

## CAN PHYSIOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES LEAD TO CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM?

Altered states of consciousness, however ethereal their domain, do not totally escape their somatic matrix. For human beings are embodied spirits. Even in spiritual activities, the body with its brain and nervous system plays an indispensable part. Indeed, the words that Thornton Wilder puts on the lips of Caesar apply also to the contemplative: "To deny that one is an animal is to reduce oneself to half a man." But some go to the other extreme, asserting that the body—stimulated or orientated by drugs, sex, pain or diverse esoteric practices—is the only door to mystical experience. A working balance must be found since the animal component, though subordinate, is unquestionably significant. Assuming, then, the interaction of mind and muscle, of soul and body, I will try to suggest the role of physiological techniques in Christian mysticism.

At this point, I will explain briefly the two terms of the question: "physiological techniques" and "Christian mysticism." First of all, by "physiological," I refer to bodily functions and processes, not to anatomy or structure. Physiology includes such disparate items as muscular activity, glandular secretions, metabolism, sensation, and brain waves. Though psychology differs from physiology, much of what I am discussing could fairly be called psychophysiological, in view of the effect these bodily techniques have on mental behavior.<sup>1</sup> But I will not deal here with mind-changing drugs, like alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, mescaline, LSD or psilocybin. Although bodily functions have a biochemical base, I will not consider chemically induced states, despite the frequent claim that they are similar to and even identical with the traditionally induced mystical states.<sup>2</sup> In short, my precise interest here, as far as techniques are concerned, is whether one can by voluntary physical action and inaction so alter one's state of consciousness as to influence or induce Christian mysticism.

Secondly, by "mysticism," I mean an awareness of God more intimate than the usual knowledge afforded by reason and faith—a heightened knowledge. Three definitions will sharpen the focus. William James speaks broadly: "Consciousness of illumination is for us the essential mark of 'mystical' states."<sup>3</sup> Joseph Maréchal, S.J., brings

<sup>1</sup> Many recent scientific books on contemplation and mysticism, currently often referred to simply as meditation, encompass both physiological and psychological disciplines. For example: C. Naranjo and R. Ornstein, *On the Psychology of Meditation* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971); R. Ornstein, ed., *The Psychology of Consciousness* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1972); C. Tart, ed. *Altered States of Consciousness* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> For a scholarly rebuttal of this claim, see R. C. Zaehner, *Zen, Drugs and Mysticism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> J. Maréchal, S.J., "On the feeling of Presence in Mystics and Non-mystics," in *Studies in the Psychology of the Mystics*, trans. by A. Thorold (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1927; reprint ed., Albany: Magi Books, 1964), p. 103.

content into the notion: [Mysticism is] "the feeling of the immediate presence of a Transcendent Being."<sup>4</sup> Reginald Garrigou-LaGrange, O.P., makes the content more specific: "The mystical life is Christian life, which has, so to speak, become conscious of itself."<sup>5</sup>

So by "Christian mysticism" I mean an enlightened consciousness of the presence of the transcendent and triune God, in whose life we participate through grace. I take for granted the need for supernatural grace. But, theologically, it remains an open question whether ordinary grace suffices for Christian mysticism as it does for heroic sanctity. No scriptural statements or church documents compel us to ascribe mystical states to an extraordinary grace; nevertheless, Christian mystics agree that their deepest experiences are received through a free gift from God and are not achieved by their own grace-filled efforts.<sup>6</sup> Their testimony is most persuasive, but we are free to analyze their experience in the light of the natural sciences to see how much, if anything, physiological techniques can contribute to Christian mysticism, its preparation, its early stages or its ultimate reaches.

My plan is as follows: first, to note briefly the physiological techniques used by mystics; second, to discuss more fully the resulting state of consciousness; third, to study this state in two hypothetical cases; fourth, to assess its dangers and benefits; and, fifth, to suggest some conclusions.

