2002

Metaphysical Self in Other Mystical Traditions

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Metaphysical Self in Other Mystical Traditions

In an article in this journal (1994), I examined the development of *metaphysical self* in the writings of eight Christian mystics, concluding with Thomas Merton’s definition (1966, p. 180) referring to “the depths of people’s hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes.” In short, *metaphysical self* is the term for one’s self residing in God and God residing in it. Respondents to the article took the occasion to point out that *metaphysical self* appears also in the writings of mystics from other religious traditions and recommended that I enlarge the presentation by incorporating some of them. Since these correspondents were women religious more familiar than I with these various mystical traditions, I asked them to participate in a monthly online chat room to examine metaphysical self as it appears in Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim (Sufi) mysticism. Our group of nine has met for the past five years, and this article presents some of the riches these mystical traditions brought to our understanding of metaphysical self.

Each month we decided upon two primary sources we would examine in common, one Christian and one from another

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tradition. In addition, each of us read the historical and contextual introductions preceding the texts or a monograph explaining their specific themes and imagery. At the conclusion of this article is a bibliography of the sources that we found particularly fruitful. Each tradition has its own style, some directly didactic and others more metaphorical. Each elaborates upon metaphysical self with novel, arresting paradoxes and engaging imagery that invigorated our familiarity with our own Christian mystics. Each, too, emphasizes the following components of metaphysical self: the relational, nondualistic rootedness of self in God; transcendent individuality; engaged detachment as an expression of metaphysical self. Throughout this endeavor we dealt with paradoxes and found the most exhilarating paradox in the power of other traditions to confirm our Christocentric perspective.

Residing in God’s Unconditional Acceptance

This brief sampling of Christian mystics illustrates the continuing emphasis they placed on the-self-residing-in-God:

From Meister Eckhart:

The soul is so completely one with God that the one cannot be understood without the other. One can think heat easily enough without fire and the shining without the sun, but God cannot be understood without the soul nor the soul without God, so utterly are they one. (p. 309)

It is God’s pleasure and rapture to discover identity, because he can always put his whole nature into it—for he is this identity itself. (p. 167)

From Julian of Norwich:

Our soul sits in God in true rest, and our soul stands in God in sure strength, and our soul is naturally rooted in God in endless love. (p. 188)

Between God and our soul there is neither wrath nor forgiveness. For our soul is so wholly united to God that nothing can interpose.... Though we find in ourselves anger, contention, and strife, still we are all mercifully enclosed in God’s mildness and meekness. (p. 189)
From Catherine of Genoa:

My being is God; ... my me is God. (Wilber, p. 72)

From Thomas Merton:

We know God insofar as we become aware of ourselves as known through and through by him. We “possess” him in proportion as we realize ourselves to be possessed by him in the utmost depths of our being... Our knowledge of God is paradoxically a knowledge not of him as the object of our scrutiny, but of ourselves as utterly dependent on his saving and merciful knowledge of us. (1969, pp. 103-104)

Note how this same emphasis appears in the following excerpts from Jewish and Muslim mystics:

From the Maggid of Mezhirech:

Man’s essence is only the soul that is within him, which is a portion of God above. Thus, there is nothing in the entire world except the Holy One. (Uffenheimer)

From the Kabbalah:

There is nothing that is not pervaded by the power of divinity. God is everything that exists, though everything that exists is not God. ... Nothing is devoid of its divinity. (Matt, 1995)

From Rumi:

Remember God so much that you are forgotten, until you are lost in the Call, without distinction of caller and called. (Breton and Largent, p. 23).

You are my face. No wonder I can’t see you. (Breton and Largent, p. 168)

From ‘Abd Allah Ansari (Kwaja ‘Abdullah Ansari):

One went to the door of the Beloved and knocked. A voice asked, “Who is there?” He answered, “It is I.” The voice said, “There is no room for Me and Thee.” The door was shut. After a year of solitude and deprivation, he returned and knocked. A voice from within asked, “Who is there?” The man said, “It is Thee.” The door was opened for him. (p. 94)

O God, I possess that mirror in which you are reflected. Rather, I am that mirror. You are not separate from me. (p. 196)

From Fakhruddin ‘Iraqi:
The Eternal Ocean spews forth new waves. “Waves” we call them, but there is only the Sea. (p. 77)

From Ibn Al’Arabi:
As in the case of a mirror and the beholder, he sees the form in it, but does not see the mirror itself. . . . In your seeing your true self, He is your mirror and you are His mirror in which He sees nothing other than Himself. (p. 65)

Through the intimate imagery and ecstatic directness that pervade these writings, the mystics of three monotheistic traditions seem to strain the point that, while human beings participate in the divine nature, they never become the essence of God. Their mystical reach, on the other hand, does touch upon that mystery which “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Co 2:9). The mystics intuit that persons are not dualistically separated from God, but “closely united with God in a love that is always moving toward oneness” (Johnston, p. 124).

