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Speaking With and Away: What the *Aporia* of Ineffability Has to Say for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

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Years ago, I entered my graduate studies with the intent of undertaking a comparative study of the Christian apophatic tradition and Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. Shortly after enrolling in a course on Indian Buddhist philosophy, I recall a question that in spite of its apparent simplicity has since troubled me. Having been informed of my interests, the instructor approached me at a coffee break and asked, “What’s the point of comparing?” Feeling caught off guard by the absurdity of his question, I fumbled for a reply. Surely, it’s obvious (I thought). “To understand?” I jostled with noticeable unease. He nodded, and I was left wanting. Indeed, what initially appeared as an awkward icebreaker became one of the more pressing theoretical questions that has plagued my thinking as a scholar in the Buddhist and Christian traditions as well as in the philosophy of religions: Do I compare with the hope of canonizing those very concepts and categories that I claim ostensibly to call into question? Do I seek to secure some place of conceptual stability for my home tradition amidst the sacred rhetoric of “the other”? Have I adequately assessed those implicit notions that inform my method of inquiry?¹ And to what ends are texts to be drawn into conversation? Inevitably, this raises the question, is the term “compare” even appropriate?

Comparative study of religious traditions must learn from the spectre of its mis-siological past.² This means keeping at the forefront of scholarship questions about how “the other” is depicted, and made accessible. In an effort to gain its legitimacy in the academy, pioneers of comparative religions wrestled with reconciling the aims of this burgeoning academic field with the mission of entrenched, confessional theology.³ Among so-called liberal theologians of the nineteenth century, such as Ernst Troeltsch, Christianity represented the pinnacle of human culture amidst a backdrop of less-evolved cultures.⁴ (No doubt, much of German theology during that century was directly—or indirectly—influenced by Hegel’s progressive view of history.)

The so-called liberal shift toward inclusivism, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing to the present, warrants critical redress whenever doctrines and

categories deemed sacrosanct by the speaker's tradition of identification are mapped (even inadvertently) onto "the other."⁵ Karl Rahner's concept of the Anonymous Christian might serve to illustrate this point.⁶ His extension of the Christian concept of grace for the purpose of extending salvation outside the Church, for example, says little or nothing about the beliefs of the recipients who may not have requested such "charitable" extension. A more productive line of inquiry might seek to disassemble and expose the mechanisms (epistemological, psychological, historical, theological, and so forth) that underpin inclusive approaches as well as ascertain some insight into how such conceptual extensions accommodate the grantors, rather than recipients. Put another way, is the goal of comparative study to reinterpret one's own tradition or to redefine "the other"?⁷ Recent "experiments" in comparative theology advocate the need to proceed in a self-conscious manner, questioning even the appropriateness of the term "comparative."⁸

Again, does one extend or elaborate on concepts in order to secure a place of safety for one's own tradition amidst the sacred rhetoric of "the other"? Is the exchange simply an attempt at negotiating tolerance economically, politically, or legally? Viewed pragmatically, is the underpinning value one of cultural or religious self-preservation?

Tolerance evokes a connotation of "putting up with," and does not necessarily imply any respect or commitment toward comprehending the religious convictions of "the other." Rather, tolerance more suitably concurs with Thomas Hobbes's redaction on the Golden Rule: "Do not that to another, which thou wouldst not have done to thy selfe."⁹ Embracing the value of tolerance does not necessitate the view that one must appreciate the beliefs and practices of another tradition, nor does it require an openness of being transformed by "the other."

Frequently undertaken for reasons of tolerance, dialogue centers on securing ways of achieving, if not mutual respect, a right to practice one's own tradition without persecution.¹⁰ Here, dialogue seeks ways of engendering peaceful coexistence as a directive of enlightened self-interest. Beyond mere "tolerance"—for reasons other than "enlightened self-interest"—what is genuine dialogue and why is it undertaken? Is it to acquire knowledge of a tradition and its doctrines, practices, rituals, myths, for its own sake? Or is it for reasons that draw out a reconsideration of one's own tradition through the dialogical process of encountering "difference"? The latter aim appears consistent with the stated objectives of the humanities or liberal arts. The study of religious traditions may also be undertaken for reasons that embrace some version of the pluralistic thesis.¹¹

Having stated this, however, a problem persists with "packaging," for religious traditions are often compartmentalized in textbooks for easy reader consumption. As Judith Berling notes, "This distillation of religious differences into a comprehensive interpretive framework is more or less required of a 'world survey,' and it fails to do justice to each distinctive religion. As a general principle, the more 'readable' a textbook on world religions, the less well the text presents the distinctiveness of each religion."¹² Of course, such contrived categories make easier the tasks set before instructors: bringing shared topics and organizing themes to the subject matter so that one

might better achieve course objectives, student assessments, and published deadlines. But the noble intent for establishing this order also fosters a false security that comes with such reifications. That is, there is a common pedagogical lacuna or blind spot in instruction: the fact that subjects are codified, carved up, and organized piecemeal can leave students without a critical understanding of the provisional nature of the terms and categories employed. Often, textbooks take a piecemeal approach to religions, allocating a chapter for each “religion,” and leaving it to the student or instructor to build bridges of understanding (which often requires that other, historically or epistemically precarious bridges be demolished before the start of such construction).¹³ In short, limitations in theory and method should be made explicit in instruction because they necessarily color and afford shape to content. Regardless of whether the shape is intentional or not, content is necessarily shaped.

As Wilfred Cantwell Smith observed, the reification of “religion” overlooks the fact of this term has changed in its meaning and usage throughout history.¹⁴ To treat religions as static, reified sets of propositions misses not only the dialogical element in learning, but also overlooks the fact that a study of religious traditions is an exploration of ideas embodied in living cultures. (However, Smith neglects to provide adequate explanation of how dead religions—e.g., Manicheism—fit within this framework.) Beyond the historical fluidity of a tradition’s own self-understanding, there is the dynamic of genuine dialogue whereby categories are transformed in the dialogical process.

