

**Concerning Cosmic
Consciousness**

by

W. L. Wilmshurst

IT is rather to be assumed that a man who writes about cosmic consciousness has undergone the experience in his own person. Otherwise what should lead to his writing on so strange and so abnormal an experience ? We are not, however, entitled to assume that the individual who has had the experience in question is necessarily capable of writing a good book or even of writing convincingly on the subject. Perhaps in a certain sense the outsider who has had no such experience can write more dispassionately and therefore with less bias on the nature of this strange phenomenon.

The first edition of Dr. Bucke's Cosmic Consciousness * (*Cosmic Consciousness. A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind. By Richard Maurice Bucke, M.D. American Book Supply Company, Ltd., 149 Strand, London, W.C. 2. 305. net. New York : E. P. ' Dutton & Company, 681 Fifth Avenue.) was published as long ago as 1901. The book has been out of print some time, and the present edition has been corrected and entirely reset throughout. It has, I believe, the outstanding merit of being, whatever its defects,

the only comprehensive work on the subject in existence. Dr. Bucke describes his own sensations when, at the beginning of his thirty-sixth year, he met with this experience. As this incident is the foundation stone of the work in question and led to an entire change in the author's whole mental and spiritual attitude, it is well to give an account of it in his own words. It will be noted that, though the account is his own, he writes of himself in the third person.

It was in the early spring, at the beginning of his thirty-sixth year. He and two friends had spent the evening reading Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and especially Whitman. They parted at midnight, and he had a long drive in a hansom (it was in an English city). His mind, deeply under the influence of the ideas, images and emotions called up by the reading and talk of the evening, was calm and peaceful. He was in a state of quiet, almost passive, enjoyment. All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-coloured cloud. For an instant he thought of fire,

some sudden conflagration in the great city ; the next, he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied, or immediately followed, by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendour which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of heaven. Among other things he did not come to believe, he saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love, and that the happiness of every one is in the long run absolutely certain. He claims that he learned more within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of study, and that he learned much that no study could ever have taught.

This experience that has altered, in this and other similar cases, the whole tenor of the percipient's outlook on life appears, in its purer form, to have certain main characteristics. The person affected realizes as never before the oneness of the universe. He sees himself as part and parcel of this unity which he senses as the expression of a single conscious life. At the moment of the experience the realization of the consciousness of the separateness of the ego and the non-ego, the knower and the known, entirely disappears. The man who has once had it is no longer able to feel a shadow of doubt as to human immortality.

He knows it with a certainty that no argument or evidence can strengthen or shake. Jesus presumably had this experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, and the Buddha writes over and over again as if he was familiar with it, as for instance when he tells us how he attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree.

Among earlier mystics who have had kindred experiences the case of St. Paul is probably the most familiar to readers, though we should hardly be justified in affirming in either

of the two experiences recorded of him that they were certainly instances of what might strictly be termed cosmic consciousness, though perhaps the latter one to which he alludes in a very cryptic manner may have been more definitely of this nature. The first of these, it will be remembered, was on the road to Damascus, when he was converted to Christianity, and had a vision of the Christ and saw a great light which had the effect of blinding him for some days afterwards. The other was many years later, when he was caught up into the third heaven and heard, as he says, "unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

The seeing of this great light is one of the phenomena which recur again and again in these records, and seems to show that St. Paul's first experience was at least akin to other phenomena of the kind. We should perhaps associate with these experiences what has been termed the Beatific Vision, which comes to the religious devotee rather than to the mystical philosopher, and should (I would submit) be regarded as a more personal phase of the same experience.

