

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The curious case of the marginalized mystics

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Abstract

Given that the more apophatic strand of mysticism resonates more with the way contemporary philosophers are apt to think about mystical experience, the fact that apophatic mysticism was a bit of a fringe enterprise in the Middle Ages calls for explanation. The explanations that are suggested within the pages of Christina Van Dyke's *A Hidden Wisdom* are not typically historical-contextual explanations, but theological ones. This article examines apophatic mysticism in terms of three of the standard theological *loci*: creation, Incarnation, and Trinity. In each case we will find that some of the characteristic claims of the apophatic mystics are so much at odds with the mainstream of Christian theology that the mystery is not so much their being marginalized but rather their being largely tolerated.

Christina Van Dyke explains from the outset that she aims for *A Hidden Wisdom* to serve both as corrective and as complement to existing scholarship:

What follows is *corrective* in that it challenges existing narratives about medieval philosophy by debunking the assumption that medieval philosophy in the 'Latin West' happened only in university settings and (thus) that women didn't do philosophy in the Middle Ages; it is *complementary* in adding to these existing narratives the wide range of philosophical insights contained in the Christian contemplative tradition from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries.¹

It is complementary also in bringing philosophical writing on mysticism into conversation with our colleagues in other disciplines. As Van Dyke notes, 'there is not a single philosopher' among the twenty-two scholars, representing thirteen disciplines, who contributed to *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*. 'The reason for this is simple', she says: 'the standard conception of mystical experience that philosophers are working with corresponds so poorly to what everyone else is talking about that there is almost no point in trying to engage in a common conversation' (20–21).

Van Dyke succeeds beautifully in both aims: henceforth, philosophers will be without excuse if they ignore the philosophical contributions of writers working outside the universities and writing in vernacular languages, and we have been shown 'what philosophy would lose out on as a result' (21) of continuing to carry on our internal conversation about these matters in ways that isolate us from the insights of other disciplines.

In this article I want to reflect on a third aim, not stated so explicitly as the first two but, I think, clearly part of Van Dyke's intention in writing this book in the way she has. That is her hope and expectation that the work will also be *generative*. Van Dyke writes as one saying a first word rather than a last word; she seeks to open up possibilities for conversation – between philosophers and contemplatives, and between philosophers and their colleagues in other disciplines – rather than offering a magisterial treatment that purports to leave nothing more to be said.

One recurring theme that suggests directions for further research and commentary is Van Dyke's point that apophatic mysticism was never the dominant strand in contemplative writing. I use the expression 'apophatic mysticism' broadly (as Van Dyke also does) not merely to encompass what we usually think of as apophatic theology – according to which God is utterly beyond our powers of comprehension and expression – but views of the body, the self, and our ultimate end that were associated with such theology. I mean, for example, the idea that the goal of the contemplative is annihilation of the self, a disappearance of the finite soul into the unsayable God who is beyond Being. Marguerite Porete, for example, writes in her *Mirror of Simple Souls* that the ultimate aim of the soul is

radical self-annihilation. In the final stage, the Loving Soul loses herself in God to the point where 'He is, and she is not', for 'He is sufficient of Himself', while she is 'nothing in such a One' . . . 'The Soul is stripped of all things because she is without existence, where she was before she was created'. (185–186)

Meister Eckhart counsels that '[a]fter detachment is complete, there is still one work that remains proper and his own, and that is annihilation of self in the 'hidden darkness of the eternal divinity', where 'God remains within himself, unknown' (186–187). This kind of apophatic mysticism is consonant with the ways in which mysticism is discussed within contemporary philosophy, in terms of unitive experiences that are either sub- or supra-sensory.² It is not surprising, then, that contemporary philosophers have gravitated to the apophatic strand of medieval mysticism (when they have paid attention to contemplatives at all). Affective mysticism, which values embodied (including sensory) experience, the use of imagination, and a sense of selfhood and individuality that extends even into the state of ultimate union with God, doesn't fit the contemporary definition.

So much the worse for the contemporary definition, of course, as Van Dyke both argues and illustrates. In contemporary terms, the marginalized mystics of my title would be the affective mystics; but in the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, it was the apophatic mystics who were comparatively on the fringe. If we come at the historical facts from the contemporary perspective, the marginalization of the apophatic mystics is surely something of a mystery.

