

Christian Mysticism: A Meta-Theoretical Approach – Part II

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Doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n16p541

Abstract

The first paper (Part I) introduced a fundamental framework consisting of four archetypal orientations of the mind. The focus in the present paper (Part II) is, firstly, on the speculative (type I) contributions to mystical theology of Gregory of Nyssa, the Pseudo-Dionysius (Dionysius the Areopagite), and the German exemplar, Meister Eckhart. This is then followed by a review of the systematic (type II) mysticism of Evagrius Ponticus, *Theologia Germanica*, and of John of the Cross. The empyrean mind is inclined to use impersonal, abstract, terms such as: 'substance,' 'essence,' 'cause,' 'knowledge,' 'universal,' 'being,' the 'One,' the 'Good,' 'wisdom,' 'Truth,' the 'Real,' 'incorporeal,' and so on, as shown in the discussion in section 1 below. This is in contrast with the expressive and intimate language of the narrative-poetical (type III) mind, who speaks of the 'love,' 'desire,' and 'passion' for God, and the deeply personal need for union with God (see Part III). It also differs from the action-oriented approach of pragmatic mysticism (Part III), and the more methodical and taxonomic (Aristotelian) character of objectivist-empiricist (type II) mysticism, discussed in section 2 below.

Keywords: speculative mysticism, systematic mysticism, empyrean, objectivist-empiricist, methodical

1. Speculative Mysticism

The focus in the present paper (Part II) is, firstly, on the speculative (type I) contributions to mystical theology of Gregory of Nyssa, the Pseudo-Dionysius (Dionysius the Areopagite) and the German exemplar, Meister Eckhart. This is then followed by a review of the systematic (type II) mysticism of Evagrius Ponticus, *Theologia Germanica*, and of John of the Cross.

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1.1 Gregory of Nyssa (circa 335 - 394)

It is generally agreed that Gregory of Nyssa is the prototypical example of a philosophical and speculative approach to Christian mysticism:

- "...the most outstanding speculative thinker among the Greek Fathers between Origen and Maximus the Confessor..." (Silvas, 2007: 1);
- "...strong speculative leanings..." (Wace, 1892: 18);
- "...the most speculative and mystical of the three Cappadocians..." (McGinn, 2006: 13).

This is a thinker who was well versed in Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, the Stoics and the theology of Origen (Silvas, 2007: 8; Copleston, 1962: 35), which explains the influence of Hellenism on both his systematic and Trinitarian theological writings, and also in his mystical theology (*The Life of Moses*) which he composed during the last years of his life.

Gregory's approach was to apply his philosophical training and insights to Christianity, seeking to: "...establish the whole complex of Christian doctrines on a foundation of metaphysics rather than on the authority of scripture alone" (Silvas, 2007: 52); "...he wanders persistently in metaphysics." (Wace, 1892: 22).

He had a decisive influence on later developments in Christian mysticism. It is said that: "...the writings of St.

Gregory of Nyssa are the source from which not only the Pseudo-Dionysius and mystics down to St. John of the Cross drew, directly or indirectly, much of their inspiration...." (Copleston, 1962: 37).

From a meta-theoretical perspective it is interesting to note that he did not have an affinity for (or great skill in) church politics (the type IV mode), although, with his appointment as Bishop of Nyssa, he could not very well avoid it and, at one time, went into exile as a consequence of what seems to have been partly the result of political ineptness. It is reported that his older brother Basil (Bishop of Caesarea): "...shrewdly read Gregory's character at this stage, and we have his famous remarks on the 'naïveté' and 'simplicity' of his brother's sense of politics." (Silvas, 2007: 27).

The influence of Platonism and Neo-Platonism shows up in his cosmology, as follows: "He represents the mind as the mirror of the Archetypal Beauty: then below the mind comes body which is connected with mind and pervaded by it, and when thus transfused and beautified by it becomes itself the mirror of this mirror: and then this body in its turn influences and combines Matter. The Beauty of the Supreme Being thus penetrates all things: and as long as the lower holds on to the higher all is well." (Wace, 1892: 19).

The rest of this discussion briefly sketches the objectivist-empyrean (type I) character of Gregory of Nyssa's thought as it manifests itself in his mystical treatise, *The Life of Moses*. The second part of *The Life of Moses* contains Gregory's attempt to: "...present the patriarch as the model of mystical ascent to God." (McGinn, 2006: 13). The structure of his interpretation consists of three stages (referred to as theophanies or manifestations of God), namely: the sight of the burning bush; the ascent of Mount Sinai, and Moses' desire for a face-to-face vision of God.

1.1.1 *The burning bush*

Ex: 3:2: And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.

