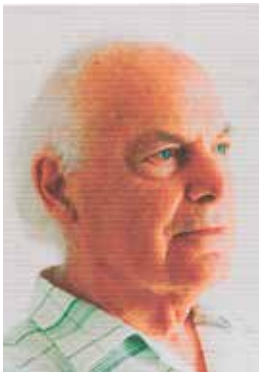




# Michael Whiteman's Scientific Mysticism

John Poynton

*Michael Whiteman (1906-2007) was Emeritus Associate Professor of Applied Mathematics at the University of Cape Town, South Africa (and an early Network Member). His work is unique in combining physics, psychical research, Eastern and Western mysticism, ancient and modern philosophy, depth psychology, and music. He treated the subjects with utmost rigour yet from the level of personal knowledge, having had a life-time of psychical and mystical experience.*



Author of six books and several book chapters, articles, papers and editorials, Michael Whiteman was able to integrate these fields in the unifying idea of 'scientific mysticism'. He was critical of conventional scientific materialism, which is unwilling (or even incapable) of coming to grips with non-physical experience and life in worlds other than physical. His methods rested on observation, conceptual analysis and insight, in tune with Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. This aims

at gaining face-to-face self-evidence, shedding the usual 'cloak of ideas' that conceals the essential character of things. Science in Whiteman's usage was not an exercise in theorising; he was a radical empiricist.

Born in London, he won a scholarship to Cambridge University in 1926, where he obtained a first class in the mathematics tripos. He and his musician wife emigrated to South Africa in 1937. Appointed a junior lecturer in the Department of Pure Mathematics at the University of Cape Town, he was also active in music, taking on editorship of *The South African Music Teacher*, a position he held for 55 years. He was awarded Trinity College diplomas in composition, also a B.Mus. at the University of South Africa in 1943. In the same year he was awarded a Ph.D. by the University of Cape Town for a thesis on the foundations of mathematics.

In 1946 he was appointed lecturer in the Department of Applied Mathematics at the University of Cape Town, then promoted to Associate Professor of Applied Mathematics, and given the title of Emeritus Associate Professor on his retirement in 1972. His activities in music continued, conducting his own piano concerto in the Cape Town City Hall with his wife as soloist. In 1947 he was awarded a M.Mus. by the University of Cape Town. He lectured on mysticism at the University of Cape Town's Summer School, and conducted several study groups on mysticism, Sanskrit and related subjects. His first publication in the field of psychical experience was on angelic choirs in *The Hibbert Journal* of 1954. It was a wide-ranging account of non-

physical states in which music, mostly song or chanting, has been reported. Its importance was in 'pointing to the unique source from which all wisdom and goodness springs.' In 1956 he published his first paper in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* on out-of-body experience. He joined the Society for Psychical Research in 1953, and was elected an honorary life member in 1999. He also had close connections with the American SPR.

He came to the attention of the newly-formed South African SPR, centred at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and was invited to give lectures there; he also took part in conferences on parapsychology held at the university in 1973 and 1980. The South African SPR awarded him the prestigious Marius Valkhoff Medal and elected him a vice-president of the Society.

His experience, insight and scholarship extended beyond the general range of experience and thought; a reader may have difficulty following him on account of a relatively limited personal context in which to place his work. A summary like this, which presents some of his main ideas without much of the evidence and reasoning behind them, might give the impression of dogmatism, which is expressly what Whiteman strove to avoid. The purpose here is to give some kind of background to his work, hopefully to encourage further reading.

## Scientific mysticism

Whiteman defined mysticism in an early work, *The Mystical Life*,<sup>1</sup> as, 'the study of everything non-physical, including the other worlds and their archetypal governance, as well as our spiritual bodies, the facts and their relationship being known by the self-evidence of direct observation and not by reasoning or speculation.' Mysticism was taken to be fact-finding, not concerned with theorising or religious belief. The definition indicates an empirical science, sharing territory with psychical research. Mysticism was distinguished from the latter by involving a 'sense of ultimates', 'openness to guidance', and 'transformed being'.<sup>2</sup>

The term 'scientific mysticism' appeared as a title in the trilogy, *Old and New Evidence on the Meaning of Life*.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Volume One was entitled *An Introduction to Scientific Mysticism*.<sup>2</sup> He aimed to bring mysticism into the field of science as being 'open-minded, rigorously tested, rationally

coherent, and illuminating. The importance he attached to direct evidence was emphasised in *The Mystical Life*,<sup>1</sup> whose subtitle is *An Outline of Its Nature and Teachings from the Evidence of Direct Experience*. The word 'evidence' also appears in the title of his trilogy *Old and New Evidence on the Meaning of Life*; his methods rested on observation, conceptual analysis, and insight regarding what he termed 'the inner constitution of nature.' This is a phrase from the subtitle of his book, *The Philosophy of Space and Time*,<sup>5</sup> which was also subtitled *A Phenomenological Study*. Phenomenology was understood in Husserl's sense, as noted earlier.

