

## The Boundary of Logos: Reason and Mysticism in the Christian Tradition

### Abstract

The dialectic of faith and reason has always been the driving force of Western thinking ever since the Christian encounter with Greek culture. The tension becomes more obvious in modernity dominated by a philosophy of subjectivity which delimits a determinate understanding of knowledge and rationality. The conventional oppositions between natural and revealed theology, dogmatic and mystical theology, result from the paradigm shift in truth and knowledge. By tracing its origin back to Platonism, this paper focuses on the grammar of mystical theology in Christian tradition, aiming to show the boundary of human reason and language in the face of the transcendent God and the unknowability. As a stance against the self-centered reason and conceptual idols, mysticism preserves the transcendence of the absent God in the post-metaphysical milieu and opens a space for thinking the unknowable.

**Key words:** Mysticism, Platonism, Logos, Reason, Unknowability

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## Editorial Foreword

### The Boundaries of Logos: Reason and Mysticism in the Christian Tradition

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The conflict between reason and faith is a perennial topic in Western thought, especially in the study of Christian culture. From the second-century Latin Father Tertullian's famous question "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" to the nineteenth-century church historian Adolf von Harnack's idea of "de-hellenization," the history of Christian thought has been marked by the tension between reason and faith. In an age of "disenchantment," the opposition between reason and faith has become a convention and a norm of thinking. This implies a specific understanding of rationality in modernity. Faith has been intentionally or unintentionally viewed as "irrational," if not altogether "superstition," or at best, no more than an esoteric "mystery." Once faith is regarded as a remnant of the age of obscurantism, or even on par with myth, "demythologizing" is required in return; it also makes it difficult for any faith to be treated seriously and fairly. Discerning the relationship between reason and mysticism can therefore contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the Christian tradition and to a critical understanding of the contemporary cultural situation.

#### I. The problematic dichotomy

The tension between reason and faith arises from the encounter

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between biblical faith and Greek culture. The Christian faith cannot announce a divorce from Greek culture. Although the earliest Christians were convinced they were living in the end times, and ignored or questioned the importance of philosophical speculation,<sup>①</sup> it was the union with Greek thought that allowed Christianity to evolve into a universal religion. It was, after all, through the Greek philosophical terms that the Christian faith established its first systematic and rational expression. With the formation of fundamental doctrines such as Christology and the Trinity, Christian theology was not only intrinsically linked to Greek philosophy, but church life could no longer be separated from the “Academy.” This led to a series of opposing ideas such as “reason and revelation,” “natural and revealed theology,” and “doctrinal and mystical theology.” These groups of concepts are interrelated, with no shortage of semantic overlap, but also show some subtle differences. These seemingly basic concepts turned out to be the most difficult to define clearly, due to the process of semantic accumulation over a long period of time across history, resulting in countless ambiguities in their usage. To a large extent, these contradictions were the result of a “paradigm shift” in cognition, highlighted by the different understandings of reason and its role in systems of truth evaluation in pre-modern and modern societies. The modern world’s critique of Thomas Aquinas’s theology is perhaps a good example.

After Nietzsche and Heidegger, the overcoming or rethinking of metaphysics became a theme that could not be ignored in contemporary Western philosophy and Christian theology. Thomas Aquinas, as a representative of Scholasticism Theology, has borne the brunt of the criticism. It is often argued that Aquinas relied excessively on Aristotelian philosophy, extended the rationalization of theology and the substantialization of God, and was typical example of Onto-theology.<sup>②</sup> In academia today, Aquinas’s theology

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<sup>①</sup> Albert Camus, *Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme*, trans. ZHU Jiaqi & YE Renjie (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2020).