The burning bush represents, for Gregory, a state of illumination in Moses' mystical ascent. Gregory reasons that this is the light of truth, which is God, for which the world of the senses must be left behind: "The light instructs us what we must do if we wish to remain within the rays of the true light. If we wish to ascend to so great a height, where the light of truth is seen, we must take off our shoes. This means that the dead and earthly covering of skins must be removed from the feet of the soul..." (McGinn, 2006: 17).

It also means that the Truth in apprehending God should not rely on sense experience or on human reasoning, because that would be in error. He formulates it in empyrean fashion as follows: "...the definition of truth is this: not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being...It seems to me that at the time the great Moses was instructed in the theophany he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists." (Malherbe & Ferguson, 1978: 60).

1.1.2 *The ascent of Mount Sinai*

Ex: 20:21: And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.

This stage seems to be the opposite of the illumination gained from witnessing the burning bush: "Then the Deity was seen in the light, now is it seen in the cloud." (McGinn, 2006: 16). However, this should not (according to Gregory) be cause for concern. He offers the following interpretation:

- "...the further the mind advances and the greater and more perfect its attention to, and knowledge of, the realm of reality becomes, the nearer in fact, that it draws close to contemplation, so much the more is it aware of the unavailability of the divine nature to human knowledge." (McGinn, 2006: 16);
- "...For it is precisely in this that true knowledge of what is sought consists, and precisely in this that seeing consists, that is in not seeing, because we seek what lies beyond all knowledge, shrouded by incomprehensibility in all directions, as it were by some cloud." (McGinn, 2006: 16).

Gregory seems to have been the first to use the metaphors of 'cloud' and 'darkness,' in connection with his mystical theology. These expressions figured prominently in later mystical thought in, for example, the 14th century treatise entitled the "*Cloud of Unknowing*."

1.1.3 *The face-to-face vision*

Ex: 33:20: And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.

Ex: 33:21: *And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock:*
Ex: 33:22: *And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cliff of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by:*
Ex: 33:23: *And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.*

Gregory interprets this stage as evidence of the soul's constant desire for knowing the hidden or unknown in terms of what is already known: "For this reason, the ardent lover of beauty understands what is seen as an image of what he desires, and yearns to be filled with the actual substance of the archetype." (McGinn, 2006: 17).

In the end Moses is only allowed a brief glimpse of the back of God, and has to be satisfied with not having his desire fully satisfied. For Gregory this means that: "...the Really Real is the true life and inaccessible to our understanding ...Moses' desire, therefore, is satisfied precisely in so far as his desire remains unsatisfied." (McGinn, 2006: 18).

Gregory's conclusion is that: "He would not have shown himself to his servant if the sight were such as to bring the desire of the beholder to an end, since the true sight of God consists in this, that the one who looked up to God never ceases in that desire. For he says: *You cannot see my face, for man cannot see me and live.*" (Malherbe & Ferguson, 1978: 115).

1.2 The Pseudo-Dionysius (circa 500)

Little is known (Copleston, 1962: 93) about the anonymous theologian (who was also an ecclesiastic) and writer of a number of influential works such as: the *Divine Names*, *Mystical Theology*, and the *Celestial Hierarchy*. Though he wrote under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite (believed to be a much earlier figure in history) it turned out that he lived during the 5th and 6th centuries, hence the now commonly accepted reference to him as the Pseudo-Dionysius.

Dionysius is probably the most Platonic (more specifically Neo-Platonic) of Christian mystical theologians. He differentiates between two ways of thinking about and approaching God, which he refers to as the *positive theology* (discussed in the *Divine Names*) and the *negative theology* (treated in the *Mystical Theology*).

In the preface to the latter work Dionysius distinguishes between the two ways as follows: "Mystic theology is like that ladder set up on the earth whose top reached to Heaven on which the angels of God were ascending and descending, and above which stood Almighty God. The Angel ascending is the 'negative' which distinguishes Almighty God from all created things. God is not matter—soul, mind, spirit, any being, nor even being itself, but above and beyond all these. The Angel descending is the 'Affirmative.' God is good, wise, powerful, the Being...*Theology prefers the negative because Almighty God is more appropriately presented by distinction than by comparison.*" (Parker, 1897: 83).

Figure 1 provides some examples of the kind of themes dealt with by Dionysius.

