

# MYSTICISM: A WAY OF UNKNOWING

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## 1. Introduction

What is Mysticism? What does it signify? Are mystics psychological misfits or are they fully integrated human beings? Are mystics ‘self-enclosed monads’ or are they deeply involved with the world and all its problems? Is mysticism irrational? Is mysticism reserved only for a spiritual élite, monks, nuns, sadhus or sannyasins? Is it a reflection of psychological regression? What is the epistemic validity of mysticism?<sup>1</sup>

Questions such as these are very much in vogue at present, given the ever-increasing interest in both spirituality and mysticism. Such interest cuts across diverse sectors of society, and is certainly not confined to the area of religion. In fact, religion is seen by some to be antagonistic to true spirituality. Sociological investigations report that the number of ‘mystical’ experiences among the ordinary populace is far higher than generally expected, and rarely associated with the ideology of a particular religious belief.<sup>2</sup>

Interest in the mystical can be seen, inter alia, in the following: fascination with studies investigating both the near death experience (NDE) and the empathic death experience (EDE);<sup>3</sup> neuroscientific research

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<sup>1</sup>See in this connection, Kourie “Mysticism: A Survey of Recent Issues,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 5 (2) 1992, 83-103: 88-89 and Norman “Rediscovery of Mysticism,” in Jones, G., ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, 449, particularly with respect to a certain strand of Protestantism associated with, inter alia, Ritschl, Troeltsch, von Harnack and the neo-orthodoxy of Barth and Brunner. Johnson exposes the “threat” of mysticism as “... both anti-Scriptural and a contradiction of the evangelical view that the Bible is the one and only ultimate criterion of truth about God and our relation to Him” and is a “non-Christian” philosophy. Johnson, *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism*. Chicago: Chicago Moody Press, 1988, 11, 13.

<sup>2</sup>Greely, A. *Ecstasy, a Way of Knowing*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974.

<sup>3</sup>Moody speaks of the phenomenon of Empathic-death experiences, which are closely related to Near-death experiences and reflect the experience of those gathered at the bedside of the dying, who have their own visions of a world beyond. Moody, *The Light Beyond*, London: Rider, 2005, x-xi.

into the biology of religious belief;<sup>4</sup> the idea of a “spiritual intelligence quotient”<sup>5</sup> which complements the cognitive intelligence quotient and emotional intelligence quotient; and recent studies in genetics which posit a “God gene.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, there is a growing distrust of the legacy of the Enlightenment; a refusal to accept what can be seen and measured as definitive of reality; and a realisation that secular humanism fails to meet the deep longings of the human heart. Furthermore, the oppression that is felt by the narrowness and rigidity of religious dogmatism, particularly where only one view of the Divine is given; claims of privileged truth, and the realisation that revelatory structures cannot contain the fullness of Reality<sup>7</sup> has led to an increasing interest in eastern philosophies with the importance given to meditation and silence, greater inter-religious dialogue, and the understanding that mysticism is a phenomenon that cuts across all religious and denominational boundaries. During the last decades, there has been what David Tracy calls a “Copernican revolution in theology ... a turn to the subject,” stressing the grounding of theological statements in *personal experience*.<sup>8</sup> William James in his classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* speaks of the need to suspend “disbelief” with respect to the mystical vision of reality:

We do not question the credentials of the great poet, artist or musician: we simply acknowledge their greatness. There should be no difference in our attitude towards the genuine mystic, whose authenticity can be sensed as surely as any great artist’s.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>D’Aquili and Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999; Newberg and D’Aquili, *Why God Won’t Go Away*, New York: Ballantine books, 2001.

<sup>5</sup>Zohar and Marshall, *SQ - Spiritual Intelligence: The Ultimate Intelligence*, London: Bloomsbury, 2000.

<sup>6</sup>Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into our Genes*, New York: Doubleday, 2004; Bowker, *The Sacred Neuron*, London: I B Taurus, 2005.

<sup>7</sup>Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness: Towards a Theology of Radical Openness*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001, 30.

<sup>8</sup>Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, New York: Seabury Press, 1975, 91.

