The Essential Agus

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CHIEF RABBI KUK was essentially a mystic. His claim that “man is by nature a mystic”¹ may or may not be applicable to the generality of mankind, but it was certainly an accurate reflection of his own state of mind. His posthumous works, in particular, reveal him as a mystic of rare profundity and scope. All the facets of his fascinating personality become understandable only when they are related to the mystical experiences that were the central events in his psychic life. His bold metaphysical speculations and his radical reinterpretations of Kabbalistic concepts derive their significance and value from the facts of his own life. Daring as some of his ideas appear to be, they never break out of the charmed circle of mystical experience and contemplation. The stormy waves of doubt that assailed him from time to time and threatened to topple the structure of his convictions were not allayed by rational or even by the traditional arguments so much as by a resurgence of that strange and overwhelming spiritual phenomenon, whose glories he never tired of singing. The many volumes of published and unpublished writings that he left behind are but a series of symphonic variations on the basic melody of his life—his yearning for and discovery of the “nearness of God.”

How does he describe this central fact in his spiritual life? In common with nearly all other great mystics, he insists that the mystical experience is unique and ineffable, so radically different from the nor-
mal course of events as not to be expressible in the medium of common speech. Silence alone does justice to the sacred intensity of mystical ecstasy. Thus, he writes,

And life is so joyous, so sacred, so filled with the majesty of the Name of the Lord. You long to express His name, to interpret the exalted light. You are filled with an intense thirst, pleasing in the extreme, to fill your mouth with the praise of the God of gods. And out of the abundance of pure fear, the intensity of holy trembling, you return to silence.²

But, incommunicable though the fulness of mystical ecstasy be, he returns again and again to the attempt to capture in human language some of its fleeting aspects. In poetic, winged words he rhapsodizes on the majesty of the mystic’s inner life, its cosmic effects and significance, and the spiritual “certainties” that it leaves behind.

Expanses, expanses
Expanses divine, my soul doth crave.
Enclose me not in cages,
Of matter or mind.
Thru heavenly vastness my soul doth soar
Unfenced by walls of heart
Or walls of deed—
Of ethics, logic or mores—
Above all these it soars and flies,
Above the expressible and nameable,
Above delight and beauty.
Exalted and ethereal.
Lovesick am I—
I pant, I pant for my Lord,
As a deer for river banks,
Oh, who can my anguish relate?
Who lyre be, to sing my agony,
To voice my bitterness,
The endless pain of expression?
I thirst for truth, not concepts of truth.
Lo, I ride above the heavens,
Wholly absorbed within the truth
Wholly pained by travail of expression;
How can I the great truth articulate
Which my heart overfills?
Who can to multitudes uncover,
To nations and individuals
The total fulness that is creation,
The sparks of light and warmth
Which my soul doth contain.
I see those flames arising,
Bursting thru all firmaments.
Who perceives them?
Who of their vigor can relate?
I am not one of God's elected heroes,
That found all worlds within them
And did not care if others
Their riches knew or not.
These herds of sheep that walk erect,
Will it matter if they know the height of man?
Is then aught harmed by ignorance?
But, I am to this world enchained.
The living, they are my friends.
My soul with them is intertwined;
How then illumination share with them?
For all that I relate
Doth only hide my radiance,
Becloud my inner light.
Thus, great is my pain and anguish.
My God, be Thou my help in trouble!
Grant me the gifts of articulation,
Expression, the mind's translation—
That I might of Thy truths narrate,
Thy Truth, Oh, my God.  

Strangely enough, there are no exceptions in nature, and the unique psychical experiences of the Chief Rabbi exhibit the same general characteristics that are found in the records of all so-called "grand mystics." The following stages on the way of mysticism are abundantly illustrated in his writings, though they are nowhere clearly schematized or systematized.
CONFLICT AND THE INWARD PATH

The first stage on the path of mysticism is marked by an uneasy apprehension of inner conflict and contradiction. The seeker tires of the "fragmentariness" of conceptual knowledge, and he undertakes in utter sincerity the task of discovering his own soul and the substance of the universe. He realizes that the surface phenomena, both of his own soul and of the outside world, present a pluralistic panorama, a multitude of diverse data and feelings, without any inherent principle of unity. Turning his gaze inward, he finds numerous mental images, a restless current of ideas and emotions, but no underlying, unifying principle, no subject corresponding to the pronoun, "I." Projecting his glance into the outer world, he finds similarly unrelated events, bits of knowledge "that cast shadows upon one another." Kuk believed that the multitudinous, chaotic appearance of the external world was merely a reflection of the loss of the sense of unity and personality in one's own soul. "Because of the narrow receptive faculty of man," he writes, "one datum contradicts the other datum; one feeling combats the other feeling, and one image pushes out the other; but, in truth, one datum fortifies the other datum, different feelings vitalize each other, and the several images in one's mind complete each other. The more a man is uplifted, the wider his faculties expand, until he comes to find within himself the satisfying fullness of inner peace and the consequent consistency between all data, feelings and images."\(^4\) In one of his poems, he wrote,

How great is my inner battle!  
My heart is filled with yearning, spiritual, multi-directional,  
I beg for sweetness, divine, to permeate me. . .  
I long without cessation,  
Cry out in my inward essence,  
in loud voice:  
"The light of God give me. . . ."\(^5\)

The first step, then, consists in a deep revulsion against the multiplicity of external knowledge and in a determination to discover the principles of truth and unity within the deeper layers of the soul. Reality cannot be apprehended by the senses in one all-encompassing vision. Consciousness is like a narrow gleam of light cast into the vast mysterious darkness of the outer world bringing only one object at a time
within the range of our mental perception. It follows that the view of the total pattern of existence is forever excluded from the reach of those who pursue only the path of external knowledge. "The thoughts which derive from the externality of the world mislead all men, even the best of them. A kind of inner intoxication is dissolved in them. And the vast majority of mankind readily succumbs to this intoxication."  