Figure 1: Topics in the *Divine Names (DN)* and *Mystical Theology (MT)* (Parker, 1897)

1. The purpose of the discourse and the tradition concerning Divine Names. (<i>DN, Ch. 1</i>). (Parker, 1897: 12)
2. Concerning common and distinctive theology and what is the Divine Union and distinction. (<i>DN, Ch. 2</i>). (Parker, 1897: 18)
3. Concerning wisdom, mind, reason, truth, faith. (<i>DN, Ch. 7</i>). (Parker, 1897: 58)
4. What is the Divine Gloom? (<i>MT, Ch. 1</i>). (Parker, 1897: 84)
5. How we ought both to be united and render praise to the Cause of all and above all. (<i>MT, Ch. 2</i>). (Parker, 1897: 86)
6. What are the affirmative expressions respecting God, and what the negative. (<i>MT, Ch. 3</i>). (Parker, 1897: 87)
7. That the pre-eminent Cause of every object of sensible perception is none of the objects of sensible perception. (<i>MT, Ch. 4</i>). (Parker, 1897: 89)
8. That the pre-eminent Cause of every object of intelligible perception is none of the objects of intelligible perception. (<i>MT, Ch. 5</i>). (Parker, 1897: 90)

Further, meta-theoretically informative and empyrean, aspects of the thought of the Pseudo-Dionysius are as follows:

- In the Divine names he essentially follows a deductive process: "...showing how names such as Goodness, Life, Wisdom, Power, are applicable to God in a transcendental manner and how they apply to creatures only in virtue of their derivation from God and their varying degrees of participation in those qualities which are found in God not as inhering qualities but in substantial unity" (Copleston, 1962: 93);
- Dionysius repeatedly affirms that: "...God created the world through the exemplary or archetypal Ideas, the 'preordinations' which exist in Him; in addition, God is the final Cause of all things, drawing all things to Himself as the Good" (Copleston, 1962: 98);
- His exposition of the ascent of the Christian mystic is as follows: "When the mind has stripped away from its

idea of God the human modes of thought and inadequate conceptions of the Deity, it enters upon the 'Darkness of Unknowing', wherein it 'renounces all the apprehension of the understanding and is wrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible.' (Copleston, 1962: 95). Note the legacy of Gregory of Nyssa.

- "...the superessential Illimitability is placed above things essential, and the Unity above mind above the Minds; and the One above conception is inconceivable to all conceptions; and the Good above word is unutterable by word..." (Parker, 1897: 12);
- "The (Names) then, common to the whole Deity...are the Super-Good, the Super-God, the Super-essential, the Super-Living, the Super-Wise, and whatever else belongs to the superlative abstraction; with which also, all those denoting Cause, the Good, the Beautiful, the Being, the Life-producing, the Wise, and whatever Names are given to the Cause of all Good, from His goodly gifts" (Parker, 1897: 19, 20);
- "... the superessential Union is fixed above not only the unions in bodies, but also above those in souls themselves, and in minds themselves, which in a manner unmingled and supermundane, the Godlike and supercelestial Illuminations, whole through whole, possess, as be seems a participation analogous to those who participate in the Union elevated above all" (Parker, 1897: 20, 21);
- Dionysius concludes as follows: "Summing up, then, let us say, that the being to all beings and to the ages, is from the Preexisting. And every age and time is from Him. And of every age and time, and of everything, howsoever existing, the Pre-existing is Source and Cause. And all things participate in Him, and from no single existing thing does He stand aloof. And He is before all things, and all things in Him consist. And absolutely, if anything is, in any way whatsoever, it both is, and is contemplated, and is preserved in the Pre-existing. And, before all the other participations in Him, the being is pre-supposed." (Parker, 1897: 51)

In sum, the mystical theology of the Pseudo-Dionysius is about as impersonal and purely objectivist-empyrean (type I) as one may find in the field of Christian mysticism.

1.3 Meister Eckhart (circa 1260 – 1327)

In medieval Europe Meister Eckhart stands out as the most speculative and metaphysical of the mystical theologians, the creator of: "...a boldly speculative intellectualist philosophy..." (Davies, 1994: xix), "...the most intellectual." (Clark, 2013: 2).

Even so, being a theologian and not a philosopher as such, Eckhart's thought shows the characteristics of both the mystical poet and the metaphysician. (Clark, 2013: 18). It is: "...the coincidence of these two - boldly speculative philosophy/theology and the personal intuition of a transcendental state of consciousness - that forms the essential structures of Eckhart's thought..." (Davies, 1994: xxxii).

The essence of Eckhart's focus is God and the soul, the abstract and impenetrable unity of the divine being and its manifestation in the 'spark' of the soul:

- "God is being, pure being, absolute being, the final ultimate reality" (Clark, 2013: 19);
- "The fundamental idea of Eckhart's philosophy is that of the Absolute or Abstract Unity conceived as the sole real existence. His God is the God of the neoplatonists: He is absolutely devoid of attributes which would be a limitation of His Infinity" (Field, 1909: 2);
- "The Godhead, according to Eckhart, is the universal and eternal Unity comprehending and transcending all diversity" (Inge, 1904: 10);
- It is also a unity that transcends the Trinity. (Copleston, 1962: 186).