## I

Mystics in both the East and the West have resorted to physiological techniques to help them in their spiritual quest. Usage varies widely according to the time, the place, the culture and the religion; but five basic categories have emerged. Generally speaking, the first two give only remote conditioning for contemplation; the next two exert a more proximate influence; and the last one combines the others into an effective and well-integrated system.

A. *Manual labor* has long been considered indispensable to the contemplative life. Hindu gurus advocated *karma yoga*—union through work. Benedictine monks caught the twin constituents of Western monastic spirituality in their motto: *Ora et labora*. Even where technology has made life more sedentary, physical work still has its surrogates in exercise and sports.

B. *Deliberate Relaxation*, as a balance to work, whether physical or intellectual, has an updated Sabbath role in fostering the calmness and tranquillity so helpful in prayer.<sup>7</sup> For when the body is freed from muscular tensions, both thoughts and emotions are more easily con-

<sup>4</sup>W. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: University Books, 1963), p. 408, n. 2.

<sup>5</sup>R. Garrigou-LaGrange, O.P., *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, trans. by M. T. Doyle, O.P. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1937), p. 128.

<sup>6</sup>J. Maréchal, S.J., "Features of Christian Mysticism," *op. cit.*, pp. 200-01.

<sup>7</sup>See Harvey Cox's original ideas of meditation as a Sabbath, in *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977). Chap. 5, pp. 63-73.

trolled. Although scientifically grounded relaxation programs are often geared to the spiritual life, they teach essentially a physical skill.<sup>8</sup>

C. *Ascetical deprivation* is a crude but often effective mind-changing practice. The lives of the saints and mystics abound with examples of the use of vigils, fasting, mortifications (such as the hair-shirt, discipline, chains, and knotted cords) and isolation in darkness and silence, all of which have served often as the prelude, if not the necessary condition, of extraordinary prayer experiences.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes these practices are carried by a Henry Suso or Rose of Lima to apparently pathological extremes. But even when used more moderately, they seem to be motivated in part by a desire to do violence to the body so that the mind will be freed for a higher spiritual awareness.

D. *Physical regularization* makes a gentler attempt to alter consciousness, one more consonant with medical prudence. Although usually presupposing ascetical restraint, it relies chiefly on bodily actions, especially posturing and breathing. Let us look at them separately. (1) When we speak of postures, we immediately think of the *asanas* of *Hatha Yoga*, but most religions have their own hieratic gestures and postures. Kneeling, bowing, prostrating, genuflecting, signing with the cross, raising the hands—all these can be as dispositive of inner religious conviction as can sitting in the Lotus position or standing motionless on one's head. The oriental *T'ai Chi Ch'uan* adds a dynamic element as it flows from one pose to another, each barely held, reminiscent perhaps of the prophet David's dancing before the Arc or St. Teresa's dancing with her Carmelite sisters before the altar. (2) Controlled breathing is often used in conjunction with the postures. The slowed down and rhythmic use of this vital function, where the voluntary and the involuntary meet, tends to relax the body, to change moods and to calm the mind. The breath pattern varies—sometimes simply regular deep breathing, sometimes breathing elaborately proportioned according to its four parts: inhalation, retention, exhalation, abstention. When one concentrates on the breathing itself or when one adds a verbal or cognitive component, a mantra to be repeated in harmony with the breathing, the mind itself seems to be more easily unified and more profoundly focused.

E. *Systematic combinations* of deprivation, relaxation, posture and breath control have resulted in highly refined spiritual techniques. Yogis, Zen Buddhists, Sufis, Hesychasts—each group has its own contemplative procedures. Here are the mind-changing techniques at their best, where physiology is put to the service of mysticism. I do not intend to analyze any one of these systems, but will rather examine the altered state of consciousness which—however different the systems, their physical approach and their religious vision—seems, in the early stages, to be common to them all.

<sup>8</sup> See the pioneer work in this field by E. Jacobson, *Progressive Relaxation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).