To break the spell cast by the material world upon one's mind, it is necessary to make a gigantic effort to achieve the feeling of inner unity. Thus we seek to discover reality by finding ourselves. The deeper we descend to the recesses of our own soul, the closer we come to the inwardness and essence of all things. Nature surrenders the key of her being to the one who has discovered the key to his own personality.

UNITY

The quest for truth, then, must begin with the endeavor to achieve inner unity. This goal is unfortunately too often taken for granted. Living from hand to mouth spiritually, we are seldom sufficiently critical of ourselves to notice the conflicting tides of emotion and currents of thought within us. It is essential, to begin with, to recognize the truth that inner unity is an ideal that may be reached for fleeting moments only and is never permanently an accomplished fact. Thus, Kuk is reported to have said,

Whoever said concerning me that my soul is torn apart, was quite right. Of course it is torn. We cannot picture in our intellect a man whose soul is not torn. Only inanimate objects are complete. But man consists of contrary aspirations, so that there is always an inner battle within him and his task is to overcome the contradictions in his soul thru an all-embracing principle, in the universality of which everything is included and brought to perfect harmony. Naturally, no human being can ever completely attain this ideal for which we strive; but, thru our efforts, we can approach it more and more. And this is what the Kabbalists call "unification."  

Kuk's predilection for the ideal of harmony and his method of reinterpretation of Kabbalistic concepts is here illustrated with striking clarity. The practice of Yichudim among the masters of Kabbalah con-
sisted in the repetition of certain names and formulae, by which “unification” was believed to be achieved in the mysterious upper worlds of the sefirot. As a result of this “unification,” the flow of “light” and grace from heaven to earth was supposed to be eased, with the soul of the saint receiving a major increment of it. Kuk applies the term in this passage to the unification of the personality of the mystic, though in other passages he continues to employ the same term in its classic significance.

The basic need, then, is a recognition of the divisiveness of our being. The next step is an attempt to overcome the dichotomies within us and to attain a measure of unity. It must be understood that the mystic is not in search of an abstract principle of unity, but of the psychic feeling of unification that overcomes at one stroke all the inner and outer lines of demarcation. Kuk does not offer a rational principle that is capable of precise formulation. He can merely point to his own experience, in which there was revealed to him an intuition of the organic unity “of all the world.” He relates that on many an occasion he would become keenly aware, in fear and trembling, of the supreme majesty of the Divine power that dwells within every particle of the universe.

The gates are opened, the King of glory enters... The worlds are united, the hidden and the revealed are commingled, body and soul are merged, the “lights” and the “vessels” are linked together. And an exquisite sweetness, an inner, intense and highly exalted pleasure is uncovered in the source of the rejoicing soul. Then power and light from above appear unto thee with all the ornamentation of their many lights. Thou wilt recognize thy power and the intensity of thy exaltation; wilt know thy humbleness and thy unworthiness, the unworthiness of all creatures...8

It is apparent from this description that Kuk’s vision of unity is not the result of an arbitrary fiat on his part, but is rather due to a sudden invasion of the normal consciousness by a current of feeling from the mysterious realm of the unconscious. Inner and outer unity is achieved simultaneously in a wondrous blaze of glory. “God enters” and all things become one in and thru Him, for in essence all creatures are but sparks of the invisible radiance of God. This does not mean, that, according to Kuk, the pluralistic universe is unreal or that, at bottom, the universe is
an undifferentiated and unvaried manifestation of the Divine. On the contrary, the principle of differentiation is directly implied in the process of revelation, as will be shown in the sequel. Thus, even in the glow of mystical ecstasy, the separateness of things does not disappear. In Kuk’s vision, unity is an added, transforming quality, not a sea of identity. A new dimension comes into view, so to speak, which uncovers the merging roots of all things. “The distinguishing mark of the spiritual intuition is the view of all things together.”

This togetherness is not horizontal in character, but vertical. Things arrange themselves in accordance with their nearness to the source of life, so that the whole universe takes on the appearance of a multitude of “ladders of Jacob,” which are “set up on the earth and the top of them reaches to heaven.” Kuk describes this hierarchy in the inner structure of things with infectious enthusiasm: “But the thing which causes us to think, to reflect, to sing and to believe is the foundation of the worlds. And this foundation includes links of one great chain, long and ordered, in which every link is attached to the next one, in a natural arrangement of sanctity.” In this mystical chain of being, all the objects of creation and all human deeds and thoughts find their proper and respective places. There is no leveling of value in the inner world. All things are not equal, but there are bonds of fellowship between the highest and the lowest. In the all-inclusive chain of creation, there are neither irrevocable breaks, nor missing links. There is no unbridgeable gulf between the sacred and the secular or between the spiritual and the material or between the good and the bad. As Kuk puts it, “The heavens and the heavens of heavens together with the depths of the earth constitute one unit, one world, one being.”

