

Ineffability in Scripture **A conversation with 6 medieval mystics**

Ismael Velasco

What, then, are some of the implications of a faith perspective to the scholarly study of a religion? One might approach this question from diverse angles, each angle yielding very different answers. One is tempted, of course, to begin from theology, from a set of doctrinal principles and parameters to set boundaries to acceptable approaches and conclusions in the light of fundamental beliefs. Seldom, however, can a set of doctrinal norms achieve universal consensus, a uniform interpretation, or a static and final formulation. Within a dialogic and ever-evolving, if not always explicit, common ground to bind believers, the room for theological diversity is demonstrably immense even within discrete subsets of a given religious tradition, let alone across religious communities.

There is, however, a dimension that, while much harder to articulate, and infinitely diverse in its forms of expression, may well be considered a universal across the phenomenon of religion, that is, religious experience itself. In speaking of a faith perspective in scholarship, I address myself to something more primal, more foundational, than doctrine and theology. I speak to that inner experience which taps into the unspoken recesses of human motivation and engenders that distinctive category of human experience we call spirituality. From this inexpressible experience, it is suggested, wells out all truly religious expression. And it is to that moment before expression, that inward encounter with what is experienced as sacred or divine, that I would like to address myself here. It is that inner moment of eternity that I would like to place as a question mark onto scholarly endeavour. And to approach the unapproachable, to speak to the unspoken, to commune with the incommunicable, one can do well to listen in on the conversation between the great mystical writers of the world's religions.

To peruse the writings of the mystics is to encounter an inescapable contradiction between their unanimous protestations regarding the ineffability of their religious experience and the seemingly endless volumes of their attempts at describing it. Why, if the experience is wordless try (and from the outset fail) to express it in words? If the descriptions offered are so inadequate or even misleading, what is the value and worth of them? Yet if they are so lacking in value or so misleading, how is it that we find the mystics quoting from each other to corroborate their own accounts, validating each other's explanation even as they disparage or discard the very possibility of meaningfully conveying such experiences in utterance? What, in sum, impels these mystics towards description, to what extent do their explanations reflect their own experience, and what factors determine or shape their formulations?

It is customary for general works on mysticism to begin by a definition of the term "mysticism"¹ In all of these discussions mysticism emerges, above all, as a form of

¹ See for example Butler, pp.1-4; James, pp.299-300; Migne, pp.9-12; Underhill, pp.3-29; Waite, pp. 1-28. We have found Waite's etymological study of the word "mysticism" a particularly useful survey of early definitions, although it should be balanced against Butler's discussion of the concept of "contemplation", which Butler regards as a term equivalent to "mysticism", as used by early Western

personal experience, more precisely, as a form of religious experience of extraordinary intensity, culminating in a profound sense of union and identity with the transcendent or immanent Absolute. While mysticism has often been seen as on the margins of “official” religion, in the Baha’i Faith mystical experience is seen as fundamental not only to the Baha’i religion, but to religion itself, universalised and aligned with religious faith. In a well known passage, Shoghi Effendi writes that *“the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites Man with God... The Baha’i Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character.”*² That mystic feeling has given rise in the great world religions to mystical traditions which in turn have engendered a rich vein of mystical writing and indeed mystical literature. The Baha’i Faith, although by far the youngest world religion, has already made significant contributions to the literary corpus of world mysticism, beginning by the great mystical treatises and visionary poems of the Faith’s Founder, Baha’u’llah. These works, regarded by Baha’is as divine Revelation, have already had a profound impact on the outlook and perspective of the Baha’i community.

Baha’u’llah’s major mystical works were revealed in the earliest period of His ministry, shaping in a fundamental way the attitudes and aspirations of the first believers, and through them successive generations of Baha’is. Baha’u’llah’s mystical masterpiece, the Seven Valleys, as well as the mystical aphorisms that crown his ethical teaching, the Hidden Words, were among the earliest works to be translated into Western languages, both by individual believers and by the Guardian of the Cause himself. It is no accident that from the time of Baha’u’llah the genre of mystical literature had already germinated within the nascent Baha’i community, in the shape of beautiful and intense poetry and prose from Baha’is such as Nabil-I ‘Azam, Na’im, Varqa, and other early believers. The roots of this poetry, beside Baha’u’llah’s inspiration and example, lay in large measure in the Persian Sufi tradition and above all in the scripture and poetry of the Bábí religion. Likewise the earliest years of the Cause in the West saw examples of Baha’i inspired mystical literature among a number of Baha’is, most notably in the writings and poetry of Hand of the Cause of God and former ecclesiast of Ireland, George Townshend. It should be emphasised, however, as we shall see, that the mystical dimension is not confined to Bahá’u’lláh’s explicitly mystical writings, but is rather, from a Bahá’í perspective, an essential element of the Word of God itself.

At the heart of mystical literature lies an ineradicable paradox already mentioned: the assertion of ineffability, of the impossibility of description in relation to mystical experience – side by side with pages upon pages of precisely such description. This paradox, pervasive in mystical literature East and West, is closely related to a similar paradox underpinning the Baha’i concept of Revelation: the absolute transcendence, the categorical unknowability and indescribability of God - given expression in volume upon volume of revealed words about His exalted reality, will and purpose. Language is simultaneously held to be incapable of hinting at the reality of God, the Most Hidden of the hidden, while being consistently offered, in the words of the Prophets, as a ladder of ascent unto His Reality, the Most Manifest of the manifest.

mystical writers. More recent scholarship on mysticism centers around the writings of such scholars as Walter Stace, R.C. Zaehner, and Steven Katz (see Pike, pp.87-115, 154-159 and 177-214, for a thorough and succinct discussion of their thought).

² Shoghi Effendi, p.88

This paradox, in both mysticism and revelation, finds sublime expression in a tablet revealed by Baha'u'llah to Aqa Muhammad Hasan, and chosen by Shoghi Effendi to be the opening passage of *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, the volume of his chosen translations of Baha'u'llah's words:

“Lauded and glorified art Thou, O Lord, my God! How can I make mention of Thee, assured as I am that no tongue, however deep its wisdom, can befittingly magnify Thy name, nor can the bird of the human heart, however great its longing, ever hope to ascend into the heaven of Thy majesty and knowledge.

...The loftiest sentiments which the holiest of saints can express in praise of Thee, and the deepest wisdom which the most learned of men can utter in their attempts to comprehend Thy nature, all revolve around that Center Which is wholly subjected to Thy sovereignty, Which adoreth Thy Beauty, and is propelled through the movement of Thy Pen.

Nay, forbid it, O my God, that I should have uttered such words as must of necessity imply the existence of any direct relationship between the Pen of Thy Revelation and the essence of all created things... All comparisons and likenesses fail to do justice to the Tree of Thy Revelation, and every way is barred to the comprehension of the Manifestation of Thy Self and the Day Spring of Thy Beauty.

...Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.

...Unsearchable and high above the praise of men wilt Thou remain for ever. There is none other God but Thee, the Inaccessible, the Omnipotent, the Omniscient, the Holy of Holies.”³

Thus not even the words of the Prophets or, in Baha'i terminology, the Manifestations of God, can hint at God's reality or that of His Messengers. At the most, they can lead to attainment to the true knowledge of one's innermost self. In this context Baha'u'llah declares in the Hidden Words: *“Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me within thee, Mighty, Powerful and Self-Subsistent.”⁴* The circularity of the process becomes apparent. Our praise of and contemplation on God leads to a recognition of the poverty of our very words and insights in relation to His exalted Reality, leading in the process to a clearer insight into our own souls – wherein God is manifest. It seems then that the purpose of our inadequate praise of God is, as echoed by the Guardian in the citation above, to attain the mystical experience of union with God within our souls. Language, however, as is made clear earlier in this quote, even from saints, remains a broken yet seemingly indispensable vessel to carry the mystic waters.

The tablet to Aqa Muhammad Hasan makes clear that the paradoxical nature of language as both ladder to and veil from God applies not only to sacred scripture but

³ Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings...*, p.1

⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Arabic Hidden Words*, #13

to mystical literature also - in relation to the “*sentiments of the holiest of saints*” and the “*deepest wisdom*” of “*the most learned of men*”.