**Transcending Individuality**

The Christian Scriptures address a second characteristic, the quality of relationships that proceed from metaphysical self. This characteristic also reappears in the mystical literature of other traditions, and our group members were able to find these paraphrases about metaphysical self-transcending individuality:

“Love is not self-seeking; it is not prone to anger; neither does it brood over injuries” (1 Co 13:5) becomes, in Rumi, the Sufi mystic, “Love has no calculating in it.” (Breton and Largent, p. 9)

“Thanks be to God, who unfailingly leads us on in Christ’s triumphal train, and employs us to diffuse the fragrance of his knowledge everywhere” (2 Co 2:14) occurs in Rumi as “Whether they know You or not, all creatures bend but toward You. All love for someone else is but a whiff of Your perfume.” (Breton and Largent, p. 141)

“For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink” (Mt 25, 35) appears,
in the Bhagavad Gita, as “Any offering—a leaf, a flower, or a fruit, a cup of water—I will accept it if given with a loving heart.” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 118)

“Let us profess the truth in love” (Eph 4:15) is, in the Bhagavad Gita, “Speak the truth with kindness, honesty that causes no pain.” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 178)

These mystical sources echo the scriptural message that in human beings metaphysical self is inherently relational. Each of us is a seat of consciousness and an experiencing agent without being independent of others. Aitken and Steindl-Rast go so far as to say: “Underlying ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’ has to be the experience that the other is no other than myself” (p. 113).

**Engaged Detachment**

During our years of meetings, members recognized a third characteristic, engaged detachment, as the way metaphysical self conducts itself in the world. This oxymoron refers to the readiness to invest ourselves in causes, tasks, and relationships while remaining ready to forgo achieving our goals. It focuses upon process, both the deservingness of the activity at hand and the affirmation that we shall die unfinished, our potential only partly realized, and that completion is ultimately God's work and not our own. The different traditions of mystical writings repeatedly express this theme:

From Julian of Norwich:

God does not want his servants to despair because they fall often and grievously; for our falling does not hinder him in loving us. (p. 188)

From Paul Tillich:

You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you. . . . Do not seek for anything; do not intend anything. (Church, p. 180)

From Anthony de Mello:

There is no clinging to a classical symphony and no hastening it. One does not wait till the end to enjoy it, but takes in every note, every chord as it comes and lets it go to welcome the next uninterrupted flow. Any attempt to stop the performance, any “attachment” to
a single note, will ruin the symphony. (p. 164)

From the Tao Te Ching:
A good traveler has no fixed plans and is not intent upon arriving. (Mitchell, 1988, p. 27)
The Tao gives birth to all beings, creating without possessing, acting without expecting, guiding without interfering. (Welch, p. 41)

From the Bhagavad Gita:
With no desire for success, no anxiety about failure, indifferent to results, surrendering all thoughts of outcome, unperturbed, he does nothing at all, even when fully engaged in actions. There is nothing that he expects. (Mitchell, 2000, p. 75)

From Fakhruddin 'Iraqi:
Give up desire. Think that whatever you get is what you want, and in this acceptance find ease and joy. Renounce desire a hundred times. (p. 114)

Engaged detachment, like the other characteristics of metaphysical self, is paradoxical. It invites a response of passive attentiveness wisely expressed in this admonition from the poet Rainer Maria Rilke:
Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart. ... Try to love the contradictions themselves.... Do not now seek resolutions, which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them, and the point is to live everything. Live the contradictions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the resolutions. (p. 97)

Imagery, Paradox, Complementarity, Love

The imagery, metaphors, and paradoxes which other mystical traditions use to illuminate the nature of mystical self amplify and complement the attention Christian mystics center upon on this theme. The artfulness of these other sources can help sustain us both in the apophatic cloud through which Christian mystics typically view mystical self and in the relaxed tenaciousness of our commitment to love others as ourselves.
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