

IMITATION OR IDENTIFICATION?

Suso's Spiritual Journey in the Light of the Indian Advaitic Tradition

The topic and methodology of this paper need some clarification. In cross-cultural approaches, it is sometimes stated that Christian spirituality finds its distinctive mark in a sense of *imitation* of Christ. The saint, i.e. the fully developed person, never reaches or realizes God, but imitates the Divine personified or incarnated in Jesus Christ. Perfection is possible only after death, i.e. in a transformation which comprises the physical, psychic and spiritual dimensions of man.

On the other hand, in Indian spirituality, it is *jīvanmukti*, as over against *videhamukti*, which is the specific contribution to the understanding of the final destination of Man. Here, in spite of and undefiled from the limiting physical conditions, Man can achieve his highest goal in attaining God by *identification* with Him. No difference is left. The *jīvanmukta* in his true being is beyond dualities and suffering. He has realized his identity in the *ātman* already here and now, though his external physical form may be subject to suffering. The physical is not transformed (as in *videhamukti*) but has disappeared as an essential dimension. He does not at all identify himself with the body, but with the Absolute or God.

Both these views seem to represent opposite extremes in the understanding of the Formation and Perfection of the human person or of the Real Nature of Man. We are not trying to reconcile them here, but we shall attempt to understand the Christian experience more clearly by focussing our attention on the great mystic Suso, looking at him in the light of the Vedāntic tradition.

I

What does it mean “to understand something in the light of something else”? Concepts as well as symbols are not comparable because a *tertium comparationis* would require a common ground which could be defined. This definable ground does not exist in the cross-cultural encounter. Even the universal *humanum* is an abstraction which always exists only in a specific tradition. However, certain concepts or symbols have functional equivalents or *Entsprechungen* (“speaking with, dialogal correspondents”) in other cultures. Though they are not the same or may even be dissimilar, they try to point to the equivalent *datum* of a certain experience. Therefore, they can interact in different kinds of existential encounter. One symbol or concept may project its own shadow on the other symbol or concept, but the *pattern of reflection* depends precisely on the specific character of the *comparandum*. Hence, a relation “in the light” is established. What it reveals is less the nature of one of this symbols as such, but their *pattern of interaction*. And this is precisely the task of this paper. In other words: what does imitation in Suso’s sense mean when we see this concept (or better: archetype) over against the background of its supposed opposite: the Eastern experience of identity or identification?

II

Heinrich Seuse (Suso), 1295–1366, is Eckhart’s most important disciple. For Eckhart, God was “superexisting Being and superexisting Nothing”, i.e. he overcame the simple negation of Being concerning God, held even often in traditional *theologia negativa*.¹ Already Palamas in the Eastern Church² had clearly seen that mere negations concerning God

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1. Heinrich Dumoulin, *Östliche Meditation und Christliche Mystik*, Freiburg: Alber, 1966, p. 118.
 2. John B. Chethimattam, “The Greek Religious Apophatism,” in *Journal of Dharma VII/1* (1981), p. 79f.

are still determination, i.e. limitation, and therefore he drew the consequence of double negation which – from Nāgārjuna in India to Hegel in Europe – means nothing else than Fulness of the Godhead (the same case of course applies for the Upaniṣads.) Eckhart expressed the same thing when he called God the “silent desert” and the incarnate fulness of the glory of grace.³ Eckhart’s language points towards the transcategorical transcendence of God which at the same time is the innermost Being of any being and therefore perfectly immanent. Obviously Eckhart does not deny the difference between transcendence and immanence,⁴ and this holds true for Suso, Tauler and others as well.

Suso uses words such as “dark stillness” or “superessential spirit” as reference for a God who *is* the ground of ultimate fulfilment for man. In order to partake in the divine Being, Man has to practice *Gelassenheit*, i.e., he has to let go of his Ego. Further : “*A gelassener man must become disentangled (entbildet) from creatureness, become shaped (gebildet) with Christ and transfigured (überbildet) in the Godhead.*”⁵

This interesting statement refers to three steps which, however, do not occur always in a temporal sequence. Both *disentangling* and *shaping* constitute aspects of the *imitatio Christi* in bringing out the kenotic and proexistential nature of Christ’s way, whereas *transfiguration* is *identification* with the Divine Nature in a qualified sense : it is not a static identity, but the process of merging into God by way of a temporal and asymptotic movement. This would be an expression of genuine non-duality (*advaita*) which is precisely not the collapse into a monistic reality, but a specific form of polarity : the mutual indwelling of the poles : not identity, but continuous identification.