As Raimundo Panikkar argues convincingly, genuine dialogue presupposes on the part of each interlocutor an openness to the dialogical process.¹⁵ This requires an attitude of openness to “the other.” But how does one reconcile such openness with apologetics?¹⁶ That is to inquire, what criteria would prevail in adjudging whether concepts and beliefs, having been transformed in the dialogical process, continue to “fit” within their tradition of origin? The transformation of categories and beliefs that can take place in genuine dialogue may well challenge the explicit criteria of a tradition as well as the implicit notions brought to the written texts out of which one speaks.

Interfaith or interreligious dialogue often focuses on what constitutes the beliefs that inform or contribute to the core identity of a tradition. The field of philosophy of religions has become more amorphous since its divorce from its medieval mission of proving God’s existence (see Aquinas’s *Quinque Viae*).¹⁷ What then sets the enterprise apart from mere dialogue that proceeds as an exchange of religious beliefs? Arguably, contemporary Western philosophy of religion places greater emphasis on the epistemological issues involved or presupposed in a religious belief, text, or tradition.¹⁸ The question of what one believes, then, might be reframed in terms of *how one comes to believe*, that is, what are the epistemological limits of such believing? The import of these questions bears directly upon the philosophical enterprise of drawing written texts into conversation.

Consistent with Raimondo Panikkar’s view of interreligious dialogue, comparative philosophy must account for the dialogical aspect in understanding, especially as it applies to the epistemological presuppositions in method and category forma-

tion for dialogue—that is, drawing written theories into conversation. In other words, from the perspective of Western philosophy of religions, the effort to engage in this enterprise should raise questions about the method applied, namely, the categories and epistemological assumptions invoked in the study.¹⁹ Conclusions drawn from comparative philosophy need to be disabused of categorical impositions. For example, one may point to studies that locate a *cryptotheological* position in Buddhism.²⁰ Or, at the very least, categories need to be made explicit when used heuristically. That is, comparative study must proceed in a self-conscious manner that must take great pains to avoid interpreting “the other” with categories that distort rather than illuminate.²¹

One may justifiably wonder whether entertaining hope for a value-free study is not itself chimerical.²² This elusiveness of achieving a value-free approach might find a parallel in what Thomas Nagel has coined the “view from nowhere.”²³ Nagel argues that a disembodied, value-free perspective is illusive. Accounting for a bias in method forces a reconsideration of what foregrounds any comparative endeavor.²⁴ Difficulties encountered in the method of comparative work resolve themselves as topics for further scholarly work. Foremost among these methodological difficulties is the suitability of categories employed in bridging traditions.²⁵ More precisely, this challenge may be restated as one of determining the intelligibility of categories within each written text (its context and tradition) before drawing written texts from neighboring or distant religious traditions into conversation. Even in applications where categories do not hold universally (again, pointing to the problem of value-free research), categories may still serve a heuristic purpose.

Problems in comparative philosophy of religions surface not only when categories from one tradition, philosophical framework, or written text are inappropriately assigned to another. Problems with interpretation also occur, and less frequently addressed as such, whenever the provisional status accorded language is overlooked for its hermeneutical implications in comparative study. This broaches the *aporia* of ineffability—the dilemma of putting into words what has been declared by a religious tradition to be beyond the scope of linguistic circumspection—as an inextricable feature of how a tradition engages its most sacred truths.

A COMMON APORIA?

As a subject of prolific elaboration, John of the Cross advises, “Since God cannot be encompassed by any image, form, or particular knowledge, in order to be united with him the soul should not be limited by any particular form or knowledge.”²⁶ Meister Eckhart’s curious remark, “Let us pray to God that we may be free of God,”²⁷ serves to further illustrate this dilemma in the Christian tradition. As Eckhart wrote, “Whoever perceives something in God, and attaches thereby some name to him, that is not God . . . [for] God is above names and above nature.”²⁸ Nāgārjuna made an equally curious remark, “No truth has been taught by the Buddha for anyone, anywhere.”²⁹ How might these sentences (as representative examples) be interpreted without succumbing to an obviously disturbing and scandalous literal

reading? Clearly, the intention by these authors was not to subvert the authority of the tradition out of which they spoke. Rather, these remarks reflect a hermeneutics of suspicion toward language and its capacity to express highest truth (*paramārtha*) or sacred (*Dios*) truth—albeit varied in formulation and concept (*unirse de Dios; paramārthasatya*).

It is important to emphasize that these authors are representative, and not originators, of an *aporia* that bears “family resemblance”³⁰ throughout the history of their respective traditions. In *Buddhism and Language*, José Ignacio Cabezón invokes³¹ Michel de Certeau’s theory that the mystic has a “manner of speaking,” that is:

The outcome of the opposition between waning of trust in discourse and the God-affirming assurance that the spoken word cannot be lacking. It oscillates between these two poles and finds, nonetheless, ways of speaking. Moreover, behind the illocutionary tactics that invent “words for that,” there is, ultimately, the principle of a concord between the infinite and language.³²

Cabezón extends this “manner of speaking” to the Buddhist predicament of oscillation, whereby “language acts as an instrument for communicating the Buddha’s doctrine and the fact that in some sense it falls short of the task.”³³ Cabezon qualifies, “Despite the repeated claims as to the ineffability of the ultimate truth in Buddhist texts, it is clear that even the least scholastic of Buddhist sects are reticent to give up the communicative abilities of language in general and scripture in particular.”³⁴ As Stephen Beyer observed, “the early Buddhist philosophical traditions made a choice for transcendence and a devaluation of the world.”³⁵ Beyer’s use of “transcendence” and “devaluation” may be questioned, however. That is, whether such transcendence is a matter of moving *beyond* this world or *removing* our delusions about this world—correcting our misperceptions about what’s real—becomes especially problematic when nirvana is also declared to be ineffable. It is this assertion (made within language) that the most meaningful truth (as a revelatory directive of the Buddha) cannot be fully fathomed in words.