<sup>②</sup> In Heidegger’s view, Scholasticism is a typical “metaphysics of making,” a reflection of the “oblivion of being” in theology. The appropriation of Heidegger by the theological circle naturally focuses on the grammar of “being” in theology. Jean-Luc Marion’s *Dieu sans l'être* (God without Being) explicitly takes Thomism as its target. Combined with the historical context and richness of his theological discourse’s, Aquinas’s understanding of God is not what modern critics would call “Onto-theology.”

is also often seen as a representative of natural theology. In fact, the extent to which Thomism is natural theology depends entirely on the definition of natural theology. In a broad sense, any systematic inquiry into the connection between nature and the divine through natural reason can be called natural theology. Natural theology in the strict or modern sense has emerged since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,<sup>①</sup> asserting the ability of reason to prove the existence of God without recourse to any religious beliefs or presuppositions, or even, as in English Deism, reason as the only valid tool to prove the existence of God.<sup>②</sup> Thus, not only Thomism, but even the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle could be called natural theology. The early Fathers also wrote widely on natural theology.<sup>③</sup> In the contemporary context, however, natural theology has been called into question, especially following Karl Barth's critique, and even regarded as "heresy" and subversive of divine revelation in some Protestant circles.<sup>④</sup> The dichotomy between natural and revealed theology stems from a shift in the understanding of "reason" and "nature." The key factor lies in the exaltation of autonomy by Enlightenment mentality, regarded as a tool for knowing and controlling reality. Associated with this "technical rationality" is "nature" as an object and resource. Natural theology, in this sense, is even seen as a branch of metaphysics.<sup>⑤</sup>

Aquinas's theology is clearly not natural theology in the modern sense, for its understanding of nature and reason is within the interpretive framework of the biblical faith: The God attested by reason is the God of creation and incarnation, not "the divine" in general terms. As God's creation, natural reason and nature both participate in the divine Logos and are transformed by the revelation of the Incarnation. Christian faith — like the reason celebrated by the Enlightenment — prescribes the self-understanding

<sup>①</sup> It is represented by William Paley's *Natural Theology*, for which it is named.

<sup>②</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford World Publications, 2002), 196.

<sup>③</sup> For a discussion of the Cappadocian Fathers on "Natural Theology as Apology" and "Natural Theology as Presupposition," see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity, and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>④</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 2-3.

<sup>⑤</sup> Nicholas Bunnin & TU Jiyuan, eds., *Dictionary of Western Philosophy: English-Chinese* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2001), 658-659.

of reason and gives it a particular way of seeing nature. For the early Fathers, philosophical reason was incomplete without the help of faith and revelation. While Aquinas believed that reason could prove the existence of God, knowledge of God's nature and attributes could only be based on revelation. Revelation is the complement and completion of reason, and the knowledge of the "Book of Nature" through natural reason is the logical consequence of revelation. Reason and revelation for Aquinas are more like different stages of a movement from *lumen naturale* to *lumen fidei* and finally to *lumen gloriae*.

Another consequence of modernity is the dichotomy between dogmatic and mystical theology as if one were "rational" and the other "spiritual." In fact, mystical theology and dogmatic theology both took shape before the fifth century and were originally two inseparable components of theology. In essence, mystical experience is the context in which people perceive the God Incarnate, while doctrine is the theorization of mystical experience, which in turn inspires a mystical experience of God. In the pre-fifth century *Patristic Theology*, piety, and reason maintained a good balance. Modernity has led to a separation of the two, and theological studies have placed too much emphasis on the speculative dimension of patristic theology while intentionally or unintentionally ignoring their numerous mystical writings.<sup>①</sup> Likewise, Aquinas, usually labeled as a representative of natural theology or metaphysics, is closely associated with mystical theology. Aquinas incorporated all the natural philosophical approaches of Pseudo-Dionysius (hereafter Denys) regarding the knowledge of God,<sup>②</sup> and his theology is rich in the mystical and possibilities beyond metaphysics, which Meister Eckhart, his successor, pushed to the extreme.<sup>③</sup> It is clear that the richness of Aquinas's theology cannot be grasped if reason and mysticism are simply seen as opposed to each other. The dichotomies mentioned above have been widely accepted in contemporary society, but

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<sup>①</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origin of Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford University Press, 1981), xi-xii.

<sup>②</sup> Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>③</sup> John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 246-287.

they are quite problematic on closer examination. The misconception lies in modernity's particular understanding of reason.

## II. The logos of mysticism

Mysticism is a common phenomenon in almost all religious cultures. Our starting point for the discussion on reason and mystery is not religious experience or "Esotericism" in the broad sense, but mysticism in the Christian tradition. Like asceticism, mysticism is not exclusive to the Christian religion: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam all have their mystical traditions. Christian mysticism is not a monolithic theology either, although there are some common features, which can be summarized as a search for union with God and the experience of that union. Although the interpretation of "union" may vary, the union of the soul with the object of longing — God or the Ultimate — seems to be at the heart of mysticism.<sup>①</sup> As a kind of theological discourse, mysticism also has its own "logos."

