The Essential Agus

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IT IS STILL too early to essay an estimate of Kuk's place in the history of Jewish life and thought. As these lines are being written, ten years after his death, some of his manuscript material is still unpublished and the full impact of his thought is just beginning to be felt. The influence which his personality exerted on the minds of numerous friends and disciples has not yet crystallized into definite literary creations. Certain it is that he belonged to the class of men whose stature grows with the passage of the years. Nevertheless, it is high time that an effort be made to evaluate the significance of Kuk's thought for the solution of the problems of Judaism in our time and place. The extraordinary religious consciousness that is revealed in his writings should prove to be a salutary influence in the confused and amorphous state of American Jewish theology. While it is certain that his philosophy as a whole cannot pass muster in the light of modern criticism, there are elements in his thought that deserve to be included in any healthy system of Jewish theology. This much is indisputable: the Jewish theologian of the future will not be able to ignore the work of Kuk, the mystic, or Kuk, the defender of the Orthodox faith.

THE MYSTIC

Many a reader will in all probability conclude that Kuk's ideas and feelings moved within an ethereal and esoteric realm of its own, a realm
that is removed from the affairs of this world and is therefore wholly
irrelevant and meaningless to the mental habits of rational humanity.
Kuk was a mystic and the basic currents of his thought were mystical in
origin and conception. But is not mysticism something that is occult
and mysterious, a wondrous and bizarre discipline that is not of this
world? Those who hesitate to condemn it outright as an abnormal
delusion of tormented souls incline generally to the view that it is an
exclusive doctrine, of consequence only to so-called “mystics,” and
quite unintelligible to non-mystics who constitute the whole tribe of
normal humanity. Indeed, if mysticism is itself the peculiar treasure of
peculiar people, how can it help in the solution of the religious prob-
lems of the common man? The mystic’s report of his ecstatic vision can
be accepted by the average man only as a matter of faith. How, then,
can mysticism afford support to the tottering pillars of faith in our time?

The answer is that the mystical experience is really an intensification
of a form of experience that is common to the generality of mankind.
While in its full extent and grandeur it is granted only to rare souls,
weaker echoes of it belong to the common experience of humanity.
For mysticism is nothing but an overwhelming concentration of reli-
gious feeling, and, in accordance with the logic of feeling, mystical
literature and contemplation is certain to arouse and stimulate the
emotions of piety. There is a strange fascination in the mystical adven-
ture that appeals to all who seek the nearness of the Lord. The genu-
inely pious cannot but feel that the mystic may err in details but that
the general direction of his efforts is true to the Divine scheme of
things.

In recent studies of the psychology of religion, much is made of the
so-called “feeling of the holy.” While the investigators of this subject
may not be entirely agreed as to the exact description of all the various
phases of the emotional complex of holiness, there is no question of its
widespread prevalence. There is scarcely a sensitive human being who
has not been overcome by this feeling at one time or another in his life.
Some may experience it in worship, others may find it invades their
souls in moments of profound crisis, fundamental spiritual decision or
earnest rededication. In every case, it appears in a characteristic pattern
of its own, with all its phases discernible thru the telescope of analysis.
Rudolf Otto, in his classic study of this subject, describes it as a *tremen-
dum mysterium* consisting of the “moments” of awe, bigness, fear, rever-
ence, trust, inscrutability, a feeling of the numinous, etc. This feeling, it will easily be recognized, is but a weaker example of mystical ecstasy.

The relation of the mystic to non-mystical humanity is therefore very much like that of a musical composer to the average person. The latter dimly feels the rightness of the sequence of notes, approving of it in his heart, though he himself could not have composed it. This was in fact the analogy with which Kuk generally operated. He conceived of the joys of mysticism as being outbursts of the pent up inner song of the soul. The melody of man’s psychic life, he felt, was unheard and unheeded in the tumultuous hubbub of superficial consciousness. But when thru a magnificent effort the noise of routine existence is silenced, the inner music of mystical yearning breaks forth. All who listen to it will, if they make the necessary effort, recognize it as the voice of their own deepest consciousness.