Emergence of the Buddhist dilemma of speaking about ultimate or higher truth (nirvana; *paramārtha; śūnyatā*) did not originate, then, with Nāgārjuna. Cabezón writes:

The fact that the Buddha’s consciousness is said to be nonconceptual is a clear indication that conceptual thought must eventually be transcended. Nonetheless, the fact that language and conceptual thought are limited in this way does not, from a scholastic point of view, undermine the ability of words to express reality, nor does it vitiate the fact that such linguistic-conceptual understanding is indispensable in the spiritual journey that culminates in Buddhahood.³⁶

The fourteen undeclared views (*avyakṛtavastu*) of the Buddha serve to illustrate the problem of ineffability in Buddhism.³⁷ To illustrate additional precedence for the *aporia* in Buddhism, one can look back to the questions of King Milinda. The

exchange between King Milinda and the holy monk Nāgasena displays the dilemma of speaking about nirvāṇa:

“Venerable one, you are always speaking of nirvana: can you give me a metaphor, or a reason, or an argument, or an inference to show me its form, or its nature, or its duration, or its size?”

“Great King, nirvana is unique and incomparable: there is neither metaphor nor reason, neither argument nor interference, which can show its form, or its nature, or its duration, or its size.”

“But venerable one, nirvana is a real thing: I simply cannot accept that there is no way to make intelligible its form, or its nature, or its duration, or its size. Explain this reasonably to me.”

“Very well, Great King, I shall explain it to you. Is there such a thing as the ocean?”

“Of course there is such a thing as the ocean.”

“Suppose someone were to ask you how much water there was in the ocean, and how many creatures lived therein. How would you answer such a question?”

“Foolish person, I would say, you are asking me an unaskable thing. No one should ask such a question; such a question should be put aside. Scientists have never analyzed the ocean: no one can measure the water there, nor count the creatures who live therein. That is the way I would answer the question.”

“But, Great King, the ocean is a real thing: why should you give such an answer? Should you not rather count and then say: There is so much water in the ocean, and so many creatures living therein?”

“But I could not do so, venerable one. The question is impossible.”³⁸

Each reply is designed to throw the interlocutor back onto the question. Through a series of negations the *aporia* is displayed, so explains the monk when he replies to King Milinda, “*Nirvana* is unique and incomparable: there is neither, metaphor nor reason, neither argument nor interference, which can show its form, or its nature, or its duration, or its size.” Questions about nirvana, though “unanswerable,” though “impossible,” also remain meaningful by conveying this insight.

Likewise, the *aporia* as figured in the writings of John of the Cross bears family resemblance³⁹ to the *aporia* expressed by previous exponents of Christian apophaticism, especially those who represent the development of Pseudo-Dionysian thought after its introduction into the Latin West.⁴⁰ One finds in these written works a recurring use of dialectical negation, that reflects a distinctively neoplatonic style of Christianity.⁴¹ In this style, one finds repeated use of self-subverting utterances that hinge upon some version of the *aporia* of transcendence. The self-subverting utterance, as Denis Turner explains, is “the utterance which first says something and then, in the same image, unsays it.”⁴² For example, Gregory of Nyssa adopts from Philo the paradoxical expression of “sober inebriation.” Jean Daniélou explains: “The expression, ‘sober inebriation,’ is a paradox, very much like ‘luminous darkness.’ It emphasizes the passivity of true ecstasy as compared with the effects of actual intox-

ication. And it is called ‘sober’ to suggest that the state is not infrarational but rather suprarational.”⁴³ Whether the self-subverting utterance suggests an issuance into some higher meditation, or simply a collapse into disordered bits of language, represents two interpretations that continue to be debated.⁴⁴ This debate can be viewed as representative of many possible sets of readings that point back to tensions generated by the *aporia* itself.

A productive excavation of this hermeneutical situation for Christianity must include an exploration of the tensions that surface between epistemic and ontological distinctions found in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and his successors. Especially noteworthy is *The Mystical Theology*, which had a widespread and profound influence upon early and late medieval writers, including John of the Cross.⁴⁵ In *The Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysius draws together the cosmological paradigms of *creatio ex nihilo* and Neoplatonic emanationism, namely, procession (*proodos*) and return (*epistrophe*), whereby the meaning of words is both fixed (by identity in procession) and elusive (as indeterminate in return). Pseudo-Dionysius adds to the problem of wrestling with the unknown by speaking of the Supreme Cause as beyond being: “It falls neither within the predicate of non-being nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it.”⁴⁶ The *aporia* of asserting an “It” that “falls neither within the predicate of non-being nor of being” generates a series of paradoxes that also signal their ultimate collapse.

Credited for completing the first intelligible translation of Pseudo-Dionysius into the Latin West, John Scottus Eriugena infused his own work, *Periphyseon*, with concepts derived from Pseudo-Dionysius’s dialectical method of negation.⁴⁷ In particular, as Michael Sells observes, John Scottus Eriugena develops the Dionysian paradoxes in a manner that further “draws out their apophatic and non-substantialist premises.”⁴⁸ Sells summarizes Eriugena’s paradoxes of the self-causing deity: “(1) as ‘beyond being’ but also as ‘the being of all things’; (2) as that which ‘overflows all things’; (3) as that which ‘makes all things and is made in all things’; and (4) as that which ‘limits all things, yet is their boundless infinitude.’”⁴⁹ Specifically, in Book Three of the *Periphyseon*, John Scottus Eriugena returns to the “It” or Supreme Good as “Nothing.” Set in the form of a conversation between student and master, the explanation follows:

Student: But I beg you to explain what Holy Theology means by that name of ‘Nothing.’