Christian mysticism is often equated with Platonism. This is highly questionable, but its Platonic background is undeniable. Platonism, as the source of Christian mysticism, provides the basic categories and syntax for its discourse. Platonism has attributed divine status to the world of "ideas" or "forms." The soul, driven by *Eros*, seeks union with ultimate reality through moral and intellectual purification. The search for the divine is the soul's ascent from the world of the senses to the world of the spirit. The goal that the soul seeks, whether called "the highest Good" or "Beauty," has some transcendent attributes. The ultimate reality is the source of all existence and knowledge, but it transcends everything, including the world of ideas. Thus, it contains a "negation" of empirical knowledge (*Doxa*) and discourse (*Logos*). The soul does not seek knowledge of the ultimate reality but "participation" in it and "union" with it. The soul's passion is not of itself but is "awakened" to experience union with the divine in its "*Ecstasy*." Plato's philosophy has almost all the essential elements of later mystical theology: the unknowability of the ultimate reality, the soul's ascent, ecstasy, union, etc. The "self-purification" as a preparation for the movement of the soul has evolved into asceticism, a companion of mystical theology. Scholars

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<sup>①</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origin of Christian Mystical Tradition*, xv.

have pointed out that behind the mystical idea of union was the ancient Greek understanding of *Nous*, a term richer than the modern understanding of “mind” or “intellect.” Its way of perception implies an intuitive grasp of reality and thus is “more like an organ of mystical union. The soul feels, touches, penetrates, and merges with another living being through *Nous*. This non-conceptual intuitive thinking was also inherited by Plotinus’ philosophy and became the core of mystical discourse.<sup>①</sup> Neoplatonism, which combines Aristotelian and Stoic views, establishes a hierarchy of existence with a three-level structure of “the One, intelligence, and soul,” which can also be seen as an introspective understanding of the self. Since the highest is also a metaphor of the innermost, the soul’s ascension to “the One” is also the process of deepening the self. Only by giving up the sensual and rational “ego” can the true self be discovered, and knowledge of the self and knowledge of the ultimate are finally connected.

Although mystical theology from Origen and Augustine to Denys has a deep Platonic imprint, Platonism and Neoplatonism are not, after all, Christian mysticism. The ontological difference in Platonism is between the world of senses and the world of ideas, while the ontological difference in Christian philosophy is between the creator and the created. Platonic philosophy has no place for the concepts of creation, for the idea is divine. The soul itself has divine attributes, and the ascent to the world of ideas is the soul’s homecoming. The biblical belief that God created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) fundamentally denies the divine attributes of the soul, which, like the physical body, is part of the order of creation. As the fourth-century Fathers completed their appropriation and adaptation of the Greek philosophical tradition, discourses on the ecstasy of the soul and its union with ultimate reality took on a different meaning.

The differences between Christian mysticism and the Platonist tradition lie mainly in the concept of God, the relationship between the soul and God, and the understanding of morality.<sup>②</sup> Plato’s ultimate reality, both as the “supreme Good” (*Republic*) and as “Beauty” itself (*Symposium*), differs from the personal God of Christianity. The “One” of Neoplatonism does not have

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<sup>①</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origin of Christian Mystical Tradition*, xv-xvii.

<sup>②</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origin of Christian Mystical Tradition*, 191-199.

