Beyond Unity, Integration and Experience: Cultural Psychology and the Theology of Mediaeval Mysticism*

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My purpose in writing this article is to encourage further productive dialogue between theology and psychology, especially, but not exclusively, on the topic of mysticism.

I am a psychologist of some years standing, who has but recently become a serious student of theology. In the brief time in which I have been studying matters theological, I have quickly become aware of the enormous influence, in English Catholic circles and beyond, of Herbert McCabe. Not only did Herbert influence a whole generation of scholars, he also made his own substantial contribution, with its distinctive Thomist flavour, some parts of which we, who are members of the wider academic community, are only now able to enjoy.[1]

True to his Thomist tradition, McCabe reminds us in *God Matters* that God makes no *particular* difference to any thing, but rather makes *all* the difference. On the one hand, there is no essential difference in the way a thing is or the way it functions simply because it is created rather than uncreated. A horse, sure enough, is and works as a horse, however it came to be, i.e. whether it is created or not. But at another level, God makes *all* the difference. The fact that a horse (or the world, or Stilton cheese) is at all, depends for the theist completely and utterly on the gift of the Creator and Sustainer of all that is, seen and unseen. From an atheist perspective, by contrast, particularly the penultimacy of the postmodern, the horse is simply a given. It is something that merely happens to be, not a gift, as Denys Turner has also repeatedly pointed out.[2]

I wish right at the start to endorse McCabe and Turner's general views and to nail my own colours to the same mast. I am a theist. Moreover, I am a Catholic theist. But I want to explore McCabe's position somewhat. If, as we assume, God sustains and abides by her own laws of nature, God does indeed make no difference to any

[1] Herbert McCabe 1987. *God Matters*. London: Mowbray.

[2] Denys Turner 2002. *Faith Seeking*. London: SCM Press, see especially pp. 21, 31–35, 46.

particular thing. A question arises, then, as to whether the existence of a creator God makes any difference to *people* or *humanity*, (and not simply on the wishful assumption that we may be more than things!). Here, things become a little more interesting. At one level, it seems, McCabe's point holds. Whether created or uncreated, and the changing and slippery post-modern self notwithstanding, people are as they are, under some stable description. Even if there is no such thing as the essential human nature, a given person still turns out one way or another from a given perspective. The bio-psycho-social complex picked out by the label 'Peter Hampson' happens to be organised (or disorganised rather more often!) in a particular way at present. He has turned out the way he has done, for better or for worse, and the way he is, and continues to change through time, is as it will be. This is as near as one can get to a brute fact.[3] Whether Peter Hampson is created or not does not appear to matter; God, it seems, again makes no particular difference.

Now this is important, at a certain level, for it legitimates psychology to proceed as a naturalistic endeavour, while leaving open the question of the existence of God. It permits us to construct scientific and naturalistic accounts of the general functioning of the person (in line with methodological if not ontological/metaphysical naturalism[4]); it also legitimates more specific accounts, again naturalistic, of the psychology of religious experience and behaviour, prayer, worship, mystical states and so on. All well and good we might say. This is a neat division of labour. We can eat and have our psychological and theological cakes. A mystic's account of spiritual development, for example, will partly refer to experienced psychological events, involving affect, perception, cognition and actions explicable *in their own terms*, but will also contain theological content assessable on *its* own terms and unaffected by the psychological account. (Although the theological may, it is hoped, be found happily to complement or cohere with the psychological.)[5]

Satisfying though this division of labour appears, there are reasons for thinking it too simplistic, or at least in need of some qualification. In particular, it is unclear whether so neat a division can be effected between psychology and theology where questions of revelation, divine providence or grace are concerned. A problem arises, for

[3] John Searle 1995. *The Construction of Social Reality*. London: Penguin.

[4] See Christopher Southgate, Celia Dean-Drummond Paul Murray, Michael Negus, Lawrence Osborn, Michael Poole, Jacqui Stewart and Fraser Watts 1999. *God, Humanity and the Cosmos: A Textbook in Science and Religion*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, for a discussion of this distinction. Also Lynne Rudder Baker. 'Third Person Understanding'. Chapter 8 in Anthony Sandford (Ed.), 2003. *The Nature and Limits of Human Understanding: The 2001 Gifford Lectures*. London: T&T Clark.

[5] This appears to be the position generally adopted by Fraser Watts 2002. *Theology and Psychology*. London: Ashgate.

example, in interpreting the statement that God makes no difference to any particular thing. Agreed that when applied to the bio-psycho-social, human entity described by (positivist) science, the existence of a creator God makes no particular difference. Whether I am created or not, my neural and cognitive systems will work as other neural and cognitive systems do; my need for attachments will be typical for a member of my species with my genetic inheritance, developmental experiences, and social origins; my emotional responses will to a large extent be naturalistically predictable and so on. God makes no particular difference. Or does He? I suggest that for a person as a whole, capable of conscious reflexivity and of entering into relationships, then not only belief in, but also the actuality of the living revealed God can not only make all the difference, but can make some pivotal, specific differences too. After all, the Trinitarian God, we believe, creates and sustains, but saves, renews life and fills us with her Word and Spirit. Either these events are, in some way, life enhancing and transforming or not. Hence, although the simple existence of God may effect no particular difference, since the Trinitarian God exists as his essence, love-in-relationship, God as revealed can make overwhelming qualitative and *meaningful* changes in the life of a person open to God's gifts, working in and through creation, the Church and tradition. We are, after all, invited to enter more fully into the life of God as revealed in Christ, and this must, one assumes, affect the way we live, move and have our being.