<sup>9</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, London: Penguin Books, 1902, 25. The need to reclaim a mystical understanding is paramount. The replacement of a predominately metaphysical understanding of reality by an essentially historical understanding, as a result of the Enlightenment, led to a situation where the only true index of reality was considered to be that of the observable and empirical. Paul Tillich speaks of the “lost dimension of depth” in contemporary society, “As long as the preliminary, transitory concerns are not

For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to define mysticism separately from spirituality, as these terms are sometimes incorrectly used interchangeably. *Spirituality* has been used as an umbrella term which covers a myriad of activities ranging from the deeply creative to the distinctively bizarre; unfortunately it has also often been identified only with “piety” or “otherworldliness.” To sharpen the notion of spirituality, it should be seen within a wide context to refer to the *deepest dimension* of the human person. It refers to the “ultimate values” that give meaning to life, whether they are religious or non-religious. Thus, as Griffin explicates, each one embodies some kind of spirituality, even if its referents are power, success, money, pleasure, etc., or a self-transcendent ultimate reality.<sup>10</sup> This certainly broadens the whole concept of spirituality, and allows for greater latitude in understanding its anthropological dimension.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there is also the ancient but new *academic discipline* of Spirituality that has emerged over the last few decades, which is reclaiming its place in the Academy worldwide.

A presupposition of the present enquiry is a correct understanding of mysticism. Unfortunately, it has often been equated with abnormal phenomena, pathological states, magic, psychical experiences and religious sentimentality. Such confusion and lack of understanding leads to prejudice and precludes proper investigation and scientific enquiry.

*Mysticism* can be described as “a passionate return to the Source;”<sup>12</sup> the realisation that “... in one way or another, everything is interconnected, that all things have a single source;”<sup>13</sup> “a heightened awareness

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silenced, no matter how interesting and valuable and important they may be, the voice of the ultimate concern cannot be heard. This is the deepest loss of the dimension of depth in our period – the loss of religion in its basic universal meaning” Paul Tillich, “The Lost Dimension in Religion,” in Thomas, ed., *The Spiritual Situation in our Technical Society*, Georgia: Mercer, 1988, 44.

<sup>10</sup>Griffin, *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988:1.

<sup>11</sup>Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals or Partners?” *Horizons* 13 (2), 1986, 253-274; Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Leuven: Peeters, 2002; Kourie, “The ‘Turn’ to Spirituality,” in de Villiers, PGR, Kourie, CET & Lombaard, C. eds., *The Spirit that Moves: Orientation and Issues in Spirituality*, Acta Theologia Supplement 8, Bloemfontein: University of the Free State, 2006, 22.

<sup>12</sup>Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 16.

<sup>13</sup>Borchert, *Mysticism: Its History and Challenge*, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1994, 3.

of God's immediate and transforming presence;<sup>14</sup> "consciousness of union with the Divine, or the Ground of Being, or Ultimate Reality."<sup>15</sup> The mystical experience is characterised by *awareness*, although the sensory-conceptual apparatus of the mind remains in abeyance. Such a state of consciousness, characterised by non-intellectual, non-sensory perception is different from everyday experience. Normal sensing, characterised by the duality of a subject-object framework, whether comprising either ordinary observation or highly complex scientific reasoning is thus absent in the mystical experience itself.<sup>16</sup> In contemporary culture, a mystical modality is a necessary antidote to the often disillusioning "problem-solving" mode of mediating reality. Mysticism can be seen as effecting a deeper, permanent way of life, in which the purifying, illuminating and transforming power of God is experienced, effecting a transmutation of consciousness.

The growing interest in the field of mysticism is reflected in a new vocabulary to delineate specific aspects of this phenomenon: *mystology* – speaking about mysticism; *mystography* – writing about mysticism; *mystagogy* – introduction to the mystical experience; *mystical way* – the experience of mysticism in daily life; *mystical theology* – the systematic reflection upon the direct experience of the Ultimate; and *mystical cosmology* – a view of the universe in which all things are seen to be interconnected.

Bearing the foregoing in mind, the aim of this paper is to consider mysticism as a *way of unknowing*, or as *nothingness* (no-thing-ness) within some of the major mystical traditions, particularly within the Christian mystical tradition. In addition, I will examine the relevance of the way of unknowing, with respect to the value of *silence* and its importance for inter-religious dialogue.

## 2. Apophatic Mysticism

An analysis of the way of unknowing, or the 'void' or the 'no-thing-ness' falls within the purview of *apophatic* mysticism, or the *via negativa*, which emphasises the *incomprehensibility* of the essence and nature of the

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<sup>14</sup>McGinn, "Mysticism," in Sheldrake, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, London: SCM Press 2005:19; McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, London: SCM Press, 1991, xviii.

<sup>15</sup>Kourie, "Mysticism: A Survey of Recent Issues," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 5 (2) 1992, 83-103: 86.

<sup>16</sup>Kourie, "Mysticism: A Survey of Recent Issues," 86.