any degree of personhood. On the contrary, it does not even concern itself with the “lower levels” of existence. Although it is the goal of the soul’s search, the “One” itself is not at all involved in the process. Patristic theology, on the other hand, honors God as supreme Good and Beauty and does not deny the Impassibility of God, yet still uses a personal language in its description of mystical experience. Mysticism seeks not an ultimate principle or an idea but a personal God. In short, while Christian mysticism adopts a Neoplatonic structure, the ultimate reality of the soul’s quest is clearly identified as God as revealed in *the Bible*. Moreover, while Platonism also holds that the mystical experience does not originate from the soul’s own power, Christian mysticism clearly emphasizes the Grace of God. God is the initiator of the soul’s transcendental movement. As Augustine held, “*Sola gracia*” (grace alone) is the driving force behind the transcendent love of the soul.<sup>①</sup> Denys also considers the “ecstasy of God” a prerequisite for the “ecstasy of the soul.”<sup>②</sup> The love of God overflows and descends from the transcendent status of the Supreme Being to all creation. The soul’s love for God is the response to the Incarnation. The more important difference is that while the Platonic ascent of the soul is a gradual return to the self and its divination, the Fathers emphasize the fundamental heterogeneity between the created soul and the transcendent being. The union of the soul with God requires a negation of the self. Therefore, the closer the soul gets to God, the more it is surrounded by the divine darkness, or the “dark night of the soul.”<sup>③</sup> This means that there is an impassable gulf between the soul and God. In the Platonic tradition, moral purification is the means and necessary prerequisite for the soul to transcend the sensual world. Christian mysticism,

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<sup>①</sup> The synergism held by the Eastern Church tradition also presupposes grace. For unless God is understood as some kind of Being external to creation, it is difficult to say that the “response” to God’s love is not a “collaboration.” In a sense, “synergy” and “grace alone” are not opposed to each other.

<sup>②</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, “Divine Names,” IV. 13:712AB, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: the Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (London: SPCK, 1987), 82.

<sup>③</sup> Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius both use divine darkness as a metaphor for the unknowability of God’s nature, while John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century “*doctor mysticus*” of the Church, believed that the soul had to go through a “dark night” in order to be united with God. While also emphasizing the unknowability of God, the idea of the dark night of the soul is not found in Eastern Church tradition. Although Origen occasionally speaks of God hidden in darkness, his mystical theology tends to be more of a “mysticism of light.” See Andrew Louth, *The Origin of Christian Mystical Tradition*, 179-190 & 72-74.

on the other hand, believes that moral behavior is the result of union between the soul and God, the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Although Christian mysticism takes many different forms, and one can speak of differences among the Fathers and between patristic theology and medieval mysticism, and even between the mystical traditions of the Latin and Eastern Churches, Christian mysticism still shows “a family resemblance.” A distinctive and controversial feature is its “grammar of negation,” so that people often equate mystical theology with negative theology.<sup>①</sup> Derrida, for example, assumes that the negation of mystical theology is actually affirmation in disguise.<sup>②</sup> It is known that nearly one-fifth of the words in patristic Greek texts begin with a negative prefix.<sup>③</sup> The use of negation highlights the dilemma of human language/reason in the face of a transcendent God, and the “via negative” becomes an expedient. Since negation and affirmation belong to the same realm of human reason, the path of negation is still a stage that must be transcended. Denys is very clear that God, “as the only and perfect foundation of all things, transcends all affirmation; and, by virtue of his transcendent simplicity and absolute nature, has no boundaries, transcends all boundaries, and transcends all negation.”<sup>④</sup> Thus, according to Jean-Luc Marion, the modern interpreter

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<sup>①</sup> The differences between mystical theologies are mainly in the ways of understanding the union of the soul with God. That is to say: whether it is a complete unity or a distant participation; through intellectual or spiritual means, through contemplation or love and prayer; the understanding of the ecstasy of the soul; the relationship between God and human, whether to become Christ or to imitate Christ; the attitude towards baptism; the knowability of God and the style of expression of the Eastern and Western traditions, etc. Concerning the grammar of negation, Origen can be considered an exception, as he tends to believe that God is knowable. However, this view of the relationship between the soul and the Word was the most unacceptable to later theologians.

<sup>②</sup> For Derrida, the ultimate goal of negative theology, no matter how negative it may be, is still the affirmation of God, the transcendent claim to hyper-essential being. The negation in mystical theology is merely an “investment” in order to return to the *hyperousios* in a superior way. See Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward & Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 73-142.

<sup>③</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 40.