<sup>9</sup> Some suggest that one reason why ascetical practices foster a heightened consciousness is the change in body chemistry and body rhythm that they induce. See R. E. L. Masters and Jean Houston, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 248.

But first I will summarize the consensus underlying the wide use of these various techniques. It is generally held, or simply taken for granted, that our physical actions can influence our minds, that we can do indirectly through these bodily procedures what we cannot do directly and that we can realize this indirect influence even on the level of prayer and mysticism.

Now we can look more carefully at the production and characteristics of this altered state of consciousness in order to understand better its relationship to mystical union with God.

## II

To help make clear the physiological changes that arise from the use of the combined techniques, I will discuss some of the scientific findings that have been reported in two recent books by two scientists who, from slightly different viewpoints, examine the same general area: one describes the basic meditation procedure and the resulting "wakeful hypometabolic state"; and the other analyzes the most relevant aspect of that state, alpha wave production. Together, these studies reveal the essence of the physiological contribution to the mystical experience.

### A. *The Wakeful Hypometabolic State*

Herbert Benson, M.D., Associate Professor at the Harvard Medical School and Director of the Hypertension Section at the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, made a short study called, *The Relaxation Response*.<sup>10</sup> The idea for the book came from his work with experts in Transcendental Meditation, a skillfully packaged and highly popular form of mantra yoga. Dr. Benson noticed that the practice of TM frequently helped reduce blood pressure and also produced a unified set of responses in certain other bodily processes. He discovered, too, that the same responses could be obtained by persons who, though untrained in TM, used a similar technique—but one without the Hindu rite of initiation, the sacred and secret mantra, and the expensive price tag. After further testing, he concluded that his technique led to a physical state of deep rest as well as to a new level of consciousness. To explain this, I will consider three main areas of this study: the simplified technique; the physiological results; and the mystical applicability.

First of all, the technique is simple with no pretensions to originality. Dr. Benson acknowledges its antiquity and its universality. He believes he has merely purified it of cultural and religious overtones. In the process, of course, he has effectively demythologized TM, his inspirational starting point. The directions are matter of fact: (1) sit comfortably in a quiet environment; (2) close the eyes and relax the body completely; (3) say a mantra, such as "one," at each exhalation, all the while breathing consciously through the nose; (4) continue for about twenty minutes, ignoring distractions by simply repeating the

<sup>10</sup>H. Benson, M.D., *The Relaxation Response* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1975).

mantra; (5) remain quiet for a few minutes after finishing, gradually readjusting.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the physiological result of this technique is that one enters a fourth state of consciousness, called a "wakeful hypometabolic state"—the other three are the sleeping, the dreaming and the ordinary waking states. What happens in the relaxation response is this: after a few minutes, with the body relaxed and the mind emptied through controlled breathing and the use of a mantra, the metabolic processes of the body show a radical change of pace, all coordinated under a master plan orchestrated by the hypothalamus in the brain. More specifically, there is a slowing down of the breathing and the heart rate; a lowering of the exchange rate of oxygen and carbon dioxide; a lowering of the blood pressure and the lactate level of the blood and, of special importance, a slowing down of brain wave frequencies with a change from beta wave to alpha wave production.

This relaxation response is the counterpart of an emergency reaction, for both are needed in coping with the environment. The emergency reaction, or the fight-flight reaction, is hypermetabolic and it stimulates the body to deal with threatening circumstances. The relaxation response is hypometabolic and it enables the body to reduce the stress occasioned by these conflicts. In calling both states "integrated responses" Benson means that, given the requisite conditions, the effect is automatic and coordinated. The sympathetic nervous system is controlled by hormones from the hypothalamus and the body changes accordingly. The responses cannot be directly willed but they can be caused by deliberately putting oneself in the appropriate circumstances or by carefully performing the requisite procedures.