Divine, and the inability of language to conceptualise God. This is in contrast to *kataphatic* mysticism, or the *via positiva* which utilises positive statements to describe God’s beauty, love, wisdom, goodness, etc., and employs affective language to speak of the love-relation with the divine. *Kataphasis* indicates a moving towards speech, and effects affirmative mysticism, approximating aspects of divinity; it is luxuriant, profound and full of splendour, rejoicing in the beauty of God’s creation. Contemporary thought, with its emphasis on creation-centred spirituality, feminism, cosmology, and the idea of panentheism (not pantheism) enhances kataphatic mysticism. Ruffing points out that the kataphatic approach leads to “wonder, amazement, appreciation ... for the earth itself. The cosmos is once again experienced as a primary revelation of God.”<sup>17</sup>

By way of contrast, in apophatic mysticism no predicates that can be attributed to finite beings can be attributed to God: *non est hoc Deus, non est hoc*.<sup>18</sup> Language is ontologically impoverished and unable to capture the Reality, which is *no-thing*, the divine *abyss*. *Apophasis*, meaning “unsaying” or “speaking away,” subverts the tendency of the mind to arrive at ultimate truth, and acknowledges the inaccessibility of the divine. Even the most eloquent language mitigates against disclosure of Reality. Thus, there is a process of stripping away or *ascesis* of attitudes and concepts and imagery; hence the use of paradox, deconstruction and the denial of names in order to lead to the abyss, or the void – the blinding

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<sup>17</sup>Ruffing, “Kataphatic Spirituality,” in Sheldrake, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, London: SCM Press, 2005, 394; See also Marshall, *Mystical Encounters with the Natural World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>18</sup>The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) states that “between the Creator and creature no similarity can be expressed without including a great dissimilarity” quoted in Egan, “Negative Way,” in Downey, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993, 700. Nothingness therefore refers to the ungraspable aspect of divinity, and expresses the breakthrough to a different state of consciousness, in which divinity, in its mode of non-differentiation is manifest: “If on one side nothingness functions to seal consciousness off from its own breakthrough, on the other hand it serves as the seat of liberation and the threshold into unaccessed revelatory experience. Nothingness assumes a more radical place in the mystical traditions by pointing beyond theology, and even beyond God, to the force that breaks through, or undoes all theologizing. It is depicted across cultures as the great moderator of spiritual life and the common denominator of ego-annihilation.” Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 6.

brilliance of the divine darkness. Thus language is manipulated and brought to breaking point in order to illustrate the ineffability of the divine.

In African religion, the Supreme Deity, in Zulu, *Nkulunkulu*, is above all, beyond all, yet at the same time in charge of the totality of life.<sup>19</sup> Thus, although the realm of the Divine transcends all knowledge, nevertheless the heavenly realm also contains the spirit of the ancestors.<sup>20</sup>

Ancient Hindu wisdom describes this paradox in the Rig Veda where Reality, although the totality of what is, what has been and what shall be, nevertheless, “Though he has become all this, in reality, He is not this ... He transcends his own glory.”<sup>21</sup> The Sublime cannot be encapsulated, says the Hindu sage, it is *neti, neti*. In similar vein, Taoism states that the Tao that can be spoken of is not the absolute Tao. The Tao is the Absolute. Nothing can be predicated about it, since it is beyond any formulation. Therefore, says Lao Tzu, “Reach far enough toward the Void, hold fast enough to the unknowing ....”<sup>22</sup> We are reminded here of Nagarjuna, the Indian Buddhist (c.150 CE) who speaks of “the blissful cessation of all phenomenal thought construction.” His *Madhyamika* philosophy subverts the inclination to assign name and identity to the Real. His famous fourfold negation utilises paradoxical non-dualisms:

Everything is such as it is, not such as it is,  
Both such as it is and not such as it is,  
and neither such as it is nor such as it is not.

This is the Buddha’s teaching.<sup>23</sup>

Nagarjuna’s critical approach to both affirmation and negation offers a way where one can abide in the ‘dependently arisen awareness’ of the emptiness of all things.<sup>24</sup>

In Jewish kabbalistic mysticism, formless reality, the *Ein-Sof*, the Infinite, is beyond qualities and attributes. This is also exemplified in the idea of *ayin*, - nothing - which refers to the simplicity and indescribability

<sup>19</sup>Karecki, Kourie & Kretschmar, “African Spirituality,” in Sheldrake, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, London: SCM Press, 2005, 92.

<sup>20</sup>Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975, 65-70. See also Kalilombe, “Spirituality in the African Perspective,” in Gibellini, ed., *Paths of African Theology*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1994, 125-127.

<sup>21</sup>Abhayananda, *History of Mysticism: The Unchanging Testament*, London: Watkins Publishing, 2002, 27; Rig Veda X: 90, 1-5.

<sup>22</sup>Abhayananda, *History of Mysticism*, 67.

<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 19.