Teacher: I should believe that by that name is signified the ineffable and incomprehensible and inaccessible brilliance of the Divine Goodness which is unknown to all intellects whether human or angelic—for it is superessential and supernatural—, which while it is contemplated in itself neither is nor was nor shall be, for it is understood to be in none of these things that exist because it surpasses all things, but when, by a certain ineffable descent into the things that are, it is beheld by the mind’s eye, it alone is found to be in all things, and it is and was and shall be. Therefore so long as it is understood to be incomprehensible by reason of its transcendence it is not unreasonably called

'Nothing,' but when it begins to appear in its theophanies it is said to proceed, as it were, out of nothing into something, and that which is properly thought of as beyond all essence is also properly known in all essence, and therefore every visible and invisible creature can be called a theophany, that is, a divine apparition.⁵⁰

Eriugena's redaction of Dionysius' *aporia* placed greater emphasis on the dilemma as a simultaneous movement between revelation and concealment.⁵¹ Eriugena's "inexpressible brilliance" suggests the simultaneity of what is knowable and unknowable.⁵² He explains, "So great is the splendour of the Divine Goodness that, not unreasonably for those who desire to contemplate it and cannot, it shall be turned into darkness."⁵³ God is talked about as exceeding knowledge and being. To encapsulate this *aporia*, as a collapse in epistemology and ontology, Eriugena speaks of God as "Nothing." This "Nothing" is not to be taken as a privation of being. As I. P. Sheldon-Williams explains, "The correct interpretation of *nihil* is not *omnino nihil*, but the purity of the Divine Goodness which descends from not-being into being . . . *nihil per excellentiam*."⁵⁴ *Nothing* implies the fullness of meaning understood as the "actuality of all possibility" as yet unexpressed in creation.⁵⁵

This signaled collapse between ontology and epistemology, between, for example, other dualities such as creation and God, engendered institutional controversy throughout the history of the Christian tradition. In 1225 Pope Honorius issued a decree of condemnation of "the *liber periphysis titulatur*, that ordered all copies be sent to Rome for burning, since the work was 'teeming with the worms of heretical perversity.'"⁵⁶ That charge of heretical perversity, for Pope Honorius, centered on what he understood to be pantheistic consequences suggested by this tension and collapse, noted above. Still, while doctrinal tensions engendered by such a collapse prompted condemnations by ecclesiastical authorities, this *aporia* also articulates what it means to be a believing member of the Christian church, for it encapsulates the central article of its faith, the incarnation. The dilemma or "absurdity to reason" (to borrow Søren Kierkegaard's usage) of God becoming man resides at the heart of the Christian tradition as the central article of faith to be embraced but never comprehended.

The *aporia* of ineffability, therefore, represents the central article of Christian faith while also engendering interpretive consequences that have spawned condemnations by its religious authorities throughout its history. One may look back at a sample of prominent apophatic thinkers to illustrate unfavorable treatment: the posthumous condemnation of Meister Eckhart's teachings (twenty-nine propositions); Marguerite Porete's burning at the stake in Paris 1310; Pseudo-Dionysius being accused by Martin Luther of Platonizing rather than Christianizing. Arguably, one aspect of rejection or condemnation has centered not on the cataphatic but on deconstructive or destabilizing (of the cataphatic) outcomes of what these authors wrote. One can witness in each case a problem of theoretical triage whereby some ambiguities, contradictions, affirmations, and collapses, triggered by the *aporia* of

ineffability, are declared orthodox by some and heretical by others. Is the real problem one of having to wrestle with a fear of the implications of an epistemic and ontological collapse? Even today, recent papal letters have tried to exercise control over interpretations prompted by the *aporia* that would in any way indicate support of religious pluralism over and above the privileging of the Christian faith.⁵⁷ One problem that needs to be explored is how heresy can be construed in light of the *aporia* of transcendence? On what grounds, then, does one affirm or reject linguistic formulations of a mystery that resides at the heart of how a tradition identifies itself? To simply interpret the dilemma in a manner that reinforces some reified institutional interpretation is tantamount to dismissing or ignoring those “absurdities to reason” and paradoxes of faith to which one ascribes.⁵⁸ In other words, it betrays the articulation of the sacred mystery that characterizes a tradition and the struggle of its existential adherence.

Viewed in this way, the *aporia* serves to convey truth while pointing to the inadequacy of language to capture it. By this view, one must grapple hermeneutically with the *aporia* of ineffability before or, at least, in the midst of interpreting claims made about religious truth. How, then, can the imperfect medium of language, which limits as it defines, adequately *capture* a referent that is either ontologically indeterminate or transcendent? Obviously, this question prompts two clarifications. First, what is meant by “capture”? Denotation and description differ, as do identification and explication. Second, confusions attending the term “transcendence” will need further explication. For many Buddhists, the ontologizing of the term amounts to a categorical error in the interpretation of *paramārthasatya* of *śūnyatā*. Nāgārjuna makes this point at MMK 24:11 when he likens the reification of emptiness to grasping a snake at the wrong end. As a starting point, surely the danger associated with committing categorical errors, especially those resulting in ontological impositions, might be circumvented if one restricts usage of the term to the limits of language. This nuance might be adopted in reading Michael Sell’s definition of the *aporia* of transcendence. He writes, “The transcendent must be beyond names, ineffable. In order to claim that the transcendent is beyond names, however, I must give it a name, ‘the transcendent.’ Any statement of ineffability, ‘X is beyond names,’ generates the *aporia* that the subject of the statement must be named (as X) in order for us to affirm that it is beyond names.”⁵⁹ Imbedded or rather *shown* in this explanation is the performative contradiction of having to use language to name what is deemed beyond the limits of language. According to Sells, there are three ways of responding to this *aporia* or dilemma of transcendence. He writes:

The first response is silence. The second response is to distinguish between ways in which the transcendent is beyond names and ways in which it is not. In the medieval context, the most common appeal is to a distinction between two kinds of naming; between God-as-he-is-in-himself and God-as-he-is-in-creatures, for example, or the incommunicable deity as it is in itself, and the deity as it is in our mind. . . . The third response begins with the refusal to

solve the dilemma posed by the attempt to refer to the transcendent through a distinction between two kinds of names. The dilemma is accepted as a genuine *aporia*, that is, as unresolvable; but this acceptance, instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse.⁶⁰