Which brings me back, at the risk of trying the patience of the reader, to a route map for this essay. My overall aim is to determine what general sort of psychology is needed to dialogue with theology on mystical exploration, what sort of psychology is insufficient, and in what relationship a suitable psychology will need to stand with theology. To do this I need to explore the consequences for a psychology of mysticism of the thesis convincingly demonstrated by Denys Turner in *The Darkness of God*.[6] Turner shows that there are two levels of discourse to be teased out from the writings of the mystical theologians he has studied: a first order imagistic and metaphorical account, and a second order reflexive and reflective dialectical critique operating on and within the first. Now, a potential source of misunderstanding arises here, which it is as well to dispel at the start. Assuming that *I* have correctly interpreted his position, Turner is *not* suggesting that mediaeval mystical theologians first described their spiritual experiences, perhaps in some tradition free way, and then applied a second order theological critique to their descriptions. For Turner, *both* first-order *and* second order discourses of his mystical theologians are *theological* accounts. Keeping this

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[6] Denys Turner 1995. *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

clearly in mind is vital in that it affects the way in which psychology and theology might dialogue on this issue, and the type of psychology qualified so to do.

Turner thoroughly explores the relevance of his distinction for understanding the apophatic tradition using test cases from Augustine and pseudo-Dionysius, and including Bonaventure, Eckhart, St John of the Cross and Denys the Carthusian. In this essay, I take his account as a starting point. As a theological neo-phyte, I happily accept his thesis that the mystical *theologians* whom he has studied moved in their second order dialectical critiques way beyond their first order metaphors, and beyond experientialism itself, to try to do justice to the God beyond all categories. I also agree that any naïve psychologism, which attempts to read the accounts of a pseudo-Denys or a Bonaventure as mere descriptions of positive or negative spiritual experiences, rather than as referring more ulti-mately to the negation of experience, not only misses the point, but is both psychologically and theologically reductive. Nevertheless, I am a psychologist and one also interested in the debate between psychology, religion and theology. So there remains the need for me to try to do some psychological justice to both of Turner's orders of theological description, and other more basic 'spiritual', experien-tial accounts as well if possible.

To make some progress, therefore, I will assume that there are two chief ways in which psychology can approach mysticism, which might interest theologians.[7] First, I propose that accounts of, for want of a better expression, the basic psychological *mechanisms* and their experiential correlates, will be at least necessary, and may in some limited cases prove sufficient in psychology, to deal with first person descriptions of mystical religious experiences. For convenience I will label this family of accounts, *intra-psychic approaches*. Next, and crucially, I question the adequacy of such purely naturalistic, often mechanistic, intra-psychic psychologies to deal with Turner's discus-sions of mystical *theological* accounts, first or second order, as dis-cussed in *The Darkness of God*. Here, *extensive* reflections on and critiques of metaphors of approach toward and unity with God are faithfully undertaken by persons, who, our tradition affirms, are sustained and engraced by the love of God. Such persons operate in a cultural-historical milieu, are thus often informed by prior theolo-gical and philosophical positions, which are in turn, again according to the tradition, at least partly inspired by the Spirit.

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[7] See *Theology and Psychology*, op. cit, chapters 6 and 7 for a related though not identical distinction of religious experience, where Watts helpfully contrasts and thor-oughly discusses cognitive neuroscience and social construction approaches. The former partially exemplify what I term intra-psychic approaches, the latter form a necessary but not sufficient component of a more fully developed cultural psychology.

Such theological accounts are, of course, accounts of faith-and-experience seeking understanding, not religious experience. To do scientific justice to these it will be necessary to recruit a *cultural* psychology, i.e. one which acknowledges psychological and cultural *meanings*,[8] and, furthermore, to assume that such a psychology is embedded in a theological *milieu*. I will explain in more detail shortly what I take to be the defining features of a suitable cultural psychology. For now, it is enough to note that this will be one which fully acknowledges the relevance of socio-cultural and historical factors, both for the person's general understanding of themselves, including their self-concepts, for their personal identity, and, in this case, for their implicit theories about themselves, others and God.

Now this immediately raises a third and equally vital issue. The status of (or at least one's stance as a psychologist toward) theological truth now becomes critical. For, if Christian theism holds, then God's transforming action can and does work within individual lives. The person as gift (although in principle indistinguishable from the person as given in the way they function) is offered radically more open, truthful, purposeful, hopeful and meaningful ways of becoming, both for themselves and in and through their relationships. It follows further that upholding the truth claims of theism necessarily and crucially affects the relation between theology and such a cultural psychology. If God exists, and *deus se revelans* does make a difference, theological accounts of the *meaning and interpretation* of certain types of behaviour, experience, affect and action will properly be in a supervenient relation to cultural psychological ones. They will take precedence.[9] Furthermore, if God exists and is acknowledged as the creative ground of all that is, the grounds for post-modernism,[10] or at least post-modern projects of the person, will be severely undermined, even in the absence of any strong claims regarding revelation. Theology thus immediately becomes the architectonic, meta-narrative for disciplines such as psychology in at least some of their aspects.[11] If God does not exist, but a significant subset of people still believe that he does, appropriate theological accounts will still be required to contribute and feed into cultural psychological ones, but only now in so far as they are needed to contextualise or 'position"

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[8] For example Jerome Bruner 1990. *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.

[9] See *Theology and Psychology* op.cit., p. 106, for a related point on special providence.

[10] Irony intended. Presumably on its own admission postmodernism is groundless! See also Hugo Meynell 1999. *Postmodernism and the New Enlightenment*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press.