I found this mystery one of the most generative aspects of the book. Given that the more apophatic strand of mysticism resonates more with the way contemporary philosophers are apt to think about mystical experience, and perhaps also with half-garbled impressions of the sorts of things mystics get up to, the fact that apophatic mysticism was a bit of a fringe enterprise calls for explanation. The explanations that are suggested within the pages of *A Hidden Wisdom* – even when that particular topic is not in view – are not typically historical-contextual explanations, but theological ones.

This is not to say that historical-contextual explanations are not available as well (we shall invoke such an explanation below), just that the material Van Dyke provides seems rather to invite theological reflection on the inadequacies of apophatic mysticism. I propose to examine apophatic mysticism in terms of three of the standard theological *loci*: creation, Incarnation, and Trinity. In each case we will find that some of the characteristic

claims of the apophatic mystics are so much at odds with the mainstream of Christian theology that the mystery is not so much their being marginalized but rather their being largely tolerated and left in peace to continue writing their fringe-y takes on the spiritual life.³

Let's begin with the doctrine of creation. According to standard Christian teaching, all things other than God came into being through an act of divine will, and they remain in existence because God conserves them moment by moment. The variety and differentiation of creatures is, therefore, in accordance with the divine intention, a matter of delight to God himself ('And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good') and of joy and wonder for human beings who contemplate it. All things are good insofar as they have being, according to one very standard medieval doctrine, although of course some things are better and nobler than others.

Apophatic mystics who teach that our ultimate end is the annihilation of the self – a topic I will discuss further in connection with both Christological and Trinitarian doctrine – often also teach the annihilation of the created world. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* might well mean only that we are not to *think about* created things, on our way to not thinking even about ourselves: 'When you succeed in forgetting all creatures and their works and even your own life and all you've done, you will be left alone with God to experience a stark awareness of your own existence. But even this must go' (58). Marguerite Porete, however, is quite clear that the ultimate end is the sheer extinction of all creatures, the mystic herself included:

And so nothing is, except He who is, who sees Himself in such being by His Divine Majesty through the transformation of love by the goodness poured out and placed in her. And thus also He sees Himself of Himself in such a creature, without appropriating anything from the creature. All is properly His own, and His own proper self. (188)

As Van Dyke comments immediately after this passage from Porete, 'Phrased this baldly, it's easy to see why this version of apophatic mysticism was often seen as falling outside Christian orthodoxy; for the sort of union it advocates with the divine blurs the Creator/created distinction to the point of erasure' (188). I would add that it is not merely erasing the distinction between Creator and creature: it is denying the dignity, the goodness, even the *point* of creation. I am reminded of Bishop Berkeley: to agree with the apophatic mystics on this score 'must needs be a very precarious opinion; since it is to suppose, without any reason at all, that God has created innumerable beings that are entirely useless, and serve to no manner of purpose' (Berkeley (1982), 30). I certainly do not mean to suggest that only what is permanent is of value: for 'whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away' (1 Cor. 13:8, AV). But the suggestion that the curtain will ultimately be drawn over the whole project of creation is at least in tension with the Christian idea that the whole cosmos is being renewed, that when the former things have passed away, there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

A second theological *locus* of importance here is the Incarnation. The doctrine that God the Son became, and remains, incarnate – that he fully took on our human nature while retaining his divine nature – speaks eloquently of the goodness not only of bodies (as the doctrine of creation also does) but of embodiment. It is hard to see how the apophatic suspicion of embodied experience squares with this central tenet of the Christian faith. 'Figures like Porete, Eckhart, and Walter Hilton', Van Dyke writes, 'acknowledge that unusual embodied states such as visions and auditions occur regularly in the contemplative life, but they portray them as experiences to be ignored or suspicious of, and as part

of a stage that needs to be moved past' (193–194). I try to imagine the temerity of such advice being tendered to the risen and ascended Incarnate Word. How did the distaste for embodied experience survive contact with the doctrine of the Incarnation?

Compare the most severe of the apophatic mystics to contemplatives who take Christ's enduring physicality as 'prefiguring our own experience of heaven' (190). Here I am tempted simply to quote the whole of section 6.3, 'Embodied Immortal Experience', in which Mechthild of Magdeburg, Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, and Margaret Ebner take turns meditating on Christ's glorified humanity, which of course includes a body. Mechthild says:

When I reflect that divine nature now includes bone and flesh, body and soul, then I become elated in great joy, far beyond what I am worth . . . The soul with its flesh is mistress of the house in heaven, sits next to the eternal Master of the house, and is most like him. (190–191)

We read elsewhere that in Julian of Norwich the themes of creation and Incarnation are closely linked, in that she 'portrays the Incarnation as the key' not only to the redemption of fallen humanity but also to the 'restoration of creation as a whole' (59).

