

THE DARKNESS OF GOD

Negativity in Christian Mysticism

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Introduction

This book is an essay in the philosophical history of some theological metaphors. The metaphors – of ‘interiority’, of ‘ascent’, of ‘light and darkness’ and of ‘oneness with God’ – appear to have occupied a central role in the description of the Christian ways of spirituality for as long as Christians have attempted to give one. And they still do. There are many other metaphors – in particular, there are many metaphors of Christian love – whose role is equally crucial, but I have chosen to study the particular metaphors I have mentioned, and not others, for a number of reasons, among which the following are perhaps the most important.

First, because the metaphors of inwardness, ascent and light–darkness form a closely related cluster; secondly, because taken together they have an impact on the description of the Christian way of life which is distinctively ‘negative’ or ‘apophatic’, for which reason I have called them ‘metaphors of negativity’; thirdly, because they are metaphors characteristic of a Neoplatonic style of Christian theology, so that the study of them opens up lines of enquiry into an important aspect of the influence of Neoplatonism on Christian spirituality; fourthly, because they are metaphors which retain a currency still, and so it seemed that the study of them could also shed some light on what they do for us, by way of an account of the traditions from which we inherited them; and finally, this last reason seemed important to me because I suspected when I embarked on this study that the purposes which these metaphors serve for Christians today are very different from the purposes which they served within the ancient and mediaeval traditions of Christianity in the West, and that therefore it might be useful to know what those differences are. The evidence I have considered in the course of writing this book has, on the whole, confirmed this suspicion.

It takes much exposition and some argument to clarify what this suspicion amounts to, which is why it is not until the last chapter that I attempt any formal statement of it. Any explanation of my hypothesis ahead of that exposition and argument must therefore be tentative and heuristic. What I can say is that I began by wondering whether or not there was any such thing as 'mystical experience'. And I wondered about this question because on the one hand there seemed to be a common, informal view around that the 'mystical' had something to do with the having of very uncommon, privileged 'experiences'; and, on the other, because when I read any of the Christian writers who were said to be mystics I found that many of them – like Eckhart or the Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* – made no mention at all of any such experiences and most of the rest who, like John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila, did make mention of 'experiences', attached little or no importance to them and certainly did not think the having of them to be definitive of 'the mystical'.

Then almost immediately I found myself wondering whether that was a very good question at all. For it seemed very unclear what the question was being asked about. What is 'mysticism'? What is 'experience'? The latter question seemed to me to be too difficult; the former, to be a blind alley, for I do not know of any discussions which shed less light on the subject of 'mysticism' than those many which attempt *definitional* answers to the question 'what is mysticism?' For it seems that answers generally fall into two categories: those which are merely *stipulative* and whose relation with actual mysticisms is at best contingent; and those which are merely *descriptive* of the varieties of actual mysticisms, the question of which varieties are included in the canon being left to convention or intuition. Neither way of answering the question seems very satisfactory in principle, nor do they shed much light on the subject in practice.

Hence, I set the problem as stated in that very a priori form on one side, though it seemed to me that there was *some* problem about 'experience' which did need clarification. And so I embarked upon the study of a group of 'mystical' writers within the late Patristic and mediaeval traditions of Latin Christianity: a group characterised by their explicit reception of the influence of Neoplatonism and by their systematic exploitation of these metaphors. My hope was to clarify what that problem was. Very

quickly I began to observe a puzzling fact which did seem to have some bearing on the question of 'mystical experience' not in its limited form of 'special' or 'ecstatic' experiences, but in the most general form of the role of religious experience as such within the understanding of 'the mystical'.

I began by supposing that it would be fruitful to look at some elements of the metaphorical lingua franca of Western Christian writing about 'spirituality' and 'mysticism' – or what Bonaventure rather more engagingly called 'the journey of the soul into God'. It seemed that there was common agreement among these 'Neoplatonists', from Augustine to John of the Cross, in the description of that *itinerarium mentis* as an *itinerarium intus*, a journey of 'inwardness'; it was commonly agreed, moreover, that the journey of 'inwardness' could also be described as an 'ascent', whether of a ladder or of a mountain. And it was commonly agreed that as the soul ascended to God it would approach a source of light which, being too bright for its powers of reception, would cause in it profound darkness.

Now all these metaphors seem, as I have said, still to be in current usage when Christians, following ancient traditions, seek to describe the ways of prayer, spirituality and mysticism. I do not think we would know how to describe what it is that Christians are to do, or how they are to do it, without some appeal to the language of 'inwardness' and that of 'ascent', for those metaphors are built in to our psychological and epistemological language so intimately that we have, I suspect, quite literally *embodied* them. Christians, in the West, quite spontaneously close their eyes when they want to pray with concentration, in tribute, perhaps, to the need for inwardness. And though verticality is no longer, as it was once in the Middle Ages, the spontaneous communal architecture of the divine, it remains, I think, the natural metaphor of the individual, as against the communal, relationship with God: as when today some complain of excessively social forms of Christianity that they neglect the 'vertical' for the sake of the 'horizontal'.