This chapter will explore in more detail the nature of this paradox by exploring in detail the way in which mystics within one religious tradition, Christianity, use language to describe mystical experience, how that endeavour is shaped by the mystics’ environment and background, and how that process illuminates our understanding of Baha’i scripture. We conclude with reflections on implications of this linguistic paradox to the conduct and direction of Baha’i scholarship.

We have chosen to take a very narrow focus on medieval mendicant Christian mystics. The intention is that, by rooting our discussion in a relatively homogenous context, the dynamics giving rise to differences in mystical description may be more readily perceived, and the relationship between mystical expression and social context be more clearly located. As we explore the experience of these mystics, we shall draw links and comparisons to Baha’u’llah’s mystical works.

The experience of mystical union, as has been mentioned, may be considered the cardinal pole of mystical experience, giving to the mystic’s quest its meaning, purpose and fulfilment. In Christian mystical writings the concept of mystical union appears to extend to two kinds of experience: first, the momentary rapture in which all sense of self is lost in God and all the powers of the soul are temporarily stilled in wordless ecstasy - an experience which, according to William James in his now classic and still influential Gifford Lectures, cannot last much more than half an hour, and at most an hour or two.⁵ Secondly, the concept of mystical union is also applied to a less transient and not at all disabling sense of deep union with God which usually follows, or is punctuated by, such raptures, in which the human will is said to become one with the divine Will, and all actions, thoughts, affections, are described as flowing from and tending towards God, resulting in a saintly life characterized by goodly deeds and an abiding sense of God’s presence in oneself and in all else. The technical term sometimes used for the second of these two states of mystical union is “the unitive life”.⁶

It should be said that although often Christian mystics make clear the distinction, equally often this distinction is blurred in the similarities of language used to refer to both kinds of experience. What is clear, however, is that both states are intimately linked, and, phenomenologically at least, are often considered as different aspects or phases of an ultimately unique experience of union with God.

Bearing in mind the interrelatedness of these two states, we will focus in this essay on the second kind of unitive experience, an experience which we may describe as ‘abiding’ union with God, - the daily experience of union with God to put it another way - as opposed to the ecstatic flight of union often linked with stirring visions,

⁵ James p.300. For a thorough analysis and discussion of this first, momentary kind of mystical union see Pike, *passim*. Additionally, all our primary sources contain descriptions of such experiences. William James’ treatment of the topic, although old and in some respects dated, is still useful and always stimulating.

⁶ Most contemporary academic discussion of the concept of mystical union appears to have centered on the first, transient and rapturous, state of mystical union. A very good discussion of the unitive life may be found in Evelyn Underhill’s very influential book, *Mysticism*, pp.494-530

which is said to herald, usher in, or recur in the course of, the unitive life. More precisely, we will focus on how this experience of abiding union is articulated by a number of important Christian mystics affiliated to the Franciscan and Dominican mendicant orders.⁷ In exploring this theme we will pay attention to the manner in which their formulation of an inescapably personal experience sought to bridge the gap of ineffability to reach an audience physically close, yet to all appearances still too far from their state to share or even conceive the preciousness of their sense of realization.⁸ We will frame this discussion in an exploration of Baha'u'llah's mystical teaching.

We begin with general remarks regarding the nature of the experience of abiding union as intimated by the writings of the mystics under review, noting aspects common to all of them before proceeding to discuss some aspects upon which they differ, in order to attempt some conclusions regarding the concept of mystical union and its formulation and discussion by our mystics. As a point of departure, a brief description of the sensations attending the experience in the mystics' own words seems in order.

Suso writes of intoxication, quiet and freedom: *"when the good and faithful servant enters the joy of his Lord, he becomes intoxicated with the immeasurable abundance of the Divine House. For in an ineffable manner it happens to him as to a drunk man, who forgets himself, is no longer himself. He is quite dead to Himself, and is entirely lost in God, has passed into Him, and has become one spirit with Him in all respects, just as a little drop of water that is poured into a large quantity of wine." "A man's will fades away as regards volition, in the sense of wanting to do this or that from self-will. He has no activity of such a will in this sinful sense... his life and will and activity are a quiet, untouched freedom, which is certainly, beyond all doubt, his support."*⁹

Jacopone da Todi writes: *"In God the spiritual faculties come to their desired end, lose all sense of self and self-consciousness, and are swept away. The soul, made new again, marvelling to find itself in that immensity, drowns. How this comes about it does not know.... The soul that possesses You remains forever pure, does not wound or sully itself with sin. On a height and in peace it looks down on the world below steeped in sin. The sense of self disappears, for it can never rise to this level, where the infinite charity of God engulfs all... So it is with the soul: Love drinks it in, it is united with Truth, its old nature fades away, it is no longer master of itself. The*

⁷ We have chosen to focus on the works of John Tauler (c.1300-1361), Henry Suso (c.1300-1365) and Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) on the Dominican side, and Bonaventura (1221-1274), Jacopone da Todi (c.1230-1306), and Angela di Foligno (1248-1309) on the Franciscan side. These mystics may be said, with some additions, to represent the flowering of the mysticism associated with the Franciscan and Dominican orders respectively. The geographical and temporal span distancing them from one another makes similarities, by virtue of the extremes they bridge across, all the more telling and compelling.

⁸ For the purposes of this essay we will adopt a phenomenological approach, seeking to explore our mystics' self-understanding without assessing the genuineness of their experience. Rather than debating the validity of their descriptions we will seek to find their rationale, and relate it to the wider context of their lives and of their world.

⁹ Suso pp. 185, 198.

soul wills and yet does not will: its will belongs to Another. It has eyes only for this Beauty".¹⁰

Angela di Foligno describes the experience thus: *"He is presented intimately to my soul, and when I understand Him to be present, I then understand how He is present in all nature, how in all things He has being... And God presents Himself with great illumination and truth and divine grace. So that the soul, seeing Him thus, can in no wise offend... And although I can experience sadness and joy exteriorly, I cannot interiorly; for in my soul is a room into which no joy or sadness, nor pleasure of any kind, neither virtue nor anything else, can enter. But into that room enters the All-Good... there remains continually with me a Divine unction, which is a supreme unction, and which I may have at all times of the day."*¹¹

We could add quotes from our remaining authors, but it is hoped that these excerpts, characteristic of the genre as a whole, will suffice to indicate the tenor of their descriptions.¹²

Baha'u'llah's Seven Valleys echo these descriptions of the unitive life:

*Whensoever the light of Manifestation of the King of Oneness settleth upon the throne of the heart and soul, His shining becometh visible in every limb and member. At that time the mystery of the famed tradition gleameth out of the darkness: "A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him; and when I have answered him, I become the ear wherewith he heareth..." For thus the Master of the house hath appeared within His home, and all the pillars of the dwelling are ashine with His light. And the action and effect of the light are from the Light-Giver; so it is that all move through Him and arise by His will. And this is that spring whereof the near ones drink, as it is said: "A fount whereof the near unto God shall drink"... For when the true lover and devoted friend reacheth to the presence of the Beloved, the sparkling beauty of the Loved One and the fire of the lover's heart will kindle a blaze and burn away all veils and wrappings. Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend.*¹³

As a starting point for a more detailed examination, it may be useful to turn to William James' simple yet useful model of the mystical experience. For William James four characteristics may be said to mark an experience as mystical: ineffability; noetic quality; transiency; and passivity.¹⁴ Of these four marks of mystical states noted by James the only one that does not apply to the kind of experience we are examining is, evidently, transiency. Indeed, William James is focusing on the visionary and rapturous experiences we mentioned earlier, rather than on the sense of abiding union or unitive life we are discussing here. The other three characteristics, on the other hand, certainly appear to be present in our mystics' discussions.

¹⁰Todi, pp.266, 270, 271.

¹¹ Foligno, pp. 154, 158-159.

¹² For references regarding our remaining authors' experiences and sensations see Bonaventura, pp.109-113; Tauler, p.124; Siena, p.364-365.