In another connection, he describes the hierarchy of Being in intellectualistic terms, as graded particularizations of the one Great Thought. Thus, he writes, “What do we see in the vision? We see the Supreme Thought (HaMachshavah HaElyona), the Thought which embraces all things, the Thought which contains the power and the fulness of the Whole. We see that all the great rivers flow from it, and streams issue from the rivers, and brooks from the streams, and the brooks divide into many channels and the channels divide into many thousands, indeed an infinity of little canals, which pour forth the bounty (shifoth) of will, life and thought.”
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FEAR AND TREMBLING

The sudden incursion into normal consciousness of the Divine current of light and life is sometimes preceded or followed by a keen feeling of fear and awe. A physical shudder, without apparent cause, shakes the mystic to the depths of his being. At the very threshold of delighted ecstasy, he is seized by a mysterious anxiety, which gradually deepens into a sense of nameless, inexplicable terror. In keeping with his Kabbalistic background, Kuk interprets this phase of the mystical experience as being a vague, subconscious memory of the cosmic catastrophe of the “destruction of the vessels.” Thus, he writes, “The first step, which derives from the ancient event of destruction, arouses that shudder in the soul (zi-azu-a) which is to pure fear, as the shell is to the seed.”

According to Lurianic Kabbalah, the first ten sefirot, also called vessels, were shattered because they could not contain the flow of God’s grace, when it was poured into them for the purpose of creating the world. This cosmic catastrophe is conceived in Kabbalah not as an event of the dead past but as an integral phase of the eternal riddle of the universe and of the human soul. In the case of Adam and Eve and millennia later when the Israelites stood at Sinai, the same drama was reenacted, the “vessels” proving too weak for the transcendent power of the Almighty. The creature is always liable to “break” when it comes into direct relation with the overflowing boundless energy of the Creator which impels it to levels of being for which it is not prepared. Therefore, when the soul of the mystic becomes aware of the imminent influx of the Divine current of grace, it recalls vaguely the tragedy of ancestral experience and it trembles in fearful anticipation of being unable to bear the blinding radiance that might ensue.

The shudder of mystical ecstasy has its counterpart, according to Kuk, in the peculiar spiritual travail that is the special burden of all original creators. “Great are the agonies of creation,” he writes. “They remove man from the troubled world in which the material forces of life are so deeply rooted, to the realm of Divine emanation and purity in which the human soul is a rightful citizen, exercising its powers in freedom.” The more profoundly original a new creation is, the more it is accompanied by “the agonies of creation reminiscent of the destruction of the worlds.” Since all genuine creativeness is mystical in character deriving from an inflow of Divine energy into the soul of the artist, there can be no real artistic productivity without the sting of
spiritual tension and pain. "Superficial artists dream of creativeness, while they indulge in satiety, in lightheartedness, in a life of eating and drinking and promenading. They regard the pain and bitterness in which the royal crown of the spirit is hidden as a kind of sweat which is reserved for second rate artists. But this is a bitter mistake. . . .”\(^{16}\)

**FREEDOM**

An essential phase of Kuk's religious experience is a unique awareness of freedom. The iron laws of causation which hold all creation in thrall seem to break and fade away for the mystic in his moments of exaltation. The normal human sense of freedom of choice seems to increase in intensity a hundred-fold as the mystic becomes more keenly conscious of the springs of power in his own soul. So characteristic is the experience of freedom in Kuk's pattern of piety that he consistently refers to the spiritual world of mystical intuition as the "world of freedom" (*Olam HaCheruth*). This realm of freedom is closer to ultimate reality than the physical world of sounds, shapes and colors. Glimpses of it come to every man whenever he opposes the free dictates of his own conscience to the temptations of the world. Kuk employs Kant's terminology when he designates every moral act as a free act, but he parts company with the great German philosopher when he declares our human standards of justice, including the Golden Rule and the Categorical Imperative, to be merely rough crystallizations of the fluid spiritual current of freedom that derives from the Creator. In other words, God is above morality, and whenever we ascend nearer to Him, we glimpse the reality of freedom, of which the principles of human ethics are but rough approximations.\(^{17}\)

From a psychological point of view, the basic meaning of freedom is the absence of limitation on one's power. Thus Kuk writes,

Mystical apprehension is founded on the inner conviction of almightiness, the absence of limitation on the possibilities of infinite power. Objective cognition is, on the other hand, built on the knowledge of the limitation of power in accordance with the circumstances in which power manifests itself in this world. In each sphere, the form of one or the other cognition enjoys absolute sovereignty. There is no limit to one's power in the inner world; there is no freedom in the outer physical world.
But, freedom is not only a negative feeling, denoting the absence of foreign, limiting forces; it contains also a positive phase, the feeling of being true to the nature of one's own inner life. Kuk portrays the interior life of the spirit as a living wellspring of ceaseless creativity, that is normally hemmed in and held in check by the pressure of outside distractions. The surface processes of the human mind can only register impressions, arrange them in their proper classifications and rearrange them according to need. Even the power of reasoning is superficial in character, suited for practical calculations, for the critical appraisal of new creations, for finding faults and adjudging merits. The real source of creativity lies in the deeper recesses of the human soul, where it is in contact with the Divine current of creativity. Thus as soon as one's consciousness is liberated from the bewitching power of the outer world, his soul becomes aware of the tremendous stores of creative power within it.