<sup>④</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, “Mystical Theology,” V. 1048AB, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: the Complete Works*, 141.

of Denys' apophatic theology, mystical theology is "Eminence," the third way apart from affirmation and negation, ultimately pointing to a direct union between humans and God.<sup>①</sup> Admittedly, the union with the unknowable God in an unknowable way still contains a strong denial and is therefore often labeled as Apophaticism. Similarly, Orthodox theologians often refer to Latin mystical theology "Apophaticism of essence" and the Eastern Church tradition as "Apophaticism of person."<sup>②</sup> If negative theology, as Derrida understands and criticizes it, is only a means of reaching a higher level of affirmation through negation or of acquiring some kind of *hyperousios*, it is still within the realm of epistemology. If we interpret the concept of *epekeina tes ousias* in Plato's *Republic* in this way, then mystical theology opens up to a kind of metaphysical interpretation. Whether it is a "double negation" in the epistemological sense or the union of the whole person is the key to understanding mystical theology. Another issue related to this is how to understand the language of mystical theology and the "knowledge" of theology.

Platonic mysticism is more of a pursuit of a few individuals or elites, in which the speculative life takes precedence over practical action. The love of God not only inspires individuals' "eros" but also unites people into one fellowship. Therefore, Christian mysticism is essentially ecclesiological, the result of the participation of a baptized life in the "Mystical Body of Christ." Christian mysticism from the Apostle Paul to the late Middle Ages has always

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<sup>①</sup> In response to Derrida's criticism of negative theology, Marion argues that the third path of mystical theology is "de-nomination": the naming of names while denying all names, the key to understanding this third path is to take the practical application of language seriously. Mystic theology is a "performative" use of the language of prayer and praise. Jean-Luc Marion, "In the Name," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo & Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 24-30 & 46.

<sup>②</sup> Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God*, trans. Haralambos Ventis (London & New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), 28-29. Orthodox theologians such as Vladimir Lossky and Christos Yannaras often use this to emphasize the difference between Eastern and Western mystical theology, with Latin mysticism as a "union of intellect" rather than a "union of person." Whether Eastern and Western mysticism is qualitatively different, or whether it is simply a different perspective on the interpretation of mystical experience, and the associated differences between the Eastern and Western churches regarding the Trinity, remain a controversial topic.

been associated with ecclesiology.<sup>①</sup> The modern understanding of mystical experience is usually at the level of individual consciousness, as in the case of William James. However, the use of the word “mystery” in the *Early Church* was not associated with a surprising personal experience but with the experience of the body of the Church. According to a contemporary Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, the “mystery of Christ” has three layers of meaning: Christology (the person and especially the resurrected body of Christ), Ecclesiology (the Church as the body of Christ), and the Eucharist (the body of Christ shared in the Eucharist). In the Early Church, these three meanings were unified. After the scholasticism of the thirteenth century, the Church as a “mystical body” was separated from the Eucharist. The Eucharist became only one of the many liturgies of the Church, and the Church became institutionalized.<sup>②</sup> It is clear that mystical theology is not just a contemplation of God, but is inseparable from spiritual exercise, prayer, and other aspects of church life. As Andrew Louth argues, the mystical theology of the patristic period was essentially a liturgical theology, where the liturgy invites a person to open themselves to respond to the love of God and to be united with God in the liturgy.<sup>③</sup> The primary concern of mystical theology is not to know the nature of God, but — as Denys says — to praise (*hymnein*) God. Mystical theology is intellectual and scholarly only when it is seen as an object of study, that is, in itself, a response of creation with praise and worship to the love of God.

### III. The unknowability and the boundary of logos

No faith claims to be irrational. A faith that lacks rationality is a devaluation of the worshipped one. Christianity is no exception. The relationship between reason and mysticism is entirely internal to the discussion of faith. Faith seeks not only understanding but also expression.

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<sup>①</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origin of Christian Mystical Tradition*, 199-203.

<sup>②</sup> John Zizioulas, “The Church as the Mystical Body of Christ,” in *Communion and Otherness* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2006), 286-307. This view of Zizioulas comes from the Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac. See Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Fairfax: Eastern Christian Publications, 2006).

<sup>③</sup> Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London and New York: Continuum, 1989), 104-109.

