

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE, LANGUAGE AND TRUTH

Philosophical Investigations after Wittgenstein

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1. Introduction

Wittgenstein famously concluded his early work, the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (TLP 7).¹ In its Preface, he remarked, 'What can be said at all can be said clearly.' He was, however, very clear that 'There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical' (TLP 6.522). The positivists rejected Wittgenstein's mystical realm as nonsense and, consequently, as of no concern because they accepted wholeheartedly Wittgenstein's assertion that 'The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science' (TLP 4.11). According to them, the questions of metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of mind are better addressed by physics, physiology and psychology respectively and the concerns of social and political philosophy were better left to sociology and political science. Since the task of acquiring knowledge about the world has been taken over by science, the only task that remained for philosophy was to clarify linguistic meaning. They would prefer to define science as the 'pursuit of truth' and philosophy as the 'pursuit of meaning.' Everything that does not belong to the scientific purview belongs to the realm of the mystical, unsayable. Only nonsense results when people try to say what is by nature unsayable. For those who are under the spell of the scientific point of view there is nothing to be silent about; what we can speak about is all that matters in life.

The realm of the mystical is of enormous importance to Wittgenstein as he was convinced that a scientific point of view was incapable of

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¹TLP=Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, C. K. Ogden (trans.), London: Routledge, 1922.

answering questions regarding the meaning of life. 'We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched' (TLP 6.52). Ethical and spiritual values also are in the realm of the mystical. Wittgenstein says we will not find values among the facts of the world, for everything is what it is (TLP 6.41). Therefore, the sense of the world, what constitutes its value, must lie outside the world. It cannot be one more fact among the scientifically observable facts in the world. Consequently he held that 'ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental' (TLP 6.421). 'How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world' (TLP 6.432). In his view, 'The use of the word 'science' for 'everything that can be meaningfully said' constitutes an 'overrating of science' (NL 134, 145).² He made these distinctions 'to emphasise the importance of that area he called mystical and to preserve it from the tyranny of the sciences, not to dismiss it.'³ He recognized that there are ultimate questions regarding the meaning and the purpose of life. He related them with belief in God:

To believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life.

To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter.

To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning (NB 74).⁴

Belief in God is not primarily a cognitive act, a matter for our reason but a form of life. Though the mystical experience generally occurs through the mediation of a belief, they are not identical. Mystical-experience, religious beliefs and practices are interwoven in the stream of life and it is the life of the mystics that gives significance and meaning to them and they, in turn, give meaning and purpose to human life.

It is interesting to note that Aquinas who wrote copiously about God reverted to silence once he had a mystical vision, claiming that whatever he had written was mere straw. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, moved from the realm of silence to the realm of words, perhaps following the admonition of Augustine: '*Et vae tacentibus de te quoniam loquaces muti*

²NL=Wittgenstein's *Nachlass: The Bergen Electronic Edition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

³Tilgman, B. R. *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics: The View From Eternity*, London: Macmillan, 1991, 17.

⁴NB=Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961.

*sunt.*⁵ Perhaps his new attitude regarding God-talk is: 'don't for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! Only don't fail to pay attention to your nonsense' (CV 64).⁶

In his later writings, Wittgenstein saw language basically as a human praxis, exhibited in a variety of language-games and forms of life. Mystical talk is part of human language use and forms a kind of unity from a varied and interconnected complex network of different languages. All are not of equal value, but they overlap and crisscross, witnessing and contributing to the richness of mystical experience, shedding light both on the mystical experience and human being. What I learn from Wittgenstein is that one has to take mystical experience as something fundamental and resist temptations to explain it or to reduce it to something else for which a philosophical or scientific point of view is capable of providing an answer. Mystical experiences are, by nature, not available for empirical verification. That does not mean that they are not real. As in other matters of philosophy, though hard to achieve, realism but not empiricism (RFM 325)⁷ is the noble goal in a philosophical investigations on Mystical Experience, Language and Truth.

2. Dynamics of Mystical Experience and Language

Wittgenstein characteristically brings into focus a day to day experience to clarify the philosophical muddles regarding experience and language:

⁵*Confessions* 1.4: G. E. Moore, at the beginning of his lectures, had told the students that he had nothing to say on the 'philosophy of religion', though he was required to lecture on the topic. M. O'Drury thought a Professor of Philosophy had no right to keep silent concerning such an important subject and told so to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein responded with this quote from *Confessions*. Not satisfied with the translation that Drury had, Wittgenstein translated it: 'And woe to those who say nothing concerning thee just because the chatterboxes talk a lot of nonsense.' He added 'I won't refuse to talk about God or religion' (R. Rhees, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984, 104). The passage appears also at the end of Wittgenstein's remarks to Moritz Schlick as recorded by Friedrich Waismann on the subject of Heidegger's paradoxical statements on Being and Anxiety: 'Augustine sagt: 'Was, Du Mistvieh Du willst keinen Unsinn reden. Rede nur einen Unsinn, es macht nichts!' (Augustine says: 'What, you swine! You don't want to talk nonsense. Go ahead talking nonsense, it doesn't matter'.') (Wittgenstein, *Schriften* 4, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1937, 69).

