

The Christian Mystics on the Nature of God

Copyright © 1980/2006 by Timothy Conway (written in June 1980; reformatted for the Internet)

In this paper I would like to present the *views of the Christian mystics on the issue of the nature of God*. For comparison, I will also briefly refer to the views found in other traditions on this subject. The “nature of God” could be said to be equivalent to the “nature of ultimate reality,” so a study of the mystics’ views on this subject is a key to understanding something of their philosophy and the psychology behind this philosophy, within their mysticism.

To begin with, we find that this subject is made very complex by the Christian doctrine of the *Trinity*—“Three Divine Persons in One God” (i.e., three Persons sharing one Divine Substance)—a doctrine surrounded by much obscurity and religio-political wrangling since the early days of the Church. Since this doctrine is of such great importance for so many of the Christian mystics (as well as for the non-mystics), and is clearly one of the doctrines which distinguishes Christianity from other traditions (sadly preventing ecumenical reconciliation), allow me to explicate the history of this concept at some length.

One might think that a doctrine of such vital importance for Christianity would be a central theme in the teachings of Jesus. But surprisingly enough, Jesus himself *never* speaks of the Trinity *per se*, and *only once* does he even hint at it—I refer to the passage at the end of Matthew’s gospel wherein he supposedly tells his apostles to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”[see endnote 1] This statement, however, is most likely a later addition by overly zealous and/or political church fathers, and *not* an authentic saying of Jesus, because it is *not to be found anywhere else in the New Testament, even in the many places where the apostles are busily engaged in baptizing people*. If Jesus had really made this statement, one would think that the disciples would repeat it every chance they had. But while we find in *Acts of the Apostles* 1:5 and a few other places the phrase “baptizing *with* the Holy Spirit,” we never hear of anyone baptizing “in the name *of* the Holy Spirit.” The only passages that employ this phrase “in the name of” have Jesus as the referent, not the Holy Spirit, nor the Father, for that matter.[2]

Outside of the aforementioned passage at the end of Matthew’s gospel, the New Testament writers never even associate the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on an equal level, except for the author of the epistle *1 John*, who does so briefly at (5:7), a possibly interpolated line.

Most of the early (third and fourth century) Christian arguments for the Trinity are based on those **Gospel of John** [Johannine] passages wherein Jesus is saying, “I and my Father are one,”[3] “The Father is in me and I in Him,”[4] and stating that the Father is to be “known” and “seen” by people via Jesus himself.[5] Looking over at the Indian *advaita* [nondual] *vedānta* tradition, any mystic worth his loincloth would know the line from the most ancient *Upaniṣads*, “I am Brahman,” and thus could say, “I and Brahman are one,” and so we should not take Jesus’ statement to be that unusual. It is easily one of those tidbits of wisdom that could have come down the Silk Road or over the even more traveled sea lanes during the rampant maritime trade of that and earlier eras. (Some persons have even posited the idea that Jesus traveled to India and possibly learned the wisdom of the Vedānta.[6]) Furthermore, most people forget that, in the same *Gospel of John*, Jesus is alleged to have stated[7],

“Is it not written in your law [Psalms 82:6], ‘I said, *ye are gods*’? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?”

At the last supper, evidently in order that the apostles realize their own Sonship with the Father, Jesus prays that they and everyone else, “may all be one, even as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be in us... that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one...”[8] Here Jesus seems to be implying that, just as he has realized his Divinity, his oneness; with God, so may his apostles and anyone else who follows.

It is, of course, at the opening of the John Gospel (and, in a similar vein, at the opening of the first Johannine epistle), that Jesus is equated with the “Word”:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us [as] the only Son from the Father.”[9]

We note that John is the *sole* New Testament writer to speak of Jesus as the “*only* Son of God.”[10]

With regard to the Holy Spirit, John never mentions “him” as a third person sharing in the oneness of the Father and the Son(s). He only has Jesus saying, “I will pray [to] the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth... you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.”[11]

Elsewhere, John says that this Spirit “proceeds from the Father.”[12] But he never speaks of the Spirit as a divine, third “person.” The Spirit is only that which is “given” by God.[13]

Now what do the other New Testament writers say in reference to this subject? The closest we come to an association of Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit is in 2 Cor. 13:14 and in 1 Peter 1:2, but in these two places neither Jesus nor the Holy Spirit are said to be God or are made equivalent to the Father. In the *Acts*, Luke has Peter speaking of Jesus as God’s “servant,”[14] telling of “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power,”[15] and how “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior...”[16] and how “God raised him up”[17] and how “God has made him both Lord and Christ.”[18] In several places[19], the epistle-writer **Paul** says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and in one place[20] we read, “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father...”—all of this implying that Peter and Paul saw a distinction between Jesus and God the Father, and not just “in person” but “in nature” as well. In the Pauline epistle Phil. 4:20, we read, “To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” It is only centuries later that we find the prayer, “Glory be to the Father *and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit...*” (emphasis added)

It is curious that Jesus is said to “sit at the right hand of God”[21] or at the “right hand of the throne of God”[22] in the New Testament, yet several centuries later, we find the various creeds maintaining that Jesus “sits at the right hand of the *Father*,” which seems to eliminate the difference between Jesus and God, rendering him equal in nature with the Father. Concerning the Holy Spirit, we read in the Pauline epistle 1 Cor. 2:12 of the “Spirit which is of God”—not the Spirit which is God; and, in Acts 5:32, of “the Holy Spirit *whom God has given* to those who obey him” (emphasis added), implying that the Holy Spirit is *not* God Himself, but a “something” which God bestows. In 2 Cor. 3:18, the “Lord” is said to be the Spirit, but then in Phil. 1:19 and in 1 Peter 1:11 we read, respectively, of “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” and “the Spirit of Christ.”

This all seems to suggest that the Spirit is *not* a Person distinct from the Father-God, but perhaps more of an “attribute” or “force” or “gift of Grace” from God, rather like the *Śakti*, *Baraka* or *Beraka* blessing force bestowed by God in Hindu, Muslim Sūfī and Jewish mystical traditions, respectively. The most telling evidence seems to be Paul’s standard form of address in his epistles: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”—which never mentions the Holy Spirit—and note that “the Lord” and “God” seem to be considered different in nature. Paul only speaks of the Spirit as that which is “given” by God.[22] In a number of the epistles, Paul urges that one “live” or “walk” “in the Spirit,” again, suggesting a transpersonal Divine force.

Recall that it is Paul’s epistles which are the earliest Christian writings, thus probably representing the purest thought of early Christian devotees.

Again, all of this confusion concerning the Trinity is clarified to a great extent (if not altogether) by looking to the Indian Hindu Vedānta spiritual tradition, where it is not unusual for a great spiritual master to realize his “oneness” with *Brahman* (and thus see everyone else as also one with *Brahman*) and then be able, while in the body or after bodily death, to bestow *Śakti*, or spiritual power, onto disciples, enabling the latter to have visions, work all kinds of miracles, and even transmit this *Śakti* in turn to others. The Hindu Vedāntins, because of the prevalence of this phenomenon, have not felt the need to make *Brahman* and the particular spiritual master and the *Śakti* power “Three Divine Persons sharing one Divine nature.” Moreover, the Vedāntins have wit-

nessed the appearance of many perfected “Sons” of God, so they don’t need to get wrapped up in the idea of an “only Son” of God, as did St. John and later theologians. (A theological move that seems to have been necessary in Christianity’s strategic embedding of itself within the Greco-Roman Hellenistic traditions, wherein the Emperor was viewed as a “son of God”.)

In light of the Indian Vedānta view, it is not unlikely that Jesus and the “Spirit” that he sent to his apostles (which Spirit comes from the Father, just as *Śakti* is the manifest, divinizing energy of *Brahman*) represent the exact same phenomenon as found so often in India. (I have written another paper at about this “*śaktipāt*” phenomenon as it has occurred and is occurring in Hinduism, Christianity and other traditions[24].) But some of the early Christians, unaware of the existence or the nature of this *śaktipāt* phenomenon, probably felt compelled to devise a theological concept to explain the wonders they had heard of, and so, following the leads in John’s writings, they gradually spawned the notion of the Trinity. We find **Justin** (c. 150 A.D.) and **Tertullian** (160-230), *à la* the John Gospel, equating Jesus with the Word and the Word with God, thus consolidating the Incarnation doctrine[25]. Then **Dionysius**, Bishop of Rome (ruled 259-68), writes of the “Divine Triad” and the “Holy Triad.”[26] At the first Church council, in Nicaea in 325, when an official creed was being drawn, the historian **Eusebius of Caesarea** suggested that the creed of his own church be adopted. It ran as follows:

“We believe in one God, the Father, All-sovereign, the maker of things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God of God, Light of Light, Life, Son only-begotten, Firstborn of all creation, begotten of the Father before all the ages through whom also all things were made... We also believe in one Holy Spirit.”[27]

Eusebius’ creed was orthodox, but it did not deal explicitly with the Arian “heresy.” **Arius**—a gracious-sounding man, judging from his letters a man of God, yet much vilified by later tradition—claimed that Pope Alexander “grievously attacks and persecutes us...[and] drives us from the city as atheists because we do not concur with him.”[28] Arius taught, along with “Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea, Theodotus, Paulinus, Athanasius, Gregory, Aetius, and all the other bishops of the East... that the Son is not unbegotten... and before he was begotten or created or appointed or established, he did not exist; for he was not unbegotten. We are persecuted because we say that the Son has a beginning, but God is without beginning.”[29]

Arianism was condemned at the first council, and Eusebius’ creed was taken merely as a base and put forward, by a minority of those at the council, in the following form, which became known as the “creed of Nicaea.” (Additions and alterations are shown underlined.)