<sup>24</sup>Keenan, “Buddhism and Christianity,” in Sheldrake, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, London: SCM Press, 2005, 159.

of God. *Ayin* is dynamic and transformative, leading to renewal, and a new something, *yesh*.<sup>25</sup> In Islam, the Sufi mystic, Al-Junayd (d 910 CE) speaks of the self that is annihilated and passes away in *fana* : “He annihilated me in generating me ... I cannot designate him because he leaves no sign ...”<sup>26</sup> Daring articulation of complete loss of self in the divine darkness scandalises those who are wedded to the concept of divine transcendence, as seen in the execution of Al-Hallaj (d 922 CE).

Plotinus (205-270 CE) who exerted a strong influence on Christian mysticism, locates the Absolute beyond the multiplicity of all concepts: “Awareness of the One comes ... neither by knowing nor by ... pure thought ... but by a presence transcending knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> The “One is none of the things of which it is origin ... nothing can be predicated of it, not being ...”<sup>28</sup>

Subversion of absolutist and substantialist thinking is clearly seen in Mahayana Buddhism, in the concept of the undifferentiated *void*, the absence of all multiplicity, the abolition of individuation and difference, namely, *sunyata*, absolute emptiness or nothingness. Lest *sunyata* be confused with nihilism, it is important to note that in Buddhist thought this emptiness is in actuality *unbounded openness*. It includes rather than excludes. In this nothingness, there is no time, space, or becoming, and at the same time, it is a dynamic concept which is a source of infinite possibilities, and an opening to vastness, rather than a withdrawal from reality. Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945) founder of the Kyoto School of Buddhist philosophy in Japan, elucidating the idea of emptiness, says that Absolute Nothingness is the “place, as it were, wherein all existences reside as interrelated determinations of the place itself.”<sup>29</sup> This is where ultimate unity, or the coincidence of opposites, is found and Emptiness is the “self-transforming ‘matrix’ of the absolute present ... lived from an inner horizon of freedom ... issuing in compassion.”<sup>30</sup> Nishitani, a leading

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<sup>25</sup>Matt, “‘*Ayin*’: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism,” *Tikkun* 3, 1988, 36-46:46.

<sup>26</sup>Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 77.

<sup>27</sup>Enn.vi.9.4, quoted in O’Brien, *The Essential Plotinus*. New York: New American Library, 1964, 78.

<sup>28</sup>Enn.iii.8.10, quoted in Roy, *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2003, 64.

<sup>29</sup>Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity*, New York: Paulist Press, 1991, 11.

<sup>30</sup>Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness*, 12, 14.

Japanese Buddhist also of the Kyoto School, makes a similar point with respect to *sunyata*, namely, that it lies “on the near side”, in the immanent, not on the “far side” of transcendence.<sup>31</sup> It is the “home-ground” a paradoxical *place* where reciprocal interpenetration of identity and difference takes place – what Nishitani calls *egoteki* – a word translated into English as “circuminsessional” a term used to describe the inter-trinitarian relationships in Christian thought.<sup>32</sup> Thus, *sunyata* is not static. The circuminsessional dynamic is that of Emptiness or Nothingness itself.<sup>33</sup> It is not simply an “empty nothing”, but rather an “absolute emptiness, emptied even of these representations of emptiness.”<sup>34</sup> It is the *experience* of *sunyata* and not the conceptualisation that is primary:

Sunyata is to be experienced and not conceptualised. To experience [*sunyata*] means to become aware of it, but not in the way in which we become aware of the world of sense-and-intellect. In the latter case, we always have a subject that is aware of something and an object of which the subject is [intentionally] aware .... To be aware of *sunyata*, according to Zen, we have to transcend this dichotomous world in such a way as not to be outside it .... Sunyata is experienced only when it is both subject and object .... ‘Knowing and seeing’ *sunyata* is *sunyata*’s knowing and seeing itself; there is no outside knower or spectator; it is its own knower and seer.<sup>35</sup>

By way of summary, the phenomenology of emptiness and unknowing as exemplified in these religious traditions helps eliminate the crystallising tendencies of thought, resulting in a freedom from determinism and an openness to radical calm and clear emptiness.

### 3. Christian Apophatic Mysticism

Apophasis in Christian mysticism is rooted in scripture. Gregory of Nyssa (c 335-395 CE) influenced by the Jewish exegete, Philo, uses the Old Testament image of Moses encountering God in the “cloud” to indicate that “darkness” is the primary metaphor for the divine. In addition, he refers to the statement in John 1:18, “no-one has ever seen God” to confirm a negative mysticism. Such seeing “... consists in not-seeing ...

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<sup>31</sup>Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Van Bragt, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, 173.

<sup>32</sup>Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness*, 17.

<sup>33</sup>Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness*, 17.

<sup>34</sup>Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 123.