In the third response, the dilemma of ineffability forces a linguistic regress. This new form of discourse manifests itself as a discourse that must endlessly turn back upon its own propositions. As a style of discourse, *apophasis*, which literally means unsaying or speaking-away, stems from the disparity between sign and signified.⁶¹ In Turner's definition, apophatic theology is a "speech which, in the face of the unknowability of God, falls infinitely short of the mark." It is "that speech about God which is the failure of speech."⁶² Turner explains: "It follows from the unknowability of God that there is very little that can be said about God: or rather, since most theistic religions actually have a great number of things to say about God, what follows from the unknowability of God is that we can have very little idea of what all these things said of God *mean*."⁶³

To indicate the provisional nature of all utterances, one enters into dialectical play between naming and unsaying. As Sells explains, "Every act of unsaying presupposes a previous saying."⁶⁴ The problem of articulating what is deemed to be a transcendent truth forces a kind of discourse that asserts then denies—then denies that denial—*ad infinitum*. Higher religious meaning is not afforded through a positive capacity of language, but intimated through an exploitation of the fissure between sign and signified. Each and every utterance, whatever is written or spoken about, conceals greater meaning. This prompts a need for revision, centering not so much on a desire to rectify false interpretations but rather on disclosing the inherent inadequacy of the most sanctioned or esteemed interpretations. For even the more reputable interpretations will fail to capture. Therefore, in this dialectical movement, attention shifts away from content and toward an attitude of reverence or awe for mystery.⁶⁵ As attention shifts from thematized and finite being to the infinite horizon of possible reality, the human being experiences wonder. In his *Investigations*, Karl Rahner writes, "in these very mundane everyday activities the human being experiences that, occupied with the grains of sand on a beach, he lives on the shore of the infinite mystery."⁶⁶ Reflecting on this shore of infinite mystery is the activity of theology or, to borrow Rahner's phrase, "*reductio in mysterium*." He explains: "In the ultimate depths of his being man knows nothing more surely than that his knowledge, that is, what is called knowledge in everyday parlance, is only a small island in a vast sea that has not been traveled. Which does he love more, the small island of his so-called knowledge or the sea of infinite mystery?"⁶⁷ Of course, this interpretation needs to be qualified, for not every scholar equates this notion of mystery with some encounter with an ineffable presence. Mystery may simply point to the irrational element in knowing or perhaps to an absence of knowing.

Among detractors on the subject of presence in the study of medieval Christian mysticism, Denys Turner ranks prominently. In *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Turner refers to the metaphors of light/darkness that character-

ize a Christian apophatic way of life as “metaphors of negativity.”⁶⁸ In Turner’s view, these metaphors are understood today in almost the exact opposite way of how they were employed in medieval times. Contemporary theorists operate from an experientialist point of view whereas medieval Neoplatonists operated with a dialectical reasoning that, in effect, employed these metaphors to downplay the value of the experiential.⁶⁹ Turner argues, “What differentiates the mediaeval employment of those metaphors from ours is the fact that we have retained the metaphors, evacuated them of their dialectics and refilled them with the stuff of experience.”⁷⁰

Turner’s thesis, however, can be challenged with two observations. First, every assertion of absence is an assertion made in language about an *experience* of absence. Second, and perhaps more pertinent to this study, this duality between absence and presence still suffers from the constraints of language. In other words, questions of the duality between absence/presence, as far as written or spoken transmission is concerned, are reduced to an epistemic problem, that is, articulating within language an absence or presence that remains extralinguistic.

Again, one might reexamine the ontological dilemma as one situated in language itself. Focusing on the dilemma as a problem situated in language might provide a shift in focus for comparative philosophy without stepping immediately into the messy field of accessing the experience of the text’s author. As Keith Yandell has argued, one can access (with questionable success) the written or spoken word of another, not his or her experience.⁷¹ Added to this epistemological problem is the claim of ineffability concerning experience. It is this problem that serves as the centerpiece of this study: What does it mean to use language in the claim to ineffability or transcendence? Qualifying “transcendence” with the term “linguistic” delimits the discussion as a problem situated within language. This way, one might avoid stepping immediately into the morass of difficulties associated with experience itself. Rather, this issue will be approached by examining the formation of categories employed in arriving at the judgment of whether experiences are the same, similar, different, or indeterminate.

STRUCTURING A CONVERSATION: A CASE STUDY OF TWO EXAMPLES

The *aporia* of linguistic transcendence in Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* and John of the Cross’s *Subida de Monte Carmelo* and *Noche Oscura* suggests that any representation of so-called truth for the philosophical purposes of characterizing Buddhism and Christianity should adopt a hermeneutic that calls for a recognition of a dialectic within these traditions, namely, that each and every expression of such truth simultaneously affirms meaning while denying its full disclosure within a heuristic field that points to ever unfolding meaning. That such a heuristic field makes possible further reflection affirms the role of ongoing revision and disclosure.

As exposed in the shared view that language is both necessary and insufficient in capturing the sacred truth for each tradition, the *aporia* suggests that all talk about sacred truth, albeit categorically different between Madhyamaka and Christianity, be interpreted as provisional. Implicit in this provisional status is an ambiguity and

indeterminacy that discloses simultaneous hermeneutical standpoints. One may affirm differences, such as the dialectics of Nāgārjuna are directed toward achieving a renewed perception of this world of change, whereas John of the Cross's apophaticism seeks transcendence from this world of change.