“We believe in one God the Father all-sovereign, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, *begotten of the Father*, only-begotten, *that is, of the substance of the Father*, God of God, Light of Light, *true God of true God*, *begotten not made, of one substance with the Father*, through whom all things were made, *things in heaven and things on the earth*; who for us men and for our salvation *came down* and was made flesh, *and became man*.... And in the Holy Spirit. And those that say ‘There was when he was not,’ and ‘Before he was begotten he was not,’ and that ‘He came into being from what is not,’ or those that allege that the son of God is ‘of another substance or essence,’ or ‘created,’ or ‘changeable,’ or ‘alterable,’ these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.”[30]

In the later part of the same century, many other creeds came forth from different councils in different locations, each one promoting the views of a particular faction. Finally, in 381, at Constantinople, the Creed of Nicaea was reaffirmed by the particular group in power, and opposing schools of thought were condemned. Around this time we find Theodosius I (ruled 379-395) speaking of “the one deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity.”[31] The concept of the Trinity was now intact, after years of struggle: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were now considered three Persons sharing one Divine nature, substance, and essence. And, borrowing (and distorting) the “pre-Trinity” phrase of St. Paul, these three Persons were considered, respectively, “above all and through all and in all.”[32]

It is most interesting to note here the candid words of **Julian “the Apostate”** (332-63), the

deeply ascetic, charitable, but short-lived Roman Emperor who, though raised as a devout Christian, turned against it when he saw the murderous behavior of his “Christian” kin. Julian, in a letter to a Christian friend, scorned the worship of the human Jesus and martyrs:

“... You, unfortunately, do not abide by the tradition of the apostles, which in the hands of their successors deteriorated into greater blasphemy. Neither Paul, nor Matthew, nor Luke, nor Mark [nor Peter, James, Jude] had the audacity to say that Jesus is God. But the worthy John, realizing that by that time a vast number of people in many of the Greek, and Italian cities were infected with the disease [of saying that Jesus is God], and hearing, I fancy, that the tombs of Peter and Paul were being worshipped (privately, no doubt, but still worshipped), John, I say, was the first to have the audacity to make this assertion. This evil was inaugurated by John.”[33]

So it is peculiar that a concept which was most probably *never sanctioned by Jesus and never mentioned by any of the New Testament writers save one*, found its way into the Christian faith and came to be one of its central beliefs—indeed, a *sine qua non* for being an orthodox Christian. Among the early mystic theologians, we find **St. Augustine**, Bishop of Hippo (354-430) and **pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite** (most probably a Syrian monk trained at Alexandria, writing between 475-525) making only passing references to the notion of the Trinity (pseudo-Dionysius hardly speaks of it at all), obviously *not* considering it very important for mystical life. And **John Scotus Eriugena** (writing around 850), the next great mystic theologian to appear on the scene, is even quoted by Evelyn Underhill as saying, “The three Persons of the Trinity are less modes of the Divine Substance than modes under which our mind conceives the Divine Substance”—to which Underhill adds, “A stimulating statement of dubious orthodoxy.” (Sure enough, Eriugena’s main work, *De Divisione Naturae*, was condemned as “heretical.”)

However, after **St. Thomas Aquinas** (1226-74) and the other scholastics get through working with it, the concept of the Trinity was fixed once and for all, referring to an “objective” reality, independent of human experience. We then find the Trinity to be a major topic in the consciousness of the majority of Christian mystics. For many of them, the vision of the Trinity becomes their loftiest experience. I might point out here, however, that the descriptions of the mystically- experienced Trinity usually differ noticeably in content from writer to writer.[35]

Given the fact that *none* of the earliest Christian writers have mystical experiences of the Trinity, and that such a specific experience is to be found *nowhere else* in the world’s spiritual traditions, I am tempted to say that the Christian mystics’ vision of the Trinity is a mental construct, a projection from their consciousness, heavily conditioned by orthodox Christian theological doctrines. It might here be argued by some people, as a way of defending the Trinity concept, that the Hindus have a Trinity, thus implying that God actually is Triune in reality. But this Hindu Trinity is very different from the Christian one. For starters, the word the Hindus use is “*trimūrti*”—which means three *forms* or *aspects*, not *persons*. Again, Brahmā, the world-creator aspect of the Absolute Spiritual Reality or *Brahman*, Viṣṇu, the world-preserving aspect, and Śiva, the world destroyer, transformer or absorber, derive their distinguishing characteristics, not so much from how they relate to each other (this is the usual basis for distinction in the Christian Trinity, where the Father timelessly expresses the Son, their mutual love timelessly manifesting the Holy Spirit), but from *how they relate to the world*, namely, as a) creator, b) preserver, and c) destroyer. Indeed, in contrast to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva rarely relate to each other at all; in some accounts in the Hindu *Purānas* they are even considered rivals (but this idea of competition between the three seems to be a reflection of the pettiness of the authors who were devotees from competing cults).

While we are comparing Christianity and Hinduism, it is interesting to note that, just as the Second Person of the Christian “Trinity—namely, the Son, the Logos/Word, the Christ—is said to have incarnated as Jesus, so also Viṣṇu, the second “aspect” of the Hindu *trimūrti*, is said to incarnate—although he has many numbers and types of *Avatāras* or divine Incarnations, not just one. Concerning the supreme type of incarnation (called a “*pūrṇa avatāra*”), there have supposedly been around ten (Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are the most famous; the Buddha is sometimes said to have been

one; more recently, Rāmakṛṣṇa and/or Sāi Bābā were/are considered to be *avatāras*).

Leaving aside the notions of Trinity and Incarnation(s), how do the Christian mystics look at the “simple” nature of God, the ultimate Reality as they conceived this Reality? **Jesus** himself, as we have seen, spoke of God as the Father—quite intimately and informally as *Abba*, akin to “Dad.” Jesus also refers to God as Spirit[36]—not *a* spirit, as some versions of the Bible mistakenly read. This God-as-Spirit must be “worshipped in Spirit and in Truth,” suggesting a very mystical approach to the Divine beyond conventional forms of piety involving mental/emotional praise, bodily ritual, etc. Elsewhere, especially in the parables, Jesus indicates God to be Lord and King, the more common way of speaking of the Divine in Jewish tradition. Neither the Gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, nor *Luke* ever really try to define God. The *Gospel of John* notably speaks of God supra-personally as Light[37] and as Truth[38] and as Love[39]—it was this last definition that no doubt facilitated the Trinity doctrine: for it was argued that love is meaningless without “persons” who love and are loved. The idea of nondual, transpersonal Love was not evident to the early Church fathers. **St. Paul**, the rabbi-turned-Jesus-lover, quoted earlier, also wrote mystically of “One God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:6), “the Father of glory... rich in mercy” (Eph. 1:17, 2:4), etc. For Paul, God is He “in whom we live, move and have our being” (as quoted in Acts 17:28). In the epistle *1 Timothy*, Paul writes of God as “Lord of lords... invisible... the light which no man can approach, whom no man has seen nor can see.” (6:16, 1:17) The author of that strange book capping the New Testament, *Revelations* (not by the same “John” of the John Gospel and epistle) referred to God as “the *Alpha* and the *Omega*,” the first and last (Greek letters), symbolizing the Divine who stands at the beginning and ending of time.

St. Augustine (354-430), one of the most influential “Doctors”/theologians of the Church, was quite effective in making Platonic and Neoplatonic views a main feature of Christian thought at the time (and this stream of thought allowed some very mystical ideas to come into the Church and continue down the ages, even when Aristotle’s non-mystical ideas became dominant in the scholastic period). Augustine mystically had this to say about the nature of God (and note how so many of these ideas “seeded” Meister Eckhart in the 14th century):

“What, then, is my God?... Most high, most hidden, most present, most beautiful, most strong; stable and incomprehensible; unchangeable yet changing all things; never new and never old, yet renewing all things.... ever active and ever at rest, gathering in, yet needing nothing.[42] ... Wonderfully simple and incomunicable[43]... more inward than my inmost self, and superior to my highest being.[44]... God is not... any bodily thing... [but God is] the life of life.[45] ... You fill all things, and you fill them all with your entire self.[46]... You precede all past times in the sublimity of an ever present eternity and you surpass all future times, because they are to come ... Your years neither come nor go... Your years stand all at once, because they are steadfast... Your years are one day, and your day is not each day, but today, because with you today does not give way to tomorrow, nor does it succeed yesterday. With you, today is eternity. Therefore you begot the coeternal, to whom you said, “this day have I begotten you” [An interesting borrowing from Psalms 2:7, where it refers to David]. You have made all times and you are before all times, and not at any time was there no time [for there cannot be a “time” when time is not].[47]... God’s will and power are God himself.”[48] [the Indian sage Śankara would say the same about *Brahman* and its *māyā*-manifesting power; this is *nirguṇa Brahman*, Reality without attributes, which is also *saguṇa Brahman*, Reality with attributes, though *Brahman*’s attributes are not other than itSelf].