⁶CV = Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, G. H. von Wright, ed., Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998.

⁷RFM= Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, G. E. M. Anscombe (eds.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978.

“Describe the aroma of coffee. – Why can't it be done? Do we lack the words? And for what are words lacking? – But how do we get the idea that such a description must after all be possible? Have you ever felt the lack of such a description? Have you tried to describe the aroma and not succeeded? (PI 610)⁸

We experience more than we can speak about and we speak about more than we could systematise in propositional language. It seems that the best solution is for mystics to maintain total silence. Experience and language, belief and practice, though distinct, are inseparable. They are not generally expressed in the language of science. They get their significance and meaning only in the stream of life. It is not the question of what they are in themselves, but what lies around them, the hurly-burly of our ordinary life that gives them their value in our lives. Mystical experience and mystical talk, though unique, are also interwoven in the stream of life giving ultimate meaning and purpose for our being human.

It is true that mystical language is mischaracterized when treated as if it aims to represent states of affairs. It does not, however, follow that they cannot be understood as corresponding to something real. Although mystical language is expressive, this does not mean that the experience it speaks is not real. ‘Real’ cannot be reserved to speak only about physical objects and sense experiences. We use ‘real’ in a variety of ways to qualify life, love, pain, time, number mind, will, etc. There is no one use as *the* real. Because we are over-familiar with the use of real with empirical object; and also because of the enormous success of empirical sciences, we are tempted to reserve ‘real’ for empirical objects.

In many ways, throughout history, human beings have given expression to their quest for and mystical experience in their beliefs and practices. What we need to remind ourselves of are the differences and similarities of mystical language with other uses of language. Mystical language describing mystical experience, though given in the language of describing other experiences, is categorically different. It is also different from our language for sensations, abstract concepts, music, etc. The differences are shown in the ways mystics use language. When mystics claim to have an ineffable, or inexpressible, knowledge of ultimate realities, they refute themselves because anything intelligible the mystics may say, including the very idea of the ineffable, is by definition not ineffable but expressed. It is not without reason that mystical traditions

⁸PI=Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe (trans.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953.

often preferred *neti, neti* (the *via negativa*) in speaking about mystical experience, both in the East and in the West. This is not to say that there is no experience to speak about, but rather to draw attention to the fact that mystical language is different from our talk about other experiences. According to Wittgenstein, 'The urge towards the mystical comes of the non-satisfaction of our wishes by science' (NB 51).

In the *Zettel*, to the observation by the interlocutor that "'Joy" surely designates an inward thing,' Wittgenstein replied: 'No. "Joy" designates nothing. Neither any inward nor any outward thing' (Z 487).⁹ This is not the same as to argue, however, that joy and other feelings do not exist; nor that they are identified with forms of behaviour. Wittgenstein admitted that they are real and they are important aspects of human life. Like other words, they have their roles in the stream of life. We can say the same about mystical experience and words that refer to such experiences. They cannot be used on the model of 'object and name': 'It is not a *something*, but not; *nothing* either!' (PI 304). This is also not to claim that the word 'mystical' is used like the sensation words, 'pain', 'joy', etc. but to draw attention to the fact that the referring functions of words differ. Referring to objects and their qualities, subject and subjective experiences, and mystical experiences differ. Mystics do not use it because they recognize a particular object or experience with certain characteristics. Expressions like "That's mystical!" 'Check whether this is mystical!', 'I know what is mystical; but I am not sure whether this is mystical!' etc. are excluded from meaningful mystical language. There are no criteria, identification or misidentification. Yet the word 'mystical' is used as corresponding to the reality of mystical experience.

Mystical language is not a discourse about an object, but about the meaning of life. It has its own style, includes whole being of the mystic, needs the mediation of a belief, expressed in symbolic language with plurality of meanings and not conceptual language of uniform meaning. To pretend to limit, define, or comprehend mystical experience is in itself a contradictory effort, since its achievement would be a creation of the mind. It is in this sense that it is often said that the mystical experience is ineffable and no one can describe it adequately.