¹³ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.22,p.136

¹⁴ See James, pp.299-300

Let us begin with passivity, a word which may at first mislead, since, as it relates to our subject, it does not refer to the abandonment of human effort but rather to the incapacity of human effort, of itself, to bring about the longed for union, and the consequent ascription of this union and of the effects of this union to the activity of God rather than to the strivings of man. To this insufficiency of human effort all of our mystics testify, asserting the necessity of grace, defined as a "supernatural" bestowal originating in God Himself through Christ Jesus. Human effort then, according to each and all the mystics under review is secondary - necessary but not sufficient to attain reunion. Bonaventura summarises this position as follows:

*"But we cannot rise above ourselves unless a higher power lift us up. No matter how much our interior progress is ordered, nothing will come of it unless accompanied by divine aid. Divine aid is available to those who seek it from their hearts, humbly and devoutly; and this means to sigh for it in this valley of tears, through fervent prayer. Prayer, then, is the mother and source of the ascent... First, therefore, I invite the reader to the groans of prayer through Christ crucified,... so that he not believe that reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility, endeavour without grace, reflection... without divinely inspired wisdom."*¹⁵

Baha'u'llah echoes this in many passages of which we will cite but one from the Book of Certitude:

*"Thus will these mysteries be unravelled, not by the aid of acquired learning, but solely through the assistance of God and the outpourings of His grace... Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being. At that hour will the mystic Herald, bearing the joyful tidings of the Spirit, shine forth from the City of God resplendent as the morn, and, through the trumpet-blast of knowledge, will awaken the heart, the soul, and the spirit from the slumber of negligence."*¹⁶

Here the balance is struck between spiritual preparation on the part of the seeker and ultimate dependence upon divine assistance, in the form of "the breeze of His loving kindness", and "the mystic Herald, bearing the joyful tidings of the Spirit".

The link between mystical feeling and mystical knowledge is likewise clearly drawn in the passage. Of the noetic quality of mystical experience, James writes: *"Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths unplumbed by the discursive intellect."*¹⁷ This, again, is clearly reflected in everyone of our mystics. Again, we will turn to one of them, Catherine of Siena, to speak for the rest:

¹⁵ Bonaventura, pp.59-60, 56. For similar statements in our other sources see Tauler, pp. 95, 97; Suso, p.200, Siena, p.307; Todi, pp. 268-269; Foligno, p.124

¹⁶ Baha'ullah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, pp.195-196

¹⁷ James, p.300.

*"O Abyss! O eternal Godhead! O deep sea! What more could you have given me than the gift of your very self? You are a fire always burning but never consuming; you are a fire consuming in your heat all the soul's selfish love; you are a fire lifting all chill and giving light. In your light you have made me know your truth: You are that light beyond all light who gives the mind's eye supernatural light in such fullness and perfection that you bring clarity even to the light of faith. In that faith I see that my soul has life, and in that light receives you who are Light."*¹⁸

We now arrive at the ineffability of union, the unutterable nature of what is felt and apprehended in the privacy of the mystic's communion. In the Seven Valleys, having described the experience in words such as those cited above Baha'u'llah adds the paradoxical disclaimer:

*The pen steppeth not into this region, the ink leaveth only a blot. In these planes, the nightingale of the heart hath other songs and secrets, which make the heart to stir and the soul to clamor, but this mystery of inner meaning may be whispered only from heart to heart, confided only from breast to breast.*¹⁹

"No one grasps this", explains Bonaventura, "except him who receives, since it is more a matter of affective experience than rational consideration."²⁰ And Tauler asserts: "But this reaches far above all knowledge and understanding; far beyond all powers, even unto a fathomless abyss. As weak eyes cannot bear the brightness of the sun, so a thousand times less can nature endure this condition in her weakness. All that we can say of this is that however well we may be able to comprehend it with our minds, express it in words, or grasp it with the understanding, still it is all as utterly unlike the reality as it would be were I to say of a piece of black coal: 'Look, here is the bright sun which lightens all the world.'"²¹ And in Dionysian fashion Suso refers to God as the Nothing, and says: "in point of fact, it is as far and farther from the Nothing as it would be to say 'chopping block' instead of 'fine pearl'."²² Angela di Foligno finds language so inadequate as to feel that her descriptions approach blasphemy²³ (although doctrinally they could not be more orthodox) and asserts: "Of

¹⁸ Siena, p.365. Cf. Bonaventura, p. 114; Foligno, p.59; Suso, p.195; Tauler, p.80, Todi, p.266

¹⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.30

²⁰ Bonaventura, p.89

²¹ Tauler, p.124

¹⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.30

²⁰ Bonaventura, p.89

²¹ Tauler, p.124

²⁰ Bonaventura, p.89

²¹ Tauler, p.124

²¹ Tauler, p.124

²² Suso, p.192

²³ Foligno, pp.155, 159

²⁴ Ibid. p.156

²⁵ Siena, p.68

²⁶ Todi, p.268

²⁷ Siena, p.366

²⁸ Bonaventura, p.56

²³ Foligno, pp.155, 159

²⁴ Ibid. p.156

²⁵ Siena, p.68

²⁶ Todi, p.268

these divine operations of the manifestation of God in the soul not one word can be spoken, and of them no man can babble."²⁴ Catherine of Siena, as if it were God Himself speaking, writes, "Your tongue could never tell, nor your ears hear, nor your eyes see the joy they have who travel on this road",²⁵ and Jacopone da Todi exclaims despairingly: "Oh, the futility of seeking to convey with images and feelings that which surpasses all measure!"²⁶

Notwithstanding the sense of futility attending their attempts however, "seeking to convey with images and feelings that which surpasses all measure" is precisely what we find these mystics doing. It is this paradox which alerts us to the peculiarity of the mystic's use of language, which attempts, by means of "images and feelings", to bring, Prometheus like, the hidden fire of mystical experience from unapprehended heights to the lowly ground of human utterance. Not for the sake of those who, like themselves, have experienced the summits of reunion first hand - what need have they of words to do injustice to their ravishings? - but rather for the sake of those who have not yet attained the peak of mystical experience but who are receptive enough to be brought closer to their goal by the mystics' melodies.

Thus we find Catherine of Siena thanking God for her revelations not only on her own behalf, but on behalf also "of others who might see themselves mirrored here."²⁷ Clearly the mystic's path, although an intensely personal one, is not a lonely one, but one understood as shared by a multitude of souls. Bonaventura is still more explicit and precise. He writes his book for "those, therefore, predisposed by grace, the humble and the pious, the contrite and the devout, those anointed with the oil of gladness, the lovers of divine wisdom, and those inflamed with a desire for it,... those wishing to give themselves to glorifying, wondering at and even savouring God".²⁸ Those "wishing to", "lovers of", "inflamed with desire for": those, in other words, who want to arrive at the promised goal and are actively endeavouring to reach it, but who are not yet there.

This target audience for mystical texts resonates with the target audience designated by Baha'u'llah in the opening paragraphs of the Kitab-i Iqan: "They that tread the path of faith, they that thirst for the wine of certitude" who have the insight to seek *the shores of the ocean of true understanding* ['irfan]" but have yet to attain

²⁷ Siena, p.366

²⁸ Bonaventura, p.56

²⁴ Ibid. p.156

²⁵ Siena, p.68

²⁶ Todi, p.268

²⁷ Siena, p.366

²⁸ Bonaventura, p.56

²⁵ Siena, p.68

²⁶ Todi, p.268

²⁷ Siena, p.366

²⁸ Bonaventura, p.56

²⁶ Todi, p.268

²⁷ Siena, p.366

²⁸ Bonaventura, p.56

²⁷ Siena, p.366

²⁸ Bonaventura, p.56

²⁸ Bonaventura, p.56

the ultimate goal of reunion.²⁹

From the above may be gathered therefore that in attempting to describe the undescrivable, the mystic's purpose is allusive rather than descriptive, and is aimed at those held to have the capacity to profit from the guidance, namely, those with mystical calling even if as yet lacking in mystical attainment. And if words and concepts, including the concept of mystical union, are held to be descriptively inadequate or even altogether blasphemous in judging the reality of God by merely human yardsticks; yet are held to be at the same time didactically useful before a particularly receptive audience, then clearly their purpose is not description, but rather to carry the intended audience to a point beyond description. To use language not so much to nullify as to transcend itself, so that words are possible but inescapably inadequate, yet capable of triggering within the reader a mystical experience of the text.