Third, any mystical applicability after this biochemical litany may seem out of the question. What has the wakeful hypometabolic state to do with mysticism? Dr. Benson's answer is his fifth chapter, of which the "chief purpose is to illustrate the age-old universality of this altered state of consciousness."<sup>12</sup> After a cursory survey of Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, Taoist, Jewish and Christian mysticism, he concludes: "We believe that people have been describing the type of thinking which elicits the Relaxation Response throughout many cultures and religions."<sup>13</sup> Benson does not actually say that the wakeful hypometabolic state and mystical experience are the same. It is more a matter of mysticism by implication or, better, by association. For by quoting St. Teresa and Ruysbroeck and many other mystics and mystical writers he gives the impression that they are all speaking about the same thing—the wakeful hypometabolic state. That he does consider it a vehicle for transcendent experience is clear: "This approach is not to be interpreted as viewing religion or philosophy in a mechanistic fashion. The ultimate purpose of any exercise to attain transcendent experience corresponds to the

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, cf. Chap. 7, especially pp. 114-15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

philosophy or religion in which it is used."<sup>14</sup> He quotes William James on this point:

The fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies, provided only they can find a place in their framework for its peculiar emotional mood.<sup>15</sup>

Joseph Maréchal, S.J., writing about ten years after James, confronted this same issue squarely but made an important distinction: "From the *empirical* and *external* point of view all the isolated religious manifestations—*lower than the mystic states described as immediate union with God*—seem identical from one religion to the other; there is certainly a difference in their combination and harmonization, but not in the psychological type to which they are individually reducible."<sup>16</sup> Admitting that grace is not empirically visible, he nevertheless insisted on the radical difference that it makes, "a difference of value and finality."<sup>17</sup>

Benson makes no such distinction. Yet in the very first quotation that he uses to illustrate this "approach," we find Ruysbroeck distinguishing, on the basis of intending God's glory, true union from the imageless ascent: "Whoever then has, in his inward exercise, an imageless and free ascent unto his God, *and means nought else but the glory of God*, must taste the goodness of God; and he must feel from within a true union with God."<sup>18</sup>

For Benson, then, mysticism is a special alpha state with an ideational component. Spiritually, his simplified procedure is merely a means of altering brain waves so that, while the body cooperates, the alpha state dominates in a religious reverie. If so, we must take a closer look at these mysterious waves to see whether or not they hold the secret of the saints.

### B. *The Alpha Wave Production*

Barbara Brown, Ph.D., is Chief of Experimental Physiology at the Veterans Administration Hospital, Sepulveda, California, and a lecturer in the Department of Psychiatry at the UCLA Medical Center. An expert in the developing field of biofeedback, she has made an exhaustive study of the voluminous material on mind-body interaction. Her latest book, *New Mind, New Body*, brings together the most recent advances in the biofeedback drama, with special emphasis on the role of alpha waves.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> Maréchal, *Op. cit.*, pp. 199, italics supplied.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Benson, *op. cit.*, p. 76, italics supplied.

<sup>19</sup> B. Brown, *New Mind: New Body* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974, Bantam Edition, 1975). The bibliography is excellent.

Convinced of the importance of alpha wave research, she fights against three enemies: mystification, oversimplification, and presumption. First of all, we learn that just about everyone has experienced the alpha state, whether contemplative or not. It is part of our ordinary brain wave production. To go into the alpha state is not an unusual mystical experience, but one as familiar as resting or day-dreaming. Moreover, there is not just one alpha state, but "perhaps almost an infinite number of alphas."<sup>20</sup> Great differences exist between individuals and within the same individual. Frequency, amplitude, location, variation, cause and condition—these variables make each person's alpha profile almost unique. Finally, Dr. Brown notes that over the last forty years, there have appeared more than a thousand reports on alpha waves involving more than two thousand researchers but that, "after all this work, it is surprising how little we can say about the meaning and function of alpha."<sup>21</sup> And she warns that "concluding anything about alpha is perilous."<sup>22</sup> So to relate the mystical state and the alpha state is no solution to the problem, just a tentative beginning.