In sermon forty eight Eckhart describes the essence of his thought by way of a comparison, in the following manner: "As I was coming here today I was wondering how I should preach to you so that it would make sense and you would understand it. Then I thought of a comparison; if you could understand that, you would understand my meaning and the basis of all my thinking in everything I have ever preached. *The comparison concerns my eyes and a piece of wood. If my eye is open, it is an eye; if it is closed, it is the same eye. It is not the wood that comes and goes, but it is my vision of it.* Now; pay good heed to me!" (Griffin, 2005: 83). Figure 2 summarizes Eckhart's several reasons and justifications for loving the immutable 'One.'

Figure 2: Eckhart's reasons for loving 'God the One" (Davies, 1994: 252 – 254)

1. All that is loves likeness to God and seeks it out.
2. In the One there is never any suffering, pain or grief.
3. All things are contained in the One, by virtue of the fact that it is one...
4. They who truly love can love only one thing. Accordingly, the phrase 'God is one' is followed by: 'you should love the Lord your God with all your heart' (Deut. 6:5).
5. Lovers wish to be united with the beloved. This is impossible if the latter is not one.
6. The One is indistinct from all things.
7. The One in its most proper sense refers to perfection and to the whole, for which reason, again, it lacks nothing.
8. The One, according to its own essence, refers to being itself or to essence - that is to a single essence...so that union and uniting are appropriate to it on the grounds of its unity.
9. The One is higher, prior and simpler than goodness itself, that it is closer to being itself and to God or rather, according to its name, is one being with being.
10. God is over-flowingly rich because he is one. He is the first and the highest because he is one. Therefore the One descends into everything and into each single thing, yet remaining the One that unites what is distinct.

Examples, showing the empyrean nature as well as often paradoxical way of expression of Eckhart's many, thought-provoking, ideas and sayings, are as follows:

- "God and I, we are one. I accept God into me in knowing; I go into God in loving" (Griffin, 2005: 70);
- Referring to the humble person, Eckhart says: "God and this humble man are wholly one, and not two; for what God performs, he performs, too; and what God wishes, he wishes, too; and what God is, he is, too - one life and one being. Yes, by God! If this man were in hell, God would have to come down to him in hell, and hell would have to be for him the kingdom of heaven. God must of necessity do this; he would be compelled so that he had to do it, for then this man is divine being, and divine being is this man" (Griffin, 2005: 72);
- Concerning the idea of the 'spark' (*funklein*) of the soul, Eckhart explains as follows: "I say that if a man will turn away from himself and from all created things, by so much will he be made one and blessed in the spark in the soul, which has never touched either time or place. This spark rejects all created things, and wants nothing but its naked God, as he is in himself" (Griffin, 2005: 85);
- In answer to how one should love God, Eckhart says: "You should love him as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image, but as he is a pure, unmixed, bright 'One,' separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of 'something' into 'nothing'" (Griffin, 2005: 101);
- Concerning God's action he makes the following statement: "...God is in all things, not as Nature, not as Person, but as Being. He is everywhere, undivided; yet the creatures participate in Him according to their measure" (Inge, 1904: 10);
- For Eckhart: "The beauty of the soul...is to be well ordered, with the higher faculties above the lower, each in its proper place. The will should be supreme over the understanding, the understanding over the senses." (Inge, 1904: 13). And here Eckhart's subjectivist-empiricist (type III) orientation clearly shows in the primacy he gives to the will.
- "I have a capacity in my soul for taking in God entirely. I am as sure as I live that nothing is so near to me as God. God is nearer to me than I am to myself; my existence depends on the nearness and presence of God" (Field, 1909: 8);
- Eckhart considers sanctification as more important than love. He also goes on to say that: "If my eye is to discern colour, it must itself be free from all colour. The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love." (Field, 1909: 14).

2. Systematic Mysticism

This section reviews the approaches of Evagrius Ponticus, the anonymously authored *Theologia Germanica* (so named by Martin Luther, who was most impressed with the work), and the mystical treatises of John of the Cross.

As will be shown and may clearly be observed in their writing, the mysticism of these three exemplars are concerned with detailing the subject in a 'procedural,' methodical and systematic manner, typical of the objectivist-empiricist (type II) modality of mind. Their main approach, of course still reflects the narrative-interpretative (type III)

paradigm of mysticism in general. Yet, within *that* context, they stand out as theologians notable for their Aristotelian tendency of classifying and enumerating the various elements of mysticism.

2.1 Evagrius Ponticus (circa 345 – 399)

Evagrius Ponticus (although little known today) is one of the pioneers and systematizers of mystical theology, and was at the forefront of theology in the 4th century, interacting with the Cappadocian Fathers and other theologians of the time. (Harmless & Fitzgerald, 2001: 499).

