

EDITORIAL

Mysticism and Chemistry

AT THE ACADEMY's Annual Meeting in Boston during April, the use of LSD and other psychedelic drugs, particularly by college students, was the subject of considerable discussion. It happened that, during that very week, Dana L. Farnsworth, M.D., Director of Harvard University Health Services, took the opportunity at one of the workshops to state the position of the Health Services on the use of these drugs. Dr. Farnsworth's statement can be read in this issue of the *Journal*. Essentially it is a warning that responsible research in the effects of these drugs has been impeded by the laws against their sale and use; that there have been instances where unsupervised and irresponsible use has led to severe psychotic difficulties; and that, while there are specific therapeutic situations in which these drugs seem to be effective, we have not yet sufficient evidence to make any final judgments about their effectiveness.

Walter Pahnke, M.D. of Harvard Medical School, and Professor Huston Smith, of MIT, at another panel discussion agreed that, while LSD when taken under careful supervision could in some cases enhance human perceptiveness and self-understanding and induce experiences similar to religious experience, every precaution should be taken against its careless and indiscriminate use.

Shortly after these discussions we saw a television program on the Canadian Broadcasting System in which young people interviewed Canadian physicians and psychiatrists about the use of LSD. The medical experts offered the same comments and warnings, as well as a further one. LSD is a specific chemical substance in its pure form. There is, however, absolutely no way of knowing whether the LSD that is sold illegally "on the street" is chemically pure or not. Hence nobody can predict the possible effects of these drugs on individuals who use them.

The whole controversy brings up a number of serious problems. In the first place, the use and distribution of psychedelic drugs are as of

now illegal. One can say, as many do, that the laws against them are foolish, unenforceable, and unjust. This may well be true, but the fact remains that the laws exist and that those who violate them involve themselves in the consequent criminal acts. The situation may prove to be somewhat like that which prevailed in our country during prohibition. Millions of respectable and otherwise law-abiding citizens consistently violated the prohibition amendment; illegal traffic in liquor flourished; the criminal underworld grew rich and powerful until at last the eighteenth amendment was repealed and the use and sale of alcoholic beverages became legal. The prohibition experiment and its failure should have taught us that when most people believe a law to be foolish or unjust enforcement is all but impossible. The same situation may exist with regard to marijuana and LSD. Marijuana grows as a weed almost everywhere. LSD can be created in any chemical laboratory, and, since it is odorless and tasteless, combined with almost any innocent substance without being recognized.

These facts, coupled with widespread use of the drugs among college students, have led to serious administrative problems in colleges and universities. Sympathetic as we are with the desire of members of the present college generation to experiment with these drugs and ready as we are to accept the fact that they do provide some who have used them with increased awareness of sensual and aesthetic realities and even experiences that could be described as religious, we still have our doubts. We do not see, for example, how the Dean of Harvard College, J. U. Monro, could have taken any other position than the one he did recently when he warned members of the Freshman class that the college was prepared to "take serious disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal, against any student found to be involved in the use or distribution of illegal and dangerous drugs. . . . If a student is stupid enough to misuse his time here fooling around with illegal and dangerous drugs, our view is that he should leave college and make room for people prepared to take good advantage of the college opportunity."

This is not to say that there may not be positive and creative values connected with the controlled and supervised use of LSD. Many have attested to this possibility, and there is no reason to think that all the positive reports are lies and delusions. On the other hand, we also know of serious negative consequences of the use of LSD. These consequences have included profound depressions, psychotic episodes, and, in a few

instances, suicide. These findings should be enough to induce a very cautious approach to the use of LSD except under the supervision of professional people who have been carefully trained in the effects the drug can have upon individual users. There is no evidence to indicate that LSD improves the human capacity for intellectual growth and sustained scholarship. Since this is the primary reason for the existence of a college or university, the student is confronted with a serious choice. He may pursue the program of intellectual exploration and growth, or he may pursue the experiences of heightened awareness and deepened self-understanding that LSD is alleged to make possible. It is unlikely that he can do both simultaneously with any degree of success.

This is a serious choice for young people. The appetite of the young is notoriously larger than their ability to digest, and the choice, therefore, seems an unfair one. Yet the fact remains that such choices have to be made, and one of the marks of emotional maturity is the capacity to postpone immediate gratification of desires in favor of more abiding values and long-range goals.

This leads us to the question of the relationship of certain LSD experiences to religious or mystical experiences. We have never taken LSD, nor have we ever had anything that could properly be described as a mystical experience. But we have listened to and read the reports of many LSD "trips" and have for many years read widely in the field of religious mysticism, both Eastern and Western. Our impression is that the LSD experience may at times involve something that closely resembles the mystical experience. People feel a sense of unification within the self and a feeling of unity of the self with the natural world and with other human beings. The perceptions of the five senses are intensified and clarified. There is apparently a feeling of close identity with ideal aims and purposes.

The religious mystic achieves these experiences by practicing long and often arduous discipline of the body and mind. He learns to control his thoughts and desires, to empty his mind of the superficial and irrelevant details, and to focus his attention on enduring spiritual values and meanings. At times there is a kind of break-through, when it appears that God or the object of the spiritual search enters in and takes control of the individual, so that he says with St. Paul, "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me."

Sometimes the mystical experience is more general and diffused, so that the individual feels the loss of himself in the larger self that surrounds and includes. Sometimes the mystical experience is clarification and commitment to social values and purposes, as in the case of Albert Schweitzer, who felt himself called to the direct effort to alleviate human suffering.

The basic difference, it seems to us, between the LSD experience as we have read about it and heard it described and the religious mystical experience is that the former is treated as an end in itself, while the latter leads on to some realistic personal involvement in the service of mankind.

This is an all-important difference. The great mystics of the Christian or non-Christian traditions have taken the experiences of spiritual reality that have come to them as guides and directives to ethical action in the world. The experiences have been means to an end and not an end in themselves. They have led to the enrichment of human life through dedicated service.

The difference is illustrated in an Indian fable about two holy men walking down a road together. They come at length to a high wall and climb into a tree to see what lies behind it. What they see is a lovely garden, more beautiful than anything they have ever seen before. Both holy men are entranced with the beauty of the vision. One leaps over the wall into the garden, in order that he may remain there always. The other is tempted to do the same thing, but after gazing long at the garden he climbs down the tree on the outside of the wall and walks back along the dusty road to the village to share with the people there the beauty he has seen.

Here is the basic test of the validity of any religious experience. Does it lead the one who claims to have had it to commit himself to the service of his fellow-men? It seems to us that so far the LSD experience has yet to pass this test, whereas the authentic experience of the religious seeker passed it centuries ago. Jesus stated the issue very clearly: "By their fruits you shall know them."

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