3. Ewert Cousins, “Fulness and Emptiness in Bonaventure and Eckhart,” in *Journal of Dharma* VI/1 (1981), p. 66f.

4. H. Dumoulin, *op.cit.*, p. 118.

5. *Des Mystikers Heinrich Seuse deutsche Schriften*, Heidelberg : N. Hellerl 926, p. 155.

Suso has expressed his experience of becoming-one, or identification or *henōthēnai*, most clearly in his "booklet of Truth" (*Büchlein von der Wahrheit*) which, to my understanding, seems to manifest an extraordinary closeness to Indian Advaitic thought. We shall now give a short survey and interpretation of the contents of this booklet.⁶

III

Contemplation of God refers Man to his own Self (336), because it is a "tasting" of God which overcomes "any hindrance and any otherness" (338). In contemplation, God's simplicity is experienced which is eternal Nothingness without any determination (333). The essence of this still simplicity is its life, i.e. foremost, its character as "self-existing Spirit" (333) which is by no means an attributive qualification but the self-expression of the one. We cannot overlook a similarity with the Aristotelian *noēsis noēseōs* and also with the *cit*-aspect of the Indian *saccidānanda*. Both words, Nothing and Life, are in a polar relation which is mediated by means of Trinitarian categories.

Whereas Eckhart seems to point to a trans-trinitarian Godhead which, at a higher level and beyond the manifestations of the Trinity, is perfect calmness,⁷ Suso speaks of the "power

6. Heinrich Seuse, *Büchlein von der Wahrheit*, in *Deutsche Mystische Schriften*, ed. by G. Hofmann, Dusseldorf: Patmos, 1966, pp. 331-362. The pages in the text refer to this edition.

7. "The Trinity is only manifestation of the Godhead." (Predigt 76: *Expedit vobis* in Pfeiffer's edition *Meister Eckhart*, Göttingen, 1924). Cf. E. Cousins, *art. cit.*, p. 64. Thus for Eckhart, unity and self-generated differentiation in the Trinity are not a polarity, but a graded essentiality, for dynamism cannot be in the One. The argument runs similar to Sankara's who maintains that *nirguṇa* is higher than *saguṇa*. He means it epistemologically, of course, but since ontology and epistemology are actually one, this has further consequences which cannot be discussed here. However, the Trinitarian notion as developed by the Cappadocian Fathers and John of Damascus holds the position of union *in* differentiation.

of differentiation” and “ground of oneness” in a non-dualistic way, particularly in the second chapter of his book.

The equivalence with Advaita Vedānta goes very far. Thus, the reason for the activity of the Godhead is a “creative force” (*śakti*) which is essentially indwelling in the Godhead. This force is responsible for multiplicity in God which externalizes itself as multiplicity of the world. “This multiplicity is in its ground and basis a simple oneness” (336).⁸ This view corresponds with the Indian identity of *nirguṇa brahman* and *saguṇa brahman*. The divine nature in the abyss of Nothingness is “pregnant with fruition and activity” (335). The essence of Godhead consists in that “the threefoldness of the Persons sinks into Oneness, and any pluriformity loses, in a certain way, its own self” (334).

Here, Suso refers to the intratrinitarian self-negation which is its total *kenōsis*, the essence of the God. For Suso, God and Godhead are one and the same. And yet, “it is God who acts and gives birth, not the Godhead” (335). Differentiation does not destroy Oneness because it is conceived in the framework of a polar perichoretic process, a becoming-one: “For in divine nature there is nothing else than essence and the attributes referring to this essence. And these attributes do not add anything but themselves are the essence even if they differ from what they refer to, i.e. their object” (333). The simplicity of the Father *is* simplicity of the Divine Nature. This holds equally true for the other persons of the Trinity, because Oneness is not merely *beyond* multiplicity; it is the innate ground of creativity expressed in the interrelation of the Persons.

It is the same with reference to the non-duality of the Indian *saccidānanda*. In *saccidānanda*, in a certain way, “Being-Consciousness-Bliss” represent an inner dynamism without destroying the Oneness. Suso says this *verbis expressis*

8. Cf. Dionysius Areopagita, *Holy Names* I, 1, 5, and *Mystical Theology* V; cf. also *Celestial Hier.* II, 3 and also Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theol.* I, 9, 13.

when stating that this *Nothingness* (i.e. the Trinitarian Mystery or, for India, *saccidānanda*) is in itself this Consciousness (*cit*) or Being (*sat*) or Tasting (*ānanda*), as he puts it. However, he adds that all these words cannot really convey what they want to point to (347).