Influenced by the work of Origen who lived about a century earlier, the aim of Evagrius, who eventually joined the Egyptian monks, was to bring order to the various ascetic and reflective practices of these desert monks by organizing it (in typical objectivist-empiricist manner), into a systematic theology of the contemplative life of prayer. As Harmless recounts: "With his Greek literary and philosophical training, Evagrius was able to translate and transform Coptic spirituality for the Greek-speaking world, systematizing its insights into gem-like brilliance." (Harmless & Fitzgerald, 2001: 501).

Evagrius identified eight types of evil thoughts (from which, later in the history of Christianity, the 'Seven Deadly Sins' were derived) that the desert monk had to overcome on his mystical journey to God. These take a prominent place in his various writings and analyses, such as in the *Praktikos* and the *Gnostikos*. (McGinn, 2006: 56). It is noteworthy that the New Testament already contains a set of basic sins or evil conduct, of which 'pride' shows up in Evagrius' system. It appears in Solomon's Proverbs 6:16 – 19, as follows:

Proverbs: 6:16: These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:

Proverbs: 6:17: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,

Proverbs: 6:18: A heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief,

Proverbs: 6:19: A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.

Incidentally, Harmless mentions that Evagrius was especially fond of the 'wisdom' books, so that it is therefore: "...no accident that Evagrius singled out the Book of Proverbs..." (Harmless & Fitzgerald, 2001: 504).

Evagrius' system consists of a number of stages, as indicated in Figure 3 below.

For purposes of briefly showcasing Evagrius' methodical and systematic (type II) approach, his *Skemmata* ('Reflections'), consisting of sixty two 'chapters' is chosen. It is a work of short proverbs and aphorism that deals with: "...the interplay among the eight deadly 'thoughts' (*logismoi*); the distinction between the 'life of ascetic practice' (*praktike*) and the 'life of mystical knowledge' (*gnostike*); [and] the practice of pure prayer." (Harmless & Fitzgerald, 2001: 502).

The proverbs of the *Skemmata* are presented by way of: 'enumerative lists,' such as: 'There are four ways by which the mind grasps representations: the first way is through the eyes; the second, through the ear; the third, through memory; and the fourth, through temperament' (*Skemmata* 17); 'systematic classifications' such as: 'Of the (various types) thoughts, certain ones lead, others follow. Those of the concupiscible lead, those of the irascible follow' (*Skemmata* 41), and many definition-like statements, such as: 'Prayer (*proseuche*) is the state of mind that comes to be from the single-light of the Holy Trinity.' (*Skemmata* 27) (Harmless & Fitzgerald, 2001: 505).

Evagrius' point of view is that: "to see one's highest, truest self - the mind - one must have arrived at a fairly advanced state, that of a tranquil passionlessness; and to see that highest, truest self, one must also enter into a sort of psychic *ascesis*, clearing the mind of mental images." (Harmless & Fitzgerald, 2001: 517).

Figure 4 and Figure 5 present core concepts of Evagrius' mystical theology and a short selection of some of the contents of the *Skemmata*, respectively.

Figure 3: Evagrius' system of mystical theology (McGinn, 2006: 55 – 56)

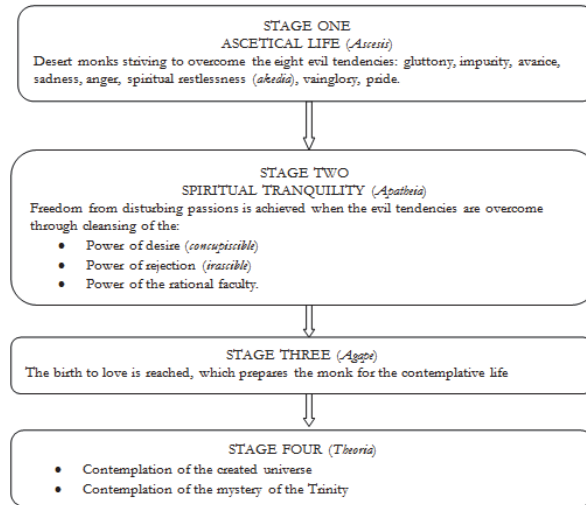


Figure 4: Core concepts of the theology of Evagrius (McGinn, 2006: 513 - 517)

Mind (<i>nous</i>)	Intuitive; the most God-like faculty; 'The mind is the temple of the Holy Trinity.' (Sk. 34)
State (<i>katastasis</i>)	Prayer is not an activity but a state of mind (Sk. 26, 27)
Representations (<i>noemata</i>)	One must deprive oneself of all (mostly sense) representations in order to achieve a state of prayer (Sk. 17)
Passionlessness (<i>apatheia</i>)	Prayer requires 'a quiet state of the rational soul.' (Sk. 3)

Figure 5: Some examples from Evagrius' *Skemmata* (McGinn, 2006: 521 - 525)

No. 2: Let him deprive himself of all representations, and then he will see the mind appear similar to sapphire or to the color of the sky. But to do that without being passionless is impossible, for one must have the assistance of God who breathes into him the kindred light.
No. 17: There are four ways by which the mind grasps representations: the first way is through the eyes; the second, through the ear; the third, through memory; and the fourth, through temperament. Through the eyes it grasps only representations that imprint a form. Through the ear it grasps representations that either imprint a form or do not imprint one, because a word (can) signify both sensory objects and contemplative objects. Memory and temperament follow the ear but each one either imprints a form on the intellect or does not do so, in imitation of the ear.
No. 62: Of the representations, five are from the senses; ten are from memory. Of those (ten from memory), five are pure if one acts well, five are impure if one behaves badly. (Of the various representations), there are five from angels – spiritual ones, and there are five from demons...