[11] Ibid. Also see Brian Hebblethwaite 2003. The Nature and Limits of Theological Understanding. Chapter 10 in *The Nature and Limits of Human Understanding*: op. cit., for a strong defence of theological supervenience.

the overall interdisciplinary discourse. If God does not exist, there is nothing left but to deconstruct a given set of arbitrary 'takes' on whatever passes for the theological topic, mysticism in this case, and there are no meta-narratives to appeal to.

To unpack these admittedly abstract points I will briefly provide selected examples of both types of psychological account, intra-psychic and cultural, and show in more detail how these are implicated in debates between psychology and theology. I also illustrate briefly the application of a particular cultural psychology to understanding Eckhart's theory of self. Finally, I raise issues as to the limits and boundaries of psychological accounts, indicate some constraints on the theological, and return to the question raised at the beginning: 'Does God make a difference?'

Intra-Psychic Approaches to Spiritual Discourse: Some Examples

William James's chapter in the *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is a traditional starting point for the student of the psychology of mysticism.[12] Providing a mainly phenomenological description of mystical states, James seems to offer a prototypical, intra-psychic psychological account. He is also keen to establish whether there are any warrants for the truth claims of religious belief which follow from mystical states. James concludes that the states themselves may have such warrants for their owners, but not for third parties, and that they demonstrate that there may be more to consciousness than understanding from the senses alone.

Given that it is religious *experience* which James considers, is his treatment necessarily too limited for our purposes? Before pigeon holing James as offering a 'mere' intrapsychic account, and one basically descriptive at that, it is worth noting that while he indeed generally discusses mystical *states*, he was well aware of the complex interplay between intellect and simple descriptions of experience. The reader may care to note carefully the following passage:

> The fountainhead of Christian mysticism is Dionysius the Areopagite. He describes the absolute truth by negatives exclusively [James here quotes several examples of negative imagery from Denys the Areopagite.] But these qualifications are denied by Dionysius, not because the truth falls short of them, but because it so infinitely excels them. It is above them. It is super-lucent, *super*-essential, super-sublime, *super everything* that can be named. Like Hegel in his logic, mystics journey towards the positive pole of truth only by the 'Methode der Absoluten Negativität'.[13]

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[12] William James 1952. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. London; Longmans, (originally published 1902).

[13] Ibid., pp. 407–408.

In other words, James teeters on the brink of acknowledging the need for a more sophisticated account to accommodate the role of dialectics in negating experience itself or at least going 'beyond' it. But, given his overall aims, viz, to discuss the varieties of *religious experience*, he does not dwell on the *theological intent* of authors such as Dionysius. By not taking this important step, James is thus unable to reach the fuller conclusion, which Turner successfully attains, that the apophatic tradition is engaged in asserting the negativity of experience rather than describing the experience of negativity.

Neither given the state of psychology in his time, does James spend time on the underlying mechanisms involved, so where to look? Subsequent, more explanatory attempts to ground mystical and spiritual experiences in psychological mechanisms and intrapsychic processes can be found in various Jungian accounts. The Jungian framework offers a way to explore various psychological changes on the so-called 'spiritual ascent', charting progress on the purgative way, through the illuminative stage to union with God, while referring to changes in the relation of conscious and unconscious processes in the corresponding progress toward self-integration. Indeed, Jung himself was keen to explore parallels between the process of integration as a person and spiritual development, in debate with Victor White and others in the 1950s. Conrad Peplar, discussing the application of Jungian ideas to Walter Hilton's ladder of ascent, states for example: "Hilton has already been introduced to students of modern psychology as conveying many of the same ideas as Professor Jung though in different language."[14] While more recently, members of the psychotherapeutic community have apparently rediscovered the potential relationship between the spiritual ascent and depth psychology, as if for the first time![15]

I do not intend to explore these interesting studies in detail here, but wish simply to note that there may still be useful applications for the Jungian approach. Using a rather crude shorthand, Jungian readings show the metaphorical *route* to union with or discovery of God to imply and be implied by a corresponding route to self-discovery and intra-psychic integration. It is not hard to see why this mutual implication obtains. If the self is constituted in part at

[14] Conrad Pepler OP 1958. *The English Religious Heritage*. Oxford: Blackfriars Publications, p. 394.

[15] See for example: Ewert Cousins 1969. Psychotherapy and spiritual growth. *Pastoral Counsellor 7(1)*, 3–9; Dereck Daschke 1993. Individuation and the psychology of the mystic union. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity 12(3)*, 245–252; Kevin Fateux 1996. Beyond unity: religious experience, creativity and psychology. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis. 23* (4), 6l9–634;Frederica Halligan and John Shea 1992. Sacred images in dreamwork: The journey into self as journey into God. *Pastoral Psychology 40 (1)*, 29–38.

least by interpersonal relationships, which help determine its intrapsychic structure, then to the extent that these are harmonious, the ego can enter into harmonious relation with God as the 'significant other' and with the 'Self as a whole.[16] We cannot join the feast while we are in enmity with our brothers and sisters, or with ourselves for that matter. Secondly, the approach reminds us of the importance of unconscious contents in this process, and so qualifies any naïve spiritual experientialism based solely on conscious introspection. Also, Jungian analytical psychology is generative, and applicable to other situations not normally thought of as 'spiritual journeys'. Thus, Via, for example, offers a polyvalent reading of the parable of the Prodigal[17] which, with a little creativity, could be further read as an intra-psychic journey of ascent.

However, as with all such accounts, the Jungian can be pushed too far as an explanation of the unitive state. It then too easily reduces to psychologism. At its worst this may end up deifying the Self, though, more positively, it can provide a useful mythopoeic perspective. Nor does the Jungian framework provide a fully worked out theory of the post unitive, nor does it do full justice to theological reflections on religious or spiritual development.

