Mysticism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Paul Lachance, O.F.M.

While recognizing the differences and variations within the mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the author locates two areas of common emphasis in the writings of Rabbi Moses De Leon, Angela of Foligno and Rabi’a al-Adawiyya: self-emptying and mendicancy.

As we enter a new millennium, it is becoming more and more crucial that members of the religious traditions of the world understand and mutually enrich each other by sharing some of their spiritual treasures. This will enable them better to collaborate in the common effort to respond to humankind’s thirst for the infinite and to stem the forces of violence and destruction. An appreciation of some of the salient elements of various traditions can work toward these goals. To this end a glimpse at some of the features of the mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is offered here. Perhaps the best way to arrive at insights into these mystical traditions is to examine the lives and/or writings of various mystics themselves, for they are the ones who incorporate these values and they witness to this incorporation by means of their lives.

Lest we presume that what appears to be common among these traditions is an exact correspondence, it is important to recognize that there are in fact important variations within and among the traditions themselves. Furthermore, the considerable problems involved in the actual translation of texts from another culture and another period in history often prevent an accurate presentation of the thought of the respective mystic. Despite such limitations, this

Paul Lachance, O.F.M., an adjunct professor of spirituality at Catholic Theological Union, is the editor and translator of the Angela of Foligno volume in the Classics of Western Spirituality series (Paulist Press).
essay will attempt to provide a comparison of two basic areas of apparent commonality among the mystical perspectives of the Jewish Rabbi Moses de Leon, the Christian Blessed Angela of Foligno, and the Muslim Rabi’a of Basra.

The first characteristic reflected in the lives of these mystics is that of personal self-emptying. This emptying process seems to be understood as a way of purifying the consciousness and, thereby, opening the mystic to the fullness of ultimate reality or mystical union with the divine. The second common trait, a correlate of the emptying process, is the living out of some form of poverty. This aspect of life style enabled the religious seekers to strip themselves of possessions and to live a marginal, sometimes misunderstood, and often persecuted, life at odds with the prevailing or conventional culture.

The Jewish Tradition

Given the current revival of interest in mysticism, it is not surprising that in the Jewish tradition there is considerable attention, both scholarly and popular, being paid to the Kabbalah. Literally translated “tradition” or “the handing down of things divine,” the Kabbalah is considered the sum or pinnacle of Jewish mysticism. Its literary production, more intensive in certain periods of history than in others, has been preserved in an impressive number of books dating back to the late Middle Ages. The Kabbalah contains a theosophical symbol referred to as ayin, the Hebrew word for “nothingness.” Over time, this mysterious term took on a variety of meanings and thus no consistency can be found in its use.

Ayin appears in the works of the early medieval Kabbalists in Provence and Spain. It was later used extensively by Rabbi Moses De Leon, the author of the Zohar. The Zohar, the greatest and most influential text of the Kabbalah, was written in northern Spain near the end of the thirteenth century. (The importance of Spain in the development of Kabbalah cannot be overestimated. The claim has been made that the mystical interpretation of the erotic language of the Song of Songs, the biblical book considered the mystical text par excellence, was the creation of Spanish Kabbalists.) Some scholars maintain that in its glorification of poverty as a religious value, the Zohar was influenced by the Spirituals, the radical wing of the early Franciscan movement to which Angela of Foligno belonged. Whether or not this was indeed the case, the Zohar's understanding of symbols, including the term ayin, which it used extensively, became a central tenet of devotion for later Jewish mystics, such as the teachers of Hasidism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

For the Kabbalists, ayin is part of the elaborate system of the Sefirot, a work that highlights aspects or dimensions of the infinite. Ayin also corresponds to the stages of divine manifestation and attributes of the divine essence. In the
thirteenth century it became the appellation for the first and highest Sefirah, that of divine power. As such it was considered the source of all divine and material existence. It denoted the inner recesses of the divinity. Since God's being is ineffable and incomprehensible, the employment of ayin indicated that the only appropriate way to describe the divine essence is paradoxically by way of complete negation.

Rabbi Moses de Leon offers the following explanation: “God, may He be blessed, is the annihilation of all thoughts; no thought can contain Him. Since no one can contain Him (with) anything in the world, He is called ayin. This is the secret of what is said: ‘Wisdom comes into being out of ayin . . .’. Ayin served as a bridge between the completely hidden and inactive Godhead and the emanated divine Sefirot. The relationship between the first Sefirah and the Godhead itself, the secret of being and non-being united in the symbol of the ayin, was a constant subject of mystical inquiry in the Kabbalah tradition.

