

History of Non-dual Meditation Methods

Javier Alvarado Planas



sanz y torres

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Madrid, 2014

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Javier Alvarado Planas

to Pedro Rodea

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The aim of this book is to study certain meditation methods followed not only by religious traditions or metaphysical movements that are still alive nowadays like Advaita Vedanta, Kabbalah (within the Jewish tradition), Christianity or Islam (particularly Sufism), but also practiced by other currents or schools that, even though already gone, significantly influenced the West. This is the case of Neoplatonism or Stoicism, whose influence was felt by ancient and medieval Christianity, or Greco-Egyptian Hermetism, which played an important role in the European cultural *Renaissance* from the 15th century on. A special consideration has been given to Christian tradition, introducing some of the most representative authors of recollection and their meditation methods.

The objective of this study may seem paradoxical. On one hand, it is usually admitted that the methods are transmitted from master to disciple and guarded within spiritual brotherhoods and lineages. However, on the other hand, it is also stated that there is no method and that all of it is just an invention of the mind or, if preferred, of the *ego*, which enjoys entertaining itself with the ideas of “seeking”, “spiritual progress”, “Enlightenment”, etc. In fact, some wise men talk about the method as a non-method, since, strictly speaking, what method can there be to go from myself to myself? But, if the Spirit does not need to progress or find anything, who is then the one who seeks and who is the one who is found? At the end, it seems that the method is not directed to achieve anything (since we already have what we are seeking), but to make us get rid of what, erroneously, we think we are... Facing such questions, the enterprise of writing a book about this issue seems, at first glance, too ambitious. Firstly, it is to be warned that, however, when adopting the historical point of

view, it is not even necessary to solve the enigma... it is enough to point out the existence of the paradox.

The historical-critical point of view is precisely the most suitable to introduce oneself *from outside* into this subtle universe. Nevertheless, it is to be warned that the timeline exposition reflects just merely practical purposes that do not prejudice or imply the acceptance of an evolutionary history of spirituality, mysticism and esoterism, or that such an evolution is exclusively a product of the influence and borrowings that have passed from one tradition to another. On the contrary, the similarities in the descriptions of the so-called mystical experiences are also due to the existence of supraindividual dimensions or states out of the *human* time and space that can be *hic et nunc* transcended or overtaken under certain circumstances. Therefore, those who have nowadays lived or reproduced such an *experience* and *have connected* with *That* or *have been taken by* that *Source* have done it in the same way in which ascetics, wise men, magi or philosophers of past centuries had experienced it. The Source is the Same and Only one, and the moment is always *Now*.

In my wish to respect the original thought of the here-studied authors, the most significant texts of certain works have been selected in order to guide the reader through a particular itinerary together with some glosses, trying to stay always behind the original discourse. With this respect, one of the difficulties we find when trying to go deeper into the thought of ancient authors comes from the different meaning they give to concepts such as “God”, “soul”, “mystic”, “method”, “spiritual knowledge”, etc. When facing such a plurality of meanings, it seemed more suitable to respect the vocabulary used by each author, making, in certain cases, some clarifications. This is the case, for example, of the nowadays so-multifaceted word “*mystika*”, which has been recovered here in its most strictly etymological meaning. Indeed, words such as “mystic”, from the Greek *mystikos*, as well as “myth” or “mystery”, *mystērion*, or silence,

myeō, relative to mysteries (*ta mystika*), that is, to mysteric ceremonies, the initiate (*mystes*), the adverb *mystikos* (secretly), come from the verb *myō*. This verb comes from the onomatopoeic sound derived from the action of strongly closing the lips not to articulate any sound. For that reason, the word “mysticism” has traditionally described the “science of mystery”, the “science of the initiates” and, more expressively, the “discipline of silence”, understanding as silence or secret not only that spiritual “experience” which is, by its own nature, “inexpressible” or “incommunicable”, but also a certain method or technique used to facilitate the transition from the meditation on shapes and objects to the contemplative or *pure meditation*, that is, the one exempt from thoughts. Distinguished wise men, like Guénon, have shown their rejection to use the word “mysticism” referring to the metaphysical field with the reasoning that “the current meaning of the word *mysticism* is too far from its etymological definition as to allow us to use it now”, proposing the use of “esoteric”, “initiatric” or “metaphysical” instead. However, the word “esoterism”, acceptable in Guénon’s time (first half of the 20th century), does not seem so clarifying at the beginning of the 21st due to its random use in all kind of fields. The same, though to a lesser extent, happens to terms such as “initiatric” or “metaphysical”, which have been deprived of all their spiritual content and are mainly used in a speculative, philosophical sense, if not vulgar. This explains why the words “*mystika*” and “*mystēs*”, in their original meaning, are taken up again here. The same happens with the confusing usage of the words “spirit” and “soul” that is found in many ancient and modern works, despite being two absolutely different concepts. The terminology of each author has been respected here as well. It is true that the Judeo-Christian religious tradition distinguishes between *ruach* (spirit), soul (Heb. *nefesh*) and body, so that, whereas the soul or *nefesh* dies with the body, the *ruach* (spirit) is immortal. However, since *ruach* and *nefesh* were both translated into Greek as *ψυχή* (*psychē*) and into Latin as *anima* (soul), many mystics have used the words “soul” and “spirit” as synonyms. The Stoics distinguished be-

tween body (*sōma*), soul (*psychē*) and spirit (*hēgemonikon*) as well. Likewise, some traditional authors draw a distinction between the “*Being* that causes the Being” (that is, God *before* the appearance of God, who is referred to as Yahweh in the Old Testament) and the “*Being*” itself, fact that equals the distinction drawn in India between *Parabrahman* (that is, what is beyond “I am”) and *Brahman* (“I am”), or the one Eckhart drew between Godhead (before the appearance of Creation) and God (as a Creator). Whether these distinctions respond to a metaphysical reality or rather to mental constructs for pedagogical purposes is a question that will be dealt with later.

Given these considerations, let us proceed to analyze some representative authors, episodes and texts of the metaphysical way.

ADVAITIC PREFACE

“Like the worms in the cow dung, men, the moment the dung dries, are finished, however much progress they have made” (Sri Nisargadatta, *Seeds of Consciousness*, p. 67).

Why an Advaitic preface? Given that this work deals with the history of meditation methods, it seems appropriate to start with the Advaita Vedanta, for it is considered as one of the most ancient manifestations that, however, still keep their purity and vitality.

In this introduction, it is not intended to present a history of metaphysics in India in general¹, nor even one of its most complete, deep and effective creations, the Advaita Vedanta (ad-vaita= non-dual). Instead, some reflections on some texts of ancient masters like Sri Sankaracharya or contemporary representatives like Sri Ramana Maharshi and Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj will rather be made.

Advaita Vedanta is neither a philosophy, nor a religion, nor a mixture of both; it is a metaphysical doctrine². Veda comes from *vid-*

¹ As an approach to Indian metaphysics, the work by René Guénon is still an obligatory reference: *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, Hillsdale (NY), 2001; *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedanta*, Hillsdale (NY), 2001. It is useful as well: H. Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, London, 1952; and Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Princeton, 2009.

² Several classic works have been used, like *Ribhu Gita*, Madrid, 2007 [English version, *The Song of Ribhu*, Santa Cruz (CA), 2000]; other works by ancient Advaita masters like the ones by Sri Sankaracharya, for example, *Dieciocho Tratados Advaita*, Madrid, 2011 (from now on, it will be referred to as Sri Sankaracharya, *18TA*) or by contemporary masters like Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Be as you are*, New York, 1985, (referred to as *BYA*); *Conversaciones con Sri Ramana Maharshi*, 2 vols., Madrid, 2006 (referred to as *CRMI* and *CRMII*); Sri Nisargadatta, *Prior to Consciousness* (referred to as *PC*), *Seeds of Consciousness* (referred to as *SC*), Durham (NC), 1990; *I am That* (referred to as *IAT*), Durham (NC), 2012, *Yo*

“to see” (like *videre* in Latin) or “to know”, from where *vidyā* (knowledge, being *Vedanta* the end of knowledge) is derived, since such a knowledge consists in an “inner vision” of the oneness of the Being or, if preferred, of the non-duality of the Absolute that ends with the quest for knowledge. According to this, human individuality is but one state of the Being, out of an indefinite number of states, the addition of which does not equals the whole Being, since those states of existence an *illusory reflection* superimposed onto the Being. Only the Being is, whereas the states exist (*ex-stare*), that is, they are supported or vivified by the Being, which is the Only real one. The Only one is the One without a second, being the second a mere mirage. That said, the non-duality of the Absolute does not mean that we do not exist, but, more strictly, that we are not like we think we are. What really are we?

The Advaitin teaches that, when someone starts his quest for transcendental knowledge, he must examine the real purposes that lead him to it, in order to relinquish, if necessary, those prejudices or preconceived ideas that prove to be a real burden. One of the most common prejudices lies in believing that the metaphysical Way will grant advantages such as enlightenment, peace, powers, someone else’s recognition, knowledge (even though about himself), etc. to the seeker. In sum, he is seeking for something that comes from outside and may provide him with satisfactory experiences. Another common mistake takes place when someone falls victim to his own mirages. For example, from the moment when someone considers himself as a spiritual candidate or seeker (*sādhaka*), or even a comprehensor, he starts to indulge in autosuggestion, imposing and superimposing on others a particular conceptual image or model; “I must adopt this pose”, “I must not eat this”, “I must look like this”,

no sabía, Madrid, 2011; Michael James, *Happiness and the Art of Being*, 2012 (referred to as *HAB*); David Carse, *Perfecta brillante quietud, más allá del yo individual*, Madrid, 2009 [original English version: *Perfect brilliant stillness, beyond the individual self*, Saline (MI), 2006] (referred to as *PBQ*) and other texts that will be opportunely quoted.

“this is bad”, “this is good” and, in conclusion, “this is ignorant”, “I am the only one who is on the right path”, “I have the knowledge”. And so he lives on, strangled by the concepts he himself has created. Other of the most widespread mistakes is *voluntarism*. A voluntarist believes that “liberation” is the result of applying a specific method based on ascetic, devotional, meditative practices and intricate methods of pure lineages that will facilitate him to make his desires come true. Thus, for example, he will learn to control his breath and take it to some point of his body in order to briefly enter *Samādhi* and reach the certainty of being a fulfilled man. However, those who practice these or other techniques to go inside and outside of *Samādhi* or any other supraindividual state rarely understand that this is not the aim of the quest, and that such a temporary state does not necessarily involve true knowledge.

What is true knowledge? For the Advaitin, dual knowledge produces ignorance and suffering, whereas non-dual knowledge, which could strictly be considered as non-knowledge, is the only reliable one. An ancient Advaitic text explains that, since the world of knowledge is endless, it cannot provide true wisdom by itself because all knowledge implies duality, that is, a separation between knower and known; “If there is bondage, there is liberation; in the absence of bondage, there is no liberation. If there is death, there is birth; in the absence of birth, there is no death either. If there is ‘you’, there is ‘I’; if there is no ‘you’, there is no ‘I’. If there is ‘this’, there is ‘that’; in the absence of ‘that’, there is no ‘this’ either. If ‘it is there’ implies something not being there; ‘it is not there’ implies something being there. If there is an effect, there is some cause; in the absence of effect, there is no cause. If there is duality, there is [a concept of] non-duality; in the absence of duality, there is no [concept of] non-duality either. If there is something to be seen, a seer is also there; in the absence of anything to see, there is no seer at all either” (*Ribhu Gita*, p. 22). Reality is neither subjective nor objective, neither mind nor material, neither time nor space.

However, even though all these divisions are only creations of the human mind, it is true that there must be *something* or *somebody* that is here to witness them and that is not part of the mirage. To become aware of the problem is the first step to go out of the problem; “Just as the perceiver of a pot is ever distinctly different from the pot and can never be the pot, so too, you, the perceiver of your body, are distinct from your body and can never be the body... Similarly, be sure in yourself that you, the seer of the senses, are not the senses themselves, and ascertain that you are neither the mind, not the intellect, not the vital air” (Sri Sankaracharya, *18TA*, p. 73-76).

The paradox is that, though the metaphysical seeking lies in getting rid of *Māyā* (etymologically, “what is not”), the desire to escape from it is *Māyā* itself. If one understands that he is living a dream called “wakefulness” or “world” and that the quest is part of that dream, then he stops looking for exits or, at least, he stops his anxiety to seek. The idea itself of going beyond the dream is illusory because it is part of the dream. Sri Nisargadatta stated that the problem is not to be aware that one is dreaming, but to like some parts of the dream and reject others.... We insist on resisting and fighting those parts of the dream and we even start a crusade to improve this dream we call world without considering that, maybe, the universe is not what needs to be improved, but only our way to look at it (*PC*, p. 3). If the knowledge about all we see is as false as a mirage (*Māyā*), for duality is both its cause and its consequence, it is deduced that true knowledge is the non-dual one, that is, the knowledge about the Self. This self-knowledge has a special flavor and scent that make it different from other supposed forms of indirect or mediate knowledge, since it is not based on the usual, dependent paradigm of a knower (mind), a known object and the action of knowing (thought). On the contrary, non-dual knowledge is direct and immediate because, since the subject is its object of knowledge, it disregards the thought in order to place itself in another domain of the Being. Some call it *Nous*,

others pure intellect, others attention or self-consciousness, others “I am”... *Be that as it may, it is a state, as superior or transcendental as one may want, but, after all, another state.* At this point, once again, it is to be noted the panic, not to say horror, that the Western seeker feels when he hears talking about overtaking, sublimating or “annihilating” the mind. He is so identified with his mind and its thoughts that it seems to him extraordinarily difficult to understand that it may be just one tool among others. He generally considers spiritual progress to be something like mind strengthening and the development of his parapsychological and mental powers. In line with this mistake, he embarks on a frantic race to hoard readings and experiences about the “transcendental”, which may provide him with enough intellectual “authority”.

Against this kind of widespread attitudes of seeking for knowledge, the fiercest self-criticism is to be recommended. Firstly, it must be found out whether what is sought is a knowledge that, being acceptable for the mind, may be an object of appropriation and exhibition before others, so that they may recognize his superiority. In that case, he must understand that that kind of knowledge consists in no more than repeating what has previously been read or heard, and that mere erudition will only fill his mind with countless concepts that will reinforce his vanity. On the contrary, the metaphysical way it is not about *knowing*, but about *being*, it is not about strengthening the mind, but about transcending it so that it may not block another instrument that is considered to be superior: consciousness. It must be highlighted that, for the Advaitin, erudition itself does not affect the metaphysical Way if it is at the service of the quest for the Truth. This does not happen if it leads to the desire to be admired, if it feeds the mirage of duality, that is, the fact of supposing that there is “someone”, an individual identity, who “knows” and others who “do not know”.

Therefore, the progress through the Advaitic Way does not lie in hoarding knowledge and experiences, but in relinquishing or detaching oneself from everything that is considered to be a foreign attachment to the true nature of the Being (Spirit, Self, *Ātman*). Moreover, it is to be warned that, according to Advaita Vedanta, the organism we usually think we are, that is, the body-mind, is not but a brief, temporary attachment that is not the Self. Each body-mind organism has some latent conditionings that must be known, redirected and finally sublimated. In India, *such conditionings* or psycho-mental latencies are denominated *samskāras* or *vāsanās*, “impregnations” or “residues” that, like we would nowadays say, find their origin in the “genetic memory” and the cultural environment. As long as our *vāsanās* or latent desires are not weakened, the body-mind organism will go on wandering unfocused. If it is about the rider (our real nature) *breaking in* the horse (*vāsanās* of our body-mind) so that it may help him quickly reach his destination, what does breaking-in consist in? One thing seems clear; it does not consist in compelling or forcing anything. In India, the usual example given to illustrate this is the cow that escapes from the cowshed and goes grazing on the surrounding fields. If it is forced to stay at the cowshed, it will escape again, but if it is fed with good grass, it can finally be left free since it will only want to graze the fodder of the cowshed. Likewise, the mind that is used to paying attention to the external objects due to the force of the latent *vāsanās* that reveal themselves as thoughts, if adequately educated, will finally stop paying attention to *Māyā* and will focus on the Self.

I.- I AM NOT THE BODY

Where was “I” before being born? Where will “I” be in a hundred years? “That”, which remains unchanged and beyond the space-time conditions and beyond shape (the body) and individual names, is “I” (that is, “I” without “me”).

It is usually said that we are neither the body, nor the mind, nor the feelings, nor the desires, etc., but that reflection-negation (*neti, neti*) is all the same a conceptual process. Indeed, there is nothing bad in the idea “I am the body”, as long as it is understood that we are not only a body (or a mind) that has a name and was born in a certain date. It is simply to be understood that the one who erroneously takes this body as “me” is the mind, because “I” is an all-embracing, transcendental (transmental or supramental) reality that encompasses not only “me”, but also “you” and “it”, that is, All (and thus it is also Nothing).

The Advaitin usually answers the question “who am I?” with the metaphor of the bowl with water that is given back to the lake, or the one of the stream that flows back into the sea. Can anyone distinguish the water from the different rivers that flow into the sea? Likewise, how to distinguish that particle of “individual” consciousness that “me” consists of when it immerses itself in the total consciousness, which is “I” or “That”? Moreover, there is no difference between the water of the sea, the water of the lake, the water of the river or the tap water after all. All of them are water that carries salts and other mineral components or additions depending on the places it flows through. Therefore, as well as water has no separate parts, to think that one is separate from the Essential Source is but an ambition created by the ego.

For the Advaitin, the individual consciousness, considered as the sense “I am an individual or a soul imprisoned within the limits of a body”, is a distorted form of the pure awareness “I am” that aspires to prolong the “desire to be *someone*”; someone separate, someone special; someone with his or her own story. The dream character is completely caught in this spinning of a personal web, building and maintaining the personal story, driven by that unknown, unexamined

wanting to assert and continually reconfirm the individual *self*" (David Carse, *PBQ*, p. 101).

In sum, for the Advaitin, it is not the individual who is conscious, but the Consciousness that takes countless shapes. However, we are so accustomed to consider ourselves as conscious bodies, that we may not conceive that it is the Consciousness that supports the bodies.

II.- I AM NOT THE MIND

It is stated, "Mind only is itself the pollution, always. Mind itself is marvelous magic. Mind itself is the great illusion. Mind is like the son of a barren woman. Mind itself is thought, and mind itself is egoity" (*Ribhu Gita*, p. 59). A paradox is found here again: although the Advaitin distrusts knowledge, he however states that it is the knowledge itself that can help us flee from the labyrinth of concepts, so that we may find out what or who we really are. Indeed, the mind is necessary for the daily life, but to try to understand metaphysics by means of concepts is like to try to find the horns of a hare: "The organs of knowledge, the senses, the group of organs of action, waking, dream, deep sleep, and any other such state are all like the horns of a hare. All bondage, all 'liberation', God, all time, and all instruction are all like the horns of a hare" (*Ribhu Gita*, p. 51). The seeker recreates so transcendental concepts such as God, karma, reincarnation, salvation, and thus he feels compelled to hold them, defend them and even impose them on someone else, living anxious to perpetuate them. Nonetheless, as the world (our world) is a mere projection of our thoughts, the question would rather be how to save such a world from ourselves. The main step lies in experimentally verifying that the mind is nothing but the thought "I", that is, that the mind and the ego are the same; "The mind is a bundle of thoughts. The thoughts arise because there is the thinker. The thinker is the ego.

The ego, if sought, will automatically vanish. The ego is the root-thought from which all other thoughts arise” (Sri Ramana Maharshi, *CRMI*, p. 442). At this point, one may wonder; what is above the mind? Or, using the Advaitic language, who observes the mind? Who witnesses the thoughts? Doubtlessly, the consciousness.

III.- BUT I AM NOT CONSCIOUSNESS

One of the most transcendental contributions of Indian mysticism is the *experience* of the consciousness-witness, that is, the consciousness free of psycho-mental and physical attachments and from their individual genetic and cultural conditionings. Whereas the consciousness is involved in the thoughts, the mind seems to have its own autonomy, but when we stop paying attention to all the thoughts, we just find out that the mind is not our ultimate reality: there is life beyond the mind. We all experience the fact of thinking; we can even witness thinking, that is, be aware that we are thinking. But we can go one step further *when we are aware that we are aware*. In that moment, a loop occurs that stops the mental flow and makes us remain in a state of self-consciousness or *pure awareness*. There are no thoughts or, should any remain, it is seen with an absolute disregard and neutrality. But we immediately realize as well our inability to remain stable in such a state, because thoughts require our attention. Well, that state of individual consciousness “it is me”, free from thoughts, is what, in religious terminology, is defined as “soul” and constitutes the door or preliminary toward the state of universal³ and unlimited consciousness “I am”, which is defined as “spirit”, “heart”, “the center of the soul” or “God”. And it is called God because such a consciousness “I am” is the original source where duality arises from, that is, God-world, Creator-Creation.

³ It is to be warned that universal consciousness is not collective consciousness. Whereas the former is the homogeneous, partless source, the latter, which is a creation of modern psychology, would imply an addition of parts that still keep their individuality.

This fact explains that the name of the god *Brahmā* comes from *brahm-aham*, literally “I am”. Thus, the *mahāvākya* or “great saying” “I am *Brahman*” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10) precisely means, “I am I am”. This coincides with the secret name of God that appears revealed to Moses in Ex. 3:14: “I AM THAT I AM” (*EHYEH ASHER EHYEH*), whose importance can be inferred from the fact that it is the only one time when a name of God appears in the Bible written in capital letters, in Latin script languages, including English. Moreover, in the Gospel of Saint John and other passages of the Bible, it is said, “Before Abraham was, I am” (Jn. 8:58), placing that “I am” at the end of the sentence in order to stress the meaning of “I am” intended by Jesus. Well then, this “I am” is not a thought; “I am” does not consist in thinking of “I am”.

That is why it is convenient to distinguish between the “I” as a pure Self, and the thought “I am”. One thing is to *experience* the self-consciousness or “I am” and another thing is to think “*I am*”. Up to a certain extent, they are two incompatible situations, since the self-consciousness “I am” overtakes or transcends the thought. In sum, the consciousness “I am” is not a thought, but a state from where the thoughts are observed.

IV.- THE “I AM” AS A WITNESS OR THE PARADOX OF THE METHOD

How to stop being the rat in the labyrinth? How to gain access into the heart (*hṛdaya*)? *Chāndogya Upanishad* (3.14.3) explains that the Being, the *Brahma* Awareness, is in the vital center of the human being, which is symbolically located in the smallest ventricle (*guhā*) of the heart (*hṛdaya*), though its true location does not depend on spatial conditions. Therefore, it is explained that *Ātman*, when adopting the domain of the individual existence, is *Jīvātma* (*jīva*=life, that is, the life of *Ātman*) and that it is subtler or “smaller” than a mustard

grain. But that small grain is bigger than the earth (domain of subtle manifestation), bigger than the sky (domain of informal manifestation) and bigger than all these worlds together (beyond all manifestation, since it is unconditioned).

Nonetheless, the universal Consciousness is apparently identified with an individual body, so that, as long as this identification remains, we will only think about doing good to that pseudo-personality. It is initially enough to understand, even though just intellectually, that one is neither in the body nor in the mind, yet present at both them, and that, therefore, as the individual consciousness is a false or illusory consciousness, by paying “attention” to that form of individual, limited consciousness that we feel to be “I”, we will end up finding that it is but a distorted reflection of the real, unlimited consciousness “I am”, which is God. Thus, once understood that all we see is just the performance of the universal Consciousness and that there can never be any individual entity, the problems of liberation, birth or death, and even the one of the doer who does something, disappear (Sri Nisargadatta, *PC*, p. 152). In fact, the mere intellectual understanding implies that one is already beyond. To accept that it all is a concept implies that the mere conceptual level has been overcome. However, we must not stop there, since the certainty is just a mental state. “That” is beyond the mind.

The Advaitin insists that the methods to stimulate or improve the concentration on the “I-am-ness” *are not directed to achieve anything*. Therefore, those approaches that urge us to broaden our “consciousness focus” or to grow spiritually, and that convert the *Ātman* into a mobile object under all kind of conditionings must be avoided, since they are false. Firstly, the Advaitin insists on something evident: we are not more or less Being or “spirit”, because *That* is not acquired; *we already are*.

In that case, what is meditative practice for? Advaita masters agree that no method can lead us to the truth or to the Self. At the most, the method may contribute to discipline the mind for a certain period. Sri Ramana taught that the realization of the Self does not admit a progress because, if it were something to be gained in the future, it would have the same possibility to be lost. The true aim of the practice is not then to make us be aware of the Being we already are, but to unmask who we are not, to *empty* or *relinquish* our genetic and cultural attachments (*vāsanās*). The paradox of all this is that the practice itself is no longer part of the “I am” and may become another bonding or *vāsanā*. That is why it is said that the practice can produce athletes or champions of bliss blinded because of their spiritual pride. And that is also why it is said that the aim of the practice finally lies in giving up and accepting that no effort gets you closer to That and thus that practice only works in the field of duality, which is the field of the “I am”.

Indeed, one of the most important certainties that arise after a restless meditative practice is to come to understand who is the one who seeks and what is sought. Quoting David Carse, “struggling is instinctive, and we think it helps, but actually it is itself the problem. The struggling, the seeking, is the sense of individual self trying to keep telling its story. There is nothing to seek. Separation is the illusion; there is nothing to be separate, nothing. There is only One, not-two, and That Is. All else is not” (*PBQ*, p. 110).

Therefore, up to which extent is not our seeking motivated by the need to experience supposed superior states of consciousness? Up to which extent does the practice of rituals, meditations, prayers... try to feed the ego? Real liberation starts by *accepting* that, as an individual, we are nothing and that, hence, the point of view of an individual doer is a mere suggestion or a mirage that continuously recreates the events of life, giving them an imaginary causality. The con-

clusion is that no effort leads to realization... though it does help to quiet the mind.

V.- GOAL OF THE MEDITATIVE PRACTICE

There are different methods and techniques proposing the *non-duality experience*, but they all agree in the need to quiet the mind and detach ourselves from the thoughts, so that the reality that lies beyond them may become evident.

The main method to experience the non-duality is meditation. Like Sri Nisargadatta said, “Meditation is a deliberate attempt to pierce into the higher states of consciousness and finally go beyond it” (*IAT*, p. 305). Advaita Vedanta prevents the seeker to worship meditation methods excessively. What should be an aid or prop for the beginner might become an unbeatable burden. When meditation is practiced, it is advisable to wonder, who meditates? The Self, the I, *Ātman*, does not need to meditate; it is the unsettled mind that embarks on that activity looking for emotions. Indeed, meditation helps the “unaware” layers of our psyche arise, accept and get over old memories and repressed frustrations providing a certain relief, preparing the basis to practice self-inquiry (Nisargadatta, *IAT*, p. 385). To understand these essential rules of game (*Līlā*) of *Māyā* helps us not keep false expectations when the desired results are not achieved.

Among the diverse ways to improve our attention, one of the easiest ones is the concentration on only one object. The aim of the meditator is to put his thoughts away and widen the space-time of his self-consciousness by means of sustained attention. However, since sustaining the attention is as difficult as trying to stop the smoke from an incense stick, the Indian thousands-year-old experience has developed certain techniques to improve the ability to sustain the attention on oneself; fasting (*yama*), body discipline (*āsana*), breath

rhythm (*prāṇāyāma*), sensory inhibition (*pratyāhāra*), concentration (*dharmā*, from the root *dhṛ*, “to keep tight”, meaning “focusing the thoughts on only one point” (*Yogasūtra*⁴ III, 1)), etc. Therefore, for example, the concentration on an only object (*ekāgratā*), either a physical object (the space between our eyebrows, the tip of our nose, a light source, etc.), or a thought (a metaphysical truth or a verse from a sacred text), or even God, has the goal to momentarily inhibit the activity of the senses (*indriya*), the activity of sub-consciousness (*saṃskāra*) and the activity of thoughts. By concentrating on or support only one thought, we facilitate the dispelling of the rest of the thoughts and, little by little, the mind becomes more attentive. Likewise, by means of the breath discipline or *prāṇāyāma*, the profane man stops breathing in an arrhythmic way and concentrates on a particular rhythm with notable psycho-mental effects (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad*, for example, 1.5.23)⁵. Similarly, the unceasing repetition of the name of God or sacred words (*mantra-japa*), for instance, AUM (*Maitrī Upanishad* 6.5 and 23), helps us control our mind, mainly if practiced with devotion and certainty. The four *mahāvākyas* or “great sayings”, contained in each one of the four Vedas, are especially worshiped in India. Rig-Veda *mahāvākya* is “*prajñānam brahma*”, that is, “pure awareness is *Brahman*” (*Aitareya Upanishad* 3.3); Yajur-Veda one is “*aham brahmāsmi*”, which means “I am *Brahman*” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10); Sāma-Veda one is “*tat tvam asi*”, which means “you are that [*Brahman*]” (*Chāndogya Upanishad* 6.8.7), and Atharva-Veda one is “*ayam ātmā brahma*”, which means “this self is *Brahman*” (*Māṇḍūkya Upanishad* 2). On the other hand, with this and other techniques, many *sādhakas* expect to activate the *kuṇḍalinī*, the *chakras*, etc. in order to acquire powers or some kind of psychic or mental advantages. But all this is zero, nothing (Sri Nisargadatta, SC,

⁴ F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, *The Yogasūtras of Patañjali on Concentration of Mind*, Sanskrit text with translation into English, introduction and commentary, Delhi, 1987.

⁵ Breath rhythm and breath retention also have an important role in Taoism (*taixi* among others) and Islamic mysticism (for example, when reciting the *Dhikr*).

p. 110), since, as Sri Ramana explains, the powers called parapsychological provide no peace or happiness, but, on the contrary, will make us completely miserable; “Moreover, what are these powers for? The would-be occultist (*siddha*) desires to display the *siddhis* (powers) so that others may appreciate him. He seeks appreciation and, if it is not forthcoming, he will not be happy. There must be others to appreciate him. He may even find another possessor of higher powers. That will cause jealousy and breed unhappiness” (*CRMI*, p. 37). It is quite clear that the non-duality experience cannot be based on assumptions that accept duality; “I want powers to be admired”. But, who is there but Brahma? Who wants powers but the ego? The *sādhaka* must refuse those “magical mirages”, “only desirable to the ignorant ones”.

In any case, these techniques, even though they produce only a temporary immersion of the mind, help us experience the joy of dwelling in the state of consciousness free from thoughts and therefore feed the mind, so that it may go on practicing self-nullification.

VI.- MEDITATION ON “I AM”

One of the main revelations of the meditative practice is that, when we attend to external objects, our attention takes the form of “thoughts”, “but, when we attend to our ‘essential being’, our attention remains as being” (M. James, *HAB*, p. 170). Indeed, this fact must not be a “thinking” of ourselves, but an attending to “I am” that will cause the mind to unroll like a sock until we can realize the amazing fact that our thought stops and remains in the state of only being. Whereas, in conventional meditation, an object to meditate on is required, in the “I am” meditation, there is only a subject without an object. Or, if preferred, the subject makes himself his object of observation until he gradually experiences that there is no subject or object, but only impersonal observation.

The starting point is our verification that we are-exist or, in other words, our sense of *aware presence*. Meditation is no more and no less than paying attention to that sense of presence that is blocked by a curtain of thoughts. “Meditation is to reject all experience and be in the experienceless state” (Sri Nisargadatta, *SC*, p. 194). It is important to insist that the attention to that *sense of oneself* must be paid in a patient, calm way, avoiding any exertion or violence. It is attention without tension. In this sense, any physical or intellectual effort is always a body-mind one. True meditation, like true awareness, is always effortless. Therefore, it is not about fighting against the thoughts, but about not paying attention to them. To face them would be like to expect to put fire out with gasoline; when fought, they are given life. It is simply enough to realize, each time with greater frequency, that whatever happens happens because “I am”. We do not need to stop thinking, but just stop being interested in thoughts. And this is only achieved by experiencing that we are a consciousness that is beyond, witnessing thoughts. The detachment from the external objects, that is, the thoughts, provides us with the strength and certainty needed to go through the *metaphysical way*. When asked, is the thought “I am God” helpful? Ramana answered it was not, because “‘I AM THAT I AM’. ‘I am’ is God, not thinking ‘I am God’. Realize ‘I am’ and do not think ‘I am’. ‘Know I am God’, it is said, and not ‘Think I am God’” (Sri Ramana Maharshi *CRMI*, p. 105).

How to sustain the attention on “I am” effortlessly? Sri Ramana recommended sustaining or recovering the attention by unceasingly inquiring, *to whom?* “If other thoughts rise, one should... inquire ‘to whom did they rise?’. What does it matter however many thoughts rise? At the very moment that each thought rises, if one vigilantly inquires ‘to whom did this rise?’, it will be known ‘to me’. If one then inquires ‘who am I?’, that is, if we turn our attention to ourselves and keep it firmly and carefully fixed on our essential self-

conscious being in order to discover what this ‘I’ really is, the mind will turn back to its source and, since we refrain from paying attention to it, the thought which had risen will also subside” (*Who am I?* 11)⁶.

Advaita Vedanta states that, being the Self (Spirit) the only existing reality, the individual “I” that we believe we are is an erroneous entity that assumes a false identity when appropriating the objects. As “I” is but another thought (it is actually the first thought), when other thoughts rise, the thought “I” appropriates them and assumes that “I think”, “I do”, “I want”, etc., recreating a personal story made of appropriations of memories and expectations. But, since there is really no individual “I” that can exist independently from the objects, should we separate the subject “I” from the objects, as the thought “I” cannot exist without objects, then the individual “I” will vanish, giving way to the Self (the Being).