The intratrinitarian Oneness is the direct cause for the Unity of Reality because there is no reality outside God. Suso makes a very interesting distinction. He speaks about “evening knowledge” (*Abenderkenntnis*) which is concerned with the multiplicity of the created world, and a “morning knowledge” (*Morgenerkenntnis*) which sees creatures “without any differentiations, stripped of all image (*entbildet*) and denuded of all possible comparison in the One which God himself is in himself” (351). These expressions refer to two polar ways of knowing which have their equivalent in the Vedāntic *Vyavahārika* (relative standpoint) and *Pāramārthika* (absolute standpoint). Both depend on each other like morning and evening, implying their mutual existence respectively. For Suso as well as for the Advaita Vedānta, there is no doubt that Unity integrates multiplicity. This is to say that only from the view point of Oneness is a total perspective possible. Therefore, it is the higher all-encompassing standpoint. With reference to our initial question we have to conclude: non-dualistic identification implies imitation, but not the other way round.

Both these ways of knowing are grounded in the Trinitarian notion of God, because, being creative force, God is Form which causes formation in communicating His essence. As potentiality in God, this form-essence is more comprehensive than any possible explication of it.

Therefore, after the “exit from God,” creatures have a distinct existence of their own, though they are endowed “with the same life, essence, potentiality as far as they are in God” (336). Each creature is *ideally* in God from eternity, and actualization gives it creatureliness which is “more noble and useful than the essence which it has in God” (337). In

creatureliness, the formative order of God is expressed, i.e. His creative life expresses and externalizes itself and finds a genuine expression of His perichoretic Being. Before creation, creature and creator are the same, which implies also that they are not unified. But, after having returned to God, creatures have gone through differentiation and are united with Him as the *result* of the Trinitarian love (349). This is the higher, more integrated notion.

Having merged into God, the person is perfectly one with Him, and yet a difference between creator and creature remains. Unity is not Identity. Man cannot be creature and God at the same time and in the same sense. But "God is threefold and One. Thus, even man in a certain way, after having merged into God, is one in losing himself, while yet seeing in external ways, tasting etc" (349). Unified with God, man is *aware* of this oneness, is consciousness, (*cit*) and enjoys' it in a state of bliss (*ānanda*). This is quite different from the absolute and monistic identity often expressed with the simile of a drop of water merging into the ocean.

The "eternal Nothingness" which is superconscious Being brings forth all ordered differentiation by its creative power, i.e. it is the ground of Reality (356). Yet, differentiation is not separation (357). Suso uses the example of the interdependency of the limbs of an organism or speaks also about the interpenetration of body and soul: they cannot be separated but have to be distinguished. They constitute a psychosomatic oneness (357).

The mystic is on a graded path which will lead him eventually to unity with God. But only after death can he enjoy this oneness "permanently". This earthly life gives only a "pre-taste" (348). To put it in Indian terms: Suso—and with him the whole Christian tradition—denies *jīvanmukti* but advocates *videhamukti*. What can be reached during this life is "participatory communion" with God, whereas "the superperfect, all power transcending union" which is even *transspirital*, is possible only after death (342). However,

even the present spiritual experience transforms life totally, because it leads into equanimity (*Gelassenheit*) which is the source for freedom and love both of which let reality appear in the light of Oneness.

Equanimity is the "let go" of the Ego. Suso speaks about the Ego in a fivefold sense. This distinction is vitally important to understand the repeatedly stressed demand for egolessness by the mystics of all religions.

1. Ego is to say that something is. This is common to man and all beings.
2. Ego refers to the process of growth and identity in change. This is common to man and the realm of plants.
3. Ego is the centre of sensation which is common to man and animals.
4. Ego means the general human nature and condition.
5. Ego is the physico-spiritual distinctiveness which man enjoys in a distinct and individual way (339).

Only in the fifth sense is the Ego harmful for spiritual development, says Suso. For the individual, Ego maintains its status of Ego in usurping "on the basis of its own personal self" what belongs to God alone. Instead of returning into God, it believes in its independence. This ignorance disturbs the right order and is the very root of sin as well as the source of all evil. This can be generalized: "Since the creature endowed with mind should have a grounding revision into the One, yet remains turned toward outside", it produces constantly "sin, malice . . . devil" (339).