But from my study of the mediaeval mystical tradition, I began to see that not only would it be dangerous to assume that the similarities of language entailed a similarity of purpose, but that it would be actually wrong to suppose this. For the purposes being served by this cluster of metaphors in the mediaeval traditions began to seem very different from those it is serving today and, in

one important respect, it looked as if it is serving an opposed purpose. Moreover, that difference of purpose seemed to have to do with – and at the same time seemed to clarify – the problem about the role of ‘experience’ within ‘the mystical’.

Put very bluntly, the difference seemed to be this: that whereas our employment of the metaphors of ‘inwardness’ and ‘ascent’ appears to be tied in with the achievement and the cultivation of a certain kind of experience – such as those recommended within the practice of what is called, nowadays, ‘centring’ or ‘contemplative’ prayer – the mediaeval employment of them was tied in with a ‘critique’ of such religious experiences and practices. Whereas we appear to have ‘psychologized’ the metaphors, the Neoplatonic mediaeval writer used the metaphors in an ‘apophatic’ spirit to play down the value of the ‘experiential’; and that, therefore, whereas it would come naturally to the contemporary, ‘psychologising’ mind to think of ‘the mystical’ in terms of its characterizing *experiences*, the mediaeval mind thought of the ‘mystical’, that is to say, the ‘hidden’ or ‘secret’, wisdom as being what the Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* called a ‘divinity’ which is ‘hidden’ precisely *from* experience. It is impossible, in advance of telling the long and complex story of mediaeval Neoplatonic mysticism, to state this opposition between the mediaeval and the modern employment of the common language otherwise than thus bluntly and crudely. But it is necessary to do so in advance, even if crudely, because, in the last resort, that is what the story as I tell it is about.

It is, after all, a story about the meaning of the word ‘mystical’; and it is therefore a story about what the practice of ‘mysticism’ consists in. I have drawn the conclusion from my study that in so far as the word ‘mysticism’ has a contemporary meaning; and that in so far as that contemporary meaning links ‘mysticism’ to the cultivation of certain kinds of experience – of ‘inwardness’, ‘ascent’ and ‘union’ – then the mediaeval ‘mystic’ offers an *anti-mysticism*. For though the mediaeval Christian neoplatonist used that same language of interiority, ascent and ‘oneness’, he or she did so precisely in order to deny that they were terms descriptive of ‘experiences’. And the central metaphor of this negativity, of this restraint of ‘experience’, was the apophatic metaphor of ‘light’ and ‘darkness’, of the ‘cloud of unknowing’.

My suspicion being thus far clarified, it was obviously important to discover what accounted for this very radical shift of purpose to

which that language had been submitted. And, again paraphrasing a complex answer, what is distinctive about the employment of these metaphors within the mediaeval traditions of 'mystical theology' is the Neoplatonic dialectical epistemology – its apophaticism – within which those metaphors are set and by which their employment is governed. What differentiates the mediaeval employment of those metaphors from ours is the fact that we have retained the metaphors, evacuated them of their dialectics and refilled them with the stuff of 'experience'. This modern development I call 'experientialism'. And for all I know it is a development to be welcomed. Some, no doubt, will say so, though I do not agree. But what matters from the point of view of the argument of this book is the quite different consideration that if we read the mediaeval Neoplatonic mystics – and increasingly they are being read – from within the perspectives of a contemporary 'experientialism' we will very grossly misread them, for we will find in them allies for a position which, in truth, they reject.

An ultimate purpose of this book is, therefore, to be an essay in the retrieval of the mediaeval tradition of apophatic, or 'negative' mysticism. The retrieval I have in mind is their rescue from a contemporary 'experientialist' misreading and therefore to make them more valuable to us, paradoxically not by making them easier to read but by making them more difficult. For as read adequately, they challenge much in contemporary thought and spirituality, in particular they challenge a certain positivism of religious experience. The mystics I discuss may seem to acquire, as a result, a rather more austere, spare, 'reduced' physiognomy than they appeared, formerly, to possess. But I am afraid I think it more important to dislike these authors, if we must, for what they are than to like them for what they are not.

That, more or less, was the programme I discovered for myself in the course of researching for this book. In the course of writing it, however, another important problem began to emerge which, like the first, brought into play the difficult matter of how to relate our contemporary conceptions with those of a long tract of a very different historical period. And that problem was the problem of 'the self'. I do not think that I became fully conscious of the scale of this problem until I began to write about the fourteenth-century masters, in particular about Meister Eckhart. But with Eckhart, with the *Cloud Author* and with John of the Cross, the problem

became inescapable of what significance their practical strictures of a 'self-denial' and a detachment had for what we think of, if there is any one thing that we think of, as being 'the self'.

For in these authors may be found what I have called an 'apophatic anthropology' as radical as their apophatic theology, the one intimately connected with the other. All three in *some* sense deny that I am 'a self'; or at least, they appear to say that whatever may be the proper description of the fullest union of the human self with God, there is no distinction which we are able to make *between* that 'self' and the God it is one with. Nor are they alone in this, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Genoa and Teresa of Avila being three others who say the same.