It was Augustine who, in a moving passage[49] tells of how he sought for God externally and internally, but all the “things,” or “creatures” he encountered cried out, “He made us”—thereby serving to define God as the supremely transcendent, the Formless which creates all form.

Now let us turn to **pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite**. For centuries he was thought to be an apostle of Paul, and hence was considered orthodox. At the Lateran Council of 649, Pope Martin I appealed to his teachings as authoritative, but would his highly influential writings have been considered acceptable if his true identity as an author of a later era were known? Probably not, and we

would have lost one of the main sources for Western Christian mysticism (Meister Eckhart, Suso, St. John of the Cross, even St. Thomas Aquinas were just a few of those influenced by him).

For pseudo-Dionysius, the highest names for God are “the Perfect,” and “the One” (after Plotinus, who was a great influence on him, and, through him, on the whole mystical Christian tradition). Elsewhere in his *Divine Names*, pseudo-Dionysius states:

“[God] is not This without being That, nor doth He possess this mode of being without that. On the contrary, He is all things as being the cause of them all, and as holding together and anticipating in Himself all the beginnings and all the fulfillments of all things; and He is above them all in that He, anterior to their existence, super-essentially transcends them all. Hence all attributes may be affirmed at once of Him, and yet He is No Thing. He possesses all shape and form, and yet is formless and shapeless, containing beforehand incomprehensibly and transcendently the beginning, middle, and end of all things, and shedding upon them a pure radiance of that one and undifferentiated causality whence all their fairness comes.[50] ... He ...[is] present unto all and everywhere, both in the particular individual and in the Universal Whole, and going out unto all things while yet remaining in Himself. He is both at rest and in motion, and yet is in neither state, nor hath He beginning, middle, or end; He neither inheres in any individual thing, nor is He any individual thing.”[51]

Dionysius is mostly known for his view of God as totally “transcendent,” beyond the space-time universe. Yet the careful reader can find phrases in the above quoted passages which suggest an “immanent” God, a God who “indwells” His creation. (For a more detailed discussion of the concepts “transcendent” and “immanent” see below.) What follows are some quotes expressing only his more familiar idea of the “transcend Godhead.

“...The Super-Essential Godhead is unutterable and nameless.[52] [According to C.E. Rolt, the translator, “Super-Essential” means “Supra-Personal:”] ... the One, the Unknowable, the Super-Essential, the Absolute Good, ... is impossible to describe or to conceive in Its ultimate Nature.[53] ... We... must declare the Unity of the whole single Godhead, which is the One Cause of all things; before all distinctions of One and Many, Part and Whole, Definiteness and Indefiniteness, Finitude and Infinitude.[54] ... we apply the titles of ‘Trinity’ and ‘Unity’ to That which is beyond all titles, expressing under the form of Being That which is beyond Being. But no Unity or Trinity or Number or Oneness or Fecundity or any other thing that either is a creature or can be known to any creature, is able to utter the mystery, beyond all mind and reason, of that Transcendent Godhead which super-essentially surpasses all things. It hath no name, nor can It be grasped by the reason; It dwells in a region beyond us, where our feet cannot tread. Even the title of “Goodness” we do not ascribe to It.”[55]

In his *Mystical Theology*, pseudo-Dionysius continues to take the idea of God into the unthinkable, not to mention insensible, domain:

“... the universal cause transcending all things is neither impersonal nor lifeless, nor irrational nor without understanding: in short, ... It is not a material body, and therefore does not possess outward shape or intelligible form, or quality or quantity, or solid weight, nor has It any local existence which can be perceived by sight or touch; nor has It the power of perceiving or being perceived nor does It suffer... any change or decay or division, or deprivation, or ebb and flow, or anything else which the senses can perceive. None of these things can be either identified with It or attributed unto It.[56] Once more, ascending yet higher, we maintain that It is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason, or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can It be described by the reason or perceived by the understanding, since It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness, or equality, or inequality, and since It is not immovable nor in motion, or at rest, and has no power, and is not power or light, and does not live, and is not life, nor is It personal essence, or eternity, or time; nor can It be gasped by the understanding, since It is not knowledge or truth; nor is It kingship or wisdom; nor is It one, nor is It unity, nor is It Godhead or Goodness; nor is It a Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not Sonship or Fatherhood; nor is It any other thing such as we or any other being can have knowledge

of; nor does It belong to the category of non-existence or to that of existence; nor do existent beings know It as It actually is, nor does It know them as they actually are [Rolt notes: “It knows only Itself, and there knows all things in their Super -Essence—*sub specie aeternitatis*”]; nor can the reason attain to It to name It or to know It; nor is It darkness, nor is It light, or error or truth; nor can any affirmation or negation [even these negations, one would think] apply to It; for while applying affirmations or negations to those orders of being that come next to It, we apply not unto It either affirmation or negation, inasmuch as It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature—free from every limitation and beyond them all.[57]

Theodosius I had destroyed the famous library at Alexandria in 385 A.D., a library that supposedly contained works documenting the thought of the Eastern traditions, and so it is probable that pseudo-Dionysius was never exposed to any of this thought, although there just might have been a stray book somewhere or a wandering sage (Hindu? Neoplatonic?) that revealed to him a notion of an entirely transcendent Absolute, a Reality about which one can only say, “*neti, neti,*” “not this, not that,” as India’s most ancient wisdom text, the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* states in its *via negativa* way of discarding all but the purely, absolutely spiritual Divine Reality. Perhaps pseudo-Dionysius experienced God this way for himself, without Eastern influence. Whatever the case, his writings on the nature of God are probably the most profound in all of Christianity, with the possible exception of Meister Eckhart, who, in fact, was very much influenced by the former.

After pseudo-Dionysius had definitively expressed the *via negativa* for Christian tradition, we find the next great mystic theologian to be the ninth century Irish mystic/theologian **John Scotus Eriugena**—“the greatest mind of early medieval Christianity.” Living in France, teaching and writing at the Carolingian court of King Charles the Bald, Eriugena translated pseudo-Dionysius from Greek into Latin, a translation work of major significance for the later history of mysticism in western Christianity. Eriugena’s entire theology boiled down to the following purely mystical insight: “The Cause of all things can only be known to *exist*, but by no inference from the creature can we understand *what* it is.”[58] (See my long treatment of Eriugena elsewhere at this website.[59])

There are no articulate mystics, or mystical theologians, for that matter, appearing on the scene in Christianity for a few centuries after Eriugena’s time, so the accounts of God’s nature tend to be the work of arid theologians. The mystics of this time are mainly content with leading an inconspicuous monastic discipline of prayer and contemplation, eschewing theology and philosophy. St. Bernard (1091-1153), for instance, borrowing from the *Song of Songs*, popularized the use of the poetic term “Bridegroom” to refer to God in His relationship with the soul. This forsaking of theology and emphasis on God as the Lover of the soul subsequently becomes common for many Christian mystics, most of whom equate the Bridegroom with Christ.

Perhaps the most notable mystic to emerge on the scene around this time is **St. Francis of Assisi** (1182-1226), founder of the Franciscan Order, and evidently the first Christian to manifest the *stigmata*, the wounds of Christ. Supposedly only having the New Testament as his literary influence, Francis’ praises of God suggest that he related to a most Personal, Immanent God:

“You alone are holy, O Lord God... You are strong. You are full of majesty. You are the most high. You are the Lord God, threefold and one, all that is good. .. You are charity and love. You are wisdom. You are humility. You are patience. You are assurance. You are restfulness. You are gladness. You are justice and temperance. You are all the wealth desirable. You are beauty. You are gentleness. You protect. You guard and defend. You are fortitude. You are refreshment. You are our hope. You are our faith. You are our great relish. You are our eternal life.”[60]

Francis had likely never heard of the “*via negativa*” as a way of expressing the nature of God, and so he writes in a solely positive vein about his Lord, strongly influenced by the post-Crusades medieval tradition of chivalry and romantic love, brought back by Crusaders from the Muslim Middle East. We may examine Francis’ description of God and not regard it as being very “sophisticated,” but here we learn that intellectual cleverness about the nature of God and love of God do

not always go together, and, if we are to have a choice between one of the two, it seems that love of God would be infinitely more precious. It is obvious from this simple passage of Francis and from a study of his life, that he had that love of God—in a most profound way.