Mystical language and terminology then, in purpose, is not descriptive but allusive and evocative, and it is by evocation and allusion that it conveys meaning beyond words to those receptive to its images, by reason of what Baha'u'llah describes as their "*purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit*".³⁰

²⁹ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.1

³⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

³¹ As far as the quoting of authorities goes we find the German Dominican mystics referring to Aquinas as an equally crucial intellectual authority, which we do not find even vaguely in Jacopone da Todi, much less in Bonaventura who was Aquinas' contemporary. On the other hand, we find Catherine of Siena, a Dominican tertiary, using St. Francis as an exemplar repeatedly and with evident devotion, suggesting that the lines between the two orders, at least as far as mysticism is concerned, were less sectarian at the popular than at the academic level.

³² A good discussion of Pseudo-Dionysius' thoughts on the concept of mystical union and his subsequent influence on Christianity may be found in Waite, chapter III, esp. pp.45-54. His relation to Neoplatonism is discussed by Armstrong, pp. 367-371

³³ Butler, pp.179-182. Waite devotes some pages (pp.57-59) to asserting that Augustine could not be called properly a mystic mainly by reason of this absence of Dionysian language; but Butler's arguments for inclusion of Augustine among the great Christian mystics seems to us the more persuasive

³⁴ A good and succinct overview of the friars may be found in C.H. Lawrence's "The Friars". Of relevance to our discussion may be mentioned chapters 6, 7 and 10 of that book, dealing with the links between the friars and the universities, the towns and the Pope, under whose authority they served as (often itinerant) preachers and confessors, and in some measure as popularisers of contemporary theological thought

³⁵ For a more in depth discussion of Sufi motifs in the Seven Valleys see Michael McCarron *The Ineffable In Context*

³⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

³¹ As far as the quoting of authorities goes we find the German Dominican mystics referring to Aquinas as an equally crucial intellectual authority, which we do not find even vaguely in Jacopone da Todi, much less in Bonaventura who was Aquinas' contemporary. On the other hand, we find Catherine of Siena, a Dominican tertiary, using St. Francis as an exemplar repeatedly and with evident devotion, suggesting that the lines between the two orders, at least as far as mysticism is concerned, were less sectarian at the popular than at the academic level.

³² A good discussion of Pseudo-Dionysius' thoughts on the concept of mystical union and his subsequent influence on Christianity may be found in Waite, chapter III, esp. pp.45-54. His relation to Neoplatonism is discussed by Armstrong, pp. 367-371

³³ Butler, pp.179-182. Waite devotes some pages (pp.57-59) to asserting that Augustine could not be called properly a mystic mainly by reason of this absence of Dionysian language; but Butler's arguments for inclusion of Augustine among the great Christian mystics seems to us the more persuasive

Evocation and allusion together form the bridge that connects the intelligible with the ineffable and makes mystical teaching possible. It is a bridge built by vivid imagery, used metaphorically and paradoxically to convey what is regarded as unutterable truth.

Here is where we discover the social dimension of mystical language. To be effectively allusive or evocative language must at the outset be intelligible; and to be intelligible it must use images and concepts that its audience is equipped to understand. Further, the language used by an author will be shaped by his or her intellectual and cultural background, and, for the mystics under review, will additionally be limited by a desire to remain within the bounds of Catholic orthodoxy. We thus find our mystics' discussion profoundly influenced by, yet not reducible to, their social context. Their treatises may in this light be seen as a conversation between the individual's deeply subjective, indescribable, yet not incomunicable experience, and society's mores and aspirations. Time and space constraints prevent our dealing with each of our mystics individually, to see how their particular context influenced their writing. What we can attempt to identify is general ways in which the language of all of these mystics is affected by their environment, with particular reference to the concept of mystical union.

We mentioned that the intellectual and cultural background of the mystics would affect their writings. In this respect it would be natural to expect that (male) university trained mystics would present differences from the (female) non-academically trained mystics in our list. Indeed, this appears to be the case. The four university trained mystics, Bonaventura, Jacopone da Todi, Suso and Tauler, all reflect a similar intellectual heritage that differs somewhat from the two female mystics. In style if not always in content, moreover, Bonaventura, Suso and Tauler, the theologians, are set apart from Jacopone, the erstwhile lawyer, the former using, unlike the latter, prose rather than verse, and being far more prone to cite, explicitly or without acknowledgement, the voice of scholarly authority. In sharp contrast, the writing of our women mystics is comparatively devoid of references, other than to the Bible and to popularly accessible devotional stories, and is both less philosophical and more intimate in character.

A look at the three theologians, although separated by many miles and decades, reveals them to share, as was mentioned before, a common intellectual heritage, with Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and Aristotle representing the major wellsprings of their thought, if not of their inspiration, which derives rather from the gospel and the lives of saints, most significantly St. Francis.³¹ The same intellectual

³⁴ A good and succinct overview of the friars may be found in C.H. Lawrence's "The Friars". Of relevance to our discussion may be mentioned chapters 6, 7 and 10 of that book, dealing with the links between the friars and the universities, the towns and the Pope, under whose authority they served as (often itinerant) preachers and confessors, and in some measure as popularisers of contemporary theological thought

³⁵ For a more in depth discussion of Sufi motifs in the Seven Valleys see Michael McCarron *The Ineffable In Context*

³¹ As far as the quoting of authorities goes we find the German Dominican mystics referring to Aquinas as an equally crucial intellectual authority, which we do not find even vaguely in Jacopone da Todi, much less in Bonaventura who was Aquinas' contemporary. On the other hand, we find Catherine of Siena, a Dominican tertiary, using St. Francis as an exemplar repeatedly and with evident devotion, suggesting that the lines between the two orders, at least as far as mysticism is concerned, were less

influences are present in Jacopone da Todi, although less emphatically and less distinctly. By contrast, the influence of these three authors on Catherine of Siena, although noticeable, appears negligible, and the same is the case with Angela di Foligno. This is most clearly reflected in the relation between the concept of mystical union with God and the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius.³² Pseudo-Dionysius' apophatic theology (seeing God in negative terms - as a Darkness, as a Nothing, etc. - by reason of His utter transcendence) is one of the principal non-scriptural, explicit references in Bonaventura's "Journey of the Soul", and is even more ubiquitous in Tauler and Suso. Dionysian thought becomes less noticeable though still clearly apparent in Jacopone da Todi, and even less evident in Catherine of Siena and Angela di Foligno. It would thus seem that the apophatic image of union with God was mediated by the universities, and popularised in the sermons and counsels of such as Tauler and other mystically inclined preachers and confessors through whom it would have reached most lay persons aware of such teaching.

This suggestion that the apophatic images of mystical union were transmitted by the schools rather than drawn naturally from experience is all the more plausible since, as Butler noted, earlier mystics like Augustine, Gregory and Bernard of Clairvaux, were predominantly affirmative, which is equivalent to saying non-Dionysian (or as he puts it pre-Dionysian) in their mysticism.³³ Indeed, the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius was

sectarian at the popular than at the academic level.