Kuk’s works on mysticism were written in the style of personal “confessions.” The author made no effort to convince by logical argumentation, to prove a point by meticulous analysis, or even to persuade thru the medium of stirring eloquence. He wrote for himself, as it were, jotting down the reports of his own experiences and ideas and challenging the reader to rediscover the same events in the recesses of his own soul. Well did he realize that the spirit of religion may be awakened but not communicated, and he firmly believed that in charting the events of his own psychic life, he was rendering an account of the deepest realities in human nature generally, since, in their roots, the souls of all men and women are one.

He was quite aware of the occasional obscurities in his writings and of the abrupt mystical “leaps” which abounded in his style. As he wrote to a friend:

I wish to call your attention to the general circumstance that in spiritual matters we are always related to the mystical element which is the deepest truth in our consciousness. Therefore, it should not occasion surprise if in the midst of a usual and factual exposition we suddenly encounter expressions which lift us out of the realm of the normal, the sensible and the logical. For the most part, it is just then that we resume to speak with simple naivete, the naiveté of childhood, as was said, “out of the mouths of children and babes hast Thou founded strength.” These obscure passages are inevitably to be found in the words of those who speak
out of the depths of their soul—and it is thru them that the radiance of inner truth is revealed. It seems to me that this observation is a faithful key to the understanding of the difficult sections in my works and the works of those who write in this style, both of past generations and of the present time.¹

We shall regard his estimate of the mystical experience with greater sympathy and understanding if we bear in mind the undoubted fact that, philosophically speaking, mysticism is possible. There is very little that all philosophers worthy of the name are agreed upon. Nevertheless, it may be stated with little danger of contradiction that the whole point of philosophy is an attempt to expose the naivete of common sense humanity, that is inclined to take the world simply as it appears to the naked eye. Philosophers may and do differ regarding everything under the sun, but on this they are agreed, that “there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of” in the philosophy of non-analytical common sense. The so-called “naturalistic” school of philosophy seeks to approximate the common sense picture of the universe, but there is all the difference in the world between a post-critical philosophy of Force and Energy and the naive views of non-philosophical humanity.

The grand course of the evolution of philosophical thought was begun when thinkers became aware of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities of objects. Sound, color, odor, taste and the tactile appearance of an object were obviously the product of interaction between the object in itself and the senses. This was even more obviously true in the case of such qualities as beauty and harmony or repulsiveness and awkwardness. On the other hand, certain qualities, like mass or size, or shape, seem to belong directly to the object, being independent of the vagaries of the perceiver. Further reflection reveals that all objects are subject to change and mutation, capable of assuming a multitude of diverse forms and shapes. Evidently there is a substance that is common to all objects of existence and that underlies the current of change. This much is elementary observation and deduction. Philosophical thought began with speculation concerning the nature of this underlying substance. Was it water, air, the four elements, the Indeterminate, Mind, Fire, Unchanging Being, Numbers, Ideal Forms, Substance? These were the questions that occupied the ancient Greek
philosophers and basically, the character of the essence of all things is still the fundamental question of philosophy.

In our scientific age, this line of reasoning has become common knowledge. We know now that sound is the movement of waves of certain lengths and that sight is due to the excitation of the optic nerve by a different type of wave. Behind the facade of the physical universe, as it appears to our senses, there is the “real” world of atoms and molecules, electrons and neutrons. More recent scientific studies prove that the electrons are not simply tiny particles whirling about their fixed orbits in perpetual motion, but that they too are multi-dimensional waves of some sort in an ether that does not really exist. At this point, the human imagination gives up and abstract mathematics take over. Einstein’s search for an all-embracing mathematical formula that would express the underlying substance or energy of the universe is really the attempt of a mathematician or scientist to encroach upon the domain of philosophy and capture the key to its riddles. The atomic bomb which demolished Hiroshima also dealt a body blow to the mechanistic conception of the universe, for it demonstrated that matter is not the basic unit of existence. If matter is congealed energy and energy in turn is defined as that which sets matter in motion, then how shall we picture ultimate reality? Theoretical physics endeavors to penetrate the mystery of existence, veil by veil; no sooner is one veil torn apart by the genius of research than there is displayed another and more baffling one. The progress of scientific research and reflection tends to confirm the intuition of the great minds of all ages, that behind the simplest grain of matter there lie hidden oceans of mystery.