The renowned Dominican priest, **St. Thomas Aquinas** (1226-74)—in private life more a mystic than seems evident from his scholastic writings—was said to have been much influenced by the Neoplatonic stream of thought coming through pseudo-Dionysius, but Thomas was influenced even more by Aristotle, who had recently been translated from Greek into Latin. (Why the scholastics revered the ancient “pagan” philosophers so much is still something of a mystery.) Accordingly, Aquinas’ formulations of God integrate the Aristotelian notion of God as the First Cause and the Old Testament idea of God as the “I Am Who Am.” Aquinas speaks of God as He “Whose essence is its very act of existing.”[61] God, we read in Thomas, is “the First Being, which is existence only; the First Cause.[62] ... the first substance.[63]... a supernatural agent of infinite power.[64] ... pure act, having no mixture of potency. Consequently He is pure and absolute goodness.[65]... God possesses all perfections in His very act of existing.”[66]

Toward the end of his life, St. Thomas had an especially powerful mystical experience that led him to abandon his scholarly writings with this statement, issued December 6, 1273: “I can do no more, I can do no more. Such things have been revealed to me that everything I have written seems to me *as so much straw*.”[67] One wonders how St. Thomas, after having had this transformative experience, would have replied to any questions about God’s nature—with poetry? silence?

After St. Thomas’ rather dry formulations of God’s nature quoted above, it is a noteworthy contrast to quote the Franciscan “Mistress of Theologians,” **Blessed Angela of Foligno** (1248-1309), who wrote these words, echoing the thought of pseudo-Dionysius:

“Those persons who do best know God, who is infinite and unspeakable, are those who do the least to presume to speak of Him, considering that all which they do say of Him, or can possibly say, is as nothing compared with that which He truly is. ... Because God is so much greater than the mind and all other things, we are not able by any means whatsoever to measure or speak or think of Him.”[68]

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), in his masterful poem, the *Divine Comedy*, God is “there where every ‘where’ and ‘when’ are centered.[69]... the First Love[70]... the Light Supreme[71]... the Living Light[72] ... the Eternal Light[73].”

The Dominican friar-scholar-mystic, **Meister Eckhart** (1260-c.1327), was the most popular preacher of his day and also an eminently *holy* man—but one who would never be canonized because of the vicious charge of heresy thrown at him a few years before his death (the entire matter evidently instigated by some jealous, anti-mystical Franciscans). With Eckhart we often find, as we did with pseudo-Dionysius, language straining to express the “absoluteness” of God, who is really beyond all language. The many passages following will provide a feeling for Eckhart’s loftiness of intuitive, mystical theology, a theology which aims at the utter transformation of the individual, the complete negating of egocentricity and divinizing of the human being. Let us begin with Eckhart’s honest opinion concerning God’s nature:

“It is God’s nature to be without a nature. To think of his goodness, or wisdom or power is to hide the essence of him, to obscure it With thoughts about him. Even one single thought or consideration will cover it up.”... And Eckhart also counseled: “We ought not to have or let ourselves be satisfied with the God we have thought of, for when the thought slips the mind, that god slips with it. What we want is rather the reality of God, exalted far above any human thought or creature.” [74]

Eckhart famously (or notoriously, depending on your viewpoint) distinguished between *God* and *the Godhead* (*Gottheit*), a distinction that is made explicit as early as pseudo-Dionysius, and possibly earlier (there are certainly hints of it in Plotinus), but which Eckhart took to the limit: “God and the Godhead are as different from each other as heaven and earth. ... God waxes and wanes... God *becomes* as phenomena express him.... God acts. The Godhead does not. It has nothing to do and there is nothing going on in it. It never is on the lookout for something to do [God *is*].

The difference between God and the Godhead is the difference between action and non-action.”[75]

This last passage helps to explain this next one, typically Eckhart:

“... Before there were creatures, God was not god, but, rather, he was what he was [meaning, no doubt, the Godhead]. When creatures came to be and took on creaturely being, then God was no longer God as he is in himself [i.e., as the Godhead], but god as he is with creatures.”[76]

Eckhart evidently did not use capital and lower case “G’s” to distinguish his meaning; imagine the last passage with, say, only capital “G’s” and one can begin to understand why he was so popular yet also considered so dangerous by the non-mystic priests, Pope and bishops who chanced to hear or read his views.

What is God, then, in himself, that is, as the Godhead? Eckhart defines “It” in this manner:

“... the still desert, into which no distinction ever crept—neither the Father, the Son, nor the Holy Spirit. This core is a simple stillness, which is unmoved itself but by whose immobility all things are moved and all receive life.”[77]

Eckhart tends, naturally, to define the Godhead (which he sometimes confusingly refers to as God) negatively, since “man cannot know what God is, even though he be ever so well aware of what God is not,”[78] and “because God’s being is transcendent, He is beyond all knowledge.”[79] Eckhart asks:

“How, then, shall I love him? Love him as he is, a not-god, a not-spirit, apersonal, formless. Love him as he is the One, pure, sheer, and limpid, in whom there is no duality; for we are to sink eternally from negation to negation in the One. May God help us to do it. Amen.”[80] [Note the use of Plotinus’ and pseudo-Dionysius’ term “One” as the name for God.]

“There is nothing like the Divine Being, for in him there is neither idea nor form.”[81]

“[In] the desert of the Godhead, ... both activity and forms are no more.”[82]

“God is something that must transcend being. Anything which has being, date, or location does not belong to God, for he is above them all and although he is in all creatures, yet he is more than all of them... . When I say that God is not being and that he is above being, I have not denied him being, but, rather, I have dignified and exalted being in him.”[83]

“The authorities say that God is a being, an intelligent being who knows everything. But I say that God is neither a being nor intelligent and he does not ‘know’ either this or that. God is free of everything and therefore he is everything... . Therefore I pray God that He may quit me of god, for unconditioned being is above god and all distinctions.”[84]

“All distinctions are alien to God. There is no distinction in either the divine natures or persons... . God is one in all ways and according to every reasoning, so that in him no plurality is to be found... he who sees any distinction clearly does not see God. For God is One, without number and above number, and he is not numbered with anything.” ... “*Ego*, the word ‘I,’ is proper to no one but God alone in his uniqueness.” [85]

Echoing Augustine on God’s timelessness, Eckhart writes:

“God gives nothing outside himself; he always gives from eternity and not in time. God has nothing to do with time but he gives and works only from eternity.”[86]

“God is not in time and is not affected by time but his activity is his substance. ... Therefore, God is not in time, just as being is not that which has no being; for God is being. In fact, this is the whole reason why time does not exist—because God, that is, being, is not in time—just as he is not in evil, privation, negation, sin, and in parts which do not exist as such beyond and outside the whole. For such things as have no being are recognized by not knowing them.”[87] [It should be noted that Eckhart sometimes speaks of God as being, and sometimes as beyond being.]

In addition to defining God as the transcendent Godhead according to the *via negativa*, Eckhart came down, so to speak, from the philosophical heights and offered some positive metaphors—often quite poetic—to suggest God’s immanent nature:

“God is the great self-sharer.[88] ... a pure clear light.[89]... perpetually verdant and flowering with all the joy and glory that is in him.[90]... God is love.[91]... The Kingdom of God is God himself with all his fullness... . God is One and lives within his own pure being, which contains

nothing else. All alloy must be done away with. He himself is a pure presence in which there is neither this nor that [a little of the “*via negativa*” has crept in here—a true mystic, he blends both views], because what is in God is God![92] God recognizes only being, knows only being; God loves only his being, thinks only being [how could it be otherwise?].[93] ... God is Mind in all things and is more intimate to each than anything is to itself.”[94]

Along this line, the great mystic preacher Eckhart revealed the secret intimacy of God for anyone who would realize God by becoming utterly “dead” to themselves, “disinterested” in anything but God, completely emptied out, self-naughted and submitted to God, “lost in God”:

“Consider that God is near you, for great harm comes of feeling that God is distant. For let a man go away or come back: God never leaves.” “Some people imagine that they are going to see God as if he were standing yonder and they here, but it is not to be so. God and I: we are one.” “God’s is-ness is my is-ness.” “Wherever God is, there is the soul, and wherever the soul is, there is God!” “God is near to us but we are far from him; God is within, we are without; God is at home, we are abroad.” “Nothing is as near to me as God is. God is nearer to me than I am to myself.” “The core of God is also my core; and the core of my soul [is] the core of God’s.” “Our Lord Jesus Christ besought his Father that we should be made one—not merely united—but joined together in him and with him in the one single One.... God is that same One that I am, the One I create in my nature by remaining in the bosom and heart of the Father.... God loves One to one... He gathers all up into unity, the unity which all creatures really seek, even the meanest of His creatures.”[95]

Eckhart could use the “*via negativa*” against itself to say something positive: “The Divine One is a negation of negations and a desire of desires. What does ‘One’ mean? Something to which nothing is to be added.... In God there is no deprivation nor yet negation, since there is fullness of being.[96] He is that One who denies of every *other* that it is anything except himself.”[97]

Meister Eckhart also gives us a “happy” God: “God enjoys himself. His own inner enjoyment is such that it includes his enjoyment of all creatures not as creatures, but as God.[98] ... truly, God plays and laughs in good deeds...[99] [This suggests the Indian idea of *līlā*—the Divine sporting and playing—which the Hindu *bhaktas* wrote and sung so much about.]