<sup>35</sup>Suzuki, “Existentialism, Pragmatism and Zen,” in Barrett, ed., *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, New York: Doubleday, 1956, 261-262.



that which is sought transcends all knowledge.”<sup>36</sup> Gregory of Nyssa in his effort to prevent the subtleties of revelation becoming mere mechanistic constructs describes the soul’s wrenching ascent into the divine abyss. He speaks of an endless progression into the divine darkness – a continual *epektasis*. For Gregory the inaccessibility of the divine essence effects a progression of endless unknowing instead of certainty. Every construction is deconstructed, every name is seen to be nameless; there is continual entry into the paradoxical depths of the divine and the transformation from glory to glory is forever increasing. There will never be a limit to this process of perfection.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.1. Dionysius the Areopagite

The foundational work of Dionysius the Areopagite, the anonymous 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century Syrian monk, whose works were translated into Latin by John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century (877 CE), resulted in his being called the father of Christian mysticism. His major work, *Mystica Theologia*, gave ‘mysticism’ an authoritative status. For Dionysius, mysticism is a “trans-conceptual state of consciousness” which experiences God as a “ray of divine Darkness.”<sup>38</sup> This mystical state occurs in the highest part of the inner person, the ‘eye’ or ‘point’ of the soul where the adherent is borne on high to the superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness. The apophatic mysticism of Dionysius has an almost Zennist quality: God is “all in all things and nothing in none; ... he is known through all things and through none of them.”<sup>39</sup> The centrality of moving beyond thought in mystic contemplation is clearly stated by Dionysius: “... leave the senses and the activities of the intellect and all things that the senses or the intellect can perceive.”<sup>40</sup> In the last two chapters of his *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius negates a hierarchy of the names of God, as the adherent “... progresses up

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<sup>36</sup>Howells, “Apophatic Spirituality,” in Sheldrake, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, London: SCM Press, 2005, 118.

<sup>37</sup>Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 30.

<sup>38</sup>Egan, *What are They Saying about Mysticism?* New York: Paulist Press, 1992, 2.

<sup>39</sup>De div. nom VII, 3; quoted in Werner, *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, London: Curzon Press, 1989, 12.

<sup>40</sup>Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, London: SPCK, 1983, 191.

the scale of language until at the end ... all words are left behind.”<sup>41</sup> Dionysius uses a “clamour of metaphors and description” and the denial of speech is itself a form of speech; therefore, the aim is to move beyond assertion and denial, and “step off the very boundary of language itself ... into the ‘negation of the negation’ and the ‘brilliant darkness’ of God.”<sup>42</sup> The journey toward the ‘superessential’ mystery of the ‘divine darkness’ is beyond assertion and denial. Negation itself must be negated.

One could ask is not this state of nothingness merely morbid introspection, or facile iconoclasm, which leads to physical, emotional and spiritual disarray? On the contrary, such an “epistemology of unknowing” is a mystical disruption that aims at drawing consciousness to a new level. The “ascent to the Nought,” the “desert of God” and the “divine dark,” far from de-stabilizing the practitioner, facilitate progressive purification and deification in the depths of the human spirit.

### 3.2. Meister Eckhart (c 1230-c1327 CE)

Meister Eckhart, a German Dominican, professor, scholar, preacher, retreat master and spiritual guide, par excellence, lived in a turbulent era of institutional decadence, state and church corruption, poverty and disease. Nevertheless, his teaching and preaching did not concentrate on the evils of society, but rather on elucidating the inner meaning of the gospel message. His works were controversial, leading to a condemnation of twenty-eight articles of his writings, incidentally by a pope who was subsequently declared heretical!<sup>43</sup> Eckhart publicly declared that he was not a heretic, and that his works had been distorted or misunderstood, but died while his case was still in process.

Eckhart relies heavily on the Dionysian concept of nothingness and unknowingness. He develops this further in his idea of the *Godhead behind God*:

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<sup>41</sup>Turner, “Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason,” in Davies, and Turner, eds., *Silence and The Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 19.

<sup>42</sup>Turner, “Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason,” 20.