Yet, such affirmed differences on such transcendence are provisional because they are issued within language. The dilemma of transcendence becomes a dilemma situated in language; that is, a simultaneous affirmation (*ipso facto*) of language in its employment and an affirmation issued within language of the collapse of language. From the perspective of the collapse in articulation, one can neither confirm nor deny whether the content of so defined truth or transcendence is the same or different, only that there is imbedded, formally speaking, a dilemma of linguistic transcendence that turns language back onto itself in the realization of a higher affirmation. From the perspective of the collapse, talk of truth shifts to a metadialogue, that is, talk about the collapse of talk concerning sacred truth. The higher affirmation points to a meaningful silence, that is, as a noble silence (*āryatuṣṇim*) for Madhyama or as interior quietude (*quietud interior*) for Christianity. To underscore the simultaneity of revelation/concealment, hyphenated terms might serve as linguistic markers for the *aporia* and its simultaneous hermeneutical implications of naming and unknowing (i.e., Christian-Agnostic or Buddhist-Agnostic)⁷²: the knowable foregrounds the epistemic horizon of what is unknowable or as-yet-to-be-known.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGIONS

Cross-cultural and comparative studies in the philosophy of religions often proceed, methodologically, with confidence in the categories that have defined each religious tradition. As illustrated by the writings of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, any methodology of so-called comparative philosophy of religions needs to make explicit, and incorporate, levels of interpretation that account for the semantic ambiguity implied whenever language is accorded provisional status. Implications drawn from using the *aporia* as a heuristic device for structuring a conversation between John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna can be situated among contemporary philosophies of religion. Among the many implications, any semantic certainty assigned to those defining truths by which a religious tradition identifies itself—and hence sets itself apart from other traditions—must be reexamined in light of the hermeneutical consequences of the *aporia*.

The *aporia* engenders for philosophy of religions interpretive gaps, both stated and shown, and manifested as simultaneous standpoints: the act of articulation of a sacred truth, the articulation of the failure of articulation, and realization of a sacred truth declared to be ineffable. This hermeneutical rubric is by no means exclusive to John of the Cross or Nāgārjuna. Indeed, though varying in formulation, the *aporia* of linguistic transcendence can be located in the writings of many exemplars of the world's religious traditions.⁷³

For comparative philosophy, this means that the *aporia*, however formulated, and its interpretive consequences be admitted as qualifying (and challenging) the cate-

gories employed in constructing philosophical characterizations of truth and the manner in which religious traditions and their written texts be drawn into conversation on the topic of truth. Ranking prominently among these consequences is an appreciation for ongoing revision. Revision proceeds on a dialectical assumption that the meaning of each doctrine-expressing sentence is descriptive while also semantically indeterminate, indeed, serving to display the limits of language itself. Indeed, implicit in each and every articulation of truth is the actuality of a dialectical movement between revelation and concealment. This dialectical movement suggests that the *aporia* needs to be made explicit, heuristically speaking, not only for the purpose of representing the truth of a tradition but, by extension, whenever texts and their traditions are drawn into conversation for the purposes of philosophy of religion.

As an aside, this inquiry takes note of the influence that Ludwig Wittgenstein's epistemology of "language games" and "family resemblances"⁷⁴ has had upon contemporary comparativists and philosophers of religion.⁷⁵ For one, as Andrew Tuck has observed, a Wittgensteinian shift in interpretation may characterize the third wave of Madhyamaka studies in the west.⁷⁶ Similarly, D. Z. Phillips reads John of the Cross through the lens of the later Wittgenstein.⁷⁷ Still, the place of Wittgenstein's thought warrants critical review.

For example, an appeal to later Wittgensteinian theory does not resolve the *aporia* and its implications; rather, it merely resituates the focus and locus of the *aporia* as intralinguistic instead of extralinguistic. Still, this turn toward context does not account for a formal understanding of the *aporia*, as stated and shown in the writings of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. In reading John of the Cross's *Subida* and *Noche Oscura* through the later Wittgenstein, for example, the *aporia* of ineffability shifts from an extralinguistic indeterminacy toward an intralinguistic indeterminacy. One may argue that, formally speaking, this contextualization of meaning unveils the *aporia* as the semantic indeterminacy shared among all language games. Indeed, the *aporia* unveils itself in these fuzzy boundaries that characterize all language games. This fuzziness cannot be discretely identified and resolved as a matter of individual doctrine-expressing sentences. Rather, the question might be stated: From which side of the *aporia* does one glance? Both sides are held epistemically in tension, simultaneously unveiling meaning amidst a heuristic field that is the actuality of all potential meaning (Nicholas of Cusa) or, for Madhyamaka, a heuristic field that is the source of ever changing and dependently co-arisen meaning, extending *pratītyasamutpāda* to the realm of verbal language.

The *aporia* of linguistic transcendence compels, then, any comparative study in the philosophy of religions to adopt levels of interpretation that simultaneously affirm and undo articulated meanings with respect to any defining truth said to be ineffable. Situated within contemporary (and "comparative") philosophies of religion, especially those perfumed⁷⁸ by Wittgenstein's epistemology, the *aporia* of linguistic transcendence challenges any exclusive reliance on anchored, reified, or cataphatic formulations. The implications of this insight is especially fruitful in recent exchanges, where pluralism is pitted against exclusivism⁷⁹ and perennialism against constructivism.⁸⁰

In quick summary, pluralist theories in the philosophy of religion examine the epistemological grounds for the diversity of truth claims, which, in effect, help construct the self-definition of a religious tradition. This argument suggests that each and every tradition celebrates an equal claim on truth. The exclusivist position advances an absolute or privileged claim to truth. Fundamentalism, as a cross-cultural phenomenon of reading texts literally, behaves as an extreme form of exclusivism. The pluralist position also engenders another fervently contested debate between perennialism and constructivism. The perennialist position argues that a “common core” of truth exists cross-culturally yet varies in expression because of cultural and historical differences that afford differing interpretative frameworks. Countering this argument is the constructivist position: all experience is mediated by language, therefore making “truth” culturally determined and necessarily relative. There is no discernable “common core” because one could never escape the determinative effects of one’s language and culture.

Specifically, an *aporia* appears in perennialism’s stepping beyond individual reports, and evacuating them of their unique content in order to assert the content of an “undifferentiated unity.” The possibility of such an “undifferentiated unity” should be affirmed, instead, only as a possibility suggested by the limits of language. In other words, ineffability needs to be interpreted formally. On the question of constructivism, an *aporia* emerges in its tendency to reify contextual knowledge for each religious tradition in question; otherwise, Steven Katz (et al.) could not claim that religion-specific concepts play a necessary formative role. For pluralists and inclusivists, an epistemological tension ensues between confessional *aporias* (specific to each exemplar’s religious tradition and specifically content driven) and an overarching *aporia* that issues from the dialectical nature of language itself.