We thus find in Meister Eckhart a many-aspected God, who can really only be properly referred to by using *all* the possible modes of expression: positive and negative definitions, metaphors, and paradoxes. Incidentally, I might add that Eckhart was, in addition to being a theologian of the highest rank, a profoundly insightful psychologist who knew of the many pitfalls and mistakes the mystic is liable to on his path toward God-realization. A treatment of this side of Eckhart, beyond what is hinted at in the above-quoted passages, would go way beyond the scope of this paper.[100] However, I do mention it here because he deserves to be better known in this respect.

The **Blessed Henry Suso** (c.1295-1365), a leading disciple of Eckhart’s in the “Rhineland school of mystics,” reiterated the distinction between Godhead and God. Speaking of the former, he wrote, “... in this unfathomable abyss the Trinity of the Persons is engulfed in Their unity, and all multiplicity is in a certain manner lost to itself. Nor is there any alien activity therein, so to speak, but only a silent, hovering darkness.”[101]

In the same place, Suso states: “Godhead and God are all one, and yet the Godhead does not act or beget, but God acts and begets. And this is merely due to the difference in the terms, according to our [limited] mode of intelligence. Basically, they are one. For in the Divine Nature there is nothing but essence and reciprocal relations; and the latter add nothing at all to the essence; indeed they are the essence, although they are distinct from that to which they relate, that is, from their object. For the Divine Nature, considered in Its basic ground, is by no means simpler in Itself than the Father, considered in the same nature, or any other of the Persons. Thou allowest thyself to be merely deceived by thy imagination if thou dost consider all this in the manner in which it occurs in the creatures. But in itself it is one and simple.”[102]

Notice in this last passage how Suso, who tried to interpret Eckhart in a more orthodox fashion, was compelled to “maneuver” philosophically in order to reconcile the unnatural, but orthodox

doctrine of the Trinity with the more natural, mystical notion of the Godhead. Apparently referring to the Godhead, he daringly speaks of God as “this unfathomable Being ... one might call this Being an eternal Nothing.”[103]

He clarifies such a Dionysian statement by saying, “The eternal Nothing that is meant here, and in all true reasoning, is nothing, not because it does not exist, but because of its transcendent actuality. This ‘Nothing’ has in itself no distinctions at all, yet from Him, since He generates come all the ordered distinctions of all things.”[104]

Referring to God as immanent, Suso declares Him to be “a living, essential, subsisting intelligence, which understands itself, and exists itself in itself, and it is itself. Now I cannot express it any more plainly. And I call it the eternal uncreated Truth.”[105]

Another disciple of Eckhart’s, the Flemish mystic, the **Blessed Jan Van Ruysbroeck** (1293-1381) claimed that “The exalted and supernatural unity of the Divine nature, where the Father and the Son possess Their nature in the unity of the Holy Spirit, above all the comprehension and understanding of which we are capable, in the naked being of our spirit; in this exalted stillness God exceeds every thought of His creatures. This exalted unity of the Divine nature is a living fertile unity. For out of this same unity the everlasting Word is evermore born of the Father... and out of [the] mutual contemplation of the Father and the Son in Their eternal illumination, there flows an eternal satisfaction, an unfathomable love, and that is the Holy Spirit.”[106]

Saying that God is “beyond comprehension and cognition,” and speaking of the “depth of the Godhead which no understanding can touch in created light,” he nevertheless added, “but desire and love go in where understanding is not admitted,”[107]. And here the soul “shall observe [sic] and contemplate that it is all simplicity and unity, heights unattainable and depths unfathomable; incomprehensible depth and everlasting length; a dark silence and a vast desert; the everlasting rest of all the saints, and the enjoyment of God and of His saints in all eternity. And still man can see many a wonder in the boundless sea of the Divinity. Even though, because of the crudeness of our senses, we make sensual images of that which we show forth, yet still in truth it is observed within and seen to be riches immeasurable and without manner. But because man must communicate it, so he attributes to it many kinds of images and manners... [Ruysbroeck then goes on to list, rather arbitrarily, the attributes of each of the Persons of the Trinity.] All this is seen and contemplated singly and without any division, in a simple nature of the Divinity... . The incomprehensible riches and exaltation and the mildness and liberality with which the Divine Nature makes itself common: all this makes man to be astonished.”[108]

Ruysbroeck also gives us a very dynamic view of God [Eckhart would want to say that this refers to God, not the Godhead]:

“... God is a sea, ebbing and flowing, ceaselessly flowing into each one of His elect, according to the needs and worth of each. And in His ebbing He draws back again all men to whom He has given in heaven and in earth, with all that they have and all of which they are capable.”[109]

Elsewhere, Ruysbroeck says that God is “simplicity,”[110] “a single deepness,”[111] “a living depth,”[112] and he declares that “the delectable unity [of God] is a darkness”[113], keeping alive that old Dionysian idea. Bringing in the element of God’s timelessness, he writes, “God contemplates himself in an eternal instant.”[114] On the God/Godhead distinction, we find him saying simply, “God according to the Persons is Eternal Work, but according to the Essence and Its perpetual stillness He is Eternal Rest.”[114]

One of the loveliest accounts of the Godhead to appear in Christian literature is this passage of Ruysbroeck’s: “... the infinite Undifferentiation of the Godhead is so dark and so naked of all image, that it conceals within itself all the divine qualities and works, all the attributes of the Persons, in the all-enfolding richness of the Essential Unity, and brings about a divine fruition in the Abyss of the Ineffable. And here there is a death in fruition, and a melting and dying into the nudity of Pure Being; where all the Names of God, and all conditions, and all the living images which are reflected in the mirror of divine truth, are absorbed into the Ineffable Simplicity, the Absence of image and of knowledge. For in this limitless Abyss of Simplicity, all things are embraced in the

bliss of fruition; but the Abyss itself remains uncomprehended, except by the essential Unity. The Persons and all that which lives in God must give place to this. For there is nought else here but an eternal rest in the fruitive embrace of an outpouring love; and this is the wayless Being that all interior souls have chosen above all other things. This is the dim silence where all lovers lose themselves.”[116]

In the late 14th century, the **anonymous English author** of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in a lesser known work of his (assuming that “he” was a male writer), *The Book of Privy Counsel*, wrote these words:

“... there is no name or feeling nor regard which agrees better, nor even so well, with eternity, which God is, as does that which may be had and seen and felt in the blind and loving regarding of [the] word ‘Is.’ For if you say ‘Good,’ or ‘Fair Lord,’ or ‘Sweet,’ ‘Merciful,’ or ‘Just,’ ‘Wise,’ or ‘Omniscient,’ ‘Mighty’ or ‘Almighty,’ ‘Knowledge’ or ‘Wisdom,’ ‘Power’ or ‘Strength,’ ‘Love’ or ‘Divine Love,’ or whatever else you may say about God, all of it is hidden and preserved in this little word ‘Is.’ For it is proper to Him only to be all that all these are. And if you were to accumulate a hundred thousand such sweet words as these, ‘Good,’ ‘Fair’ and all the rest, still you would not depart from this word ‘Is’; and if you were to recite them all, you would add nothing to it, and if you were to name none of them, you would take nothing from it. Therefore be... blind in your loving regard of the being of your God... without any laborious intellectual investigations for some quality proper to His being....[117]

So here we find a master of Christian contemplative prayer referring us, like Meister Eckhart, back to God’s ultimate nature as pure *Is-ness*, a simple, intuitive way of putting Aquinas’ scholastic idea of “*esse*” as God’s basic property.

Another English mystic, the anchoress **Julian of Norwich** (c.1343 to after 1413), brought the *feminine* element into God (although this element never really caught on in Christianity) by saying

“As verily as God is our Father, so verily God is our Mother.... Our high Father God Almighty, which is Being, ... willed that the Second Person should become our Mother. And thus is Jesus our Very Mother in Nature by virtue of our first making; and He [sic] is our Very Mother in Grace, by taking our nature made. All the fair working, and all the sweet natural office of dear worthy Motherhood is impropriated to the Second Person....[118]

Julian had experienced a remarkable series of fifteen visions from the Lord on May 8 (or 15), 1373, while suffering from a severe heart attack, followed the next day by a final vision, and then another revelation fifteen years later—the crux of which is this: God is all-good and almighty, and God will surprise humanity in the most glorious way at the end of time by turning all sin and evil into good, thereby redeeming and saving all souls. “And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

In most of the subsequent mystical Christian writings of the medieval Renaissance period, whether Catholic or Protestant, God’s nature either is discussed in quite unoriginal terms, or, as is more usually the case, it is rarely referred to at all, giving way instead to a total emphasis on the soul’s relation to God. Indeed, the mystics have always tended to be more concerned with relating mystically to God rather than with engaging in dry theological analyses of God’s nature as He exists independent of human experience. Hence, more and more we begin to see God referred to simply as “God,” with no attempt to define His nature, or He is referred to in quaint metaphoric fashion—for instance, as the “Spouse,” “Companion,” “King,” or “His Majesty” of **St. Teresa of Avila** (1515-82), the great Spanish Carmelite reformer/mystic.

