Griffin Lesica
Prof. Maria Hatjigeorgiou
RELI 0700
12/24/24

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" - Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Introduction

I do not claim this paper to be objective, but that is the very nature and gift of writing with human hands. It would be both foolish for me to pretend a greater understanding of Christian mysticism than the mystics themselves or those scholars with whom I engage in this study. To put it simply, what I *know* is that which I can see, and what I can see depends on where I stand. However, what I *understand* involves a much deeper, much more involved process of cognition which I cannot explain, but am perpetually inspired to explore. As I see it, knowledge may be the product of learning, but understanding is the yet unreached destination of knowing. Knowledge is not an arrival, nor a point of stasis, but merely a level of familiarity with the surface of reality. It is understanding that comes when we begin to venture beyond that surface. In a way, this statement is central to the scholarly claim of this paper, that what we know about religious experience is deeply lacking, and any understanding of it remains a distant hope insofar as we pretend direct access into the mysterious depths of human beings.

By the very fact of our physical separation - that my feet and perception must always rest in a different place than yours - subjectivity lies at the heart of human experience. To think that I can understand one's experience from a distance is foolish. Any scholarship which deals with lived experience must acknowledge that it begins at the fringe of understanding, and from there - if it has any hope of producing compassionate or productive insight - it must work to move inwards. This work is hard, and even when done responsibly will likely never produce a

conclusive insight, for experience has always been eternally shrouded in networks of cognition and embodiment, interpretation and expression, and all those theoretical concepts and processes which may comprise our sense of reality. Yet somehow, the task at hand - that of exploring the experience of the Christian mystic - is yet more formidable, for how do we begin to understand a tradition whose essential note is located beyond any possible human conceptualization?

In the time I have spent exploring the mystical voices of Christianity, the principle of ineffability gripped me: that the state of pure unadulterated union with God, which some have described as the "essential note" of mysticism, defies "conceptualization and verbalization, in part or in whole" (Mcginn, "Foundations" xvi-xvii), for the Divine himself[1] is the ultimate ground of our being. Nonetheless, the mystics continue to write. It is here that lies the "ineradicable paradox" at the heart of not only mystical literature, but the mystical tradition in Christianity itself. Though the mystics assert the ineffability of their encounter with the Holy - the impossibility of giving a sufficient description of God, the "wordless ecstasy" of divine absorption and union - they still *try* to say *something* about him (Velasco 119-120).

As Andrew Louth writes in his essay *Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology,* this belief that "God is beyond anything we can affirm of him" can be found in the voice of several early Greek Father's of Christianity, whose writings suggest that the negative quality of the divine may be found in sacred scripture (Louth 138). In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-394) re-evaluates the story of Moses as described in the Old Testament, reflecting on the Theophany at the burning bush as the moment where Moses grasps the utterly unintelligible nature of God:

[1] I choose to refer to God with the pronouns he/him for the historical and interpretive consistency it provides to this paragraph. However, this is not to affirm God as a biological male, but as a provisional mode of referring to the Divine through familiar language. "God" is referred to by many terms in Christian/mystical texts - the Source, the Divine, the Holy, the Ultimate, the Ground of being - and as such this paper includes several of these terms. What is key is while they all commonly refer to the Christian God, all terms are used provisionally.

"What the great Moses learned in the theophany is simply this, that neither those things grasped by sense, nor those that the mind can understand, have real existence. The only reality that truly exists is the one that is above all of them, the cause of all from which everything depends" (Mcginn, "Essentials" 15). In the collected letters of Gregory's older brother, Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330-379), Basil distinguishes that which we can know of God and the energies of Him which remain unknowable: "from his activities we know our God, but his very essence we do not profess to approach. For his activities descend to us, but his essence remains unapproachable" (Basil of Caesarea 234). We see this claim persist through the writings of more recent mystics, such as Thomas Merton (1915-1968), who describes contemplation as a knowing of God which, "goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith… contemplation is not vision because it sees 'without seeing' and knows 'without knowing'" (Merton 1). As Jacopone da Todi (ca. 1230-1306) exclaims, "Oh, the futility of seeking to convey with images and feelings that which surpasses all measure!" (Da Todi 268). Or, take it from Johannes Tauler (1300-1361), who argues any human comprehension or verbalization of Divine union is "all as utterly unlike reality as it would be were I to say of a piece of black coal: 'Look, here is the bright sun which lightens all the world'" (Tauler 124). Regardless of where you look, the ineffable heart of Christian mysticism holds strong across time and space.

Yet, as many scholars have noted, and the history of Mysticism makes clear, mystical authors continue to seek expression of this reality - to some degree - using the same language that is utterly incapable of encompassing the Divine to at the same time grasp some understanding of him. It is in this paradoxical engagement that we are invited to wonder how the language of the mystics may be different? While it may be insufficient, language remains a

"seemingly indispensable vessel to carry the mystic waters" (Velasco 121). So, we must ask ourselves how - if at all - does the mystic use language to bring the unapproachable domain of the Divine down to earth?

The purpose of this paper is to see where this question takes us. By recognizing my place at the far reaches of understanding mystical union - whatever meaning or reality which that encounter may hold - I aim to respect the depth of human *beingness*, and begin to explore the realms of interpretation which surround that depth. While it may conclude at some claim on the power of figurative language, that point must not be mistaken as the destination of this scholarly path. This is but one frame of insight into a much greater, much deeper story of the Christian mystical tradition, and I am privileged to study the views of religious meaning which it offers to me.

This paper can thus be broken down into four sections, each of which aims to lead into the next and builds upon the previous. Each section can be framed - in the most general sense of its contents - by a central question/questions.

The first will try to establish a functional sense of what is meant when I refer to mysticism as a field of study: '*What is Christian mysticism, and who are the Christian mystics?*'. Resisting some of the normative theories of mysticism, which hold as the heart of their inquiry the nature of the mystical experience - the Divine encounter/union with God - I instead argue that we need to take a scholarly step back. Privileging the ineffable quality of the Divine which the Christian mystics have widely held, and the immense amount of spiritual practice which contribute to the mystical way of life, scholarly evaluations of mysticism must first start with an appreciation of the mystics' humanity, and the wondrous complexities which come with it.

Examining the origins of the term “mysticism”, as well as the varied domains which Christian authors deem “mystical”, I am encouraged to start my scholarship with compassion for my cognitive limitations, and respect for the depth of experience. As a result, I begin my study of the Christian mystics with an understanding that I stand at the fringe of not only their spiritual experience, but the depths of human, embodied experience.

Now knowing where my scholarship starts, I am encouraged to explore how we may understand more about the extraordinary humanity of the mystics. In other words, what element of the mystics’ human experience may be a possible resource for my scholarship? Given that the paradox of ineffability very often emerges as a matter of language, it is helpful to ask ‘*What is the capacity of human language*?’. Drawing from the philosophies of German romantics, as consolidated in the work of Charles Taylor, I argue that language is an inherently incarnate and constitutive force which does not merely describe, but opens humans up to new understandings of the world and themselves. Humans’ relationship with language is reflexive: we don’t simply use or shape language, but language - in a deeper, mysterious way - shapes us, revealing landscapes of meanings upon which we make sense of our very existence. And, given this power of language in human life - as established in section one - I beg the question of extending it to mystical scholarship may help build scholarly insights.

This overlap leads to the third question of this paper, which is ‘*What role does language play in the context of Christian mysticism?’.* Contrasting reductive theories of language which are critical of trope and metaphor, I again draw from human-centered theories of language to argue that figurative language has a functional role in human life, allowing us to mediate understandings about subjects which literal language has yet to find sufficient description. Given

the ubiquitous nature of ineffability in Christian mystical writings, I propose that we must take the symbolic nature of mystical language seriously. As such, it may be more helpful to ask what the language of Christian mystical texts *does*, rather than what it *means*. In this way, the voice of Christian mystics holds a symbolic capacity which does not describe, but opens up a level of meaning beyond the literal and into the sacred.