In short, the *aporia* of linguistic transcendence calls for a simultaneous affirmation (conventionally speaking), redress (within the heuristic field of unknowing that enables ongoing revision), and collapse into silence of the categories employed in contemporary Buddhist-Christian academic discussions. Viewed in light of this dynamic tension, perennialism, constructivism, and pluralistic philosophies of religion are rendered provisional (conventional arguments, useful or not), but ultimately confirming only the limits of talk about “truth.” This simultaneity once again underscores a gap between engaging in philosophy of religions, or of mysticism, as a discursive enterprise and what it means to realize a “truth” that has been articulated as either indeterminate or beyond articulation. Any philosophical argument that neglects to foreground this representational collapse runs the risk of misrepresenting the religious tradition in question.

NOTES

1. For related discussion, see David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

2. See Eric Sharpe, “The Antecedents of Comparative Religion,” in *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Open Court, 1975), 1–26.

3. Sharpe, "Antecedents," see especially chapter 6, "The Quest for Academic Recognition," and chapter 7, "Religion: Comparative and Absolute."

4. Sharpe, "Antecedents." Sharpe qualifies, "The most important work in which these questions are considered was his monograph *Die Absolutheit des Christentums*, in which he argues that Christianity can have only 'a certain superiority' because of the universal appeal of its ethics—a conclusion typical enough of the 'history of religion school' of theologians. But of course Troeltsch was not himself a close student of the data of comparative religion . . ." (p. 150).

5. See Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Theology after Vedānta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993). Clooney writes, "Good comparative study, including good comparative theology, of course depends heavily on the ability of the comparatist to articulate a viable understanding of the 'other,' in which the encountered 'other' is not manufactured to fit the comparatist's prejudices and expectations. The comparative theologian must achieve a certain distance from his or her own starting point, in order to be able to learn from another tradition by understanding it on its own terms, and in a way that can never be entirely predicated on the expectations of one's home tradition, because it reformulates those expectations regarding the home tradition" (p. 7).

6. See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

7. For example, see James L. Fredericks, "The Incomprehensibility of God: A Buddhist Reading of Aquinas," in *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), 506–520. As introduction to the overarching purpose of this article, Fredericks offers this explanation of the goal of comparative theology: "Comparative theology is a better way of responding creatively and responsibly to the fact of religious pluralism than a theology of religions. The article that follows proceeds from this premise. In lieu of a generalized theory of religion or a systematic theology of religions, I will offer a limited exercise of comparison leading to tentative findings. Comparative theology is not comparative religions. It is not interested in investigating a theory of religion in general. It does not begin in a pan-religious perspective. Comparative theology is Christian theology in its basic sense: the project of interpreting the Christian tradition. In the case at hand, however, interpretation will be driven by placing Christian texts in conversation with a Buddhist text. This article is also founded on a hope, viz. that non-Christian religions pose not only a threat to our present theological understandings, but also offer resources for a creative revision of those understandings" (p. 506).

8. Clooney, *Theology after Vedānta*. Clooney writes, "One may also concede that 'comparative' may not be the right word to suggest what actually goes on in the reading of texts and therefore in this book [*Theology after Vedānta*], where the engaged reader is 'inscribed' into an ever-more complexly composed context, in order to write after and out of it. The distance one might normally associate with comparison is lacking; the images of visual assessment often associated with comparing—looking at things together—are inappropriate . . . 'comparative theology' serves to indicate my intention to inscribe within the Christian theological tradition theological texts from outside it, and to (begin to) write Christian theology only out of that newly composed context" (p. 7).

9. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 214. Hobbes contends that it is contrary to human nature to believe that one could ever put another's interest before one's own, and that one could extend such concern to all human beings (not just a select few); therefore, in his view, his redaction retains the basic principle of self-interest, namely, that it is in one's self-interest to sacrifice for others because it will ultimately ensure the protection of those things (values, rights) that are in one's self-interest to protect. The virtue of religious tolerance seems consistent with this line of reasoning.

10. Of course, taxation was preferable to persecution or forced conversion. As an example, one might reference the organization of the Muslim community in history. One might refer to the protected status accorded People of the Book (the *dhimmi*, or non-Muslim People of the Book, those who recognized the Jewish and Christian scriptures). In early Islamic

states, People of the Book were allowed to continue to practice their faith at the expense of an additional land tax. As John L. Esposito writes, “All revenue was owned, collected, and administered by the state. The distribution of revenue was managed by the registry (*diwan*) at Medina through a system of payments and pensions based on priority in accepting Islam” (p. 45). See John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

11. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 233ff.

12. Judith A. Berling, “Entering Other Worlds: Theological Learning and Non-Christian Religions,” *GTU Distinguished Faculty Lecture*, 15 November 2000, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley.

13. For example, see Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

14. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1962), 15–50. See also Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). Asad argues that religion ought to be viewed as an anthropological category.

15. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 23–40.

16. Paul Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), especially 1–18.

17. I am reminded of Frits Staal’s opening remarks for his Philosophy of Religion class (University of California, Berkeley, fall 1984). To paraphrase, he said, “since no one can agree on what religion is, we really can’t have a philosophy about it, so I discourage you from taking this class. You all go home now.” Of course, such an introduction served well to bait students into staying. What could we possibly talk about for fifteen weeks?

18. The *aporia* of ineffability has been described by some philosophers as really a problem about the limits of language and its power to describe things fully. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes: “Describe the aroma of coffee—why can’t it be done? Do we lack the words? And for what are words lacking? But how do we get the idea that such a description must after all be possible? Have you ever felt the lack of such a description? Have you tried to describe the aroma and not succeeded?” (610)

19. Panikkar, *Intrareligious Dialogue*, chapters 2 and 6. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1995).

20. For example, see Anthony Haglof’s “Buddhism and the *Nada* of St. John of the Cross,” in *Carmelite Studies* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1980).

21. T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1955), 123–124, 293–301. While scholars have criticized Murti’s appropriation of Kantian categories to explicate Madhyamaka, the question of categorical errors might also be raised with respect to how the “third phase” or “linguistic” scholars of Madhyamaka have employed the philosophy of Rorty, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Foucault.