³² A good discussion of Pseudo-Dionysius' thoughts on the concept of mystical union and his subsequent influence on Christianity may be found in Waite, chapter III, esp. pp.45-54. His relation to Neoplatonism is discussed by Armstrong, pp. 367-371

³³ Butler, pp.179-182. Waite devotes some pages (pp.57-59) to asserting that Augustine could not be called properly a mystic mainly by reason of this absence of Dionysian language; but Butler's arguments for inclusion of Augustine among the great Christian mystics seems to us the more persuasive

³⁴ A good and succinct overview of the friars may be found in C.H. Lawrence's "The Friars". Of relevance to our discussion may be mentioned chapters 6, 7 and 10 of that book, dealing with the links between the friars and the universities, the towns and the Pope, under whose authority they served as (often itinerant) preachers and confessors, and in some measure as popularisers of contemporary theological thought

³⁵ For a more in depth discussion of Sufi motifs in the Seven Valleys see Michael McCarron *The Ineffable In Context*

³² A good discussion of Pseudo-Dionysius' thoughts on the concept of mystical union and his subsequent influence on Christianity may be found in Waite, chapter III, esp. pp.45-54. His relation to Neoplatonism is discussed by Armstrong, pp. 367-371

³³ Butler, pp.179-182. Waite devotes some pages (pp.57-59) to asserting that Augustine could not be called properly a mystic mainly by reason of this absence of Dionysian language; but Butler's arguments for inclusion of Augustine among the great Christian mystics seems to us the more persuasive

³⁴ A good and succinct overview of the friars may be found in C.H. Lawrence's "The Friars". Of relevance to our discussion may be mentioned chapters 6, 7 and 10 of that book, dealing with the links between the friars and the universities, the towns and the Pope, under whose authority they served as (often itinerant) preachers and confessors, and in some measure as popularisers of contemporary theological thought

³⁵ For a more in depth discussion of Sufi motifs in the Seven Valleys see Michael McCarron *The Ineffable In Context*

³³ Butler, pp.179-182. Waite devotes some pages (pp.57-59) to asserting that Augustine could not be called properly a mystic mainly by reason of this absence of Dionysian language; but Butler's arguments for inclusion of Augustine among the great Christian mystics seems to us the more persuasive

³⁴ A good and succinct overview of the friars may be found in C.H. Lawrence's "The Friars". Of relevance to our discussion may be mentioned chapters 6, 7 and 10 of that book, dealing with the links

first translated into Latin by John Scotus in the 9th century, but did not become popular until the 12th century. It was subsequently commented on by great schoolmen such as Hugh of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart and, as we have seen, Bonaventura. It is thus no surprise that the closer we get to the universities, and the more we advance in time, the more apophatic our mystics become. Similarly, it is logical to believe that the friars, trained in the universities yet preaching to the masses, would have been a prime channel for the diffusion of such thought among the people, particularly among lay members of the mendicant orders such as Jacopone da Todi, Angela di Foligno and Catherine of Siena.³⁴

In the case of Baha'u'llah, a theologically informed Baha'i perspective assessing the influence of Baha'u'llah's environment on the shape of His Revelation faces the tensions between illuminating the meaning of His message, and giving expression to "*such words as must of necessity imply the existence of any direct relationship between the Pen of Thy Revelation and the essence of all created things*". A beginning however may be made from Baha'u'llah's own utterances. To take the example of the Seven Valleys, the book is clearly influenced in its formal structure by Attar's Conference of Birds,³⁵ which uses the structure of seven stages to the eventual destination of mystic union. Within the Seven Valleys, mystical poets such as Rumi, Hafiz, etc. are cited very frequently, in a way that does not recur in other genres within Baha'u'llah's corpus of Revelation. The descriptions of mystical union, emphasising the notion of Poverty and Absolute Nothingness likewise echo a specifically Sufi mystical tradition.

However the key influence in the literary shape of the Seven Valleys is likely to be the recipient and intended audience of the work, rather than Baha'u'llah's own previous education, as in the case of the mendicant mystics. Thus Baha'u'llah explicitly states in the Seven Valleys: "*so much as We have quoted here is out of deference to the wont of men and after the manner of the friends*".³⁶ In this as in so

between the friars and the universities, the towns and the Pope, under whose authority they served as (often itinerant) preachers and confessors, and in some measure as popularisers of contemporary theological thought

³⁵ For a more in depth discussion of Sufi motifs in the Seven Valleys see Michael McCarron *The Innefable In Context*

³⁴ A good and succinct overview of the friars may be found in C.H. Lawrence's "The Friars". Of relevance to our discussion may be mentioned chapters 6, 7 and 10 of that book, dealing with the links between the friars and the universities, the towns and the Pope, under whose authority they served as (often itinerant) preachers and confessors, and in some measure as popularisers of contemporary theological thought

³⁵ For a more in depth discussion of Sufi motifs in the Seven Valleys see Michael McCarron *The Innefable In Context*

³⁵ For a more in depth discussion of Sufi motifs in the Seven Valleys see Michael McCarron *The Innefable In Context*

³⁶ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valeys*, p.26

³⁷ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.237

³⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p.14-15

³⁹ See Tauler, p.94, footnote 3

⁴⁰ On the reaktion between Suso and Eckhart see Davies' excellent and comprehensive study of Meister Eckhart, chapter 10. The same chapter also deals with the relation of Eckhart's thought to Tauler's. On Eckhart's condemnation for heresy, see Davies, pp. 26-45, 195-20

⁴¹ Suso, p.192

⁴² Suso, p.202

⁴³ Suso p.184. Cf. Ibid., pp. 185

many aspects the Baha'i Faith from its very roots is a uniquely a self-conscious religion, as described by the founder of World Theology, William Cantwell-Smith. The suggestion that the key factor in shaping the form of the Seven Valleys is its intended audience may be strengthened by noting that the prevalence of poetic quotes so striking in the Seven Valleys is not characteristic of a roughly contemporary work dealing in part with very similar themes, the Kitab-i Iqan. There the supporting quotes are drawn primarily from hadith (traditions) and, as is common throughout His writings, the Qu'ran. In the Iqan as well, Baha'u'llah expresses His consistent approach to citation of authority: "*Although We did not intend to make mention of the traditions of a bygone age, yet, because of Our love for thee, We will cite a few which are applicable to Our argument.*"³⁷ Towards the end of His ministry in His Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, Baha'u'llah clarified the purpose behind this variety of styles, of languages of Revelation:

*"So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth... At one time We spoke in the language of the lawgiver; at another in that of the truth-seeker and the mystic, and yet Our supreme purpose and highest wish hath always been to disclose the glory and sublimity of this station."*³⁸

⁴⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.23

⁴⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

³⁷ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.237

³⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p.14-15

³⁹ See Tauler, p.94, footnote 3

⁴⁰ On the relation between Suso and Eckhart see Davies' excellent and comprehensive study of Meister Eckhart, chapter 10. The same chapter also deals with the relation of Eckhart's thought to Tauler's. On Eckhart's condemnation for heresy, see Davies, pp. 26-45, 195-20

⁴¹ Suso, p.192

⁴² Suso, p.202

⁴³ Suso p.184. Cf. Ibid., pp. 185

⁴⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.23

⁴⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

³⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p.14-15

³⁹ See Tauler, p.94, footnote 3

⁴⁰ On the relation between Suso and Eckhart see Davies' excellent and comprehensive study of Meister Eckhart, chapter 10. The same chapter also deals with the relation of Eckhart's thought to Tauler's. On Eckhart's condemnation for heresy, see Davies, pp. 26-45, 195-20

⁴¹ Suso, p.192

⁴² Suso, p.202

⁴³ Suso p.184. Cf. Ibid., pp. 185

⁴⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.23

⁴⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

This passage intimates that Baha'u'llah's styles were intentionally adopted to speak to different audiences the underlying message of unity which forms the leitmotif of His Revelation, and that the principle of adopting styles and images that maximise the evocative power of the texts to their intended audience.

The need to tailor language to audience was shared by the mendicant mystics under review as well. We find, by way of illustration, that German mystics use terminology not employed by the more numerous Italians on our list. A case in point is the term "ground" to signify the essence of the soul where the image of God is found, the place of 'hypostasis' where the union of the soul with God takes place. The idea goes back to Pseudo-Dionysius and before that to Plotinus, and was influentially used in German circles by Meister Eckhart himself.³⁹ The term was also used by George Fox and Julian of Norwich among others in England, but does not appear in our Italian mystics' vocabulary, even though, as we have explained, Bonaventura at least, and likely also Jacopone da Todi, had direct knowledge of Pseudo-Dionysius. The root of the difference therefore very possibly lies in the differing audiences. In whichever way it became common in Germany as a mystical term, the word "ground" was clearly a familiar feature of mystical discourse by the time John Tauler was using it in his sermons to various congregations of nuns who could not have been expected to have acquired knowledge of Dionysius at university. The image of the ground of the soul is ubiquitous in Tauler and is almost as common in Suso, yet is wholly absent in all other mystics under review. In Italy, where the rest of our mystics originate, the term was clearly not current, so that even if Bonaventura and Jacopone da Todi were familiar with this term, and even if they had found it descriptively very useful, being largely unknown to their intended audiences, it would have been didactically useless.