Ramana explained that the best method to isolate the “I” was the self-inquiry. Of course, he did not discredit the various previous techniques of concentration or meditation. But always keeping in mind that, as all of them remain in the subject-object duality, they must be given up in a certain moment of the practice, since “meditation requires an object to meditate upon, whereas there is only the subject without the object in self-inquiry (*vichāra*)” (*BYA*, p. 78).

How is self-inquiry (*vichāra*) practiced and what does it consist in? The reader may find the best exposition of such method in the second part of the systematized compilation of Sri Ramana’s teachings published under the title of *Be as you are*. There, it is explained

⁶ From this point of view, when Jesus Christ states “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me” (Jn. 14:6), this sentence can be interpreted in the sense that “The spirit ‘I am’ is the way, the truth, and the life: no man comes unto the spirit ‘I am’, which is the Father or source of all things, but by this same spirit” (M. James, *HAB*, p. 30). That is, “I am *is* the way, the truth, and the life”.

that the self-inquirer has to pay attention to his sense of being as long as possible. In order to avoid constant distractions caused by thoughts, Sri Ramana proposed a simple auxiliary method that consisted in inquiring “to whom did this thought rise?” as many times as necessary in order to focus our attention on the sense “I”; “What does it matter however many thoughts rise? At the very moment that each thought rises, if one vigilantly inquires ‘To whom did this rise?’, it will be known ‘to me’. If one then inquires ‘who am I?’, the mind will turn back to its source [the Self] and the thought which had risen will also subside... If you are vigilant and make a stern effort to reject every thought when it rises, you will soon find that you are going deeper and deeper into your own inner Self. At that level it is not necessary to make an effort to reject thoughts” (*BYA*, p. 85-86).

It is possible that, during the first few moments of practice, the attention to the sense “I” takes the form of a mental activity where attention is focused on the thought “I”, but gradually, the thoughts will ease up until they give way to the experience of thoughtless self-inquiry, that is, to a natural, effortless consciousness of being, since *vichāra* is not an intellectual activity, but, on the contrary, a method to transcend or isolate the mind and recover the original peace or purity. As Sri Ramana stated, the great sayings, such as “I am Brahman [*aham brahmāsmi*]”, were not meant for “thinking ‘I am Brahman’”, since *Aham* [‘I’] is known to everyone. Brahman abides as *aham* in every one. Find out the ‘I’. The ‘I’ is already Brahman. You need not think so. Simply find out the ‘I’ and all will be well” (*BYA*, p. 109).

And this easy method of self-inquiry is compatible with the daily duties, since “the life of action need not be renounced. If you meditate for an hour or two every day, you can then carry on with your duties. If you meditate in the right manner, then the current of mind induced will continue to flow even in the midst of your work... As you go on you will find that your attitude towards people, events and

objects gradually changes. Your actions will tend to follow your meditations of their own accord..." (BYA, p. 87-88).

Let us explain this process with more detail.

VII.- TIME AS AN APPROPRIATION OF OBJECTS

Our conception of time is quantitative; we believe that time is the measure of reality, so we suppose that the longer something lasts or remains, the more real it is. And when the object is unstable, as long as we project our feelings or expectations on it, a part of us seems to die after the objects disappear. The truth is that the universe and everything that is subject to the becoming cannot be real. If it were real, that is, if it were immutable, it would remain perfect and identical to itself and, in that very moment, it would disappear. That is why Plato stated that our life is a succession of instants of consciousness, *of which no two are the same*; that is, *a man is never the same man from one moment to the next*. But "it is only because the changes that take place in any brief period are usually small that we mistake the incessant process for an actual being"⁷. Therefore, it is illogical to affirm that something *is* if that something never remains, but finds itself in constant change, that is, it seems to be *being*. What Is can never stop Being, it never changes. (Plato, *Symposium* 207d, *Phaedo* 78d).

I do not consist of time. Our Real Nature does not consist of time. If we formed part of the temporal becoming, we could not realize its apparent movement the same way we do not notice the speed of a plane or vehicle when we are inside them. This means that it is because the observer is not part of time that we are aware of the becoming. That is, time is a state of existence; it is being held, wit-

⁷ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Meaning of Death", in *Metaphysics*, ed. by Roger Lipsey, Princeton, 1977, p. 426.

nessed or experienced by someone. From the physical or *phenomenic* point of view, it seems that we are time, that we were born and that we will die. But, metaphysically, that is, as a Being, we are neither past nor future because we are not subject to temporal or spatial conditionings. We are pure atemporality that is expressed in the always present *Now*.

1.- There is no past but the memories from the present.

The past does not exist as a succession of events that are recorded and petrified somewhere. It is only a theoretical construction that lacks an independent existence, that is, that needs someone to remember it. It only exists as an accumulation of different impressions recorded in the memory. In effect, the past is only a thinking modality that we call *memory*. Memories, as a personal biography, are thoughts in which I have recorded experiences that basically consist of desires (memories of pleasure) and fears (memories of sufferings).

Past facts are not archived anywhere, even in the human brain, following a chronological order. It is the mind that, when recalling them from the now, sorts the memories sequentially, giving them a particular sense. Continuity is thus another fiction created by the memory. Therefore, every succession of events is just an arbitrary, fragmented selection of thoughts with which the mind builds an apparently logical chain of memories to which it attributes a certain causality. Time is sequential, intemporality is simultaneous. Balsekar explained this with the example of the thousands of frames of a huge movie shown on a large wall hundreds of feet wide. Whereas pure awareness can witness all the frames simultaneously from its just perspective, perceiving their essential oneness, the speculative mind needs to approach the wall in order to see the frames, so that, unable to perceive them all, it will imagine and recreate sequences or stories to which it will attribute a temporal connection or a logical argument, depending on the visual itineraries carried out in the different

frames. But that sense or causal link is merely fictional or arbitrary, because it is only in the observer's mind.

To the individual, the personal memories that form his small story give him a false feeling of continuity. Thus, the past provides us with the sense of identity and the future gives us the hope of a certain personal realization. But we do not actually exist in the past; we just exist in the now, so it is the memory that configures the individual's personality. Or, in other words, without the memories of the past and without the expectations of the future, the individual is nullified, because the "I" is so as far as it has a past and a future. Outside the common temporal field, the sense of identity is suspended.

In conclusion, the sense of the "I" cannot remain in the "now" because, in the present, there is no sense of appropriation of memories or expectations.

When the memories are collectivized or socialized, they are called general History, local history, histories of all sorts. Such *Histories* are but a subjective connection between certain events. Even the so-called remains or documents of archeological value are so as far as we think and value them in the *now*, that is, we interpret and use them with the mental or ideological categories of the present. The past is an artificial construction built from the present. Every History is always presentist.

2.- There is no future but the expectations from the present.

The thought can only be born and spread along time. Its main activity consists in imagining projects and planning objectives. Its essence is the tomorrow. It spreads its strategy and activity expecting to get results in the tomorrow. However, the future is an imagined present. The future is a thought by means of which a person guides his activities or expectations realized in the now, expecting to get re-

sults. But the future only exists in the mind because, when that supposed future comes, it will always be now. In fact, a great deal of nowadays man's frustrations is caused by his obsession to avoid living the present and keep the mind concerned about an imaginary future, that is, living with the hope to get results tomorrow. That is precisely a fertile field for the ego, because aims and goals need time to be achieved and provide the speculative mind with the opportunity to design its plans, enjoy its projects, develop their execution and obtain satisfaction after achieving them. However, the concept "future" is just a strategy of reaffirmation of the mind in order to avoid facing the present because it knows it must give control to the pure awareness there. It knows that desires, expectations, projects, etc. cannot survive in the present because they need time to be achieved. This way, many people live autosuggested by a continuous expectation with the idea of being improved in the future. But that imaginary future never comes, is never enough or never remains because it is a mere concept invented by the mind, as impossible to reach as the horizon. No one has ever reached the horizon; thus, between projects and hopes, life seems to turn its back and slip out over and over again.

In short, the past is "now" a memory; it is an experience that takes place because it is recalled in the present in order to provide us with a sense of identity opposite the rest of the world. And the future is a thought as well, arisen in the "now" about a present that has not yet "come", on which we pin our hope to obtain happiness. Therefore, as the future never comes (because the mind needs the idea of "future" in order to survive), happiness will never be achieved either.

3.- *What is the now?*

"Now is the favorable time" (2 Cor. 6:2). Time is experienced as a past or a future because the *speculative mind* is identified with the thoughts (memories and expectations) of the imagined character that

tries to find usefulness, pleasure or sense in external objects. On the contrary, when the mind is placed in the present and pays attention to itself, that is, when there is consciousness of being conscious or, in other words, when it realizes it is thinking, and it does with a sustained intensity, it becomes pure awareness. Actually, one of the biggest discoveries or revelations in the *history* of spirituality is the discovery that the “ego” cannot survive in the now. The present voids the sense of appropriation. In such a state of consciousness that pays attention to itself, as the flow of thoughts is stopped, the ego is left with neither food nor borders to refer experiences to; there is no “I” that may appropriate anything. As there is no identification with the thoughts, there is neither attachment to the past in the form of memories, nor sense of future in the form of expectations. A clean, natural consciousness remains: a vision that witnesses things without projecting the ego’s desires and ambitions on them. In conclusion, when there is no sense of appropriation of things, time is abolished and the sequences of continuity, with which the mind identifies itself or builds a character, cease. When the hoarding mind is absent, that is, when we stop identifying ourselves with the flow of thoughts, we access a sort of atemporality. That is why it is said that the *Now* is a door to eternity. But eternity, rather than a chronological magnitude, that is, an undefined or unlimited temporal duration, must be understood as an intemporal condition. The true “Now” is not an instant in time but an access door to the immutable Being, not conditioned by time. Therefore, for the Advaitin, true immortality is not eternal life, but the *realization* that one has never been born, since only what has never been born can never die⁸.

What is not the Now? “The Now that flows away makes time, the Now that stands still makes eternity” (Boethius, *De Trinitate*). The dual nature of the mind has imaginarily divided time in two opposite directions: the past and the present. But it has also imagined

⁸ The concept of *eviternity* (what has been born but will never die) regarding soul is a forced way to combine theology and metaphysics.

the opposite of time itself: the eternal present. And when conceiving or imagining that eternal present, it is automatically changed into another mental construction: a thought. That is, when the present is conceived as an idea, it is introduced into the past, and stops being *now*. Thus, here is one of the mind's subtlest maneuvers to keep on hoarding experiences and maintaining control over the character it believes it plays. When noticing that there is no "I" who appropriates the experiences in the *Now*, the mind designs a subordinate model of the present in which it imagines grandiloquent concepts such as "non-mind", "dissolution of the ego", "Paradise", "personal realization", etc., which serve as substitutes. But it is not the same to think about the *Now* and to Be in the *Now*, since only then is there no appropriation of thoughts. It is not about an already-thought *Now*, but about a *Now* without thought.

On the other hand, the present is a door to Reality, but it is not a means to achieve a goal. We would make a mistake if we converted the present into another mental object, that is, into a chronological stage within a temporal sequence that is to be concluded in the *future* realization of an individual. In that case, the "now" would not be other than a mere thought created to satisfy the ego. It is to be considered that there is no sense of appropriation in the *Now*. If there are expectations, aims, desires... there is "ego". If there is "ego", there is no *Now*.

The present must not be mixed up with its contents; sight must not be mixed up with witnessed objects, the same way the frames of the huge film must not be mixed up with the screen.

4.- Time is ego.

Mind and time are inseparable because the action of knowing involves a mental movement, that is, the shifting of thought through time. Thought needs to shift through time in order to spread out. For

explanatory purposes only, Sri Ramesh Balsekar used to distinguish between the *thinking* or *speculative mind*, which moves within a *productive* or *rational time* (in the sense that it just analyzes as it seeks for its “ration”) and the *working mind*, which moves within an *inert time*.

The *hoarding* or *speculative mind*, the egoist “I”, cannot remain in the present. It needs time (that is, the past and the future) in order to move and appropriate objects. There is an individual consciousness in the present, but there is no sense of appropriation because the mind does not have enough space-time to identify itself with the objects. Or, in other words, if the time strip of the consciousness is narrowed, then the “ego” is weakened and ends up dying. The *speculative mind* moves within a *productive time* in which every action expects a result, whose benefits are to be taken. Two are the characteristic elements of the *thinking mind*: there is a sense of the becoming of time, and there is a sense of appropriation of objects. Thus, the thought “I” strives to hoard objects, design projects, achieve goals that provide it with a stable happiness. But, since the objects are mutable, the pleasure they provide is ephemeral, fact that causes an insatiable desire to hoard objects. Therefore, this escape forward will only cause negative emotions, since, if it believes to be winning the race, its ambition, arrogance, pride and vanity will increase; but, if it believes to be losing, it will feel full of envy, anxiety and frustration.

On the contrary, the *working mind* acts from the *Now*, which means that, when recalling memories, imagining future situations or planning projects, it does it with no sense of appropriation. The *working mind* deals with the situations without an added component of passion; it observes the events as mere occurrences, and not as problems. It does not torment itself trying to study pros and cons, nor does it get distressed by the results even before performing the action. In sum, the working mind is not pre-occupied, but occupied with the issues. It is the natural, basic mind. It establishes relation-

ships with the objects with no sense of appropriation. Consequently, the goals, as well as the result of its actions, are not products of ambition, fear, greed, etc. Therefore, for example, before the sight of a large green meadow, whereas the *working mind* can feel the peace and beauty of the place without issuing any judgment or comparison, the *speculative mind* will imaginarily take over the field and design its house in the middle or calculate how much profit it would make if able to sell it once divided and urbanized. Whereas the *working mind* would go for a walk through the forest, feeling the oneness of the apparent plurality, the *thinking mind* would see no more than timber to be felled and sold. For the *speculative mind*, the relationship with people and things is always selfish because it is conditioned by the profit they can provide.

5.- *How to break free from the chains of time?*

To Advaita Vedanta, the taming of time seems to be simple; it is enough to break free from the sense of appropriation. However, it may seem paradoxical to talk about breaking free from the time-ego because that would precisely imply a process... in time. Could we perhaps break free from the time-ego using what precisely feeds it, that is, the time itself? The idea itself that “I have to know myself” or that “I have to realize myself” is confusing, since it implies that I am not realized *now*. Should that realization be progressive, that is, subject to time, it is not true, because the authentic Realization cannot change or be subject to time. Consequently, the so-called “spiritual realization” is outside the temporal dimension. From the metaphysical point of view, no one can acquire, achieve or realize anything that he does not already have by nature and that is inherent in himself. But the mind wants processes, goals, experiences and comparisons between yours and mine with which to establish imaginary borders and reaffirm its sense of identity. The mind flees from vertical time, that is, from the present, because it depends on horizontal or chronological time, on the feeling of continuity of the events, in or-

der to maintain the mirage that there is an individual being who progresses in time by means of hoarding experiences and who competes against other individuals for being more or different from them.

It might be supposed that the abolition of time equals its stopping. However, how to stop anything that does not exist but as a thought? What has an objective existence can be stopped, but time lacks an objective existence. Actually, the suppression of time is just a concept of the mind, which immediately builds its polar opposite. Against Time, it proposes atemporality (eternity). And maybe that is the key. If time is a modality of mental activity dedicated to external objects, its abolition or transcendence implies the mind's inwardness by means of what is known as meditation or attention to the present. It is about facilitating the detachment from the past and the future, about shortening the ego's attention span to the past and the future, by means of an increasing, gradual attention to the *Now*. In sum, it is about Being, about replacing the "I was" or "I will be" with the present form, that is, "I am".

On the other hand, words such as "liberation", "realization", "happiness", etc. are concepts produced by the mind in order to stay active and feel useful. The mind, when identifying itself with a particular sequence of events, recreates or builds a character. That character believes to be subject to temporal and spatial conditionings, and thus he believes that he was born, that he will die and that he urgently needs to make the most of his time in order to hoard experiences that may make him happy. However, he is aware that nothing in this world is permanent and that he cannot retain the happy moments. Just after a moment of joy, time sinks him into a desperate quest for pleasant experiences that may bring his lost happiness back. Therefore, man aspires to a happiness that he can never retain, fact that causes him impotence, distress and unease, that is, suffering. Thus, days go by in the middle of a frustrating duality between pleasure and suffering. All man's ills can be defined in time coordi-

nates; fear is a form of refusal of the future; remorse or guilt is a chain to negative memories; anxiety is an obsession with the future; nostalgia is the attachment to pleasant memories.

As the ancients warned, time is a region of duality; you cannot bathe twice in the same river; everything flows, nothing stands still. Man lives caught in a time loop woven just from thoughts. Those thoughts are dual: the past as a memory, and the future as an anticipation. This way, man, while keeping the hope to achieve happiness in the future, just delays the solution to his problem because the future does not exist, but only the *now* exists. It is to be insisted that the future is but a mirage, created by the mind, which prevents us from remaining in the present. If one believes that the future will free him from the past, the solution will only move further away, since time will not free us from time. Just the present frees us from the past and the future.

The Advaitin teaches how to dwell in the present. But remaining in the present is not a kind of mental escapism; it is not about fleeing from family or work responsibilities; it is not a way to look “away” or hide our head like an ostrich to evade problems. On the contrary, there is no worse escapism than fleeing from the present on the pretext of a better future. Actually, the continuous quest for aims and projects for future is usually a way to escape from the past or to avoid facing the present moment. And the mind avoids the *Now* by resorting to the comfortable daydream of waiting, since to wait is to deny the present. The ostrich hides its head precisely because it fears the future. The Advaitin does not praise the idle, relaxed life, nor does he condemn the attitude of planning projects and achieving goals. They are unavoidable and even necessary to simplify and make daily life easier. On the contrary, what he suggests is the need not to add a pre-occupation to the normal, daily occupation. It is about not adding more confusion to the already existing disturb-

ances, about not overimposing more suffering upon the unavoidable pain.

In sum, the liberation from the chains of time, the “conquest of immortality”, is achieved when ceases the sense of appropriation of objects, of all objects including that imaginary character (the body-mind organism) that daily plays a role in our name. Ultimately, the abolition of time implies breaking free from the idea that the past gives us an identity, that is, from the erroneous assumption that the “I” has a personal story made of memories. And it also implies breaking free from the idea that the future contains the hope to achieve happiness.

VIII.- THE INSUBSTANTIALITY OF THE “I”

The Advaitin warns: *That* which we define as universal Consciousness, “I am”, “God”, “Brahma”, is a temporary, impermanent state that is being witnessed. Or, in other words, that Consciousness is part of Duality: “Whatever experiences you have in meditation are confined to the realm of consciousness. Consciousness is born and it will go. You are prior to it” (Sri Nisargadatta, *SC*, p. 101). The state “I am” is but that, just a “state” of the Being, something that is being experienced and that will sooner or later disappear. Certainly, as Sri Nisargadatta stated, “bringing the mind to the feeling ‘I am’ merely helps in turning the mind away from everything else” but, even “I am” is something contingent. (*IAT*, p. 230, and also Sri Muruganar, *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, verse 716). Beyond the mind is the state “I am”, free from thoughts, but beyond “I am” is the I am free from “I am” (Sri Nisargadatta, *PC*, p. 123).

As *Nirvāṇa* and *Samādhi* imply a loss of individuality, the persistence of the “I” and the Realization are incompatible. As the Realization is a supraindividual “state”, if the “I” (the identification with a

body-mind) remains, peace or “enlightenment” will not happen. Patañjali defined the state of *dhyāna* (expression from which the word *Zen* is ultimately derived) as “a current of unified thought” (*Yogasūtra* III, 2) sustained long enough as to “penetrate” beyond the veil of the mind and remain in the state of consciousness free of thoughts. *Samādhi* expresses another indescribable “experience” or “state” in which the differences between *subject* and *object* are transcended. For most people, such a state might only be experienced shortly or at certain intervals [*manolaya*]⁹. Only a minority pointed by the Grace will make that state a *mansion*, that is, a permanent situation [*manonasa*] (Sri Ramana Maharshi, *BYA*, p. 94).

Consequently, the so-called “spiritual awakening” can be a mirage of the consciousness if such a Realization implies the duality of a subject who seeks to realize something, or a realized subject, and a non-realized subject. And it is not to be forgotten that, as the so-called “Realization”, “Enlightenment” or “Understanding” is neither a process nor an experience that may take place in the space-time, if we see that idea through to the bitter end, we will come to the conclusion that the idea of “Liberation” or “Bliss” itself is just an exclusive concept of the world of consciousness. There is no “Liberation” or “Realization beyond Consciousness, because there is no room for a difference between an “enlightened” being and a “non-enlightened” one in the Oneness. Some Advaita masters teach that “we all are realized” beyond Consciousness, statement that equals saying that “nobody is realized”, since There is no room for distinctions. When this idea is accepted, it is finally understood that there was never anything to seek or find, since there was nothing lost. No one needs to reach the Absolute or get to the Being, because we al-

⁹ Advaita masters advise against the Way to those meditators who only look for the trance experience, since the spiritual practices such as meditation try to eliminate the psycho-mental and cultural tendencies of man (*vāsanās*), and not to momentarily suspend them as long as the meditative practice lasts. They also advise against the use of certain narcotics, since the result will not be peace or liberation, but drug addiction.

ready are what we try to find. Not to see it is just another mirage created by the mind.

In sum, there are not realized individuals, since, as the so-called Realization, Liberation or Gnosis is supraindividual, what characterizes such an *event* is the absence of the sense of individuality itself. There are not liberated individuals because “the Realized one” has stopped considering himself an individual, has understood and verified not only that there are neither individuals with consciousness nor Consciousness to be manifested by individuals (Nisargadatta, *IAT*, p. 218), but that there is Nothing, a mere illusion or mirage. That is why the awakening is the realization that there is no one who may awake. In sum, as far as the “Realization” involves an overcoming of individuality, there cannot be an “I” who may reclaim that “state”. To affirm, “I am realized” is a contradiction in terms, since “Liberation” is a “supraindividual” state beyond the “I”. And that is precisely why, in such a transpersonal state, there is no room to talk about experience of God or experience of Consciousness.

IX.- WHAT IS THERE BEYOND CONSCIOUSNESS?

Who witnesses the Consciousness? We erroneously suppose that the Consciousness is the final state or the non-state beyond all conditioned states, in which the consciousness is observing the consciousness. The truth is that “I am”, the “spirit”, “God”... is not the Supreme Reality because it is time-bound (Sri Nisargadatta, *SC*, 19). On the contrary, the “I am-ness” is part of the universal mirage. Nonetheless, it is to be understood that this is not a form of pantheism or immanentism, because, although God is in all things, things are not God. Brahma contains and penetrates the manifestation, but is different from it, since “all beings are in me but I am not in them... My being is the maintainer of all beings but I am not part of them” (*Bhagavad Gita* 9.4-5). Certainly, it is stated that the God who can

call Himself God is not a true God, though He were attributed with omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, since we would still be in the dual world of concepts: there is God because there is Creation; without Creation, there is no God. Well... however, what is there beyond duality? What or who was there before Creation? ...

Consciousness is the desire to “be” that wants to last longer. Its quality is the desire to live and keep on creating the suitable conditions to continue its activity in the world. Actually, the supposedly highest happiness (*sat-chit-ānanda*) is a form of superior happiness that, however, is not permanent; it is just a state of consciousness. *Sat-chit-ānanda*, being-consciousness-bliss, is actually a *state* of happiness that, however, is still a “state” subject to the space-time, that is, it is being held or witnessed by “someone” as long as there is a body available for the Only Consciousness. Consequently, the so-called Realization has nothing to do with Consciousness, no matter how much Unique or Universal it may be. It rather looks like a neutral state without quality or shape, a state of non-mind, where the supposed individuality is permanently zero, Nothing (Sri Nisargadatta, *Beyond Freedom*, Mumbai, 2007, p. 49).

Therefore, Advaita Vedanta answers the question: is there a higher reality than consciousness? Yes. Beyond consciousness, there is *Parabrahman*, the Absolute. But, as the Absolute is beyond all experience, it cannot be conceived or explained by the mind; “The Absolute cannot be experienced. It is not an objective affair. Any manifestation, any functioning, any witnessing, can only take place in duality. There has to be a subject and an object, they are two, but they are not two, they are two ends of the same thing” (Sri Nisargadatta, *PC*, p. 81). Or, in words of Chinese esoterism, “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the true Tao” (*Tao Te Ching*, 1).

In order to solve this conceptual problem, the Advaitin distinguishes between *consciousness* and *awareness*. *Consciousness* be-

longs to the world of duality and thus to the “ego”. All aspiration to self-consciousness is but a refined modality of the desire to obtain something, and it is therefore a subtle dodge of the ego. Consciousness is, ultimately, consciousness of duality, whereas there is no duality in *awareness*. On the contrary, when the mind or “ego” is absent, the *awareness* takes place. It is a state of non-duality in which there is no one conscious. It is the original state before consciousness appeared. Nevertheless, who is aware in the awareness? To state, “I am aware” implies that “I am aware of experiencing that I am aware”, which is a contradiction, for there is no “I” in *Awareness*. Certainly, in order to *be aware*, there has to be *someone* and *something* to be aware of and, therefore, we are still in the world of duality: witnesser-witnessed-witnessing.

However, lacking a better expression, the word “Awareness” is conventionally used to refer to the Supreme State, the original state, without a beginning or an end, immutable and causeless. Such a “state” is called *Parabrahman*, beyond Brahma or beyond “I am”. As a pedagogical concession, some wise men have defined the natural state of non-dual awareness or self-knowledge as the “fourth state” (*turīya*) in order to highlight that it is beyond the three ordinary states of waking, dream and deep sleep. Thus, *turīya* is that which witnesses the three states. However, it might be wondered, who witnesses *turīya*? The mind can imagine another higher witness that transcends the fourth state (*turiyatita*, literally, beyond the fourth). But such conceptualizations, which the mind likes so much, are endless because, following that path, there will always be a higher level of awareness. And the truth is that calling it the state without states, the state beyond the states or the fourth state (*turīya*) does not stop being absurd, since, strictly speaking, as it is earlier or higher than the mind, it cannot be described or experienced; one can only *be* It. As Sri Nisargadatta clarifies, one cannot even *be* It in this state, because it is rather a state that *is not* (Sri Nisargadatta, *PC*, p. 32).

If there is neither anything to be witnessed nor anyone who witnesses, nor anyone who claims or assumes any action, do experiences stop being there? No. Awareness becomes a state where the presence or absence of the experience seems to be recorded, but, as there is no “one” who assumes the action of experiencing, every action becomes impersonal. Going deeper into the differences between consciousness and awareness, Sri Nisargadatta explains, “there can be no consciousness without awareness, but there can be awareness without consciousness (as in deep sleep). Awareness is absolute, consciousness is relative. Consciousness is partial and changeful, awareness is total, changeless, calm and silent. Awareness is not of time. Time exists in consciousness only. *Parabrahman* has no beginning and no end, whereas this consciousness is time-bound: it has a beginning and an end. The Absolute, the Awareness, is the supporting principle for the consciousness” (Sri Nisargadatta, *IAT*, p. 29).

Awareness is not achieved with effort or attention, because that would imply a movement at the level of the mind. At the most, we may think that we are practicing the fact of witnessing; in that case, it is the mind that thinks that it is witnessing... but then, we will have fallen into *Māyā*’s clutches again.

That being said, the seasoned Vedantin knows that, no matter how much sharpened are the concepts, these cannot stretch enough as to clearly define the topic that is being discussed. Strictly speaking, the concept “Awareness” is but a pedagogic concession to facilitate the comprehension of something impossible to experience and that does not reflect, even by a long shot, the real Nature of the Being. In fact, rather than “Awareness”, our authentic Reality would be more strictly defined as “Absence”, considering that *Nothing* is not inert.

X.- THE “EXPERIENCE” OF AWARENESS IS THE EXPERIENCE OF THE NOTHING.

Some people have a quite odd concept of what an enlightened, “realized” or wise man really is, which may be explained by the proliferation of false “masters” and impostor “gurus” who take advantage of the good faith of naïve seekers. It is deplorable to watch the show of those false prophets, truly ego-saurs, who only seek to feed their own mirage by means of adulation. The fact that they require the worship to individuality is itself a clear evidence of their hypocrisy. Firstly, it is to be pointed out that a *jnani* (comprehensor of the real nature) does not boast, since, if he is beyond duality, before which other individuals could he brag?

What is a *jnani*? Whereas the common individual is identified with the body-mind and is happy or unhappy as the daily events change, the *jnani* just witnesses unbiasedly without being individually interested in what happens. Whereas the world of the ordinary humankind is made of dreams and nothing stands still, the world of the *jnani* is real and nothing changes. For the *jnani*, the three states of waking, dream and deep sleep are *all of them* a mere dream. The *Sāmadhi* itself is but a kind of dream. The *Ribhu Gita* explains, “Of just one nature, the Self in peace, devoid of thoughts of anything being separate, such a one who does not, in the least, have anything, is called a *jīvanmukta* (freed in life). All this is none of mine. I have no merit. I have no demerit. I have no body. I have nothing auspicious. I have nothing to see. There is no lineage for me, no race for me, and no knowledge for me. There is no existence for me. There is no birth for me. There is no aging for me. There is no fame for me, and no philosophy for me. No old age exists for me. No childhood exists for me. No death exists for me” (*Ribhu Gita*, ch. 8). With such a description, it can be understood that the “experience” of awareness may be compared with the experience of the Nothing. Nevertheless, whereas in the Western thought, terms such as “emptiness” and “nothing”

have a negative nature, in the Eastern thought, they show a positive dimension. That is because of the *anthropological* point of view adopted in the West, that is, that man is considered to be the center of the universe, whereas, in the East, the *metaphysical* point of view is adopted; Creation and creatures are appearances within the Only Reality; the isolated, independent “I” not only does not exist, but also not to understand such a mirage causes great frustrations. From this viewpoint, the Eastern emptiness or nothing (even though a transcendental concept of “nothing” also exists in certain Western monastic orders) is defined as the absence of an “ego” or “I” that is experienceable like something real and that claims the authorship of its actions. That is to say, for the individual mind, whose nature is built on the appropriation of personal memories and expectations for the future that may provide it with a comfortable, false feeling of personal identity, any supraindividual or transpersonal state in which the experience cannot be referred to an individual is considered as Emptiness or Nothing. What is more, without memories or projects for the future, deprived the mind of its food, it should theoretically end up dying of starvation. For the individual, the Nothing is the death... but the death of the “ego”. However, is the Emptiness or the Nothing the ultimate Reality? More clearly, do I consist of emptiness? Obviously, no. Emptiness is witnessed¹⁰. But it will still be a game of concepts if it is not accepted that *Awareness* is, more strictly speaking, *Absence*.

The attachment to a name and a form is what feeds fear. But, after a process of detachment, I am nothing, and the nothing has no fear. On the contrary, who is attached to everything is afraid of the Nothing because he fears losing his world made of appropriation and because, when something touches the Nothing, it becomes nothing. The “nothing” scares because there is still “someone” who can be

¹⁰ Likewise, Buddhism talks about “emptiness” or “nothing” (*śūnyatā*), considered as *non-mind* (*mu-shu*) or *non-I* (*mu-ga*), similar to Taoist *non-action* (*wú wéi*), as a mental state free or empty of thoughts.

scared. But the truth is that “Nothing exists at any time. Neither does ‘only one’ nor ‘this’ exist. There is nothing inside, nothing outside; there is nothing at all. There is no duality either. There is no creation. There is nothing to be seen, no knowledge, no separate body, nothing like a comprehensor, no transmigration” (*Ribhu Gita*, ch. 8). Without “ego”, the “nothing” becomes “Everything”.

XI.- A DAILY “EXPERIENCE” OF THE NOTHING; THE DEEP SLEEP

The deep sleep is, in Advaita Vedanta, a state with an enormous pedagogic value. Of course, such a state is not separable from the fact of sleeping. On the contrary, during innumerable moments of the day (waking state), consciousness becomes self-absorbed and the sense of individuality shortly disappears. It is the case, for example, of situations such as walking, listening to music, cooking, etc., in which our inwardness sometimes takes us to a state of peace, uninterrupted by any thought, that we leave when we recover the sense of individuality. Actually, the deep sleep while awake (or waking during deep sleep) is considered as the state of the wise or realized man (*jnani*) because it makes compatible the consciousness of the waking state with the stillness of the deep sleep, or even beyond waking (*atijagrat*) and beyond deep sleep (*atisushupti*) (Sri Ramana Maharshi, *CRMII*, p. 337). It is obvious that I am not conscious of my body or the world during deep sleep, but I cannot affirm that I cease to exist. Therefore, I can conclude that there is no individual or consciousness “I am” in deep sleep (M. James, *HAB*, p. 93). Therefore, as a gap in memory is not necessarily a gap in consciousness, deep sleep may consist in a state of supraindividual consciousness (or rather, *awareness*) in which we disappear as individuals and feel free of memories. Nevertheless, as we are what supports and, at the same time, what is beyond the three states, this means that the Self does not consist of consciousness. In fact, no one can deny that we keep

on being or existing during deep sleep even though that form of individual consciousness that knows objects may not exist that way in that state. Although we stop having memories in the deep sleep state, however, we keep on being-existing and we can even affirm that, after waking from deep sleep, despite having no memories about it, we however experience the peace and relief of having slept deeply and of having known nothing while asleep; “In deep sleep, all beings are united with Brahman and enjoy bliss. That supreme bliss can be enjoyed forever when a person realizes his identity with Brahman” (Sri Sankaracharya, *18TA*, p. 118-119). There is thus a continuity of the Being through all the three states, though there is no continuity of the individual or the objects (M. James, *HAB*, p. 190).