In every second, in the smallest instant of time, we create, consciously and unconsciously, an endless multitude of creations; if we can only learn to perceive them, bring them within the borders of clear cognition, accustom ourselves to include them within the framework of expression suitable for them, then their splendor and majesty will be revealed and their power in all the phases of life will become visible.\(^{18}\)

This creativity of the inner soul is not always understood, because it is too vibrant with the intensity of life to be captured in cold, conceptual terms, but, then, Kuk declares emphatically that whatever is genuinely creative derives from it. "It is only the free soul that creates."\(^{19}\)

In common with Maimonides, Kuk describes the process of creation in the inner realm of freedom as being neither smooth nor constant, but as consisting of intermittent, fleeting flashes of insight, very much like the flashes of lightning in a dark sky. Even if their real import is not realized at the moment, the residue of "spiritual fulness and grace" that they deposit in the soul develops in the course of time into works of art.\(^{20}\)

For in them the secret of the higher life is revealed; all rational labor, all systematic work, all laws and judgments, religious precepts and verdicts, profound conceptions and maxims of logic derive the spirit of their life
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only from the shadows of the shadows of the radiance of these great flashes.  

PRINCIPLE OF ALTERNATION

In the writings of Kuk, the thought is frequently reiterated that the path of mystical enlightenment is not one of continuous ascent, but that, in accordance with the law of rhythm that governs all phenomena of life, the highest experiences of piety contain phases of depression as well as exaltation. In fact, these ups and downs in the inner life of the spirit are as intimately related as the crest of an ocean wave and its trough. Every upward step into the joy of ecstasy and freedom is followed by a downward plunge into the depths of darkness and despair. The glorious lightning-like vision of the organic unity of the universe is succeeded by a gradual relaxation of inner tension, which slowly deepens into a feeling of gloom and frustration. "Hours of this kind," he writes, "are most bitter to the possessors of a higher soul. Then they groan and moan in spiritual travail; then the world and its pains cannot measure up to the intensity of their agony. Then their souls cry unto God out of their terrible anguish, out of the fathomless deep, and the Lord turns unto them and bestows more of His Light unto them." Kuk returns again and again to this fascinating theme of the alternation of light and darkness, joy and pain, exaltation and depression, in the great spiritual adventure of the mystic. The profound melancholy of the mystic’s “dark night” is a kind of psychical recoil from the dizzy height to which his soul had leaped. It is the “morning after” feeling of returning, with eyes dazed by the glory they beheld, to the drab routine of ordinary existence. The riddle of the universe is felt to be agonizing in its obdurate opaqueness, because of the unforgettable memory of the brief glimpse into its solution that was afforded to him. As Kuk phrases it,

Thereupon, there follows the recognition, how everything is dark and devoid of any value in comparison with the light of the Infinite; how the endless depths which separate the Creator from the created render seemingly impossible any kind of relation between them. Then everything is dried up and emptied of meaning. And out of this travail of the soul and out of this deep insight into the nothingness of all things and the majestic fulness of their Source and the power of the exalted existence of the Supreme Light, its positive phases
and its brightness begin to fill all the chambers of his soul. . . . And he begins to ascend, the confidence of his soul and the sense of the eternity of his life is intensified and he is uplifted to higher spheres, until he recognizes his frustration and wretchedness, and, with a broken spirit, he succumbs to despair; thereupon, the spirit returns to shine for him. It comes and goes like flashes of lightning.  

Thus, there was an ebb and flow of spiritual insight and exaltation in the inner life of Kuk, as in the case of most mystics, his spirit oscillating between feelings of ecstasy and moments of deepest despair.

**CONTENT OF THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE**

We have already sketched some of the characteristics of Kuk’s mystical experience, the sense of unity, the experience of freedom and the resolution of conflicts. These are qualities of the psychical phenomenon of mysticism. But what does the mystic himself “see” in his highest moments? What is the substance of the reality that is revealed to him? What is the nature of the message that he receives from the Divine?

In common with other great mystics, Kuk affirms that the “what” of the mystical experience remains nebulous even in the lucid moments of ecstasy. But, there is the ineluctable certainty “that” one is listening to a call from above and that this call derives from a transcendent source. A profound feeling of consecration to high ends takes hold of the mystic, abiding with him as a dynamic urge to discover the significance of these ends and to attempt their realization in the circumstances of his actual life. Generally, he need not wait long before the nature of the duties to which his life must now be dedicated is manifested to him.

Though we do not perceive articulate letters and distinct words, we regard our secular and Torah studies as intended solely for the purpose of obtaining as much as possible the clarity of words out of the exalted sound which beats constantly in our inner ear, that we may present them to ourselves and to others in a form that leads to action and to properly ordered and systematized reflection.

Kuk frequently refers to the “call” that wordlessly transmits a message to the mystic. Thus he defines the basic attitude of the mystic as being that of absorbed, whole-souled listening.
The higher waves beat upon our soul increasingly. The inner movements of our spirit are products of the notes which the violin of our soul sounds, in its rapt exaltation. Though we cannot know what it is all about, nor express it in any detail, nor give a rational summary of it, nor define the topics of the higher sounds, nevertheless we listen with a total listening. The voice of words do we hear. . . .