2.2 Theologia Germanica (circa 1350)

The *Theologia Germanica* is attributed to an anonymous theologian who lived in the second half of the fourteenth century: "...a wise, judicious, truthful, just man, God's friend...a priest and warden in the house of the Teutonic Order in Frankfurt." (McGinn, 2006: 421). It is a work which is: "...fundamentally practical, even experiential, in its teaching." (McGinn, 2006: 421).

The content of the book clearly reflects the objectivist-empiricist (type II) orientation and is briefly sampled with reference to a number of its chapters, below (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Examples from *Theologia Germanica* (Winkworth, 1893)

1. Of what sin is, and how we must not take unto ourselves any good thing, seeing that it belong unto the true Good alone. (Ch. II).
2. Of the eyes of the spirit wherewith man look into eternity and into time, and how the one is hindered of the other in its working. (Ch. VII).
3. How the soul of man, while it is yet in the body, may obtain a foretaste of eternal blessedness. (Ch. VIII).
4. How a righteous man in this present time is brought into hell, and there cannot be comforted, and how he is taken out of hell and carried into heaven, and there cannot be troubled. (Ch. XI).
5. Of three stages by which a man is led upwards till he attains true perfection (Ch. XIV)
6. How that the life of Christ is the noblest and best life that ever hath been or can be, and how a careless life of false freedom is the worst life that can be. (Ch. XVIII).
7. How, after a union with the divine will, the inward man stands immoveable, while the outward man is moved hither and thither. (Ch. XXVIII).
8. How God will have order, custom, measure, and the like in the creature, seeing that he cannot have them without the creature, and of four sorts of men who are concerned with this order, law, and custom. (Ch. XXXIX).
9. How that he is to be called, and is truly, a partaker of the divine nature, who is illuminated with the divine light, and inflamed with eternal love, and how light and knowledge are worth nothing without love. (Ch. XLI).
10. Whether we can know God and not love him, and how there are two kinds of light and love - a true and a false. (Ch. XLII).

2.2.1 What sin is

Referring to Scripture the author states that: "...Sin is nought else, but that the creature turneth away from the unchangeable Good and betaketh itself to the changeable; that is to say, that it turneth away from the Perfect to "that which is in part" and imperfect, and most often to itself." (Winkworth, 1893: 23).

2.2.2 The eyes of the spirit

This chapter distinguishes between 'two eyes,' the one behold the eternal (the 'divine Essence' and the 'Eternal Perfection'), and the other with the perception of all creaturely things. The key idea is that one cannot serve two masters. These two eyes: "...of the soul of man cannot both perform their work at once; but if the soul shall see with the right eye into eternity, then the left eye must close itself and refrain from working, and be as though it were dead." (Winkworth, 1893: 29).

2.2.3 A foretaste of eternal blessedness

Relying on the authority of the Pseudo-Dionysus, the author states that: "...as soon as a man turneth himself in spirit, and with his whole heart and mind entereth into the mind of God which is above time, all that ever he hath lost is restored in a moment. And if a man were to do thus a thousand times in a day, each time a fresh and real union would take place; and in this sweet and divine work standeth the truest and fullest union that may be in this present time." (Winkworth, 1893: 30).

2.2.4 A righteous man

The chapter describes how a righteous man at first descends into hell and is then removed from there to heaven: "...Now God hath not forsaken a man in this hell, but He is laying His hand upon him, that the man may not desire nor regard anything but the Eternal Good only... And then, when the man neither careth for, nor seeketh, nor desireth, anything but the Eternal Good alone, and seeketh not himself, nor his own things, but the honour of God only, he is made a partaker of all manner of joy, bliss, peace, rest and consolation, and so the man is henceforth in the Kingdom of Heaven." (Winkworth, 1893: 34).

2.2.5 The three stages

The author describes the familiar phases or stages (with sub-divisions) of the mystic way, namely: purification, enlightening and union with God: "The *purification* concerneth those who are beginning or repenting, and is brought to pass in a threefold wise; by contrition and sorrow for sin, by full confession, by hearty amendment. The *enlightening*

belongeth to such as are growing, and also taketh place in three ways: to wit, by the eschewal of sin, by the practice of virtue and good works, and by the willing endurance of all manner of temptation and trials. The *union* belongeth to such as are perfect, and also is brought to pass in three ways: to wit, by pureness and singleness of heart, by love, and by the contemplation of God, the Creator of all things." (Winkworth, 1893: 38).