In talking about mystical experience, the very word 'mystical' is problematic, though we cannot avoid employing one word or another. It not an experience of an object; that does not mean it is an illusion or

⁹Z=Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, eds., Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967.

hallucination. It just means that 'mystical' does not mean something in the way that a name refers to an object. The name and object formula is neither sufficient nor necessary for referring to the reality of mystical experience. In fact, the search for an object that stands for 'mystical' is the result of ignorance regarding both the reality of mystical experience and the use of the word 'mystical' in mystical literature. It is the deep-seated philosophical prejudice that bewitches us to treat all words as names referring to objects. There are numerous ways of understanding 'mystical,' and no one use has a monopoly on its meaning. Mystical language is part of human language use and forms a kind of unity from a varied and interconnected complex network of different languages. All are not of equal value, but they overlap and crisscross, witnessing and contributing to the richness of mystical experience, shedding light both on the nature of language and truth. It is to be reminded that we do not use a special language in mystical language. What I learn from Wittgenstein is that one has to take the mystical experience as something fundamental and resist temptations to explain it or to reduce it to something else for which a philosophical or scientific point of view is capable of providing an answer. The mystical experience is something fundamental for mystics not because of any epistemic or phenomenological property, but by virtue of the place it occupies in their lives.

Following Wittgenstein, instead of searching for a *Merkmal*-definition of 'mystical', we should better raise the question: 'How is the word 'mystical' used?' (see PI 370). We should explore the contexts of applications involved and look at the various language-games in which the word occurs, how it is being used, etc. 'What sort of entity is a mystical?' – like 'What sort of entity is a number?' – can only be answered insisting that mystical, like a number, is not an entity of a sort; neither empirical nor fictional. It is neither a discovery nor a product of human intelligence and ingenuity, individually or collectively. A proper account of mystical talk has to take into account its differences and similarities with ways of speaking about physical things, persons, sensations, numbers, etc. Though they all refer, there are categorical differences and one kind of use (name-object) should not be taken as the norm for other uses. Wittgenstein repeatedly observes that 'Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning' (NL 137, 29a, 41b, 66a; 138, 24b; 232, 765; 233a, 35). The attempts to find their meaning, removing all their surrounding thought and life is bound to fail. The meaning of 'mystical' cannot be found, if the philosopher excludes all the religious discourse and practice that are

interwoven with other aspects of human life. Once these familiar surroundings are excluded, 'mystical' becomes problematic, which is not the case for a follower of mystical tradition. Learning from Wittgenstein, what we really need to do is 'to call to mind the differences between the language-games' (PI 290) and note the differences and similarities of the various uses of 'mystical'. Indeed, 'One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from that. But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice, which stands in the way of doing this. It is not a stupid prejudice' (PI 340).

3. Mystical Language, after Wittgenstein

In Wittgenstein's terms, we use pictures in our mystical language. These pictures are from our lives in the world and they are seen from a mystical point of view so that they correspond to mystical experience. "The picture has to be used in an entirely different way" (LC 63),¹⁰ in a mystical way. Wittgenstein in his *Lecture on Ethics* narrated three mystical attitudes: wonder that anything exists, feelings of absolute safety and absolute guilt and related them with the religious pictures of God as Creator, Father and Judge respectively. The first, the experience of *wonder at the existence of the world* is, in his view, exactly what 'people were referring to when they said that God created the world'. According to Wittgenstein,

When someone who believes in God looks around him and asks, "Where did everything that I see come, from?" "Where did everything come from?" he is *not* asking for a (causal) explanation; and the point of his question is that it is the expression of such a request. Thus, he is expressing an attitude toward all explanations' (RC 317).¹¹

This is not a scientific enquiry regarding the origin of the world but wonder at the existence of the world here and now. In other words, this is to see the world as a miracle (LE 11).¹² A miracle, for Wittgenstein is 'a gesture which God makes' (CV 51); 'It must be as it were a sacred gesture' (CV 57). For believers this is to confess God's presence and power in the created world; to see the world as God's world rather than merely as a material world, 'my world' or 'our world'. The scientific point of view does not see the world as a miracle, but something that is there for exploration, experimentation and explanation. From a scientific

¹⁰LC=Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966.

¹¹RC= *Remarks on Colour*. G. E. M. Anscombe, ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1977.

¹²LE= "A Lecture on Ethics," *Philosophical Review*, 1965, 3-12.

point of view, 'the world is all that is the case' (TLP 1). Scientists try to understand its workings and to control the order of events. They are not typically moved by wonder but curiosity. There is nothing 'mystical' about it. Religious believers, on the other hand, see the world in its relation to God. The world is seen as God's world; he created it and sustains it miraculously.