From this emerges the final question(s) of this paper - but not of this greater line of inquiry - which is '*How does language fulfill this role of opening sacred meanings? What is the impact of mystical authorship?*'. Drawing from research in the natural sciences, I argue that socially oriented theories of language acquisition - in which we learn new languages from and through connections with others - provide a helpful framework for understanding the work which mystics perform in their writing. While the mystic may never be able to verbalize the wholeness of God, they can still open frames of insight into this level of meaning; they don't need to describe the whole reality to convey something about that reality. In the act of writing, mystics extend their language into a social domain, opening up possibilities of sacred meaning which - with the necessary receptivity to that meaning - may turn other Christians to the mystical way of life. As such, I argue mystical authorship may be appropriately considered a form of sacramental labor: an embodied act of devotion which creates a channel for the infinite through the finite.

This final question, of course, requires the most speculative and theologically oriented exploration. It engages not only the possibilities of language, the mystical, and symbolic forms which were established before, but now involves the effect which these possibilities have on other human beings. I want to be sensitive to the depth which all of these possibilities hold, but particularly this one, for how can we possibly know or verbalize the precise way that language,

and even more symbolic language of the Holy shapes us? As such, a significant portion of this section involves the question of how mystical language seems to affect me, as a person with faith, and moreover as someone engaged in my own search for meaning. Thus, you may be inclined upon arriving at this section to stop reading, for it seems to sacrifice objectivity for opinion. But, before doing so, I beg you to ask if it is possible to write such a paper, either on human experience or religion, without it being mediated by the meanings which our own experience holds? Can a human scholar, living their own subjective life, write about another's impartially? Responsible religious scholarship, as I see it, requires me to not only respect the depths of another's experience, but that of my own. This section is not meant to offer a definitive claim on the workings of mystical language, but a way of seeing these workings which elevates language to the level of curiosity I believe it deserves. This paper would not have done its job if it left you with no questions, because the reality is that my research has left me with plenty of my own. A good theory of religion is a good proposition about religion, and a good proposition about religion is an invitation to discuss and debate the complexities of a devoted life.

If this paper does not convince my reader about language, or about mysticism, I hope it opens at least a curiosity to construct one's own understanding of these things. The central claim I make in this paper is that if we want to understand what experience is - as improbable a scholarly destination that may be - we must start by embracing the array of experiential possibilities which our humanity has, does, and will continue to bring about. Those possibilities of which the mystics write, and those realities to which the mystics point just happen to be the ones I encountered along the way, and which inspired me to explore deeper.

Griffin Lesica
Prof. Maria Hatjigeorgiou
RELI 0700
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Section 1: Premises and Working Paradigms

Before entering into an evaluation of mystical language, it may be helpful to establish a ground of understanding - a working paradigm, if you will - of two things. The first is what I understand mysticism to be (and to offer some foreshadowing, it is not a straightforward answer). The second is the extent of human linguistic capacity: what makes human language "special" in the first place? What power does it hold? As a scholar in a field which involves the workings of the human experience, there is no direct access for me to understand or "grasp" another's experience. Furthermore, given that mystical union itself transcends cognition, any assertion of universality to my claims or of my immediate *access* to evidence for these claims is both irresponsible and ignorant. Historical scholarship on linguistic capacity and mysticism has often neglected the value of experiential depth, committing itself instead to empirical systematizations which generalize and objectify. Without elevating the humanity of the mystic and language (i.e. without recognizing how our scholarly routes of access into Christian mysticism lie through the products of their humanity), as well as recognizing the humanity of our scholarship, we will never be able to grasp the profound work which mystical language does in illuminating and moving others towards the Divine.

In my writing, I thus assess Christian mysticism upon a fundamental framework which I call a shared *ground of unknowing*. This point operates on two related but distinct levels, the *experiential* and the *ontological.* The experiential level of unknowing refers to the subjectivity of the first-person experience. What an experience, expression, or relationship means to another may not be immediately accessed by my research, my observations, or my language. As put best by Thomas Tweed, "it is precisely because we stand in a particular place that we are able to see,

to know, to narrate," and as such my findings may be better understood as scholarly "sightings" from a particular context. And, it is from those sightings that I construct meaning using "categories and criteria [I] inherit, revise, and create" (Tweed 18). Locating myself as a scholar who learns in relation to and observation of mystical voices forces me to accept that some knowledge will always be inaccessible; that there will always be a gap between my meanings and those of another. Witnessing the experience of mystical humanity does not produce information which I can parse objectively, for what it even means to be my own person is to be only semi-aware of a vast network of "multilayered emotional and physiological engagements" (Dempsey 148). To learn my own experience - let alone that of the extraordinary mystics of the Christian world - involves a commitment to proximal *understanding*, of seeking ways to draw myself closer to the deeper meanings presented by another's.

The ontological level refers to a deeper unknowing - that ineffable quality beyond conceptualization or verbalization - which for the mystics is an essential quality of the Divine encounter and *pure* being. I do not challenge - nor do I have the cognitive capacity to challenge - the veracity of such ineffability in this paper. What I can say is that this unknowingness is central to the cosmic order of the mystic, and the way of life to which they commit.

To do anything other than privilege unknowing would be a misrepresentation of my scholarly capacities, but also a harmful dismissal aimed at the tradition I aim to explore. Any assumption of direct and/or immediate knowledge would make this paper naively detached from the human element of religious scholarship, and even more an irrevocably insufficient depiction of Christian mysticism.

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I. A World of Mystical Possibilities: The Problem of Defining Mysticism

If we are to engage in a study of Christian mystical language, we must establish a functional sense[2] of what mysticism is. In the limited pages I have to write this essay, there is no way to do this comprehensively or concretely: such a feat has yet to be accomplished, and I am not brazen enough to claim I can change that. "Mysticism" as a noun did not emerge until the early 17th-century in France ('La Mystique') (Mcginn, "Foundations" 420; Certeau 267-291). Furthermore, the modern academic study of mysticism didn't begin to seriously take shape until the end of the 20th century (Nelstrop and Magill 3-4; Mcginn, "Foundations" 267). Yet, as Louis Bouyer writes in his essay *Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word*, there is "no other subject in the… field of religious studies which lends itself to such widely differing descriptions" and powerful prejudice as "mysticism" (Bouyer 42). This is a reality which must be acknowledged before entering the rest of this paper: 'mysticism' is not a term indigenous to the Christian mystical tradition, it is an "academic invention" (McIntosh 11). When reading the texts of those we now call 'Christian mystics', we find reference to a "mystical" view of reality, but up until the 20th century there was no internal commentary on "mysticism" or reference to "mystics" in the Christian tradition (Mcginn, "Foundations" XIV).

Scholarship has revealed that the term "mystical" - as it is used in the context of Christian mysticism, at least - originates from the Greek mystery religions. *Mystikos,* from which 'mystical' originates, comes from the verb *muo* - meaning "to close" - and referred in its earliest pre-Christian usage to the hiding of ritual rites from cult initiants (Bouyer 43; Mcginn

[2] Functional in that it may offer an interpretive value to this work upon which further claims may be made, and discourse may be enhanced. It is impossible to offer an objective description of mysticism - it is simply too vast of a domain - so I'd argue that any attempt to define mysticism instead offers a sense of mysticism: a particular and dynamic meaning which clarifies something, but not everything, about mysticism.

"Essentials" 4). Starting in the second half of the 2nd century CE, the term was taken up by early Christians to characterize the "inner dimension" of their religious realities. When the noun "mysticism" was coined in the 17th century, it was used to refer to those "mystical" domains - the secret, "inner" realities of belief, ritual, practice and scripture - which had been described by historical Christians over time (Mcginn, "Essentials" xiv). Over time, however, the umbrella of mysticism has expanded, abstracted across religious traditions and spiritual contexts to refer - generally speaking, of course - to that realm of experience and/or knowledge attained on levels above "normal" consciousness. The ethics or accuracy of such an abstraction of course warrants its own exploration. However, that is not the purpose of this paper. Instead, it argues that the space of what we may call Christian mysticism holds mysterious depths which deserve greater exploration.