Again, he speaks of the “call” as a paradoxical combination of light and sound, as in this passage,

When all the parts of man, the physical and the spiritual, are readied and purified, and the lust for the holiness of the exalted Nature of God . . . breaks for itself a path, then, to the extent that this is done, the walls of limitation are removed and a straight light and a straight sound reaches us, suffused with the riches of life and the wisdom of truth.

Weaker echoes of this mystical “call” seem to have been almost daily occurrences in the life of Kuk. Thus he frequently writes of the “song of the soul” as an ever present, never silent, inner melody, an expression of the ceaseless yearning of the creature for its Creator. All religious life and thought is simply an attempt to grasp and to express this melody of faith.

Faith is the song of life, the song of Being. And a song is the most penetrating perception, more inward by far in its conceptual essence than any prosaic conception can be. . . . Woe to him who wishes to denude life of the splendor of its poetry; he loses all the inwardness and truth of life.

The profound religious experience of Kuk transformed for him the entire sordid panorama of mundane existence into one infinite expanse of radiant beauty. Consequently, the dark pessimism of the modern man is totally alien to his spirit. In one of his poems, he wrote,

Radiant is the soul of the world,
Beautiful and resplendent,
Soul-wealth, overflowing,
Holy Spirit, abounding,
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Fountains of fortitude,
Majesty and beatitude.
Proudly I am unlifted,
Raised to the world's elan,
Loftiest peak of its soul.
How gorgeous the vision!
Come all, partake, enjoy,
Take in this delight,
This heavenly bliss.
Taste and see that God is good.29

DYNAMISM

The world of reality as revealed in mystical intuition is not an empty placid Nirvana, but a dynamic current of vitality, full of vigor and verve and creativity. Far from being an escape from life, the path of mysticism takes one to the very source of life, "the life of life" in Kabbalistic terminology. The discovery of the mystic consists in the claim that at bottom the world is not a dark dead machine, running down to total stillness, like an unwound spring. The real world is, on the contrary, full of life and light and overflowing energy, seeking to express itself in ever new forms. To the interior vision, "everything flows on and on, trembles and aspires."30 There is a nisus in the substance of the world, which breaks forth in new creations, from time to time, bringing a chunk of recalcitrant matter one step nearer to God. "The strong will to become part of the body of the King, to return to the high, pure, free and strong Source of existence, the Source of Infinite Light, is imbedded in all living creatures, in the whole of creation. And this is the fundamental force that drives the whirling wheel of all existence, the force of development."31 We must bear in mind that this account of the elan of the universe is not a statement of dogma, but a description of that momentary glimpse of reality, which flashes across the mind of the mystic at the apex of his ecstatic experience. Thus, he writes of the "experienced process of development"32 and of "the phenomenon which comes to man, whereby he senses all creation, not as a thing that was done and completed, but as a thing which is always becoming, uplifted, developed and exalted. . . ."33

Mystical ecstasy, then, is basically an intensification of the feeling of
being alive in the midst of a vibrant world. Kuk refers very frequently to this feeling of the restless drive and upward surge of the current of life in his poetic descriptions of his spiritual experiences. Note this gem of religious poetry:

All being whispers a secret to me: I have life, take, please take—if you have a heart and in the heart there is blood, that the poison of despair has not sullied;

But, if thy heart be uncircumsized and my beauty holds no charm for you—Being whispers to me—away, away from me, forbidden am I to thee!

If every gentle twitter, every flash of beauty, not the splendor of holy song but the stream of foreign fire in thee arouse—away, away from me, forbidden am I to thee.

And a living generation will arise
That will sing to beauty and life;
And youth without end
From the dew of heaven will derive.

And a living people will attend to the flow of the secrets of being from the splendors of Karmel and the Sharon, and out of the tenderness of song and the beauty of life—the light of holiness will rise to overflowing; And all being will murmur to him, My chosen one, I am for thee intended! 

UNIO MYSTICA

Does the mystic, at the height of his ecstatic experience, know himself to be at one with God? This question stands at the vague and shifting borderline between the actual experience of mysticism and its philosophical interpretation. Among Christian writers, the prevailing opinion is that unio mystica is the goal toward which the long and tortuous path of mysticism ultimately leads. In Jewish mystical literature, on the other hand, the possibility of actual union with the Supreme Being is ruled out in advance. Martin Buber, who sensed the true pulse of Jewish mysticism, insists in his little work, I and Thou, that the apex of religious experience is a dialogue with God, not a union with Him. The Jewish pattern of piety has no room for the ideal of unio mystica,
based as it is upon the profound consciousness of the absolute distinction between the Creator and His creatures.

Kuk sometimes employs language which suggests the attainment of complete unity in the mystical experience. Thus he writes of the psychical level of sanctity, "when man becomes one with the body of the King, and there is no longer any separation between him and his God." In another connection, he asserts that when man reaches the state of moral excellence in which the exercise of his own free will is identified with the categorical demands of absolute justice, he becomes part of "the body of the King."