But in *what* sense do I, when 'one' with God, cease to be a 'self-other-than-God'? In some sense in which *we* think of 'selfhood'? Do they deny something which in our modern culture we think it important to assert – our identities as *individual* selves? Or is the mediaeval denial of 'the self' consistent with whatever it is that we wish to assert about the self? And what do *we* wish to assert about the self? For any given contemporary conception of the self, who are the 'we' who assert it? These questions made me uneasy. They seemed to create an immense and new agenda, altogether too vast in scope to be contained within the limits of the essay I had envisaged. And yet they were also inescapable questions, for they arose inevitably out of that original agenda; in fact, from Augustine to John of the Cross, the question of 'interiority' is the question of what 'I' am; for in this tradition 'I' am in the last resort what I am in my deepest 'interiority'. And if, in my deepest inwardness, I and God meet in a union beyond description and beyond experience, then an apophaticism of language about God and an apophaticism of language about the 'self' are obviously intimately connected. What is more, if that is the case then the same question of interpretation must be raised about the apophatic concepts of 'self' as about theological apophaticism: do we think about the 'self' so differently from our mediaeval forebears that perforce we misinterpret them in reading what they say about it against the background of our own preoccupations?

No one, least of all I, could regard the brief attempts I make to discuss these questions as being sufficient. It could be said that I attempt to bite off more than I can chew. That would be unfair. I attempt no such thing. Intentionally I only nibble. In particular,

the historical hypothesis outlined in the last chapter is meant to be no more than a sketch of some late mediaeval developments which anticipate the emergence, perhaps in the nineteenth century, perhaps earlier (I do not know when) of a distinct, esoteric essence of the 'mystical', a thing in itself; and the sketch is intended only to be sufficient to indicate the plausibility of a rash hypothesis, having a bearing on both parts of my argument about mediaeval Neoplatonic mysticism; that is to say, both on the question of 'experience' and on that of 'the self'.

The hypothesis is that there is too much discontinuity between what the mediaeval Neoplatonic apophaticist meant by the 'mystical' element in theology and life and what modern people have come to mean by 'mysticism', to permit of the common assumption that Western Christianity possesses a single 'mystical tradition' embracing them both. For sure there is sequence and historical causation, often direct 'influence'. And there is a common vocabulary and imagery. But mere sequence and even common causation does not entail common purpose; common language and imagery do not entail a shared significance. At its boldest, my hypothesis is that modern interpretation has invented 'mysticism' and that we persist in reading back the terms of that conception upon a stock of mediaeval authorities who knew of no such thing – or, when they knew of it, decisively rejected it.

The outline of this hypothesis is so lightly sketched that true as I think it is, it is evidently falsifiable as it stands. I do not identify when, where or how this conception of 'mysticism' emerges – though I am inclined towards McGinn's suggestion that it is a product of nineteenth-century scholarship. Nor do I offer any account of what this 'mysticism' is, except in so far as I detect its emergence within developments in late mediaeval theology. My case rests on three factors mainly: first, and indicatively, that perhaps from the late fourteenth century, the canon of those now called 'mystics' ceases to include theologians of repute and, *e converso*, from that time to our own the canon of theologians includes no mystics. This generalization is surprisingly exceptionless. Secondly, and more substantively, in the classical period of mediaeval theology, the *metaphors* of negativity are interpenetrated by a high Neoplatonic *dialectics* of negativity; that late mediaeval voluntarisms begin to lose their grip on this dialectics at about the same time, and that, in modern times, the grip is lost entirely. Thirdly,

and again at the same time, the problem of what I call 'experientialism' emerges. It is harder to doubt that these things happen than that they are linked, still less is it easily demonstrated that they are so linked as to put in question the continuity of 'the Western Christian mystical tradition'. For, of course, proof of connectedness is no more guaranteed by synchronicity than by sequence. But my claim is one of the plausibility of an hypothesis, not, as I say, of a certainty warranted by sufficient evidence.

Finally, it has been no purpose of mine to demonstrate, nor do I think it the inevitable consequence of what I do demonstrate, that we must despair of being able to read the mediaeval apophaticists without profitless misinterpretation. On the contrary, though I do believe that we have been misreading them equally within the recent traditions of comparative scholarship and within the rather closed, anti-intellectual world of Christian 'spiritualities', the concluding remarks of the last chapter hint at the possibility that certain quite contemporary developments in Western thought, associated with 'post-modernism', contain a revival of that awareness of the 'deconstructive' potential of human thought and language which so characterized classical mediaeval apophaticism. Those remarks contain the agenda of another book as much as the conclusion of this one. But it might be noted that if there are points of intellectual convergence in our times between mediaeval and contemporary apophaticisms, there is this at least in which those two cultures differ: that in the Middle Ages, apophaticism was no mere intellectual critique of discourse, but was in addition a practice which was expected to be embodied in a life. For us, the disarray of our cultural decentredness is often perceived as the bewildering consequence of a fact. Perhaps there is something to be learned from that Christian theological tradition which consciously *organized* a strategy of disarrangement as a way of life, as being that in which alone God is to be found.