In conclusion, as René Guénon explained, our true nature is that Fourth “state without states” (*turīya* or *chaturtha*), pure and immaculate, homogeneous, identical to itself, uncontainable (because it contains all), immutable (because it is not acting), unthinkable (because it takes no shape) and indescribable (because it has no particular attribute or characteristic).

Only That, *Ātman*, the Self, is who supports and goes through the states like a thread that strings the beads of a collar. We are not the states, but the ones who witness and give life and breath to the states.

You are *That* (*Tat tvam asi*).

SOLARIZATION OR ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE GRECO-EGYPTIAN HERMETISM

“There is no way, no place about thee, nor any other thing of things that are. All are in thee; all are from thee” (*Corpus Hermeticum* V, 10)

I.- THE HERMES DOCTRINE AND THE *CORPUS HERMETICUM*

The word “Hermetism” comes from the Greek name of the Egyptian god Thoth. *Theúth*, *Thōúth*, *Thōth*, means “messenger” or “interpreter”, because the herald of the gods is, consequently, the interpreter of the word; and so comes his association with the Greek Hermes, both as an “interpreter” (*hermeneus*) and as a herald of the gods. For the Egyptians, he represents the heart of Re, and he appears in the myth of Osiris as a scribe or lord of the *Maat*, of the Justice and the cosmic Order. As the god of wisdom and writing, he is represented with an Ibis head (*dhwtj*, Thoth, means “messenger”) because this bird eats crocodile eggs, that is, it destroys the evil and the ignorance. That is why he is the patron god of knowledge in general and, especially, of the initiatic literature produced in the “Houses of Life” of the Egyptian temples, that is, the initiatic centers.

The epithet *Trismegistus* comes from the Egyptian title of Thoth; *aā aā*, great great, that is, greatest, which, since the time of Ptolemy IV Philopator (221-205 BC), was translated into Greek with a superlative thrice repeated. In fact, the twice-great Thoth is worshiped in the ancient Egyptian texts of the Dynasty XIX (13th century BC), also referred to as the only one. Amongst the *ostraca* collection (inscriptions on ceramic), written in demotic, registered by W. B. Em-

ery, dated between 168 and 164 BC and most likely left by the people who came to consult the Saqqāra oracle, there is one that contains the following inscription: “τὰ ῥηθέντα μοι ὑπὸ μεγίστου καὶ μεγίστου θεοῦ μεγάλου Ἑρμοῦ” [the things that I was told by the greatest and greatest god the great Hermes]. Likewise, about 172 BC, during the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor, Hor of Sebennytos, servant of the goddess Isis, dictated the following *ostrakon* in demotic: “Dare not anyone fail in a duty concerning the god Thoth, the personified god who brings his influence to the temple of Memphis, and Harthoth with him as well. The blessing he receives from Ibis, the soul of Thoth, *the thrice great*, is also received by the hawk, the soul of Ptah..., the soul of Horus”¹¹.

On the other hand, at the beginning of the 9th century, when the monk George “*Syncellus*” writes his *Universal chronicle* and proceeds to summarize the work *Aegyptiaca* or *History of Egypt* written by the Egyptian priest Manetho (3rd century BC), states that this priest knew “inscriptions which had been written down by Thoth, the first Hermes, in hieroglyphic script, had been interpreted after the Flood by Agathodaemon, son of the second Hermes and father of Tat, and had been deposited in the houses of life of the temples of Egypt... [Manetho] dedicated [them] to... Ptolemy... with these words: ... As you are making researches concerning the future of the universe, in obedience to your command I shall place before you the sacred books which I have studied, written by your forefather, Hermes Trismegistus”¹². Apparently, this text by Manetho (or Pseudo-Manetho, as other specialists prefer to call him) distinguishes between a first Hermes –identified with Thoth– and a second Hermes, who was the Trismegistus. Likewise, Saint Augustine of Hippo, managing information from Varro, says that Hermes Trismegistus

¹¹ Discovered and registered by W. B. Emery, “Preliminary Report on the Excavations at North Saqqāra: 1965-1966” in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 51 (1965), pp. 3-9.

¹² Manetho, *Appendix I* (ps-Manetho, apud Syncellus), p. 72. tr. by W. G. Waddell, (Loeb Classical Library, repr. 1964), p. 208.

was the “grandson” of Mercury the Elder¹³. From all this, it can be deduced that the monk *Syncellus* echoed a tradition that affirmed the *in-illo-tempore* existence (that is, “before the flood”), of steles inscribed by Thoth, the first Hermes, as a transmitter of a teaching of non-human origin under the shape of a dialect and sacred characters, afterwards *translated* into hieroglyphics. This Thoth first Hermes might be the equivalent to the “Demiurgic Logos”, the god Ptah, who, in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, is denominated *Nous-Poimandres* and who reveals the tradition to Hermes “Trismegistus”. The second Hermes seems to be a hierophany of the first one destined to set and update the original teaching. The preface of the first book of the collection titled *Kuranides* explains that “the god Hermes Trismegistus received this book from the angels as God’s greatest gift and passed it on to all men fit to receive secrets (*mystika*)”. It is also insisted that Agathodaemon, son of the second Hermes (the Trismegistus) and father of Tat, carried out the systematization “in books” of all these materials. In some paragraphs of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, this teaching of divine origin is denominated message (*kērygma*) or proclamation (*kēryssō*), and its bearer is described as herald (*kēryx*), all of which are names that the authors of the New Testament will use as well in order to refer to the prophecy. Finally, the text by the priest Manetho warns that the writing of the texts was carried out in the “Houses of Life” of the Egyptian temples, residence and production place of the initiatic, sacred and technical literature, whose symbolic, tutelary head was the god Thoth himself. Are there more evidences that support this tradition? The truth is that one of the hermetic manuscripts of Nag Hammadi, *The discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead*¹⁴, most likely composed at the end of the 3rd century, seems to

¹³ In *City of God*, XVIII, 39, it is mentioned: “As regards philosophy... studies of that kind flourished in those lands [Egypt] about the times of Mercury, whom they called Trismegistus, long before the sages and philosophers of Greece... At that time, indeed, when Moses was born, Atlas is found to have lived, that great astronomer, the brother of Prometheus, and maternal grandson of the elder Mercury, of whom that Mercury Trismegistus was the grandson”.

¹⁴ *The discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead* (NHC, VI, 6), in Antonio Piñero, *Textos gnósticos. Biblioteca de Nag Hammadi*, vol. I (from now on, referred to as

confirm part of this. The procedure used by masters, philosophers and priests to prevent the teachings from being profaned or misunderstood is described there. Specifically, it is prescribed that they had to be written in the script used by the scribes of the “Houses of Life”, that is, in hieroglyphic characters, engraved on a stone of a particular type, shape and color (steles, obelisks) in order to be placed in the temple, inscribed in a particular astrologic moment and, finally, to write the sacred name of God on the top of the inscription. Nonetheless, which books contained that divine teaching transmitted and guarded by Hermes?

About the year 200, Clement of Alexandria affirmed to have knowledge of “forty-two books written by Hermes”, considered as essential for the rituals of the Egyptian priests. About the year 300, the Neoplatonist Iamblichus commented in his treatise *On the Egyptian Mysteries* that, “in the books of the ancient writers of sacred concerns, many and various opinions concerning these things are circulated... [Based on] many essences... differing from each other, the all-various multitude of the principles of these, and which have different orders, ... delivered by different ancient priests, as Seleucus narrates, therefore, Hermes described the principles that rank as wholes in two myriads of books; or, as we are informed by Manetho, he perfectly unfolded these principles in three myriads six thousand five hundred and twenty-five volumes”¹⁵. More reticent about figures, Lactantius records in his *Divinae Institutiones*, written about 305, that Hermes “gave laws and letters to the Egyptians. The Egyptians call him Thoth; and from him first month of their year... He was a man... most fully imbued with every kind of learning, so that the knowledge of many subjects and arts acquired for him the name

NHC), Valladolid, 1997, p. 416 ff. [an English version can be found in James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, San Francisco (CA), 1990] The quotations of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (from now on, referred to as *CH*) follow the translation by G. R. S. Mead, *Thrice-Great Hermes*, vol. 2, 1906. For the texts that are not collected in the aforementioned works, I will use *Textos Herméticos*, introduction, translation and notes by Xavier Renal Nebot, Madrid, 1999.

¹⁵ Iamblichus, *On the Egyptian mysteries*, VIII.1.260-261.

of Trismegistus. He wrote books, and those in great numbers relating to the knowledge of divine things, in which he asserts the majesty of the supreme and only God...”¹⁶. Likewise, Cyril of Alexandria and Johannes Stobaeus managed some collections of short treatises or *logoi* that they attributed to Hermes.

However, in spite of that supposed amount and variety of texts, only a few manuscripts have gotten to us. Actually, for the first edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in 1471, Marsilio Ficino used a manuscript of the 14th century that contained only fourteen *logoi* or treatises. Some decades later, in 1554, Turnèbe would rely on a different manuscript that contained “seventeen” *logoi*: the same fourteen used by Ficino, plus other three, as well as excerpts or fragments coming from Stobaeus. In 1574, Flusas (François Foix de Candelle) reproduces the Turnèbe edition, assigning the number XV to the fragments of Stobaeus¹⁷ and giving the other three treatises the numbers XVI, XVII and XVIII¹⁸. To this traditional version of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, other documents recently recovered should be added. In particular, the Coptic texts found in Nag Hammadi¹⁹, other three texts published by Mahé, some *Hermetic Definitions* preserved in their Armenian version²⁰, some unpublished hermetic extracts preserved in one of the Oxford Papyri²¹, and the texts known as “Vienna fragments”²².

¹⁶ Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, I, 6, 1; *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. VII, New York, 1896.

¹⁷ In particular, ten of the forty fragments from the work by Johannes Stobaeus (5th-6th century), known as *Anthologion*. The most famous of these passages preserved by Stobaeus is the 23rd, titled *Korē Kosmou*. *The pupil of the eye of the world* [or *The virgin of the world*]. Published in *Textos Herméticos*, cit., p. 257 ff. [this work was translated into English by A. Kingsford and E. Maitland in 1880]

¹⁸ Therefore, it is wrong to use the name of the first treatise, *CHI* “Poimandres”, to refer to the whole collection.

¹⁹ An English version of these texts can be found in Marvin Meyer ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, New York, 2007.

²⁰ J-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, Quebec, 1978 (vol. I) and 1982 (vol. II).

²¹ J-P. Mahé, “Extraits Hermétiques inédits dans un Manuscrit d’Oxford”, *Revue des Études Grecques*, 104 (1991/1), pp. 109-139.

²² J-P. Mahé, “Fragments Hermétiques dans les Papyri Vindobonenses Graecae 29456r et 29828r”, in *Cahiers d’Orientalisme*, Geneva, 10 (1984), pp. 51-64.

II.- THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT THE EGYPTIAN ORIGIN OF HERMETISM

It has been largely discussed about the so-called Egyptian origin of these texts. Could a thorough examination of their contents shed light on who the true authors of the denominated *Corpus Hermeticum* were? Given the unusual interest arisen by Hermetism from the 15th century in Europe and the rebuilding of its doctrines in versions that would later constitute a Christian Hermetism, some scholars entered the fray trying to “canalize” or “redirect” this interest by attempting to demonstrate that all what was called “Egyptian”, that is, “pagan” within Hermetism was really an “artificial addition at the service of fashion” or a “propaganda device”. Already in 1614, Isaac Casaubon²³ tried to demonstrate that the *logoi* of the *Corpus* had been written by Christian authors close to the Gospel of Saint John. And, in 1866, Louis Ménard, in his work *Hermès Trismégiste. Traduction complète, précédée d'une étude sur l'origine des livres hermétiques*, proposed placing the hermetic treatises in the context of the Hellenistic mysticism that competed against Christianity. Thus, in a few years, there were at least three theses regarding the filiation of the hermetic writings: the supporters of the “Judeo-Christian” thesis, the defenders of the “Greek” origin, and the ones who kept the Egyptian roots²⁴.

In 1904, Reitzenstein²⁵ placed the cause of inspiration of the hermetic texts again in the theology of Ptah and other Eastern sources. In particular, Reitzenstein maintained that the *Corpus* proved the existence of an Egyptian community that used those trea-

²³ Isaac Casaubon, *De Rebus Sacris et Ecclesiasticis Exercitationes XVI ad Cardinales Baronii Prolegomena in Annales...* London, 1614. In the *Exercitatio* I. 10, p. 70.

²⁴ R. Pietschmann, *Hermes Trismegistos, nach ägyptischen, griechischen und orientalischen Überlieferungen*, Leipzig, 1875.

²⁵ R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres. Studien zur griechisch-ägyptischen und frühchristlichen Literatur*, Leipzig, 1904.

tises in their religious worship. Reacting against this hypothesis, Thaddeus Zielinski hurried up to refute this “Egyptomania” placing the *Hermetica* again in the context of the Greek philosophical trends, basically the peripatetic, Platonizing and pantheistic ones²⁶. Almost immediately, Josef Kroll²⁷ would oppose Reitzenstein as well as Zielinski, connecting Hermetism with the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Posidonius and Philo, giving an essential role to middle Stoicism. For his part, Bausset explored the Eastern sources of Gnosticism and set as key element the Greek reception of the Iranian influence. This made Reitzenstein change his mind about the Egyptian Hermes and maintained that Iran was the cradle of the hermetic doctrine²⁸.

In the middle of this controversial panorama, the Jesuit Festugière publishes *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*²⁹, maintaining, because of his religious prejudices, a philhellenistic, anti-Eastern position. His aim was to demonstrate that there was nothing valuable in Hermetism whose origin was Egyptian or Eastern, compiling information from any source that could allow him to dilute that Egyptian and Eastern influence on Hermetism. The reactions to Festugière's thesis did not take long to appear. The first one was suggested by B. H. Stricker when commenting the denominated “Letter of Aristeas”³⁰. In it, it is narrated how, by suggestion of the peripatetic librarian of Alexandria, Demetrius of Phalerum, Ptolemy II Philadelphus asked the High Priest of Jerusalem, Eleazar, for a

²⁶ Th. Zielinski, “Hermes und die Hermetik I: das Hermetische Corpus” and “Hermes und die Hermetik II: der Ursprung der Hermetik”, in *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 8 (1905), pp. 321-372, and 9 (1906), pp. 25-60.

²⁷ J. Kroll, *Die Lehre des Hermes Trismegistos. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters* (TU 12). Münster 1914.

²⁸ R. Reitzenstein, *Erlösung Mysterium. Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, Bonn 1921.

²⁹ A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, Paris, 1944-1945.

³⁰ B. H. Stricker, *De Brief van Aristeas. De Hellenistische Codificaties der Praehelleense Goddiendiensten*, Amsterdam, 1965. An English translation of the mentioned “Letter” can be found in R. H. Charles ed., *The Letter of Aristeas*, Oxford, 1913.

genuine version of the Jewish Law in order to have it translated into Greek by a team of wise men. The result was known as the Old Testament LXX version. Well, for Stricker, this was just one episode in a wide project of translation of the different religions practiced in Egypt, among which there should be “the Greek adaptation of the Egyptian religious thought, which constitutes the *Corpus* attributed to Hermes Trismegistus”. With this, Stricker placed the birth of Hermetism in the 3rd century BC, since “only this age knew a mutual interest between Greek and Egyptian thoughts strong enough as to produce such a work”. Mahé contributed to this reinforcement of the “Egyptian” hypothesis too, in his two volumes about *Hermes in Upper Egypt*, establishing that the Gnostic contents of the *Hermetica* were a secondary feature in comparison with the strictly speaking Egyptian cultural influence. After Stricker and Mahé, other scholars (Doresse, Krause, François Daumas, Philippe Derchain, Cumont, Serge Sauneron, J. D. Ray, B. R. Rees and others) provided new arguments for a tinged version of the Egyptian thesis. In fact, regarding the mentioned authors, it could be talked about a Greco-Egyptian synthesis, in the sense that there was a transposition of Egyptian images and symbols into the Greek cultural categories, fact that sometimes involved a deep “reinterpretation” of the Egyptian hermetic thought.

In sum, when transferring the Egyptian metaphysics to the Greek philosophical language, the analysts of that time carried out the detailed task of synthesizing the elements from the one and the other shore. The “universalistic” cultural program developed by Demetrius of Phalerum, centralized in the Library of Alexandria, explains that, during that task of “re-writing” the Egyptian thought, other cultural elements were incorporated, besides the mentioned Hellenic influence, such as, for instance, Jewish ones. About this subject, Marc Philonenko, Birger Pearson, William Grese and others have continued studying the biblical and Jewish connections within the *Hermetica*. But, doubtlessly, the most suggestive studies about Hermetism

are the ones carried out by Fowden³¹. With a notable erudition and lucidity, he has pointed out that the hermetic authors combined an open attitude toward Hellenism with a deep consciousness of their Egyptian roots.

III.- THE CULTURAL CENTER OF ALEXANDRIA

There had been cultural relationships between Greeks and Egyptians since ancient times. Already in the 7th century BC, Pharaoh Psammetichus I allowed the Milesians to found a colony called Naukratis at the delta. However, the most representative moment of this relationship was when Alexander the Great annexed Egypt in 332 and decided to found the city that would be called after himself. Once again, as a paradigmatic example of hermeneutical and synthesis work, it is to be mentioned the cultural project of the librarian of Alexandria, the peripatetic Demetrius of Phalerum, fully dedicated to the collection of texts and to the study of the sources of the religions practiced in Egypt. Actually, it is stated that, since then, the prestige of the Hellenic culture was spread in Egypt as a fashion that influenced everything. Perhaps, that was why, in mid-3rd century BC, literary signs claiming an Egyptian “nativism” appeared against the Hellenizing trend. This is the case of the *Demotic chronicle*, which narrates nostalgic stories about the glorious days when the Pharaohs used to hold power with true authority and free from foreign influences. Or the *Oracle of the Potter*, which claimed back the age of Pharaohs; it was released at the end of the 2nd century and later, during the Roman period, in order to announce an apocalyptic promise: Alexandria, the city of the hated foreigners, shall fall. In sum, up to which extent did Egypt adapt to the beliefs of its foreign residents and not the opposite? The truth is that the Greek and Roman colo-

³¹ Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*, Cambridge, 1986. F. Samaranch Kirner has also reliably declared himself a supporter of the Egyptian thesis, *Filosofía y teúrgia. Una interpretación del Hermetismo*, Madrid, 1999.

nizers were also intellectually colonized. An example of this symbiosis is the fact that Hellenic equivalences to Egyptian divinities are found: Thoth-Hermes, Imhotep-Asclepius, Zeus-Amun, etc.

One of the most noticeable examples is the fusion between Osiris and Apis under the shape of Serapis³², whose association with Hades-Pluto was reinforced by the identification of Isis with Demeter, as Heraclides of Pontus and Archemachus of Euboea³³ had pointed out. It is possible that the consolidation of Serapis' worship could be motivated by Ptolemy's interest in creating a worship that could be accepted by the Egyptian community as well as by the Greek one³⁴. For that reason, he was consecrated as the tutelary divinity of Alexandria, assuming the qualities of the *agathos daimon*³⁵, the beneficial *daemon* with the shape of a snake that, according to tradition, had died as a consequence of the city founding works. Boosters of this religious syncretism were, amongst others, the Egyptian priest Manetho and Timotheus of Eleusis (member of the Eumolpid family). Because of the latter, Isis was Hellenized by introducing certain particularities of the Egyptian worship into the Eleusian mysteries.

Therefore, since the Eleusian mysteries had the disadvantage of not traveling, for their worship was only possible at its site, in Eleusis, the identification of Isis with the Eleusian Demeter allowed the development of a Mediterranean repercussion of the Egyptian goddess under a Greek appearance.

³² Already pointed out by Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptic* IV, 48, 6.

³³ As Plutarch refers to in *Isis and Osiris* (Is) 27.

³⁴ Not only with the aim of achieving a greater social cohesion around his person; Plutarch, *Is*, 28, 362a; Tacitus, *Histories* IV, 83, 2.

³⁵ *Agathos Daimon* is a form of the Egyptian Thoth, the *nous* of the *Hermetica* that appears in *CH* XII, 1.

IV.- THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE EGYPTIAN HERMETISM

The most clarifying and, at the same time, the most controversial text about the Egyptian origin of Hermetism can precisely be found in the *Corpus Hermeticum* itself. Certainly, in *CH XVI*, 1-2, Asclepius mentions something that he had heard from Hermes Trismegistus himself: “Unto those who come across my books, their composition will seem most simple and clear; but, on the contrary, as ‘tis unclear, and has the meaning of its words concealed, it will be still unclearer, when, afterwards, the Greeks will want to turn our tongue into their own, for this will be a very great distorting and obscuring of what has been written. Turned into our native tongue, the sermon keepeth clear the meaning of the words. For that its very quality of sound, the power of the Egyptian names, have in themselves the bringing into act of what is said. As far as, then, thou canst, O King – and thou canst all things– keep our sermon from translations; in order that such mighty mysteries may not come to the Greeks, and the disdainful speech of Greece, with its looseness, and its surface beauty, so to speak, take all the strength out of the solemn and the strong, the energetic speech of Names. The Greeks, O King, have novel words, energetic of argumentation only; and this is the philosophizing of the Greeks, the noise of words. But we do not use words; but we use sounds full-filled with deeds”.

From all this, it can be deduced that the Egyptian Hermetism considered itself as a metaphysical, philosophical and magical teaching, apparently clear but concealing a hidden meaning that could only be transmitted by people previously instructed or “initiated” in its true interpretation. This mistrust of the Greek translation points out that the books were written in a certain native language, and that this refusal tried to preserve the sacred doctrine from any adulteration, the way it would happen with the “translation” to another language different from the original one.

Could it be supposed that this vision of Hermetism was a mere invention of Greek or Greco-Egyptian philosophers who wanted to justify a new doctrine by means of connecting it with the ancient teachings of the god Hermes? In such case, how to explain that those same Greeks depicted a so negative, pessimistic panorama of the Greek culture or mentality, describing it with terms such as “disdainful”, “looseness”, “noise of words”, etc.? The reason why the authors of the hermetic text, either Greeks or Greco-Egyptians, decided to discredit their culture so deeply cannot be explained. Rather, it should be believed that the text is reliable and be accepted that the statements attributed to Hermes, regarding the refusal to translate the texts to profane languages and about his derogatory vision of the Greeks, formed part of the mentality of the Egyptian priests of that time. It is to be reminded how Plato, in *Timaeus* (21e), has his Critias tell the anecdote starred by Solon during his stay in Egypt. Solon was boasting about the ancient origin of Athens when an old Egyptian priest replied: “Solon, Solon, you Greeks are always like children... you keep in your soul no ancient opinion...”, explaining him that mankind was periodically destroyed by water or fire, and then restarted again their path without remembering anything from the previous stage lived. The historical memory of those peoples that do not keep annals of such events is, therefore, very limited. However, according to the Egyptian priest, this did not happen in the lands of the Nile.

On the other hand, documented interest, if not even cultural dependence, of the Greeks regarding Egypt is found, especially about the journeys of Greek intellectuals to know and even learn at the Egyptian “Houses of Life”, to be “initiated” in the Mysteries of Isis and Osiris. Diodorus of Sicily, whose source seems to have been Hecataeus of Abdera³⁶ in this subject, provides, in his *Bibliotheca*, a

³⁶ Diodorus Siculus (1st c. BC), *Bibliotheca*, I (96-98). Hecataeus of Abdera (4th-3rd c. BC) was in Egypt under Ptolemy I Soter (362-304 BC).

list of some of the Greek wise men who, according to the “archives of the temples” of that country, were to Egypt: Orpheus, Melampus, Daedalus, Homer, Lycurgus, Solon, Plato, Pythagoras, Eudoxus, Democritus, Oenopides, the Anax (Anaxagoras, Anaximedes, Anaximander)...

Other sources confirm the existence of hermetic texts or books that were originally written in Egyptian language. For instance, due to a journey to Egypt between 24 and 20 BC, Strabo states that “the priests of Thebes, who called themselves the wisest philosophers and astronomers, attributed all their wisdom to Hermes”³⁷. Likewise, Clement of Alexandria, a Christian writer of the 2nd-3rd century, within the Alexandrian context and well informed about Hermetism, says that “there are forty-two books of Hermes; of which six-and-thirty contain the whole ‘philosophy of the Egyptians’... and the other six are the ‘*pastophoroi*’: they are medical books treating of the structure of the body, and of diseases, etc.”³⁸. These testimonies support the already mentioned narration of monk George “Syncellus” who, about 800 AD, collected the last historical-religious writings of the Egyptian priest Manetho of Sebennyos, who lived in the 3rd century BC and was the author of the works *Aegyptiaca* and *The Sacred Book*, in which he let the Greeks know the history and the religion of his native country. Monk George says, “In the time of Ptolemy Philadelphus, Manetho was styled high-priest of the pagan temples of Egypt, and wrote from inscriptions in the Seriadie land [Egypt], traced by Thoth, the first Hermes, and translated after the Flood... When the work had been arranged in books by Agathodaemon, son of the second Hermes and father of Tat, in the houses of life of Egypt, Manetho dedicated it to the above King Ptolemy II Philadelphus in his *Book of Sothis*”³⁹. Another special text is to be mentioned here: In the work *On the Egyptian Mysteries*, attributed to the priest

³⁷ *Geographia*, XVII, 1, 46.

³⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI, 4,35.3/37.3

³⁹ Manetho, *Appendix I* (ps-Manetho, apud Syncellus), p. 72. tr. by W. G. Waddell, (Loeb Classical Library, repr. 1964), p. 208.

Iamblichus, it is said that “the ones [books or writings] that go round under the name of Hermes contain hermetic opinions, no matter if they are often expressed in the language of philosophers; they have been, actually, transcribed [or translated: *metagegraptai*] from the Egyptian language by people inexperienced in philosophy” (VIII, 4). However, if the mentioned hermetic text affirming the Egyptian origin of the *Hermetica* can be considered as reliable, it should be set out, up to which extent were not the Egyptian metaphysical, esoteric or magical texts that passed to the books of Hermes recognizable, once flooded within the philosophical vocabulary? Up to which extreme was not that result yet “translation”, but rather “re-writing”? Iamblichus himself provides a subtle piece of information: that, under an apparently philosophical language, the hermetic texts “concealed” Egyptian doctrines wisely masked by experts. This introduces us the technique of concealment by means of a language with double etymologies, so abundant in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Let us study some examples of what is has just been said.

1.- “Poimandres” and the technique of the etymological masking

“Poimandres”⁴⁰ is mentioned twice in *CH* XIII, with the same titles and adjectives with which he appears in *CH* I: “for thy Nous is the shepherd to thy word [or shepherds thy word]”⁴¹. This composition seems to contain a word game with *poimēn* (shepherd) - *poimainō* (I shepherd) and the first syllable of the name *Poimandres*. This way, “Poimandres” would seem to come from the Greek terms *poimēn* (shepherd) and *anēr, andros* (man); thus, “Poimandres” would be “shepherd of men”. However, this Greek etymology of the name is linguistically insufficient.

⁴⁰ P. Kingsley, “Poimandres: the etymology of the name and the origins of *Hermetica*”, in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 56 (1993). The Warburg Institute, Univ. of London, pp. 1-24. Poimandres has been the wrong title of the *Corpus Hermeticum* since Marsilio Ficino until 1854.

⁴¹ *CH* XIII, 15 and 19.

Truly, “Poimandres” is the Greek version of an expression that, in Coptic, would be “*P-eime n-Re*”, whose meaning would be “The knowledge or thought of Re”. *P* is the definite, masculine, singular article in late Egyptian. In turn, “*eime*” is the knowledge or intellect. For its part, *-Res* is the standard way to translate into Greek the Egyptian names ending with the divine name *-Re*. Only the genitive form is left, which should be here *n-te*, because the step from *n-te-Re* to *-ndres* is easier and more reasonable. That gives us the following translation of “Poimandres”: “the knowledge / intellect of Re”. But even the Coptic *eime* may mean something more than “knowledge”, and had better be translated as *nous-noein*. Therefore, etymologically, “Poimandres” means in Coptic: “I am... the absolute Nous”. According to Kingsley, the double etymology of *Poimandres* is not accidental, but complies with a deliberate strategy to *mask* the hidden meaning of an Egyptian concept under Greek terms. This leads us to consider the possibility that the *Corpus Hermeticum*, “as a whole, could in a sense be a huge example of double etymology: of ideas being re-interpreted, *re-etymologized*, as it were, through being transferred into the terms of Greek culture and language”⁴².

On the contrary, in other cases, the double meanings are more clearly shown. In effect, the title of one of the hermetic texts referring to the goddess Isis, *Korē Kosmou*, can be understood under a double etymology as well. *Korē* means “girl, maiden, virgin” and also “pupil of the eye”. The problem is to define what *Korē Kosmou* means as a description of Isis⁴³. Certainly, the use of the term “*Korē*” to describe the pupil is an ancient metaphor explained by the fact that the eye pupil reflects a small image of those who look at it. Latin will produce diminutive feminine nouns such as *pupilla* and *pupula*, derived from *pupa* (doll). In the hermetic text itself, the god who

⁴² P. Kingsley, “Poimandres: The etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica”, in *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition*, Boston, 2000, p. 70.

⁴³ H. Jackson, “Kore Kosmou: Isis, pupil of the eye of the world”, in *Chronique d'Égypte*, 61 (1986), p. 116.

creates the universe describes Isis as a “second effluvium or emanation [*aporrhoeia*] of my nature”, so that, through Isis-Korē or Isis-“pupil of the eye”, God can survey the world. The Greco-Roman culture associated Isis with Demeter and the “Korē” Persephone⁴⁴. Plutarch provides an explanation of the Isis-Korē association regarding “pupil of the eye”: Isis “has been called both, Korē and Persephone, the latter as being a bearer of light and Korē because that is what we call the part of the eye in which is reflected the likeness of him who looks into it as the light of the sun is seen in the moon”⁴⁵. *Korē* is a lunar pupil that reflects an image of Helios.

Actually, the idea that the sun, the moon and the rest of the celestial bodies are the eyes of divinities was very spread in Egypt⁴⁶. Already the *Pyramid Texts* referred to “the damsel who is in the eye of Horus”, meaning “the pupil of the eye”. And an Egyptian text of the 4th century BC, the *Festival songs of Isis and Nephthys* (Bremner-Rhind Papyrus) says that Isis is the “mistress of the universe, emanation from the eye of Horus, Noble Serpent which issued from Re and which came forth from the pupil of the eye of Atum when Re arose on the first occasion”⁴⁷. This Egyptian “mythology of the eye” is materialized in the amulet in the shape of a made-up eye of the celestial god (*oudjat*), from which the *tear of mercy* comes forth for the world. In sum, the association of Isis with the pupil of a celestial eye was firmly established in Egypt. Isis is an emanation of the “sun’s eye”, risen to protect the Humankind and survey the order of cosmos. Well, that is precisely the function assigned to Isis by the author of the hermetic *Korē Kosmou*.

⁴⁴ Herodotus 2.59 and 156. Plutarch, *Is*, 27, 361e.

⁴⁵ Plutarch, *Concerning the face which appears in the orb of the moon*, 27 [=Moralia 942d].

⁴⁶ *Greek Magical Papyri*, Pap. CIII, 769 ff. (p. 303); Pap. XXI, 5 ff. (p. 325); Pap. LXII, 33 (p. 376).

⁴⁷ Pap. Bremner-Rhind, 17.8-10; Jackson, cit. p. 129.

Examples of the Egyptian influence onto the hermetic texts might be easily multiplied⁴⁸. After a rough reading, some significant evidences can be detected. For example, in the extract or fragment 26 of the *Anthologion* by Stobaeus, it is said, “the earth is set in the midst of the universe like a man lying on his back and gazing into heaven”. This is precisely the typical Egyptian representation of the world’s structure, where the masculine god Geb (the earth) is below, lying on his back, being the goddess of the heaven, Nut, curved above him. This is doubly significant because, *unlike the Greek mentality and mythological concepts*, the hermetic text follows the ancient Egyptian tradition, which assigns a masculine value to the earth and a feminine one to the heaven!

Just as much clarifying are those *Hermetica* paragraphs that describe the right cardinal orientation of the worshiper facing South, since the Nile, source of life and gift of the gods, flows from South to North. In *CH XIII*, 16, it is read: “thus then, my son, stand in a place uncovered to the sky, facing the southern wind, about the sinking of the setting sun, and make your worship; so in like manner too when he doth rise, with face to the east wind”. And, in *Asclepius 41*, it is said: “they turned their faces towards the South when they began their prayers to God (for when the sun is setting, should anyone desire to pray to God, he ought to turn him thitherwards; so also at the rising of the same, unto that spot which lies beneath the sun [East])...”. And also, “he hath his head set to the south of all, right shoulder to Southeast, left shoulder to Southwest; his feet below the Bear, right foot beneath its tail, left under its head; his thighs beneath those that succeed the Bear; his waist beneath the middle” (Stobaeus,

⁴⁸ Including some references to words with double meaning. For instance, the Coptic term used for “generation” means “generation” and also “book”, so that, in *NHC VI*, it is expressed such a word: “how is it to be prayed, my father, when joined with the generations-books?” (52, 1); or “as wisdom in the generations-books” (54, 9); “I have recognized each one of the generations-books” (54, 30). According to Mahé, it could be a word game played by the translator in order to express that the *regeneration*, besides providing the *vision of the eternity*, can also

Ant., 26). Actually, the ritual orientation towards South, where the Nile comes from, is one of the defining features of the most archaic traces of the Egyptian culture. Only later, when the solar technology reached its most developed phase, the South came to share its ritual value with the East as the birthplace of the Sun as the source of Life. In the course of time, the South-North axis was connected with the Osirian cycle, and the East-West axis remained connected with the solar religion.