It may be that the beatific vision is in the nature of a realization of the Higher Self or the Christ in man, while cosmic consciousness is in the nature of an intuitive perception of the immanence of the Deity in all manifested life, and the essential oneness of the Universal Consciousness. According as the mind of the percipient is attuned by his past life and spiritual outlook, so does he attain to either one form of the experience or the other. Certainly the most noteworthy records in early days, outside those which may be set down as of a specifically religious character, are those recorded of the great mystical philosopher Plotinus, of whose experiences in the matter there is no suspicion of doubt. Plotinus was born AD. 204, and died approximately at the age of seventy. His philosophic training and ascetic life rendered him a peculiarly favourable subject for such an experience. His ideas as to the true inwardness of the cosmic scheme are beautifully expressed in the following passage :

There is a raying out of all orders of existence, an external emanation from the ineffable One. There is again a

returning impulse, drawing all upwards and inwards towards the centre from whence all came. Love, as Plato in the Banquet beautifully says, is child of poverty and plenty. In the amorous quest of the soul after the Good lies the painful sense of fall and deprivation. But that love is blessing, is salvation, is our guardian genius; without it the centrifugal law would overpower us and sweep our souls out far from their source toward the cold extremities of the material and the manifold. The wise man recognizes the idea of the Good within him. This he develops by withdrawal into the place of his soul. He who does not understand how the soul contains the beautiful within itself, seeks to realize beauty without, by laborious production. His aim should rather be to concentrate and simplify, and so to expand his being; instead of going out into the manifold, to forsake it for the One, and so to float upwards towards the divine fount of being whose stream flows within him.

He asks how we can know the infinite, and replies that it cannot be known by reason, but only by a faculty superior

to this, which is attained by entering into a state in which man has his finite sense no longer, and in which the divine essence is communicated to him. This, he says, is "ecstasy" and clearly by this expression, "ecstasy" which really means standing outside of oneself, Plotinus is referring to the phenomenon of cosmic consciousness. For he adds, "When you thus cease to be finite, you become one with the infinite." He also observes that this sublime condition is not of permanent duration and it is only now and then that it can be enjoyed. "I myself," he says, "have realized it but three times as yet." He tells us that "all that tends to purify and elevate the mind will assist us in this attainment, and will facilitate the approach and recurrence of these happy intervals."

Plotinus offers a philosophical justification for such experiences. External objects, he tells us, present us only with appearances. The problem of true knowledge, on the other hand, deals with the ideal reality that exists behind these appearances. It follows, therefore, that the religion of truth is not to be investigated as a thing external to us, and

so only imperfectly known. Rather, it is within us. Truth, therefore, he maintains, is not the agreement of our apprehension of an external object with the object itself, but it is the agreement of the mind with itself. Hence, he contends, knowledge has three degrees: opinions, science, and illumination. The instrument of the first is sense, of the second dialectic, and of the third intuition. This third is the absolute knowledge founded on the identity of the mind knowing with the object known.

We have little evidence bearing on this phenomenon between the post-classical times of Plotinus and the later Middle Ages. In these times, however, there are many noteworthy experiences recorded with greater or less historical truth of the Catholic saints of that period, conspicuous among whom may be named John Yepes, more commonly known as St. John of the Cross, and St. Theresa, both of whose lives date as recently as the sixteenth century AD. St. John of the Cross was born in 1542 and died in 1591. At the age of twenty-one he adopted the religious habit of the Carmelite friars. In 1578 he was

imprisoned for some months for certain practices of a kind which were regarded by the ecclesiastical authorities as unorthodox, and it was during this period at the age of thirty-six that he had the mysterious psychic experience which is identified by Dr. Bucke with the phenomenon of cosmic consciousness, though it must be admitted that the evidence with regard to its specific character is not altogether conclusive. His biographer, David Lewis, gives the account of it as follows :—

His cell became filled with light seen by the bodily eye. One night the friar who kept him went as usual to see that his prisoner was safe, and witnessed the heavenly light with which the cell was flooded. He did not stop to consider it, but hurried to the prior, thinking that some one in the House had keys to open the doors of the prison. The prior, with two members of the order, went at once to the prison, but on his entering the room through which the prison was approached, the light vanished. The prior, however, entered the cell, and, finding it dark, opened the lantern with which he had provided himself, and asked the prisoner who had

given him the light. St. John answered him, and said that no one in the house had done so, that no one could do it, and that there was neither candle nor lamp in the cell. The prior made no reply and went away, thinking that the gaoler had made a mistake.