St. John of the Cross (1542-91), a follower of Teresa’s (and who seems to have surpassed her in his mastery of the contemplative way to God-realization), is one of the few people from this period worth quoting on the subject of God’s nature. John’s works, which have been called “the culminating peak of Christian mystical literature,”[119] abound with ardently loving (almost sensuous), exceedingly poetic phrases in glorification of the immanently-felt Beloved. God is “the Living Flame of Love,”[120] “the Divine Fire,”[121] “silent music, sounding solitude,”[122] “a fountain,”[123] “an eternal spring [of water],”[124] “friend, brother, and spouse.”[125]

In addition to giving us a God of such aesthetic loveliness and intimate lovableness, John also, rather surprisingly, shows us a God who was more familiar to Old Testament writers, a God who gets “angry” with those who lead His souls astray—in this case, those “spiritual directors” who give deluding instructions to the people under their care.[126] We note that John was an authority on the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, and so he would be most familiar with this idea of God, which only very rarely appears in the writings of the Christian mystics. Of course, great contemplative that he was, John also realized God to be that “pure and naked essence”[127] which transcends the faculties:

“God’s being cannot be grasped by the intellect, appetite, imagination, or any other sense, nor can it be known in this life. The most that can be felt and tasted in this life is infinitely distant from God and the pure possession of Him.”[128]

“... God is darkness to our intellect.[129] ... Nothing delightful and sweet in which one can rejoice is God. For, since God is inapprehensible to the faculties, He cannot be the object of the appetites and satisfactions of the will.[130]... God ... is incomprehensible and transcends all things.[131] God... has no image, form, nor figure.[132]... God allows nothing else to dwell together with Him.[133]... God is of another being than His creatures, in that He is infinitely far from them all.”[134]

This transcendence and inaccessibility of God is masterfully bridged for St. John through the miracle of “emptied,” “naked” love, whereby the soul comes to “participate” in God,[135] and only in this way does it thus come to share in God’s ultimately ineffable nature.

Another person worth quoting here on God’s nature is the “greatest and most original of Protestant mystics”[136]—**Jacob Boehme** (1574-1624), One of the difficulties with Boehme is that his thought, in addition to being obscure in many places, shows significant changes over time, even reversing itself in some areas. In the *Von der Gnadenwahl*, one of his later works (1623), which we can presumably take to represent his more mature thought, Boehme says of God:

He is not this and not that, neither evil nor good, love nor anger. It cannot be said of God that he has distinction in Himself, for He is in Himself natureless, emotionless, creatureless.”[137]

Other terms Boehme uses for this God-as-Transcendent-Absolute are “Eternal Nothingness,”[138] “Great Mystery,” “Stillness without Being (*Stille ohne Wesen*),” and “Incomprehensible Nothingness”—and this is a man who supposedly had never been exposed to the “Godhead” ideas of pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, et al. But lest we get the idea that Boehme considered God mostly according to the *via negativa* (which is evidently what Protestant mystic William Law read into Boehme’s works in translating them into English, or so says Brinton[139]), we should know that, for Jacob Boehme, God was more often viewed as a positive, vital, dynamic force, and spoken of in those very terms: God is the “ground” (*ungrund*), the dynamic, Absolute, Abysmal Will, out of which the Father, Son and Spirit are timelessly generated as this Will “goes out” and then “reflects” on Itself. The issue of the Divine Will is actually much more complex than this—with Trinities within Trinities—but to explore any further would be to go beyond the scope of this paper, so we will move on. It is really not necessary to elucidate the views of later Protestant mystics on the issue at hand, since they are more concerned with the issue of how God dwells immanently in the soul as the “Divine Light.” When referring to God in Himself (i.e., as the Godhead) they simply reiterate the Dionysian view that He is the Divine Darkness, totally beyond description, etc. When thinking of God in terms of the Trinity, they do not differ significantly from the Catholic teaching.

What do the Eastern Orthodox Christian mystics have to say about God’s nature? Actually, they say very little. They tend to follow more closely the feelings of the early Desert Fathers (like the Western post-scholastic mystics), who maintained that God’s nature is not really to be discussed theologically, but loved and united with in perfect union. Hence the Eastern mystics were virtually unanimous in agreeing with pseudo-Dionysius that God’s essence (which is, to us, the Super-essence) is transcendent, unknowable, ineffable, “dark.” However, these Eastern Orthodox mystics were also much agreed that the basic way to characterize God’s nature as it manifests immanently to the human faculties is, simply, “uncreated Light.” That the manifest energy or power

of God was to be fundamentally considered as Light was an idea which became official doctrine at the Synod of Constantinople in 1351, largely due to the efforts of the Eastern Church's dominant theologian/mystic, **Gregory Palamas** (c. 1296-1359), a monk at holy Mt. Athos in Greece, who was also the foremost upholder of the Hesychasm school of mystics. On this idea of the manifest God expressing basically as Light, it is interesting to note that modern physics considers the entire universe, i.e., "God's power manifest as creation," to be merely a play of light, although they are not decided whether this is "uncreated" or "created" light (in other words, they are undecided whether the primordial matter that exploded in the "Big Bang" was created or uncreated).

I might mention that, while the Eastern Orthodox mystics accepted the doctrine of the Trinity, their experience of the Divine Light usually brought with it an annihilation of the distinctions among the Divine Persons, so we find few accounts of visions in which the Trinity *form-ally* appeared to these mystics. I might also add that the crucified form of Christ, a prominent object of contemplation for many Western mystics, such as Suso, St. John of the Cross, et al, was/is only rarely found in the Eastern tradition (St. Tychon [1724-83] is the notable exception, and he evidently was influenced by some Western ideas that had by that time filtered Eastwards).

Throughout the preceding section, the idea of God's immanence and transcendence has come up again and again. I have tended to use the terms loosely, often in the same manner in which they are employed by the translators and commentators who write about these mystics. But there are some inconsistencies which should be brought to light and clarified.

To begin with, it is commonly stated that the "transcendent God" is the God who is "beyond" the universe of space/time (this is a standard dictionary definition), whereas the "immanent God" is the God who "indwells" the universe of space/time. In terms of the spatial aspect, this implies that the immanent God is "here" while the transcendent God is—"there"?? But "there" seems to refer to a place, and the transcendent God is "beyond" place/space. This term "beyond" implies spatial removal, so it is probably better to say that the transcendent God is *spaceless*, not "beyond" space. Now I would venture to say that to be truly "*here*" is to be spaceless, and would therefore maintain that if God is spaceless, then He could be said to be Here. My reasons for saying that "here" is spaceless follow from the realization that "here" denotes *this immediate point*—and a point is, strictly speaking, spaceless, without extension (i.e., without extension over into a "there"). So it seems that the *transcendent God* could really be said to be *no different than the immanent God*, in this sense of their both being "here," "spaceless."

In the same way, if the transcendent God is said to be *timeless* (not "beyond time"), then He can easily be said to be "now," that is, to be indwelling this present moment. And in doing so, He would be no different than the immanent God, who indwells this moment. Again, my reason for saying that the present moment, "now," is timeless is because it is devoid of any "past" or "future" which could extend it along a conceptual time-line. Another reason for saying this is that time is a figment created by memory. The body, after all, knows no such thing as a "past" or a "future," but only *now*. And it knows this "now" in a timeless way. So we see that, again, the transcendent God, seems, by this way of explanation, to be none other than the immanent God. Is this clear?

Actually, what I have done in the foregoing argument is simply to indicate that, contrary to popular belief, there is no such reality as space/time outside of our conventional way of perceiving and talking, for every place is a "here" and every moment is a "now" and, when one penetrates further, "here" is revealed to be spaceless, and "now" is found to be timeless. Hence to make a distinction between a transcendent God and an immanent God on the basis of one's "going beyond" space/time and the other's "indwelling" space/time is a fallacious distinction, because, as we have just seen, *space/time is an illusion*. This implies that, in the absolute here/now, God has no distinguishable attributes or aspects, which in turn means that the Trinity concept, or Eckhart's God who "waxes and wanes," etc., is human illusion. If there is no way to identify the *transcendent God* and the *immanent God* as distinct except within the framework of the illusion woven by our thought, then, similarly, there is also no way to distinguish the Godhead and God, except as their differences

be products of our illusion.