The feeling of absolute safety has been described as feeling safe in the 'hands of God' (LE 10). Malcolm, in his *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, mentions an incident that had caused a change in his attitude to religion.

In Vienna he saw a play that was a mediocre drama, but in it one of the characters expressed the thought that no matter what happened in the world, nothing bad could happen to him - he was independent of fate and circumstances. Wittgenstein was struck by this stoic thought; for the first time he saw the possibility of religion.¹³

Only in the hands of God is one absolutely safe. To be safe normally means that certain unpleasant things would not happen to me and therefore, it is categorically different ('nonsense', according to Wittgenstein in LE) to say that I am safe *whatever* happens. This is to give an absolute value, which can be seen only in relation to God, the Absolute Reality. In his personal life, however, he could not submit himself into God's hands: "Trust in God". But I am far away from trusting God. From where I am to trusting God is a *long* way,¹⁴ he wrote in his diary in 1946 (NL 133,9r). He clearly saw, however, that 'a being that stands in contact with God is strong' (NL 183, S6).¹⁵

The experience of absolute guilt is 'described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct' (LE 10). According to Malcolm,

Wittgenstein did once say that he thought that he could understand the conception of God, in so far as it is involved in one's awareness of one's own sin and guilt... I think that the ideas of Divine judgement, forgiveness, and redemption had some intelligibility for him, as being related in his mind to feelings of disgust with himself,

¹³Malcolm, N. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, 58.

¹⁴"Auf Gott vertrauen". Aber vom Gottvertrauen bin ich weit entfernt. Von da, wo ich bin, zum Gottvertrauen ist ein welter Weg."

¹⁵"Ein Wesen, das mit Gott in Verbindung steht, ist stark."

an intense desire for purity, and a sense of the helplessness of human beings to make themselves better.¹⁶

The thought that one-day he has to give an account of his life is a dominant streak in his religious remarks. It is not just that the Judge would examine his case, but that he should judge himself is overpowering for Wittgenstein. As he struggled for perfection, he always found himself wanting; sometimes outright disgusting.

This sentence [God disapproves of our conduct] can be, for example, the expression of the highest responsibility. Just imagine, after all, that you *were* placed before the judge! What would your life look like, how would it appear *to yourself* if you stood in front of him? Quite irrespective of how it would appear to *him* & whether he is understanding or not understanding, merciful or not merciful (NL 183,147).

In spite of the fact that God is a terrible or merciful Judge who would examine my life in the strictest possible way (or with understanding) I must so live that I can stand before him when he comes.¹⁷ Here the ideal of the duty of a genius becomes the duty of a slave before the master. In his personal life Wittgenstein could not submit himself to become a slave. He was driven by the duty of a genius, though he prayed: 'Lord, if only I knew that I am a slave!' (NL 183, 210).¹⁸ He also confessed: 'I cannot utter the word "Lord" meaningfully. *Because I do not believe* that he will come to judge me; because *that* says nothing to me. And it could only say something to me if I were to live *quite* differently' (CV 38). Here philosophy cannot resolve the truth of the issue whether there is a God, whether he is merciful or strict, or whether there is a judgement. What a philosopher can and should do, after Wittgenstein, is to describe the various uses, provide a synoptic view of the pictures used and clarify the concepts involved. Arguments and syllogisms do not establish truth in this field of human life. Depending on the pictures that the believers hold they will have different

¹⁶Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 59.

¹⁷'*Du sollst so leben, daß Du vor dem Wahnsinn bestehen kannst, wenn er kommt. Und den Wahnsinn sollst Du nicht fliehen. Es ist ein Glück, wenn er nicht da ist, aber fliehen sollst Du nicht, so glaube ich mir sagen zu müssen. Denn er ist der strengste Richter (das strengste Gericht) darüber ob mein Leben recht oder unrecht ist; er ist furchterlich, aber Du sollst ihn dennoch nicht fliehen. Denn Du weißt ja doch nicht, wie Du ihm entkommen kannst; und während Du vor ihm fliehst, benimmst Du Dich ja unwürdig*' (NL 183,185).

¹⁸*Das Knien bedeutet, daß man ein Sklave ist. (Darin konnte die Religion bestehen.) Herr, wenn ich nur wußte, daß ich ein Sklave bin.*

attitudes not only to God but also in their lives. The meaning of the picture of God as Judge is shown in the life of the believers; its depth and religious significance is given by the life led by those who believe it and hold it dear.