When I refer to "Christian mysticism" as I do above, it is important to locate the context in which this term operates. When we speak of a "Christian mystic", we must understand this to be a reference to a practicing Christian who engaged with questions of a mystical reality. In *The Foundations of Mysticism,* Bernard Mcginn argues that this historical fact begs us to understand mysticism as a operating within - or being a dynamic element - of Christianity, not an independent tradition: "the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God" (Mcginn, "Foundations" xvii). Such a definition is important for two reasons. First, it problematizes normative understandings of mysticism as the mystical experience alone. Second, it allows us to imagine mysticism as a dynamic space; one that is accommodating to the mystic's humanity and activity, but also contextually located within

the Christian tradition. Researching within such a space, I privilege the authenticity and mystery of the mystical voices - as well as the possibility of a pre-linguistic experience of God - but acknowledge that I am not in the position to responsibly abstract their messages beyond the Christian context.

Popular contemporary theories on mysticism have tended to involve questions of the so-called "mystical experience": the intimate and transformative encounter of the mystic with God (Nelstrop and Magill 10). While mystics have described such an encounter with various terms and varying significance, the one quality that persists amongst all descriptions is that it happens at a level far deeper than everyday human cognition can understand. As Mcginn writes, "One thing all Christian mystics have agreed on is that the experience in itself defies conceptualization and verbalization, in part or whole" (Mcginn, "Foundations" xvii). For some scholars, this contact is one and the same with mysticism itself. As such, in the study of mysticism, the mystical experience often becomes the object of study. If looking at historical schools of thought on mysticism, this primacy of the *unitive* mystical experience - the nature or knowledge of the divine encounter - is clear.

William James, widely considered to be the formative figure of modern scholarship on mysticism, describes the mystical state of consciousness to be the highest expression of personal religious experience, its root and centre, proceeding in the following pages to outline the four characteristics of an experience which may qualify it as mystical (ineffability, noesis, transiency and passivity) (James 252-254; Nelstrop and Magill 4). Grounded in the view that human faculty and cognition extends deeper than the senses, James argues that there are modes of experiencing and knowing which exist beyond sensory input (James 51-65; Nelstrop and Magill 4). James'

claims catalyzed the development of the Perennialist school on mysticism, which generally argues that mystical texts are "primarily concerned" with accounts of these experiences that defy everyday language, and that it is ultimately a "deep and personal experience" which underpin the purpose of mystical texts. Robert Forman - a contemporary Perennialist - describes as an essential view of the Perennial school that the mystical experience represents an "immediate and direct contact with a (variously defined) absolute principle" (Forman 3). Furthermore, it is only after such immediate contact that it is "*interpreted"* per a tradition's "language and beliefs" (3). In other words, Perennialist generally posit that the mystical experience is the same, pre-linguistic experience for all mystics: mysticism *is* the mystical experience for Perennialists, and those who have had that experience are mystics (Nelstrop and Magill 10).

Over the past 25 years, a growing number of students of the Constructivist - or Contextualist - school have charged the Perennialist view as being "hermeneutically naive" (Forman 4). In response to Perennialist claims, Constructivists argue that the mystical experience itself is "significantly shaped and formed by the subject's beliefs, concepts, and expectations," abiding by a paradigmatic view that "all experiences… are in significant ways formed, shaped, mediated, and constructed by the terms, categories, beliefs, and linguistic backgrounds" which the subject of the experience brings to them (Forman 3-4). Constructivist thinkers such as Steven T. Katz argue that there cannot be experiences which are not mediated through cultural context, effectively denying the possibility that a mystic may separate from their worldly being and encounter the Divine: "There are NO [sic] pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences" (Katz 26), and as such the ineffable experience of God is thrown to the wind (Nelstrop and Magill 10-13). There is, of course, further nuance within and across each of these schools of thought. Bernard Mcginn

himself straddles a liminal space between Contextualism and Perennialism, arguing that vernacular mysticism - that is the language and theology of the mystics we encounter in their writing - cannot be separated from their human experience as a whole, this does not deny the possibility of the divine encounter, nor make it unimportant (Nelstrop and Magill 13). Even more, recent scholarship has challenged both these schools altogether. For example, the "Performative Language" readings of mystical texts move away entirely from the primacy of the mystical experience, focusing instead on the way mystics use language to reveal something about the "*nature* of God" (Nelstrop and Magill 14-16). However, in this history it is important to note the way in which the formative school of thought on mysticism - being the Perennialists - and one of the most widespread reactions to this school - being that of Katz and the Constructivists/Contextualists - have located the essence of mystical scholarship in the nature of the unitive experience.

This problem is that, as described earlier in this section, "mysticism" has not been a word used by Christians to describe their religious experience, nor has the nature of the unitive experience with God been the only qualitatively mystical element of reality. The most continuous and widespread use of "mystical" as an adjective was made in reference to the Bible - i.e. a mystical/deeper understanding of scripture. And though the first uses of the word as *a way* of "knowing God" can be traced back to Origen of Alexandria, there was no internal reference to "mysticism" or the "mystical experience" as a term which grasped that knowing itself (Mcginn, "Essentials" 3-4; Bouyer 50)[3].

[3] Offer some possible sources where they can find the use of the word

Mark McIntosh - a scholar of mysticism - writes how the earlier eras of mystics referred to, “the most intimate and transforming encounter with God as “contemplation” (Mcintosh 11). From the second century on there we find a growing emphasis on this contemplative vision of God as the “ultimate goal of the devout Christian” (Mcginn, “Essentials” 310). Over the centuries of mystical authorship, this encounter came to be known by varying names, whether it be contemplation, rapture, ecstasy, or *Theosis* (deification). And, while each label carries its own weight and connotations, they can reasonably be understood as “complementary ways of presenting the consciousness of direct presence,” of and with the Divine (Mcginn, “Foundations” xvii). However, such an experience - as described by the mystics and we may know - has never been evaluated in isolation from the mystics' humanity. Even if the encounter with the Divine is a pre-linguistic experience, which occurs apart from the mystic’s physical form, the understanding of it which outsiders have access to resides in what the mystics are capable of sharing on a worldly level. Even more, these terms have never been presented as an absolute representation of the Divine or of mystical union, but instead as provisional pointers towards an element of mystical life. The divine encounter, while it may be an essential goal of Christian mysticism, remains but one, incomprehensible moment in the experience of Christian mystics. And, even more importantly for my own research, the power of such an incomprehensible encounter has never been described or elaborated without the use of human language.

If we take an honest look at the voice of Christian mystics, we begin to see that mysticism is not a singular experience, but represents a vast, connected, and mysterious network of mystical possibilities which point to a reality beyond - but which remains inaccessible through - the modes of everyday consciousness and cognition. Mysticism is and has never been restricted

to the encounter with God alone, but is a "process, or a way of life" that includes the active and transformed elements of the mystic's humanity which lead up to and emerge from the ineffable union with God (Mcginn, "Foundations" xvi). As Elijah John writes in *The Mystical Path of Christian Theosis*, the direct vision of God is not only the "quintessential purpose of Christian life, but the *very purpose* of human life" (John 7). However, it also relies on a "process of transformation that occurs only if you devote yourself to the deep spiritual training and practice" (7). Restricting mysticism to the nature of the Divine encounter limits what may be grasped from the mystical voices available to us, but also ignores a fundamental claim of Christian mystics that the consciousness of God is not an ordinary, or even humanely accessible form of consciousness: "God is not just another person - "person" as a limited category of the created world cannot contain or define the God who is both the source of the cosmos and infinitely beyond it" (Mcginn "Essentials" xv). Even more, such a restriction relies on the scholar having immediate access to the experience of another, overlooking the devotional labor and humanity described to be on either side - before and after - this encounter.