The ancient Greek philosophers were already aware of the identity of thinking and existence, as well as the relationship between language and reason. According to Heidegger, the primary meaning of “logos” is “to reveal and make manifest,” i.e., to reveal what is said through words. Making something visible as a phenomenon means bringing it out of concealment and into the light.<sup>①</sup> Reason, like language, has the function of “bringing together” the diversity of things, so “logos” means both “discourse” and “reason.” Both are linked to the image of light. Thus, any discourse conveys some kind of reason, and the question of mysticism can be reduced to the question of language: what kind of logos/reason should faith apply?

Here, Kant’s critique of pure reason, especially the distinction between the *Noumena* or “thing-in-itself” (*Ding an sich selbst*) and the phenomenal world (*Phänomena*), can provide a reference for our thinking about God and mystery.<sup>②</sup> God as *Noumena* is not a cognitive object of pure reason but can be known only when He appears to us in phenomena. Even if God is manifest in phenomena, there is still a dimension of “thing-in-itself” that cannot be known by reason. Because of God’s transcendence and unknowability, theology is not strictly speaking knowledge of God Himself, but knowledge of God as revealed to us. One can know God through His creation or “energy,” which gives legitimacy to natural or affirmative theology. But God Himself is not in the phenomenal world. He appears and withdraws from time to time. The desire to be united with God must go beyond affirmative speech to the negation and transcendence of natural reason and human language. Affirmative theology is concerned with the outward presence of God in creation, while negative theology is concerned with the inward movement of the soul toward God Himself. However, the path of negation has its priority in mystical discourse. If God is the Thomistic “subsisting being itself” (*Esse ipsum subsistens*), He is at the same time Eckhart’s divine “nothingness” (*das Nichts*), the “abyss”

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<sup>①</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 51-58.

<sup>②</sup> The meanings of “*Noumena*” and “thing-in-itself” overlap but are not identical. “*Noumena*” cannot be perceived at all, while the “thing-self” refers to the self-existing thing, the unknowable dimension of perceivable phenomena.

(*Abgrund*) concealed by existence, the absolute desert (*Wüste*) where no concept can grow. Here all human conceptual construction will fail, and God recedes from all names. In order to encounter the divine, the soul must divest itself of all the attributes of creation, all thoughts about God and personal desires, as well as all the attributes we have attributed to God, and be in a state of “letting-be” (*Gelassenheit*).<sup>①</sup> In his study of the nature of human freedom, Schelling points out that human freedom begins with uplifting God from every metaphysics and moral theology, thus rejecting all names of God, which either say too much or too little. God is above all idols, including “being.”<sup>②</sup> All languages about the divine are impoverished, whether affirmative or negative. Theology can only use limited human languages in an analogical or metaphorical way.

The opposition between reason and mystery is a “modern event.” The question is whether modern reason and theological reason share a conceptual basis, whether they are the same kind of reason? The modern “philosophy of subjectivity” bases knowledge on the “ego” and comprehends reality from the transcendental structure of the subject/object. This is a kind of “representational thinking” and “technical rationality” seeking conceptual mastery. Under the domination of such a “distanced” rationality, all experiences, including that of the world and the self, are reduced to an objective phenomenon, leading to the objectification and de-valorization of the world. Or, all values are understood as a human construction, leading to an extreme humanism that is “all-too-human.” As Kant’s critique shows, pure reason can only know “entities” in the phenomenal world, but not God Himself, who is beyond being. Mystical theology accommodates limited human reason *via affirmativa* and reveals the limits of reason *via negativa*, retaining the transcendence of God in an analogical understanding of language. Later scholasticism departed from the principle of the analogy of being, leading to a common concept or horizon under which God and creature were placed on a par. The quest for certainty

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<sup>①</sup> John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics*, 274-278.

<sup>②</sup> David L. Clark, “Otherwise than God: Schelling, Marion,” in *Trajectories of Mysticism in Theory and Literature*, ed. Philip Leonard (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 133-176.

also influenced the emergence of modern philosophy.<sup>①</sup> Mysticism and reason are not antithetical, nor does faith imply anti-intellectualism or the abandonment of philosophical reflection. What is needed is to clarify the boundaries of human rationality.