What does all of this suggest? Simply that there is no real difference between Godhead and God, except in conventional thought. Suso was right: Godhead and God are one. God is non-dual.

It seems to me that a more useful way of distinguishing our experiences is to speak of the “*unmanifest, formless* God” and the “*manifest God with form*,” *nirguṇa brahman* and *saguṇa brahman* (the Absolute without attributes and the Absolute with attributes) as the Vedānta mystics of India would say. Here we can maintain that the “Godhead” is unmanifest, formless and without attributes, while “God” is manifest, has form, and has attributes in the sense of, say, being three distinct Persons who relate dynamically (i.e., they “act,” as Eckhart would say) toward creation in different manners, as “light,” “knowledge,” “love, etc. Of course, in line with the argument stated above concerning the illusoriness of space/time, we can know that the whole experience of manifest forms is an illusion from the viewpoint of the Absolute Infinite/Eternal Here/Now—for to perceive any “forms” one must utilize memory to define them, project them “out there” and then sustain them “over time” so that they can register in consciousness and be noticeable.

That this entire experience of forms is an illusion is borne out not only by experiments in the psychology of perception, but is also indicated by the testimony of many mystics who in their relationship with the manifest God, penetrate that manifest form of God, thereby realizing the spaceless/timeless domain that is God’s essential formlessness. Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, John of the Cross, and Jacob Boehme are just some of those who have related this very experience. Along this line, we can recall here that Jesus himself never spoke of the “Father” as having a form or being manifest or having any attributes; so it may just be that it is this Father-God who is the Godhead into whom the mystics’ awareness merged and become one with in union or “losing one’s life,” as Jesus stated it. The aspects of the “Persons” and/or the “light” which the Eastern Orthodox mystics and others experience as God’s “manifest form” may simply be a somewhat illusory prelude to His formless “darkness”—which is actually not a darkness per se, but an absence of both dark and light.

Having said all of this, let me now compare the Christian conception of God (manifest and unmanifest) with conceptions of the ultimate reality as they occur in other traditions. “We have already just seen how the Hindu Vedānta makes a distinction between *nirguṇa brahman* (attributeless Reality) and *saguṇa brahman* (Reality with attributes), and how this parallels the distinction between unmanifest Godhead and manifest God (and we have already compared the Trinity and Incarnation ideas). A further contrast is on the subject of God’s attributes (power, goodness, etc.)—whether they are intrinsic or extrinsic to Him. Augustine and Aquinas, in statements earlier quoted (see notes 48, 61, and 66) have maintained that God *is* His attributes; this turns out to be equivalent to the *advaita* (non-dual) *vedānta* position of sage Śankara (c.700 CE), which holds that *Brahman*’s attributes are not other than *Brahman* (compare this with the *viśiṣṭadvaita* “qualified nondual” or *dvaita* “dualist” positions, which hold that *Brahman*’s attributes are actually “other” than *Brahman*, independent of it).

Of course, for the Hindus, *Brahman* is not considered to be “personal,” whereas most Christians would tend to want to view their God as personal. However, the Christian mystics who realize the Godhead assert, like it or not, that It is *sans* Persons, before/beyond Persons. It may help here to clarify the word “*person*”: it derives from the Latin “*Persona*,” the “mask” through (*per*) which the Roman actor sounds (*sonare*) his voice. Like the Greek actors before him, the person or mask is what he “puts on” to present himself to the audience. Therefore, when we speak of the “Three Persons of the Trinity,” or even just of the “Father” as a “Person,” we can be said to be speaking of the “masks” which God wears or puts on so that we may perceive Him. It is probably more the case that we impose these masks on God rather than God’s putting them on for Himself. *God seems to want us to be “one” with Him, as Jesus was, and not to be standing apart from Him, merely looking at the mask we have put on Him. So the terms “personal God” and “non-personal Brahman” should not really be considered irreconcilable.* “Personality” may just be said to be an attribute which the

Absolute can be adorned with for the sake of His devotees who prefer to perceive God as a person. A highly respected modern Indian sage, Nisargadatta Mahārāj, has said, in answer to the question, “Is God a person?” “As long as you think yourself to be a person, He too is a person. When you are all, you see Him as all.”[140]

The sagely Buddha Siddhartha 2500 years ago claimed to have “realized the all,” so to speak, the transcendent, thereby surpassing the Hindu gods, including the creator-god Brahmā, in spiritual status, and so he did not emphasize the importance of worship of a creator god or divine person. He also transcended the experience of light, which he considered to be a temporary phenomenon that one experiences on the path of purification and which one should not get hung up on because it is only a “pseudo-*nirvāṇa*.” His super-personal, formless *nirvāṇa* (*nibbāna* in the original Pali), long considered to be atheistic in formulation, is actually strikingly similar to the mystical Christian idea of the unmanifest, formless Godhead, in that *nirvāṇa* is “an Unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded...”[141] “Where is no-thing, where naught is grasped, this is ... nirvana...”[142] We should, however, be aware that the early Buddhist idea of *nirvāṇa* refers more to a psychological/“pneumatological” state rather than to an ontological [philosophical] one, that is, some kind of metaphysical “entity.” Later, the Mahāyāna Buddhists, led by Nāgārjuna, came up with the metaphysical concept of *śūnya* (or *śūnyatā*), “voidness” or “emptiness,” which is very similar to the Godhead concept, although it too has sometimes been interpreted merely as a psychological state, wherein all concepts have been “emptied” from the awareness. When used philosophically, it has a wider application than the “Godhead” concept, in that it also applies to the world of *samsāra*. Interestingly, perhaps due to Western influence, a concept of a Personal, Divine Buddha, Amitabha (Infinite Light) or Amitayus (Infinite Life), arose in the 2nd-3rd cent. CE (Nāgārjuna gave the concept his sanction and thus served to popularize it) and strongly persists today in the *Jodo-shin shu* school of Buddhism in Japan.

Ancient contemplative Taoism (expressed in the *Tao Te Ching* and in the *Chuang-tzu*, etc.) had no real conception of a Personal Lord, but their idea of the un-nameable Tao is akin to the Godhead concept. The Tao begets one, two, three, and then begets all things, implying that, in itself, it is not a thing, it is unmanifest.[143]

The Sūfīs’ view of Allāh holds that He is the non-dual God, Absolute Being, the Sole Reality, who is manifest as creation; this manifestation as creation, however, is considered “relative being,” real only in that it is a manifestation of God, illusory otherwise (this is the exact same idea as Śaṅkara concerning the world as “*māyā*”). Whether Allāh is more like the Godhead or the Personal God of Christianity is a hard question to answer, since the Sūfīs are not always consistent in how they speak of Him. In the *Korān*[144] we read of Allāh’s “Face,” implying a personal God, a God with form, but the constant reference to Allāh as “absolute Being” implies that He is essentially formless, unmanifest. For what it is worth, translations of Sufi theological works read that Allāh is both “Transcendent” and “Immanent,” probably meaning that He is both Formless in Himself and with form as perceived by man, albeit man, paradoxically enough, does not have a reality independent of Him. I note here that the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Divine Incarnation (and the Hindu *Avatāra*/Incarnation ideal) were totally rejected as outright blasphemy by Prophet Muḥammad and the Sūfīs after him.

Obviously the Christian mystics have collectively Given rise to an extremely rich conception of the nature of God, a God who shows many faces—or no face at all!—to suit the needs and tastes of His devotees. We have here a God who is “transcendent” and “immanent”; formless and possessing form; “light” and “darkness”; one and “none,” so to speak; the most beautiful, loveable object of the faculties, and the Infinite No-thing; verdant and flowering, and a still desert; pure Is-ness, and waxing and waning; laughing and playing; and angry as well; an ocean, a spring, a fountain, a fire; Father, Mother, Bridegroom, Spouse, Friend, Brother.

I venture to say that no tradition of mystics has come up with such a wide variety of conceptions of their “ultimate concern,” to use Paul Tillich’s phrase.

In India they have the notion of the *Iṣṭa Devatā*, the favorite aspect of God whom one chooses to suit one's own spiritual needs and temperament. Mystic Christianity has provided us with a wide range of choices from which we can select the aspect of God most attractive to us and most efficacious as an object of contemplation (or "non-object" in the case of the formless God).

It is my hope that anyone who reads this paper finds in it an aspect (or "no-aspect") of the Divine which is appealing and inspiring, thereby facilitating the reader's God-realization process.

I close here by making a critical editorial remark: it is unfortunate that the Catholic Church came to enforce early on in its history such a stiff censorship on what could and could not be said about God's nature. It is obvious that some of the finer mystical minds, like Eckhart, Ruysbroeck and St. John of the Cross, were always laboring to interpret their deep mystical experience in terms of strict doctrines held by the orthodox, non-mystical ecclesiastics. One would like to see how these and other mystics would have expressed their experience if they were theologically "free" and not tied down to the Trinity-notion, Aristotelian logic's "law of the excluded middle," and so on. We might have thereby enjoyed and been edified by an even more profound view of God's supremely wondrous and glorious nature.