St. John, at a later time, told one of his brethren that the heavenly light, which God so mercifully sent him, lasted the night through, and that it filled his soul with joy and made the night pass away as if it were but a moment. When his imprisonment was drawing to its close he heard our Lord say to him, as it were out of the soft light that was around him, "John, I am here; be not afraid ; I will set thee free." A few moments later, while making his escape from the prison of the monastery, it is said that he had a repetition of the experience, as follows :—

He saw a wonderful light, out of which came a voice, "Follow me." He followed, and the light moved before him towards the wall which was on the bank, and then, he knew not how, he found himself on the summit of it without effort or fatigue. He descended into the street, and then the

light vanished. So brilliant was it, that for two or three days afterwards, so he confessed at a later time, his eyes were weak, as if he had been looking at the sun in its strength. '•

Elsewhere St. John of the Cross refers to his own spiritual experiences in language which suggests that these were of a similar character to those already recorded. But his language is vague, and deliberately so, as he says that his description of his experience "relates to matters so interior and spiritual as to baffle the powers of language. All I say," he continues, "falls far short of that which passes in this intimate union of powers of the soul with God. ... I stood enraptured in ecstasy beside myself, and in every sense no sense remained. My spirit was endowed with understanding, understanding not, all knowledge transcending. . . . He who really ascends so high annihilates himself and all his previous knowledge seems ever less and less."

St. Theresa's mystical experiences, as is well known, were legion. They included the stigmata, i.e., the imprint of the five wounds of the Crucifixion, levitation, clairvoyance, clairaudience, etc. She, too, had an experience which she

terms the "orison of union," which corresponds closely by its description to cosmic consciousness.

In this orison of union [says St. Theresa], the soul is fully awake as regards God, but wholly asleep as regards things of this world, and in respect of herself. During the short time the union lasts she is as it were deprived of every feeling, and even if she would she could not think of any single thing. Thus she needs to employ no artifice in order to assist the use of her understanding. In short, she is utterly dead to the things of the world, and lives solely in God. . . . Thus does God when He raises the soul to union with Himself suspend the natural action of all faculties. But this time is always short, and it seems even shorter than it is. God establishes Himself in the interior of this soul in such a way that when she returns to herself it is wholly impossible for her to doubt that she has been in God and God in her. This truth remains so strongly impressed on her that even though many years should pass without the condition returning, she can neither forget the favour she received nor doubt of its reality. If you ask how it is possible

that the soul can see and understand that she has been in God, since during the union she has neither sight nor understanding, I reply that she does not see it then, but that she sees it clearly later after she has returned to herself, not by any vision but by a certitude which abides with her and which God alone can give her.

Reverting to the same experience on another occasion, St. Theresa recounts how one day it was granted to her to perceive in one instant how all things are seen and contained in God.

" I did not" she adds, "perceive them in their proper form, and nevertheless the view I had of them was of a sovereign clearness and has remained vividly impressed upon my soul. This view was so subtile and delicate that the understanding cannot grasp it"

Jacob Boehme is another classic example of this experience. His first illumination occurred in the year 1600, when he was twenty-five years of age, and he had a further and more

vivid experience ten years later. Martensen describes Boehme's first experience as follows :—

Sitting one day in his room his eyes fell upon a burnished pewter dish, which reflected the sunshine with such marvellous splendour that he fell into an inward ecstasy, and it seemed to him as if he could now look into the principles and deepest foundation of things. He believed that it was only a fancy, and in order to banish it from his mind he went out upon the green. But here he remarked that he gazed into the very heart of things, the very herbs and grass, and that actual nature harmonized with what he had inwardly seen. He said nothing to anyone, but praised and thanked God in silence. He continued in the honest practice of his craft, was attentive to his domestic affairs, and was on terms of good-will with all men. Of his complete illumination ten years later he says himself :

The gate was opened to me that in one quarter of an hour I saw and knew more than if I had been many years together at a university, at which I exceedingly admired and thereupon turned my praise to God for it. For I saw and

knew the being of all things, the byss and the abyss and the eternal generation of the Holy Trinity, the descent and the original of the world and of all creatures through the divine wisdom: I knew and saw in myself all the three worlds, namely, (1) the divine (angelical and paradisaical) ; and (2) the dark (the original of the nature to the fire), and then (3) the external and the visible world (being a procreation or external birth from both the internal and the spiritual worlds). And I saw and knew the whole working essence, in the evil and the good and the original and the existence of each of them; and likewise how the fruit-bearing womb of eternity brought forth. So that I not only did greatly wonder at it but did also exceedingly rejoice.