Christian theology as a discourse follows a higher reason, which, according to Marion, comes from the Word that became flesh, revealed through Christ as a reason of love. The love of God is unconditional, is able to overcome death and all impossibilities, and at the same time is the only way to know the self and the other. In Christ (the Word), love is revealed as the primary and ultimate truth. Thus, the question of knowledge in theology is no longer an intentional act of the subject but implies the communion of love: transformation by the loved through love. Because of its faith in the divine Logos (who is also the divine wisdom), Christian theology is obliged to appeal to the logos/reason for the truth of love. Faith gives legitimacy to theological discourse/reason. Theology so understood is first of all the self-utterance of the Word, Christ asserts himself as the Word. The reason of faith comes from the Word, and transmits the word of the Word in the name of the Word.<sup>②</sup> Faith requires the renunciation of self-centered reason and the union with the higher Logos.

In summary, the significance of Christian mysticism is at least threefold. In the Christian tradition, its defense of God's transcendence is a corrective and a counterpoint to metaphysical theology. Christian faith was too easily integrated with Onto-theology in modernism and was therefore rejected by the postmodern. After the "death of God," the unknowable God of mystical theology became the driving force and source of the self-renewal of Christian faith. Mysticism contributes to the rethinking of a single understanding of reason and knowledge and to the reshaping of

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<sup>①</sup> According to Hans van Balthasar, modern philosophy or modernity emerged from a departure from the Thomistic principle of analogy. Duns Scotus adopted Averroism in his theology, which considers existence as a univocal concept, and Francisco Suarez reinforced univocity as the basis for certainty and provability. This quest for certainty directly influenced Cartesian philosophy. Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology* (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 33-37.

<sup>②</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 146-154.

the relationship between reason and faith based on a departure from the stereotypes of Enlightenment reason about knowing and knowledge. As Marion says, the problem now is “no longer a matter of giving reason to all things, but of giving reason for rationality.”<sup>①</sup> In contemporary philosophy, mystical theology reveals the limits of human reason and the dimension of unknowability and gives rise to thinking about “mystery” and religion. As Christos Yannaras argues, mystical theology is primarily a stance that rejects conceptual idols, psychological egocentricity, and conceptual certainty.<sup>②</sup> This stance has been characteristic of post-metaphysical philosophy.

According to Heidegger, being is not a persistent presence in the sense of traditional metaphysics but a process of presence out of absence and concealment. Truth in its original sense (*aletheia*) means unconcealment, presence in *Lichtung*, which is in itself preserved by lethe, the dimension of “nothingness” in presence. The presence of being is a mysterious “*Ereignis*” with *Dasein* as the locus and space of the presence. The task of thinking is to open to presence and let “being” show itself. Here one can discern a trace of Eckhart’s “*Abgrund*” and “*Gelassenheit*.” For theologians, the presence of “being” presupposes God. For Heidegger, “God” can only appear in the space opened by *Ereignis*. “Being” is a free play of presence and absence, light and darkness. The world itself is preserved by the opaque “earth,” and *Dasein* as always already in the world is not a construction of the subject. Even in Kantian philosophy, nature and the self also maintain the dimension of unknowability. Although reason legislates nature, the “thing-in-itself” is not an object of knowledge, and the real world can never be exhausted by human concepts. Similarly, the knowledge of self cannot be reduced to simple empirical knowledge. For the “Transcendental I” is a precondition for all knowledge but cannot be the object of one’s own intuition and inner perception. Knowledge of the self can only be knowledge of the “empirical me,” that is, the person or the self as an object appearing to the transcendental self. For Kant, the value and dignity of human beings are not at all determined by their natural properties, and humankind as end in itself must not be objectified. Taking the Kantian thesis of what the

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<sup>①</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, 154.

<sup>②</sup> Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and the Unknowability of God*, 17.

human is as a starting point, Marion recalls Augustine's confusion about the self: "I had become to myself a huge question" (*Factus eram ipse mihi magna quaestio*), that is, I experience that I am unknowable to myself. Marion questions the idea of knowledge dominated by the philosophy of subjectivity: does all knowledge have to be reached with the same set of univocal concepts? The human, or even desirable, to use concepts to know the self that produces them? The human, like God, cannot be named, and philosophy must recognize and respect the unknowability of humans.<sup>①</sup>