2.2.6 *The noble life*

The author differentiates between the noble life (of Christ) and the human life of 'false freedom.'

"A life of carelessness and freedom is to nature and the Self and the Me, the sweetest and pleasantest life, but it is not the best; and in some men may become the worst. But though Christ's life be the most bitter of all, yet it is to be preferred above all." (Winkworth, 1893: 44).

2.2.7 *Order, custom and measure*

The chapter opens with the statement that: "It is said, and truly, God is above and without custom, measure, and order, and yet giveth to all things their custom, order, measure, fitness, and the like." (Winkworth, 1893: 70). In this regard four types of men who are concerned with order, law and measure, are distinguished. They are those who (Winkworth, 1893: 70 - 75):

- "...keep them neither for God's sake, nor to serve their own ends, but from constraint...;
- '...obey for the sake of reward...;
- '...are wicked, false-hearted men...;
- '...are enlightened with the True Light, who do not practise these things for reward, for they neither look nor desire to get anything thereby, but all that they do is from love alone."

2.2.8 *Partaking of the divine nature*

This chapter explains the concept and also the difference between knowledge and love in partaking of the divine nature. The 'partaker' is: "...he who is imbued with or illuminated by the Eternal or divine Light, and inflamed or consumed with Eternal or divine love, he is a Godlike man and a partaker of the divine nature..." (Winkworth, 1893: 76). This striving towards the 'True Light' requires that love be set above knowledge: "...It is indeed true that Love must be guided and taught of Knowledge, but if Knowledge be not followed by love, it will avail nothing." (Winkworth, 1893: 76).

2.2.9 *True and false love*

The distinction may succinctly be stated as follows: "...true Love is taught and guided by the true Light and Reason, and this true, eternal and divine Light teacheth Love to love nothing but the One true and Perfect Good, and that simply for its own sake, and not for the sake of a reward, or in the hope of obtaining anything..." (Winkworth, 1893: 79).

2.3 *John of the Cross (circa 1542 – 1591)*

John of the Cross, a Spanish priest of the Carmelite order is considered to be one of the most outstanding Christian mystical theologians: "...a great systematician of mystical theology." (McGinn, 2006: 72). He was also an ecstatic poet. Many of his poems, which formed the basis of his systematic descriptions and analyses of the mystical life, were composed during periods of incarceration.

In a number of works, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *Dark Night of the Soul*, the *Spiritual Canticle*, and the *Living Flame of Life*, he deals extensively with basic stages in the mystical journey, namely: purgation, illumination and union. (McGinn, 2006: 73).

John's *modus operandi* is to present the various stanzas of his poem which he then analyses in detailed steps. He describes his method as follows: "...it will be fitting to set down each stanza separately before expounding it, and likewise the lines of each stanza, according as the matter and the exposition require." (John of the Cross, 1962: 64).

By way of example, various chapters in the first three works mentioned above, show a methodical treatment of the mystical process in the following manner:

- "Wherein is described the nature of dark night and how necessary it is to pass through it to Divine union; and

in particular this book describes the dark night of sense, and desire, and the evils which these work in the soul." (John of the Cross, 1962: 70);

- "Sets down the first stanza. Describes two different nights through which spiritual persons pass, according to the two parts of man, the lower and the higher. Expounds the stanza which follows." (John of the Cross, 1962: 71);
- "Wherein is treated the proximate means of ascending to union with God, which is faith, and wherein therefore is described the second part of this night, which, as we said, belongs to the spirit, and is contained in the second stanza, which is as follows" (John of the Cross, 1962: 116);
- "Wherein is described how it is the three theological virtues that perfect the three faculties of the soul, and how the said virtues produce emptiness and darkness within them." (John of the Cross, 1962: 133);
- "Wherein distinction is made between all apprehensions and types of knowledge which can be comprehended by the understanding." (John of the Cross, 1962: 147);
- A chapter dealing with two types of revelation, that of 'intellectual knowledge' and that of 'the manifestation of secrets.' (John of the Cross, 1962: 222).

The *Dark Night of the Soul* deals with purgation of the senses, but especially also with the purgation of the spirit. Some of the 'imperfections of beginners,' are shown in Figure 7 below, whilst Figure 8 outlines John's 'ladder of mystic love.'