Moving beyond a Jungian analysis, Brigitta Mark has recently considered mysticism and cognition, in her more scientific and detailed account grounded in contemporary cognitive psychology.[18] From her reading of the works of St John of the Cross, she discusses how St John's developing experiences and subsequent reflections on them lead to a redescription of the images and feelings themselves. In her opinion, such acts of describing and writing about spiritual experiences are not only driven by and reflect changes in the experiences, but are efficacious in further shaping subsequent experiences. Furthermore, the articulation and description of experiential states can change in turn the person's views of themselves as a whole.

Brigitta Mark's approach is sophisticated and, like the Jungian, has a number of useful features. Her grasp of cognitive developmental psychology is good, and she appeals to a plausible account of cognitive and emotional development associated with Karmiloff-Smith.[19] The latter shows how initial 'behavioural mastery' of a skill or ability can first be made explicit, and is then typically followed by one or more acts of 'representational re-description'. She

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[16] Susan Andersen and Serena Chen 2002. The relational self: an interpersonal social-cognitive theory. *Psychological Review 109*, 619–645.

[17] Dan Via 1977. Prodigal Son: A Jungian Reading. *Semeia 9*, 21–43.

[18] Brigitta Mark 2000. *Mysticism and Cognition: The Cognitive Development of St John of the Cross as revealed in his works*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

[19] Annette Karmiloff-Smith 1995. *Beyond Modularity: A Developmental Perspective on Cognitive Science*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

capably demonstrates the psychological possibilities of reflection beyond the spiritual experience and its metaphors, and so opens the way to a fuller account of spiritual *understanding* such as we shall consider shortly. Mark also explores the guiding role of emotions in the spiritual ascent. However, there are limitations in her account too. For a start it is still largely an experientialist treatment. She appears to assume that St John of the Cross, and by implication other spiritual writers, are primarily describing changes in spiritual *states* or consciousness. Thus, in common with the most contemporary writings on spirituality, she takes it for granted that an understanding of the spiritual or mystical is to be achieved through an explanation of spiritual states, experiences and affects alone. Secondly, while admitting the possibility that background knowledge contributes to representational re-description, Mark mainly offers a cognitive explanation which necessarily emphasises the changes in psychological mechanisms, not the meanings which they support or the more global changes to self which ensue. Third, and developing the last point, despite her own obvious theological sophistication, Mark does not exploit fully the insight that theologically rich knowledge systems might be brought to bear in self-critiques of spiritual experience. For instance, and crucially, she neglects the apophatic as an important element in such critiques, and the power such a dialectic of negativity affords.

To review the argument thus far: intra-psychic psychological approaches need not be wholly reductive from a psychological perspective, though, as naturalistic accounts, they will invariably stand in this relation to theology. They can acknowledge the role of negative experiences, and their subsequent negation, as with James, or take into account the mythopoeic, as with the Jungian, and they can, to an extent at least, acknowledge the effects of background knowledge, as in Mark's case. Still, they can easily be seductive. Their chief danger is that their primary emphasis on psychological events alone, in their explanations of the spiritual, can easily tempt = us to treat these as humanly and religiously central, and so risks adding to an idolatry of 'self. It is easy to see how this may contribute in turn to the materialism and narcissism of much contemporary life, but also, more insidiously and apparently benignly, to self-esteem culture. Jung, Rogers, Maslow and their thousands of followers have helped create a situation, doubtless with the best of intentions, in which being 'fully-integrated', having 'got it together, being 'in touch with one's true self, in short, being happy, are seen collectively as the *summum bonum*. As a way of raising the lowly, and helping give people some feelings of self-worth there is obviously a great deal of good here, but whether self-integration should serve as an ultimate goal for the already secure is rather more debatable. Helping someone who is bereft

find some human relief and happiness is one thing, making happiness itself a godlet quite another.[20]

The Post-Unitive, Post-Experiential Self and the Need for a Cultural Psychology

So, if unqualified intra-psychic psychological accounts of spirituality are often insufficient, potentially misleading and theologically reductive, what more is required? Here a return to Turner's prescient account is useful. As I indicated earlier, Turner shows in a variety of converging ways how, for approximately a thousand years of mediaeval theology, the apophatic tradition entailed the critical application of tradition grounded dialectic onto first order accounts which made use of more standard, tradition derived images and metaphors. Take Denys the Areopagite, for example, where the mutual interplay of cataphatic and apophatic language is pushed to the point at which language becomes 'self-subverting', and after a series of negations of corresponding affirmations we are left with a 'negation of the negation', beyond words and experience.[21] Similarly with Eckhart, the rigorous pursuit of radical detachment leads to an expulsion of all idolatries, external or internal, until the self, like God, becomes a no-thing, nowhere, then empty for the unknowable One.[22]

What criteria or attributes would a suitable psychology need, to be grapple with the sophisticated activities of mystics such as these? Or, to put it another way, what would a suitable psychology need, to guarantee, underwrite or even to make sense of some of these theological claims? At the risk of labouring the point, I hope it is obvious that a suitable psychology will need to address *meaning seeking* and *meaning making* activities. By this I mean the tradition grounded, *faith-based*, meaning related activities of the mystics concerned, not merely their experiences (meaningful or otherwise) of their religious 'states'. Although, of course, an account of such meaning seeking may ultimately need to presuppose, refer back to, but then ultimately subsume any embedded accounts of prior experiences of religious states.

Perhaps not surprisingly, we are looking for a psychology which can do justice to 'faith-seeking-understanding' and not

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[20] See Ciarán Benson 2001. *The Cultural Psychology of Self Place Morality and Art in Human Worlds*. London: Routledge, pp. 222–235, for a useful, corresponding, secular critique of 'self-esteem' culture on the grounds of its self centredness, also Belden Lane 1998. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*. New York: Oxford University Press, for a more theological one.