Despite the limitations of scientific knowledge in this field, Dr. Brown can report some emerging generalizations on the relationship of alpha waves and meditation. I will consider just two topics suggested by her study: the role of the alpha mantra; and the subjectivities of the alpha state.

The term, "alpha mantra," is used once in a subheading and never fully developed. It seems, in fact, to be identified by her with the signal of a feedback machine. Thus Dr. Brown speaks of "the relaxing effect of sitting still in a quiet place with nothing more than the feedback signal of one's alpha to disturb the silence"<sup>23</sup> and, again, of "a feeling of dissolving back into the feedback signal."<sup>24</sup> On the assumption that her "alpha mantra" is a mechanical aid, the following reservation is well taken: "While I question the value of alpha feedback for the advanced meditator, I find nothing wrong in its use as an educational aid."<sup>25</sup>

Biofeedback machines aside, I think her notion of an alpha mantra can profitably be pushed further. Certainly there is—perhaps more frequently than realized—the use of this delicate alpha sensation by itself to focus and stabilize consciousness, freeing it from discursiveness and the multiplicity of forms. Subtle and almost imperceptible, this alpha mantra barely fulfils the Aristotelian minimum for cognition: "The human soul is not able to know without a phantasm."<sup>26</sup> But consider what simplicity and quiet there is when the mind focuses exclusively on its own rhythmic electrical discharges. How crude and noisy, in comparison, when the focal point is the beating heart, heaving breath, echoing word or fragmenting thought, though these grosser mantras

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 386.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul*, III, 7.

may, of course, lead to the refinement of an alpha wave state. Here, then, is the quintessential physiological technique—the use of one's own alpha waves as a mantra.

The second topic concerns the alpha subjectivities, with which we must familiarize ourselves before attempting any comparisons with Christian mystical experiences. A fundamental characteristic can be noted: alpha states and environmental awareness are inversely proportional. "The best alpha producers generally are those who lost awareness of their environment, tending to lose all awareness of time and reporting later that their 60- or 90-minute session seemed like only a few minutes."<sup>27</sup> Here we see an aspect of the time-space detachment which is symptomatic of mystical experience.

Dr. Brown concludes that the alpha state and meditation give rise to very similar feelings: "Even the sensation of separation from the material universe can occur in both; a depersonalization, loss of individual identity, and a feeling of becoming aware of the unifying thread of life."<sup>28</sup> Or take, for example, another list of experiences reported from biofeedback sessions: "A sensation of floating, a feeling of dissolving back into the feedback signal, the loss of time perception, detachment, and other non-ordinary states and feelings."<sup>29</sup> Those experiences were also common to certain drug states. But Zen meditation revealed similar findings:

Many advocates, including some researchers, believe that alpha is instant Zen, instant satori, that the filling of the head with alpha waves with its accompanying divorcement from material reality is the equivalent of the Zen no-mind state. They tend to believe that the no-mind is the absence of thoughts of material attachments to the self, a dissolution of the ego. The experience is described as the ecstatic, mystical state of unity with the universe.<sup>30</sup>

The alpha state may be with or without content but, even when content is present, it may be vaguely amorphous or vividly concrete. It may be a feeling, a picture or an idea. "Some people report the flow of considerable imagery, almost a day-dreaming reverie; males often reported sexual fantasies."<sup>31</sup> As long as one does not focus on the contents of the alpha state intently or analyze them discursively, the state will not be interrupted. Nevertheless they do militate somewhat against the unification of consciousness. Here is where the mantra often proves helpful, recycling as it does the same feeling, image, word or thought, thereby focusing the mind and simplifying the consciousness.