These passages, however, are not to be taken literally. The "body of the King" is a Kabbalistic designation for the Sefiroth of malchuth, the last of the ten stages in the descent of the "Grace" of God to earth. Kuk identifies this Sefiroth with the free moral order of the Universe, of which man becomes aware in moments of grave ethical decision. To be a part of the "body of the King" is therefore merely a euphemistic expression for the attainment of that degree of ethical perfection, in which man becomes fully responsive to every shade and nuance of the spiritual life.

His inner life was so stirring and exulting that he could not help feeling that his soul had attained some sort of contact with its "Source" in God. As to the manner of this contact, he was understandably silent, since it is beyond the human ken.

The first, He pulled me, as by a rope,
To His palatial dwelling place,
And thru the strings of His holy violin,
My soul doth listen to His song.

INTERPRETATION

Even in the case of normal, routine experience, the line of demarcation between fact and interpretation cannot be drawn with certainty. How much more is this true in the case of the mystic who strives constantly for the complete integration of his personality round the central core of his ecstatic insights! Mystical literature proves abundantly that the whole training of the mystic, the ideas derived from books and the subtle influence of the environment, enters into the very texture of the mystical experience. Fact and interpretation get to be so intimately commin-
gled as to be completely indistinguishable from each other. The mystic is rarely a devotee of religion in general. As Schleiermacher pointed out, the mystical Gefühl is an amorphous, albeit exalted sensation, which is molded into definite shape by the subjective character and background of the mystic.

This observation applies with particular force and pertinence to the religious consciousness of Kuk, which was peculiarly synthetic and many-sided. Passages describing the ideals of mystical piety are to be found side by side with rhapsodies on the occult virtues of the Hebrew alphabet. Descriptions of the mystical current of creativity, à la Bergson, alternate with paans of praise about the cosmic effects of the study of the secrets of Kabbalah. Kuk was an Orthodox mystic, in the exact sense of the term; his orthodoxy and his mysticism were as closely related as body and soul. The heritage of his past was turned into living, vibrating reality for him by the fire of his ecstatic piety.

The two basic concepts, in the light of which Kuk interpreted his mystical experience, were grace (shefa) and holiness (k'dushah).

Kuk's doctrine of grace stands in the direct line of the evolution of Jewish religious thought. It is a tribute to the originality and uniqueness of his thinking that his writings which read at times as thoroughly Bergsonian in spirit and modern in temper are really the expression of a deeply traditionalist mind. The dried bones of Jewish tradition took on new life in the mind of Kuk, because he had actually experienced the profound and ennobling feelings of genuine piety. In the insights vouchsafed to him in the hours of his mystical ecstasy Kuk found a bridge between the ancient, esoteric world of Kabbalah and the modern world of science and bold philosophical speculation. He virtually identified the Kabbalistic doctrine of the flow of grace with the elan vital of Bergsonism, which is the cosmic dynamic urge behind the process of evolution and the progress of mankind. By the same token, he ranked the scientific achievements of the modern era on a par with the mystical "improvements" of Lurianic Kabbalah. Thru this reinterpretation of Kabbalistic thought, Kuk arrived at a philosophy of religion that is ultra-modern and ultra-traditionalistic at one and the same time.

In numerous passages, he emphasizes the many-sided influence of the Divine flow of grace which affects every aspect of existence. It generates life and strength, which interpenetrate the entire world.37 Every part of the universe is filled with the overflow of blessing which breaks into the souls of the saints.38
The soul's of all creatures and all the worlds are filled with pleasure. Nations are blessed, scholars and writers are crowned with thoughts of peace and blessing. Every spirit is endowed with sweet hope. Trust in God . . . fills all . . . The splendid determination to be uplifted above all epochs of time in order to cleave unto the value and splendor of eternity suffuses all things . . . The plants of the earth rise to be blessed . . . the love of life becomes refined . . . who can properly glorify the preciousness of these exalted hours which ebb and flow with their light! The light of the Torah is their source . . .

The effects of religious inspiration are to be found in every phase of social progress. Human society as a whole is the ultimate beneficiary of Divine grace. Oftentimes, the recipients of mystical inspiration are temperamentally unsuited for the study of the detailed sciences. "The two capacities contradict each other subjectively, as they are united objectively." 39 As a rule, "geniuses of piety" lack the talent and inclination for experimental research and the run of the mill scientists are insensitive to the mystical "yearning for God." Nevertheless, there is a direct chain of causation between these two fields of endeavor. The creative power which invades the consciousness of the ecstatic mystic is the real source of the selfless devotion to truth that constitutes the core of the scientific attitude, and it is also the ultimate origin of those intuitive insights into the structure of the universe, those bold leaps in the dark, which periodically raise the sciences to ever higher levels.

If men had not waited until the revelation of the "rootlight," no wisdom would have developed, no forward step in ethics, public law and practical progress would have prevailed. 40

But the influence of man upon the physical universe is not confined to the techniques of science and industry. Thru the mastery of mystical knowledge and practice, man affects the "essence of the world," refining it and rendering it more subservient to the needs of humanity. 41 Thus the saints, who never descend from the high pinnacle of "attachment to God," induce progress and achievement in every field of human activity, "for the great light of their life fills the entire universe with 'improvement' and light." 42 Kuk does not even find it difficult to believe that the fruits of the soil are perfected by the "Divine overflow" that courses thru the soul of the mystical saint. 43 For the world in essence is consti-
tuted of the same substance as is the flow of Divine illumination. All things are part of one living organism—a deathless, ever growing “tree of life.” There are no solitary souls, no isolated events in the universe. The coarsest clod of matter is joined in its root to the source of all life and thought. “To the great soul, characterized by the qualities of absolute freedom, unity and rightness, everything is united.”