This does not, of course, mean we should see the ineffable encounter with God any less real for the mystics. It does, however, acknowledge that our access to such an experience is inherently limited. There may be a theoretical distinction to be made between experience and interpretation of the Divine, but that is not a distinction scholars can claim to understand comprehensively when looking from the outside in. There can be, as Mcginn writes, "no direct access to experience" for a scholar, let alone for scholars of a tradition which seeks to encounter the ineffable mystery of the divine (Mcginn, "Foundations" xii). As such, I write this paper knowing that I stand on the outside of the Christian mystical tradition, and am looking in.

Understanding this space to be understood as a dynamic and active way of life for Christians, I cannot not try to evaluate the nature of union without first engaging seriously the extraordinary humanity of Christian mystics. My role as a scholar is, in this way, to try and build frames of insight through which I may more compassionately understand the possibilities of the mystical world.

Griffin Lesica
Prof. Maria Hatjigeorgiou
RELI 0700
12/24/24

II. Language as a Transformative Force of Being

Theories of language - or more specifically of human linguistic capacity - tend to run in circles. In trying to systematize the possibilities and limitations of language, the scholar is at the same time restricted by their own linguistic capacity. In short, we must use language to explain language. However, it is clear to see that our understanding of language involves something more than an immediate cognition of unchanging vocabularies and denotations: our language is dynamic, constantly changing, expanding, reshaping as we maneuver through the time and contexts which life moves us through. Furthermore, the expanse of human linguistic capacity appears to be - as far as modern science has shown us - a specially human faculty. As Aristotle writes in *Politics,* "man alone of the animals possesses speech" (Aristotle, "Politics" bk. 1 sec. 1253a). In *The Language Animal,* Charles Taylor takes this foundational claim and expands on its implications in the modern age. Though Taylor himself concedes that, even after 340+ pages of writing and years of reflection[4], "Language remains in many ways a mysterious thing," he offers several claims which may aid in the study of the mystics (Lecture Language Animal 341).

Starting from the first post-medieval theories that did not assume language to be embedded in the cosmos - i.e. which saw language as a "purely human possibility" rather than pre-established order to be understood - Taylor aims to show how language can only be understood sufficiently if we understand its "constitutive role in human life" (Taylor 261; Youtube, "Charles Taylor: 'The Language Animal'"). Without totally rejecting its importance, Taylor challenges the ability of what he calls the HLC - or "designative-instrumental" - theory of language to sufficiently describe human linguistic capacity. Based on the claims of Hobbes,

[4] Not to forget this also is not his first published piece involving human linguistic capacity

Locke, and Condillac - hence the acronym HLC - the designative-instrumental theory of language emphasizes language as a way of encoding information (Taylor 35-36). One of the first key principles of the HLC theory is that vocabulary is introduced to "designate features which have already in one way or another come to our attention" (Taylor 133). In such a view, language remains separate from our beingness. While it may help us describe what we perceive, it does not fundamentally shape us: "language doesn't alter the basic purposes of the creatures possessing it," but offers a means towards a common, assumed end of human life, that of encoding information (Taylor 84). while seeing language as the HLC theorists do - as an excarnate tool to describe what has always been, is, and will be - may be useful for building a scientific grasp of the world, it also misses a great deal of what language has meant and continues to mean for humans in their lived experience.

Turning away from this model, Taylor favors a theory of linguistic capacity which embraces human meanings, and the power of discourse. Drawing from German romantic thinkers like Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt, Taylor draws out the HHH - or "expressive-constitutive" - theory, which identifies a reflexive relationship between language and human potentialities. At the heart of this theory is the thought that language is not posterior or external to experience, but can actually enable new shapes of human experience, helping us build "landscapes of meanings" (Taylor 332; Youtube, "Charles Taylor"). In other words, language is transformative, changing not only what we understand but our sense of the world in which we live, altering not only what it means to be in the world, but "the way in which we live in the universe" (Youtube, "Charles Taylor"). As such, we cannot separate language from our beingness; it is "the medium we are in" but also a "feature of what we are," opening up new

levels of reality and existence within and around us which can transform our place in the world (Taylor 90).

So, why does this matter? Why is it important to understand language as transformative; as constitutive and expressive? In the HHH theory lies a kernel of insight that our language carries weight beyond prescribed meaning. To understand how language is used, and what it means, requires involving the subjectivity of the human - of both the speaker and receiver of language - experiencing that language. Our language is shaped by and shapes the mysterious realms of humanness for which the natural sciences do not yet have a firm grasp upon. Language is full of human meanings: sensory or emotional significances, subjective associations to linguistic elements - whether they be words, images, metaphors, etc. - driven by our own evolution and interactions within a human world of language. We cannot know what something "means" without a *sense* of the embodied meanings it brings about (Taylor 182-183). As Taylor explains, there is no "*dispassionate* access" to those meanings we hold for ourselves: "for them to be meanings for me, values that I recognize and which move me, I have to experience the felt intuition of them," and be cognizant of the way this meaning moves me on a level beyond logic. In the second and third-person case - in the encounters we have of others' language - this framework suggests that there is no "dispassionate *understanding*" of meanings: "Understanding [meanings]… is grasping their point, the point they have for those who live by the. But I as an outsider can only grasp this point, if I have some sense of what it is to experience it, to feel it, to have the appropriate felt intuition" (Taylor 183).

In this light, it becomes clear how meaning and identity are deeply entwined with the human experience of language, and the capacity of our language has never been alone in its

literal use. In studying human linguistic capacity on a humanistic level, we cannot understand by looking to the literal - to our vocabularies structured systems of descriptive, independent, and excarnate meaning - but instead need to engage the questions of language *does*: the active modes by and through which language is shaped by us, but also shapes us; the weight of experience and human meaning which our vocabularies carry, and the ways by which we may make that weight heavier; the ways that language is built by connection, but can also build and break social bonds. It is only through such an impassioned, personal, and self-sacrificial view of language that we can understand what language even *means*.

Subsequently, in experiencing the voice of Christian mystics - which in this research will be 'heard' through text - it becomes important to look at the ways in which Mystics craft their language, and what that language may do. As Bernard Mcginn writes, the works of mystical scholarship - which he describes as "Mystical masterpieces" - are often closer to poetry in the way they "concentrate and alter language" to convey meaning (Mcginn, "Foundations" xiv). Extending Taylor's endorsement of the constitutive-expressive theory, we are begged to wonder the ways in which this linguistic performance engages with humanity and experience. Not only should we consider what the language does for the mystic, but what it does to and for their audience, as well as the way it engages us as scholars.

Griffin Lesica
Prof. Maria Hatjigeorgiou
RELI 0700
12/24/24

Symbols and 'Figurings': Mystical Language Beyond the Literal

The previous two sections establish a set of theoretical frames which point us to the mystical language - or what I will call the mystical voice - which inspired me to write this paper. As a scholar, my understanding of mysticism is located only in the accessible realms of the mystic's humanity. To conflate the mystical experience with mysticism not only silences so many the mystical voices, but presupposes that scholars have direct access to and can sufficiently interpret another person's experience - and even more importantly an experience beyond conceptualization or our sense of self. I'd argue that as of today, these feats are not within the realm of human cognitive capacity. As such, we may recognize that, while it is an essential goal within the Christian mystical tradition, divine union cannot be clarified insofar as we continue to ignore the humanity of mysticism. Even more, such an experience cannot be described concretely. As such, mysticism must be compassionately understood "in light of its interactions with the other aspects of the whole religious complex in which it comes to expression" (Mcginn, "Foundations" xiv).

Even if the Divine encounter is a pre-linguistic experience, when brought back down to Earth, and expressed by the mystic, it is unequivocally mediated through human language. And, while this language is entrenched in liminal and subjective meanings, it also holds a distinct constitutive power - it may create, open, and move us towards new meanings. We must remember that language is embodied, enacted through the "unmistakably material process," which our bodies and minds - on conscious and unconscious levels - perform, and which produces those various forms of materialized meaning we may call expression (Williams ix-x). However, no mystic would claim any form of linguistic expression may describe Divine union

literally, nor may language itself offer a sufficient understanding of God. Yet, language remains the tool through which the Christian mystical element is expressed. Given such a paradox, how do we even begin to engage the language of the mystics? How should we be listening to the mystical voice? The answer to this lies in the possibility that language is a much stranger faculty than we think: that the truth value of language may not be dependent on its literal meaning, but those deeper meanings it may figuratively point us towards.