Dr. Brown has made the alpha waves come alive as sources of somewhat familiar but still largely uncharted experiences, ranging from a merely pleasant feeling to a sense of being in tune with the universe. By her investigations of the alpha mantra and the alpha subjectivities, she has opened up new possibilities for the study of the contemplative life.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 383-84.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

Indeed, the work of both Benson and Brown afford us a scientific basis for holding that consciousness can be so altered by physiological techniques as to produce an alpha wave state and also that this state characterizes many varieties of contemplation and mysticism—at least in their early stages. Now I intend to consider the effect of these alpha experiences in terms of the distinction between acquired and infused contemplation.

### III

Applying these standard subjectivities of the alpha state to the prayer experience will help us see the problem there is for the Christian in determining the borderline between natural and infused contemplation. I will propose two hypothetical cases: the first grounded in an historical experience; the other based on the common alpha experiences.

The first case rests on an account that the poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson, related in a letter about a mantra-induced state of his.

I have never had any revelations through anaesthetics, but a kind of waking trance—this for lack of a better word—I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has come upon me through repeating my own name to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words—where death was an almost laughable impossibility—the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life.<sup>32</sup>

Suppose a parallel situation, in which someone when all alone repeats the name of Jesus until he, too, is no longer conscious of his own individuality. In fact, his individuality seems to fade and dissolve into boundless being—which represents God to him. He feels that he shares in the only true life and that he is immortal. Could he not apply to himself St. Paul's words: "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20)? But which experience, the historical or the hypothetical, would be mystical? Perhaps, in the broad sense, both. Which would be infused? Probably neither.

The second case is less obviously mystical and more commonplace. Suppose a committed Christian with firm and fervent faith, who tries to love God wholeheartedly and conform his will to God's, who, during the day, frequently recalls the presence of God and remains faithful to his half-hour of daily mental prayer.

What happens when he goes into the alpha state? Would not the standard subjective experiences take on a Christian dimension? He might begin to feel detached from environmental awareness, yet with a sense of the unifying thread of life. He might, in a confused and general way, identify this alpha feeling with the presence of God and respond to it peacefully and lovingly. His ego might at times feel depersonalized as if he were dissolving back into the alpha mantra and the presence of God.

<sup>32</sup> A. Tennyson, quoted in James, *op. cit.*, pp. 383-84, fn. 2.

The duration of this pious and prayerful alpha state might sometimes seem to be only a few minutes, though a whole hour might have passed. And so we must ask, did he have a mystical experience or simply an alpha experience elevated by ordinary faith and charity? Or to put it more precisely, was his experience infused or acquired contemplation?

The answer is easy: acquired contemplation, since I postulated only natural physiological responses and ordinary grace. But in individual lives God makes these allotments and does so mysteriously. The difficulty of discernment is increased by the fact that, as John of the Cross says of the dark contemplation of the night of senses: "This loving knowledge is apt at the beginning to be very subtle and delicate, and almost imperceptible to the senses,"<sup>33</sup> and that "although the soul be occupied therein, it can neither realize it nor perceive it."<sup>34</sup> Is there, then, no way to discern infused contemplation?

St. John's criteria for the beginning of infused contemplation focus on experiences very different from the descriptions of the alpha state reported by Dr. Brown. In fact, he would have classified the latter, however spiritually they were formulated, as hindrances: "In order to come to this essential union of love in God the soul must have a care not to lean upon imaginary visions nor upon forms or figures or particular objects of the understanding; for these cannot serve it as a proportionate means to such an end; rather they would disturb it and for this reason the soul must renounce them and strive never to have them."<sup>35</sup>

The best indication, for him, that the soul has passed into infused contemplation is that it is no longer able to meditate discursively as it used to do and is no longer able to get satisfaction from created things of sense or spirit, but that it does have a longing for silence and solitude with an attentiveness to God in a confused, general and loving way.<sup>36</sup> The sureness of his psychological insight is seen in his asking not what "mystical experiences" the soul has—always a dangerous question—but almost what experiences it does not have. He wants to discover whether it can still pray in the way that it normally does most other things, by using imagination and discursive reason, or whether it is perforce in the darkness of a transitional stage in which, though it yearns constantly for God and not his creatures, it can neither experience him on the former level of consciousness, which it is leaving, or on the new level of consciousness, which it is just entering. The soul has a difficult time, beset with self-doubts and frustrations; but it is a good time, a growing time.