4. Conclusion

According to Wittgenstein, “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man” (TLP 6.43). The world of a mystic is categorically different from that of others; it is not an empirical difference but in the way the mystic lives and moves in the world. The mystical experience is not just one of the experiences beside others; it is beneath every experience. The mystical experience requires all our being and our whole being; it occurs in and with the totality of reality. We are not like fish in the water, but a water drop in the ocean of reality. God is not just the *intimor intimo meo* but I am *intimo Deo*. It is not primarily my experience of God but God’s experience in me and through me of which I am conscious. It is a participation of myself in the experience of God. It implies my conscious response and my participation in that experience whose ultimate subject is God. I understand my participation in that experience as a communion, a communion between God, who is the subject, and that experience of God that is mine to the degree that I become conscious of it.

Mystical experience is the experience of the religious dimension of reality, transcending reason and passion, which shows its effect fundamentally in the way we live, move, and have our being. It is the life that gives meaning and significance to our mystical experience and mystical talk. A well-defined initiation is the normal path to the mystical experience. We have a need of genuine masters who can initiate their fellow human beings into the mystical experience. Initiation is personal and the mystical experience is also personal. The way is unique for each pilgrim. We are human, that is a living being more than a species of animal, precisely through that initiation that renders us, in scholastic terms, *capax Dei*.

God is everywhere, immense, yet does not have parts: God is simple. This means we can meet God completely in any place, whatever form, and we can encounter God anywhere. We have only to seek God and hold ourselves ready for the encounter. A fish, for example, has a certain awareness of things but does not perceive that it is surrounded by water. Just so, we do not perceive God if we do not go beyond our purely empirical consciousness. The first generations of Christians criticized “the

pagans" because they personified the forces of nature by divinizing them. Recent post-Christian generations reproach Christians for having an anthropological vision of God. God is not reducible either to a 'super-kosmos' or to a 'super-anthropos.' He is the root of the *cosmotheandric* intuition. We can meet God everywhere but not in just any way. Purity of heart is the condition for the experience of God: "Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8).

Among the innumerable places where God is to be found, Raimon Panikkar identifies nine: "Love, The Thou, Joy, Suffering, Evil, Pardon, Crucial Moments, Nature and Silence."¹⁹ These are also privileged places for mystical experience. There seems to be unanimity that the most privileged place for the meeting of humans and God is the experience of love. It is in human love itself that Divinity resides. The experience of God is the experience of thou, which leads us to the impossibility of the experience of I alone, precisely because I am not able to experience myself without being "objectivized" in a thou. Joy, suffering, evil, and pardon also give occasions for the experience of God. Any moment can be a privileged place to encounter God. According to Panikkar, the readiness to be surprised and to wonder is almost a requirement for experiencing God. It is not that the mysterious, the ineffable, the incomprehensible, is in itself identical to the experience of God, but that it is a privileged locus of that experience. It is written that God is a hidden being, whose tabernacle is found in the shadows and whose recreation consists in chatting with people, even about cooking and sex. Nature is also a privileged place for the experience of God. The absence of an advaita experience has led Christianity, according to Panikkar, to allow itself to be invaded by a panic fear of a so-called pantheism. To avoid monism, Christians fall into dualism. God and the world are radically separated, which means that the transcendent God becomes progressively more superfluous, relegated to a heaven that is not even the heaven of the astronomers. While nature as the temple of God is a well-known image, it usually is interpreted in a way that keeps divine transcendence intact, at the price of forgetting God's immanence. Nature is not only a privileged but also a natural place for meeting God. Silence, Panikkar concludes, is the medium of God-talk and God-experience. He quotes Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Pilgrim*:

God is so far beyond everything that we can scarcely speak,
Thus it is also by means of your silence that you adore him.

¹⁹Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery*, Joseph Cunneen, trans., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

Remain silent, beloved, silent...
 If you wish to express the being of eternity,
 You first must abandon all discourse.
 When you remember God, you hear him in yourself.
 You become quiet and if you remain silent and peaceful,
 He will not stop speaking to you.
 No one speaks less than God, without time or place...
 The more that you know God, the more you shall confess
 That you are able to know less of what he is.²⁰

Knowing how to listen is the gate to mystical experience and silence is the medium of mystical talk. According to Panikkar, an *acharya* in interreligious dialogue, "One of the most urgent tasks of the world today is the establishment of bridges between different religions."²¹ Mystics of different religious traditions can lead the way. Mystical experience is open to all cultures and traditions and takes different forms in expressions in different places and times.

Let me conclude with the concluding words of Wittgenstein in his "Lecture on Ethics:"

My whole tendency and, I believe, the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it (LE 12).

²⁰Panikkar, *The Experience of God*, 130.

²¹Panikkar, *The Experience of God*, 28.