2.- *Cosmogonical accounts*

The purely Egyptian filiation of the cosmogonical conceptions recorded in the hermetic texts is also evident. However, it is to be taken into account that the first problem found when elucidating this question lies in the fact that the cosmogonical doctrines on which those Egyptian mythological narrations are based do not match only one model. On the contrary, we find a disconcerting variety of episodes, enriched with the local particularities. However, it must be pointed out that this will not prevent the hermetic terminology to remain coherent⁴⁹. In fact, just as it happens in other initiatic traditions, the differences between the various cosmogonical accounts must not be seen as dissensions or incoherences within the general outline of the doctrine. The same truth can be expressed in different ways in order to adapt it to the mentality or degree of understanding of those who listen.

Basically, three explanatory models about the origin and nature of the universe could be established.

be inscribed in the “book” of the chosen ones; *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, vol. I, cit., p. 42.

⁴⁹ J.-P. Mahé, “*La création dans les Hermetica*”, in *Recherches Augustiniennes*, 21 (1986), pp. 3-53, in which an exhaustive, synoptic study is dedicated to the subject of the “creation” within Hermetism.

According to a first a-casual model, just the Only-One exists as an immutable reality. That would imply that the creation of the world never happened at all because nothing else than the One can exist or ever cease to be. The comprehension of this mystery is deciphered when the hermetic text reveals to the disciple, “I am you”, that is, there is nothing but the Being. This theory is not a denial of the reality of the world, but the creative process that has brought it to existence. However, the profane or disciple who is at the first few levels of learning is absolutely unaware of the nature and unique source of the world and, consequently, his mind may build an illusory world of separate interactive objects, misunderstanding the sensory impressions he receives. Thus, there is neither birth nor death; just the only reality exists, the One, the Being. In some Egyptian cosmogonies, “the demiurge has come to be by himself. He is the solitary, the only one, and witnessless” (statement that could be positioned far from the Genesis of the Old Testament⁵⁰). Likewise, in *CH XVI*, we find an example of ontological creation without symbolic or literary concessions: “the creator and father and who surrounds the universe, all beings being the One and the One being all beings”. But even the Egyptian thought went further beyond this concept of the Being as Only-One and developed a subtle speculation about the Non-Being. Some Egyptian texts explain that “the upper side of the sky exists in uniform darkness, the southern, northern, western, and eastern limits of which are unknown, these having been fixed in the Waters, in inertness... [A place] whose... land is unknown by the gods or spirits, there being no brightness there. And as for every place void of sky and void of land, that is the entire under-

⁵⁰ Concerning the supposed biblical influences on the *Hermetica*, authors such as J-P. Mahé, op. cit., p. 23, state that the vocabulary of the *Corpus Hermeticum* “becomes separated, quite clearly most of the times, from the LXX and the Alexandrian Judaism”. Even *Korē Kosmou* develops a cosmogony so distanced from the biblical parameters that it might be suspected that it was not Gen. 1 that transfused its anthropocentrism into *CH I* and *III*, but that both textual traditions come from a common Egyptian source.

world”⁵¹. With this, what is being described is the dark, aquatic realm before Creation, that is, the uniform ocean or darkness. The realm of the Non-Being where the sovereignty of the Creator monarch of the universe finds its limit, because He was not there either. Likewise, in the chapter 125 of the *Book of the Dead*, which describes the well-known “negative confession” with which one gives his explanations before the court of Osiris, the deceased pronounces the sentence “I have not known what is not”, which allows him to pass through different hostile gates, one of which is the one “that devours those who are not”⁵². He finally finds himself in the presence of a god “who is reached by what is and by what is not”⁵³. And, in the *Coffin Texts*, it is stated, talking about the blessed deceased, that “his repugnance is the non-existing (*jwtt*) because he has not seen the disorder (*jsft*)” (*CT*, VI 136k).

The Egyptian terms *tm wnn* and *nn wn* are the negative form of the verb “to be”, and the negative relative adjective (*jwttj/jwtt*) means “what is not” or “the non-existing”. According to the Egyptian thought, the non-being is the endless primordial matter, raw and pure potentiality. From the temporal point of view, “what is not” or “the non-existing” is the time without time before Creation, that is, something that is incomprehensible and unimaginable to the human mind. Space did not exist, nor gods, nor human beings; in sum, the Word of God did not exist, “the name of things had not yet been proclaimed”⁵⁴, because what has no name does not exist. In such a state, “the dispute had not yet arisen”⁵⁵, because there was nothing and no one. Consequently, if life or birth did not exist, neither did death. The darkness “was everything in the beginning”; it makes “faces unrecognizable”, erases all figures, and makes the forms of existence

⁵¹ Pap. Carlsberg I, II 20 ff., last published in O. Neugebauer and R. A. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts I*, 1960, pp. 52 ff.

⁵² *Book of Gates I*, 79.

⁵³ Amun, as well as Osiris, is considered the “lord of what is, to whom what is not belongs”.

⁵⁴ Pap. Berlin 3055, 16, 3 ff.

⁵⁵ *Pyramid Texts*, 1040 and 1463

merge. The Creator God lies asleep, “like dead”, in the uniform darkness before light (*Keku zemau*), also represented as the unlimited primordial ocean (the god Nun).

It is significant that the Egyptian thought did not want to define this state or *non-state* as *Oneness*, and that, on the contrary, it preferred to describe it in terms of non-duality: “there were not two things yet”⁵⁶. With this, it indirectly refers to a certain oneness, so homogeneous and incomprehensible that it can only be defined in negative terms: it is non-dual. That is as inconceivable as to state that the Creator God is the “One who turned into millions”. Therefore, all what is born, all what *is*, disappears with death, including gods. But what disappears is the apparent individual shape, because death, as a permanent state, only affects the non-existing. That is why, “The Egyptians remain detached and balanced, and avoid falling into nihilism or abrogating the self by surrendering to an unlimited state of non-existence”⁵⁷.

With the statement “I have not known what is not”, the deceased wants to explain that he has not violated the limits of the established order, that is, of the Being, and that, therefore, he can aspire to continue “existing” beyond death⁵⁸. This is not an individual return to life, but a resurrection in the beyond, where one has “all the faces” (individualities), that is to say, one has no face. The cosmic serpent wrapping itself (converted in the Roman period into the Ouroboros, “the tail devourer”) is a representation of this idea. But even that “afterlife” in the “beyond” is time-bound, because Creation (including its most celestial, sublime places) is like an island or a hill destined to be flooded by the primal waters; it is a single moment or episode “between the nothing and the nothing”. The idea itself of eternity, as well as its Greek translation (*aeter-aetas*, the duration of the ether)

⁵⁶ *CT*, II, 396b and III, 383a.

⁵⁷ Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, Cornell Univ., 1982, p. 182.

⁵⁸ Erik Hornung, *The One and the Many*, cit., p. 181.

and the two Egyptian terms (*nhh* and *dt*) for “eternity”, really mean “the *time* that the being may last”⁵⁹.

The second explanatory model of the origin and nature of the universe is based on the mental nature of the universe, insofar as it is “created” or interpreted from and by the mind. The world comes into existence at the same time as the thought (the Word) that perceives it, and ceases to exist when the thought is absent. This means that the way to transcend this “imaginary” world is by using a higher form of knowledge that may overcome the subject-object duality; this is the intellect (*Nous*). Thus, the origin of the Universe is explained as a pronunciation of the divine Word. The Egyptian religious hymns provide many examples of these beliefs: Re, the “primordial God... who uttered a word when the earth was flooded by silence... unique Lord who created the beings, who shaped the language of the Ennead”⁶⁰. The *Corpus Hermeticum* prolongs these beliefs: “Thereon out of the light a holy Word descended on that nature. And upwards to the height from the moist nature leaped forth pure fire” (*CH* I, 5), statement that agrees with the Egyptian belief about the power of language (to pronounce the name equals to create the named thing) and the permutations of sounds derived from a main sound. For instance, when Re wept (*rem*), men (*romé*) or fishes (*ramú*) began to exist. And when the god let the word *hab*, (“to send”) escape while talking to Thoth, the ibis (*hib*), Thoth’s animal, was born.

Finally, the third explanatory model of the origin of the universe is based on a gradual or chronological Creation according to laws of cause and effect that can be tracked until an originating action of creation. It is, therefore, an explanation made not from the Being (metaphysical point of view), but from the point of view of Creation (cosmological point of view). In the hermetic *logoi*, we find several

⁵⁹ Erik Hornung, *The One and the Many*, cit., p. 183.

⁶⁰ Hymn of adoration to the Sun, in A. Barucq- F. Dumas, *Hymnes et prières de l'Égypte ancienne*, Paris, 1980, p. 222.

examples of Creation according to a chronological model that shows a process with a beginning and an end (for instance, in *Asclepius*). Creation “by generation” appears as well; in some cases, the Creator is hermaphroditic (*CH I*) or “father and mother” of the living (*CH V*, 7). In other cases, Creation has been the result of an utterance, for instance the seven guffaws with which the divinity created the world according to the hermetic text “*Leiden Kosmopoiia*”, whose precedent is the seven creating words of Neith in the cosmogony of the Temple of Esna⁶¹.

For its part, the topic of the handcrafted creation of the universe, so common in the universal mythology, finds an example in the Egyptian god Khnum and his potter’s wheel. This topic has inspired the hermetic *logoi* that record the creation by handcrafted production or manufacture that appears in *CH IX*, 5 and *CH XVI*, 9. Likewise, the Egyptian mythological argument of the primordial ocean (the god Nun), from which the sun and the cosmos arose⁶², is reused in the *Corpus Hermeticum*: “Darkness that knew no bounds was in

⁶¹ *Greek Magical Papyri* (=PGM), cit., pp. 282-284 and 294-297. Vid. S. Sauneron, “La légende des sept paroles de Mether au Temple d’Esna”, in *Bulletin de la Société Française d’Égyptologie* (BSFdE) 32 (1961), pp. 43-48. The first part of the PGM XIII mentions an “account of the creation”. Its resemblance to the cosmogony of *CH I* is amazing: “When the god laughed, seven gods were born (who encompass the cosmos...). When he laughed first, *Phōs-Augē* [Light-Radiance] appeared and irradiated everything and became god over the cosmos and fire... Then he laughed a second time. All was water. Earth, hearing the sound, cried out and heaved, and the water came to be divided into three parts. A god appeared; he was given charge of the abyss of primal waters, for without him moisture neither increases nor diminishes. And his name is Eschakleo... When he wanted to laugh the third time, Nous or Phrenes [Mind or Wits] appeared holding a heart, because of the sharpness of the god. He was called Hermes; he was called Semesilam. The god laughed the fourth time, and Genna [Generative Power] appeared, controlling Spora [Procreation]... He laughed the fifth time and was gloomy as he laughed, and Moira [Fate] appeared. And she was the first to receive the scepter of the world... He laughed the sixth time and was much gladdened, and Kairos [Time] appeared holding a scepter, indicating kingship, and he gave over the scepter to the first-created god, [*Phōs*]... When the god laughed a seventh time, Psyche [Soul] came into being, and he wept while laughing. On seeing Psyche, he hissed, and the earth heaved and gave birth to the Pythian serpent who foreknew all things...”.

abyss, and water and subtle breath intelligent; these were by power of god in chaos” (CH III, 1). More specifically, one of the most spread cosmogonical arguments in the Egyptian mythology is the one of the hill or pyramid that emerges from the waters of chaos. In this case, it is the god or “concept” Nun who, personifying chaos, is also the beginning of the life that exists before the world. Well, fragment 28 of the edition of the hermetic texts says: “The pyramid, then, is below both nature and the intellectual world. For that it hath above it ruling in the creator Word of the Lord of all, who, being the first power after him, increate and infinite, leaned forth from him [the Father], and has his seat above, and rule over all that have been made through him. He is the first-born [*progonos*, not *protogonos*!] of the All-perfection, his perfect, fecund and true son”⁶³.

Nevertheless, these metaphysical speculations about the tetrad and the Demiurge placed above a pyramid would pass unnoticed if the image of the pyramid were not the Egyptian traditional symbol of the primordial hill where the sun alights when it is born, in the origin of times, or the mountain that arises from light so that the god Demiurge alights on it. The pyramid makes a so spread symbol that almost all cosmogonies and all classical theologies of Ancient Egypt have represented the origin of the world as the emergence, from within the primordial ocean Nun, of a primal mountain destined to serve as the seat of the Demiurge, who is to proceed to create the universe⁶⁴. The pyramid was a stylization of the mountain or hill as an elevated place where the sun is settled when it is born.

Precisely from these cosmogonical models comes the consideration of initiation as a symbolic way with stages, more specifically as

⁶² A. Barucq- F. Daumas, *Hymnes et prières de l'Égypte ancienne*, Paris, 1980, p. 537.

⁶³ All the fragments from 23 to 35 of the *Corpus* come from the *Contra Iulianum* by Cyril of Alexandria.

⁶⁴ S. Sauneron and J. Yoyotte, “La naissance du monde”, in *Sources Orientales I* (1959), p. 35.

a sidereal journey through planets ruled by tutelary gods. Each stage involves a purifying ascension by means of the realization of one of the virtues or qualities of the disciple, until attaining the contemplation of the supreme divinity. From these speculations about the spiritual itinerary come the Egyptian and hermetic mythological and philosophical conceptions about the Ogdoad and the Ennead. It is the case of the manuscript of Nag Hammadi VI, 6, titled *The Ogdoad and the Ennead*, whose aim was to take the disciple to the contemplation of the Ogdoad and the Ennead, that is, to elevate him up to the highest degree of initiation in the “Way of Hermes”, as Iamblichus called it⁶⁵. This treatise explains that this “vision” or mystical enlightenment culminates after the five stages: prayer, first enlightenment, new prayer, second enlightenment and, finally, thanksgiving.

The definition of “enlightenment” or “contemplation” as the vision of the Divinity or the emanating Light or, in this case, the vision of the four couples of gods emanated from Him, or the Ogdoad and the Ennead, finds its parallels in all religions. Since its meaning will be explained later, now it is important just to point out that the terms “Ogdoad” and “Ennead” refer, in Ancient Egypt, to the families of primordial gods especially worshiped in Hermopolis and Heliopolis, connected with Thoth. It is enough to remind some of their titles: “The Great one of Hermopolis”, “Lord of the city of Eight”, “The ancient and great one for the Ennead”, “Who leads the throne of the Ennead”, “Annalist of the Ennead”, etc. For example, in the Memphite theology of the dynasties III and V, Ptah is the creator god on whom an Ogdoad of primordial gods depends: a hypostasis of the demiurge. These gods are: *Tatenen*, the earth that makes the initial watery chaos emerge (distant version of the primal hill), *Nun*, the primordial ocean (condition of possibility of all physical production), with his feminine partner *Naunet*, *Atum* “the Great” (that is why Ptah is “the very Great”) and other four gods whose names have not been

⁶⁵ Iamblichus, *On the Egyptian mysteries* VIII, 5 (267.13).

preserved. In the Heliopolitan theology, the male *Amun*⁶⁶ and the female *Amaunet* were the fourth of the four couples coming from *Nun* (the primal water), making an Ogdoad. King *Ammōn*, who appears as *Hammona* six times in the *Asclepius*, is precisely a Greek version of *Amun* or *Amun-Re*. The significant thing here is that, according to the ancient Egyptian tradition, the Ogdoad was represented under the shape of four frogs and four snakes. However, the Ogdoad mentioned in the Coptic hermetic text of Nag Hammadi is formed by four frogs (male principles) and four cats (feminine principles)⁶⁷. This was considered as an exotic Greek innovation until Zandee recognized that strange representation of the Ogdoad formed by frogs and cats on the walls of the Temple of Edfu! This means that the hermetic author was familiarized with this unusual Egyptian way to symbolize the Ogdoad. The conclusion of all this is that, “in Egyptian cosmological texts... we often find direct parallels of hermetic doctrines enfolded in particular mythical terms”⁶⁸.

The lists and commentaries of data and evidences that prove the connection between the hermetic texts and the ancient Egyptian tradition could be easily extended. Therefore, the metaphor of the rays of sunlight as working hands that appears in the *Hermetica*: “Just as the sun, the nurse of all the things that grow, on his first rising, gathers unto himself the first-fruits of their yield with his most mighty hand, using his rays as though it were for plucking off their fruits” (*CH XVIII*), is unmistakably Egyptian and profusely used in different steles and tombs, as well as in religious literature, for example the *Great Hymn to Amun* of the dynasty XVIII, in which the solar

⁶⁶ The name “Amun”, which means “hidden” or “invisible”, identified with the cosmic air, was represented by a ram or a snake. Under the shape of the god Kneph or the Greek *Agathodaemon*, it was the name of the *nous* and the *dēmiourgos*. That is why, when Hellenizing and historicizing this doctrine, *Ammōn* was connected with Zeus as a divinity of air, and then with the powers of the *pneuma*.

⁶⁷ *The discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead* (NHC VI, 6), op. cit.

⁶⁸ Jan Zandee, *Der Amunhymnus des Papyrus Leiden I 344, verso*, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, 1992. Vid. also *Opuscula Graecolatina* (Museum Tusculanum Press), vol. 27; Erik Iversen, *Egyptian and hermetic doctrine*, Museum Tusculanum Press, Copenhagen 1984.

god is that “of many arms”⁶⁹. Likewise, the sanctioning formulas that appear at the end of some hermetic texts: “I conjure, to anyone who read this sacred book, that the fury of each and every one (of them) shall rain down upon those who transgress it...” (Annex to *NHC VI*), just repeats the typical form of the formulas to protect the property in Ancient Egypt⁷⁰. Certainly, the Greek, Latin, Coptic and Armenian translators of the *Corpus* seized the opportunity to add some beliefs, likely foreign to the original contents of the text, or maybe as a means to adapt them to the Greek culture. This way, together with the repeated mention to the Egyptian geography, cities, gods, heroes, dynasties, temples and worships in the texts, certain doctrines of Neoplatonism, Stoicism, Neopythagoreanism, etc. have been added as well. But, anyway, I insist that its formal and doctrinal coherence is still clear.

These considerations should be enough to prove that, ultimately, the *Hermetism* sinks its roots in the Egyptian metaphysics, cosmogony, philosophy and magic. Consequently, the only thing left would be to classify the hermetic texts within the general panorama of the ancient Egyptian literature. For that purpose, one more step should be taken on the way toward the clarification of the origin and goal of the hermetic texts in comparison with the Egyptian “sapiential” genre that used to adopt the form of “instructions”, “maxims” or “wisdoms”⁷¹.

3.- *The Egyptian sapiential genre*

The most ancient sapiential text known is the one by *Imhotep*, vizier or chancellor of King Djoser of the Dynasty III (about 2800

⁶⁹ Vid. Barucq-Daumas, cit., p. 197.

⁷⁰ Vid. for instance the formula of the treatise between Ramesses II and prince Kheta quoted by J-P Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, vol. I, cit., p. 35.

⁷¹ A grouping edition of the Wisdoms in Bresciani, *Letteratura e poesia dell'antico Egitto* (wisdoms of Hardejedef, Kagemni, Ptahhotep, Merikare, Amenemhat, Khety, Any, Amennakhte, Amenote and Onkhsheshonqy).

BC). Like the one by prince Djed-Hor, it is completely lost. Precisely, one of the most prominent characters of the *Corpus Hermeticum* is Asclepius, whose name is a Hellenized transmutation of the Imhotep who laid the foundations of the Egyptian colossal architecture, whose most famous result is the monumental pyramid of Saqqāra. This feat made him a sort of patron of master masons until the Ptolemies. His fame as a wise man and his legendary past made him the perfect disciple of Hermes.

Only the beginning is preserved from another text of the Dynasty V, *Kagemni*. Nonetheless, the *Wisdom of Ptahhotep*⁷², of the same Dynasty V, is fully preserved. The *Instructions of Merikare* belong to the same genre. From the New Kingdom, the *Maxims of Any*, the *Wisdom of Amenemope* or the *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy*.

From the comparison of this Egyptian sapiential literature with the hermetic *logoi*⁷³, the following formal coincidences are inferred:

- a) The dramatization is identical; a dialogue with which a master instructs a disciple, or a father teaches his son. In the hermetic texts, Hermes appears teaching his son Tat, Isis instructing Horus, and Master Hermes initiating Ammōn.
- b) The instruction is composed of a succession of sentences or sayings of an approximately fixed length.
- c) The sentences are usually grouped by subjects or chapters.

However, regardless of these formal resemblances, the contents of both literary genres are radically different. In contrast to the *moralist, pedagogical* nature of sapiential literature, the hermetic teaching of the *logoi* is clearly different because it is a doctrine with an esoteric, initiatic nature that can only be taught to those who possess the suitable skills. Could it then be affirmed that this kind of litera-

⁷² *Maxims of Ptahhotep*, published by Gustave Jéquier, *Le papyrus Prisse et ses variantes*, Paris, 1911.

⁷³ J-P. Mahé is one of the authors who maintained the thesis of the close relationship between the Egyptian “Instructions” genre and the hermetic *logoi*.

ture was used by the Egyptian priests to expound the “hermetic” doctrine in a suitable way? Was this genre an exclusive method of the moralist literature? The truth is that the training dialogue format had already transcended the sapiential genre itself and entered the field of philosophical teaching (if not even found in its own origin). In fact, reached this point, a demotic text titled *Book of Thoth* is to be brought up, since it could be considered as the immediate predecessor of the hermetic *logoi*. Also this writing dramatizes a “dialogue” between Thoth and a disciple “who wishes or longs to know”. Thoth is once called “*wr wr wr*”, the “thrice great”, Trismegas, variant of Trismegistus. According to J-P. Mahé, the *Book of Thoth* “is, at the most, the closest Egyptian document to the Greek *Hermetica* about philosophy”. In his opinion, the sapiential literature of Ancient Egypt, after making its light reach the whole Near East, survived in Egypt at least until the Roman period, playing a decisive role in the formation of the hermetic literature in Alexandria⁷⁴.

V.- EGYPTIAN METAPHYSICS AND POPULAR RELIGIOSITY

In a well-documented monograph, Erik Hornung has specified some appropriate points about the Egyptian religiosity and, especially, about the assumed accusation of zoolatry, pantheism and other manifestations of popular devotion⁷⁵. Of course, as it has already

⁷⁴ J-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, cit. In contrast to the hypotheses of some researchers who have sought possible biblical or LXX sources in the hermetic texts, the results seem to prove the contrary. In 1922, W. Budge already demonstrated the relationship between Prov. 22:17 - 24:22 and the *Precepts of Life by Amen-em-Apt, the Son of Ka-Nekht*. In 1929, P. Humbert reached the conclusion that “Egypt was actually one of the main sources, if not the most important one, of the Israelite sapiential literature”. Clear biblical influences have also been found in CH XIII, 17, specifically from Job 38. Now then, Job 38, as well as Job 5:9 ff., 12:7 ff., 26:5 ff. and 36:22 ff., have very clear Egyptian parallels, especially in the religious “Hymns” of the Dynasties XVIII and XIX. Vid. Adolph Ermann, *Die Literatur der Ägypter*, Leipzig, 1923, p. 352 ff.; A. Barucq-F. Daumas, *Hymnes et prières de l'Égypte Ancienne*, Paris, 1980, p. 91 ff.

⁷⁵ Already in the 2nd century AD, Lucian accounted for this refusal:

been warned, such beliefs were induced in order to facilitate the practice of the religious feeling among the popular classes⁷⁶, whereas the most philosophical or metaphysical doctrines and speculations remained reserved for the intellectual and religious elites of the country, educated in the scribal schools, the “houses of life” of the temples, etc., where it was taught that the gods, beyond their physical appearance, represented forces, aspects or attributes of the Only One Being. Thus, *Amun* etymologically means “the hidden one”, *Atum* is “the undistinguished one”, *Huh* is “Infinite”, *Kuk* is the “Darkness”, etc.

That is to say, philosophical and metaphysical concepts about the incomprehensibility of God are concealed under the names of the gods. That is why most current Egyptologists agree that the Egyptians of the Pharaonic times did not believe that their gods really had a human body and an animal head, because “none of these images shows the *true* form of a god, and none can encompass the full richness of his nature”. Egyptians used to draw a clear distinction be-

“Momus: But I should just like to ask that Egyptian there, the dog-faced gentleman in the linen suit, who he is, and whether he proposes to establish his divinity by barking. And will the piebald bull yonder from Memphis explain what use he has for a temple, an oracle, or a priest? As for the ibises and monkeys and goats and worse absurdities that are bundled in upon us, goodness knows how, from Egypt, I am ashamed to speak of them; nor do I understand how you, gentlemen, can endure to see such creatures enjoying a prestige equal to or greater than your own. And you yourself, sir, must surely find ram’s horns a great inconvenience.

Zeus: Certainly, it is disgraceful the way these Egyptians go on. At the same time, Momus, there is an occult significance in most of these things; and it ill becomes you, who are not the initiated, to ridicule them.

Momus: Oh, come now: a god is one thing, and a person with a dog’s head is another; I need no initiation to tell me that”; “The Gods in Council”, in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, vol. IV, tr. by the Fowler bros., Oxford, 1905.

⁷⁶ As well as in the different monotheistic religions of nowadays, a distinction is to be drawn between the elite of theologians who perform a certain role as guardians of the dogma, and the most popular manifestations, which like to worship archangels, angels, virgins, saints, beatified and the rest of relevant characters. Even many followers of a so radically monotheistic religion like Islam, some of whose adherents consider the Christian worship of the Holy Trinity as a polytheistic survival, have succumbed to these populist trends that “worship” local historical characters (relatives of Prophet Muḥammad, relevant mystics or rulers, etc.).

tween those images and “the true form” of God, which remains forbidden to human sight⁷⁷.

Therefore, the Egyptian religion could not be described as zoolatric since, even though accepted that the divinity may be settled or manifested by means of an image with a certain animal feature, in any case, in Egypt, just a particular specimen was worshiped, whereas “only when all members of a species are worshiped can one speak of ‘animal cults’”⁷⁸. Egyptians used to distinguish the apparent form of the divinity, which always had a symbolic nature referring to his specific attributes or qualities, from his true nature, which remained “hidden” and “mysterious”. Thus, these “illustrations or descriptions of appearances of gods were not seen by the Egyptians as real images of the gods, but rather as allusions to essential parts of the nature and function of deities”⁷⁹. To describe these attitudes as zoolatric brings only distortion to the manifestations produced by the popular devotion of all times, including the Christian worship to the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world”, the dove of the Holy Spirit, the zoomorphic representation of the Evangelists, etc. To deprive these religious manifestations of their mystical, theological or symbolic value will drive us to describe the worship to the saints’ relics as necrophilia and the sacrament of the Christian communion as anthropophagy or theophagy.

On the other hand, the zoomorphism of the Egyptian religion “does not lead to pantheism, for only certain species are related to a deity, and they are often worshiped in only one locality”⁸⁰. Consequently, it is not correct either to describe the Egyptian religion as pantheist, because “although in Egyptian religion the accumulation

⁷⁷ Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, Cornell, 1982, p. 117.

⁷⁸ Erik Hornung, *The One and the Many*, cit., p. 137.

⁷⁹ Erik Hornung, *The One and the Many*, cit., p. 114, following here H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, New York, 1948, p. 12, among others.

⁸⁰ Erik Hornung, *The One and the Many*, cit., p. 137.

of manifestations and combinations of deities produced phenomena that are reminiscent of pantheism, the resemblance is coincidental and superficial”, for the Egyptians have never had the wish or will to divinize it all. The Egyptian creator god shows himself in Creation, but is not merged with it. Although his nature may be extended by means of new forms and epithets, he never becomes identical to the “universe”, which, according to the Egyptians, contains non-divine features. “Therefore one cannot speak of pantheism, in the strict sense, in Egyptian religion”⁸¹.

Likewise, the alternative monotheism/polytheism not only does not contribute to explain the Egyptian religiosity, but also even hinders us from understanding certain aspects of its metaphysics. In different texts, such as the spell 261 in the *Coffin Texts*, which narrates the creation of the gods, it is specified that they were created by the “Only Lord, when even two things had not yet come into existence on this earth” (CT III, 383a), that is, before the first distinction existed. And from that primal duality, that is, from those “two things”, the subsequent dualities arise, the “millions” of forms of creation.

And, even though these texts supply documentary evidence of several invocations to the “unequaled only God” creator of the other Egyptian gods, the fact that some of those gods were in turn considered as “the greatest” or the “only one” is explained because, according to the Egyptian religiosity, any divinity is considered as an attribute, power or space-time modality of the Only One God. Precisely, in order to overcome the contradictions of describing it as polytheistic or pantheistic, in modern times, some authors had coined the term “*henotheism*” or “*monolatry*” to define the belief in Only One God who appears under different hypostases.

Nevertheless, for the Egyptians, the concept of the Only One God has some very particular characteristics, since the absolute

⁸¹ Erik Hornung, *The One and the Many*, cit., p. 128.

Oneness of God can only be conceived outside Creation, that is, beyond time and space. The world, the Being, comes from the One, which is also the Only. And that Only One is the Non-Being⁸².

Several authors have defended the monotheistic conceptions of the ancient Egyptians, based, amongst other evidences, on the etymology of the word *ntr*, “god”, which is pronounced inserting two vowels: *Netjer*. This term is employed, for example, in the Egyptian didactic literature (the “sapiential texts”, also called “teachings for life”) to distinguish between “God” in singular, and the particular names of the different gods, fact that points out that the diversity of gods or names were only hypostases or manifestations of the One, *ntr*. Thus, “Do not stir up fear in people, or God will punish in equal measure [...] It is not what men devise that comes to pass, but what God determines comes to pass” (Ptahhotep, 6th maxim). As well, “Man is clay and straw, God is his builder. He tears down, he builds up daily. He makes a thousand poor by his will; he makes a thousand men into chiefs, when he is in his hour of life. Happy is him who reaches the West [the realm of the dead], when he is safe in the hand of God” (Amenemope, chapter 25). These authors state that the idea that all the gods are really but manifestations or hypostases of another god was common in Ancient Egypt; the most impressive example is the “Solar Litany”, recorded for the first time about 1500 BC⁸³.

⁸² It is usually stated that the Egyptian thought discovered monotheism as a result of the religious reforms carried out by Akhenaten, which is untrue. Akhenaten, by denying the existence of the plurality of gods, stopped considering the One and the Many as complementary conceptions that, from that moment on, became radically exclusive to each other. Without prejudice to factors of metaphysical order that might have inspired the young monarch, the reforms of this historical period must be studied within the context of political fight maintained between Pharaoh and the priestly class. Akhenaten wished to be the only one mediator between the people and the new religion, so he had to fight the possibility that any devout person or priest could become an interpreter of the intermediary beings or of an Only One God, since that would only be his responsibility as Pharaoh. As such a mediator, it would be the monarch’s responsibility, and only his, to establish the “doctrine” of Aten and reveal it to his subjects. Under a layer of monotheism, he hid a fight to weaken the power of the priestly class as a mediator between gods and men.

⁸³ Jean Vergote, “La notion de Dieu dans les Livres de sagesse égyptiens”, in *Sagesses du Proche-Orient Ancien (SPOA)*, p. 159-190. E. Drioton, “Sur la Sagesse

On the other hand, the assumed Egyptian polytheism rather seems to hinge on a semantic question: for instance, would the opinion of any of the nowadays experts change if the Egyptians had called their gods angels? The truth is that the Egyptian gods do not look like gods in the full sense of the term, so how can they really be considered as gods even when they are murdered (for example, Osiris) or born (Horus)? How can they be considered as gods when, like most of the Egyptian divinities, they just influenced a particular geographic area? In large part, all this is a consequence of the popular devotion, which, unable to conceive the Oneness of the sacred, needs to rely on the protection of various divinities who are in charge of their families, their health, the paths through desert, their birthplace, harvests, cattle fertility, the rise of the Nile, etc.

The truth is that, although there are gods who are limited by time or geographic factors, or even “great” (*wrw*) and “small” (*ndsw*) gods, they all are generated by a primal God. For example, in the well-known *Monologue of the Lord of All*, it is said: “I created the gods from my sweat. Man is from the tears of my eye”⁸⁴. Could this belief in a primal, universal “father of the gods” who created all the gods and the rest of the beings be considered as a form of monotheism?

With all that, even the highest conceivable Egyptian god seems to be subject to the conditionings of time and space. Documented records of the title “king of the gods” (*njswt- ntrw*) are found in the ritual formulas of the pyramid of King Pepi I Meryre (about 2292-2260)⁸⁵. And, even more clearly, in the *Coffin Texts*, another frequent name of the Supreme Being appears (*Nb-r-dr*), usually translated as “Lord of All”, but literally meaning “lord-to-the-limit”, a

d’Aménémopé”, in *Mélanges rédigés en l’honneur d’André Robert*, Paris, 1957, pp. 254-280.

⁸⁴ It is based on a word game concerning the similarity of the terms “human being” and “tear” (*CT VII*, 464 ff.).

⁸⁵ *Pyramid Texts*, 1458e.

term that clearly sets out the idea that even the power of the supreme being has a certain limit. Actually, this primal God Father is not a “non-created” one, because he is not present since eternity, but he arises during creation, “when no god had yet arisen and the name of things had not yet been proclaimed”. Therefore, the world before Creation is a world without God or gods. Only together with Creation does a primal God arise, and then he calls the other forces of the Being (deities) to life⁸⁶.