#### IV

In assessing the value for Christian mysticism of physiologic techniques and the resulting alpha state, I will note, in summary fashion,

<sup>33</sup> John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (trans. and ed. by E. Allison Peers), II, xiii, 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv, 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, II, xvii, 10.

<sup>36</sup> For a full discussion of these criteria, see *Ascent*, II, xiii; *Night*, I, ix; and *Points of Love*, 40.

both the dangers and the benefits. First, then, the negative aspects, which, though not insurmountable, cause concern:

1. Some theorists use the evidence for a new level of consciousness that accompanies at least some "mystical" states as justification for the conclusion that all mystical experience is essentially the same. Huxley's "perennial philosophy"<sup>37</sup> and Maslow's "peak-experiences"<sup>38</sup> are, each in their own way, part of this naturalistic reductionism that contradicts the traditions of Christian mysticism.

2. Many people with genuine spiritual aspirations may easily become content with "the natural rest which the soul obtains when it is free from images and form," as John of the Cross defines it,<sup>39</sup> without moving on to the riches of the life of grace. Ruysbroeck, too, mentioned this "false vacancy"<sup>40</sup> or "vacant introversion in quietude,"<sup>41</sup> whereby some "have gone astray into the vacant and blind simplicity of their own being."<sup>42</sup>

3. Sincere beginners in prayer may be tempted to bypass both spiritual reading and discursive meditation for a spiritually flavored natural rest. They think they are mystics: St. Teresa calls them "dolts," *bobos*.<sup>43</sup> Their hearts are as empty as their minds, for they have not brought their wills into a loving relationship with God through an enlightened and informed faith. Wasting precious time and energy, they deceive themselves.

4. Emptied souls, unfilled by love, may find themselves subject to unexpected evils. R. C. Zaehner warns of the return of the proverbial seven devils.<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere, he quotes Bernanos on how Satan counterfeits the peace that surpasses understanding: "Far higher than the pleasures that only stir your entrails, his masterpiece is a silent peace, solitary, icy, comparable only to the enjoyment of nothingness."<sup>45</sup> In addition to pride and its progeny, dangerous also is the subtle quietism which avoids all actions—unless prompted by a manifest intervention of God—including not only external activities but also the internal practice of the virtues, even acts of love of God.

Despite the very real hazards arising from the misuse of this alpha state, its great benefits certainly warrant its use. Of course, sooner or later this state will appear if one prays regularly and quietly without

<sup>37</sup>A. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1945). See also the response by Martin D'Arcy, S.J. *The Meeting of Love and Knowledge* (New York, Harper and Row, 1957).

<sup>38</sup>A. Maslow, *Religion, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964; New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

<sup>39</sup>John of the Cross, *Ascent*, III, xiii, 1.

<sup>40</sup>John of Ruysbroeck, *The Book of Supreme Truth*, trans. by C. A. Wynschenk Dom, ed. by E. Underhill (London: John M. Watkins, 1951), p. 229.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>43</sup>St. Teresa, *Castillo Interior*, ed. P. Silverio (Burgos, 1935), 4th Moradas, C. III, No. 5, p. 532.

<sup>44</sup>R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957; Galaxy Book, 1961), p. 173.

<sup>45</sup>G. Bernanos, *Sous le Soleil de Satan* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 154, quoted in Zaehner, *Zen, Drugs, and Mysticism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 147.

busyness, so the task is to correspond with it properly. Here are the positive aspects of this physiological change.