But, do we only think of the world and its contents? Do we not also live in the world, and is it not possible for us to reflect upon the current of life in our own being and thereby to attain a glimpse of the real nature of existence? Is it not true that unbeknown to our conscious selves we carry the secret of life within our breast and that if we could only probe ourselves deeply enough, we should solve at one stroke the riddle of our Self and of the Universe? Logically, there is no reason whatsoever to deny the validity of this method of introspection. Historically, mystics have been among the most fastidious and thoroughgoing logicians.

Metaphysical intuition has long been a respectable doctrine in philosophy. There is scarcely a great system of thought that does not include
or leave room for an intuitive grasp of reality. The whole vast range of philosophical speculation may, as a matter of fact, be divided into two categories—those that are frankly based upon an intuition and those that presume to be wholly objective or scientific. In the former category, we should include names like those of Plato, Plotinus, Fichte, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Bergson and S. Alexander. The latter category includes all the incorrigible Aristotelians who know quite definitely that there is nothing mental or physical that can elude the rigid methods of the test tube. Now, intuition is essentially an attempt to pursue the path of mysticism, albeit to a limited degree. Bergson, the outstanding exponent of intuition in our day, identified it in his last book, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, with the doctrines of mysticism.

As a mystic, Kuk was exceedingly healthy, sober, optimistic and many-sided. Many a thinker or pietist who sought to find God thru the *parad* of mysticism could not endure the emotional strain and became in one way or another “peculiar.” The annals of mysticism are filled with such perversions—a considerable part of which are of an erotic character. Kuk was happily free of any such distortions. His mystical experiences were uniformly of the healthy-minded variety, lending fresh wings to his creative faculties and endowing him with an enormous capacity for sheer drudgery.

The essential content of Kuk’s mysticism is also free of any trace of asceticism, acomism, or any form of “sick-minded” escapism. The terms that occur most often in his description of the mystical state are “light,” “life,” “love” and “creativity.” In his mysticism, a happy combination of the loftiest faculties of normal consciousness is brought to the highest pitch of efficiency. Kuk’s persistent emphasis on the current of vitality perceived in the mystical state is especially worthy of note. It would be most difficult to find any parallels to this phase of Kuk’s piety in the vast range of Christian or Buddhist mysticism. In this respect, both Kuk and Bergson are true to the life-affirming character of Jewish piety, in which holiness is not a thing “other than life,” but an intensified form of life itself, transmuting and sanctifying all that is coarse and earthy.

Kuk’s mysticism is of particular importance in the history of Jewish philosophy because he was practically the first Jewish literary mystic. As a state of mind, mysticism was naturally never completely absent from the Jewish scene, but the fact is that introspective mysticism of the kind that is so common among Christians, detailing all the steps of emotional
refinement on the way to mystical ecstasy, is almost completely lacking in the enormous literature of Jewish piety. Prof. G. Scholem attributes this fact to a certain bashful reticence on the part of Jewish mystics. However, this reticence itself needs to be explained. Whatever the explanation, the fact is that Kuk blazed a new path in Jewish thought.

When we bear in mind the fact that modern philosophy of religion is for the most part founded upon the theory and practice of mysticism, we are enabled to see Kuk's contribution in the proper perspective. Theology was not always tied to mysticism. In the Middle Ages and in the early period of modern philosophy, theology could afford to be thoroughly rational. Philosophy was then still the handmaiden of theology, proving in four different ways the existence of God. After Kant's devastating criticism of this rational approach, religious thinkers almost uniformly found themselves compelled to resort to the realm of feeling and ethical will for the foundation of their faith. Mysticism and religious experience generally then came into their own. As a matter of experience, religion could meet the challenge of modern criticism without difficulty since the test of experience is the touchstone of truth for the modern mind. The renewed interest in mystical literature, however, could find only indifferent material in Jewish sources. Whether because of "voluntary censorship" or because it did not seem to fit into the established molds of Jewish piety, the fact itself is incontestable, that only rare and vague instances of genuine mysticism can be discovered in Jewish sources. Kuk's writings fill in this gap with unique distinction, adding fresh potentialities and nuances to the future growth of Jewish religious thought.

NOTE

1. *Igroth Hor'iyah* (Jerusalem, 1934), p. 131.