[21] *The Darkness of God*, op. cit., p. 22.

[22] Ibid., p. 185.

'spirituality' *per se*. More specifically such a psychology will be required *inter alia*:

i) to deal with the range of factors involved in initial formulation of religious metaphors. For instance to acknowledge the role of cultural factors, to consider the contribution of embodiment to metaphor construction and so on;

ii) to demonstrate the psychological possibilities and *modus operandi* of escaping from one's root theological metaphors, or, to coin a phrase, the possibility of escape from 'metaphorical entrapment';

iii) to acknowledge the possibility of beliefs and traditions as informing, critically guiding and shaping the continuing narrative of self which accompanies the theological narrative;

iv) to incorporate some suitably flexible and sophisticated account of self, capable, in principle, of accommodating the radical and creative shifts in self positioning, self concepts, self boundaries, God concepts and relationality which seem to occur in genuine theological mysticism. In more everyday terms, it will need to speak to the radical and indeed courageous shifts in perspective needed to withdraw from commonly held ideas about self and God into the *terra incognita* of the self/soul.

Then,

v) for further productive dialogue with theology it will be required to take a clear moral position on its acceptance or otherwise of theological truth claims, and its own cultural contribution.

It is beyond the scope and space of this short essay either to explore the detailed characteristics of such a psychology, or to apply it point by point to particular theological examples, but it is possible to indicate its general outline, examine it under the above headings, and apply it in outline to a test case.

Cultural psychology emphasises the role of inter-subjectivity in the construction of meanings. Unlike standard, positivist theories, cultural psychology is post Wittgensteinian in that it embraces the role of culture, language and tradition in shaping the self. This might lead one to suppose that this will inevitably result in a purely social-linguistic and postmodern view of God-self discourse. Moreover, such an approach might be taken to imply that such discourse will remain forever trapped in its metaphors. Only Wittgensteinian therapy, through the mixing of metaphors, it might be thought, will be the escape route.[23] In fact the outlook may be more positive.

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[23] Nancey Murphy 2003. On the role of philosophy in theology-science dialogue. *Theology and Science 1*, 79–93.

The psychology outlined recently by Ciarán Benson in *The Cultural Psychology of Self* offers a useful way forward.[24] Benson acknowledges the tradition dependence of the self, does justice to the psychological sources of its metaphors, and offers a theory sophisticated enough in principle to show how metaphors might be reconstructed or refreshed. Central to his account is the notion of the self as a 'locative system', a system which permits people to 'navigate' through 'place-time'. By integrating recent seminal work including that of Harré[25] on the self Damasio in neuropsychology,[26] Lakoff and Johnson in cognitive linguistics[27] and Bruner in discursive psychology,[28] Benson is able first to acknowledge the importance of embodiment in the creation of an initial sense of a positioned, 'core' self. He then shows how emplacement and embodiment is the psychological source and resource for our major conceptual metaphors, and how through language, memory and social interaction we form 'extended', metaphorically dependent selves. Building on this basic framework, Benson discusses the achievement of a 'cultural self. This depends on an understanding, *pace* Taylor[29] and others, of the emergence of the self from its historical-cultural and linguistic sources. A cultural psychology of the self cannot then be closed or complete, but must stand in a hermeneutic or interpretative relation to the human subject. Beliefs are crucial to this process, since they not only feed into a working account of the extended self's nature (e.g. as Cartesian self, or the Buddhist 'no-self) but are also critical in allowing the reshaping, or better, the *relocating* of self. As an example, Benson cites William James who chose to believe in free will and then proceeded to act as if he had, thus:

> "Renouvier's formulation of the idea of free will, and James's embodiment of that belief created a new location from which James could view the world, and with that shift of perspective came a change in his sense of himself in the world . . . " [and so, in a neat turn of phrase] . . . self-belief has the potential as self-fulfilling prophecy".[30]

From this thumbnail sketch we now examine how Benson's theory can be made to address the above criteria.

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[24] *The Cultural Psychology of Self* op. cit.
[25] Rom Harré 1998. *The Singular Self An Introduction to the Psychology of Personhood.* London: Sage.
[26] Antonio Damasio 1999. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness.* New York: Harcourt Brace and Co.
[27] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh.* New York: Basic Books.
[28] *Acts of Meaning*, op. cit.
[29] Charles Taylor 1989. *Sources of the Self The Making of Modern Human Identity.* Cambridge: Mass.: Harvard University.
[30] *The Cultural Psychology of Self* op cit. p. 83.

i) Benson's theory suggests an interesting, generative source for root metaphors, and fully acknowledges the vital role of the language and culture in their transmission. Embodiment and our spatio-temporal emplacement, for Benson, as for Lakoff and Johnson,[31] are the roots from which primary metaphors arise, such as knowledge as seeing, life as a journey, the self as a container and so on, but this is not to imply a naïve psychologism. Metaphors, again following Lakoff and Johnson, are conceptual and not merely linguistic, may arise from bodily, spatial or perceptual-motor sources, but then become knitted into our linguistic and cultural forms and rely on cultural traditions for their transmission. So, many of the first order metaphors used by an Augustine or a Bonaventure will, as Turner ably demonstrates, depend critically on the traditions out of which they are writing, but also, and of interest to the psychologist, will be expected to draw heavily on bodily or spatial imagery too.

ii) The cultural self is reflexive. This implies that people have the ability to move beyond the lure of an initial metaphorical or imagistic assignation, and so need not remain trapped forever in tradition dependent models of self or God. Such reflexivity and our subsequent ability to 'deconstruct' metaphors follows from the basic possibilities which repositioning or re-locating affords. Benson himself does not explore in detail how this might be accomplished, but, further to his account, I suggest that this ability arises from four skills or sources. First, as a meta-cognitive quality arising from self-awareness.[32] Second, as part of our basic cognitive equipment, we are not merely able to entertain mental models but to manipulate and transform them in syllogistic and other formal types of reasoning.[33] Third, having constructed models into larger metaphorical schemes we are capable of metaphorical and analogical reasoning.[34] Fourth and importantly, beliefs themselves, as Benson points out play a crucial role in this process.[35]

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[31] *Philosophy in the Flesh*, op. cit.

