
**FROM MARTYRS, CHRISTIANS, WITCHES AND FREUD . .
TO ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS
IN OCCIDENTAL RELIGIONS**

by

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The taboo which has always covered and protected the sphere of religious experience has made sure that, from Christian persecution to the Inquisition, from Freud to the present, anyone owning up to having participated in inexplicable events should be labelled pathological, thus ensuring the continuation of the taboo and placating the conscience of the expert. In my 17 years as a professional psychoanalyst, I have been able to verify that this depends on a fear of delving into the unknown, of venturing beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and yet this is the very task of a science which is based on human awareness and on investigating the psyche itself.

Mystic vision is as much a part of our culture and experience as is denying it and running it down out of self defence. In support of this, many patients, colleagues (and myself) have related experiences with the transcendental in the privacy of a situation covered by professional secrecy. All things considered, I think it is time to throw open the doors and stop peering through the key-hole, whatever be behind it.

From christian martyrs, witches, warlocks and Freud . . to altered states of consciousness in western religions.

There is a strange circular pattern in the elements of my title which in the end takes me back to the beginning: to the pathological alibi which historically has always been present to explain what our rational world is unable to define on the basis of common sense (1)

Ther first not to be believed was Christ, who spoke of another reality, of another life yet to come. He was considered dangerous, socially destabilizing, and was therefore accused of madness and eventually put to death. The ensuing persecution of Christians created thousands of martyrs: an examination of the Greek etymon of 'martyr' shows its meaning to be *witness*, and herein lies the nature of their 'transgression': they had dared to see, to think and to believe beyond what was rationally permitted, beyond the perceptible.

Historical progression takes us to the epoch of witches and warlocks who, by exceeding the bounds of conformism, lived their diversity and paid for a tendency to reach

towards the unknown, towards overcoming the limits pre-established by common morality and therefore, by definition, normal.

The study of anthropology, of sociology and of theology reveals a history of religious, social, political cultural and scientific persecution, born of abysmal ignorance and fear.

Yet life, and science, which is awareness, evolve by intuition, the root of which is 'to look, to see'. Intuition is clear vision par excellence. It is seeing clearly into the unknown. This makes it a specific aptitude and privileged instrument of psychoanalysis.

Nevertheless, Freud, fearful of the emotional state evoked in religious practice, preferred to talk of hallucination, delirium and hysterical ecstasy, and expressed himself in a partial language identifying such states with unhealthy mental conditions, even though objective scientific terminology would have defined them unusual. He was most likely intimidated by the persecution which he himself had to suffer because of his daringly expressed revolutionary ideas. It is no coincidence that the epoch of hysteria was almost contemporary with the spread of spiritualism, suggesting the same need for the supernatural.

Today a compromise has been reached: the experience is now described as 'altered states of consciousness. Taine already defined hallucination as a real perception of what we feel, see or

touch, but goes beyond this to another world' in which a co-life, a meta-life keeps us from limiting the Universe only to that which can be seen and touched.

It is clear to the attentive observer that what is defined as 'collective hallucination' is created between like individuals (since science accepts the existence of experiences such as telepathy and free association), determining a local 'field' which may be defined either as fanaticism or authentic religious experience.

In 'The Evolution of Physics', Einstein states that 'reality is a field which concerns matter and man, and sooner or later a link will be discovered between the world of ideas and that of physical phenomena'.

Fear of risking our name, prestige, credibility and professional respectability still prevents many analysts from testifying to our personal experiences of altered states of consciousness, which mix and merge with the Transcendental.

Yet in this historic period it appeared that a common subconscious was creating hoards of visionaries, of mystic experiences (Russia, Yugoslavia, Italy, etc.) and even though abiding by the strict prudence of the Church in relation to this delicate subject (mystics such as St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa D'Avila did not have faith in their visions), my feeling is that all this is the response to a human need for contact with the divine, to the ethical,

cultural and scientific ferment which accompanies any period of deep transformation, without this necessarily revealing a pathological component.

St. Matthew said: 'Ask and it shall be given you . . . knock, and it shall be opened unto you', and perhaps the time is ripe for just that. Too many paranormal experiences are being reported in different parts of the world, from the widest range of social classes as evidence which must no longer be suppressed as pathological or socially unacceptable. Instinct, the mystical (3) and the emotional, for too long relegated to the symbolic language of dreams, can now come out of the closet.

I was fortunate, on one occasion, to see into a world beyond, and once I had overcome my natural, instinctive fear and my cultural and rational barriers, I felt richer. I had broken the restraints of some of my preconceptions. I am mentally healthy; my equilibrium, my concept of reality and my intuitive ability made me become a psychoanalyst: I am a Catholic; and I shall no longer consider visions or extra-sensory experiences as the fruit of pathologies or fanatical minds. Rather, with deep humility and faith, I shall try to understand the message they contain, without confusing them with the conventional label of 'mental disturbance'

Bibliography

- 1 Enciclopedia della Psicologia. Volume: Parasicologia, Trento Procaccianty Editore, Milan, 1972.
- 2 The Bible, The Gospel according to Matthew, Cap.7, 1 - 13.
- 3 Enciclopedia Motta, Federico Motta Ed., Milan, 1964.

Notes

1 Jung in 'Man and his Symbols' states: "What the psychologists call psychic identity or mystic participation has been cut out of the world of our experience . . . More than once I have been consulted by educated, intelligent people who have had special dreams, fantasies and even visions which left them deeply impressed. They started from the assumption that nobody in their right mind suffers these disorders and that anyone who had a vision must be suffering from a pathological state. To quote the terror of a theologian who experienced a vision: 'We are totally accustomed to the apparently rational nature of the world in which we live and it is difficult for us to imagine an event which cannot be explained on the basis of common sense. If we consider free associations, they constitute the link between the rational world of consciousness and the instinctive world.' "

2 Hallucination: perception of an object in the absence of the object itself.

3 Mystical: from the Greek