<sup>43</sup>Elements of Eckhart’s thought were condemned in a Papal Bull of John XXII, *In agro Dominico* in 1329. Eckhart had defended himself in a *Rechtfertigungsschrift* in 1326, which was only printed six hundred years later in 1923! An unfortunate consequence of this was the fact that Eckhart’s works remained in oblivion for a long time, while those of his more orthodox pupils, such as Tauler, Suso, and Ruusbroec were widely read.

the simple ground... the quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed, not the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit ... for this ground is a simple silence, in itself immovable, and by this immovability all things are moved, all life is received...<sup>44</sup>

The *Godhead* is the “*negation negationis*” – pure, simple, naked, divested of every attribute that the mind can frame. This *nameless nothingness* is equated with an *unbecome Isness*.<sup>45</sup> There is a Zen-like quality to Eckhart’s thought: “Leave place, leave time; avoid ... image; go forth without a way on the narrow path; then you will find the desert track.”<sup>46</sup> Such is Eckhart’s understanding of transformation of consciousness. This takes place in *emptiness*. The way of unknowing is divine ignorance. It is the *via negativa*, the emptying process that leads the adherent to the naked essence of the Divine, the pure essence of the Spirit. This is the *barren Godhead*, the *desert of the Godhead* – the *void* – in which there is absence of movement and silence prevails. For Eckhart, nothingness is the quintessence of reality, a nothingness that paradoxically *is*. This *isness* is both fullness and emptiness. Eckhart’s thought, whilst deeply philosophical and theological, is at the same time theoretical and practical. His aim is to transform or overturn ordinary limited forms of consciousness through the use of paradoxical language in order to deconstruct the self, and free it from external phenomena. Eckhart uses explosive metaphors which break through previous categories of mystical language to create new ways of presenting the mystical encounter with God. The use of subversive linguistic strategies to facilitate an abolition of concepts and preconceived ideas is seen clearly in the well-known statement: “When you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.” In a similar vein, Eckhart says, “I pray to God to rid me of God.” A fasting-mind or no-mind results in total letting go and detachment, *Abgeschiedenheit*, “the highest and loftiest thing that a person can let go of is to let go of God for the sake of God.”<sup>47</sup> Released from the fear of nothingness, the result of such detachment is freedom from the bondage of metaphysical authority, and openness to the “exuberance of a breathtaking ontological freedom.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart, The Man from whom God Hid Nothing*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001, 46.

<sup>45</sup>Roy, *Mystical Consciousness*, 80.

<sup>46</sup>McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 114.

<sup>47</sup>Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart’s Creation Spirituality*, New York: Doubleday, 222.

<sup>48</sup>Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 43.

Released from all distinctions, it is possible to live “without a why.” The person who has learnt to live in this manner henceforth lives life in reverence, gentleness and humility. We are reminded of Heidegger, who, influenced by Eckhart, says:

Releasement (*Gelassenheit*) towards things and openness to the mystery belong together. They grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a profoundly different way. They promise us a new ground and foundation ...<sup>49</sup>

This does not mean a metaphysical abstraction from our existential situation, rather it points to a radically different relationship with things, people, circumstances. We are called to exist as “an ecstatic inherence in the truth of Being.”<sup>50</sup>

Eckhart’s radical apophasis leads us far along the road of negation to a deeper stage in which epistemic certainties are relinquished. In the subversive nature of language, apophasis itself must be left behind. God is beyond even apophaticism. Having ascended the ladder of negation, it is necessary to kick down the ladder itself. The “destabilizing dynamism of divine nothingness” prevents a return to the “conceptual limits demanded by the language of being.”<sup>51</sup> As such, a new “breakthrough” (*Durchbruch*) occurs, in which the mystical way of unknowing is:

a lived exegesis on the continual strengthening of the self’s ability to withstand its own nothingness and the searing power of divine indetermination ... One is “saved” because saving no longer matters. The mystical event compels the self toward radical unself-interest... (and calls into question) every form of ultimate and exclusive truth.<sup>52</sup>

Freedom from self-distinction and self-identity allows for a quantum leap in consciousness which is free from particularisation, multiplicity, specificity and plurality. This void, says Eckhart, necessitates freedom from the “crowds,” the agents of the soul and their activities: memory, understanding and will in all their diversifications. As Eckhart states, “When I come to the point when I no longer project myself into any image ... then I can be transported into God’s naked being;” this is the pure essence of the Spirit.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, Eckhart, utilising language in a daring manner, by means of contradictions and oxymora, effects “shock

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<sup>49</sup>Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966:205.

<sup>50</sup>Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 205.

<sup>51</sup>Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 76.

<sup>52</sup>Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 76.