[32] See Sir F.C. Bartlett 1932, *Remembering*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, for an early discussion of this issue.

[33] The technicalities of this process are interesting, but need not detain us here, the interested reader may care to examine Phil Johnson-Laird's 1983. *Mental Models*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Johnson-Laird provides evidence that mental reasoning may not arise from the application of logical *rules*, but rather from the internalisation of sensori-motor activities applied to image like structures. We retrieve, form, build and then deconstruct mental models. Thus, reasoning, understood now as a skill rather than rule application, appears to involve the recursive application of analogues of physical processes on imagined structures.

[34] *Philosophy in the Flesh*, op. cit.

[35] *The Cultural Psychology of Self* op. cit., pp 73–74, 83, 122.

iii) Beliefs form part of the narrative in and through which the self is formed in and through time. Since beliefs are carried by the culture and language, and historically transmitted, it follows that cultural psychology needs to be in constructive dialogue with relevant disciplines, to show properly how beliefs arise and can shape and change the self. Otherwise such a psychology will be content free.

iv) However, as I have already implied, the real key to a flexible account of self is the locative self, at the basis of which is the idea that the pronoun 'I' has a positioning role relative to the world and to the narrative that is 'me'. Benson explains this as follows:

> To say that 'I' am a pronoun in use is to say that 'I' denotes processes rather than entities. It is to argue that these processes are acts of ownership and authorship which are called into play in the first place.

He goes on to suggest that:

> Only in symbolic fields of inter-subjectivity can elaborated subjectivities of ownership, authorship, morality and desire arise. Only by being adept in skills of positioning, of which forms of pronoun use are primary, can I come into being *as* an owner, author, moral agent or location of desire for future possibilities.
>
> Contrariwise, it is only within social worlds that I can change or leave one kind of ownership, authorship, responsibility or desire for another. Forms of selfhood come in and out of existence in dialogue with forms of inter-subjective demand. The corollary is that forms of subjectivity transform themselves in parallel with changes in ambient inter-subjectivity.[36]

In other words self-concepts and the experience of self can be expected to change as their relation changes with the inter-subjective milieu, including significant others. If God is treated as *the* significant other, as a person's construal of God changes, so too, it follows, will the self.

v) Cultural psychology necessarily places a moral responsibility on its proponents, since its accounts are not value free.[37] Its practitioners need to be sensitive and responsible in their attitudes and commitment, both to their partners in interdisciplinary dialogue, and regarding the descriptions of the person they help form. This follows since cultural psychological descriptions feed into and contribute to the wider culture and its traditions, and so contribute to the formation of future selves.

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[36] Ibid, 91.
[37] Ibid.

I will now show in broad outline how such a cultural psychology might be used to explain the way in which, for example, Eckhart, manages to construct what Turner has called his 'apophatic anthropology' in concert with his apophatic theology.[38] From a cultural psychological perspective, the key to understanding Eckhart's description of a changed self-concept, ending with a 'no-self who is nowhere, is to see that it results from his appreciation of the importance of detachment, and the perspective shifts and revaluations that this brings about. Throughout his account there is an implied locational theory of self. Indeed, I suggest, the main components of Benson's cultural theory are all to be found implicitly in Eckhart's references to the self. These include: the notion of the located self, or I as 'point of view', the role of tradition and belief in shifting perspective, changing subjectivity and inter-subjectivity in relation with God, and the role of guiding emotions as indicators of success in the liberation from the attachment to things.

So how do these self dynamics work? As Benson points out, 'forms of selfhood come in and out of existence with forms of inter-subjective demand . . .', and 'forms of subjectivity transform themselves in parallel with changes in ambient inter-subjectivity".[39] So, as his theological critique bites, and his understanding grows, we can see how Eckhart grasps that there is no place, neither here nor there, in which God can be met. The self, or I as 'point of view', will therefore need to be placed no-where if it is to achieve such a rendezvous, 'if the soul is to know God it must know him beyond space and time'.[40] But Eckhart, or one following Eckhart's path, is now in an interesting position, since as Benson astutely points out:

> We cannot imagine being nowhere. We can visualise ourselves being lost, but that is to be somewhere unfamiliar to us, possibly without the means of getting back to a place we know. Where and when, place and time, are the conditions of existence. Being nowhere is quite simply a contradiction in terms. Without being placed or located I would not be, and where I find myself implaced (sic.) influences not just the fact of my being but also its nature. Where, when and who are mutually constitutive. Lives, selves, identities are threaded across times and places. Who you are is a function of where you are, of where you have been and of where you hope to arrive. There cannot be a 'here' without a 'you' or an 'I' or a 'now'. Self, acts of self-location and locations are inextricably linked and mutually constructive.[41]

[38] *Darkness of God*, op. cit., p. 140.
[39] *The Cultural Psychology of Self* op. cit, p. 91.
[40] Meister Eckhart, *Sermon* 6. p.[13] 1. All references to Eckhart are from: *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*. New York: Harper, 1941. (trans. Raymond Blakney).
[41] Ibid. pp. 3–4.