We also mentioned the desire for orthodoxy as a significant factor in the way language is used by our mystics. We may see this most clearly in the discussions of mystical union with God by Henry Suso. In his "Little Book of Truth", written against the background of the condemnation of Meister Eckhart - Suso's teacher - for heresy (on the grounds of pantheistic use of language in dealing with the concept of mystical union),⁴⁰ Suso goes out of his way to state that the collapse of distinctions

³⁹ See Tauler, p.94, footnote 3

⁴⁰ On the relation between Suso and Eckhart see Davies' excellent and comprehensive study of Meister Eckhart, chapter 10. The same chapter also deals with the relation of Eckhart's thought to Tauler's. On Eckhart's condemnation for heresy, see Davies, pp. 26-45, 195-20

⁴¹ Suso, p.192

⁴² Suso, p.202

⁴³ Suso p.184. Cf. Ibid., pp. 185

⁴⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.23

⁴⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

⁴⁰ On the relation between Suso and Eckhart see Davies' excellent and comprehensive study of Meister Eckhart, chapter 10. The same chapter also deals with the relation of Eckhart's thought to Tauler's. On Eckhart's condemnation for heresy, see Davies, pp. 26-45, 195-20

⁴¹ Suso, p.192

⁴² Suso, p.202

⁴³ Suso p.184. Cf. Ibid., pp. 185

between man and God in the divine union is one of perception rather than of substance.⁴¹ Man remains man and God remains God, except that man ceases to think in terms of this dichotomy. Ontologically however, the gap between Divinity and humanity is unbridgeable, except in Christ, and in Christ alone.⁴² So emphatic is he on this point that he holds a realization of the truth of this ineradicable distinction between man and God to be an essential prerequisite of attainment to mystical union.⁴³ Although, with varying degrees of emphasis, all our writers appear to agree on this point, none is so explicit nor so insistent as Suso, nor is the context for such discussion so poignant or relevant as it is in his case.

In the writings of Baha'u'llah the same theological self-consciousness is found, the same explicit effort to bind spiritual experience within a theological understanding that preserves the distinction between the divine and the merely human, the finite and the infinite. In the Seven Valleys, having described the experience of mystic union in the Valley of Unity, Baha'u'llah declares:

“However, let none construe these utterances to be anthropomorphism, nor see in them the descent of the worlds of God into the grades of the creatures; nor should they lead thine Eminence to such assumptions. For God is, in His Essence, holy above ascent and descent, entrance and exit; He hath through all eternity been free of the attributes of human creatures, and ever will remain so. No man hath ever

⁴⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.23

⁴⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

⁴¹ Suso, p.192

⁴² Suso, p.202

⁴³ Suso p.184. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 185

⁴⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.23

⁴⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

⁴² Suso, p.202

⁴³ Suso p.184. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 185

⁴⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.23

⁴⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

⁴³ Suso p.184. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 185

⁴⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.23

⁴⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

known Him; no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being. Every mystic knower hath wandered far astray in the valley of the knowledge of Him; every saint hath lost his way in seeking to comprehend His Essence."⁴⁴

To conclude, phenomenologically, the formulation of the concept of mystical union appears to find roots in a distinctive kind of mystical experience: personal, illuminating, transcendent and climactic. Passive, noetic, ineffable, in the words of William James. An experience or state far above any and all words to describe, if not to hint at. Indeed, the concept of "mystical union" appears to have been conceived not so much to describe the feeling or experience of the mystic - a forlorn hope - but to hint at its nature; to evoke an intuition of it in the receptive heart by means of vivid metaphorical and often paradoxical imagery. Receptivity to this imagery was said by these mystics to depend on a subtle combination of effort and grace in the quest for this same "mystical union".

The concept of "mystical union" thus stands out as didactic in purpose even if descriptive or speculative in form, aiming at imparting non-discursive knowledge to receptive audiences, in order to facilitate or add momentum to these audiences' ongoing mystical journey towards "reunion" with God. Images and descriptions are useful to our mystics only insofar as they are able to evoke such non-discursive apprehension, or rather intimation, of a state experienced first hand by them and uniformly stated to lie beyond the capacity of language to depict, yet evidently not beyond its power to allude (which in a certain way signifies a capacity to lead towards).

It would seem that, at the individual level at least, Baha'u'llah takes a similar approach to Revelation. Its main purpose is not to inform but to transform, and the depths of meaning that lie within the Sacred Word can be plumbed only by the spiritually prepared, that is, the spiritually thirsty. In the *Kitab-i Iqan*, Baha'u'llah emphatically states: "*The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit. This is evidenced by those who, today, though without a single letter of the accepted standards of learning, are occupying the loftiest seats of knowledge*"⁴⁵ By understanding, Baha'u'llah clearly means something deeper than the purely linguistic or even intellectual comprehension available to all alike – the accepted standards of learning. Rather it is suggested that he means a transformational experience of the text leading to an essentially mystical experience. Like the mystics, Baha'u'llah

⁴⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys*, p.23

⁴⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

⁴⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.211

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

writes primarily not to expound but to transform.

This fundamental intention necessitates that the language used be intelligible, indeed evocative to the intended audience. This, together with a desire to keep mystical language within the bounds of doctrinal clarity, and, particularly in relation to the mystics, life experience, make the use of mystical imagery and language heavily influenced by the social environment. Thus the cultural and intellectual make-up of the intended audience will be a factor in the choice of imagery used to evoke intuitions of the mystics' ineffable experience. The concern for doctrinal clarity will act as a constraint on mystical discourse, influencing, among other things, the degree of emphasis and elaboration devoted to various aspects of mystical experience in order to justify, if necessary, the use of images of great evocative potential but of doctrinal ambiguity. The intellectual background of the mystic will affect both his style and his choice of imagery with which he attempts to articulate his insights.

In the case of Revelation, the intellectual environment of the Prophet clearly influences, at the very least, the language of scripture, the questions He is asked, the audiences He engages with, and the literary and philosophical heritage He draws on. This accounts to a considerable degree for the differences between mystical writers even within the same religious and even monastic tradition. It underlies the pivotal principle of Baha'i theology – progressive revelation.

In a way that resonates with the Baha'i notion of the fundamental oneness of religion, there appears to be at the heart of mysticism a fundamental oneness or convergence of religious experience. In the religious accounts of the mystics, notwithstanding the varieties of expression, the rhetorical effect of the various images used seems to coincide to a remarkable degree in evoking a shared sense of climax, of ineffability, of illumination, of encounter, and of moral development. This suggests that the experience alluded to by the concept of "mystical union", although irreducibly subjective in character, has an objective nature which allows it to be experienced by a multitude of believers - which assumption underlies the very attempt of our mystics at communicating something of their insights and experiences. It is this that enables mystics to quote liberally from each other to illustrate their experiences.

The link between such mystical experience and Revelation is most compellingly illustrated by Baha'u'llah's use of mystics' writings to validate His own Revelation. This suggests that the mystics' description of his or her journey towards God potentially holds insights that can help illuminate our experience of the Word of God.

Although the state alluded to by the concept of mystical union is affirmed by the mystics we have reviewed to be indescribable, it is indeed considered communicable, at least partially, to kindred souls, even if to those not mystically inclined the mystic's words might appear not so much paradoxical as merely contradictory - not so much ineffable as hopelessly incongruous. Mystical language is thus in a way exclusive in its functioning, even if not by design, insofar as its proper understanding is explicitly held to be conditioned on the sincere desire for, and active pursuit of, the mystic's goal. It is considered to elude intrinsically the comprehension of others who, though remote from the mystic's own inmost aspirations, care nonetheless to eavesdrop on his conversation.