VI.- SPREAD OF HERMETISM DURING THE MIDDLE AGES

The influence of some hermetic concepts on the Coptic monks seems more than likely. It has actually been pointed out that Christian monasticism was originally an imitation of the life of the confined monks (*katochoi*) in the Egyptian temples of Serapis⁸⁷. The quest for God by means of the purification of the seven vices or the twelve torments in order to attain imperturbability or calmness (*aklinēs*), the techniques of meditation destined to inhibit all sensory activity and attain the silence of thoughts, the final enlightenment, etc. have a close similarity to the writings of Origen, Evagrius, Cassian, etc. regarding the purifying combat against the eight evil thoughts or demons by means of meditation or *pure prayer*, directed to silence the thoughts and achieve the *apatheia* or *tranquillitas mentis*, a state of peace in which one can receive the grace of enlightenment or contemplation of God. Anyway, after the virulent attack that Saint Augustine launched on Hermetism in *City of God*, Christianity barely showed interest in those writings until the 12th century, on occasion of the reception of the Platonic tradition, espe-

⁸⁶ The best compilation is S. Sauneron and J. Yoyotte in “*La naissance du monde*”, *Sources Orientales* I (1959), pp. 17-91.

⁸⁷ This was the thesis, otherwise undemonstrated, of the Protestant pastor H. Weingarten, *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums*, Gotha, 1877.

cially from the *Asclepius*, because of its relationship with the *Timaeus*.

However, Hermetism survived in several places of Northern Africa, Mesopotamia and certain Byzantine philosophical circles. For instance, in Northwest Mesopotamia, the inhabitants of the city of Harran, where a great center of hermetic studies was placed, after their forced conversion to Islam, adopted a new name (Sabians), tolerated by the Quran, and likened prophet Hermes to the Quranic Idrīs and the biblical Enoch. Like in other regions, the practice of a certain Islamized Hermetism (which influenced the origins of Sufism so much) was maintained there until the religious pressure was intensified at the beginning of the 9th century, forcing some hermetic Sabians to go into exile in regions under control of the Eastern Roman Empire. The origin of the Byzantine hermetic renaissance could be found in these emigrations.

In any case, the hermetic texts continued being translated and studied by Muslim philosophers and theologians (it is the case of Al-Kindī, as an example of an author of the 9th century). As already expounded, the introduction of Plato's works in Europe between the 9th and the 13th centuries stimulated the interest in the hermetic texts. Amongst the many authors who came to know these texts, we could mention Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Albert the Great, Thierry of Chartres, John of Salisbury, Alan of Lille, Vincent of Beauvais, and William of Auvergne.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 caused a massive forced exile of Byzantine wise men and mystics throughout Europe, especially to Italy. One of the most noticeable consequences of this was the arrival of different collections of hermetic manuscripts that would soon (1462) be used by Marsilio Ficino to publish the *Poimandres* (*Book on the power and wisdom of God, whose title is Pimander*) and, above all, to finish the translation of the fourteen treatises in 1463

and promote, after that, their publication in 1471⁸⁸. From that moment on, it was spread the idea that Hermes had been one of the most ancient prophets in humankind, whose teaching was a synthesis of pagan wisdom and Christian doctrine, and an inspiration to Moses, Orpheus, Plato and other great personalities of ancient times. There were many notable attempts to Christianize Hermetism until, in 1614, Isaac Casaubon ended up cutting all the bridges with his discrediting theses.

VII.- ON THE ESOTERIC TEACHING IN EGYPT: METHOD TO ACHIEVE ENLIGHTENMENT

The essential institution that supported the spiritual activity of the Egyptian Temples was called “House of Life”. It was not only the true intellectual center of the region because of its work of transcription and study of the texts, but, above all, it was also the spiritual center that gathered the priests and where the mysteric or initiatic teaching was regularly taught.

The ancient Egyptian sapiential literature sometimes referred to the title or function of “Teacher of the House of Life” or the apprentices’ custom to “read the secret books with the scribes of the House of Life” (*Tale of Sinuhe*). In coherence with the dichotomy Life-Gnosis/Death-ignorance, the *Corpus Hermeticum* countered the way of Hermes, which leads to Life, with “the way of death” (*CH* I, 29),

⁸⁸ Though outside the chronological frame of this study, it is to be mentioned that, in 1494, Ludovico Lazzarelli wrote a Christian interpretation of the hermetic philosophy titled *Crater Hermetis* and, in 1507, published a Latin version of the *Corpus*. The impact of the hermetic writings on the European intellectuals was increasing. Thus, they will be the main source of inspiration for the work *De Harmonia Mundi* (1525) by Francesco Giorgi, and for the theological writings and the configuration of what Agostino Steuco called “*philosophia perennis*”. Isaac Newton used them in his *Principia* and in his works on hermetic alchemy. Among the “hermetic” authors or those fascinated by Hermetism, we could mention Guy Lefèvre de la Boderie, Philippe du Plessis Mornay, Giordano Bruno, Robert Fludd or Michael Maier, as well as a list that could be easily extended...

which is followed by the ignorant ones. These latter are who, according to the *Book of the Amduat*, are at the desert valley, have lost their heads (they appear decapitated) and are called “those who are turned upside down”⁸⁹.

Regarding the specific “way” (*hodos*) revealed by Hermes, followed by “prophet” Bitis, King Ammōn⁹⁰, and practiced in many Egyptian “Houses of Life”, the *Corpus Hermeticum* employs a very precise terminology to refer to the *initiates* as “perfect” or “transcendent” (*teleioi*) and righteous (*dikaioi*)⁹¹. This teaching is solemnly transmitted (*paredōkas*) in a specific environment and in a detailed, reserved way by those who have expressly been conferred the authority (*exousia*) as guides (*hodēgos*) or heralds (*kēryx*) of the “Houses of Life” (*CH* I, 32). The existence of terms such as *bathmos* (“step”, “degree”, “grade”) in *CH* XIII, 9 clearly proves that the initiatic teachings were transmitted at consecutive levels or grades (*bathmoi*) that began with exoteric lessons (*exotika*) or instructions of *general* issues (*genikoi logoi*; *CH* XII, 8; XIII, 1): “And he who will not be begotten at the start by God comes to be by the *general and guiding discourses*. He will not be able to read the things written in this book”⁹². The next step was the esoteric teachings or *special studies* by means of class notes (*hypomnēmata*), as they appear in *CH* XIV, 1 and *NHC* VI, 6, 63. Concurrently, in addition to the doctrinal education, the disciple was introduced to the mental and verbal prayer, the meditative practice⁹³ and other disciplines that aimed to

⁸⁹ The quotations from the *Book of Amduat* usually follow the translation by E. A. Wallis Budge, 1905. The inline quotation is from ch. XI. The most complete edition of the *Pyramid Texts* is the one by S. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts in Translation and Commentary*, New York, 1952. The quotations from the *Book of the Dead* accord with the translation by Budge, 1895.

⁹⁰ According to Iamblichus, *On the mysteries* VIII, 3.262-263, 4.267, 6.269.

⁹¹ The Greco-Egyptian authors of the *CH* sought a certain similarity to the gnostic terminology and the language of the mystic religions; *teleioi* is the Gnostic term and *dikaioussthai* defines the inner change experienced after initiation.

⁹² *The discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead* (*NHC* VI, 6, 63), op. cit.

⁹³ Including meditation on images and hieroglyphic language. Thus, a fragment from the *Book of the Amduat* warns, “whoever knows these mysterious images is a

culminate in the enlightenment or contemplation of God. On the other hand, all this demonstrates the existence of clearly organized religious communities of a monastic nature that prolonged, in large part, the spiritual doctrines, rites and practices of Ancient Egypt. This explains that, in the hermetic texts, the enlightened one is considered as part of a mystical family, or that his rebirth is sealed with a kiss or an embrace, and a ritual supper⁹⁴.

Let us summarily explain the three levels of instruction of the way of Thoth-Hermes: firstly, the candidate for initiation begins with some introductory lessons or general discourses (*CH XIII*, 1), then comes a second phase of “regeneration” and, finally, the phase of enlightenment or spiritual understanding⁹⁵.

VIII.- FIRST DEGREE OF THE WAY OF THOTH-HERMES: THE GENERAL PREPARATORY EDUCATION

Most hermetic treatises have a “preparatory” nature, that is, they aim to show the obstacles and teach the virtues that facilitate the individual’s psycho-mental nullification as a previous step to his “regeneration” or spiritual rebirth. Thus, at the beginning of the “Secret sermon on the mountain concerning rebirth and the promise of silence” (*CH XIII*, 1), a disciple, conversing with his master “while descending from the mountain” (that is, from the “House of Life”), reminds him, “in the General Sermons thou didst speak in riddles most unclear” about the secret of regeneration, and “thou saidst that thou wouldst give it me when ‘thou shalt have become a stranger to

well-provided *Akh*-spirit. Always [this person] can enter and leave the netherworld; always speaking with the living ones. Proven to be true a million times.”, ch. XI.

⁹⁴ The kiss in *NHC VI*, 6, the supper in *Asc.* 41. Vid. *Textos Herméticos*, Madrid, 1999, p. 514.

⁹⁵ The similarity of these phases to the ones described in the *Book of the Dead* (preparation, regeneration and transfiguration or apotheosis) can be explained because of the aim of this last one to provide the deceased with the “enlightenment” or vision of Re, even though in a delayed or *post-mortem* way.

the world'. Wherefore I got me ready and made the thought in me a stranger to the world-illusion". The goal of the preparatory stage is condensed in this brief sentence: once understood that the world is illusory, the senses lose interest in the objects, so that they attain a certain degree of distancing from the worldly matters. Only after having attained that degree of detachment is it possible to face the stage of "regeneration" or spiritual rebirth.

How to enter the beautiful way of regeneration? "One is the path that leadeth unto the beauty; devotion (*eusebeia*) joined with knowledge" (*CH* VI, 5). Devotion, piety, love, reverence... the *eusebeia* is, ultimately, that mysterious force that sprouts from the deepest part of each man and is externally projected, driving him to seek the meaning of existence. But that force or infinite longing to know God can undergo a *conversion* of 180° and be directed inward; this is what different religious traditions define as the "eye of the heart" (the Vedanta *hṛdaya*, the wound of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Christianity, the Sufi '*ayn al-qalb*...')⁹⁶. "Gaze upwards with the eyes of the heart. Seek ye for one to take you by the hand and lead you unto knowledge's gates. Where shines clear light, of every darkness clean; where not a single soul is drunk, but sober all they gaze with their hearts' eyes on him who willeth to be seen. No ear can hear him, nor can eye see him, but only mind and heart. But first thou must tear off from thee the cloak which thou dost wear, the web of ignorance, the ground of bad, corruption's chain, the carapace of darkness, the living death, sensation's corpse, the tomb thou carriest with thee, the robber in thy house, who through the things he loveth, hateth thee, and through the things he hateth, bears thee malice" (*CH* VII, 1). This is possible when man leaves some room for God in his heart. Although the Egyptian gods do not directly walk on earth among the human beings and it is only possible to meet them at borderlands (for example at a distant island, as in the tale of the *Ship-*

⁹⁶ About this subject, vid. René Guénon, "The All-Seeing Eye", in *Symbols of Sacred Science*, Hillsdale (NY), 2004, p. 422.

wrecked Sailor⁹⁷), when the detachment from the created things culminates and man is completely emptied, then is when he can accept God in his “heart” because “God is within the human being”⁹⁸.

The mystical initiation is no more and no less than the process by which a man who is inside leads or teaches another man “by the hand”, that is, with mutual confidence, until placing him at the threshold. The “apprentice” or candidate must enter by himself, guided by the “eyes of his heart”, *because the last step is taken with no foot*, once he has gotten rid of the world’s main illusion or mirage, that is, the identification with the body. In *CH IV*, 6, it is also shared the idea that the body is a dark jail or cell that hinders the sight of beauty. We are urged to refuse the body and to tear that thick tunic, in similar terms to the Platonic language⁹⁹. The ascetic tone of the text can be tinged with another paragraph where it is warned that the theological pessimism is a mistake: “And do not thou be chary of things made because of their variety, from fear of attribution of a low estate and lack of glory unto God. For that His Glory’s one; to make all things, and this is as it were God’s body, the making of them. But by the maker’s self naught is there thought or bad or base. These things are passions which accompany the making process, as rust doth brass and filth doth body” (*CH XIV*, 7). Strictly speaking, all these explanations are but propositions destined to soothe the disciple’s inquisitiveness until he, after ceasing his curiosity and vital

⁹⁷ A translation of this tale can be found in Eva March Tappan ed., *A History of the World in Story, Song and Art*, vol. III, tr. by W. K. Flinders Petrie, Boston, 1914, pp. 41-46.

⁹⁸ É. Drioton, *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte (ASAE)* 44 (1944), p. 20.

⁹⁹ The effort of hermetists to present their *paideia* with a Hellenized language is clear here again. Thus, they use the term *peribolon* (“cell”) the way it was employed in the *Cratylus* (400b-c; cf. *Theaetetus*, 197c) in order to explain the analogy *sōma/sēma* or body/tomb (jail). Porphyry, in his *On the Life of Plotinus* 1.1, comments, “Plotinus, the philosopher, our contemporary, seemed ashamed of being in the body”. As well, Proclus, in his *Elements* (prop. 209), echoes the idea of the body as a cell for the soul: “The vehicle (*ochēma*) of every partial soul descends indeed with the addition of more material vestments (*chitōnōn*), but be-

anxiety, acquires a certain calm and mental silence. Only from that state of *eusebeia* can the true knowledge of God really be accessed, since “the greatest ill among men is ignorance of God” (*CH VII*).

1.- Nous and logos

In this first stage, the master introduced the disciple to the new specific language of mysteries. To that effect, one of the first taught conceptual clarifications was the difference between *nous* and *logos*. The hermetic doctrine distinguishes¹⁰⁰ between the discursive mind or reason (*logos*) and the pure mind or intellect¹⁰¹ (*nous*). Hermes explains to his disciple: “Reason indeed among all men hath God distributed, but intellect not yet” (*CH IV*, 3; cf. for example *CH X*, 9 and the fragments of Stobaeus). A different way of cognitive process is derived from this. In addition to the ordinary knowledge (*epistēmē*), which is a product of the reason (*logos*) and can be learned as an “art” or “ability” (*technē*), there is a knowledge of a higher or intuitive order (*gnosis*¹⁰²), which is product of the intellect or pure mind (*nous*), being a special gift of God.

In the “way of Thoth-Hermes”, the master teaches the *epistēmē* to the disciple, so that he may understand (*gnosis*) that to accept the ineffability of God is an indispensable step to the proper knowledge of God. In *CH IX*, 10, it is stated, “To understand (*noēsai*) is to believe (*pistis*)”, because the access to the divinity, which is a revelation, is not attained through the ordinary reasoning (*logos*), but through a special, unitive process of cognition that, no matter how

comes united to the soul by an ablation of every thin material, and a recurrence to its proper form...”.

¹⁰⁰ Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*, Cambridge, 1986, p. 101.

¹⁰¹ *Nous* is usually translated as “mind”, but, given the ambiguous character of this word, it is preferable to translate it as pure consciousness or “intellect”; vid René Guénon, “The Limits of the Mental”, in *Perspectives on Initiation*, Ghent (NY), 2004, p. 205 ff..

¹⁰² In this sense, the best translation of “gnosis” would be “vision” or “understanding”.

much of it may be taught to the initiate, is only granted by God, “who willed to have it set up, just as it were a prize” (CH IV, 3).

How can the prize of the intellect (*nous*) be collected? Hermes answers that the *nous* is like a krater, a cup, whose content can only be obtained by throwing oneself into it: “Plunge thyself into the krater, when heart can do so, thou that hast faith thou canst ascend to him that hath sent down the krater” (CH IV, 4). Those who “doused themselves in mind became partakers in the knowledge; and when they had received the *nous*, they were made perfect men”. Those who do not plunge into the krater “are ignorant wherefor they have come into being and whereby... they fail in all appreciation of those things which really are worth contemplation. These centre all their thought upon the pleasures of the body and its appetites, in the belief that for its sake man hath come into being” (CH IV, 5). How to plunge into the krater? Regardless of the usage of the metaphor of the krater as a dramatization of an initiatic rite¹⁰³, its interpretative key is shown immediately afterwards in unequivocal terms: “Unless thou first shalt hate thy body, son, thou canst not love thy self, but if thou lov’st thy self thou shalt have mind, and having mind thou shalt share in the knowledge (*gnosis*)”.

This lucid paragraph establishes a dichotomy between hating the body and loving the spirit. Only the certainty that *I am not the body* and that *this body is like a jail* will make me realize that *I am immaterial* and love the true essence of the human being. Hermes replies to Tat: “It is not possible, my son, to give thyself to both; I mean to things that perish and to things divine. For seeing that existing things are twain, body and bodiless, in which the perishing and the divine are understood, the man who hath the will to choose is left the choice of one or other” (CH IV, 5-6).

¹⁰³ The motif of the krater, pot or cup whose drink or contact provides immortality is recorded in different traditions. It is not to be dismissed that the topic of the ingestion of a drink or immersion into a krater-lake will also be part of the dramatization of the initiation ritual in some degrees of the hermetic way.

2.- The sidereal journey and the *eusebeia*.

Some *Hermetica* describe the candidate's way toward "*gnosis*" with the metaphor of the journey throughout constellations, planets or sidereal zones¹⁰⁴. It seems to be deduced that the ascension from one sidereal zone to the next one equaled the overcoming of a vice or torment and the acquisition of the corresponding virtue. The initial virtue needed to understand the journey is the *eusebeia* (for example in *CH* III, 4), whereas the final quality or virtue is the *aklinēs* (calmness, imperturbability). Certainly, the terms *eusebeia*, *eusebeō* and *eusebēs* refer to the initiatic virtue of the "devotion", "reverence" or "worship" as a respectful, affectionate attitude toward gods, masters and teachings.

¹⁰⁴ The similarity of the topic of the hermetic sidereal journey to the soul's celestial journey in the Avestan religion (the *post-mortem* journey beyond the Primal Man Gayōmard) has made some researchers consider certain Iranian influences coming to Egypt (and to the Judeo-Christian thought) through the Mithraic worship. Thus, authors such as Richard Reitzenstein (*Studie zur Geschichte des Mönchtums und der frühchristlichen Begriffe Gnostiker und Pneumatiker*, Göttingen, 1916), as well as H. H. Schaeder (*Studien zum antiken Synkretismus aus Iran und Griechenland*, Leipzig, 1926, pp. 26-27), already connected the list of the seven planetary vices that appear in Poimandres (*CH* I, 23) with Iranian sources, and the Ogdoad (for instance, in *CH* I) to the Garodman and the Iranian eighth heaven. However, it is to be reminded that, as well, the Egyptian mythology developed the topic of the "Ogdoad", formed by the four couples of divinities, with no evidence that such a pattern were an Iranian borrowing. On the other hand, the Egyptian funerary literature also considers the transition of the deceased to the Beyond as a journey through the different constellations related to the Decans and the hours of the day under the direction of Orion (Osiris) and Sothis (Isis). Anyway, the topic of the celestial journey is also described in Celsus' Ophites (Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI, 30-32), in Mark's Gnosis (Father Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*. I, 21, 5), in the Gospel of Mary (Papyrus Berolinensis 8502), etc. In the latter, a Gnostic text, each and every one of the seven heavens is guarded by a Power who allows the traveler to pass only when he replies "what binds me has been slain" (the text of the *Gospel of Mary* has been published by several authors; among them, Douglas M. Parrott ed., "Gospel of Mary" in *Nag Hammadi Studies* XI, Leiden, 1979. Perhaps there were in more ancient versions three guardians or archons, like in the First Apocalypse of James (*NHC* V, 3). There, the guardian asks the soul "Who are you?", and it must answer, "I am a son and I am from the Father". When questioned again, "where will you go?", it must reply "to the place from which I have come, there shall I return"; in James M. Robinson ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, San Francisco, 1990, p. 260 ff.

Without prejudice to other astrological or astronomical considerations, there is no doubt that the apprentice's receptiveness, expectancy and confidence in the received initiatic teaching increased considerably when he was posed this kind of planetary metaphors in which it is explained that the individual's *nous* must get rid of the identification with the body (*sōma*)¹⁰⁵ in order to return to its original mansion, that is, to "be in God" or "become God" (*theothenai*). In *CHI*, 23, the list of the seven vices that hinder the purification of the *nous* is mentioned: "But to the mindless ones, the wicked and depraved, the envious and covetous, and those who murder do and love impiety, I am far off". And, soon after that, it describes the cosmic journey through seven zones that leads the wise man to get rid of his faults so that, once purified, he may enter the eighth room, the *ogdoadic region*: "And thus it is that man doth speed his way thereafter upwards through the cosmic frame. To the first zone he gives the energy of growth and waning; unto the second, device of evils de-energized; unto the third, the guile of the desires de-energized; unto the fourth, his domineering arrogance, de-energized; unto the fifth, unholy daring and the rashness of audacity, de-energized; unto the sixth, striving for wealth by evil means, deprived of its aggrandisement; and to the seventh zone, ensnaring falsehood, de-energized. And then, with all the energizings of the cosmic frame stript from him, clothed in his proper power, he cometh to the ogdoadic region, and there with those-that-are hymneth the father. They who are there welcome his coming there with joy; and he, made like to them that sojourn there, doth further hear the powers who are above the ogdoadic region, singing their songs of praise to God in language of their own. And then they, in a band, go to the father home; of their own selves they make surrender of themselves to powers, and becoming powers they are in God" (*CHI*, 25).

The seven planetary heavens constitute the lower world (the Hebdomad) that imprisons the mystic who wishes to ascend to the

¹⁰⁵ *CHI*, 24-26; X, 15-18; XII, 12-14; XIII, 7-12.

next higher level (the Ogdoad), the ogdoadic region or eighth sphere of the fixed stars. All this means that man's fight against his vices has a universal size, since his combat is fought within a cosmic frame. Somehow, his fight will refresh or repeat the gods' fight against chaos in the darkness. Actually, all this is but a way to explain or symbolize the spiritual itinerary that leads the Greco-Egyptian mystic to contemplation on the path of prayer and meditation, of which several examples are found in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and which is, on the other hand, very similar to the moralizing interpretation of the ascent on Jacob's ladder (Gen. 28:12), whose metaphysical meaning clearly expresses the transition from meditation to a contemplation free of forms, images and thoughts.

3.- *Prayer, meditation and contemplation.*

The hermetic texts contain different examples of vocal and mental prayer, as well as preparatory meditation topics for pure meditation, that is, a *vision* that is not influenced by the senses or any other mental perception. *CHI*, 31 records an example of a prayer invoking the divinity¹⁰⁶:

“Holy art Thou, O God, the universals' Father.

Holy art Thou, O God, whose Will perfects itself by means of its own Powers.

Holy art Thou, O God, who willeth to be known and art known by Thine own.

Holy art Thou, who didst by Word make to consist the things that are.

Holy art Thou, of whom All-nature hath been made an Image.

Holy art Thou, whose Form Nature hath never made.

Holy art Thou, more powerful than all power.

Holy art Thou, transcending all pre-eminence.

Holy Thou art, Thou better than all praise”.

¹⁰⁶ The usage of the word *hagios* (holy) may be due to the influence of the Jewish liturgy (Is 6:3, Deut. 6:5-9).

In a parallel way, besides this kind of hymns of praise and thanksgiving that constitute the “offering or sacrifice of the word” (*logikē thysia*), the mental prayer was practiced: “Accept my reason’s offerings pure, from soul and heart for aye stretched up to thee, o thou unutterable, unspeakable, whose name naught but the silence can express”. The prayer asks for the grace to understand God: “Do thou, then, Tat, my son, pray first unto our lord and father, the one-and-only, from whom the one doth come, in order that thou mayest have the power to catch a thought of this so mighty God, one single beam of him to shine into thy thinking” (*CH V*, 1).

However, the spiritual practice, par excellence, of the *Hermetists* was the meditation on divinity. We find different references that clarify the meditation topics and their goal. In *CH V*, 3, the disciple is posed: “If thou wouldst see God, bethink thee of the sun, bethink thee of moon’s course, bethink thee of the order of the stars. Who is the one who watcheth over that order?”. Further on, it is explained that God can be seen by means of these meditation exercises, through the *nous*: “there is naught in all the world that is not He. He is Himself, both things that are and things that are not. The things that are He hath made manifest, He keepeth things that are not in Himself. He is the God beyond all name; He the unmanifest, He the most manifest; He whom the intellect (*nous*) alone can contemplate, He visible unto the eyes as well” (*CH V*, 9-10). And *CH XIV*, 9-10 develops another meditation topic about the mystery of the appearance of cosmos: “But would’st thou learn how He doth make, and how things made are made, thou may’st do so. Behold a very fair and most resemblant image: a husbandman casting the seed into the ground; here wheat, there barley, and there some other of the seeds. Behold one and the same man planting the vine, the apple, and other trees. In just the selfsame way doth God sow immortality in heaven, and change on earth, and life and motion in the universe”. Nonetheless, this stage is but a preparation to carry out the phase of spiritual regeneration or rebirth that leads to the vision or contemplation of

God. Actually, vocal and mental prayers are but material offerings that may even limit or hinder the genuine devotion. The hermetic texts show God Hermes' own refusal of the offering of perfumes and incense, and his satisfaction with the "sacrifice of the word", that is, the silence of the mind.

It is a confirmed fact in the various religious and metaphysical traditions that the apophatic way to approach God is a consequence of the mystical experience of His *ineffability*. The verification that the ordinary mind (*logos*) can neither describe nor imagine God (thus only a *via remotionis* intuition is left, defining Him for what He is not) has led to a form of spiritual meditation that teaches how to suspend, annul or stop the identification with the own mental activity, and to make it easier that we may approach the divinity in a purer way. This may make us affirm that the considerations that appear in the hermetic texts about the impossibility to describe God by means of mental conceptualizations was part of the disciple's contemplative teaching: the inability and uselessness of the discursive mind (*logos*) as a contemplative tool were to be verified and accepted in order to develop a higher tool: the pure or intuitive mind (*nous*), to clear up the "mists" (*Asclepius*, 32) that conceal the cosmic consciousness and the world of attributes (gods) of the Only God¹⁰⁷. "Now from one source all things depend; while source dependeth from the Only One" (*CH X*, 14). In *CH V*, Hermes tells Tat that "He is the God beyond all name", "and for this cause hath He all names, in that they are one Father's; and for this cause hath He Himself no name, in that He's Father of them all" (*CH V*, 10-11). He is before time, but He is also in time: "so that thou thus shouldst think of Him as everywhere

¹⁰⁷ The idea that the gods are the different names or attributes of the Only One God already appears in ch. 17 of the *Book of the Dead*. As well, within Greek philosophy, Plato, following the Pythagoreans, developed a theory of the becoming from the One. To distinguish between the One and the Only, the Platonic philosophy refers to the Only as *hen*, the nominative neuter singular of the word "one", whose masculine form is *heis*; since *hen* (the Only), God is the supreme source of the *heis* (One), from which the rest of the numbers come, from two on.

and ever-being" (*CH* IV 1)¹⁰⁸. Although God is "one and only" (*CH* IV, 1), He can be called with many names, depending on the aspect of His activity that may be considered (Chrysippus¹⁰⁹, Zeno, *SVF* I, 43, 9-12). This idea is common to all ancient religions. In the Egyptian religion, "only" or "alone" is one of the titles of Osiris, Re and Amun¹¹⁰. As the Only One God, He encompasses All; that is why His magical name represents the whole cosmos¹¹¹. "This body of Him is a thing no man can touch, or see, or measure, a body inextensible, like no other frame. 'Tis neither fire nor water, air nor breath, yet all of them come from it" (*CH* IV, 1). God is in all forms, "but my true form is hidden, as I am unknowable¹¹²" (*Book of the Dead*, ch. 42). "If, then, space be some godlike thing, it is substantial; but if 'tis God, it transcends substance" (*CH* II, 5). God, even when considered as the supreme good, is unattainable, "for to the good there is no shore, it hath no bounds, it is without and end, and for itself it is without beginning, too, though unto us it seemeth to have one: the knowledge. Therefore to it knowledge is no beginning; rather is it that knowledge doth afford to us the first beginning of its being known" (*CH* IV, 8-9). God does not know, or at least He does not as

¹⁰⁸ In the *Coffin Texts*, it is said: "I am the Eternal... I am the creator of the Word... I am the Word" (ch. 307). The *Coffin Texts*, the *Book of the two paths* and the rest of the literature previous to the fixed version of the *Book of the Dead* or *Going out in Daylight* have been published by Adriaan de Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 7 vol. Chicago, 1935-1961.

¹⁰⁹ According to this Stoic, the various gods are but different names of one and only one God; *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta* (*SVF*) II 306, 7 and III 235.

¹¹⁰ These are the local or geographic names of the same unique divinity. Osiris (A. Barucq- F. Daumas, *Hymnes et prières de l'Égypte ancienne*, Paris, 1980, pp. 89, 97, 113), Re (*ibid.* pp. 132, 146, 174, 175) and Amun (*ibid.* pp. 188, 189, 191, 211, 257).

¹¹¹ The representation of the Name of God by means of a series of vowels appears in the *Hermetica*, in the *Greek Magical Papyri* (e.g. *PGM* XIII, 207) and in other texts. Thus, under the name of *aa ee ēēē iiiii ooooo yyyyy ôôôôôôôôô*, it is symbolized that twenty-eight gods rule the seven spheres or planets, and all of them together constitute a hypostasis of the only one God, who is the great, great (the greatest). As the God beyond time, that is, beyond life and death, He is called *Zōthaxathōz*, whose name come from *zōē* (life) and *thanatos* (death), and appears e.g. in *PGM* XIII 176.

¹¹² He is not unknowable by *Himself*, but by means of a so imperfect instrument as it is the discursive mind.

man does, because knowledge implies a knowing subject, an object to be known and the action of knowing, and, strictly speaking, God is neither an object of knowledge, nor a subject who knows, for it can only be talked about subject when there are objects.

But God transcends that plurality of elements because all is One in Him. Or, in hermetic terms, “God is first thinkable for us, not for Himself, for that the thing that is thought doth fall beneath the thinker’s sense; God then cannot be thinkable unto Himself, in that He is thought of by Himself as being nothing else than what He thinks. But He is something else for us, and so He is thought of by us” (*CH* VI, 5-6; also in *CH* II, 1 and *CH* IX, 9); “Thou art Thought when Thou thinkest”. Certainly, the topic of the unknowable, invisible, unspeakable God already appears in Plato (*Symposium*, 210e; *Parmenides*, 141e and *The Republic*, VI, 509b) or Apuleius (*De Platone* 190-191) among others, but it is also a frequent topic in the Egyptian theology, where the word game between Amun (*Imn*) and hidden (*imn*) is constantly used¹¹³, or where the binary-contradictory names of the gods are recurrent: Re is “he who is and is not”, statement that will be prolonged in the *Hermetica*, “God is concealed, God is manifest” (*CH* V, 9 and 11).

The *via remotionis* serves to awaken subtlety in the disciple’s intellect, and takes no pity on minds that clung to the specific reasoning, fact that explains the exasperation of the impatient apprentice: “What, then, is God?”. Again, Hermes clarifies that “not any one of these is God, for He it is that causeth them to be, both all and each and every thing of all that are” (*CH* II, 12). Hermes explains the three worlds considered as Non-Being, unmanifested Being and manifested Being: “Nor hath He left a thing beside that is-not; but they are all from things-that-are and not from things-that-are-not. For that the things-that-are-not have naturally no power of being any-

¹¹³ Examples of the religious hymns in Barucq-Daumas, cit., pp. 196, 212, 221, 224 and 327.

thing, but rather the nature of the inability-to-be. And, conversely, the things-that-are have not the nature of some time not-being” (*CH* II, 13).

In sum, the disciple’s logic (*logos*) goes insane when it understand that “God, therefore, is not mind, but Cause that the mind is; God is not spirit, but Cause that spirit is; God is not light, but Cause that the light is” (*CH* II, 14) and that, consequently, the only way to reach God, to deify oneself, is to be like God, that is, through the way of not being (not being the mind, not being spirit, not being the light... no being... anything). But then, what remains...?

IX.- SECOND DEGREE: THE DOCTRINE OF REGENERATION (MENTAL SILENCE AND SUSPENSION OF SENSES)

When the disciple is introduced to the doctrine of regeneration or rebirth, the first thing that he is prevented of is that “this race, my son, is never taught; but when he willeth it, its memory is restored by God” (*CH* XIII, 2). It is a gift, a grace of God, but not in the sense of being given to a few ones. On the contrary, He gives it to those who make a reverent effort to deserve it, “for God doth will this vision to be, and it is both Himself and most of all by reason of Himself” (*CH* X, 4), because “not that God ignoreth man; nay, right well doth He know him, and willeth to be known” (*CH* X, 15). For a man, this God’s will “is the sole salvation”, whereas “forgetfulness becometh vice”. Actually, Hermias of Alexandria, in his commentary on the *Phaedrus*¹¹⁴, already mentions that Hermes Trismegistus, during his third stay, had “remembered himself” (*heautou anamnēsthai*) or “recognized himself”, receiving or remembering his true name, that is, recovering the consciousness and the possession of his authentic “I”.

¹¹⁴ Hermias Alexandrinus philosophus, *In Platonis Phaedrum scholia*, ed. by P. Couvreur, Paris, 1901, lib. II, schol.2, p. 94, 21-22 and schol. 45, p. 168, 23-24.