The very instant, then, however instantaneously, one fully grasps that one is nowhere, the very experience of being someone, who is located, vanishes.[42] As Eckhart indicates, repositioning to nowhere mutually implicates the loss or emptying of self. Notice however, this is not simply a collapse into a Buddhist *annatta*. Mystical theologians can, in a curious way, be likened to Buddhists, but they appear to me to be Buddhists with a strong hold on their cultural and religious narratives! They retain memories and concepts of themselves, in relation to salvation history, on a faith journey — even if one with no 'ways'. They know at least where they have been and where they hope to arrive, but lose their self-centredness *en route*. They truly become empty, but only then for the God of all being to fill.

> When the temple is cleared of every hindrance, that is, of strangers and their properties, its appearance is beautiful and it shines so clear and pure above all, and in all God has created, that no one but the uncreated God can be reflected in it. To be sure, nothing is like this temple but the uncreated God himself.[43]

The 'ambient inter-subjectivity', the relation with God in which Eckhart's theological critique takes place, and the manner in which this contributes to own his experience of self, provides a converging way of understanding how he may have reached the conclusion of a no-self.[44]

Furthermore, as Benson notes:

> There is an underplayed dimension in psychological studies of self, though not in many artistic and literary explorations, which recognizes the importance of finegrained micro-temporal analyses of the subtleties of experience. This would take seriously the idea, for example, that there is a sense in which you are what you see while you are seeing it, or that you are the music while you are listening to it, and so on.. In more abstract terms, subjectivity and intentionality co-constitute conscious experience.[45]

And Eckhart has this to say:

> if the soul is to know God it must forget itself and lose [consciousness] of itself, for as long as it is self-aware and self-conscious, it will not see or be

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[42] There is a (temporary) disappearance of what Lynne Baker would refer to as first-person perspective, Lynne Rudder Baker. 2003 'First-Person Knowledge'. Chapter 7 in *The Nature and Limits of Human Understanding*, op. cit.

[43] Meister Eckhart *Sermon 13*, p. 158.

[44] This is not to suggest that Eckhart should be read in a reactionary way as an experiential account of mysticism. Rather, it seems likely that he will have undergone changes in first-person, self understanding along with his deepening theological critique, and that these changes will most likely have added implicit understanding to and support for his explicit theological analyses.

[45] Ciarán Benson, in press Oct. 2003. The unthinkable boundaries of self: The role of negative emotional boundaries in the formation maintenance and transformation of identities. In R. Harré and F. Moghaddam (eds.), *The Self and Others. Positioning Individuals in Personal, Political and Social Contexts*. USA: Praegger/Greewood.

conscious of God. But when, for God's sake, it becomes unself-conscious and lets go of everything, it finds itself again in *God, for knowing God it therefore knows itself and everything else from which it has been cut asunder, in the divine perfection*. (italics added.)[46]

The exquisite paradox, the joke even, of this 'co-constitution' (or co-emptying) is readily apparent in Eckhart's anthropology. As a person becomes increasingly aware of, and able to understand and articulate the ultimacy of the no-thingness of God, with whom she is nevertheless still in relationship, she is synchronously aware of and understands (because she is so co-constituted) the ultimacy of the no-thingness of experience. The nothingness of God provides the 'ambient inter-subjectivity', which effects a change in subjectivity. Since her intentionality and subjectivity co-constitute her experience, she becomes, at least at the point where subjectivity collapses, what she believes God to be, a no-thing, possibly akin to pure intentionality. And when, by the same token, through the practice of detachment, she is able to negate experience, and 'dies to self', she becomes, in a sense, indistinguishable from her understanding of the very God, who is beyond created being and experience, yet on whom her very being and experience depends. But now not only is she co-constituted,[47] by the loss of experience, she also continues to be upheld by God.[48]

> Comes then the soul into the unclouded light of God. It is transported so far from its creaturehood into nothingness that, of its own powers, it can never return to its agents or its former creaturehood. Once there, God shelters the soul's nothingness with his uncreated essence, safeguarding its creaturely existence. The soul has dared to become nothing, and cannot pass back from its own being into nothingness and then back again, losing its identity in the process, except God safeguarded it.[49]

This overall explication of Eckhartian self-understanding through inter-subjectivity and co-constitution bears at least a passing resemblance to Turner's argument from more scholastic sources.[50] This is comforting. It suggests that anyone as grounded in the tradition as Eckhart, and who pursued a similar process of radical detachment

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[46] Meister Eckhart, *Sermon 6*, p. 131.

[47] It is tempting to rewrite the *cogito* as "I am co-constituted therefore I am', as I am indeed co-constituted by my embodiment, by persons, places, things and, of course, in the image and likeness of God, were it not for the risk of reducing personal being to conscious experience.

[48] I see this argument as converging from a psychological analysis onto the theological stance adopted by Denys Turner 2002. 'Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason'. Chapter 1 in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds.), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Only by a whisker, as Turner puts it, and through his understanding and firm belief in his utter dependence on the unknowable God, was Eckhart himself saved, by his Thomism, from lapsing into a premature nihilism.

[49] Meister Eckhart *Sermon 13*, p. 159.

[50] *The Darkness of God*, op. cit, pp. 157–165.

would be likely to undergo a corresponding process of self under-standing and discovery, as they too became 'unselfconscious' (sic.).[51] In other words, a cultural psychology is able to accommodate, in broad terms at any rate, Eckhart's apophatic anthropology, and the outcome which Turner explicates more scholastically. But there is one important difference, which usefully indicates the limits of cul-tural psychology. On its own, such an account can at the most suggest that the apophatic self, operating within classical theism, will find itself *indistinguishable from* its understanding of God. To claim, as Eckhart does, that the soul becomes *identical to* God, or to adjudicate between this and the more traditional position with its clear distinction between the created soul and God, is obviously beyond the scope of a psychological account. The reasons for the chains of beliefs and inferences which lead an Eckhart to one con-clusion, and a Julian of Norwich to another, are conceivably of interest to the psychologist, but cannot possibly be elucidated by psychology. Here, the psychologist is well advised to pass back adroitly the baton to the theologian.