A radical mystical theology, seemingly similar to "mystical atheism," would ultimately break the illusion of human conceptual clarity and certainty, pointing to the opacity of the world and the self. Instead, there are now discussions on questions such as the "phenomenology of givenness" in contemporary philosophy,<sup>②</sup> the revival of Neoplatonism in contemporary French philosophy and theology,<sup>③</sup> the "gift," and "what comes after the subject?" They all address the problem of modernity resulting from the Western metaphysical tradition and therefore are intrinsically linked to the mystical tradition. Traces of mysticism can be found in contemporary theological and philosophical discussions of "God as Otherwise than Being" and "God without Being,"<sup>④</sup> as well as "Religion without God" and "Religion

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<sup>①</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, "*Mihi Magna quaestio factus sum*: The Privilege of Unknowing," *Journal of Religion* 85, no.1(2005): 1-24.

<sup>②</sup> Marion's "phenomenology of givenness," which follows the phenomenological approach of Husserl and Heidegger, criticizes the philosophy of subjectivity with a notion of "saturated phenomena." It could be regarded as a philosophical footnote of his theological thought, which takes Denys's mysticism as one of the main sources.

<sup>③</sup> One of the distinctive features of the revival of Neoplatonism in twentieth-century French philosophy is the direct connection between the senses, sensuality, and a certain transcendental unknowability. Cf. Wayne J. Hankey, "Neoplatonism in Contemporary French Philosophy," *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 161-190.

<sup>④</sup> For example, Levinas advocates an ethical basis, and Calvin O. Schrag and Marion try to talk about God from the perspective of the "gift," both of which are attempts to overcome the grammar of "being." See Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Calvin O. Schrag, *God as Otherwise than Being: towards a semantic of Gift* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002). Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

without religion.”<sup>①</sup> Although they do not always involve Christian mysticism, such statements are indeed postmodern rhetorics of mystical experience.

### Conclusion

The complexity of the problem of mysticism lies in the relationship between language, experience, and reality. Is there an experience independent of language? Does reality determine language, or does language construct reality? What is the relationship between language and thought? The perception of these questions determines the different understandings of “mystery.” Unlike Continental philosophy, the prevailing notion in Anglo-American analytic philosophy is that any experience is a human experience and therefore needs to be mediated by language. This means that there is no “pure experience” independent of language. George A. Lindbeck’s “cultural-linguistic model” view of religion holds that religious experience is derived from a system of linguistic symbols, including liturgy. It has a unique cultural code and “grammar.” In this sense, all mystical experience, including Christian mysticism, derives from the interpretative structure provided by a particular linguistic form and takes place with the help of a particular language.<sup>②</sup> This seems to support Derrida’s criticism of negative theology. The ineffable God is the God of *the Bible*, not a God without definite cultural attributes. But does this mean that nothing exists outside of language and that the world is only a human construction?

As mentioned above, this view cannot deny the basic fact that human

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<sup>①</sup> Ronald Dworkin and Mark C. Taylor speak of “religion without God” from different perspectives, Gianni Vattimo puts that “nonreligious Christianity,” while Derrida proposes “religion without religion.” See Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2013); Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2007); John D. Caputo & Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York, Columbia University Press) 2007. Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” *Acts of Religion*, ed., Gil Anidjar (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 40-101. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1997.

<sup>②</sup> George Pattison, “What to Say: Reflections on Mysticism after Modernity,” in *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology*, eds. Kevin Vanhoozer & Martin Varner (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007), 192-194.

existence is always already in the world, which is the most basic and greatest mystery. Language is not a simple counterpart of independent meaning, nor is meaning an invention of language. Language always has to point to the signified beyond itself, and cannot fully express human thought and experience. According to Heidegger's view of language, the possibility of human language lies in listening to the voice of "being." *Ereignis* is more original than meaning and language, an event in which "being" and humans belong together, without ultimate foundation and concepts. It is only in response to this event that different cultural-linguistic patterns emerge. Language gives certain properties to experience in interpretation, but the experience is not a construction of language. The realm of silence is the border between language and mystery, not the end of the experience.

Mystery is open to language so that mystical experience can be expressed in different forms: not necessarily Christian, not necessarily personal, not necessarily in the name of God, not necessarily even in religious terms. Mystery can be the Buddhist "emptiness," the Taoist "Way," the Heideggerian "*Ereignis*," or a pure unknown. Of course, Christian mysticism is one of these possibilities.

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