1. Longer prayer is facilitated by the removal of restlessness, the body having become more obedient and tranquil.

2. More attentive prayer is facilitated by the elimination of distractions, for the mind is freed of preoccupations and of its continuing dialogue with itself.

3. More profound prayer is facilitated by transcending forms and discursiveness, for the mind learns to function on a less divided level and with a larger capacity for spiritual experience.

4. In brief, the physiologically induced alpha state helps in varying degrees to dispose a person for mystical experience, natural or supernatural, by minimizing, at least in part, the impediments arising from our bodily condition. It does so by gradually subjecting the senses, emotions, imagination and discursive reason more completely to the Spirit.

How necessary for the mystical life this *removens prohibens* function is can be seen from the purpose St. John attributes to the dark night of the senses—for him, a state of infused contemplation: “The purgation of the senses is the only entrance and the beginning of contemplation leading to the purgation of the spirit, and . . . serves rather to accommodate sense to spirit than to unite spirit to God.”<sup>46</sup> Earlier in the same treatise, he developed the point more fully: “God leads the soul into the night of sense in order to purge the sense of its lower parts and to subdue it, unite it, and bring it into conformity by setting it in darkness and causing it to cease from meditation.”<sup>47</sup>

Note that this purpose is largely natural as is the purpose of the physiological techniques—the accommodation of sense to spirit. Thus we have two complementary means of disposing the soul for mystical experience: in the dark night the emphasis is on the radical purgation of inordinate appetites and the transcending of created forms; in the physiological mind-changing process the emphasis is primarily on the elimination of forms and partly on the pacification of the body.

Although the soul cannot purify itself sufficiently without the passive purifications of the dark night, St. John urges it on: “It befits the soul, in so far as it can, to contrive to labor on its own account to purge and perfect itself, so that it may merit being taken by God into that divine care wherein it becomes healed of all things that it was unable of itself to cure.”<sup>48</sup>

## V

How, finally, do we answer the question: can physiological techniques lead to Christian mysticism? I will phrase my reply in a series of conclusions:

1. These physiological techniques can lead to an altered state of consciousness called the wakeful hypometabolic state or, more simply, the alpha state.

<sup>46</sup> John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, II, ii, 1.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, I, xi, 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, I, iii, 3.

2. In itself, this alpha state is certainly not supernatural and it is not even essentially mystical, but it may facilitate a mystical experience involving nature, self or God.

3. For Christian mysticism, a supernatural grace is needed, and perhaps even an extraordinary one, for the alpha state can facilitate, though it cannot cause, infused contemplation.

4. The precise function of this natural alpha state in Christian mysticism is kenotic: it helps empty the imagination and discursive reason so that the soul is better disposed to open itself to the light of God's grace. For, as John of the Cross insists, "Pure contemplation is to receive."<sup>49</sup>

5. Nevertheless, the crucial act of the Christian mystic is not in emptying the mind but in loving God. John of the Cross is again in point: "God communicates Himself most to the soul that has progressed farthest in love."<sup>50</sup> For the Christian, mysticism is fundamentally a union of wills from which, through connaturality, awareness comes: in the words of Gregory the Great, *Per amorem agnoscimus*.<sup>51</sup> There is no short-cut in this mysticism other than the conformity of our wills to the will of God. No physiological or psychological skill can ever substitute for this love. That is why Jesus, in the Discourse after the Last Supper, linked a loving conformity with his promised manifestation: "He that has my commandments and keeps them, he it is that loves me: he that loves me shall be loved of my Father and I will love him and will manifest myself to him" (Jn 14:21).

Can physiological techniques lead to Christian mysticism? Yes, but only as the humble instrumentality of a purified and intensified love of God.

DAVID GRANFIELD  
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<sup>49</sup>John of the Cross, *The Living Flame*, B, III, 36.

<sup>50</sup>*Idem*, *Ascent*, II, v, 4.

<sup>51</sup>Gregory the Great, *Moralia*, X, 8, 13.