For the Kabbalists, everything emerges from ayin and everything eventually returns there. Since the task of the religious seeker was to climb step-by-step the ladder of emanation leading from the first to the tenth Sefirot, ayin, the first and highest divine emanation, became the supreme goal of mystical ascension. In the Hasidic phase of Kabbalah, the devout are instructed to devote all of their religious energies to self-negation, seeking to empty themselves of all thoughts of and feelings toward the material world. Becoming nothing emerges as the spiritual goal, because nothingness is the essential attribute of the divine. Ultimately, ayin enables one to see the world mystically; it provides a window on the oneness that underlies the manifold appearance of created reality; it enables one to preserve equanimity in the midst of chaos; and it becomes an agent of world transformation.

The Christian Tradition

One of the characteristics of the medieval Church was a profound longing for reform, for the transformation of the ecclesial body. Concomitant with this was the emergence of devotion that centered on the passion and death of Christ. This devotion sprung up at about the same time as bridal and nuptial mysticism that was derived from, among other sources, interior assimilation of the message of the biblical Song of Songs. There was another strand of mysticism referred to as apophatic mysticism. Many religious people believed that the path to union with God called for an emptying of all images and concepts so that at the summit of the ascent to God one was totally absorbed in the life of God. This devotional movement produced a new wave of mystics, predominantly, though not exclusively, among the women who comprised the Beguine circles. Beguine
was probably the first identifiable women's movement in history. Among these exceptional women was the thirteenth-century mystic Angela of Foligno.

Angela's classic work *The Liber* consists of two parts: *The Memorial*, which recounts the thirty steps of her spiritual journey, and *The Instructions*, which is a collection of writings that reveal her as a spiritual mother. It is in the first nineteen steps of *The Memorial* that we discover poverty as one of the most dominant characteristics of her spirit. This work contains some of the highest and most daring expressions of mystical union in the history of Christian mysticism. In her burning desire to grow in amorous response to the call of her beloved, Angela sought to align her life with that of Christ and to follow the example of her model St. Francis, stripping herself of all her possessions. It is in the final steps of *The Memorial* that we read that the most sublime visions and assurances of the presence of God slightly precede but interlace with the experiences of the greatest suffering and despair—the latter diminishing somewhat during her life.

In *The Instructions* an anonymous disciple of Angela reports that during one of her experiences of illumination, she was drawn into the “fathomless abyss of God.” While under the impact of that vision, the crucified God-man appeared to her and bestowed upon her soul “the double state of his own life.” Hers was an experience of the sweetness of the uncreated God and, at the same time, that of the cruel death pains of Christ’s crucifixion. Angela seems to have shared the very kenotic experience of Christ, through which he manifested divine love by totally emptying himself of divine privilege while hanging on the cross. By entering into the mysterious inner world of Christ’s passion, sharing even his abandonment on the cross, she experienced a darkness that was not eliminated but was integrated and inverted (euphemized) in order to disclose the superabundant light and the inner recesses of the Triune God. Thus, instead of a symbol of inexplicable absence, darkness became for her a symbol of ineffable presence.

To further describe the final stages of her union with God, Angela resorts to the theme of divine darkness. This theme she draws from the important revival and development of apophatic mysticism that spread throughout religious circles during the thirteenth century. Using apophatic language (language of negation), she asserts that she saw God as the “All Good” or the “Secret Good . . . in and with darkness.” This paradoxical language indicates the subjective blindness or negative mode of perception as well as the transcendental obscurity of the trinitarian life which she claims she is now perceiving. Angela describes

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the moment of mystical marriage so celebrated by the mystics. For her, there is no longer any intermediary between God and herself.

In this vision of God in the darkness, Angela claims that neither body nor soul trembles or moves. The soul sees both nothing and everything; the body sleeps and speech is cut off, an experience akin to what some of the Greek Fathers variously described as *apatheia*, a state of tranquillity, of perfect control of the irrational parts of the soul that have been reordered to receive the fullness of divine indwelling. These visions of God were both in and with darkness. Indeed, as a result of such an experience, everything that could be named is as nothing and fades in the background. Angela’s use and pursuit of negations to describe the unnameability of her experience is relentless. The entire created universe has now become transparent to her. She possesses a knowledge achieved through communion, a knowledge of the primal harmony of all that is, as seen from within its transcendent source. In the ineffable abyss of her own nothingness, Angela discovered correlatively the unknowable, unfathomable, and unnamed depths of the Triune God.