Of men belonging to our modern world who have had the experience of cosmic consciousness, two only seem to my mind absolutely valid instances. One is Edward Carpenter, the author of *Towards Democracy*, a work of great breadth and insight, with which every reader of this magazine should make himself familiar if he has not already done so, and James Allen, the author of *From Poverty to Power*, As

a Man Thinketh, and many other booklets which may be characterized as essays on the spiritual life. Edward Carpenter has himself stated that he had this experience, and in fact intimated as much in a letter to Dr. Bucke himself.

I really do not feel [he says in this letter] that I can tell you anything without falsifying and obscuring the matter. I have done my best to write it out in *Towards Democracy*. I had no experience of physical light in this relation. The perception seems to be one in which all the senses unite into one sense, in which you become the object, but this is unintelligible mentally speaking. I do not think the matter can be defined as yet, but I do not know that there is any harm in writing about it. Elsewhere, in *Civilization: Its Cause and Cure*, he writes more definitely on the subject:

There is in every man a local consciousness connected with his quite external body. That we know. Is there not also in every man the making of a universal consciousness? That there are in us phases of consciousness which transcend the limit of the bodily senses is a matter of daily experience.

That we perceive and know things which are not conveyed to us by the bodily eyes and heard by our bodily ears is certain. That there arise in us waves of consciousness from those around us, from the people, the race to which we belong, is also certain. May there not then be in us the makings of a perception and knowledge which shall not be relative to this body which is here and now, but which shall be good for all time and everywhere? Does there not exist in truth, as we have already hinted, an inner illumination of which what we call light in the outer world is the partial expression and manifestation, by which we can ultimately see things as they are, beholding all creation, not by any local act of perception, but by a cosmical intuition and prescience, identifying ourselves with what we see? Does there not exist a perfected sense of hearing as of the morning stars singing together, an understanding of the words that are spoken all through the universe, the hidden meaning of all things, a profound and far-pervading sense of which our ordinary sense of sound is only the first novitiate and intuition?

Mr. Carpenter refers elsewhere to "that inner vision which transcends sight as far as sight transcends touch" and to "a consciousness in which the contrast between the ego and the external world and the distinction between subject and object fall away." These are surely the words of one who has himself undergone this experience. Carpenter, however, is careful to warn us that we are not to suppose that people who have this experience are in any way to be regarded as infallible as to its exact meaning. "In many cases indeed" he remarks, "the very novelty and strangeness of the experience may give rise to phantasmal trains of delusive speculation"

In further interpretation of this mystery he observes that the whole body is only as it were one organ of the cosmic consciousness. "To attain this latter one must have the power of knowing oneself separate from the body, of passing into a state of ecstasy, in fact. Without this, cosmic consciousness cannot be experienced." It is perhaps well that Mr Edward Carpenter has written of the matter so definitely and from such an aloof and impersonal

standpoint as he has done, as those who have experienced the state have, as a rule, been both too reserved with regard to their spiritual experiences and too deficient in the critical faculty to give us anything that would appear to the ordinary mind as a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon. We have nothing, for instance, in writing, from Mr James Alien, who claims to have had the experience more than once, which would throw any intimate light on what he saw and felt in connection with it, though it leaves its trace, as it must ever do, on his own standpoint in life, and on all that he has written. Mr Alien claimed to have had this experience in the first instance at 24, an unusually early age, while later on it returned after an interval of ten years in, as he says, a more permanent form.

In three modern poets — Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Walt Whitmans - there are suggestions which point to some experience of the kind, and Walt Whitman especially, in his *Leaves of Grass*, has expressed in singularly beautiful phraseology the mental attitude which we associate with

the transmutation of the individual life by this mystical experience.

The lines written by Wordsworth on Tintern Abbey, in his twenty-ninth year, are again singularly apposite as an expression of the mental state to which cosmic consciousness serves as the portal. In these he speaks of

. . . That blessed mood

In which the burden of the mystery,

In which the heavy and the weary weight

Of all this unintelligible world

Is lightened : that serene and blessed mood

In which the affections gently lead us on,—

Until, the breath of this corporeal frame

And even the motion of our human blood

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep

In body, and become a living soul ;

While with an eye made quiet by the power

Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,

We see into the life of things.