What is regeneration? The texts define it as “to know” or “to recognize” oneself. Specifically, the descriptions recorded in the *Hermetica* might make us assume that it is a technique of sensory deprivation that unleashes an out-of-body experience. However, this description just partially reflects the roughest part of their teachings. Actually, “regeneration”, starting with the unidentification of the body, provides the consciousness of the oneness of all things or, in more precise terms, it is a form of cognition in which the subject/object duality does not exist. “Father, I see the All, I see myself in intellect. – This is, my son, regeneration...” (CH XIII, 13). It is an experience difficult to explain and even more difficult to understand with the discursive reasoning, because it overflows ordinary mind’s comprehension: “Thou hast, O father, filled us so full of this so good and fairest Sight, that thereby my mind’s eye hath now become for me almost a thing to worship... For that the vision of the good doth not, like the sun’s beam, fire-like blaze on the eyes and make them close; nay, on the contrary, it shineth forth and maketh to increase the seeing of the eye, as far as ever a man hath the capacity to hold the inflow of the radiance that the mind alone can see. Not only does it come more swiftly to us, but it does us no harm, and is instinct with all immortal life. They who are able to drink in a somewhat more than others of this sight, oftentimes from out the body fall asleep into the fairest spectacle” (CH X, 4-5). It is not an experience because there is no experiencer, nor is it exact to talk about “journey” because the path is within oneself (*nous*), who is involved in the *cosmic* or *unitive consciousness* at the same time, since, ultimately, that is, from the metaphysical point of view, the only real viewpoint, “there is no way, no place is there about thee, nor any other thing or things that are. All are in thee, all are from thee” (CH V, 10). The rest is a mirage of the *logos*: “I would, my son, that thou hadst even passed right through thyself, as they who dream in sleep yet sleepless” (CH XIII, 4). In effect, from that “gnosis”, the ordinary life is revealed like a dream or mirage that we can only be aware of, fact that equals “awakening”, that is, “regeneration”. In such a state of

existence, the previous vital circumstance is no longer recognized as own, and the body and the thoughts disappear or are considered as an alien addition: "I cannot see myself now". Thus, the description of the world's experience made by an "initiate", a mystic or a wise man, is revealed as a vision without "*logos*", without "ego", without sense of appropriation of the things, that is, a vision from the *nous*, pure supraindividual consciousness. At this point, when the disciple asks Hermes how to attain regeneration, he is answered: "throw out of work the body's senses, and thy divinity shall come to birth. Purge from thyself the brutish torments, things of matter" (*CH XIII*, 7). Next, Hermes instructs Tat about man's tormentors that prevent him from quieting or suspending his sensory activity. The number of these tormentors is personified by twelve particular vices, to which the different virtues are opposed, as a kind of ladder that leads to the total purification¹¹⁵.

¹¹⁵ -"I have tormentors then in me, O father?"

- "Ay, no few, my son; fearful ones and manifold".

- "I do not know them, father".

- "Torment the first is this not-knowing, son; the second one is grief; the third, intemperance; the fourth, concupiscence; the fifth, unrighteousness; the sixth is avarice; the seventh, error; the eighth is envy; the ninth, guile; the tenth is anger; eleventh, rashness; the twelfth is malice. These are in number twelve; but under them are many more, my son; and creeping through the prison of the body they force the man that's placed within to suffer in his senses".

The twelve vices have their corresponding virtues: "Knowledge of God hath come to us, and when this comes, my son, non-knowing is cast out. Knowledge of joy hath come to us, and on its coming, son, sorrow will flee away to them who give it room. The power that follows joy do I invoke, thy self-control. O power most sweet! Let us most gladly bid it welcome, son! How with its coming doth is chase intemperance away! Now fourth, on continence I call, the power against desire. This step, my son, is righteousness' firm seat. For without judgment see how hath chased unrighteousness away. We are made righteous, son, by the departure of unrighteousness. Power sixth I call to us, that against avarice, sharing-with-all. And now that avarice is gone, I call on truth. And error flees, and truth is with us. See how the measure of the good is full, my son, upon truth's coming. For envy hath gone from us; and unto truth is joined the good as well, with life and light. And now no more doth any torment of the darkness venture nigh, but vanquished all have fled with whirling wings" (*CH XIII*, 8-9). This hermetic purifying route is connected with the journey through the twelve hours described in the Egyptian funerary literature. The relationship between these twelve torments of Hermetism and the faults or bad thoughts (*logismoi*) that, according to Origen, Evagrius and other Coptic monks, disturbed the mystic's impassiveness on his way towards contemplation is evident as well.

In several paragraphs, it is taught that the sight of beauty, enlightenment, understanding, in sum, contemplation, is achieved after a certain purification whose clearest result is calmness or *aklinēs* (equivalent to the *apatheia* of the Coptic Christian monks) and whose symptoms are: a) the inhibition of the senses and b) the silence of or detachment from the thoughts, “for knowledge [*gnosis*] of the good is holy silence and a giving holiday to every sense” (*CH* X, 5).

The *holy silence* is a meditative discipline or practice destined to achieve detachment and unidentification with the thoughts, that is, the nullification of the ordinary mental activity based on reasonings and concepts (*logos*), that gives way to the *nous*. At the beginning of the meditative practice, “not yet have we the power our intellect to unfold and gaze upon the beauty of the good” (*CH* X, 5), so we must insist on mental silence (*sigē*): “Be still, my son” (*CH* XIII, 16). “Only then wilt thou upon it gaze when thou canst say no word concerning it” (*CH* X, 5). When collecting or stopping the thoughts, the *logos* keeps quiet and makes the room for the rise of the intellect (*nous*). But it is to be noticed that we are not talking here about a sort of vow of silence, but about a *mental technique* or *discipline* that must lead to another form of cognition. Oral silence or, at least, disregard of mundane conversations is a consequence of understanding that the true language is ineffable, “for he who spendeth time in arguing and hearing arguments, doth shadow fight. For God, the father and the good, is not to be obtained by speech or hearing”. In any case, reflective meditation can only lead us up to the threshold of the knowledge of God; the only way to jump “beyond” is the verbal sacrifice (*logikē thysia*) or “sacrifice of the word”, which is at the same time silence and interior recollection. This idea of silence comes from the Egyptian *Wisdoms*: “Come (Thoth), that you may rescue me, the silent one! Oh Thoth, the pleasant well for a thirsty man in the desert, it is closed for the one who has found his speech, it is open for the silent one. May the silent one come, that he finds the

well...”¹¹⁶. Certainly, in the literature of the “Egyptian instructions” or “wisdoms”, it is taught that the best way towards contemplation is the mental silence. It constitutes the deepest prayer (*Maxims of Any*) because it involves an offering of the thoughts and perceptions.

Regarding the inhibition or suppression of the senses, Hermes recommends Tat, “throw out of work the body’s senses, and thy divinity shall come to birth; purge from thyself the brutish torments, things of matter” (*CH XIII*, 7). Afterwards, he adds, “who then doth by his mercy gain this birth in God, abandoning the body’s senses, knows himself to be of light and life and that he doth consist of these and thus is filled with bliss” (*CH XIII*, 10). Another text vividly describes the characteristics of a mystical rapture or ecstasy: deprived of the hearing and visual perceptions, the body remains paralyzed, unable to move, whereas the intellect is inflamed and driven to the sight of beauty: “Neither can he who perceiveth it, perceive aught else, nor he who gazeth on it, gaze on aught else, nor hear aught else, nor stir his body any way. Staying his body is every sense and every motion he stayeth still. And shining then all round his mind, it shines through his whole soul, and draws it out of body, transforming all of him to essence” (*CH X*, 6). Since it is an ineffable experience that transcends the sensory perceptions, one can only say about it that “oftentimes the intellect doth leave the soul, and at that time the soul nor sees nor understands, but is just like a thing that hath no reason. Such is the power of intellect” (*CH X*, 24: NF I, 125, 10-12).

Asclepius, 32 adds that, “by the mind’s concentration”, the human consciousness achieves the understanding or “*gnosis*” of the world’s consciousness, above which there is eternity and deification, so “that by the mind’s concentration, intellect can reach to the intelligence and the discernment of the quality of world’s consciousness.

¹¹⁶ Many other examples, like *Amenemope* XI, 13, can be consulted in J-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, Quebec, 1978 (vol. I) and 1982 (vol. II); this particular quotation is in vol. II, pp. 300; Barucq-Daumas, cit., pp. 202 and 360.

The world's intellect, on the other hand, extends to the eternity and to the gnosis of the gods who are above itself". But, during the meditative practice that should lead to contemplation, the *mental concentration* the Hermetist talks about finds a new obstacle: "and thus it comes to pass for men, that we perceive the things in heaven, as it were through a mist, as far as the condition of the human consciousness allows" (*Asclepius*, 32). The topic of the mist is frequent among the contemplative mystics; it is enough to mention the cloud of ignorance or unknowing of Dionysius the Areopagite and the medieval contemplative mystics. Anyway, it represents the last and most intimate obstacle before attaining the intimacy with God. The darkness symbolizes the transition from a state of individual consciousness to a state of impersonal consciousness where the space-time conditionings have been overcome. For the Hermetists, *by means of a sustained effort of mental concentration on that silence of thoughts*, it is found out that there is "something" beyond or "outside" the body and the ordinary process of sensory perception, and that, besides, that "something" has a supraindividual nature. By means of the "regeneration", it is understood or verified that there is no individual or "separate" souls and that such a belief is but a mirage caused by the discursive mind (*logos*), since "from one soul, the All soul, come all these souls which are made to revolve in all the cosmos, as though divided off" (*CH X*, 7). That is why it seems absurd to talk about soul's birth or death: "There is no death for aught of things that are; the thought this word conveys, is either void or fact, or simply by the knocking off a syllable what is called 'death', doth stand for 'deathless'. For death is of destruction, and nothing in the cosmos is destroyed" (*CH VIII*, 1). Can it be said more clearly?

One of these hermetic texts narrates the especially significant moment of the disciple's enlightenment: "And now, my son, be still and solemn silence keep! Thus shall the mercy that flows on us from God not cease (...)" (*CH XIII*, 8). The blank space of the original text, "...", tries to symbolize the lapse of time (days, months, years)

needed by the Hermetist to purify himself until Hermes proclaims that the event has already happened. In *NHC* VI, 6, 55-57, a ritual osculation or embrace accompanies the regeneration or enlightenment (“the Power that is light”).

And, what happens after the first ecstasy and the vision of the ineffable? Is it possible to reproduce that experience again or even settle in it? In effect, the die is cast; it should not be even necessary to turn to the hackneyed metaphor of the mystic, formerly enraptured by the presence of God, who longs to contemplate Him again and who does not know how to leave the *dark night of the spirit*. The *Hermetica*, in this point, refuse to attribute all volitional action or individual effort to the mystic, because he is assumed to be abandoned to the mysterious power that works behind the vision of God. “The sight hath this peculiar charm, it holdeth (*katechei*) fast and draweth unto it those who succeed in opening their eyes, just as, they say, the magnet draweth iron” (*CH* IV, 11)¹¹⁷.

X.- THIRD DEGREE; THE “GOOD END” (SOLARIZATION OR ENLIGHTENMENT)

In the Egyptian metaphysics and *mythology* (in the sense of Sacred History), there is a god or metaphysical concept called *Aker* or *Akerou*, represented with two lions sitting back-to-back while holding the sun disk-gate. Sometimes, the double lion is replaced by the two jackals of Anubis. This is the way it appears drawn in several tombs (Seti I, Tutmose III, Amenophis II, etc.). In the tomb of Ramesses VI, the double lion appears standing within the primal waters, above an inscription that says “Aker”, followed by an ellipse, above another inscription that explains that *Aker* and *Shu*, the god of

¹¹⁷ Plato (*Ion*, 533d), as well as Porphyry (*De Abstinencia*, 4.20), turns to the same expression, “it holdeth” (*katechei*), regarding the ecstasy or rapture of a man caused by a supernatural being.

air, are the two creators of the world. The ellipse is the simplest outline to represent the snake that bites its own tail as a symbol of the becoming of the cycles and the submission to the space-time conditionings. During the process of “regeneration”, the moment or instant immediately prior to the apotheosis or resurrection of the initiate (or the deceased in case of the *post-mortem* initiation¹¹⁸) is precisely represented with a snake that eats its own tail enclosing the initiate with the attributes of the Sun God and a laconic inscription that says, “This is the corpse”. This is the decisive *liminal* instant when death and resurrection meet.

The image of the double lion or double dog, meaning the Yesterday and the Tomorrow, represents the crucial moment of the Sun God’s resurrection. The Yesterday died, the Tomorrow does not exist. Midnight, when the sun is in its lowest point and starts to rise again, is the critical moment of the transition from death to life, from yesterday to the next day. This lowest moment of *enantiodromia* and resurrection is *Aker*, name that, precisely because of this, means “this moment”, “now”. Therefore, *Aker* represents the a-spatial and a-temporal “moment” when death and resurrection, the yesterday and the tomorrow, are transcended. In chapter 17, the *Book of the Dead* seems to point out that *Aker* is the door “to the Island of the just”, to the “now” or “moment” when time stops¹¹⁹: “Mine is yesterday, I know tomorrow... Yesterday is Osiris, tomorrow is Re... (but) we abide”.

¹¹⁸ In the *Book of the Amduat*, post-mortem regeneration comes to everyone in the “last hour” and is represented with many old, weak people who get into the tail of the huge snake (the guardian of the door of time and cycles) and come out of its mouth being as young as children.

¹¹⁹ A. Piankoff, “Deux variantes du Chapitre VI du Livre des Morts sur les ouchab-tis”, in *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte*, Cairo, 49 (1949), pp. 169-170. C. de Wit, *Le rôle et le sens du lion dans l’Égypte ancienne*, Paris, 1951, pp. 91-106. It is indispensable to read the several essays by René Guénon compiled under the title of *Symbols of Sacred Science*, Hillsdale (NY), 2004, for example, the chapters dedicated to the symbolism of “The Narrow Door”, “The Guardians of the Holy Land”, “The Eye of the Needle”, “The Seven Rays and the Rainbow”, etc.

For that very reason, *Aker* is also represented as the Sun Gate to the Beyond whose passing is guarded by the two lions that are described this way by the sub-inscriptions: "These are the ones who open the path, the agents of resurrection". Actually, *Aker* also collaborates in seeking and reunifying the dispersed bones of Osiris' corpse and carries the Sun God's corpse. In the funerary literature, he who aspires to pass through the Sun Gate, personified by the disk held by the double lion or the ellipse in the shape of a snake whose twelve rings represent the zodiac constellations¹²⁰, invokes *Aker* so that he may receive him fraternally: "O Aker, I have followed your path... open your arms, receive me. Here I am, I must dispel your darkness"¹²¹ (*Book of Caverns*). In sum, *Aker* is the guardian of the Sun Gate, the Lord of Time who is beyond Time and rules the passage or border between this world subject to time factors and the "other world" that is not properly a place, but a state non-conditioned by space-time that implies the consciousness of immortality. Significantly, the name of the Gate is "*The one that swallows everything*", because one can only pass through it when being *nothing* or *nobody*, though it also has other names, such as, for instance, "Knives", because it cannot be crossed materially, but spiritually¹²². Whoever may walk through the gate goes out of the cosmos, that is,

¹²⁰ The entrance or exit from the zodiac ring, represented with the serpent *Ouroboros*, takes place through solstitial gates that seem to be referred to in *CH* VIII, 4; XI, 2; XII, 15 and *Asclepius*, 13.

¹²¹ On the occasion of the description of the trial of the deceased before embarking on the Nile on his way to their grave, Diodorus Siculus (I, 92, 1-6) mentions, "the boatman whom the Egyptians call in their language Charon" (*charo*=boat) and, since his name means "he who sees behind", he is usually depicted as looking back in order to symbolize the stopping of time (the same as Mithra riding the constellation of Taurus). From here come the name and the iconographic representation of the Greek and Etruscan Acheron or Charon. As a divinity that transcends or facilitates the passing through space-time, he is also philologically related to the Iranian *Zurvan Akarana*, who is depicted as guarding the exit gate of the zodiac ring.

¹²² Regarding the initiatic topic of the narrow door that conceals knives, or the chattering rocks that put the candidate's aptitude for the heroic initiation to the test, vid. A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Symplegades", in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, vol. 7, no. 1, World Wisdom, 1973; as well as I. Couliano, *Más allá de este mundo; paraísos, purgatorios e infiernos; un viaje a través de las culturas religiosas*, Barcelona, 1993.

out of this space-time universe, to access the world of the gods. From the viewpoint of the meditative practice, *Aker* dramatizes the crucial moment when the experienced meditator, plunged into the darkness of the liminal states, is about to be swallowed by the emptiness and must decide whether to retreat or to surrender, giving the absolute control.

Similarly, the final phase of the spiritual rebirth recorded in the hermetic texts involves a transformation or *palingenesis* by virtue of which takes place a real change of identity. In *CH I*, 26, using a common expression of the Egyptian mystic literature, it is said that “this is the good end for those who have gained knowledge: to be made one with God”. Due to this “good end” (*to agathon telos*), the old man, with a real name and constrained by body and sensory circumstances, is now a new man or, more strictly, a refresh or *hierophany* of the archetypal Man¹²³ or “essential Man”, the First Man (*anthrōpos*) who personifies the Humankind (for example in *CH I*, 12-16) in the pure, strong moment of the origin, when the things were thought or created by the Divinity¹²⁴. In this sense, “regeneration” implies a return movement *to* or *into* God. As regeneration is only possible outside this world, we must leave it momentarily. That is why the return by means of rebirth is considered as a repeat or refresh of the making of the world, when the sun rose “for the first

¹²³ This essential Man is used as a general framework to build an Egyptian temple. Schwaller de Lubicz’s research about the floor plan of the Luxor Temple reveals the existence of a large drawing of a human body on the pavement, whose limbs and vital organs match the different shrines and chambers of the building. Thus, the Luxor Temple seems to be a building consecrated to the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm, as well as “a book explaining the secret functions of the organs and nerve centers”; R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, *Le temple dans l’homme*, Paris, 1979.

¹²⁴ Zosimus, based on Egyptian sources, comments the double consideration of this essential Man: as a plural physical manifestation and as a spiritual being that dwells within; “The First Man is called by us Thoth and by them Adam... naming him symbolically according to his body... whereas his Inner Man, the spiritual... his authentic name I know not... but that for common use is Light” (*On the Letter Omega*, 6).

time”¹²⁵. Because of this too, in the *Book of the Caverns*, the re-born one, assimilated to the Sun God, announces “See, I come into the world I emerged from, I settle in the place of my first birth”¹²⁶.

With several words, the *Corpus Hermeticum* defines that state of “good end”, of “imperturbable” calmness or stillness. In *CH* XIII, 11, the disciple confesses, “regeneration... made me steadfast” (*aklinēs*). In *CH* XIII, 21, it is defined as enlightenment (*epipephōtistai*) and, in *CH* V, 3, the verb to dazzle (*kataugazō*) is used to describe immortality. Already in the Egyptian funerary literature, especially in the *Book of the Dead*, whose original name was precisely *Book of the Going out in Daylight*, the concept “going out in daylight” referred to the new birth or regeneration that lets the spirit receive the sunlight, that is, identify itself with the divinity. One of the symptoms of peace or bliss (*aklinēs*) is the consciousness of immortality, that is, the consciousness installed into the eternal present. When there is no sense of appropriation of anything, the thought stops identifying itself with the own memories that formed the small personal story. Neither is there a sense of the future, for the man settled in the *aklinēs* knows that such an idea is but a mirage because of which the ignorant one constantly delays the moment to face the present. The man who has attained such an enlightenment experiences the immortality of the eternal present, the Now: he has passed through *Aker*. That is why one of the most beautiful hermetic passages says: “None can seize thine hour or time...” (*CH* V, 11).

Other passages of the *Corpus Hermeticum* are more explicit on the descriptions of the new state of “enlightenment” that characterizes the already reborn man. As mentioned before, the vision, which is a God’s gift that cannot be taught, may be explained as an “exit” to the light of the mind (*nous*) or as a birth in the mind; “Whenever I see myself the uncompounded vision brought to birth out of God’s

¹²⁵ *Book of Amduat*, II, 191.

¹²⁶ A. Piankoff, *Le livre des Quererts*, 1946, pl. 15, 3 ff.

mercy, I have passed through myself into a body that can never die, and now I am not what I was before: but I am born in mind (*nous*)” (*CH XIII*, 3). This implies a change in the ordinary sensory perception or, rather, in the interpretation derived from the cognitive processes, for now it is not known by means of the reasoning (*logos*) based on the subject/object relationship, but using a direct intellectual or intuitive knowledge of things; “no longer with the sight my eyes afford I look on things, but with the energy the mind doth give me through the powers” (*CH XIII*, 11). There are no borders, no limits between subjects and objects in that higher modality, because all is part of all without any interruption: “Father, I see the All, I see myself in *nous*... This is, my son, regeneration: no more to look on things from body’s view-point, a thing three ways in space extended” (*CH XIII*, 13). From that state of existence, the presumably individual forms are irrelevant because they are seen as part of all; “I have had my former composed form dismembered for me. I am no longer touched, yet have I touch; I have dimension too; and yet am I a stranger to them now” (*CH XIII*, 3). The introversion into the mind leads to realize that the human consciousness is a mirage within the cosmic consciousness, so that, when transcending the space-time conditionings, it is verified that, at the same time, “in heaven am I, in earth, in water, air; I am in animals, in plants; I’m in the womb, before the womb, after the womb; I’m everywhere” (*CH XIII*, 11). But all this is too subtle for the ordinary mind (*logos*) because it is missed by the normal perception of the senses; “Thou seest me with eyes, my son, but what I am thou dost not understand even with fullest strain of body and of sight” (*CH XIII*, 3)¹²⁷.

One of the most significant hermetic texts ends like this: “For that thou art whatever I may be; thou art whatever I may do; thou art

¹²⁷ As a Sufi text says: “if he walks on sand, he leaves no trace; if he walks on rocks, his feet leave their imprint. If he stands in the sun, he projects no shadow; in darkness, a light emanates from him”. Quotation in René Guénon, “Is the spirit in the body or the body in the spirit?”, in *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, Hillside (NY), 2004, p. 158

whatever I may speak. For thou art all, and there is nothing else which thou art not. Thou art all that which doth exist, and thou art what doth not exist” (*CH V*, 11). This expression is to be highlighted: “For that thou art... I may be”; it already appears in the *Book of the Dead*: “I am he... and he is I” (ch. 64)¹²⁸. In that movement of the light towards the mind-*nous*, the human consciousness has stopped identifying itself with the body and the individual thoughts in order to integrate with the cosmic consciousness. In order to know God, we need to identify ourselves with Him, “for like is knowable to like alone” (*CH XI*, 20). How to explain that state of the Being in which there is no sense of the “I”? What is more, how to explain the paradox that the vision, understanding or realization of being part of a unique Consciousness may be verified from an individual body-mind?

Certainly, if there is no identification with a personal “I”, there is no “you” and no “he” either, because only the Ineffable exists, “the One and Only” (*CH X*, 14). That is why this way to understand the universe that characterizes the “initiate” is represented in the different traditions: Vedic, Greek, Jewish, Christian, Islamic..., with the formula “you are I and I am you”. With this, they want to express that, if “I” am “you”, strictly speaking, it is because there is neither an “I” nor a “you”, but just the Only One Being. Therefore, the belief in an individual existence is a consequence of an error of perspective.

¹²⁸ Also found in *Greek Magical Papyri*: “For you am I, and I are you; your name is mine, and mine is yours” (*PGM VIII*, 38-40; also in *XIII*, 793, *V*, 145 and *XII*, 227).

MEDITATION IN THE JEWISH TRADITION (KABBALAH)

“Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee.” (Ps. 73:25).

“I am Yahweh and there is none else” (Is. 45:5).

Etymologically, the word *Kabbalah* comes from the verb *Kabbal*, which means “to receive”. Therefore, it refers to the “tradition”, to what is “received” (*kibbel*), that is, to a “teaching that passes from mouth to ear” and dates back to the prophets of the Old Testament. But, like all spiritual transmission or tradition, the inner core of the Kabbalah cannot be intellectually taught because one can only internalize it, experience it and make of it a way of life. In fact, many Kabbalists explain that the Kabbalah is not *learned*, but *remembered*, since it is, essentially, an attempt to recover the state of intimacy with God that the Humankind or the archetypal Man (Adam) had in Paradise before his Fall. The innermost core of the teaching is symbolized with the transmission of the secret Name of God as the highest, most comprehensible manifestation of the divinity. Beyond that, the experience is ineffable, nonverbal, and cannot be communicated or taught, but lived and experienced. That is why the Kabbalah masters tell their disciples “I can tell you no more”, “I have already explained it with the words of the mouth”, “this is a secret...”¹²⁹.

¹²⁹ During the last few decades, the researches on the Kabbalah have been enriched by the notable works of authors such as Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York, 2006; *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1995; *Conceptos básicos del Judaísmo*, Madrid, 1998. The topics treated in these works have been developed by the same author in *Kabbalah*, New York, 1978, where he gathered his works published in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Very clarifying is Jay Michaelson, *Everything is God. The Radical Path of Nondual Judaism*,

According to an eminent contemporary Kabbalist, “Kabbalah is the traditional and most commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism”¹³⁰. As such, it contains doctrines about metaphysics, cosmology, psychology, magic, etc., but, essentially, its innermost core is about the science or art of meditation.

Regarding the origin of the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystics explain that God, in Mount Sinai, gave Moses not only the written Law (the Torah¹³¹), but also an unwritten Torah that had to be entrusted or taught *from mouth to ear* only to those who sought a greater recognition by God. The Kabbalah would precisely be the esoteric part of that oral Law. Other Kabbalists go even further and date the origin of the tradition back to the angels who were instructed by God. One of them was the Archangel Metatron, who, transfigured into Enoch,

Boston, 2009. It is also useful to consult Moshe Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Albany (NY), 1988 and the synthesis of it made by the same author, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven-London, 1988. Due to its clarity and empirical approach, the reading of Aryeh Kaplan’s works is essential: *Meditation and Kabbalah*, York Beach (ME), 1982; *Meditation and the Bible*, York Beach (ME), 1988; *Sefer Yetzirah. The Book of Creation. In Theory and Practice*, York Beach (ME), 1997. As well, P. Besserman, *Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism. An essential introduction to the philosophy and practice of the mystical traditions of Judaism*, Boston, 1997; and other works that will be mentioned at the appropriate time.

¹³⁰ G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, cit., p. 3. According to this author, the Kabbalah encompasses mysticism (experience that, due to its nature, cannot be transmitted but by symbols or metaphors) and esoterism or metaphysics (intellectual, intuitive knowledge leading to the meditative practices). However, he specifies that the Kabbalah is not a sort of mysticism if this is defined as the quest for the communion with God by means of the annihilation of the individual (*bittul ha-yesh*), since many Kabbalists pursue their realization, considered as an individual achievement; according to Scholem, if mysticism is defined as the direct, immediate union with God, then there is no mysticism at all within Judaism. But if mysticism is defined as an experiential consciousness or perception of divine realities, then there is a Jewish mysticism with multiple forms and facets. Anyway, even in the highest ecstasy, the infinite abyss that lies between the soul and the God-King on his throne cannot be overcome. On the contrary, in Christian mysticism, the unifying decision around God appears more explicitly in the archetype of the monk as a *monachos*, not in the sense of solitary, but undivided, unified. About this, it is also interesting P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, New York, 1992.

¹³¹ The word *Torah* also means “watering”, because the word of God is like rain-water that falls from the sky to make the land germinate and, ultimately, to restore the garden of Eden.

“walked with God; and he was not, for God took him” (Gen. 5:24), that is, he never knew death. He reappeared afterwards under the shape of King Melchizedek, who initiated Abraham (Gen. 14:18-20), who in turn initiated Isaiah, and he did Jacob, and, by means of an uninterrupted transmission, the initiation reached Moses, to whom the Lord spoke in these terms: “I revealed myself in a bush and spoke to Moses... I told him many wondrous things, and showed him the secrets of the times and the end of the times. I commanded him, saying: ‘These words thou shall publish openly, and these thou shall keep secret’” (2 Esd. 14:4-6).

Actually, Jewish mysticism in general has focused its doctrinal and practical techniques and methods on the three examples of visions or ecstatic raptures mentioned in the Old Testament; 1st, the vision of Jacob’s ladder, on which angels ascended and descended; 2nd, the vision of the burning bush of Moses, by which God Himself reveals His Sacred Name; and 3rd, the vision of the chariot and palaces of Ezekiel. Since ancient times, it has been considered that such accounts contain some esoteric information that show or facilitate the method to try to reproduce such prophetic raptures or visions.

The Talmud mentions the *sitre Torah* or *raze Torah* (secrets of the Torah), which are possessed by Kabbalists, that is, by the *ba’alei ha-sod* (masters of the mystery), the *maskilim* (those who understand), the *chakhamei lev* (the wise-hearted; vid. Ex. 28:3). In the Zohar, they are called *benei heikhala de-malka* (children of the King’s palace) or *yade’ei middin* (those who know the perfect measures), *inon de-allu u-nefaku* (those who entered [the garden] and left [in peace]) or *ba’alei ha-avodah* (lords of the service [to God]).

The Talmud and the written Torah have several senses or meanings that are to be suitably puzzled out. Origen already mentioned that a “Hebrew” wise man had confessed him that the Holy Scrip-

tures are like a large house with many closed rooms. Outside each door lies a key, but it is not the right one, so it is necessary to find it¹³². In a symbolic sense, it is said that each word has six hundred thousand “faces” or meanings, the same as the number of children of Israel, so it is only possible to access the hidden meanings of the word of God with the suitable dedication and disposition, or using a Kabbalistic expression, the secret Name of God. Certainly, the word (the Name) of God may be “black, but comely” (Song 1:5). Amongst the different examples that illustrate this, I will mention the following: some Kabbalists explain that, in order to know the secret Name of God, they must *realize* the verse 1:3 of the Song of Songs: “Therefore do the virgins (*Alamot*) love thee”, but, in order to do it, it is to be noticed that the text does not say *Alamot*, but *Al mot* (above death), so it must be then translated as “therefore doth he who is above death love thee”, which means that, when a man is pious, he will be loved even by the Angel of Death, who will flank him in order to know the Name of God.

I.- SOURCES AND TEXTS

In order to explain its meditative practices, Kabbalistic literature uses rabbinic commentaries (Talmud) on biblical books, especially the Pentateuch, the Psalms, the Song of Songs, the Book of Ruth and the Proverbs (*Misle*) of Solomon. The first references to a Jewish meditative practice appear in certain accounts called *Ma’aseh Merkabah* (literally, “Doctrine or Work of the Chariot”), regarding the chariot (*Merkabah*) described in the book of Ezekiel and in 1 Chr. 28:18. The core topics date back to the 1st and 2nd centuries, although their textual development began in the 3rd century. Their aim was to experience the divine reality by means of an ecstatic journey through the seven “palaces” (*Hekhalot*) or heavenly mansions, overcoming

¹³² Origen, *Selecta in Psalmos* (on Psalm 1), in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 12, col. 1080.

the jealousy and the hostility of the guardian of the threshold, until reaching Paradise and contemplating the Throne of God. Likewise, during the first few centuries of our Era, some texts about meditative practices and techniques were written and later grouped under the title of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* ("Doctrine or Acts of Creation"), for they were based on the first words of the Genesis regarding Creation (*Bereshit...*).

Among the most studied Kabbalistic texts, the *Sefer Yetzirah* (literally, Book of Formation), the *Sefer ha-Bahir* and the *Zohar* are to be highlighted. The first of them is an instruction manual written between the 2nd and the 4th centuries, describing certain exercises essentially based on the combination of two different meditation techniques; the permutation of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet with the ten Sefirot, totaling the 32 paths of wisdom. The *Sefer ha-Bahir* appears in Provence between 1150 and 1200, influenced by a very much earlier Gnostic and Neoplatonic tradition¹³³ that changes the vision of the *Merkabah* into God's powers that emanate (aeons) from the divine Glory (*Kabod*).

For its part, the *Zohar*¹³⁴ or "book of the Splendor" is an extensive commentary on the Pentateuch and the Torah that was written in Castile at the end of the 13th century, most likely by Moses ben Shem Tov of León, whose extraordinary diffusion was due to the fact that it was deliberately written in the old style of a *Midras* or commentary on the Torah, making many Jews believe that it was a really ancient text full of authority.

The Kabbalah, despite being a typical esoteric trend of the Jewish mysticism and religiosity¹³⁵, has been enriched by contributions of

¹³³ Vid. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, cit., p. 47.

¹³⁴ *El Zohar*, 3 vols., Barcelona, 2006 [*The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 7/12 vols., Stanford, 2004-].

¹³⁵ Although the list of the main Kabbalistic currents arisen since the Middle Ages is not one of the aims of this study, it must be at least mentioned that the medieval

other esoteric and religious currents, from the nearest ones, like the community of Qumran, to Gnosticism or Neoplatonism. In effect, the influence of the Essenes of Qumran has been noted; this is the case, for instance, of certain linguistic and liturgical similarities in prayers, such as the custom to finish the psalms with the *kedushah* or “sanctification”, pronounced by Isaiah in the Temple while contemplating the cherubs: “Holy, Holy, Holy, YHWH Sebaot, the whole earth is full of His Glory” (Is. 6:3).