In his essay *Religious Language as Symbolic*, Paul Tillich argues that religious language - in its engagement with the dimension of the "Holy" or ultimate reality - cannot be understood empirically/literally, but must be considered symbolically (Tillich 398). Symbols as a linguistic tool fall into what Charles Taylor describes as the "figuring dimension" of language, abstractly understood as those modes of expression by which we may clarify some understanding of target A through language of source B (Taylor 160; Taylor 164; Taylor ch. 5). For some, this dimension of language is seen as both unproductive and obscuring. A key element of HLC thought, for example, is that language must be introduced with clear, consistent definitions, and as such linguistic play of any sort should be avoided if language is to serve reason. As Thomas Hobbes writes, there is an "absurdity in the use of metaphors, tropes and other rhetorical figures… in reckoning, and seeking of truth, such speeches are not to be admitted" (Hobbes, *Leviathan* pt. 1 ch. 5). To HLC thinkers, figurative language does not offer any valuable information about the world. Only the "literal meaning" of words may convey this. At worst, linguistic play of this kind confuses meanings, and at best it evokes subjective feeling or reaction (Taylor 140).

However, if we take the constitutive powers of language seriously, it is in the figurative dimension of language that we may find insight into the depths of mystical text. Challenging the

claims of HLC thinkers, Taylor claims that the "primacy of the literal has no place for the lived body" (Taylor 161). Such a regimented view cannot suit the reality of human experience in which language continues to be practiced widely and figuratively, and which is embedded in a cosmos rich with knowledge we cannot yet articulate or understand. As such, engaging the figuring dimension of language is common - and some would argue "indispensable" - in human life (Youtube, "Charles Taylor"). In figuring language[5] we may extend a sense of our liminal, personal, and often incomplete understandings of the world - which alone cannot be described in literal terms - beyond ourselves. Such a feat open channels of insight into the depths of meaning beyond that which can be empirically proven: the figurative dimension may induce "the opening up of reality which otherwise are hidden and cannot be grasped in any other way" (Tillich 399)[6]. In this way, it is possible - unlike the HLC thinkers propose - to convey a truth about our world even if we do not have the words to describe or reproduce that truth 'literally' or wholly. Such a possibility accommodates a diverse and yet expanding network of epistemological routes through which we may grasp understandings about the world around us. It is possible, however, for figurings to miss the mark. Just because figurative language expands articulation, it does not mean these articulations should be seen as an objective or complete representation of the realities to which they point. For example, it is possible to extend a metaphor too far, mapping a feature from the source to the target which may confuse our understanding of the target[7]. Instead,

[5] Referring to the ways we use/modify language figuratively
[6] Writing on the necessity of the symbol, Tillich offers a helpful analog: "take that which a landscape of Rubes, for instance, mediates to you. You cannot have this experience in any other way than through this painting made by Rubens… it has [external] character of balance, of colors, of weights, of values, and so on… what this mediates to you cannot be expressed in any other way than through the painting itself" (399).
[7] In short, figurative language in everyday life shouldn't be mistaken with literal description.

figurative language may be understood to open a newer, enhanced sense of those realities we previously could not grasp.

Within the realm of figurative language, symbols stand apart from other figurative forms - such as linguistic "signs" - in that they participate in the reality which they stand for. This is ultimately what makes them so special: "the participation in the symbolized reality which characterizes the symbols" (Tillich 399). Unlike words which can act as a pointer to the reality/meaning they open, symbols actively take part in that reality. Focusing on religious symbols, this dynamic opens a new way to engage with mystical language. The distinguishing feature of religious symbols is that the level of reality which it opens up is "the depth dimension of reality itself, the dimension of reality which is the ground of every other dimension and every other depth… the level of being itself, or the ultimate power of being": This is the domain of the "Holy" (Tillich 400). In symbolizing the dimension of ultimate reality, religious symbols can actually open up the experience of this dimension to the human soul. However, in the same way that non-religious figurings may obscure, it is important to separate religious symbols from the Holy reality that they mediate: while they may participate and subsequently carry some elements of holiness, "[religious symbols] are not themselves *the* Holy" (Tillich 400). However, as is the case with the mystics, if it is the desire of a tradition to cultivate some sort of relationship with the ultimate - with "Being itself" - there is no nonsymbolic mode which is adequate. Literal language does not actually participate in the meaning to which it points. Instead, it bounds and contains a prescribed definition, its very existence prohibiting understanding beyond verbalization.

Griffin Lesica
Prof. Maria Hatjigeorgiou
RELI 0700
12/24/24

In religious symbols' ability to carry meaning and power, and to participate in the Holy, they create a route of access to holiness: "in the symbolic form of speaking about [God], we have both that which transcend infinitely our experience of ourselves as persons, and that which is so adequate to our being persons that we can say, "Thou" to God, and can pray to him" (Tillich 401). In them, the religious person sacrifices empirical control and submits - to an extent - to logical insufficiency. However, in doing so, they catalyze a process of "opening" which exposes reality in a way which words alone cannot describe.

Griffin Lesica
Prof. Maria Hatjigeorgiou
RELI 0700
12/24/24

Sharing Attention: The Labor and Exchange of the Mystical Voice

It is only now, equipped with an understanding of our conceptual frame - of the power of religious symbols/symbolic language - and of the domain of Christian mysticism - imagined as a space within the context(s) of the Christian tradition - that we may start to explore *how* mystical symbols open up views into the reality of the Holy: equipped with the frame of symbolic language as a transformative and clarifying force, we may now peer through it gain insights into the experience of Christian mystics, and the world they inhabit. Drawing from Mcginn, I have noted that a sufficient study of Christian mysticism must embrace and explore the mystics' humanity, expanding our understanding of mysticism to involve a way of living - which may include a mystical experience - that seeks to inhabit the world so as to draw closer to the Divine. But, what this intrinsically means is that the routes of *scholarly access* into Christian mysticism lie in the humanity of the mystics - in their lives, in their words, and in their stories. As such before one can even evaluate the nature of the mystical experience, we must first recognize that we start at the outer fringe of human experience, and seek to build frames of insight which draw us closer to an understanding of those depths.

In approaching the language of the mystics symbolically, we are encouraged to open ourselves to the possibility that words may hold power even if the meaning they hold is incomplete, insufficient, or allusive in form. The following paragraphs will not so much explore the mystical meanings I have encountered in my studies, but focus more on *how* language may work to reveal those meanings. In other words, while the previous section describes what symbols/figurative language may *do* in the mystical context, this section will dive a bit deeper into *how* they do this, and the impact they may have in doing so. We cannot understand the

meanings carried by the mystical voice until we look at the expressive modes by which those meanings are revealed. In doing so, the question becomes not what mystical texts *say* but what the language they hold *points us to.* But, this must come part and parcel with an acknowledgement of my potential to misunderstand these voices. Though I may share faith and frameworks with the mystics who I read, I simply cannot inhabit their body, mind, or lived context. While spending time with them, and embracing their humanity as much as the extraordinary depths of their sacred engagements, I may bring myself closer, but I will never be them. I can never *be* another person, let alone a mystic.

When evaluating mystical texts, we must recognize that at the receiving end of its lessons is the reader. The symbolic language of the mystics is not only offered in their authorship, but ultimately may be received. In this way, mystical symbols operate in a social dimension: their purpose is not to describe the Divine, but to instead allude to or evoke a sense of God which an audience may turn towards (Velasco 124-127).