Further lines in the same poem suggest the occurrence of an actual personal experience in this connection, and we should perhaps be right if we classed this poet (albeit with some hesitancy) along with the others given in these Notes as one of those who actually entered into this state of higher consciousness, who have been put en rapport with the unity of all created life, and have seen "with the bodily eye " and not in any mere poetical vision, "the light that never was on land or sea." Thus he writes once more :

I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thought; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man—

A motion and a spirit, that impels

All thinking things, all objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things.

Tennyson's verse again is steeped in a mysticism the depth of which the ordinary reader, and indeed the critic as well, have been too slow to appreciate. The author of *Cosmic Consciousness* himself speaks of this poet far too deprecatingly and must, I am afraid, be numbered with those who fail to gauge his true greatness, and the inwardness of what he wrote. The whole conception underlying the verses on the Holy Grail is steeped in mystical insight, and the thought of the deep reality underlying the entire phantasmagoria of the phenomenal world is seldom far absent from the poet's thought.

The following lines from *The Holy Grail* may be given as an instance, but they are only one example out of many :

Let the visions of the night, or of the day

Come as they will ; and many a time they come,

Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,

This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,

This air that smites his forehead is not air,

But vision—yea his very hand and foot—

In moments when he feels he cannot die,

And knows himself no vision to himself,

Nor the high God a vision, nor that one

Who rose again; ye have seen what ye have seen.

Again in *The Ancient Sage*, as many readers will recall, he relates how

. . . revolving in myself

The word that is the symbol of myself,

The mortal limit of the Self was loosed,

And passed into the nameless, as a cloud

Melts into heaven. I touch'd my limbs, the limbs

Were strange, not mine—and yet no shade of doubt,

But utter clearness, and thro' loss of self

The gain of such large life as matched with ours

Were sun to spark — unshadowable in words,

Themselves but shadows of a shadow-world.

This is admittedly the record of a personal experience and is referred to as such in the poet's *Life* by his son, the present Lord Tennyson.

Dr. Bucke gives many instances in his work of men who, in his view, have experienced cosmic consciousness in some

form or other, but by the critical mind many of these can hardly be regarded as legitimate. Among these may be mentioned Mohammed, whose illumination might be defended by some, but who to my thinking rather appears to have written the Koran in much the same way as Madame Blavatsky wrote *Isis Unveiled*, and whom I should class rather as a natural medium in this respect than as a real illuminate. Dante is again another instance given, with regard to whom, however, conclusive evidence is lacking. The Bacon and Shakespeare controversy is introduced rather unfortunately into the present work, from which it would be well, I cannot help thinking, that such fantastic and irrelevant controversies were omitted. Several of the instances given in the present Notes do not appear at all. No woman is named among the subjects of this experience. I myself have instanced St Theresa, and among the moderns in this connection Anna Kingsford, an illuminate of a very different type, should not be overlooked.

Probably at the present time, though Dr. Bucke cites only the case of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, this experience is

more common among the saints and ascetics of India than in any other part of the world. A training which lends itself naturally to the production of such phenomena is the well-known yoga discipline, the goal of which is the attainment of samadhi, a state near akin to, if not practically identical with, that known in the West as cosmic consciousness.

Dr. Bucke claims that the cases of cosmic consciousness are steadily increasing as the world grows older, and this may well be so, but the instances chosen by him are not unfrequently so capricious, while other important ones are omitted, that the list he gives in support of his contention will hardly carry conviction, more especially as only one is given from India. In Dr. Bucke's opinion there is a steady development of sentient life from that simple consciousness which is possessed by the higher types of the animal kingdom, onward to the self-consciousness which, together with the use of language, is the differentiating characteristic of mankind, right up to that cosmic consciousness which he holds will be, in eons to come, the heritage of all alike. By that time it may be supposed mankind will have developed

a more spiritual type of body and nervous organization which will be permanently responsive to influences which to-day reach only the rarest types of humanity in occasional and evanescent flashes.