The *Hekhalot* (Palaces) and the *Merkabah* literatures originally had some similarities to Gnostic texts such as the book *Pistis Sophia* of the 3rd and 4th centuries, and the *Greek Magical Papyri*¹³⁶. Likewise, the Kabbalistic distinction of the three supreme levels of the soul (*Nefesh*, *Ruach*, and *Neshamah*) comes from the speculations of Neoplatonic Jews such as Abraham ibn Ezra or Abraham bar Hiyya¹³⁷.

origin of the Kabbalah may be located in Spain (Toledo and Girona were some of the most important centers) and Provence, and also highlight Moses ben Nahmanides (1194-1270) and Abraham Abulafia (1240-1292), who, after traveling throughout Spain, Italy and the East and contacting some Kabbalistic masters and Sufi brotherhoods, wrote several treatises on initiation to meditation, including techniques of combinations of letters and Names of God. The expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 contributed to spread the Kabbalah through Europe, Asia and Northern Africa, up to the extent that one of the groups settled in Palestine, some time later, created the well-known circle of Safed, whose most representative member was Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (1522-1570) and even Isaac Luria (though he joined the community of Safed only three years before his death). Regarding this, vid. A. Muñoz-Huberman, *Las raíces y las ramas. Fuentes y derivaciones de la Cábala hispanohebraica*, Mexico, 1993, pp. 105 ff.; Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany (NY), 1988.

¹³⁶ The similarities between the formulas or spells to get an assistant *daemon* appearing in the *Greek Magical Papyri*, and the Kabbalistic practice to form a *golem* must be pointed out; vid. *Greek Magical Papyri*, I, 1-42: “Rite for acquiring an assistant daemon”; or I, 42-195, “Spell of Phouthis, the sacred scribe, for acquiring an assistant daemon (*paredros*)”, sent to Kēryx.

¹³⁷ Due to the influence of Neoplatonic Jews, such as Abraham Ibn Ezra or Abraham Bar Hiyya, Kabbalists distinguished three supreme levels of the soul, which they called *Nefesh*, *Ruach* and *Neshamah*. *Nefesh* is derived from the root *Nafash*, “to rest”, as in Ex. 31:17; “...and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed (*nafash*)”. *Ruach* is often translated as “Spirit” or “wind”. And *Neshamah* is derived from *Neshimah*, “breath”. In order to understand the difference between the three states, Kabbalists such as Isaac Luria (Ha-Ari) employ the metaphor of God

Since the 3rd century, the Gnostic doctrine of the “aeons” that fill the pleroma influenced the conception of the ten Sephirot and 32 paths as emanations, *middot* (measures) or qualities of God. Likewise, “the earliest strata of the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, which came from the East, prove the existence of definitely Gnostic views in a circle of believing Jews in Babylonia or Syria, who connected the theory of the *Merkabah* with that of the aeons... (For its part), the doctrine of the Sephirot and the language system hint at Neopythagorean and Stoic influences”¹³⁸; the stress on the double pronunciation of the *bedge-kefat* is Stoic. The Kabbalistic concept of “elemental letters” or letters that are also elements and that, for instance, appear in the *Sefer Yetzirah* as *otiyot yesod*, is a tradition that came from the Greek concept *stoicheia*, which means “elements” as well as “letters”. The “sealing” of the limits of the universe by the Sacred Name of YHWH that, for example, appears in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, finds its corresponding Greek transcription as IAO or IEU, frequent in the Gnostic texts and *Greek Magical Papyri*, with which the borders of the cosmos are delimited. It is not known up to which extent “the author of *Sefer Yetzirah* did not yet know the symbols for the Hebrew vowels and in place of the Greek vowels he employed the Hebrew consonants *yhw*, which are both vowel letters and components of the Tetragrammaton”¹³⁹.

as a glassblower. The glassblower blows his breath (*Neshimah*) into a tube to create a vessel; he blows so that his breath, with the form of wind (*Ruach*), go through the tube and enters the vessel that must be modeled. Next, it is time to rest (*Nafash*). In Gen. 2:7, it is said “And the Lord formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath (*Neshamah*) of life”. *Neshamah* is the highest level of the soul, accessible through the *Ruach*, which acts as an intermediary. That is why, when God wants to enlighten a person, He proceeds by means of *Ruach*. It is then said that the individual has attained *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*; “Until the Spirit (*Ruach*) be poured upon us from on high” (Is. 32:15). Anyway, according to the Kabbalah, the revelation of the Glory of God derived from the soul’s (*Neshamah*) movement is higher than *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*.

¹³⁸ G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, cit. pp. 22 and 27. Regarding the influence of the Greek, Gnostic and Essene philosophy and mysticism on the Kabbalah, vid. op. cit., pp. 13, 27 and 28.

¹³⁹ G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, cit. p. 27.

In conclusion, it is likely that the *Merkabah* Jewish mysticism is a derivation from Jewish Gnosticism, from which it took: 1st, the techniques of permutation of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet; 2nd, the importance of divine Names; 3rd, the passwords, signs and seals to pass through the heavenly mansions; and 4th, the arithmological speculations¹⁴⁰. A particularly interesting case is the *books of Ieu*¹⁴¹, which describe the ascent of the Gnostic through the sixty heavenly mansions he must pass through by previously memorizing the name of their guardians, seals, diagrams, maps, etc., and especially the name of the sixty *Ieus* derived from the original *Ieu* (*Ieu* is the phonetic equivalence to YHWH). The difficulty to learn such an amount of concepts drove the divinity to take pity on the pilgrim up to the extent to reveal him the master key of names, numbers and seals so that he may continue his ascent. However, as the *books of Ieu* were translated from Coptic into Greek, their cultural horizon may be positioned at the Egyptian esoteric circle, where the passing of the soul through the different mansions is described by the *Book of the Dead*. And, actually, as subsequent researchers have pointed out, Gnosticism¹⁴², in turn, feeds from the Greek magical and hermetic texts, in turn influenced by the Egyptian and Assyrio-Babylonian culture. Thus, for instance, the presence of numerological and philological techniques of permutation has been documented in the Assyrio-Babylonian tablets¹⁴³. There are also evidences of the influence flown into the Kabbalah by the Christian ascetic and Sufi literatures¹⁴⁴, mostly since the 11th century on.

¹⁴⁰ G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, New York, 1965.

¹⁴¹ The English transcription and translation can be found in Violet MacDermot, *The Books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, Leiden, 1978.

¹⁴² Regarding the Gnostic meditation and visualization techniques, vid. Giovanni Casadio, "La visione in Marco il Mago e nella Gnosi di tipo sethiano", in *Augustinianum* 29 (1989), pp. 123-146.

¹⁴³ This is Alasdair Livingstone's thesis, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Work of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, Oxford, 1986.

¹⁴⁴ Regarding this Jewish trend with Sufi influence, the Kabbalists who lived in the Islamic Spain (Al-Andalus) must be mentioned. They even wrote in Arabic and not in Hebrew; this is the case of *Chovot ha-Levavot* (Duties of the heart) written by Bahya Ibn Paquda.

II.- AIM OF MEDITATION

The final purpose of the Kabbalist or mystic is metaphorically described as to attain the vision of “the face of God”, to know the “name of God”, to enjoy His presence... Moses symbolizes the desire of every mystic when he asks his Lord: “what is [Thy] name?”; “show me now Thy way”; “show me Thy glory” (Ex. 3:13; 33:13; 33:18; cf. also Num. 12:8). More precisely, the quest for Enlightenment or spiritual Realization is called *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*, literally “Holy Spirit”. This expression appears repeatedly in the Bible. For example, in the *Psalms*, King David describes Enlightenment or the contemplation of God as “clean of heart”, “rightness of spirit”, “union with the Holy Spirit”:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence,
and take not Thy Holy Spirit [*Ruach Ha-Kodesh*] from me.” (PS.
51, 10-12).

Obviously, as the ways of the Lord are inscrutable and the wind of the Holy Spirit blows wherever it wants, the union with *Ruach Ha-Kodesh* is a gift that “descends” regardless of the ascetic effort made. Nonetheless, it is usually said that the effort to purify oneself during the spiritual quest is not a sufficient condition, though necessary, to achieve the Grace (*Ruach Ha-Kodesh*). Therefore, the Kabbalah recommends different methods, such as an intense devotion, the Torah study, prayer, etc. and, especially, the meditation, considered as a method to achieve the contemplation (*hitbonenut*) of God¹⁴⁵.

¹⁴⁵ “Meditation is primarily a means of attaining spiritual liberation. Its various methods are designated to loosen the bond of the physical, allowing the individual to ascend to the transcendental, spiritual realm. One who accomplishes this successfully is said to have attained *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*, the Holy Spirit, which is the

In some passages, the Bible describes the mystical or prophetic experience as something somatically traumatic, but spiritually delicious. In Gen. 15:12, it is said that, when Abraham went into a trance, his limbs shuddered, his body fainted and “a horror of great darkness fell upon him”. Daniel himself explains, “I saw this great vision, and there remained no strength in me; for my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength. Yet heard I the voice of His words; and when I heard the voice of His words, then was I in a deep sleep on my face, and my face was toward the ground” (Dan. 10:8-9). The prophet’s senses and mind were disconnected from every external perception and he remained at the mercy of a spiritual influence. The reason of this contradictory experience is the momentary disconnection of the consciousness from the body-mind, which implies the verification of the existence of an out-of-body consciousness and the appearance of a form of special, higher cognition.

Can the mystical experience of the vision of God be described? Universal mysticism is unanimous: there is no psalm, poem, song or metaphor able to explain that state of peace and bliss. In fact, some mystics do not consider it an experience, but the verification of the real (spiritual) nature of Mankind. And, in effect, the Spirit does not consist of any state, nor can it be experienced, because it *Is* before the appearance of the whole Creation or experience. The so-called mystical experiences or visions of God are ultimately but a human interpretation of the manifestation of the Breath of God. Prophet Elijah said, “the Lord was not in the earthquake... the Lord was not in the fire” (1 Kings 19:11-12). It is written that nobody can see God: “for there shall no man see Me and live” (Ex. 33:20). As the Zohar says, everything is what is from the perspective of him who receives it, “all this is said only from our point of view, and it is relative to our knowledge” (2, 176a).

general Hebraic term for enlightenment”, A. Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, cit., p. 11.

Anyway, the contemplation of God is considered as a renewing, radical experience that kills the old man and transforms him into a new man. That is why it is called *the death by the kiss of God*: “let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth...” (Song 1:2), because the kiss that kills the false “I” provides the consciousness of the own immortality, that is to say, it kills the death itself. The *Sefer Yetzirah* describes it as a “heart running” (1, 8). This Heart is the “Heart of the heaven”, from which departed the Word of God that was manifested at Sinai: “And ye came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire unto the midst of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness. And YHWH spoke unto you out of the midst of the fire. Ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice” (Deut. 4:11-12).

That spiritual intimacy or union is here and now forever. Thus, after meditating, David says: “when I awake, I am still with Thee” (Ps. 139:18), since, as Joseph Albo (1380-1435) points out, I am not “something separate from You”. In this eternal present or *now*, Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) unifies the consciousness so that the distinction between the thinker (*Maskil*), the pure thought (*Sekhel*) and the thought concept (*Muskal*) disappears. Ultimately, it could not be said “I am Him” or “I am in You”, or “we all are in One”, because there is no “I”, no “you”, no “he”, even no “One”. Clearly, Jewish metaphysics, for example the *Sefer Yetzirah*, does not say that He is One (*Echad*), but that He is Unique (*Yachid*), because God cannot be described with any quality or adjective. In effect, the idea of “Oneness” would introduce the whole numerical series and, with it, an element of plurality. This way, “God” would be turned into another concept. God is not One, but the Only One; He admits no otherness. That is why, in the Eccl. 4:8, it is clarified that “there is One who is alone, and there is not a second; yea, He hath neither child nor brother”.

The idea that, in order to contemplate the face of God, it is necessary to empty oneself out of oneself (regarding the *ego*) is expressed in the etymology of the word “prophet”. In Hebrew, the words “prophet” and “prophecy” have a different meaning from the one usually attributed in the current language. A prophet is not he who foresees, but he who communicates with or gets close to God. In Hebrew, the word *Navie* (prophet) comes from the root *Navuv*, which means “hollow”, like Job 11:12, “A hollow man (*navuv*) would be wise”. A prophet is he who completely empties himself out of his entire *ego* to serve as a channel for the Divine Spirit. That is the way King David’s statement in Ps. 109:22 is to be interpreted: “My heart is hollow within me”, that is, emptied out of ego and full of the Spirit. The Torah defines prophecy as the communication of God with devout men who find themselves in a state of trance, sleep or suitably disposition: “If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, will make Myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream” (Num. 12:6).

If the mystic’s aspiration or goal is to attain Enlightenment or *Ruach Ha-Kodesh* (“Holy Spirit”), then, for the Kabbalist, it is obvious that, with certain qualities and under certain conditions, man can empty his ego and become a container of Wisdom (*Chokhmah*) and Understanding (*Binah*). The Bible compares them with the rainwater that can be used by anyone who has the suitable container to hold it. For example, in Is. 55:9-11, it is said that the thought of God (*Chokhmah*) is so much higher than the human mind as the sky is than the earth. The rain that falls from the sky is compared with the Wisdom that God drops among men. Nevertheless, whereas Wisdom can be achieved by means of effort and voluntary dedication, *Ruach Ha-Kodesh* comes from outside as a gift or grace of God. Enlightenment does not happen for one’s own will, but for the grace of God. Otherwise, we could not even talk about an Enlightened one, because such a state should involve no personal circumstance or individual achievement, but just a supraindividual event. That is why

there is a difference between the water (*Chokhmah*) that falls by itself, and the Breath (*Ruach Ha-Kodesh*) that is blown downwards because it is a grace given by a direct intervention of God. In sum, *Ruach Ha-Kodesh* comes from above and cannot be attained by any human effort. This *Ruach Ha-Kodesh* is the “breath of God” mentioned in Ex. 31:3, “And I have filled him with the Breath of God, in Wisdom and in Understanding and in Knowledge”. Only that Spirit can animate what is inert matter, since “He causeth His breath (*Ruach*) to blow and the waters flow” (Ps. 147:18).

III.- MEDITATION TECHNIQUES

To the profane who approaches the Kabbalah for the first time, the apparent profusion of schools, techniques and meditative methods that appears in the Kabbalistic literature may cause him the impression to be in front of a doctrinal whole dominated by the mystic’s subjectivism and free creativity. However, the apparent diversity of Kabbalistic methods and schools is but the reflection of the fact that, in the way towards God, there is no unique way: “The Kabbalah is not a single system with basic principles which can be explained in a simple and straightforward fashion, but consists rather of a multiplicity of different approaches”¹⁴⁶. According to certain people, the close conversation with God can be as eloquent as the deepest meditation. Actually, the intimacy with God is itself a form of meditation. The people with a most sensitive sight would prefer to concentrate on the light of a candle or any other object that may lead them to an experience of oneness or emptiness of thoughts. To repeat certain prayers or words can make the mind concentrate, as well as a deep state of meditation can be induced by means of the concentration on sounds, smells, flavors or even body movements. Regarding the latter, the Bible reflects some of the most common postures of the Jewish mysticism. In the Jewish tradition, it is usual the “standing pray-

¹⁴⁶ G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, cit., p. 87.

er” (*Amidah*) with feet together, emulating the posture of angels. Other texts mention the sitting prayer. Several biblical passages mention the kneeling prayer with hands spread up to heaven. Thus, Solomon “kneeled down... and spread forth his hands toward heaven” (2 Chr. 6:13). As well, Ezra says, “I fell upon my knees and spread out my hands unto the Lord my God” (Ezra 9:5). Due to its symbolism and antiquity, the so-called “prophetic position”, kneeling with head between legs, is also practiced: “Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees” (1 Kings 18:42). In addition to these postures, a series of body signs were also established, characterizing the different states of meditation, so that it was noted when the meditator should stand, sit or kneel, how to regulate breathing or react to excessive sweat, dizziness, etc. Regarding this, one of the most notable Kabbalists was the Saragossan Abraham Abulafia (1240-1300). He, as a good knower of breathing exercises, singing, body movements and Sufi (Islamic mysticism) exercises of visualization and Hindu yoga, decided to add them to the Jewish mysticism. Thus, for example, Abulafia associated certain breathing exercises¹⁴⁷ and head

¹⁴⁷ Since breathing is a mechanical or unconscious activity, it belongs to the *Chokhmah* consciousness, but, if any kind of control or self-reflection is exercised over it, then it passes to the *Binah* sphere. That implies that the conscious control of breathing is a technique to join both states of consciousness. In order to practice meditation, some predispositions are needed: “Cleanse the body and choose a lonely house where none shall hear your voice. Sit there in your closet and do not reveal your secret to any man... Abstract all your thought from the vanities of the world... And wrap yourself in a *tallit* [prayer clothing] and place your *tefillin* on your head and your arm, so that you may be fearful and in awe of the *Shekhinah*, which is with you at that time. And cleanse yourself and your garments, and if possible let them all be white, for all this greatly assists the intention of fear and love... And begin to combine small letters with great ones, to reverse them and to permute them rapidly, until your heart shall be warmed through their combinations and rejoice in their movements and in what you bring about through their permutations; and when you feel thusly that your heart is already greatly heated through the combinations... Prepare your true thoughts to imagine the Name, may He be Blessed, and with it the supernal angels. And visualize them in your heart as if they are human beings standing or sitting around you... [At the end of the process], your body begins to tremble greatly and mightily, until you think that you shall die at that time, for your soul will become separated from your body out of the great joy in attaining and knowing what you have known... till you will choose death over life... then you are ready to receive the emanated influx... Hide your face more and

movements to the visualization of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In fact, some Kabbalists maintain the thesis that the names and shapes of the Hebrew vowel points have a mystical intention, and that the head movements associated with their sounds were adopted for that purpose. Due to its symbolism, such an exercise is especially notable when associated with the letter *Aleph*, whose numerical value 1 expresses the oneness in God.

There are many techniques employed by the Kabbalists to make concentration easier. One of them consists in staring at an object (similar to the Hindu Tatrak technique) or even at every letter of the Name of God. In the book of Ezekiel, we find another way to calm the mind down: by staring into the water. This verse has a clear symbolism, since it is about the waters of River of Chebar (in Hebrew, “now”), because it represents that what we are looking for is just here and now, that is, in the eternal present, always reflected in the “water” of the consciousness.

There is another technique that enables wiping all thought from the mind, in order to attain a state of consciousness without verbal thoughts (*Chokhmah*). In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, it is said that Abraham “bound the 22 letters of the Torah to his tongue... he drew them in water, he flamed them with fire, he agitated them with breath” and “looked, saw, understood, probed, engraved and carved, and he was successful in creation” (6, 7). The Kabbalists explain that “to engrave” refers to the meditative process to draw a letter in the mind. “To carve” implies separating that letter from the rest of the thoughts focusing attention on that letter until the rest of the images and thoughts disappear. Next, the letter must be visualized in transparent air until the *Chokhmah* level is reached. Then, the letter must be immersed and observed as if through water. It is in that moment when,

be afraid of looking at God... And return to the matters of the body... and make your heart happy with your share. And know that the Lord your God loves you”; M. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany, 1988, p. 46-50.

according to the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the initiate must “engrave and carve chaos and void, mire and clay”. In this state, the shape and feeling of individuality seems to be completely dissolved in a “chaos and void” that makes the image to blur, as if seen through muddy water, until all is covered by absolute darkness, as if buried in opaque mire. In this point, no visual, physical or intellectual sensation is experienced. Then, the initiate can be taken by a *Binah* state of consciousness, in which he will find a blinding fire or light that is the level where one “flames them with fire”. From that state, Enlightenment might happen.

Music is also an important practice mentioned in the Bible to provoke the prophetic state. For instance, when Elisha tried to prepare himself to hear God’s revelations, he said, “But now bring me a minstrel. And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him” (2 Kings 3:15). As well, Samuel told Saul, “Thou shalt meet a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery and a taboret and a pipe and a harp before them; and they shall prophesy” (1 Sam. 10:5). There were other mystics, such as Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun, “who should prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals” (1 Chr. 25:1). The root of the Hebrew word that means music (*Nagen*) comes from the letter *Gimel*, which is also the origin of the word *Mug* (“to melt”), because the aim of music is to melt or soften those who listen to it. With the purpose of melting emotional resistance (haughtiness, vanity, pride) and dissolving the ego, the prophets used “to show forth Thy loving-kindness in the morning, and Thy faithfulness every night; upon an instrument of ten strings and upon the psaltery, upon the harp with a solemn meditation (*higayon*)” (Ps. 92:2-3).

The Bible also points out the most favorable moments of the day to meditate. The most suitable moment is midnight or just before dawn; “Arise, meditate in the night, in the beginning of the watches”

(Lam. 2:19). It was the right moment for King David too: "Mine eyes awaited the night watches, that I might meditate on Thy word" (Ps. 119:148). Likewise, the Kabbalah developed different techniques to avoid sleep during meditation: "I will not give sleep to mine eyes or slumber to mine eyelids" (Ps. 132:4). Those who start practicing meditation may need the discipline of a schedule or moment to meditate. It is true that, for a comprehensor of his own real nature, there is no distinction between moments or spaces because He is in every time and place. Baal Shem Tov already taught that God, meditation and daily activity were the same thing, and that the *hawwanah* or concentrated consciousness did not have to be limited to a specific moment of the day or week, but it could be practiced at any moment.

IV.- STAGES AND FORMS OF MEDITATION

In spite of the discretion and caution with which the Kabbalists have jealously kept their spiritual tradition up to the extent to jeopardize its continuity, Moshe Idel's and above all Aryeh Kaplan's¹⁴⁸ research about the traditional contemplative methods of Jewish mysticism has notably contributed to attain a deeper knowledge of them. The works of the latter author about the ancient techniques of Jewish meditation have been very useful to revive the original meaning of the Kabbalah as a spiritual tradition. The intensive study of Eastern traditional techniques, particularly non-dual the Vedanta and Sufi ones, has been employed by Kaplan to connect nowadays Kabbalah with the ancient Jewish mysticism. Thus, many texts written by Kabbalah masters have been reinterpreted, gaining a mystical sense and wealth, in tune with the intention they were written with. It is to be reminded that some Kabbalists of the 13th century, such as Abu-

¹⁴⁸ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah; New Perspectives*, New Haven-London, 1988, pp.75-111, concerning meditative and ecstatic techniques. The main works by A. Kaplan have already been cited; a large part of this work is based on them. Particularly, regarding this matter, vid. *Meditation and Kabbalah*, cit., pp 11 and 122.

lafia or Maimonides, already mentioned the close similarity between their meditative methods and the ones practiced by the Sufis: for instance, the recitation of the name of God (*Dhikr*). Thus, the stages and methods of the Kabbalah, such as the *Hagah* and *Siyach* meditations or the *Shasha* contemplation, have found their clear profile thanks to their research.

1.- Starting point: the mental flow.

It is generally thought that you create your own ideas and choose your own thoughts. But it is not like that; it is enough to close your eyes and see how countless thoughts or images, more or less emotionally colored, appear and cannot be controlled at all. It seems impossible not only to stop that flow, but also to be able to choose the kind of thoughts preferred. But the truth is that you cannot choose the kind of thoughts you want; if you could, you would always choose good thoughts, which not always happens. In large part, it happens that you cannot choose them; instead, you just react to the different kinds of thoughts that rise. When you close your eyes, you can see how all kind of ideas and images without order or coherence fleetingly cross your mind. And, when you try to concentrate on some of them, after a few seconds, you are crushed by a flood of new images and thoughts on top of the others. In sum, the brain continuously produces a sort of static or flow that, since it appears so unceasingly and constantly before the consciousness, ends up causing an impoverishing identification between the consciousness and the thought, making us believe that we are but the mind.

One of the first aims of meditation is to stop that mental flow or static in order to make meditation on God, on the Self, on the Nothing or on the Oneness easier, since, as the thoughts are infinite to God, “they are more in number than the sand” (Ps. 139:18); anyway “without lacking one of them” (Ps. 139:16).

This ordinary state of consciousness in which the mind is full of interferences, “background noise”, no matter whether we close our eyes or not, is what the Kabbalah calls Understanding (*Binah*), that is, verbal thought. When, by means of the proper concentration, it is possible to remove the mental static and the consciousness is no longer involved in ruminations, then the Wisdom (*Chokhmah*) appears, that is, a sort of pure *thought* that precedes the state of pure attention or self-consciousness, separate from the mental flow. At the beginning of the meditative technique, it is extraordinarily difficult to experience this kind of *pure thought* because, right when one has just emptied his mind, arises the *thought* “now I am not thinking of anything”. That is why the emptiness of thought (*Chokhmah*) is not to be confused with having the thought of emptiness (which implies the mode of *Binah* consciousness).

The goal of the first steps in meditation is to increase the time in that state of *Chokhmah* consciousness, of emptiness of thoughts or “pure thought”. At the beginning, it lasts just a few seconds; in the future, with perseverance, it will last longer. Ez. 1:14 refers to this meditator’s fight: “And the *Chayot* (cherubs) ran and returned, like the appearance of a flash of lightning”. The mind can, when the time come, concentrate and see the *Chayot* as a “lightning”, but just for a short while. Kabbalists point out that “to run” denotes *Chokhmah*, whereas “to return” refers to *Binah*. Even though that state is as “unstable as water” (Gen. 49:4), it can be stabilized. That is why it is said that the *Chokhmah* consciousness has two modalities: it is fluid as *water*, but it can be held or retained when it takes the form of *snow*.

Many Kabbalistic meditation techniques are based on the recitation of mantra-like mottos or sentences with a special symbolic charge. As in the Hindu tradition, this technique has the goal to free the mind from the mental flow that prevents it from stabilizing in the peace and calmness needed to achieve a state of silent attention.

The search of biblical verses or psalms especially suitable for the different states of meditation found in the visions of Ezekiel, as well as in the prayers of Moses and King David, its greatest inspiration. For instance, to recite the verses of the *Merkabah* tale that describe Ezekiel's vision or contemplation were considered especially suitable to lead the meditator to a mystical state; "Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the River of Chebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (Ez. 1:1). Curiously enough: in the original Hebrew version, this verse and some of the following ones have 72 letters, fact that confers upon them a special meaning (Ez. 1:4 or 26). In the book of the Exodus (14:19-21), there are three verses which also have exactly 72 letters each. From these three verses does the Name of the Seventy-two come, and this fact plays an important role in Kabbalistic meditation and symbolism (the 72 steps of Jacob's ladder, the 72 angels who ascend and descend on it; the 72 *signacula* extracted from the 72 verses of the Psalter, etc.).

Likewise, according to Midrash, the eleven Psalms from the 90th to the 100th are considered to be prayers pronounced by Moses himself in order to attain Enlightenment, because "Moses said these eleven Psalms in the technique of prophecy". Therefore, the mystic who recited those same prayers with the suitable attitude could contemplate *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*. With the same purpose, the Kabbalists used to recite the Psalms that King David had pronounced in order to attain Enlightenment¹⁴⁹.

¹⁴⁹ To this effect, the Talmud distinguishes, on one hand, between the Psalms recited by King David after having attained *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*, which are the ones that begin with the sentence "By David, a psalm" (*LeDavid Mizmor*), and, on the other hand, the Psalms that begin with the sentence "A Psalm by David" (*Mizmor Le-David*), which are the ones invoked to attain Enlightenment. According to this, at least eighteen Psalms were specifically composed to achieve the highest degree of contemplation.

There are in the Kabbalah three concepts that express the idea of meditating and refer to very precise aspects or stages of meditation. Firstly, *Hagah* meditation consists in repeating a sound or sentence monotonously in order to weaken the mental static, before being ready for other kinds of higher meditation such as *Siyach*, which is a sort of self-inquiry or examination of conscience, or *Shasha* meditation, which is characterized by an introspection or inwardness and, finally, the so-called *Hitbonenut* meditation, which is the understanding of oneself by means of contemplation. Let us study each one of them.

2.- Forms or stages of meditation.

Firstly, in the field of the stages and forms of the meditative process of the Kabbalah, the Old Testament mentions three words referring to meditation (*Higayon*, *Hagig* and *Hagut*) that come from the root *Hagah*. Thus, “Thine heart shall meditate (*hagah*) terror” (Is. 33:18). “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation (*hagayon*) of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord” (Ps. 19:14). But, other times, the word *Hagah* is unequivocally attributed to inarticulate, repetitive utterances of some animals. It appears with that meaning in Is. 38:14, “Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter (*hagah*)”. Or in Is. 31:4, “As the lion and the young lion roaring (*hagah*) on his prey”. From this, Rabbi David Kimchi deduces that the root *Hagah* suggests a verbalized sound or thought that is repeated once and once again, like the crane’s chatter or the lion’s roar. Josh. 1:9 should be interpreted in this sense: “This book of the Torah shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate (*hagah*) therein day and night”. As well, “But his delight is in the Torah of God, and on His Torah doth he meditate (*hagah*) day and night” (Ps. 1:2). Kaplan connects this procedure of unceasing recitation of a sentence or word with the invocation to the Hindu mantra as a means to cause the nullification of the mind and the decrease of the flow of thoughts. Actually, in the ancient *Hekhalot* literature, it is stated that the entrance of

the initiate into the holy mansions takes place after repeating a certain formula 112 times.

Nevertheless, according to the philologist Rabbi Solomon Pappenheim, *Hagah* is derived from the word *Nahag*, which means “to lead, direct or steer”. Thus, *Hagah* expresses the idea of movements (physical or mental ones) directed to a common end, concluding that the biblical term *Hagah* means “to wipe all the thoughts” so that the mind may be led in only one direction. Besides, the base of the root *Hagah* lays on only one letter (*Gimel*), which suggests the idea of “melting” or “softening”. In this context, the term *Hagah* might explicitly refer to the “softening” of the ego as an initial or preparatory step before accessing deeper stages and forms of meditation, such as the *Siyach* or the *Shasha* meditations. In sum, the *Hagah* meditation methods, as they involve the repetition of sounds, words, sentences or melodies, might be closely related to the Hindu mantra, the Christian Hesychastic recitation or the Islamic *Dhikr*.

Of course, the unceasing recitation of a sacred sentence does not have to be necessarily limited to the moment and environment of meditation. Instead, it can be invoked and repeated at any moment of the day to make us be present before God. A paradigmatic example of this is the Jewish declaration of faith: “Hear, Israel” (*Shema Yisrael*) from Deut. 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: YHWH, our God, YHWH is One”, which has, in this sense, the same potentiality as the Islamic declaration of faith, “there is no god but God” (*lā ilāha illa Allāh*), whose consequence must be internalized as “the Lord is One, I do not exist outside of God” or, said in Sufi terms, “there is no being but the Being”, which implies that the sense of individuality is but an apparent and illusory superimposition, since “there is no ‘I’ but the ‘I’ of God”, for “I AM THAT [Only One] I AM”. Besides, the six words of the invocation: “*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*” become a *yichud* that condenses six meditations, which, like the six directions of the Universe, are unified or resolved in the Only

Name. *Adonai* (my Lord), *Eloheinu* (our God), *Adonai* (my Lord), *Echad* (One) are just aspects of God. YHWH and all his manifestations, Creator and Creation, are One. Likewise, by means of the recitation of the *Shema*, the mind, when recognizing the oneness of the Being, is nullified, thus meditator, meditation and meditated become One.

Secondly, there is a biblical term that expresses the action of meditating as well as a meditative technique; mostly, it expresses a deeper stage or level of meditation: *Siyach*¹⁵⁰.

In several verses, *Siyach* meditation is a kind of verbal or mental prayer before God: "Hear my voice, O God, in my meditation (*siyach*)" (Ps. 64:1). Likewise, "A prayer of the afflicted, when he is overwhelmed, and poureth out his meditation (*siyach*) before the Lord" (Ps. 102:1). It can also adopt the form of songs or psalmodies: "I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have my being. My meditation (*siyach*) of Him shall be sweet; I will be glad in the Lord" (Ps. 104:33-34), "Sing unto Him, sing psalms unto Him; meditate (*siyach*) ye on all His wondrous works" (Ps. 105:1). In other passages, *Siyach* meditation describes the self-reflection on God's teachings and works: "I will meditate (*siyach*) on Thy precepts" (Ps. 119:15), and also "I will meditate (*siyach*) on the glorious honor of Thy majesty, and of Thy wondrous works" (Ps. 145:5). But it also refers to a form of nonverbal meditation that comes from heart: "I call to remembrance my song in the night; I meditate (*siyach*) with mine own heart, and my spirit (*Ruach*) maketh diligent search" (Ps. 77:7). Here, *Siyach* meditation shows a close conversation with one's own heart. The meditator, once the mental noise has been quieted by means of the *Hagah* meditation, can begin the *Siyach* meditation by concentrating on the idea or thought he must work on. According to the philologist Pappenheim (1750-1814), the term *Siyach* is related to the root *Nasach*

¹⁵⁰ A. Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, cit., p. 116.

and also to the root *Sachah*, both meaning “to clean”, “remove”, “tear”. In this context, *Siyach* expresses the concentration on an idea or thought that also involves the removal of other thoughts. *Siyach* is the meditation, verbal or not, focused on only one meditative object in order to examine it in detail. It is a form of self-inquiry in which the consciousness concentrates on an idea or aspect by observing it from all the points of view. In the first stages of *Siyach* meditation, all kind of conflicts enclosed in the mind usually arise, which implies an unbeatable opportunity to submit them to a liberating analysis. In this sense, *Siyach* is an important way to regenerate the nervous system.