Figure 7: 'Spiritual imperfections' or the sins of beginners embarking on the mystic way (John of the Cross, 1962: 223)

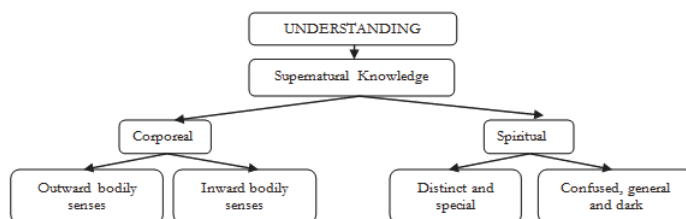
- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which beginners have with respect to the habit of <i>pride</i>. 2. Which some souls are apt to have, with respect to the second capital sin, which is <i>avarice</i>, in the spiritual sense. 3. Which these beginners are apt to have with respect to the third sin, which is <i>luxury</i>. 4. Into which beginners fall with respect to the sin of <i>wrath</i>. 5. With respect to spiritual <i>gluttony</i>. 6. With respect to spiritual <i>envy</i> and <i>sloth</i>. |
|--|

Figure 8: The mystic ladder of divine love (John of the Cross, 1959: 91 – 94)

The <i>first</i> step of love causes the soul to languish, and this to its advantage.
The <i>second</i> step causes the soul to seek God without ceasing.
The <i>third</i> step of the ladder of love is that which causes the soul to work and gives it fervour so that it fails not.
The <i>fourth</i> step of this ladder of love is that whereby there is caused in the soul an habitual suffering because of the Beloved, yet without weariness.
The <i>fifth</i> step of this ladder of love makes the soul to desire and long for God impatiently.
The <i>sixth</i> step the soul runs swiftly to God and touches Him again and again; and it runs without fainting by reason of its hope.
The <i>seventh</i> step of this ladder makes the soul to become vehement in its boldness.
The <i>eighth</i> step of love causes the soul to seize Him and hold Him fast without letting Him go.
The <i>ninth</i> step of love makes the soul to burn with sweetness. This step is that of the perfect, who now burn sweetly in God.
The <i>tenth</i> and last step of this secret ladder of love causes the soul to become wholly assimilated to God.

Figure 9 provides a partial breakdown of John's hierarchical distinctions of knowledge and understanding in the mystic's ascent of 'Mount Carmel.'

Figure 9: Knowledge and understanding in the purgative ascent of 'Mount Carmel' (John of the Cross, 1962: 147 – 222)



Whereas the first two works (*Ascent and Dark Night*) dealt with mystical ascent and purgation, the main purpose of the *Spiritual Canticle* (John of the Cross, 1909) is: "to picture under the Biblical simile of Espousals and Matrimony the blessedness of a soul that has arrived at union with God." (John of the Cross, 1909: 2).

Here John speaks, *inter alia*, of the 'tranquil night' which he narrates as follows: "In this spiritual sleep in the bosom of the Beloved the soul is in possession and fruition of all the calm, repose, and quiet of a peaceful night, and receives at the same time in God a certain dim, unfathomable divine intelligence." (John of the Cross, 1909: 82).

He compares this kind of contemplation of the spirit to the lonely sparrow, an analogical comparison of which is provided in Figure 10 below.

Figure 10: Simile of the sparrow and the tranquil spirit (John of the Cross, 1909: 82 – 83)

1. It frequents in general high places; and the spirit, in this state, rises to the highest contemplation.
2. It is ever turning its face in the direction of the wind, and the spirit turns its affections thither whence comes the spirit of love, which is God.
3. It is in general solitary, abstaining from the companionship of others, and flying away when any approach it: so the spirit, in contemplation, is far away from all worldly thoughts.
4. It sings most sweetly, and so also does the spirit at this time sing to God.
5. It is of no definite color; so also is the perfect spirit.

3. Summary: Speculative and Systematic Mysticism

Section 1 discussed the more abstract, metaphysical (type I) forms Christian mysticism as reflected in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa (regarded as the first speculative mystical theologian of Christianity); the Pseudo-Dionysius, undoubtedly the exemplar of mystical superlatives; and the subtle thought of Meister Eckhart, a leading figure in medieval German mysticism. Gregory of Nyssa portrays God as a transcendent, unknowable essence or 'Being.' The Pseudo-Dionysius constantly moves in a Neo-Platonic world of the 'Super-Good' Godhead, whilst Meister Eckhart is the Neo-Platonist poet of the immutable, transcendent and infinite God.

Section 2 presented the ideas and approaches to mysticism of three exemplars of a systematic, enumerative, approach to the mystic life and of the various barriers that need to be overcome on the journey to attain union with God. The section reviewed the ideas of Evagrius Ponticus, the anonymously authored *Theologia Germanica* and the mystical treatises of John of the Cross. It was shown that their writings approach the mystic life in a methodical, categorizing, manner, typical of the objectivist-empiricist (type II) mind. They are notable for their Aristotelian tendency of classifying various elements of mysticism, often in a layered or hierarchical fashion.

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