The supreme importance of mystical inspiration places the personality of the tzaddik in the very center of the cosmic drama of redemption.

Pathways these men of rectitude are, for the purpose of disseminating light and life for every creature. Instruments they are for the irradiation of the light of eternal life—the servants of the Lord and the executors of His Word; His faithful messengers, to give life to the dying, to fortify the weak, to awaken the dormant . . . And they call in the name of the Eternal, Lord of the Universe, Who speaks thus unto every creature, “Live and rejoice in all that is good! Rise and be uplifted ever higher, higher!”

Though they seem to have no visible part in fashioning the course of history, the saints are in reality the focal points of progress.

And these individuals (the saints), from the heights of their spiritual elevation, uplift the world from its low state, thru their existence alone, not thru their recognizable influence. The inner secrets they do not reveal and cannot reveal. But, that which the great light causes to come into being thru the scattering of its sparks over that which is revealed, over the glance of an eye, over every conversation and gesture, over the essence of will, the purpose of life—in all these ways they act, encourage, strengthen and sanctify the All.

The mystical effectiveness of the saints is in direct proportion to the intensity of the ties of affection and love by which they are united to the larger circles of society.

This great event begins with drops that come one by one. But as one continues to ascend, the Divine Power, in the height of its sacred purity being fortified by the good desires of men, of the individual and the group, shatters the walls which dam its flow; the drops begin to come more frequently, to coalesce and turn into streams; the streams in turn
become mighty rivers, a "multitude of many waters," the echo of a multitude of men, like the voice of the Lord when He speaks.  

The saint is aided in his efforts to attain the highest state of mystical ecstasy by "the good desires of men," the sea of good will and piety that fills his social environment. Unseen channels bind all men into one living entity. The ideals and aspirations of diverse individuals, each seeking a pathway to God in the isolation of his chamber, are mutually reinforced and integrated in the soul of the saint, where they contribute to the attainment of the noblest pinnacle of man's spiritual life, the illumination of the Holy Spirit. In turn, the "Divine Overflow" that is granted to the saint is communicated first to the social group of which he is the focal center, and then, by degrees to ever larger groups, spreading out in concentric waves until it reaches the whole of humanity.

The bond between all the souls in Israel is such that many channels pour the radiance of life one into the other, and in the higher levels of spiritual existence there is complete unity in the knot of the roots of their life. Thus it is that the ascent of one soul into the light is felt thru radiation, as it were, by all the souls, whether they sense this spiritual increment or not. Naturally, the personal bonds of love, trust, respect and mutual attachment in practical matters . . . open the spiritual channels more and more and fortify even more powerfully the knot of the roots of the soul. . . . And the inner light shines at the image of God in mankind generally.  

The apparent separateness of individuals is itself due to the spell of the physical veil of reality. The deeper we probe into the inner depths of our souls in order to reach the roots of things, the closer do the discrete souls of humanity merge into the one great Self of Man.

HOLINESS

Out of his soul-shaking mystical experience and his original doctrine of Divine grace, Kuk evolved a new and striking interpretation of the feeling of holiness that lies at the root of all religion.

The distinction between the holy and the secular is exceedingly deep and thorough-going in Judaism, affecting not only a few occasional,
sacramental rites, but the whole regimen of life of the pious Jew. However, this distinction was most often conceived not as an intrinsic quality, but as an external fact, resulting from the arbitrary, inscrutable will of God, Who determines what is unclean, permitted or sacred. In Kabbalistic thought, on the other hand, every mitzvah was related to some cosmic event, so that its scrupulous performance entailed automatically a triumph of holiness, in the inner structure of the universe. The Chassidic movement laid particular stress on the attitude of the worshipper, declaring that the realm of holiness is approachable only by the qualities of the "fear and love" of God.

Kuk goes one step further, citing the testimony of his own inner life for the claim that the feeling of the holy is a datum of human experience. He tells us not only what man ought to feel in the presence of his Maker, but what he does in fact feel. Piety was to him neither an ethereal abstraction nor a gloomy retreat from life, but an indubitable, thrilling and exalting event.

The outstanding characteristic of his conception of holiness is its life-affirming quality. In accord with the basic tendencies of Judaism and the disposition of the modern temper, Kuk considers the basic attitude of religion to be the endeavor to live life more fully, not to escape from it. Accordingly, he describes the feeling of the holy as a heightened sensitivity to the pulsating current of vital power in the inner substance of being. The holy is not a static quality, but a dynamic, vitalizing stream that is apprehended by the deeply pious person as a mighty current of becoming. "The good and the holy pass in a powerful current." A sense of increased power, deriving from the felt accession of energy in the ecstatic revelation of the Holy Spirit, is an essential part of the feeling of the Holy. "Great and overflowing streams of power rise, thru the mighty intensification of pure intellectual concentration, that is revealed in the light of the Holy Spirit."50