This social dimension of language - by which meaning is shared and/or received by multiple people - adds a new layer of understanding to what mystical symbols do. In *Constructing a Language*, Michael Tomasello outlines the ways by which humans - but more specifically children - acquire language. Challenging the nativist view of linguistic development as argued by Noam Chomsky, in which humans are born with an innate language model holding linguistic content, Tomasello instead emphasizes the ways we acquire new language through cognitive and social processes. Crucial to this acquisition is the concept that Tomasello calls the "joint attentional frame" (j.a.t) (Tomasello ch. 2). A j.a.t is created during a social interaction - an

exchange - between two intentional agents[8] in which the attention of both people is focused on the same object. This object does not have to be concrete. It can be abstract, intangible, or an embodied action. It is within these periods of shared attention, or "repeated moments of common focus", that language acquisition occurs (Tomasello 21-22; Taylor 53; Unger et al.). In the ontogenetic context of Tomasello's writing, j.a.ts are most clear in infancy:

> For example, suppose a child is on the floor playing with a toy, but also is perceiving many other things in the room. An adult enters the room and joins the child in playing with the toy. The joint attentional frame is those objects and activities that the child and the adult know are part of the attentional focus of both of them. In this case, such things as the rug and the sofa and the child's diaper will not be a part of the joint attentional frame, even though the child may be perceiving them basically continuously, because they are not part of "what we are doing." (Tomasello 22).

Yet, exchange does not end with infancy. Although our social networks, dialogues, and encounters may become more complex as we move through life, moments of shared attention endure, allowing us to reconcile meanings through moments of shared attention. Take a college lecture, for example. Instead of an adult and an infant, we have a professor and a student. Upon the start of class, both the student and the professor share attention to the content of the lecture, establishing a space of common focus by and through which linguistic meanings - as contained within the language of the lecture - are exchanged. Even if you are in a group discussion, this epistemological triad holds if abstracted: There is the self, an other, and the object of shared attention through which meaning is acquired or conveyed between them. These periods of

[8] Tomasello defines "Intentional Agents" as "animate beings who have goals and who make active choices among behavioral means for attaining those goals, including active choices about what to pay attention to in pursuit of them" (Tomasello 21).

communed focus may last a long time, or a short time, but there isn't a way through which we acquire new language without fundamentally involving another person. This of course implies that in any given instance of a j.a.t there is one agent who already has greater understanding of this language, and one for whom it remains unfamiliar: learning a new language requires someone with capacity to teach, and that the learner doesn't already possess that language. And, the agent who holds each role may change over time - as we grow older, or the object of shared attention changes, we may be the ones with the familiar language to impart. However, what remains true is that regardless of who imparts and who receives, we acquire a comprehensible understanding of linguistic meanings - and moreover human meanings - through moments of shared attention.

From this emerges the "fundamental point" of language, that meanings can only be exchanged "within relations of shared emotional bonding, what we might call 'communion'" (Taylor 55). As Taylor writes, "language transmission occurs in a context of intense sharing of intentions between the bonded pair" (56). In exchanges, the object of shared attention becomes an object "for us," neither for you nor me alone. And this link between language and sharing is not isolated to infants and parents alone, but is a fundamental feature of human life, which "starts at the beginning and continues throughout life" (56).

Turning back to this mystics, this mode of learning through communed attention may provide a valuable insight into the way that mystical symbols open up the Holy. And, it is in this turn where I concede my ability to interpret with pure rationality, and allow myself to imagine the possibility of sacred joint attention. And, as much as it may not be proper for a research

paper, I would ask that for a moment you try to follow this possibility with me, in a mystical voice which is personally meaningful.

One of the most - if not perhaps the most - well-known Christian mystics of the 20th century is Thomas Merton. Not only a mystic, Merton was an activist, and moreover a writer. Of all his writings, Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*[9] remains the most popular. An autobiography of his life and faith which he wrote after becoming a Trappist monk at the Gethsemani monastery in Kentucky, *The Seven Storey Mountain* was listed as one of the top 100 non-fiction books of the 20th century by the National Review (Brookhiser et al.). If you are familiar with the histories of Christian mystics, you may also know of Merton's own mystical encounter, a transformative moment which happened at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky (Merton, "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander" pt. 3).

However, my first encounter with Merton was through a different channel. In my junior year of College, I was assigned to read Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation* for a course called 'The Way of the Ascetics' with Professor Maria Hatjigeorgiou. At this point in my life, I hadn't been exposed to mysticism in any formal way, only its colloquial use which made it seem a mark of derogatory intent. I wasn't familiar with the nuances of language and of scholarship which would come to complicate my thinking. In effect, I began reading *New Seeds* in a state of mystical infancy - lacking the language to even begin understanding what mysticism even is. But, what was clear in Merton's writing from the very beginning was that he wrote as an offering new meaning and direction, which - if receptive and willing - a reader could carry forth in their own life. As Merton writes, "Yet since the interior life and contemplation are the things we most

[9] Merton, Thomas. *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.

of all need - I speak only of contemplation that springs from the love of God - the kind of considerations written in these pages ought to be something for which everybody, and not only monks, would have a great hunger in our time" (Merton, "New Seeds" xiv). Merton writes *New Seeds* in the hopes that it may catalyze a shift in his audience. And, it is clear from even this note that he is not writing descriptively, but allusively. His authorship is imbued with some meaning of the Divine beyond him which he hopes to somehow point his readers towards. Like so many other mystics, we may imagine his writing is for those people who "have not yet attained the peak of mystical experience but who are receptive enough to be brought closer to their goal by the mystics' melodies" (Velasco 123).

In this way, Merton's language inhabits the social dimension of mystical language, pointing to readers that deeper truth of the Divine which, for Merton, grounds our very beingness, without being able to conceive or convey a comprehensive understanding of this Divine with his corporeal capacities. In his first chapter, Merton opens with an exploration of what Contemplation is:

> "Contemplation is the highest expression of a man's intellectual and spiritual life… It is a vivid realization of the act that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source… It is the religious apprehension of God, through my life in God, or through 'sonship' as the New Testament says" (Merton, "New Seeds" 1-4).

But, at the same time that he can contribute something of value to this exploration, none of the identities he offers are able to encompass or describe that which is encountered in the contemplative state:

> "Yet contemplation is not vision because it sees "without seeing" and knows "without knowing." It is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or in clear concepts. It can be suggested by words, by symbols, but in the very moment of trying to indicate what it knows the contemplative mind takes back what it has said, and denies what it has affirmed. For in contemplation we know by 'unknowing.' Or, better, we know *beyond* all knowing or 'unknowing'" (Merton, "New Seeds" 1-2).

It is clear that for Merton, the contemplative encounter with the divine straddles the boundary between the positive and the negative. Any language attributed to Merton's "Source" may be appropriately seen as a symbolic approximation of that Source, a linguistic tool which points us to the Source but is not the Source itself: his words are a signpost which clarifies the path ahead, but are not the path of infinitude itself. As Tillich writes, "The wholly transcendent transcendent transcends every symbol of the Holy. Religious symbols are taken from the infinity of material which the experienced reality gives us" (Tillich 400). So, what does one do when Merton seems to offer images of the Divine, in this specific case of God's love?

> "For it is God's love that warms me in the sun and God's love that sends the cold rain. It is God's love that feeds me in the bread I eat and God that feels me also by hunger and fasting. It is the love of God that sends the winter days when I am cold and sick, and the hot summer when I labor and my clothes are full of sweat: but it is God who breathes on me with light winds off the river and in the breezes out of the wood. His Love spreads the shade of the sycamore over my head and sends the water-boy along the edge of the wheat field with a bucket from the spring, while the laborers are resting and the mules stand under the tree… and all of these things are seeds sent to me from His will. If these seeds would take root in my liberty, and if His will would grow from my freedom, I would become the love that He is, and my harvest would be His glory and my own joy" (Merton 17).