That said, a post Wittgensteinian, cultural psychology of self, such as Benson's, provides a useful framework for theologians who may wish to avoid the obvious pitfalls such as the dualism and individu-alism of Cartesian approaches without falling into the trap of dissol-ving the self into pure language or immanentism.[52] The temporal continuity of embodiment ballasts or grounds the self in being, and contributes to its sense of a located core self; society, language and memory then construct and inform the extended self, around its locations, and the self then helps us navigate through physical, intel-lectual and social worlds.

Conclusion: The Limits of Psychology and Constraints on Theology

I have tried to outline the critical dimensions required of any psy-chology (or Christian anthropology) which claims the sophistication needed to dialogue with some of the best contemporary theology of mysticism. Such a psychology can then complement theological accounts of mystical understanding showing how those who think and act as mystics do would be likely to alter as persons. To do this, psychology must distinguish clearly between *intra-psychic events* which characterise spiritual experiences, mystical states and practices (such as changes in sensation, affect or imagery), taken to represent

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[51] Meister Eckhart, *Sermon 6*, p. 131.
[52] See for instance Fergus Kerr's careful response to critics in the postscript of Fergus Kerr 1997. *Theology After Wittgenstein*. London SPCK, pp. 194–197, (first edition Basil Blackwell, 1986).

union with God, and *changes in the meaning and understanding* of images, metaphors, self-concepts and God-concepts arising out of theological critiques. The former, the accounts of spiritual states, will afford in principle, but not necessarily require reduction into accounts of intra-psychological mechanisms. The latter, the tradition dependent interpretations, will not yield to such (downward) reduction, characterised as they are by inter-subjectivity. Also, while intra-psychic accounts may offer appropriate if partial explanations of some psychological pre-requisites of religious experience, they are clearly neither sufficient nor suitable for exploring the psycho-cultural underpinnings of theological reflection of a mystical variety, or of dealing with 'faith-seeking-understanding' in general. The challenge for any full psychology of spirituality, therefore, which I have argued will need to draw on the resources of cultural psychology, is to hold various 'reductionisms' in a creative tension while maintaining a sympathetic stance toward theology. For if I am right, theologically unsatisfactory psychologies of spirituality risk being lured into one of two reductive traps: 'downward' into the intrapsychic, ignoring contextual factors, or 'sideways' into pure social constructionism, ignoring embodiment and first-person understanding. Also, those who prosecute cultural psychology sympathetically with theology, and seek productive dialogue with it, will need to position *within*, not alongside theology, or their interdisciplinary enterprise will be liable to drift into a cultural relativism where the theological is treated as just one of several competing discourses.

It is worth restating this argument slightly differently and more positively. There are interesting implications for any cultural psychology which takes seriously the claims of theology. Such a psychology may have little option but to side with St. Thomas for whom theology or 'first philosophy' is architectonic with respect to other sciences.[53] It will at the very least need to acknowledge that without recourse to wider philosophical and theological traditions, it is and always will be insufficient on its own to account fully for the open-endedness of the human condition, with its tradition constitutive as well as tradition constituted qualities.[54] Just as, say, a (cultural) psychology of art needs to take fully into account, and, at a certain point, give way to the history of art, so too a theologically sensitive (cultural) psychology of mysticism will need to take fully into account and, at a certain point, give way to theology. But, in return, psychology affords reality checks on certain types of theological accounts, whenever these rest on assumed psychological competencies, such as the ability to reason one's way out of metaphorical

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[53] Brian Hebblethwaite 2003. Chapter 10 in *The Nature and Limits of Human Understanding*: op. cit., makes a similar point.
[54] Alasdair MacIntyre 1981 *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth.

traps, or to take up a different 'point of view'. In such situations, psychology establishes the plausibility or otherwise of apparently theologically principled, but nevertheless psychologically dependent manoeuvres postulated by theologians.

However, there remains the final question of whether God affects any of this at all. What effects, if any, does God have on acts of faith-seeking-understanding including mystical understanding? Does God or the Holy Spirit engrace or affect these processes, or are they nothing but the outcome of normal socio-cultural influences? How if at all does the existence of God constrain our interdisciplinary dialogue? These are questions which psychology alone cannot answer unless it engages positively with theology.

So, to return to this our original question, does God cause anything to be different? God does, since the Word and narrative revealed to, embodied in and carried by the church, and inspired through the ages, are essential in bringing about the belief related changes in the self-under-description that occur in the process of mystical 'faith-seeking-understanding'. Any credible Christian anthropology will need to acknowledge this. But, against this, God doesn't, since 'normal' socio-cultural forces and psychological activities are at work all the time. But, *respondeo*, we believe that *deus per se* is beyond that which univocally causes, for such a God *creates* and holds in being the very orders of mechanism, experience, understanding, inter-subjectivity and meaning needed even to respond to the call to religious reflection. If this is true, theology is justified in staking its claim as the only overarching narrative, and then God's existence makes at least one specific difference: it affects how we position and conduct our interdisciplinary debates, as well as making all the difference to everything. Finally if, again as we believe, *deus se revelans*, through creation and Christ, relates to, engages with and works within the world and humanity, this necessarily challenges any account of persons which neglects at least to consider the possibility that peoples' "hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

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