This is precisely what Vedāntins as well as Buddhists call *avidyā*, ignorance. Ignorance disappears when the Ego learns to let go of itself (339). Only the one who experiences this nothingness can realize God as ground of his Being. On this journey suffering may be very helpful, as Suso explains.

For him it is an initiation into the spiritual path of Unification with God.⁹

The path of *kenōsis* is characterized by a triple view into a deeper Self of the person :

1. The Ego lets go of itself and dives into its nothingness, which is God.
2. The true Self returns from the depth, as it were “enwrapped” with God, and does not loose itself in the world any more since it has found true identity.
3. The Ego is transformed into the form of Christ (340).

Suso goes on to mention six steps along this path (340): the Mystic should

1. “loose himself with all power in God,”
2. may “part with his own self irrevocably,”
3. become in such a way “unified with Christ,”
4. “act all the time in accordance with Christ who is the inner voice,”
5. “face everything with equanimity” and
6. “regard all things in such kind of simplicity.”

Man strips his human nature and is transformed in and with the *light of God*. Like a drop of water poured into wine loses its specific quality in order to assume the colour and odour of wine, the person in ecstasy of divine bliss loses first of all the desires and dives into the divine will. “His nature remains with him, but in a different form, i.e. in the heavenly light and a different energy. And all this comes about through the incomprehensible self-negation’ (341).

Suso does not define the terms essence and nature. Yet, the meaning is rather obvious in the context of his writings : in

9. Heinrich Seuse, *Buchlein von der ewigen Weisheit*, in *Deutsche Mystische Schriften*, *op. cit.*

God the person becomes totally unified with God but is *aware* of this bliss of transformation through and into Divine Nature. What follows is that, in a certain sense, human identity as a distinct witnessing consciousness is not lost. Man attains conformity with Christ and is drawn into the inner Trinitarian love.

But man is never equal with Christ, and this is probably a difference with the Vedāntic tradition. Suso makes his points with the help of two considerations :

1. Christ as innate Son is equal with God according to his nature. He is the pure reflection of the Father. Man is formed according to the prototype of the Trinity and becomes similar to Divine Nature in continuous spiritual rebirth.
2. Christ is first whereas man enters through him into the Unity of the Father (358f).

For Suso, there is no need to discuss whether unification with God is an act of a divine grace. The very alternative is mistaken, because *all* is grace. The nature of man is good precisely in so far as it is open to receive grace. This nature is transformed by and in God. Therefore, the person, being in God, cannot but act in a godly way: the will of man is freed from its defilements, especially from desire and distraction. It is centred in the inner Trinitarian divine love which expresses itself in a different attitude (353). The mystic is not subjected to any law, because he does in freedom what others do only under pressure (360). "He is in communion with people without getting formed by their qualities, is in love without clinging and practices compassion without sorrow in genuine freedom" (361). This means that, without all the time projecting his own desires and thoughts onto reality, he lets reality speak to him as it is, for he sees God in it. This is actually the genuine foundation for egoless love.

The fundamental non-duality of Suso's position becomes even more obvious when he says that man in spiritual ecstasy is no longer mere man because he has "gone into the One and has become one with it" (348). He continues: "And thus it can be understood that this man *contains in himself all creatures in unity*... and he himself is in this already mentioned unity" (340).

IV

We can now summarize: Non-duality is not only and specifically an Eastern experience. For Christian mystics—and here Suso – all creatures inexist in God and each other in the ground of the Self, experience themselves as non-dual (*advaita*) with regard to their pluriformity as well as to their ground. The Indian experience (*anubhava*) of *advaita* is expressed in the theory of *ātman*. For Suso an obviously similar experience is expressible by means of Trinitarian categories. Both point towards the *advaita* of Reality.

Therefore, our initial question whether there is either imitation of a prototype (Christ, God etc.) or identification with the One (*brahman*, the Absolute, God etc.) is not properly put. In both the Eastern and Western religious traditions, the two are not necessarily exclusive and one may find a difference of emphasis on one or the other type of experience. I would like to suggest that, for Suso, we can speak of a tempiternal process of identification which includes different stages of imitation on certain levels of the spiritual journey of the person. It is an identification in which the person does not lose self-consciousness and the awareness of the bliss experienced. Hence, there is a distinction in the process of unification and eventually in the One. It is neither a monistic nor a dualistic state, but precisely a non-duality.