When Merton identifies these Godly things, he is not describing God's love itself. God's love is not the warmth or rain, the sweat, the winds or the river. It is neither the sycamore nor the water-boy. It is not the image of any of these things which is God's love. Instead, it is that

ineffable mystery of Grace which is behind and within all of them. In Merton's writing we see how the power of the mystical voice is not in its capacity to illuminate God, but to allow readers to relate to *something deeper about God*. It is able to tell us something more, to reveal reality behind and beyond the literal without claiming to be that reality itself. The images which Merton brings up exhibit a familiarity which make them accessible. In other words, his writing is intelligible, using images and concepts that an audience may already understand to clarify the unintelligible (Velasco 124). So, at the same time we elevate the possibility of a deeper, pre-linguistic meaning, Merton offers access to that deeper meaning through the language we already know. In this contextual paradox - in the simultaneous familiarity and complete insufficiency of our language - our sense of self-knowing breaks down. How can I know these words and not know them at the same time? Such a paradox forces us to recognize his writing as symbolic, opening within the reader a vulnerability to experience the deeper meanings of language rather than discern his words objectively. We may detach themselves from warmth and cold all at once, and know that the source of the two is the same. It forces us to be selfless in our suffering - whether it be illness in the cold or the laborious sweat of the summer - and instead open ourselves to the mysteriously infinite force which creates all these moments of life, alongside our capacity to be present within them. The Love which Merton describes is one which supplies unconditionally, rather than particularly[10]. And if one embraces those 'seeds' - those miniscule units containing everything to generate and sustain being - a garden of beauty and grace may flourish within. Merton's words challenge readers to recognize that experience is not

[10] This point in particular is very challenging to embrace, for it begs the question of the existence of suffering. I don't have a settled answer to this question, and even if I did I don't think it's responsible for me to address it in this paper. There is joy in life, and there is also suffering. There are pains which are very real and very apparent in our experience and that of others. But, what Merton seems to be pointing us to is that there is some source - God's Love - from which the possibility of these experiences, and everything which we know, is realized.

about just ourselves, but is made its own and possible by everything which surrounds and supplies it. Even more, it is in both - the self and the other - that the Divine has graced upon a capacity to exist, to *be*, in the first place.

It is as though with words Merton constructs a window of view upon the landscape of infinitude, inviting readers in to share a look alongside him. By sharing attention on the Divine through his fundamentally symbolic language, Merton offers a channel for readers to engage with the ineffable beyond intellectual comprehension. And, for some the window may be clearer than others. Those more open - whatever belief or practice that openness may require - to the limitations of the literal, to the possibility of a truth beyond that which can be conceptualized and imagined, may have a clearer view. However, upon an infinite landscape there must necessarily be an infinite number of these windows. If everything in reality emerged from the infinite ground of Divine being - if every moment and event in life is a seed of God's will, as Merton describes (Merton ch. 3) - then everything in time and space may be an insight, a symbol pointing to and participating in the Holy: "Religious symbols are take from the infinity of material which the experienced reality gives us… everything that is in the world we encounter rests on the ultimate ground of being" (Tillich 400). The question becomes, for the mystic and their reader to share, what is the relationship to the ultimate being which these symbols point to and partake?

The symbolic windows which the mystic constructs straddle the threshold between the infinite and the corporeal. They offer a view - but not the whole view - out towards the Divine, and at the same time open a channel for such a view to enter our world. Such a sight is not limited to our eyes, but involves the interdependent network of cognitive, sensory, and even spiritual negotiations through which we understand reality. In inhabiting this point of liminality

between the corporeal and that which is more, the mystic's language participates in both levels of reality at once. It is an elevated expression which also actively elevates our humanity to the point where we may see that endlessness behind and beyond the literal. In and through these windows of insight, physical truth and Divine are connected as one: separation is realized as an illusion[11].

The language of the mystic is neither a literal form of human meaning, nor the wholeness of the Holy itself. Instead, it is a channel between the two, through which the light of the infinite may pass through and upon us evermore brightly. This ultimately comprises what we may imagine to be an elevated j.a.t: mystical texts function as a sacred space of shared attention, where a reader is invited to draw closer to the Divine through symbolic language. We are the self, the mystic the other, and this window - or really the view which lies beyond it - the object of our shared attention. Like the professor and the student, or the parent and the child, a new way of language, entrenched with the meanings of that which it represents, is passed from a level of higher familiarity to a lower. But in doing so, this language elevates those unfamiliar to the new heights which understanding may bring about. Like some students may have a greater capacity to absorb the lesson of their lecture, or some children more able to make sense of the purpose of a toy, only some may have the receptivity to look through this window in its fullest clarity.

The *way* that the mystic opens insights into the infinitude of the Holy is by looking beyond the determinism of a finite world, and building new ways of imagining the possibilities of what may lie beyond it. By playing with language so as to deconstruct its formalisms - in allowing language to convey some elevated truth, even if it cannot encompass the whole of that truth - the mystic elevates and illuminates the deeper realms of meaning to which we may aspire.

[11] For insights and other frames of imagining this 'illusion of separation' Martin Laird's *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* is a great theological reference, particularly Chapter 1.

As the mystics have so often claimed, even if we cannot comprehend the Divine, God still exists through and with our humanity. And, with the language which our bodies hold, receive, and convey, they are able to bring us closer to understanding that depth which the soul inhabits. Humans require language to understand the form of reality. In our everyday lives, language exists as a vessel of the seemingly endless possibilities which existence brings about. For the mystics, both beyond and within these possibilities there is something much more, a deeper, sacred realm much from which the possibility of our very being may come about. In this way, the symbolic language of the Christian mystics becomes a vessel of the sacred: words become the signifier of the infinite signified. In creating these spaces of shared attention upon this depth, the mystic begins to teach the vocabulary of interior life, of vaster meanings beyond verbalization or imagination. And, in doing so, they may turn the experiences of willing Christians towards this way of living and seeing the world, and to seeking the ways by which they may bring themselves closer to the infinite Divine.

Synthesizing these lessons of language with my understanding of mysticism - as established in section one and drawn from time with mystical literature - it is clear that mystical language is an active and activating force of faith. While mystical language engages in what may be described as “figurative play” - in that it stretches and reshapes language to open intrinsic possibilities in a worldly reality - it is ultimately a form of sacramental labor. The Mystics write not to synthesize an exclusive or comprehensive view of the Divine, but to engage with language in a way that creates routes of access to the Divine.

Such labor is sacramental in that it actively engages in questions of the relationship between God and the world. While the mystical encounter with the Divine may be immediate,

mystics widely claim access to the Divine in worldly forms is inherently limited. In other words, the Holy is not immediately and wholly available in earthly life. What a 'sacrament' is, is yet another term without a definite conceptualization: there is no "general sacrament", there are only concrete, individual sacraments which have existed in Christian history (Vorgrimler 43). However, attempts which have been made to theorize sacramentality remain helpful in understanding the mystical element of Christianity.

Without diving too deep into the etymology of the word, the sacraments included for early church Fathers the "widest possible variety of rites" of religious life (Vorgrimler 45). The first developed theory of the sacraments comes from St. Augustine. In his interpretations of the New Testament, Augustine placed the *sacramentum*[12] in the category of *signa. Signa* are "visible signs of an invisible reality," and as such a *sacramentum* - or what we will call sacrament - is a sign "designated by God to point to a reality… and containing that reality within itself" (Vorgrimler 45). Augustine's description, while widely embraced, fell short of definition, leading subsequent thinkers of the Scholastic period to try and define a general concept of "sacrament". Hugh of St. Victor, for example, offered two definitions of a sacrament. The first was Augustines, that a sacrament was "a sign of a sacred thing" (Coolman 256). The second was an elaboration on this basic definition: "a corporeal or material element set before the senses without, representing by similitude and signifying by institution and containing by sanctification some invisible and spiritual grace" (qtd. in Coolman 256). Famously, Peter Lombard synthesized in his *Sentences* (1158 CE) a 'proper definition' of sacrament. However, he achieved this by narrowing the concept of sacrament to the seven sacraments - baptism, confirmation, the

[12] The translation of the Greek word *mysterion*, found in some Old Latin (particularly African) scriptures

Eucharist, penance, unction of the sick, ordination, and marriage - which is not helpful to the broader forms which sacramentality manifests (Rosemann 65-68).