Notes:

1. Matthew 28:19 (This and all other Biblical references are taken from The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, NY: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 194-b]).
2. See, for example, Acts of the Apostles 2:38.
3. John 10:30.
4. John 10:38.
5. Ibid., 8:19 and 12:45.
6. See, for example, Hazrat Mirza Guulam Ahmad, Jesus in India (Raswah, W. Pakistan: The Ahmadiyya Muslim Foreign Missions Dept., n.d.); Al-Haj Khwaja Ahmad, Jesus in Heaven on Earth (Woking, England: The Woking Muslim Mission and Literary Trust, 5th ed., 1972).
7. John 10:34.
8. John 17:21-3
9. John 1:1-3,14.
10. John 1:18; 3:16.
11. John 14:16-7.
12. John 15:26.
13. See 1 John 3:24; 4:13. Note that in the much-quoted passage in John 14:23, there is no mention whatsoever of the Holy Spirit, contrary to the way many people believe. Note, too, that Paul also refers to the "Holy Spirit which is given unto us" (Rom. 5:5, etc.)
14. Acts 3:13.
15. Acts 10:38.
16. Acts 5:31.
17. Acts 2:24.
18. Acts 2:36.
19. For example, 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3, etc.
20. Thess. 2:16.
21. 1 Peter 3:22 and elsewhere in the New Testament.
22. E.g., Hebrews 8:1.
23. E.g., Romans 5:5.
24. I have written another paper about this very same *śaktipāt* phenomenon as it has occurred/is occurring in Christianity and in other traditions; see "Energy Increase and Spiritual Realization" (Unpublished, 11/79). [Note: I would later expand this into my M.A. Thesis, "The Phenomenon of Empowerment / *Gurukṛpā* / *Śaktipāt* in the Indian and other traditions," 1983.]
25. Henry Bettenson, ed., Documents of the Christian Church (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 2nd ed., 1967, pp. 5,31.

26. Ibid., p. 32.
27. Ibid., p. 24.
28. Ibid., p. 39.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., p. 25
31. Ibid., p. 22.
32. Eph. 4:6.
33. Bettenson, *op.cit.*, p. 20.
34. Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism (NY: E.P. Dutton and Co. ,1961) , p. 111.
35. For some vivid, yet differing accounts of the mystic experience of the Trinity, see Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, Thomas C. Bergin, transl. and ed. (NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), Paradise, Canto XXXIII, v.117f.; Meister Eckhart, Raymond Blakney, transl. (NY: Harper and Row, 1941), p. 201; Jan Van Ruysbroeck, The Spiritual Espousals, Eric Colledge, transl. (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1953, p. 136; Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle, E. Allison Peers, transl. and ed. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1961), p. 209-10; John of the Cross, Collected Works, K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, transl. (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 1979), pp. 724-5; Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, ch. LIX, in F.C. Happold, Mysticism (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 294-5. Incidentally, most of these mystics consider the experience of the nondual Godhead to be an even “higher” state of consciousness than the vision of the Trinity.
36. John 4:24.
37. 1 John 1:5.
38. John 14:6.
39. 1 John 4:16.
40. Eph. 4:6.
41. Rev. 21:6.
42. St. Augustine, Confessions 1.4, John K. Ryan, transl. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), p. 45.
43. Ibid., 4.16.29, p. 111.
44. Ibid., 3.6.11, p. 84.
45. Ibid., 10.6.10, p. 235
46. Ibid., 1.3.3, p. 44.
47. Ibid., 11.13.16, p.287.
48. (Reference not available at this time)
49. Ibid., 10.6.9-10, pp. 234-5.
50. (Pseudo-) Dionysius the Areopagite, The Divine Names and Mystical Theology, C.E. Rolt, transl. (London, 1920), Divine Names, V.8.
51. Ibid., V. 10.
52. Ibid., I. 5.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., XIII.3.
55. Ibid.
56. Mystical Theology, *op.cit.*, IV.
57. Ibid., V.
58. Quoted by W.J. Sparrow-Simpson in Rolt, *op. cit.*
59. See www.enlightened-spirituality.org
60. The Words of St. Francis, ed. James Meyer (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1966), p. 23-4.
61. St. Thomas Aquinas, Selected Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, Robert P. Goodwin, transl. (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publ., 1965), p. 58.
62. Ibid., p. 56.

63. Ibid., p. 36. 64. Ibid., p. 100. 65. Ibid., p. 133-4. 66. Ibid., p. 59
67. Gerald Vann, St. Thomas Aquinas (NY: Benziger Brothers, 1947), p. 64.
68. Angela of Foligno, Book of Divine Consolations, quoted in Sidney Spencer, Mysticism in World Religion (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 237.
69. Dante Alighieri, op.cit., Paradise, Canto XXIX, v
70. Ibid., Canto XXXII, v. 139.
71. Ibid., Canto XXXIII, v. 67. 72. Ibid., Canto XXXIII, v. 111. 73. Ibid., Canto XXXIII, v. 125.
74. Meister Eckhart, in Meister Eckhart, Raymond B. Blakney, transl. (NY: Harper & Row, 1941), pp. 243, 9.
75. Ibid., p. 225-6.
76. Ibid., p. 228.
77. Ibid., p. 247.
78. Ibid., p. 114.
79. Ibid., p. 142.
80. Ibid., p. 248.
81. Ibid., p. 180.
82. Ibid., p. 200.
83. Ibid., p. 218-9.
84. Ibid., p. 230-1.
85. Ibid., p. 275-9, 191.
86. Ibid., p. 290.
87. Ibid., p. 293-4.
88. Ibid., p. 220.
89. Ibid., p. 160.
90. Ibid., p. 209.
91. Ibid., p. 244.
92. Ibid., pp. 129, 142.
93. Ibid., p. 300.
94. Ibid., p. 103
95. Ibid., pp. 23, 182, 180, 214, 132, 129, 126, 55, 64.
96. Ibid., pp. 247, 289.
97. Ibid., p. 247.
98. Ibid., p. 225.
99. Ibid., p. 143.
100. The “Fragments” reproduced in Blakney’s translation of Meister Eckhart, *op. cit.* are especially rich with concise insights into the mystical psychology (see particularly nos. 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 21, 34), as are many places within Eckhart’s German sermons.
101. Henry Suso, The Little Book of Truth, ch.2, in The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom and The Little Book of Truth, James E. Clark, transl. (NY: Harper and Bros., n.d.), p. 178.
102. Ibid., p. 179.
103. Ibid., ch. 1, p. 176.
104. Ibid., ch. 6, p. 202.
105. Ibid., ch. 1, p. 176.
106. Ruysbroeck, op.cit., p. 136.
107. Ibid., p. 82.
108. Ibid., p. 123-5.
109. Ibid., p. 127.
110. Ibid., p. 158.
111. Ibid., p. 187.
112. Ibid., p. 189.
113. Ibid., p. 160.

114. Ibid., p. 186.
115. Quoted in Underhill, *op. cit.*, p. 35
116. Ibid., p. 345-6.
117. Anonymous, The Book of Privy Counsel, in Eric Colledge, The Mediaeval Mystics of England (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), p. 167.
118. Julian of Norwich, quoted in Happold, *op. cit.*, p. 294.
119. Jacques de Marquette, Introduction to Comparative Mysticism (Bombay, India: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965), p. 152.
120. John of the Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 585.
121. Ibid., p. 611.
122. Ibid., p. 714.
123. Ibid., p. 173.
124. Ibid., p. 728.
125. Ibid., p. 647-8.
126. Ibid., p. 175ff.
127. Ibid., p. 152.
128. Ibid., p. 113.
129. Ibid., p. 129.
130. Ibid., p. 693.
131. Ibid., p. 192.
132. Ibid., p. 231.
133. Ibid., p. 84.
134. Ibid., p. 230.
135. See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 117.
136. According to Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
137. Quoted in Howard Brinton, The Mystic Will : Based on a Study of the Philosophy of Jacob Boehme (NY: The Macmillan Co., 1930), p. 180.
138. This and the following terms are also in Brinton, *ibid.*, p. 180.
139. *Ibid.*, p. 12n.
140. Nisargadatta Maharaj, I Am That, Maurice Frydman, transl. (Bombay, India: Chetana Pvt. Ltd., 1973, 1979), Vol. 1, p. 102.
141. Udana, 81, in Edward Conze, et al. (Eds.), Buddhist Texts Throughout the Ages (NY: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 95.
142. Sutta-nipata, verse 1094, in Conze, et al. (Eds.), Buddhist Texts Throughout the Ages p. 93.
143. Tao Te Ching, ch. 42; see also ch. 14, 25. The translation by Gia-Fu Feng (NY: Vintage Books, 1972) is one of the best for finding these similarities of the "Tao" to the "Godhead."
144. Koran, 2:115, N.J. Dawood, transl. (NY: Penguin Books, 1956, 1977), p. 344.