Far from implying the existence of any dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual phases of life, Kuk declares repeatedly that holiness is an intensified form of vitality, dependent for its very existence upon the exuberant health of the physical organism. Commenting upon the striking verse in Ecclesiastes, "Better than wisdom, than honor, is a little folly," he asserts that the dumb, restless strivings of men resulting from an abundance of natural energy, is the necessary substratum for the Holy Spirit. In the life of the nation as of the individual, the same relationship obtains between physical health and the current
of spiritual life. "The exalted powers of holiness, in the spirit of the
nation and in the light of its soul, are concealed in its vital forces. . . ." 53

The feeling of the holy includes an apprehension of its transcendental
character that is certain and unmistakable. Thru a lifelong habituation
in the disciplines of piety and thru the sustained study of Kabbalah,
"there is created in man a special sense whereby he can distinguish the
taste of a thought that is charged with holiness from a merely profane
thought." 54 This feeling of the numinous is experienced not only in
sacred ritual or in the ecstasy of revelation, but also in every good and
selfless act that bears the mark of consecration to a high cause . . .
"every good inclination, every good quality, every work, every act of
holiness, every commandment, every deed of righteousness—it can be
felt that they come to us from a strong and exalted world. . . . The
living world comes to us with the fulness of love and we kiss it in
overflowing affection. . . ."

In his all-encompassing love of life, Kuk recognized the seal of
holiness in many and diverse fields of activity. "And everything that is
beautiful and wonderful is a phenomenon of revelation, in which the
life of all life dwells in one form or another." 55 There is indeed no limit
to the extensive ramifications of the stream of holiness, "for there is in
truth nothing in the universe that is absolutely secular." 56 The triumph
of mysticism will prove "that there is exalted greatness in everything
that is small." 57 While it is the height of destructive folly to disregard
the line of demarcation between the holy and the secular, it is neverthe-
less clear that the distinction is one of degree, for the underlying current
of reality drives on unceasingly toward the goal of sanctifying all the
spheres of existence. 58

The term "holiness" thus has a general universal significance, in
addition to its particular significance which is conceived strictly along
the lines of orthodox Kabbalism. The "lights of holiness" emanate from
the study of the Torah, the observance of the mitzvoth, the contempla-
tion of the truths of Kabbalah and the practice of "unifications." Un-
compromising insistence on these principles of Orthodoxy does not
negate the universal denotation of holiness, that is defined in generally
psychological and philosophical terminology. In this latter sense, the
holy is a simple quality that is native to the human mind and that is
perceptible even by children. 59 Its appearance of unreality is due to a
peculiar illusion of the human imagination, that turns things upside
down and makes the real seem unreal and the unreal seem real. 60 In
reality, nothing is simpler to the human mind than holiness, for “the higher a truth is, the more simple it is . . . .” 61

Kuk was too deeply a homo religiosus to be insensible to the universal aspects of holiness, and too rigidly loyal to tradition to concede any validity or authority to non-Jewish forms of religious experience. He was therefore led to arrive at the following synthesis of the universal and particular types of holiness:

It was indeed proper that the whole content of holiness should have reference to humanity in general, for the perception of holiness is universal and the content of holiness, the bond between man and God, is independent of any nationality. This universal content would, in that event, have appeared for Jews in a special Jewish garment, but the wave of moral perversion that set in later in world history caused the elements of holiness to be forgotten among all men. And a new creation was made in Israel. . . . Nevertheless, there are still titans of the spirit who find the cosmic element in the root of Adam’s soul, which still throbs in the heart of mankind generally. . . . 62

These “titans of the spirit,” or saints, are peculiarly sensitive to the feeling of holiness which is the sum and substance of their lives. Their whole personality becomes a living incarnation of holiness.

The light of holiness extends first to the power of speech which wells up out of the living source of holiness . . . then, too, the sense of hearing is ennobled, so that all that is heard is added up to a great, pure and holy light, which expands further to reach the sense of sight. Thus, all that strikes the eye is sanctified and uplifted and the final account of the world appears to be pellucid and transparent . . . and then every movement, every feeling and tremor become full of favor and high glory. . . . 63

We have here an excellent account of what the students of mysticism designate as the “state of illumination.” The confusion of metaphors, bounding from sight to sound and back again, the extreme vagueness of terminology and the lyricism of the style, are all expressions of the attitude which they expound. A kind of euphoria intoxicates the senses, as if they had been vouchsafed a momentary perception of the indwelling glory of the universe. “Kissed with love,” the saints yearn to bestow love upon their fellowmen, to serve and unite in spirit with all mankind and to forge ever more powerful bonds of unity among men. 64
NOTES

2. *Oroth HaKodesh* (Jerusalem, 1938), p. 79.
5. Zikkaron, p. 16.
8. *Oroth HaKodesh*, p. 32.
9. Ibid., p. 41.
10. Ibid., p. 144.
11. Ibid., p. 144.
12. Ibid., p. 460.
13. Ibid., p. 59.
15. Ibid., p. 196.
16. Ibid., p. 196.
17. Ibid., pp. 69-74.
18. Ibid., p. 173.
22. Ibid., p. 126.
23. Ibid., p. 345.
25. Ibid., p. 346.
26. Ibid., p. 346.
27. Ibid., p. 176.
29. Zikkaron, p. 15.
31. Ibid., p. 388.
32. Ibid., p. 540.
33. Ibid., p. 535.
34. *HaTarbuth HaYisrealith* (Jerusalem, 1923).