A sixth book is entitled *Aphorisms on Spiritual Method: The 'Yoga Sutras of Patanjali' in the Light of Mystical Experience*.<sup>6</sup> This is a unique presentation of the Sanskrit text with interlinear and idiomatic English translations and commentaries. Based on his wide knowledge of classical Indian languages, he recognised that the Sutras incorporated an abundance of Buddhist technical terms, a fact underplayed in standard translations made within the Hindu tradition. He revealed close connections between thinking in the Sutras and Husserl's phenomenology. The non-mystical, physical interpretation of passages in the Sutras and other ancient texts, as generally encountered in English translations, was rigorously criticised in his radically authentic treatment.

All this was linked to a 'universal theology' connecting Minoan, Vedic, Upanishadic, Buddhist, Hebrew, Pauline and Johannine mysticism as one coherent tradition. Subsequent Christian attribution of divine status to Jesus compromised a 'universal theology', he believed; most later writings were considered to be corrupted by dogma and theory. To him theology simply meant 'the application of the phenomenological method to our awareness of the Divine.' So, 'the word "God" must be taken to stand for Archetypal Reason in all.'<sup>4</sup>

### Potentiality and actualisation

A key to Whiteman's scientific mysticism is the idea of potentiality and actualisation, as developed by Heisenberg. Behind a physical event one may recognise what Heisenberg called 'an objective tendency or possibility, a "potentia" in the sense of Aristotelian philosophy.'<sup>7</sup> This introduces a hierarchy, composed of underlying reason or substructure – potentiality, and appearances – actualisation. It is in opposition to what he termed 'one-level naturalism', the conventional idea that there is a single physical level in which all things, events and their causation happen. In his understanding, appearances are manifested only on an occasion of observation, when all potentialities, from the universal to the individual, are integrated to produce a unique actualisation. The state of the observer is itself part of the potentiality governing any appearances, so the process of actualisation will be different for different people.

Whiteman saw a potentiality-actualisation hierarchy to be self-evident. Experience taught him that actualisation does not take place only at a physical level: there are different kinds of experienced non-physical spheres, as in thought and imagination, and out-of-body, near-death and mystical experience. Thought and images are non-physical actualisations in the consciousness of an individual's 'thought-image sphere', as he called it, which includes memory and imagination. Subconscious elements are part of a potentiality field contributing to such mental actualisations.

A potentiality-actualisation model relieves the futile attempt to 'explain' mental and psi phenomena in purely one-level physicalistic terms. Whiteman saw telepathy to result from the interaction or resonance between the thought-image spheres of individuals; the interaction is not actualised at the physical level and so transfer of information occurs independently of physical space and time. Clairvoyance is resonance between the potentiality-sphere of a physical object or event and the thought-image sphere of an individual, resulting in the actualisation of impressions in the individual's thought-image sphere. Once again, resonance or interaction happens

independently of physical space and time, as there is no physical actualisation. Psychokinesis may be regarded as a reverse clairvoyant interaction; potentialities usually linked in some way to an individual result in physical actualisations.

### Precognition

Whiteman saw precognition as actualisation in an individual's thought-image sphere of potentiality-fields that may affect future physical events. The individual may intervene in the physical actualisation of these events by an action that alters the potentiality-fields, so allowing prevention of a precognised event from happening. Moving a child from a 'felt' area of danger is an example. Even if potentiality-fields are time-ordering, resulting in a succession of events actualised in the physical world, the ordering is not fixed; fields are accessible in states of physical detachment, and so allow limited alteration, and the exercise of free will. Such potentiality fields may be directly experienced as if space-like, not progressing or measurable like physical clock-time.

### Other spaces

His understanding of out-of-body experience also rested on potentiality-actualisation principles. All such experiences were considered by him to occur in a space other than physical, even though they are often so similar to what is actualised physically that they are mistaken for the physical. The prevailing one-level naturalism assumes there is only one 'real' space that can be manifested, namely the physical world; this fixed idea will contribute to the potentialities governing a separative experience, and lead to the actualisation of a physical-like 'duplicate' scene. Close empirical examination usually indicates that such scenes are not strictly physical, as is commonly shown in subtle differences in lighting. Yet this does not necessarily imply a hallucinatory state. Potentiality-actualisation processes that are different from a physical presentation must be involved in an out-of-body state, and therefore some differences from a physical presentation must be expected.

This is a subject full of complexities. A one-level physicalistic interpretation of out-of-body experience is illogical: the separated 'body' does not have the equipment to actualise physical objects, and is itself not actualisable in physical space. Therefore, what is actualised in the experience cannot be located in physical space, even if the surroundings may closely match a physical presentation.

