, the perception of a single dot, the experience of undifferentiated unity) differs in the two cases.

It *would* do so if an awareness of the climax moment’s ancestry were included *in* the climax moment, or if its phenomenological ancestry affected

its feeling tone. But of course in *that* case the climax moments of the two sequences would be *internally* distinct in virtue of the fact that one contains a phenomenological element that the other lacks. And Pike apparently doesn't intend this. (He compares the climax moments of the first pair of sequences to a picture of Jones which has been cropped from a picture of Jones standing third from the left in the front row of his graduating class, and the uncropped picture. The second but not the first is "*pictorially* [read: phenomenologically] of Jones-standing-third-from-the-left-in-the-front-row" [164]. But notice that there are no *internal* differences between the cropped picture of Jones and the portion of the uncropped picture from which it was taken. Then too, Stace's experience of undifferentiated unity is *devoid* of content. If this state is *internally* identical with Union without Distinction [as Pike seems to think], an awareness of the climax moment's phenomenological ancestry *can't* be part of it.)

Its feeling tone, I suppose, could. Or at least two experiences which are devoid of *intentional* content might differ with respect to their affective coloring. (This is a real possibility. The empty-consciousness experience is usually joyful. But not always. J. A. Symonds had it and disliked it.) I am not sure that Pike would accept this suggestion. (His photograph example suggests he might not.) Yet if he *doesn't* accept it or something like it, we are left with the apparently inconsistent assertion that two internally indistinguishable experiential moments differ in their phenomenological content and thus are *not* internally indistinguishable after all. (His analogies don't really help. For, arguably, an implicit awareness of the experience's causal ancestry is included *in* the second perception of the spot of light, and is *not* an *internal part* of the second occurrence of stun-stars and fading consciousness [although it is an essential feature of the second baseman's experience *as a whole*.] The first is therefore disanalogous to Union without Distinction because the latter *doesn't* include an awareness of its causal ancestry as an ingredient. And since "being hit with a baseball" *isn't* clearly part of the second's phenomenological content [although it is part of the phenomenological content of its immediate experiential predecessor] the example of the second baseman doesn't help us see how "being one with God" could be an *ingredient* in the climax moment of Full Union and Rapture.)

3. I wasn't fully convinced by Pike's ingenious and controversial interpretation of Zaehner. (a) Zaehner frequently speaks in ways which imply that monistic and theistic mystics have different *experiences*. (Cf. e.g., *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* [Oxford, 1956], pages 182, 189, and 205.) (b) The doctrinal and behavioral differences between monistic and theistic mystics *can* be taken as indirect evidence that their *experiences* differ. Zaehner, I think, intends them to be so taken. (c) Zaehner often speaks as if monistic experiences are a *preparation* for theistic experiences. (Cf. e.g., *Mysticism: Sacred*

and *Profane*, pages 182, 194, and 204, and *Concordant Discord* [Oxford, 1970], pages 203-205.) If so, they can't be identical. (d) Zaehner cites texts to show that theistic mystics sometimes distinguish between monistic and theistic states on the basis of their own first hand experience. (Cf. e.g., *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane*, page 189, and Zaehner's discussion of Ramanuja and al-Junayd in *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* [London, 1960].) This too implies that the experiences differ. (e) Zaehner not only thinks that theistic mystics differ doctrinally and behaviorally from monistic mystics; he also believes that the mystical states of the former are an enjoyment of God while those of the latter are (only) an enjoyment of (the unity of) their own souls. I find it hard to believe that Zaehner would have thought that one and the same phenomenological state could either be an enjoyment of God or an enjoyment of one's own soul depending on the behavioral and doctrinal context in which it occurs.

But these are quibbles. Pike's book is a major contribution to the literature on mysticism and to the philosophy of religion in general. It is the best book of its kind to have appeared since the important work of Farges, Poulain, and Butler in the early part of the century. It is superior to theirs in its analytic acumen and philosophical sophistication. I recommend it without reservation.

Passionate Reason: Making Sense Of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments, by C. **Stephen Evans**. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992. Pp. xii and 205. \$29.95 (Cloth).

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Steve Evans's latest book is the third book-length commentary on Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* to be published in the last ten years.¹ In a time when books on Kierkegaard are hard to publish and elicit little honor from the community of professional philosophers, this much careful attention to one booklet (just over 100 pages) in Kierkegaard's large corpus of works seems to need explaining. I think the explanation is that *Fragments* addresses an issue of momentous relevance to Christian thought, an issue on which the preservation of Christianity itself turns, but couches its pronouncements on that issue in an enigmatic format and sometimes in oracular statements that seem to undermine its own project of preserving the conceptual integrity of Christianity. Thus the booklet seems important, but also seems to call for quite a lot of clarifying.

Unlike Evans's *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Christian Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Humanities Press, 1983), which treated Kierkegaard's whole "Climacus literature" topically, *Passionate Reason* is a more or less chapter-by-chapter discussion just of *Fragments*. Evans distin-