<sup>53</sup>Fox, *Breakthrough*, 328.

treatment” – challenging traditional modes of speaking and understanding. He confuses in order to enlighten. This “intricate architecture” of Eckhart’s exposition leads his audience to a new level of consciousness, pure, simple, empty, yet full.<sup>54</sup>

### 3.3. Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381 CE)

The mystical way of unknowing, or the path of “nothingness” leads to the absence of all distinction, as Jan van Ruusbroec, a humble priest and contemplative whose life spanned almost the entire fourteenth century, elucidates: “Here such a person meets God without intermediary, and an ample light, shining from God’s unity, reveals ... darkness, bareness and nothingness.” Such darkness has a transforming effect, and in the nothingness of this encounter “all activity fails and he becomes one spirit with God.”<sup>55</sup>

For Ruusbroec the simple *essence* of God is distinguished from the three persons of the Trinity; it is an *abyss* without a name, a *darkness* without light, a *silence* without words, in which there is no longer distinction of persons and diverse operations. It is a profound and yet simple *unity* which Ruusbroec calls *overwesen* or superessential. However, this deepest hidden reality, the unity of essence, is not conceived in a purely philosophical manner, but theologically – within the Trinity. In contrast to Eckhart, who, as we have seen, speaks of the godhead *behind* God, or the Absolute *beyond* the Trinity, Ruusbroec stresses that the origin of the godhead is the Father, both personally and essentially. Whilst in paradoxical fashion the godhead is essential unity above all distinctions, nevertheless, the unity of the divine nature breaks into the fertility of the Father, who unceasingly generates the eternal Word. The Word, through the Spirit, returns to the original unity. Nevertheless, in spite of this difference, Ruusbroec remains very close to the thought of Eckhart. Using the terminology of the latter, Ruusbroec describes this ground of the Trinity as a “dark silence” and a “vast desert”; the “everlasting rest of the saints” and a “boundless sea”. This incomprehensible abyss can be seen as the “contemplative centre of God’s being, where he (sic) dwells in the stillness of his eternal self-sufficiency.”<sup>56</sup> This means that:

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<sup>54</sup>McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 57.

<sup>55</sup>Wiseman, ed., *John Ruusbroec: The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, New York: Paulist Press, 1985, 133.

<sup>56</sup>Teasdale, “Ruusbroek’s Mystical Theology,” *American Benedictine Review* 35, 1984, 88.

we can speak no more of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, nor of any creature; but only of one Being, which is the very substance of the Divine Persons. There were we all one before our creation; for this is our superessence ... There the Godhead is, in simple essence, without activity, Eternal Rest, Unconditioned Dark, the Nameless Being, the Superessence of all created things and the simple and infinite Bliss of God and of all the saints.<sup>57</sup>

The images that prevent an encounter with the Superessential may indeed be the “good activity” of the adherent, both in terms of its inner and outer forms: “They cannot pass through themselves or their works into an imageless bareness ... for they are caught up with themselves and their works in the manner of images and intermediaries ....”<sup>58</sup>

From the foregoing, it is clear that apophatic or negative mysticism leads to *kenosis* – a radical emptying of all constructs and a subversion of absolutist thinking. The language of intentionality is replaced by a new understanding of reality, a non-dual consciousness, no longer hampered by the rationalisations of the intellect. Lanzetta makes the interesting point that two types of apophasis are to be found in Christian mysticism, namely an “epistemological” negation and an “ontological negation”:

In the first, or epistemological, *apophasis*, the dialectical strategies of negative theology are for the sake of a higher and more sublime affirmation: God’s nature and essence are understood in superessentially positive terms and remain outside negation ... The second, or ontological apophaticism, pushes beyond the negation of knowing to a more radical negation of being. Finding God not in property or name, the soul is drawn to bearing the dialectical tension of opposites – knowing-unknowing, being-unbeing – until it breaks through to the nothingness of self and deity. Here is found a more disruptive apophasis as it negates not only concepts about God’s properties and names, but also God’s own being and essence, calling God *neither this nor that, pure nothing*, or simply *nothing*. If epistemological nothingness retains the categories of “what-ness”, ontological nothingness suspends theistic metaphysics.<sup>59</sup>

The mystical unsaying or *rupture* of language has been taken up with interest by certain postmodern philosophers, for example, the

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<sup>57</sup>Teasdale, “Ruysbroek’s Mystical Theology,” 88.

<sup>58</sup>Quoted in Mommaers and Van Bragt, *Mysticism: Buddhist and Christian*, New York: Crossroad 1995, 59-60.

<sup>59</sup>Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 20-21.

poststructuralist, Derrida. In the linguistic system, he says, “there are only, everywhere, differences and traces of differences.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, “the foundation of the system cannot be identified within the structure of language. Language is ... arbitrary, a system of infinite referral of difference ... the foundation that makes the world meaningful is hidden.”<sup>61</sup>

#### 4. Silence

What is the meaning event that lies beyond the semantic surface of the language of unknowing? Can we apply the rules of discursive thinking and intellectual analysis to texts that follow the wisdom of another genre? “Such a mistaking of voice and intent is akin to reading poetry as if it were technical prose.”<sup>62</sup> The experience of divine emptiness, and mystical negation from within a global spiritual perspective, leads to contemplative *silence*. Just as all great music, art, poetry or the higher realms of mathematics lead to a state of consciousness that is beyond speech, so too the mystical adherent finds herself in silence. We are reminded here of the Indian mystic, Patanjali, whose meditations on the divine name, the divine sound, OM, lead the yogin beyond intentionality and language by using language to transcend itself. Language is reduced from “word to sound to conscious silence” and any “possible cultural or conceptual building blocks” are eliminated.<sup>63</sup> The transparent, luminous and most subtle levels of consciousness are progressively stripped away, and speech has:

... returned to its source in conscious silence .... This totally silent, totally inactive witness ... is now isolated in its own unthinkable but conscious luminosity ... (and) sound is reduced to conscious silence, quiescent and seedless Samadhi...<sup>64</sup>

This *silence-event* cuts across all religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural or conceptual traditions – it is pure consciousness – “not self-conscious and not symbolically conscious – just consciousness itself.” Silence “crosses boundaries more easily than words may do, setting up new intensities of

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<sup>60</sup>Derrida, *Positions*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981, 26.

<sup>61</sup>Norman, “Rediscovery of Mysticism,” 461.

<sup>62</sup>Burrows, “Words that Reach into the Silence: Mystical Languages of Unsayings” in Dreyer, and Burrows, eds., *Finding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, 208.

<sup>63</sup>Pflueger “Discriminating the Innate Capacity: Salvation Mysticism of Classical Samkya-Yoga,” in Forman, ed., *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 69.

<sup>64</sup>Pflueger “Discriminating the Innate Capacity, 69.

meaning.”<sup>65</sup> A translucent emptiness, an inner silence pervading, or undergirding ordinary consciousness, effects *no-thought* even when involved in thought. Such silence in the *hesychast* tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, as exemplified in the thought of Gregory of Palamas (1296-1359), transfigures not only the inner spirit of the adherent, but also the body, so that the whole person becomes spirit. Thus, transmutation of consciousness effects transfiguration – known in the Orthodox tradition as *Taborite light* – the resplendence of the divine.

Words give way to silence and silence in turn gives birth to words. These words are that much deeper, coming as they do from the void. Consequently, speech takes on a new meaning, since silence “constitutes the possibility of discourse and utterance, and with that, the possibility of a new way of speaking and of understanding the world.”<sup>66</sup> Words that arise from the silence of the mystical way of unknowing lead to a threshold of liberation and revelatory experience. Nothingness is the “potentiality from which all actualities are birthed.”<sup>67</sup> On the “other side of nothingness”<sup>68</sup> there is a new vantage point; *samsara* and *nirvana* are no longer seen as dualistic states of consciousness, but as mutually penetrating realities. The noumenal is contained within the phenomenal order. Seemingly contradictory conceptual claims are resolved in a higher non-dualism. From within the silence of a formless state of consciousness flows an abundance of creative energy, resulting in compassion and service.

## 5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we may infer from the foregoing that there is a mystical reality which is free from the influence of ideas, concepts, words, philosophies and religious traditions, and therefore free from formulation. The “phenomenal suspension” which enables an unconditioned state, released from cultural constructs, points to the fact that failure of words is

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<sup>65</sup>Davies, “Soundings: Towards a Theological Poetics of Silence,” in Davis, and Turner, eds., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 201.

<sup>66</sup>Davies, “Soundings: Towards a Theological Poetics of Silence,” 222.

<sup>67</sup>Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 6.

<sup>68</sup>“Those who have experienced crossing the threshold to divine nothingness return bearing a dimension of consciousness capable of holding the paradox of embodiment: divine-human; infinite-finite; one-many ... there is a “quantum leap” to a new spiritual paradigm ... consequently, mystics access untapped dimensions of tradition, and may become the locus for a new view of reality.” Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 5, 52, 67.



itself a powerful “linguistic” tool, just as failure of emotions may well point to a very powerful feeling. As a result, a new ontological and linguistic freedom enables release from the strictures of any given revelatory paradigm. Thus, mysticism as *a way of unknowing* as seen in the apophatic wisdom traditions of east and west leads to the silence of *nothingness* which is the root of sound, and intensifies, rather than attenuates authentic communication. It is therefore, the *place* where true dialogue and the meeting of diverse religious traditions, in an atmosphere of reciprocal transparency, can occur. Such a creative rapprochement will facilitate an open dialogue in which the different mystical traditions can acknowledge their complementarity and articulate plurality. As such, dogmatic rigidity and colonial intellectualism will be replaced by a deep humility in the face of the infinite mystery and ‘unknowingness’ of the Ultimate: *‘If you have nothing/ gather back your sigh/and with your hands held high/your heart held high/lift up your emptiness.’*<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>From the writings of the Carmelite poet, Jessica Powers; quoted in Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness*, viii.