To such as these our mystics do not address themselves, nor do they expect to be properly understood by such (to the mystics) worldly ears. If the mystics speak to them at all it is unintentionally, one might almost say against their will. In this light, the concept of mystical union, as far as the mystic is concerned, takes on the character, not of an explanation but of a riddle - a guide to the devout and mystically inclined and an obstruction to the worldly and the unspiritual - to be unravelled only by loving, yearning effort, assisted by grace, guided by a desire to attain to that experience which in the mystics' eyes, as Bonaventura wrote, *"is mystical and most secret, which no one knows, except him who receives it, no one receives except him who desires it, and no one desires except him who is inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit which Christ sent into the world."*⁴⁶

*"But if you want to know how these things come about, ask grace not instruction, desire not understanding, the groaning of prayer not diligent reading, the Spouse not the teacher, God not man, darkness not clarity, not light but the fire that totally inflames and carries us into God by ecstatic unctions and burning affections."*⁴⁷

The words of Baha'u'llah show a fundamental harmony between mystical hermeneutics as expounded above and scriptural hermeneutics as propounded in the Baha'i writings. In the Baha'i writings too understanding of the sacred Word is held to be conditioned on a spiritual orientation, and the pursuit of knowledge is framed in a paradigm of spiritual beliefs, attitudes and skills that are said to mediate true learning:

*Know verily that Knowledge is of two kinds: Divine and Satanic. The one welleteth out from the fountain of divine inspiration; the other is but a reflection of vain and obscure thoughts. The source of the former is God Himself; the motive-force of the latter the whisperings of selfish desire. The one is guided by the principle: "Fear ye God; God will teach you;" the other is but a confirmation of the truth: "Knowledge is the most grievous veil between man and his Creator." The former bringeth forth the fruit of patience, of longing desire, of true understanding, and love; whilst the latter can yield naught but arrogance, vainglory and conceit... The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge."*⁴⁸

The key distinction here appears to centre not so much around a different methodology in purely technical terms, but around a distinctive orientation with its accompanying effect. For instance, in relation to scripture, a reading of the sacred

⁴⁶ Bonaventura, p. 113

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 115

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

⁴⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.69-70

⁴⁹ Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha'u'llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

Word whose “*motive-force*” is “*the whisperings of selfish desire*”, is likely to lead in the scholar to “*arrogance, vainglory and conceit*” and be in danger of acting as a “*most grievous veil between man and his Creator.*” The conclusions drawn will, it appears, be “*but a reflection of vain and obscure thoughts.*” On the other hand, a reading that is informed by a personal quest for divine inspiration and conscious effort to cleanse and sanctify one’s motivation and perspective, will make the heart receptive to divine inspiration and knowledge – that is, spiritually informed insight. The measure of success in this endeavour is again attitudinal at heart: yielding “*the fruit of patience, of longing desire, of true understanding, and love*” The same may be said of any branch of knowledge, although perhaps none more so than scriptural study.

The implication seems to be that Baha’u’llah regards all knowledge potentially as a bridge towards that supra-discursive knowledge which the mystics strive for. He thus links the pursuit of knowledge to the mystic’s quest and the practice of worship, which, as Shoghi Effendi adumbrated, has at its heart “*that mystic feeling which unites Man with God*”. Hence the famous sentence cited by Baha’u’llah in the Book of Certitude among other places. “*Knowledge is one point, which the foolish have multiplied*”.⁴⁹ From this perspective true knowledge is a spiritual, mystical state of communion with God (the “*single point*”) that may be alluded to, but not contained by human learning. When human learning is earnestly pursued in a spirit of worship and mystical quest, the process of scholarship becomes a process of reunion with God. When human learning is on the other hand divorced from spiritual questing, and particularly when it is driven by egotistical or selfish motivations, it acts as a dissociative process separating the scholar’s soul from his Beloved, and impeding the flow of that “*mystic feeling*” of the presence of God within the soul, which Baha’u’llah, no less than the mystics under review, equates with true understanding.

What if any are the methodological implications of such an orientation? Clearly, the above perspective is not methodologically prescriptive in a technical way. Two scholars could look at the same passage of scripture with identical methodologies and even possibly reach identical conclusions, even if their spiritual orientation was diametrically opposite. What would certainly differ would be the effect of the process upon each scholar’s soul, with one reaping the fruit of vainglory, and the other the fruit of love. But in addition, the likelihood is that the process of investigation, the tone of their writings, and the relationship to existing scholarship will also differ. These are the key areas where a mystical orientation to scholarship as described above would have a bearing.

For instance, a mystically oriented scholarship could include in the process of investigation the cultivation of prayer, and, within a Baha’i paradigm, possibly consultation as well. The tone of one’s utterance might seek consciously to be consensus building and constructive, and strenuously avoid controversy and intemperate criticism of differing views. Existing scholarship would be reviewed in a spirit of impartiality, humility, and great courtesy, using, particularly when offering constructive criticism, “*words as mild as milk*”.⁵⁰ This does not mean that only spiritually informed scholarship would be adorned with these virtues, as those

⁴⁹ Baha’u’llah, *Kitab-i Iqan*, p.184

⁵⁰ cf. Baha’u’llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

⁵⁰ cf. Baha’u’llah, *Tablets...*, p.173

potentialities are open to all scholars to a greater or lesser degree. But a spiritual orientation to scholarship is likely to generate the motive power to make this process increasingly refined, penetrating, and profound.

Within the Baha'i community the possibility exists to evolve a distinctive culture of scholarship, whose ultimate object could be to lead oneself and one's audience to a closer relationship with the Divine. In such a culture the language of scholarship would be likely to develop gradually over decades and centuries into a vehicle of spiritual evocation as well as technical description. Whether this perspective is valid or not, Baha'i scholarship over the coming decades faces the challenge of experimenting with diverse approaches to bringing spirituality and faith to bear on the scholarly endeavour. Some will be inclined towards a minimalist approach that keeps religion as far as possible implicit rather than explicit in methodologies and outcomes. Others are likely to make bold to bring faith to bear in a more explicit fashion in their scholarship, while still others are likely to experiment with both approaches in accordance with the different audiences for their scholarly endeavour. As has been the case in previous religious traditions it seems plausible to expect that the fruit of the present ferment of scholarly effort in the Baha'i community will eventually be a distinctively Baha'i paradigm of scholarship within which a number of methodologies coexist. As with previous faith traditions, this paradigm is likely in due course to integrate a devotional, even mystical orientation which has at its heart a consciousness of the ineffability and transformative influence of true knowledge. The voice of Henry Suso might well come in due course to resonate with the deep voice of Baha'i scholarship:

"What I experience is bottomless; what I love is endless; and therefore, what I want to say is wordless."

APPENDIX: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

On the Franciscan side, the first of our mystics is St. Bonaventura (c.1217-1274), described at times as the Franciscan Order's second founder. Born at a time when the Franciscan order was reaching its peak, he was to become one of its foremost scholars and mystics. Although from the moment he joined the Franciscans (1243), and especially after he became Minister General of the Order, Bonaventura lived a life of intense activity, scholarly and administrative, his mystical writings and widely acknowledged saintliness testify to the unmistakable richness of his inner life. Of his many writings dedicated to the mystical life, we have chosen to focus on his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (translated as "The Soul's Journey into God"), widely recognised as his masterpiece. The book was widely read in the middle ages and is today the most popular of his many works. Contemplative rather than lyrical in tone, it brought together and correlated existing traditions of spirituality centered on nature, on the soul and on God and integrated them in the form of a meditation on St. Francis' climactic vision of a six winged Seraph, where each wing became a mode of contemplating and reaching unto God.

There follows Jacopone da Todi (c.1230-1306). Born from an aristocratic Umbrian family, Jacopone became, after studying in Bologna, the medieval academic stronghold of the legal profession, a *notaio*, a position mixing the roles of lawyer and accountant. On the death of his wife, "for reasons that are more or less plausibly conjectural" (Hughes, p.xix), he turned his back on his previous life and embarked on a life of extreme penitence. After ten years privations, in his late forties, he joined the Franciscan order. At this time (1278), the friars minor were undergoing great convulsions that would before long lead to an open schism between the Spirituals, overridingly committed to Francis' ideal of poverty, which had been watered down by the Papacy, and the Conventuals, also committed to poverty, but equally committed to Francis' ideal of obedience to ecclesiastical authority, which demanded a measure of compromise in observing the rule of poverty. Jacopone, predictably, sided prominently with the Spirituals, and was lead into direct conflict with Pope Boniface VIII, resulting in his excommunication and imprisonment, commuted only on the death of Boniface the VIII by his successor, Benedict XI. Less contemplative and more lyrical than Bonaventura's mystical writings, Jacopone's Lauds are said to represent the best Italian poetry before Dante. Full of fervour and passion, they are informed by a philosophical element that makes his mysticism at once deep and stirring. Interestingly, Sufi influence has been traced in his poems, from the incantatory repetition of particular words in a manner reminiscent of *Dhikr*, through the concept of self-annihilation as the means of attainment and the personification of this self-annihilation and of other virtues in the form of a maiden, to the use of the Qu'ranic image of man as created from a sorry germ.