The Islamic Tradition

If, as many Muslims maintain, Angela of Foligno could very well be considered a great Islamic saint, then in like manner, the great Muslim mystic Rabi’a al-Adawiyya of Basra could be revered as a great Christian saint. Rabi’a is the most famous woman in Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam. As with Angela, evidence concerning the life of Rabi’a is very fragmentary, and the historicity of many legends about her is an object of significant scholarly debate. Though the accounts of early Sufi saints only briefly refer to her, the most reliable and complete account of her life and sayings appears in the writings of a thirteenth-century Persian poet, Faridu d-Din ’Attar. He begins his account of her life by bringing the gender issue into the forefront: How could a woman be included in the ranks of the male Sufi masters? To this challenge he responds that, from the point of mysticism, there are no class or gender distinctions, all are “one and oneness.” From this he concludes that there is complete equality of the sexes for those on the path to God.

Rabi’a lived a life of absolute devotion to God. “O my God,” she was heard to have said, “my work and my desire in all this world is recollection of you and, in the afterworld, it is meeting with you. This is what is mine—you do as you will.” Sincerity and single-mindedness were her hallmarks. What is especially interesting about Rabi’a is her insistence on mendicancy and absolute poverty as means for achieving union with the beloved. Her intimate relationship with the deity found a balance between a sense of awe before the Totally Other and a disarming
casualness in the presence of her beloved. Her love for God was not only intimate, but devoid of self-interest, a central quality of Sufi mysticism.

The path to the Real articulated by some of the Sufi mystics was based on two fundamental concepts, *fana*, or “passing away of the self” and *baqa*, the “human residing within the divine.” To pass away or to become empty of self is to become like a polished mirror, reflecting the divine image, and at times even to become one with the divine in that image. The concepts of *fana* and *baqa* are thought to be in constant interplay with everything else, but they are found especially in the Sufi’s search for union with God. In the teaching of Bin Arabia, the grand master of Sufi philosophy, union and separation occur simultaneously; the lover perpetually finds and perpetually separates from the beloved. This writer further maintains that in each inhalation of air the Sufi achieves a new form and in each exhalation gives up that form. The goal for the mystic then is to align and fuse personal breath with the eternal divine breath.

Finally, much of Sufi mysticism is characterized by the use of erotic language to describe the mystical path. Much as the biblical Song of Songs influenced Jewish and Christian piety and literature, so pre-Islamic Arabian erotic love poetry entered into the Sufi mystical tradition.

**Conclusion**

Certain common elements are evident as foundational to the mystical worldviews of the three religious traditions examined here. One such element is the use of preexistent love poetry to characterize the mystical union. This can be seen in Judaism’s and Christianity’s use of the biblical Song of Songs and in Rabi’a’s use of Persian love poetry. These examples demonstrate the rich gamut of ways that erotic language can be employed to describe the passionate love of the mystics toward God.

A second point of commonality is the fundamental conviction that if one is to come close to God, ultimate reality, or the Real, one must empty oneself. This emptying is represented as the *ayin* or “nothingness” of the Kabbalah, imitation of the *kenosis* of Christ in Christianity, and the concepts of *fana* or the obliteration of consciousness and its return as *baqa* in the Sufi tradition. In all of these traditions, it is by way of negation—even absolute negation—that one finds the essential paradoxical truth that the more we discover our authentic selves within the deep self, the more we discover ourselves within God, the Absolute, or the Real.

Related to the concept of emptying, a final theme found in all of these mystical traditions is the conviction that, in order to discover God, one must dispossess oneself and become poor. Not only are we destined to become mendicants before one another and to continue to be transformed by one another, but above
everything else, mendicancy is the basic attitude one must assume before the divine Mystery.

As fundamentally different as the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam may be, they hold many values in common. Perhaps mutual fidelity to such values will provide a context within which adherents to these traditions can recognize other elements of commonality. These will include not only their common humanity but also their common search for religious meaning and for the Divine Being of whom this meaning is but a faint reflection.

**Note**

1 This essay is an edited segment of a much longer article, “L’esperienza suprema di unione con Dio di Angela da Foligno e paralleli con altre tradizioni religiose,” in *L’esperienza mistica della beata Angela da Foligno. Il libri; una lettura interreligiosa* Atti del convegno tenuto in Assisi e Foligno nei giorni 1 e 2 dicembre 2000 (Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncola, 2001) 117–49.