22. For background on this problem, see E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). See also Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

23. See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

24. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

25. Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

26. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel in The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: Carmelite Studies, 1991), II.16.7, 201. John of the Cross (1542–1591), a sixteenth century Spanish Carmelite monk and reformer, was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1726, and later recognized as a Doctor of the Church for his novel contribution to the interpretation of the Christian faith.

27. Meister Eckhart, “Sermon 52” in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commenta-*

ries, *Treatises and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge, OSA, and Bernard McGinn, (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 200.

28. *Ibid.*, 204.

29. Mervyn Sprung, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters of Candrakīrti*, trans. Mervyn Sprung in collaboration with T. R. V. Murti and U. S. Vyas (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1979), 262. See Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* 19:24. The full verse reads: "Ultimate beatitude is the coming to rest of all ways of taking things, the repose of named things; no Truth has been taught by a Buddha for anyone, anywhere." Sprung elaborates on his translation of *sarvopalambhōpasama*: "It is not merely that ways of thinking about things change in nirvana, but that the everyday way of perceiving, or 'taking,' things ceases to function" (262 n.1). This apparent dilemma finds precedence in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*. See *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary*, trans. Edward Conze (Bollinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973). The philosopher Nāgārjuna, who probably lived in South India during the second century C.E., was instrumental in the birth of Mahāyāna Buddhism and is recognized as "patriarch" of seven East Asian Buddhist traditions.

30. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

31. José Ignacio Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 173.

32. Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, vol. 1, trans. M. B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 115.

33. Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language*, 174.

34. *Ibid.*, 174. Cabezón notes that Buddhist texts are not univocal in their claims concerning ineffability.

35. Stephan Beyer, *The Buddhist Experience: Sources and Interpretations* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1974), 200.

36. Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language*, 175.

37. See D. Seyfort Ruegg, "The Uses of the Four Positions of the *Catuṣkoti* and the Problems of the Description of Reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 5, no. 4 (1977): 59.

38. Beyer, *Buddhist Experience*, 202. See Milinda-pañha, *The questions of King Milinda*, ed. V. Trenckner (London: William and Norgate, 1880), 313–326.

39. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

40. Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 93.

41. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Christian Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991), 157–182; see also Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–8, 19–49.

42. Turner, *Darkness of God*, 21.

43. Jean Daniélou, SJ, Introduction in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, trans. Herbert Musurillo, SJ (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 36.

44. Andrew Louth argues that the dialectics of negativity point to a higher mediation in contrast to Turner's more recent argument that the dialectical negation of negation points to a collapse into disordered bits of language.

45. For an excellent summary of these influences, see Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 214ff. A partial list includes John the Scot (also known as Eriugena, ca. 810–877 CE); Hugh (d. 1141) and Richard (d. 1171) of St. Victor; Thomas Gallus (d. 1246); Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328); John Tauler (ca. 1300–1361); Marguerite Porette (d. 1310); John Ruusbroec (1293–1381); anonymous author, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (fourteenth century); Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), John of the Cross (1542–1591).

46. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology in The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Lubheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 5, 141.

47. Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayng* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 34; See also Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994), 82.

48. Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 37.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, bk. 3, trans. I. P. Sheldon-Williams (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1981), 167.

51. Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 38. Sells explains, "As in Plotinus and Dionysius, the graded levels of being (semantically dependent upon such spatial and temporal distinctions) ultimately return back into a primal unity. As in Plotinus and Dionysius, there is also a tension between the emphasis upon a graded succession of processions and an immediate relationship of each being with the source of being. . . . [Eriugena] places the tension more directly, or at least more insistently, within the emanation paradigm itself as a tension between procession and return as simultaneous movements."

52. Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 167.

53. *Ibid.*, 168.

54. I. P. Sheldon-Williams, Introduction, *Periphyseon*, Bk. 3 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1981). Sheldon-Williams adds, "If all things were made out of a privation of being, there must have been a previous possession out of which that privation was made. Therefore, the nihilium out of which all things were made is, exclusively made . . . Therefore, the *nihilium* out of which all things were made is, exclusively, the Divine Superessence."

55. See Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia*, trans. and appraised by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985). For Nicholas of Cusa, God is *possest*. This is a neologism: God is the actuality of all possibilities.

56. Moran, *Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena*, 86.

57. See *Dominus Iesus*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Roman Curia, September 2000.

58. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 209, also 410–414. See also Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 37–46.

59. Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 2.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*, 3. *Apophasis* or un-saying is commonly paired with *kataphasis*, which literally means "speaking with." Each and every act of unsaying presupposes something named or described (*kataphasis*).

62. Turner, *Darkness of God*, 20.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 3.

65. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 12.

66. Rahner, *Investigations*, 9:170.

67. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 22.

68. Turner, *Darkness of God*, 1.

69. *Ibid.*, 4.

70. *Ibid.*, 5.

71. See Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

72. Rather than adopt Rahner's term "Holy Mystery," one might acknowledge the epistemological side of this encounter as a "Sacred Agnosticism."

73. For example, see Sells, *Mystical Languages*. In addition to Christian authors, Sells profiles Plotinus and Ibn' Arabi. Other examples may include Śankara, Moses de Leon, and so on.

74. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

75. Among whom we have John Hick, Steven T. Katz, Sallie B. King, D. Z. Phillips, Frits Staal, and David Tracy. On the Buddhist side, philosophers who reflect a Wittgensteinian shift in analysis include José Ignacio Cabezón, Chris Gudmunsen, C. W. Huntington, Anne Klein, Frederick Streng, and others.

76. Andrew P. Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 74ff.

77. See D. Z. Phillips, "From Coffee to Carmelites," *Wittgenstein and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 131–152.

78. This metaphor is commonly employed in the Indian religious traditions, especially in Yogācāra Buddhism. Within the Yogācāra context, perfuming indicates doctrinal as well as karmic influence.

79. For example, as framed in the following recent exchange: *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987) and *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990).

80. As framed in exchanges between Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), and Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).