Roughly contemporary to Jacopone da Todi, Angela di Foligno (c.1248-c.1309) was also born in the region of Umbria of prosperous parents. She did not have formal schooling, but is said to have been able to read and possibly to write. She married at twenty, leading a very active social life until, troubled by a sin, possibly of a sexual nature, she went to confession, but, too ashamed to tell the whole story, received Communion conscious of her transgression. The resulting struggle with her

conscience precipitated her conversion, which she describes in 18 steps, leading to her experiencing a profound "sentiment of God" in prayer. Thereafter we follow her progress in a series of temptations and a multitude of ecstatic, rapturous visions that stimulate contemplation on the nature of God, the sufferings of Christ, the Trinity. An ecstatic through and through, her attitudes strike one oftentimes as extreme, yet her experiences, at a deeper level, appear as both ardent and profound, and invariably exalted. Unlike Jacopone, there is no sign that she engaged in any way in the controversies that were pulling the franciscans apart during her life-time.

Turning now to the Dominicans, we may begin by Henry Suso (c.1300-1365). Born in the region of Swabia to a noble family, Suso joined the Dominicans in his early teens. From that early age he experienced for some years, usually twice a day, ecstatic states and manifold visions, of Christ, of the Virgin, of Eternal Wisdom, of the Saints. His early life was characterized by a rigorous asceticism which however became less extreme as his sense of realization increased. He studied at Cologne where he would have heard Eckhart preach, and in his Little Book of Truth speaks of him as "the master". Although sympathetic though, Suso was an independent thinker, as Davies remarked. Suso's Little Book of Eternal Wisdom was one of the most popular mystical books of the middle ages, both for its readability (Suso puts the dialogue form to very good use in the form of a discussion between a disciple and Eternal Wisdom), and for its depth, clarity and spiritual uplift. His Little Book of Truth deals primarily with the concept of mystical union, and contains, in addition, a defense of Eckhart and a description of the process of self-abandonment by which we reach unto God.

John Tauler (c.1300-1361), another leading Rhineland mystic and a contemporary of Suso's, was born in Strasbourg from a respectable citizen family. Like Suso, he joined the Dominicans in his early teens, and after 2 years' novitiate and 8 years of study in Strasbourg was sent to Cologne for higher studies. It is highly probable that he heard Eckhart's preaching at both Strasburg and Cologne. By age 25 he was an ordained priest and is said to have adopted already the mystical path. Tauler's legacy are his sermons which he preached from then until his death. Other works ascribed to him appear to be spurious. His sermons may be divided, typically, into those of the year and those devoted to Holy Days. It is the latter of these that we have studied in translation. The sermons are prominent in Marian devotion, Dionysian theology and Eckhartian mysticism, and are generally sober and cautious, yet uplifting and illuminating. To Jacopone da Todi's self annihilation and Suso's self-abandonment, Tauler posits the dying life as the path of perfection. His discussion of the angelic hierarchies as relating to the various areas or levels of the self is fascinating.

Finally we arrive at Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), the only woman besides St Theresa of Avila to have been granted the title of Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, for which she had to wait nearly six hundred years after her death. Born in Siena in the period of the Black death, she was, for a change, the child of a lower-class family. She is said to have bowed her virginity to God from age seven, and from youth to have received visions and other mystical experiences. At age twenty she had a profound experience of mystical marriage to Christ, after which she gave

herself wholly to Him. She practiced, like Angela di Foligno, great charity, caring for the sick and the poor. Her reputation as a spiritual counselor grew unstoppably, aided by the support and devotion of her confessor and disciple, Raymond of Capua. She became involved in contemporary politics in the conflict between city-states and papacy, and exercised considerable influence on the papacy and on the Italian cities. In her last years she wrote the Dialogue, her crowning work, in the form of a dialogue between herself and God where God responds to her requests for illumination on various aspects of the mystical life. Although intricate, the book is extremely rich in wisdom and spirituality, and is often very beautiful indeed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words*, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Leicester, UK

-----, *Seven Valleys*, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Leicester, UK

-----, *Kitab-i Iqan*, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Leicester, UK

-----, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Leicester, UK

-----, *Tablets Revealed After the Kitab-i Aqdas*, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Leicester, UK

Bonaventura, *The Soul's Journey into God*; tr. by Ewert Cousins; Classics of Western Spirituality, SPCK, London, 1978.

Foligno, Angela di, "Of the Conversion, Progress, and Visions of Blessed Angela"; tr. By Algar Thorold in *Catholic Mysticism*, pp.90-172; Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., London, 1900.

Shoghi Effendi, *Directives of the Guardian*, p.88

Siena, Catherine of, *The Dialogue*; tr. By Suzanne Noffke; Classics of Western Spirituality, SPCK, London, 1980.

Suso, Henry, *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom & Little Book of Truth*; tr. by James Clark; Faber and Faber Ltd., London, nd.

Tauler, John, *The Inner Way: Thirty Six Sermons for Festivals*; tr. by A. W. Hutton; Methuen & Co, London, 1909.

Todi, Jacopone da, *The Lauds*; tr. by Serge and Elizabeth Hughes; *Classics of Western Spirituality*, SPCK, London, 1982.

Secondary Literature:

Agno, Franca, "Prefazione", in Jacopone da Todi, *Laudi, Trattato e Detti*; Felice Le Monnier, Firenze, 1958.

Armstrong, A.H., "Greek Philosophy and Christianity", in M.I. Finley (ed.), *The Legacy of Greece*, pp. 347-375; Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988.

Brady, Ignatius, "Preface", in Bonaventura, *The Soul's Journey into God, etc*; *Classics of Western Spirituality*, SPCK, London, 1978.

Browne, E. G., "Sufism", in *Religious Systems of the World: A Contribution to the study of Comparative Religion*, pp. 314-332; Swan Sonnenschein & Co Ltd., London, 1905.

Butler, Cuthbert, *Western Mysticism: Neglected Chapters in the History of Religion*; Constable & Co Ltd., London, 1922.

Clark, James M., "Introduction", in Henry Suso, *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom, etc.*; Faber and Faber Ltd, London, nd.

Cousins, Ewert, "Introduction", in Bonaventura, *The Soul's Journey into God, etc*; *Classics of Western Spirituality*, SPCK, London, 1978.

Davies, Oliver, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian*; SPCK, London, 1991.

Furlong, Monica, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics*; Mowbray, London, 1996.

Hughes, Serge, "Introduction", in Jacopone da Todi, *The Lauds*; *Classics of Western Spirituality*, SPCK, London, 1982.

Hutton, Arthur Wollaston, "Introduction", in John Tauler, *The Inner Way: Thirty Six Sermons for Festivals*, pp. xi-xliii; Methuen & Co Ltd., London, 1909

James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1961.

Lawrence, C.H., *The Friars*; Longman Group U.K Ltd., London, 1994.

Lilly, W.S., "Mysticism", in *Religious Systems of the World: A Contribution to the study of Comparative Religion*, pp. 631-639; Swan Sonnenschein & Co Ltd., London, 1905.

Michael McCarron *The Ineffable In Context: A Study Of Sufi Symbols In The Haft Vadi*, <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/5016/sufism.html>

Migne, J.P., *Dictionnaire de Mystique Chretienne*; J.P. Migne, Paris, 1858

Noffke, Suzanne, "Introduction", in Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*; Classics of Western Spirituality, SPCK, London, 1980.

Pike, Nelson, *Mystic Union: An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism*; Cornell University Press, London, 1992.

Sapegno, Natalino, *Frate Jacopone*; Edizioni del Baretto, Torino, 1926

Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism*; Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1912.

Waite, A.E., *The Way of Divine Union*; William Rider & Son Ltd., London, 1915.

Zolla, Elemire, "Preface", in Jacopone da Todi, *The Lauds*; Classics of Western Spirituality, SPCK, London, 1982.