For someone free of the constraints of one-level thinking, Whiteman wrote of an 'inexhaustible variety' of appearances in other spaces. The highest lead to 'perfectly acceptable forms of transcendent unified beauty,' where 'the surroundings, correspondingly, are distinguished by the quality of the light, and gain in *intelligible* character, perfection of beauty, depth of glowing heart quality, unitive freedom and sense of blending with other minds, as the highest condition, which is that of Mystical Form Liberation, is approached.' In these descriptions, Whiteman cautions: "'I" and "me" do not stand for the familiar consciousness of self in the physical personality, or, in fact, for anything that can be known in an ordinary physical state of mind. To understand what is meant, the characteristics of the merged ordinary *self* must be ruled out.'<sup>1</sup>

### Spiritual skills

This requires the development of 'spiritual skills', which overcome the limiting fixations and attachments of ordinary life. We cannot achieve a heightened spiritual state, Whiteman believed, 'without psychological and spiritual faculties of attention, judgement, purposiveness and self-discipline', based on three 'foundational skills' named Active Recollection, Continuous Recollection, and Faith + Obedience.<sup>2</sup>

Active Recollection aims to recall or recover the essence in what is perceived, 'and thus the attainment of objective

insight and release.' Husserl termed it the phenomenological *epoché* or time-stoppage, 'the necessary operation which renders pure consciousness accessible to us.'<sup>7</sup> It is termed *samadhi* or *sati* in Indian literature;<sup>2</sup> regrettably, Husserl was evidently unaware of the close parallels between his and classical Indian thinking. Stoppage advocated by Husserl involves a 'bracketing off' of the 'cloak of ideas', beliefs and assumptions: it is entering a state of 'alienation from regular life' to access 'pure consciousness', to bring 'to *complete clearness*, what at any time floats before us shifting and unclear and more or less far removed intuitively.'<sup>7</sup>

The skill of Continuous Recollection is 'the freely stabilised ground of release at which Active Recollection has been aiming.' Obedience is not a state of subservience but orientation to 'the transcendent Source of Right and Good.' It operates in conjunction with Faith in this transcendence. He did not follow or advocate any set meditation practice in developing these skills.

## Personality

Personality was regarded as existing in the realm of potentiality, actualised physically as behaviour. His own experience, combined with and classical Indian texts, led him to believe that personality has a corporate structure, centred round a largely unrecognised 'core identity'. It falls under influence of various 'contributory minds', also largely unrecognised in ordinary life. It is the task of the individual to have knowledge and command of these minds, and to discern his/her core identity as the origin of inmost disposition.

Personality as a corporate structure can survive physical death, Whiteman considered, being composed of imperishable minds; but sooner or later the structure disintegrates. Fragments, either the core identity or contributory minds, may re-enter physical life, either as 'strict reincarnation' in the case of core identity, or 'loose incarnation' in the case of a contributory mind.<sup>2</sup> They can carry memories of a former life, which may suggest 'past life recall'. But Whiteman recognised alternatives to reincarnation interpretations: other entanglements of minds such as retrocognition and psychometry, do not entail memory of successive lives assumed by reincarnation.

He placed importance on number systems in groups and cycles, expounded in ancient thinking and in physics. He recognised three time dimensions, one of which operates as potentiality and is space-like, noted above in connection with precognition. Another is physical clock-time; a third is an actualising function. Combination with the three spatial dimensions produces a sixteen-fold system that corresponds with the sixteen *kalās* ('operational parts in creation') of the Upanishads. From this he developed a system integrating physics with psychology.<sup>2,4</sup> He also developed 'the mystical derivation of quantum theory and physical laws in general'<sup>4</sup> from tensor calculus, sedenion algebra and other mathematical procedures.

## Conclusion

Scientific mysticism was a revolutionary attempt to discern and characterise the hierarchy of potentiality and actualisation. The existence of the hierarchy accounted for different levels of physical and non-physical actuality, so yielding psi phenomena and the immense variety of altered states of consciousness. He was convinced that behind any particular observation there is an intelligible structure 'operative in and analysable out of the total experience.'<sup>5</sup> He did not accept Kant's idea of the unknowability of things-in-themselves. Instead, we can

attain intellectual or perceptual knowledge which transcends in a certain clear and unmistakable way the onward urge of time, the rigid apartness of spatial objects, and the apparent isolation of the individual mind in its state of fixation on bodily impressions. It is a state of *release*. Fixation being overcome, the mind opens out into universality... Two courses are open to us: to say that the power of analysis reaches so far and no further, and to cease all effort or hope to develop them; or to watch insight gradually developing in us because instead of rigidly fencing off mind from matter, we seek always for participation and the Higher Reality in a hierarchical universe.<sup>5</sup>

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The book can be ordered through John Poynton at [jp@johnpoynton.com](mailto:jp@johnpoynton.com)