When I refer to mystical authorship as a form of sacramental labor, I refer to that older, broader notion of a sacrament. While it is broad, it is not an obsolete view. Even Lombard - who's sacramental view was normatively influential following the 12th century - did not write to necessarily refute the premise of sacramentality, but to clarify what happens uniquely in the seven sacramental rites of Scripture (Rosemann 65-66). Rooted in mystical perspectives, Augustine's "sacramental view of reality" accommodates the symbolic system which this paper has put forth. For, if a sacrament is "a visible sign of an invisible grace," then we may imagine anything in the created universe to be part of a vast "sacramental system" which points to the divine (Rosemann 66). Similar to what Tillich claims, "Everything in time and space has become at some time in the history of religion a symbol for the Holy… because everything that is in the world we encounter rests on the ultimate ground of being" (Tillich 400).

Qualifying what the mystics do with language as labor suggests an active energy, centralizing the embodied energies of the mystic in shaping and conveying meaning through language. In other words, what the mystics do with language is done with their bodies. While the meanings that their linguistic symbols point to may be more than worldly, their form - as words spoken, transcribed, and received - is located on Earth. This understanding of labor, while it may be most often assigned in economic contexts, is meant to be understood in its broadest sense, or at least that broadest sense which still offers interpretative value to this paper: to *labor* is *to do with one's body*. Additionally, labor may have a social dimension: it produces something which others may experience or make use of. The mystics' linguistic labor is not undertaken for

personal spiritual exploration, but aims to craft an intelligible channel between the world and the Divine. The symbolic systems they construct offer devoted readers a frame through which they may begin to more deeply understand the Divine, and draw closer to the Holy. Such a dynamic, however, relies on the willingness of an audience to open themselves up to the levels of reality opened to them.

The writings of Christian mystics may thus be properly imagined as sacramental labor: an embodied, devotional act which aims to construct visible signs of an invisible Grace. When the mystics write, they do not create something new, but attempt to clarify a truth which is eternally and universally present. Their language is not descriptive, but a pointer which - when embraced symbolically - opens a frame of insight into the Divine. These symbolic expressions are grounded in the material world of language, yet at the same time they actively participate in the Holy. As such, mystical texts are liminal in their very nature, constituting a space between and participating within both the finite and the infinite.

When the mystics write, they challenge and deconstruct the formalism of language. In playing with language figuratively, the mystics create a new, elevated vocabulary of the divine which straddles the boundary between the real - in a rational sense of the world - and the unreal - that which extends beyond our cognitive/corporeal capacities. In their rejection of the sufficiency of descriptive language, the mystics' language transcends the literal, turning their audience towards the possibilities of a deeper, Divine reality. When engaged in the social dimension we so often find them - in an exchange from the mystic to their audience - the symbols of the mystics become frames of insight for certain qualities/elements/insights of the Divine to be clarified. And, in this way they are sacramental. In creating a space for devotees to share attention on these

insights - as they may manifest in their intelligible forms - the mystic begins to turn the way of Christian life towards the language of the Divine. In welcoming their readers to look beyond the designations of literal language, mystics begin to clarify that realm of reality which transcends the form and meaning of language itself. It is here where meaning becomes infinite: this is the language of Silence. But, that is for another paper.

Griffin Lesica
Prof. Maria Hatjigeorgiou
RELI 0700
12/24/24

Conclusion

This paper started from a single question: What happens if *we* take ineffability seriously? Such a question was too speculative, however. It, in part, relied on me claiming that this scholar or the other had not already taken it seriously. And, I'm not sure that is the most appropriate stance to take as an entrypoint into my own scholarly writings on this tradition. So, I took a step back, and reframed this question: What happens when *I* take ineffability seriously. It was this question which would lead me to the paradox at the heart of this essay: Why do mystics write about God with the knowledge that their language will never capture God's wholeness? However, I soon realized that this paradox need not be a limitation, but is instead a profound invitation.

In reflecting on the tension between the mystics "knowledge" of and language of the Divine, we are encouraged to reconsider the role of language in understanding the world and our approach to scholarship. Language, as it is experienced in our everyday lives, is not a static means of encoding information. The meaning of language and linguistic expression is not just an instrument for transmitting fixed ideas. Instead, language is a living, relational process through which we create and reveal meaning. Language not only helps us make sense of the world around us, but also the ways in which we relate to that world. Linguistic meanings are not always literal, and it is the deeper realms of our humanity which non-literal meanings inhabit that encourage us to be curious about the extent of human linguistic capacity. In this way, we are encouraged to respect the ways in which our humanity is involved in the experience of language. In a similar way, the challenges of religious scholarship encourage us to reject the idea of mystical texts as excarnate resources of knowledge. When dealing with the study of religion,

scholarship cannot help but be located in humanity. As Thomas Tweed writes, religious theorists "do not have access to those [mental states] or [personal experiences]. They have only the narratives, artifacts, and practices of religious women and men" (Tweed 17). Yet, when it comes to historical theories of Christian mysticism, the focus of scholarship has been on exactly those depths which are inaccessible from the peripheries of scholarly observation, involving questions of the nature of the mystical experience, and of what the experience of God is like. Thus, if we are ever going to understand the paradox of ineffability found in mystical texts, we must realize our routes of access necessarily include the mystic's human experience. And, given the importance of language in the shaping and understanding of human meanings, we begin to wonder how language may offer insight into those mystical depths.

Such curiosity quickly turns us to the figurative power of language. In our everyday lives, we use characters and qualities of a familiar domain to try and make sense of another. This process - often unconscious and qualified as unproductive - allows us to navigate a reality of complex and sometimes unintelligible encounters through frameworks of non-literal meaning. And, while these figurative tools are not to be mistaken as a literal representation of the reality they are applied to, they nonetheless have the capacity to illuminate something yet unknown about that reality. In other words, figurative language can help make more sense of something even if we don't have the literal language to understand it wholly and concretely. When looking at mystical texts, or at least those which try to reveal something about the Divine, they must necessarily be understood as inhabiting this figurative dimension of language. Grounded in an understanding of the Divine as wholly beyond conceptualization and verbalization, the power of mystical language is not its capacity to literally describe God, but in the ways in which it may

point to and participate in God's infinite reality. In this way, the writing of mystical texts - the formation of mystical language - is a form of sacramental labor. And, by sharing attention on the insights which this labor opens, mystical texts have the power to draw devotees closer to the Divine. By embracing the paradox of ineffability, it becomes clear that mystics' language is not just a form of expression, but a site of dynamic interaction between the finite and the infinite.

This approach to language also invites us to engage more deeply with the ways in which scholarship is done in the study of religion. Mystical texts resist purely analytical or intellectual frameworks, requiring instead a method that holds respect for the complex way of living which mysticism is. In studying mysticism, we are encouraged to re-evaluate the ways in which we may balance critical inquiry with compassion for the humanity of ourselves and our subjects. As this paper has shown, mystical writing is not about providing definitive answers, but inviting readers to draw closer to the unknowable Divine. Even if we may not hold the same beliefs as the mystics, the lessons which they extend expose the challenge which is at the heart of responsible religious scholarship: How may we explore and express another person's/people's religious experience while respecting the fact that we may never know what resides at the ground of experience's depths?

In this way, the paradox of ineffability is not constraining, but expanding in both a religious and scholarly sense. It challenges us to see language as more than a tool for transmitting knowledge and instead a medium of relational and transformative meaning-making. By taking ineffability seriously, we are invited to approach both language and scholarship with humility, curiosity, and a sense of wonder. The mystics remind us that without mystery, there is no search for truth; without paradox, there is no further unknown upon which the life of

scholarship depends; that the magic of being human is not in a capacity to be all-knowing, but in the shared labor of our finite forms, seeking meaning amongst the infinite possibilities of the reality. And while this paper has been a journey through a small slice of that labor, it is not a journey which ends in certainty, but instead arrives at a trailhead of new scholarly possibilities.

Griffin Lesica
Prof. Maria Hatjigeorgiou
RELI 0700
12/24/24

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