Now my purpose here is not to argue that the affective mystics were right and the apophatic mystics wrong, on this or any other topic – though I suspect that my personal sympathies have become all too clear anyway – but to explore why the apophatic mystics, though perhaps far more congenial to contemporary philosophical sensibilities, were comparatively marginal in their day. Here especially it seems clear that both doctrine and medieval piety had the effect of making apophatic mysticism a somewhat exotic taste. It seems difficult to maintain a focus on God's 'enfleshment' – let alone the resurrection of the body – while retaining a kind of chronic Platonic sniffiness about bodies and embodiment.⁴ And the piety of the day emphasized highly affective and imaginative meditations in which meditators placed themselves on the scene of events in the life of Christ and of the saints. The darkness of self-annihilation, the withdrawal of all imagery and all embodied experience, offers no handle for such meditation. Small wonder, then, that the spirituality of the day found much more appeal in the vivid picture of the glorified humanity of Christ, as in this passage from Catherine of Siena:

You will all be made like him in joy and gladness; eye for eye, hand for hand, your whole bodies will be made like the body of the Word my Son. You will live in him as you live in me, for he is one with me. But your bodily eyes, as I have told you, will delight in the glorified humanity of the Word. (191)

Note that she specifies the *bodily* eyes, in stark contrast to Meister Eckhart, who 'tartly condemn[ed] those who want to see God with the same eyes with which they see a cow' (189).⁵

A third theological *locus* that I suggest rather more tentatively is the doctrine of the Trinity. My suspicion, which might prove unfounded on closer examination, is that Trinitarian doctrine provides some of the more kataphatic mystics with a model for the "personal distinction within unity" that fulfills rather than annihilates the self (184) in the attainment of our final end. In the Trinity we find union without obliteration. The Father and the Son are equally God, and one and the same God, and yet the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father. (And so forth.) Now no account of the internal life of the Godhead is going to apply straightforwardly to the union of the human being, body and soul, to the one God; but the intelligibility or coherence of 'personal distinction

within unity' that is proclaimed in Trinitarian doctrine is at least available to do some of the work that the affective mystics want done in their description of our ultimate end.

Julian of Norwich is a particularly suggestive example. Of all the contemplatives discussed in *A Hidden Wisdom*, it is Julian who most consistently employs Trinitarian arguments. Her skilful handling of Trinitarian theology is in evidence in more than one place in the book, and indeed throughout her Long Text, but consider in particular this passage, which even manages to get the *Filioque* into the picture: 'Truth sees God. Wisdom contemplates God. When these two things come together, a third gift arises: the wondrous delight in God, which is love' (125). What Julian sees very clearly – not uniquely, because she is following Augustine here, much as Catherine and Hadewijch do, but with unrivalled clarity and precision – is that we understand from the inner life of the Trinity what it means for us to be in the image of God: we are a trinity of powers in unity of soul. That same unity-in-diversity is evident in the union of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ. I feel sure (though I cannot here establish definitively) that it also enables Julian to understand a final union between the human being and the Triune God in which the human being is not annihilated or obliterated, but raised into a fullness of imaging God in which we retain, gloriously, our own individual identities.

Notes

1. Van Dyke (2022), 1 (emphasis in original). Subsequent citations to this book are given in parentheses in the body of the text.
2. See Van Dyke's illuminating discussion of this matter (*ibid.*, section 1.1, pp. 4–11).
3. The execution of Marguerite Porete in 1310 on charges of heresy is, of course, a noteworthy exception.
4. On this residual Platonism about bodies, see in particular *ibid.*, 182–183 and 188–189. Concerning the resurrection of the body in particular, Van Dyke writes, 'Not surprisingly, given the phenomenological loss of self to which [the apophatic] tradition aspires, the prospect of the bodily resurrection or continued physical existence in the afterlife is not a subject of much discussion' (189–190).
5. Consider Job 19:25–27 (I have translated from the Vulgate): 'For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last day I will rise from the earth; and I shall be clothed again with my skin, and in my flesh shall I see God, whom I myself shall see, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.'

References

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- Van Dyke C (2022) *A Hidden Wisdom: Medieval Contemplatives on Self-Knowledge, Reason, Love, Persons, and Immortality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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