Thirdly, there is another word in the Bible that refers to meditation: *Shasha*. This word comes from the root *Shaha* or *Shua*, which means “to blind”. Thus, in Is. 6:10, it is said: “Make their ears heavy, and blind (*shaha*) their eyes”. And in Ps. 119:143, it is mentioned, “trouble and anguish have taken hold on me, yet Thy commandments are my absorption”. *Shasha* also appears as absorption in Ps. 119:92: “Had not Thy Torah been my absorption, I should have perished in mine affliction”. Therefore, the word *Shasha* describes a state of meditation in which the mystic is voluntarily “blind”, absorbed and thus unable to pay attention to any external interest, for he has disconnected the senses that communicated him with the external world and feels raptured by the spiritual world. In Ps. 119:15-18, the terms *Shasha* and *Siyach* appear connected: “I will meditate (*siyach*) on Thy precepts and attend unto Thy ways. I will absorb (*shasha*) myself in Thy statutes; I will not forget Thy word... Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy Torah”. From this, it seems to be deduced that the *Shasha* meditation follows after the *Siyach* one because it is a more advanced state of inwardness. That is to say, the meditator starts to remove the mental flow by means of the recitation of a *Hagah* mantra, then he concentrates on only one idea (*Siyach*) until he is self-absorbed in it, entering a state of *Shasha* meditation.

Finally, there is another much subtler stage or form of meditation. The verb “to meditate” (*Hitboded*) is derived from the root *Baded*, which means “to be alone”, thus *Hitbodedut* meditation means “self-isolation” or “self-absorption”. Mystic Chaim Vital (1543-1620) stated, “one must seclude (*hitboded*) himself in his thoughts to the ultimate degree” in order to separate his spirit from his body. Likewise, according to Levi Ben Gershon (1288-1344), prophetic revelation “requires the isolation (*hitbodedut*) of the consciousness from the imagination, or both of these from the other perceptive mental faculties”. In short, *hitbodedut* refers to the meditative process in which the person is mentally isolated and concentrates on something in order to achieve a revelation or spiritual vision. However, it is a term that has not been quite common in the Kabbalistic literature¹⁵¹.

On the other hand, *hitbodedut* (isolation from the world) must not be confused with the concept of *hitbonenut*. *Hitbonenut* is the reflexive form of the root *Bin* (“to understand”), from which the word *Binah* (“Understanding”) is derived. *Hitbonenut* literally means “to understand oneself” in the classical sense of “self-knowledge”, even though it can generally refer to the action of contemplating the truth of the beings or penetrating into the real nature of things. Kabbalists explain that, in the meditative state of *hitbonenut* in which one may contemplate oneself not as an object but directly or unitively without associating another thing, it can be verified that the ‘I’ is “nothing”. And, when it is accepted that the ego is an illusory mirage superimposed and essentially built of desires and memories, mind’s peace and silence come. Contemplation (*Hitbonenut*) implies a so close approach or knowledge of the object of meditation that the borders or limits between subject and object are diluted. In this sense, “contemplation” consists in a state of realization in which the mystic does not perceive himself as different from the world. It is the last step of the meditative process that can be achieved by the own effort, for the

¹⁵¹ A. Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, cit., p. 16.

final culmination of contemplation is a divine gift that does not depend on human will or effort.

V.- MEDITATION TOPICS

As time goes by, Kabbalah masters have developed different topics or images of biblical origin to make meditation easier. This has not been due to the vanity of including some original or personal element in the method inherited from their masters, but to the need to facilitate and adapt the teachings to those who listen to them and enrich them with new aspects compatible with the essential core. The common element of all the meditation topics is the random spiritual quest in which the mystic, after detaching himself from his false ego, accesses the vision of the face of God, the return to Paradise or the discovery of the secret Name of God.

Amongst the most widespread meditation topics, I must highlight: the meditation on Solomon's Temple, the quest for the Secret Name of God, the ascension of the Merkabah or Ezekiel's chariot to the heaven, and the ten Names or attributes of God under the form of the ten Sephirot that represent the process of Creation of the Tree of Life.

1.- Meditating on Solomon's Temple.

It has been said that the source of all prophetic inspiration was the Temple in Jerusalem, and especially the third room of the upper floor where the Ark of the Covenant was guarded and the Presence (*Shekhinah*¹⁵²) of God manifested itself covered by a cloud. Many

¹⁵² *Shekhinah* comes from the verb *Shakhan*, "to dwell" or "reside", though it also has the meaning of "to free" or "unleash", because it is "that which resides" or is present and, as well, it is the understanding or knowledge that frees us from the chains of ignorance. In the Bible, it is symbolized with the Light or "the face of God". Kabbalists also consider it as the Paradise of the Torah, that is, of the celes-

biblical passages refer to this mysterious event, decided by the Divinity. As an example of all of them, Ex. 25:22, when God told Moses: “And I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the Ark of the Testimony”.

It can be proven that Solomon’s Temple was an object of meditation since ancient times. In the account of the first vision of Samuel, it is said, “and ere the lamp of God went out in the Temple of the Lord where the Ark of God was, and Samuel was lying down” (1 Sam. 3:3). As many commentators have pointed out, such as, for instance, Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508), Samuel could not be sleeping at the Temple because even sitting was forbidden, which implies that the expression “to lie down” may mean that he was meditating at the Temple. In the same sense appears this expression in Eccl. 2:23, “Yea, his heart doth not lie down in the night”, that is, it does not sleep. In effect, the expression “to lie down” (*Shakhav*), in addition to its usual meaning “to be into a flat position” or “sleeping”, also refers to the sensory deprivation caused by meditation.

In sum, all this shows that Samuel received his first prophetic vision after intensely meditating on the Temple in Jerusalem and especially on the *Shekhinah* or Divine Presence manifested at the *Sanctum Sanctorum*. Of course, this kind of meditation topics may have some stages; the Kabbalist could rebuild his inner Temple so that the structural activities were replaced by the task of engraving and cropping letters. When the letter building were erected, the contemplative could conceive the four archetypical worlds as quarries: first of all, the Quarry of Souls (*Atzilut*); secondly, the Quarry of Angels (*Beriah*); third, the Quarry of Light (*Yetzirah*); and finally the Quarry of Husks (*Assiah*). In this case, the task of dissolving the ego was com-

tial Law (Torah). In ancient sources, the word *Shekhinah* refers to the presence itself of the Divinity in the world. Later, it was considered as another emanation of God or it was even identified, from another aspect, with the *Keneset Yisrael* (community of Israel).

pared with working the rough stone; the parts of the Temple, associated with the body of God or the Primal Man, and the route through the inside of the Temple towards the *Sanctum Sanctorum*, represented the inner journey through the meditation stages¹⁵³ until reaching the *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*.

2.- *The quest and recitation of the Sacred Name of God.*

The mystic's pilgrimage was also compared to the quest for the lost, hidden or fragmented Name of God, in which his task of inner purification consisted in unceasingly repeating, meditating or permuting its letters until achieving the revelation of the Name of God. That name represents the highest comprehensible manifestation of the power of the divinity, so that "to know" it implies to access a higher level of the Being. This is a common idea among different ancient peoples that was literally interpreted by the popular sector, who used to write the name of God in charms and other objects for protection. Thus, in the Ethiopic Enoch, Michael is asked to show the divine Name in order to terrify the foe (1 Enoch, 69:13-14).

Although some Kabbalah masters, such as Abraham Abulafia, affirmed that the Names of God, by themselves, had no intrinsic power and that all depended on the meditator's attitude, most Kabbalists maintain that the Names have an important power of their own, because they are subtly connected with spiritual forces. Precisely, the connection between the mystic and those forces by means of the recitation of the Names of God, the visualization of certain images with the aid of different body movements and breathing techniques, is still one of the best-kept secrets of the Kabbalah. The reality of this principle is derived from the divine will. In the Bible, actually, God appears revealing that, should someone pronounce His Name, the Spiritual Influence associated with that Name would be given to him. "In all places where I record My Name I will come unto thee, and I will

¹⁵³ P. Besserman, cit., p. 48.

bless thee” (Ex. 20:24). Certainly, several biblical passages mention that the prophetic state could be achieved “in the name (*Ba-Shem*) of God”, or, more correctly translated, “with the name of God”. In Gen. 12:8, it is said that Abraham “called upon the name of the Lord”. And, in Ps. 20:8, it is the best way to reach God: “Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will remember the Name of the Lord our God”.

The unceasing recitation of the Name of God, in the style of Hindu mantras, the Christian Rosary of the Hesychastic tradition or the Islamic *dhikr* are, in principle, a form of *Hagah* meditation. In fact, as already mentioned, the relationship between the Name of God and the *Hagah* meditation appears in several biblical passages, for instance in Ps. 63:5-7: “I will lift up my hands in Thy Name... and meditate (*hagah*) on Thee in the night watches”.

In the Kabbalah, the Name of God not only shows a way to achieve the prophetic state. The knowledge of the Name of God also represents the possession of a prophetic state and the access to Major Mysteries; that is why, in Ps. 91:14, God says: “Because he hath set his love upon Me, therefore will I deliver him; I will set him on high, because he hath known My Name”. Thus, the respect, mystery and power the Kabbalah attributes to the Name of God are so huge that it must not be voiced; it can only be mouthed with the larynx and tongue using a technique called “gulping” of the Divine Name. The Talmud already explains that the *Tetragrammaton* can only be pronounced in the Temple (*Beit HaMikdash*); “unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose... to put His Name there” (Deut. 12:5).

What is the true Name of God? “And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, but by My Name YHWH was I not known to them” (Ex. 6:3). In Ex. 3:13-15, God calls Himself “I AM THAT I AM” (EHYEH ASHER EHYEH), which is a way to explain the oneness and uniqueness of the “Being” that, by itself, has no

name. Actually, “God” is just one of the names of YHWH. The first word, sound or thought of God was the appearance of the first form of duality or “otherness”; that is, to know that one knows, the awareness of being aware. The Being becomes aware of itself and explains it with the formula “I AM THAT I AM”. Nevertheless, the word “YHWH” is derived from the verb “HYH” (*hayah*), which means *to be*. Therefore, YHWH means “He who Is”. In Ps. 81:11 appears a God’s introduction formula: the *Tetragrammaton*, “I am YHWH, thy God”¹⁵⁴, that is, “I am He who Is”. In other biblical passages, it appears abbreviated under the shape YH, which means “He is”. That is to say, God calls Himself “I am” or “that I am”, and asks to be called “He who Is”.

However, on other occasions, the Divinity prefers other names, even though none of the Names of God truly refers to the Creator Himself. In fact, the first name that appears in the Genesis is *Elohim*, which describes a plurality of forces, fact that suggests that the Names of God used in the Scriptures refer to the modes by which God manifests Himself in Creation. That is why some primitive Kabbalists interpret the first verse of the Genesis in the sense of: “In the beginning, He created *Elohim*, together with the heavens and the earth”, that is, the first thing that God created was the name *Elohim*.

Lately, an intense academic discussion has arisen, trying to demonstrate that the diversity of biblical names of God shows the different Jewish religious tendencies that, throughout history, ended up converging on the composition of the Torah¹⁵⁵. Thus, it is heard about the “*Yahwist*” historical current, or about an “*Elohist*” trend, depending on their preferences when naming the God of Israel. Nevertheless, several biblical passages do not match these interpreta-

¹⁵⁴ A. Rodríguez Carmona, *La religión judía. Historia y teología*, Madrid, 2001, BAC, p. 26.

¹⁵⁵ As an example, vid. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, Minneapolis, 1992, p. 18 ff.; Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, 2 vols., London, 1994.

tions. For instance, how should Ex. 6:2: “And *Elohim* spoke unto Moses and said unto him: I am YHWH” be interpreted? The truth is that, according to the Jewish exegesis and the traditional thought in general, the historicist matters are secondary when compared to the main point of view: the metaphysical one. A Midrash commentary on these verses clarifies this question: “Rabbi Abba bar Memel said: The Holy One said to Moses: Is it my name that you wish to know? I am called according to my deeds. I am called variously *El Shaddai*, *Tzevaot*, *Elohim* and YHWH. When I judge humanity I am called *Elohim*, when I wage war against the wicked I am called *Tzevaot*, when I suspend punishment I am called *El Shaddai*, and when I take pity upon My worlds I am called YHWH” (Exodus Rabbah, ch. 3). Maimonides, in the chapter 61 of his *Guide for the Perplexed*, already clarified that the Names of God are derived from His actions, that is, they are names of His divine aspects or attributes.

As already mentioned, the most important (however not the true) name of God is the *Tetragrammaton*, YHWH: “This is My Name for ever” (Ex. 3:15). It also appears with the formula *Yah*, the Lord, YH YHWH. It is stated that, with these six letters, God proceeded to Creation: “Trust ye in the Lord for ever, for by YH YHWH He created the worlds” (Is. 26:4). Another common name is “YHWH of hosts”; “O Lord of hosts, if Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of Thine handmaid...” (1 Sam. 1:11), where the “hosts” symbolize the myriads of angels (also considered as divine supports, vehicles or attributes) that collaborate in Creation. He is also called Almighty (*Gevurah*), for instance in Jer. 10:6 and in Ps. 21:19. As well, He appears in Dan. 4:37 as the King of the Heavens (*le-Melekh Shemaiya*), and in Ps. 103:13 and Prov. 3:12 as Father. In Gen. 1:2 and Is. 31:3, He is called Spirit or Breath (*Ruach*) of *Elohim*/YHWH. He is also usually described as Holy.

The Kabbalah explains that, even though God is One or, more strictly speaking, Only One, duality occurs in the universe of *rectifi-*

cation, and thus plurality happens. Therefore, God appears with two measures (*middot*): when He acts with mercy, He is called YHWH, when He acts with strict justice, He is called *Elohim*¹⁵⁶. The Talmud refers to these two aspects of God as “one throne for Justice and the other for Mercy” (*Sanhedrin* 38b), since, in effect, in Ex. 34:6, YHWH is “merciful and gracious”. In the Zohar 20.1(a), this duality of Names of God is interpreted as representing the beginning of Creation, for they were originally united: “This is the secret of the full name *YHWH-Elohim*”¹⁵⁷. And, in effect, in some passages, such as Gen. 2:4 and 18, both names appear together (YHWH-Elohim) to show when the divine influence acts as a unified entity.

As it will already have been noticed, underneath this matter is again the topic of the origin of Creation, that is, the enigma of how the one became plurality in successive hierophanies until the Fall of Adam and his subsequent redemption or, in sum, reinstatement. To unify the Name of God equals to reinstate the Primal Man in Paradise, because, if one invokes, recites or recalls this lost, separated and now unified Name of God, he will return to the Eden: “Know therefore this day, and consider it in thine heart, that *YHWH* is *Elohim*” (Deut. 4:39).

Kabbalistic literature has developed different meditation techniques that use the letters as a support or topic. From the simplest technique of permuting the letters of a word in all possible ways (*Gilgul* or “rotation”, also used in *Gematria*), to the technique of engraving and carving letters (expression that comes from handicraft techniques). When connecting the letters with each other, the Kabbalist seeks the Perfect Word or Lost Word, taking as a model the God’s Word that put into movement the process of the Creation of

¹⁵⁶ *Bereshit Rabbah* 12 and 15; *Sifrei* 71 a; *Targum Psalm* 56, 11; *Pesiqta* 149a and 164a.

¹⁵⁷ Regarding this, vid. J. Peradejordi, *La Cábala*, Barcelona, 2004, pp. 59-74.

the Universe¹⁵⁸. Traditional Kabbalistic literature is profuse in meditation techniques to unify the Names of God. One of the most refined method is Abulafia's one. The easiest technique consists in combining the four letters of the *Tetragrammaton* with the letter *Aleph* and the five primary vowels¹⁵⁹. It is precisely from these primitive techniques of permutation and repetition that come the 12 letters of the name of God (the triple repetition of the *Tetragrammaton*) and the 72 or 42 letters of the secret Name of God (resulting from a pyramid composed of the repetition of the *Tetragrammaton* so that the first four lines of the base equal 42 letters).

Other techniques unify the Name of God YHWH by using the *Sephirot* as a support for contemplation, imagining that the highest apex of the letter *Yodh* represents *Keter*, the *Yodh* itself does *Chokhmah*, the first *He* does *Binah*, the *Waw*, whose numerical value is six, represents the six following *Sephirot*, and the last *He* does *Malkhut*. In some cases, to achieve a certain state of relaxation prior to meditation, the letters are written in pieces of paper and the Name is then composed with them.

In the *Zohar*, different words are permuted, with the accompaniment of a certain breathing rhythm and the visualization of a pillar of air that rises from the base of the spine up to the brain. This description, which, on the other hand, is connected with the Hindu technique of *kuṇḍalinī* rising, might lead the meditator to the "absence of

¹⁵⁸ As the expression "And God said..." appears ten times in Gen. 1, the Kabbalah interprets that the Universe was created by means of Ten Words.

¹⁵⁹ The four stages of a type of meditation known as Jacob's Ladder (action, discourse, thought and non-thought) match the four letters of the *Tetragrammaton*:

Yodh = action = hand / body

He = discourse = breath

Waw = thought = spirit

He = non-thought = experiencing the nothing.

thought” and prepare him to experience the “nothing”¹⁶⁰, that is, non-duality.

One of the versions of this technique is the *Tikkun* meditation, developed by Isaac Luria (1543-1620), a famous Kabbalist, also known with the nickname Ari (literally: “Lion”) due to his spiritual achievements, with whose teaching did the Safed community reach its golden age. Luria introduced the *tikkun* (unification, restitution), based on Gen. 36, where the seven kings of *Edom* are listed. The Zohar interprets the list of these kings, who ruled and died “before kings ruled Israel”, as a mysterious reference to the pre-existence of some worlds or humanities before the current one¹⁶¹. The death and “agony of the primitive kings” is interpreted by Luria as the “breaking of the vessels”, which could only be restored by the restitution or *tikkun*. But that fall or crisis is not really other than a repetition, in other levels of existence, of the process of Creation, which is refreshed in different hierophanies.

Therefore, it is explained that the original “contraction” of *Ain Sof* or Absolute Infinity was poured into vessels that, unable to hold its power, ended up cracking. The resulting *Qelippot*, “husks”, “peels”, “fragments” or “shells” became our “fallen” world. Similarly, those broken vessels contained the Sephirot that were to receive the universe from the emanation of Adam Kadmon. With the purpose of repairing the vessels and restoring the building, some lights of a building and healing nature arose from Adam Kadmon’s forehead, so that they could cause the “restitution” (*tikkun*) of the original kraters (to be compared with the krater of the hermetic texts). The Fall of Adam and his following expulsion from Paradise (or, said with the terms of the meditative language, the loss of the natural

¹⁶⁰ P. Besserman, cit., p. 52. As well, the Zohar contains other examples of useful permutations, such as, for instance, the Hebrew word *hebel*, “vanity” is permuted so that it may be read *hebli*, “my breath”.

¹⁶¹ Similar to the Vedic tradition of the seven continents or *dwipas* that successively emerge and immerse themselves throughout the Sacred History.

ability to enter a prophetic state to “listen” to God because of the appearance of the speculative mind) repeats, on an anthropological level, the breaking of the vessels of the metaphysical level. In effect, God spoke with Adam in Paradise and the latter replied, that is to say, there was a certain natural communication or intimacy with God. Adam himself had been provided by God with the power of the Word, since he gave names to the animals (Gen. 2:20), so that his expulsion from Paradise brought with it the loss or concealment of that Word, which was the Name of God. This caused the distinction between the Word and the Name of God, which had once been one: the *Yodh* and the *He* remained above, and the *Waw* and the *He* were dragged down. This is how began the world of rectification, unification or quest for the lost or concealed Word with the purpose of restoring the Oneness of the Name of God¹⁶². For this reason, “the whole art of the Kabbalah essentially consists in operating this mysterious union symbolized by the letter *Aleph*, whose numerical value is 1, *Echad*”¹⁶³, since, as in Zech. 14:9, “shall there be one YHWH, and His name One”. The mystery of the division of the Name of God is represented by the letter *Aleph*, whose script is formed by two *Yodh*’s, one above and another one below, separated by a *Waw* that joins them. According to Luria, the upper *Yodh* represents the sweet waters of Life, and the lower *Yodh* does the bitter waters, both separated by the *Waw* or sky (*Rakiah*). In fact:

YHWH= 26

2 *Yodh* (10) and one *Waw* (6) = 26

¹⁶² Unless the individual may carry out an intense, upright quest, God will keep silence; “How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me? ... Consider and hear me, O Lord my God; lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death” (Ps. 13:1-3). Despite the pleas, God hides His face (Ps. 27:9; 69:17 among others), not to punish men, but because the concealment is one of the attributes of revelation (Ps. 22:4). He keeps silence because He has spoken (Ps. 50:3) and now He is *Deus absconditus*, who does not communicate when men want, but when and to whom He wills.

¹⁶³ J. Peradejordi, *La Cábala*, Barcelona, 2004, p. 74.

But, without a doubt, the most powerful form of meditation associated with the name of God is the one associated with YHWH. Nevertheless, in this case, it is not a meditation *on* the name YHWH (either rotating or permuting letters, numbers, etc.), but a specific form of meditation that will be here defined as *HYH*, “I AM”. In Ex. 3:13-15, God refers to Himself as “I AM THAT I AM” (EHYEH ASHER EHYEH), the only one time when the name of God appears in capital letters in Latin script and, as already mentioned, a name that is derived from the third person of the verb *HY* (*haya*), *to be*. Likewise, in the Islamic tradition, the name *Allāh* would be etymologically derived from an archaic form of the third person singular of the verb *to be*. *Allāh* would then be *He who Is*. Significantly, the god *Brahma* has his name derived from *Brahm* (to be)-*aham* (I), the Being. Of course, these etymological identities are not mere coincidences, but they belong to ancient, profound traditional teachings. And, regarding the meditative practice, the name of God “I am” encompasses or rather indicates the most ancient and effective *gate* to the contemplative states.

Actually, as mentioned before, one thing is meditation *on* “I am” (which implies the action of thinking), and another thing is the plain and simple “I am” meditation, whose essential potentiality is the lack of appropriation of thoughts. Strictly speaking, “I am” meditation describes a state of pure consciousness that can be accessed after paying attention to the feeling “I am”. Since it forces the mind to remain in the present, the simple practice of that sustained self-inquiry ends up weakening the instinct of appropriation and the sense of identification with the thoughts, up to the extent that it facilitates the appearance or emergence of a state of non-dual or unitive consciousness in which the Being “knows” and “knows itself”, directly, without any mediation of the senses or the mind. There is no plurality of objects of knowledge, but an essential Oneness in which it is understood and realized that “the Lord, our God, the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4) or that “there is no god but God” (*lā ilāha illa*

Allāh). From another point of view, meditation *on* YHWH, as previous or preparatory step before “I am” meditation, assigns another meaning to the geometric, numerical and philological techniques mentioned before, associated with the meditation on the names of God. As the Zohar says: “The name Elohim is included in the name YHWH and acknowledged as one without separation” (Zohar 1, 2 a). And also, “when man understands that all is one and does not cause any separation, then even the other side¹⁶⁴ will disappear from the world and not be drawn down below” (Zohar 1, 2 a). The return to the primal oneness is carried out when one, by means of meditation (in the deepest meaning of the term), understands, that is, accepts and realizes, what he is not and what he is. Or, in other terms, the mystic who has “understood” that YHWH is the Name associated with the Universe of the Rectification¹⁶⁵ is then ready to ascend “by permuting his letters” until attaining unification. And the most powerful permutation is the one that goes from YHWH (He who is) to HYH (I am), that is, from the duality that separates the Divinity (I am) from its Creation (that sees God as He who is) to the oneness of God. Or, in other terms, there are not letters, nor numbers, nor combinations, nor meditator, nor meditation... but perfect, calm, silent Oneness.

3.- *The chariot of Ezekiel.*

There are just a few passages in the Bible in which prophets explain how their mystical experiences took place. That is why, for the Kabbalists, the account of the vision of prophet Ezekiel has been considered as a model, due to its thoroughness. It describes Ezekiel’s

¹⁶⁴ Several works talk about the power of evil. The Zohar (2, 262) refers to it as the *sitra ahra* (the “other side”), and some Kabbalists, for instance Isaac Ha-Kohen, assumed the existence of some demonic Sephirot or emanations from the left side, parallel to the holy Sephirot. Or even some *Hekhalot* or palaces of impurity with demonic guardians, like a mirror world of the holy Palaces. The power of the “other side” was also compared with the husks or *qelippot*, and with the root pruning at the Garden of Eden or the Tree of Life.

¹⁶⁵ Vid. A. Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, cit., p. 100 ff.

ecstatic journey in a Chariot (*Merkabah*) through a series of worlds, mansions or states of consciousness called *Hekhalot* (“palaces”), which symbolize the mystic’s pilgrimage towards the ideal or heavenly version of the Temple in Jerusalem. That is why the Talmud calls the mystical practice *Maaseh Merkabah*, the “Work of the Chariot”, in the sense of “riding”, traveling and reaching an angelic vision. In a general sense, it also refers to the meditation techniques required to attain the vision of God as shown in the book of Ezekiel¹⁶⁶. The word *Merkabah*, which is employed to describe the cherubs that are on the Ark, is derived from the root *Rakab* (“to ride”), because it also describes the action of “riding” them. Thus, in 1 Chr. 28:18 and above all in Ps. 18:11, “[God] rode upon a cherub and flew; yea, He flew upon the wings of the spirit”, because God “rides” or “glides” with the wings of the spirit (*Ruach*).

The ancient *Hekhalot* literature (for example, *Hekhalot Rabbati*) thoroughly described the seven Palaces, the heavenly armies who dwelled in them, the rivers of fire and the bridges to avoid them, the deceptive visions, the hostility of the angels of destruction, etc. that the meditator had to overcome during his ascent or journey through each Palace. At the gate of each Palace, he had to let the “guardians of the threshold” see his “seals”, passwords that consisted in the secret Names of God or drawings loaded with magical influence (as in the book *Pistis Sophia*), under penalty of being attacked by them. When the meditator (as prophets Elijah and Ezekiel did) used the specific Name for that gate, the angel opened it. Only then, the meditator’s consciousness passed through the gate, ascending up to the remotest Light. “In the hypothetical case that his way were blocked by a demonic guardian, the mystic could then visualize God’s Judgment as a bright red sphere and repeat the Holy Name ‘*Adonai*’ until the so-feared guardian disappeared”¹⁶⁷. This spell is just prolonged

¹⁶⁶ The most clarifying explanations and interpretations about this matter are still the ones by Aryeh Kaplan, especially in *Meditation and the Bible*, cit. pp. 35 ff., on which I am based.

¹⁶⁷ P. Besserman, cit. p. 24.

in the so-called *liturgy of the gate*¹⁶⁸, which appears, for example, in Ps. 24:1 ff., as a sort of interrogation before the gate of the shrine: “Lift up your heads, O ye gates! And be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors! And the King of Glory shall come in!”. Danger increased at the sixth Palace, because it was as if there were “thousands upon thousands of waves of water, and there is not in that place even a single drop, but just the splendor of the pure marble stones of the palace floor” (*Hekhalot Rabbati* 258)¹⁶⁹. If the traveler confused those visions with water, he was expelled from the Palace. Finally, he arrived at the Throne of God, upon which was “the likeness in appearance of a man above upon it” (Ez. 1:26): the Heavenly Man or Adam Kadmon.

1 Enoch, 14:11-19¹⁷⁰ describes the blinding vision of Enoch, who is led to heaven and then entered behind a wall made of crystal and fire, inside of which was a large house of fire, inside of which was the throne of God. This seems to be the most primitive form of the vision of the chariot or *Merkabah*, ridden to ascend the celestial temple, whose image is precisely reproduced on earth by the Temple in Jerusalem. 2 Enoch (written between 70 and 135 AD) describes

¹⁶⁸ For their part, as well, the authors of the *Sefer Yetzirah* divided the meditation on letters into a series of stages or “gates”, “paths” and “parts”. The meditator began his practice or “journey” through the different gates by visualizing himself as an angel. The first two entrance gates were called Gate of Heaven and Gate of Saints. According to this literature, the guardians of the Chariots, such as Ariel, Raphael and Gabriel, personify the different states that took place during meditation. The most ancient precedents of a dangerous journey through worlds where the guardians of the gates had to be exorcised are found in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.

¹⁶⁹ That is why R. Aqiba warned those who entered the Garden of Eden, “when you get to stones of pure marble, do not say water, water”. The fact that this recommendation not to drink water (symbolizing the material bonding in general, and to the thoughts in particular) is similar to the Orphic and Eleusinian funerary formulas is not just a coincidence. It has also been supposed that this image was a representation of the ideal or heavenly version of the Temple in Jerusalem.

¹⁷⁰ An Ethiopic translation of the original Greek version has been preserved, written between the 4th and the 6th centuries, although its most ancient parts date back to the 3rd century BC. It has been published by Michael E. Knibb, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch: A New Edition in the Light of the Aramaic Dead Sea Fragments*, 2 vols., Oxford, 1970.

the ascending journey through the seven heavens. These books of Enoch, as well as others with an apocalyptic vision (that is, about ecstatic journeys), such as the Apocalypse of Abraham, will be some of the sources of the *Hekhalot* literature¹⁷¹. In the 3rd century, a moralist trend came into the *Merkabah* literature, assigning certain moral virtues to each one of the seven Palaces; the ascent to the different Palaces was compared with the scale of ascension to those virtues¹⁷².

At this point, one may wonder, what was the vision of prophet Ezekiel? His description is focused on four ascending levels, keeping in mind that Ezekiel describes them while being himself on the third level of the cherubs or *Chayot*:

The level or universe of the angels (*Ophanim*) is under the level of the *Chayot* and populated by wheel-shaped angels. They are the *Ophanim* (singular, *Ophan*): “Now as I beheld the *Chayot*, behold, an *Ophan* was upon the earth by each of the *Chayot*” (Ez. 1:15). The level of the cherubs (*Chayot*) is above them; “And the cherubim were lifted up; this is the *Chayah* (cherub) that I saw by the River of Chebar” (Ez. 10:15). Above it is the world of the Throne of God, because the prophet, from the world of the *Chayot*, rose his “look”: “above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a Throne” (Ez. 1:26). Finally, Ezekiel visualized the universe of God as Adam Kadmon sitting on the Throne: “and upon the likeness of the Throne was the likeness in appearance of a man above upon it” (Ez. 1:26). It is to be considered that the Bible metaphorically talks about “the hand of God”, “the eye of God”, etc. as if He actually had that body¹⁷³. The Kabbalah actually explains that the different parts

¹⁷¹ The most important among them is the *Hekhalot Rabbati*. It has been published and studied by Peter Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, Tübingen, 1981.

¹⁷² For instance, in *Maaseh Merkabah*, par. 9. It has been translated and published by Naomi Janowitz, *The Poetics of Ascent: Theories of Language in a Rabbinic Ascent Text*, New York, 1989.

¹⁷³ This vision is the origin of an esoteric doctrine called *Shi'ur Qomah* (“body measurement”) about the secret measures and names of the different parts of the body of God.

of the “Body” of God represent the different Sephirot. Apart from that, when it is said that God “is sitting”, it is to be interpreted that He is descending or “stooping” to take care of the world.

From the account of this vision, the Kabbalists deduce that Ezekiel had had the vision of the Four Universes¹⁷⁴ (which match the four letters of the *Tetragrammaton*). Certainly, as Ezekiel just reached the *Yetzirah* level, when he rose his inner look, he saw the Throne above his viewpoint. That is why he says that he saw a blurry “likeness of a throne”. Likewise, when he saw the “Man above upon” the Throne, two levels above him, he describes his vision as the reflection of a reflection, “the likeness in appearance of a Man”. The names of these Four Universes are derived from Is. 43:7, “Even every one that is called (*Atzilut*) by My Name: For I have created him (*Beriah*) for My Glory, I have formed him (*Yetzirah*), yea, I have made him (*Assiah*)”. Therefore, they refer to the verbs *to call*, *create*, *form* and *make* respectively.

1.- *Atzilut* is the world of Emanation (*Olam ha-Atzilut*) that comes from the ten words pronounced by God to originate Creation. It contains the first three Sephirot.

2.- *Beriah* is the universe of Creation (*Olam ha-Beriah*) as described in the book of Genesis, represented by the Throne of God. It contains the fourth and sixth lower Sephirot. The part of the human soul that reaches this level is *Neshamah*.

3.- *Yetzirah* is the world of Formation (*Olam ha-Yetzirah*), which contains the seventh, eighth and ninth Sephirot, as the top highest zone of the archetypical world of formation that rests on the lowest part of the world of Creation (*Beriah*). Like in other traditions, such

¹⁷⁴ The influence of the Jewish and Neoplatonic philosophy on medieval Kabbalists' speculations is the origin of the doctrine of the four universes, which already appears in the Zohar and reached its highest development with the circles of Safed in the 16th century.

as Vedanta or Islam, it is the state of consciousness of the Primal Man, Adam, before abandoning the Garden of Eden. It corresponds with the level of *Ruach* in the human soul.

4.- *Assiah* is the Universe of Action or Composition (*Olam ha-Assiah*), which represents the tenth Sephirot, our material world of the “husks” or “shells” (*Qelippot*), coming from the broken vessels. It corresponds with the level of *Nefesh*.

Each and every one of these four worlds is connected with the four elements: fire, air, water and earth, so that the action of passing through their respective thresholds equals to overcome a test. Paying attention to philology, Jewish metaphysics provides an interpretation that clarifies the meaning and nature of these four worlds or universes. In effect, from the etymological analysis of the Hebrew words *Bara* “to create”, *Yatzar* “to form” and *Asah* “to make”, it can be deduced that *Bara* refers to Creation *ex nihilo*, “something out of nothing”. *Yatzar* expresses the idea of forming something from a pre-existing substance, “something out of something”. *Asah* indicates the conclusion of a series of actions. But, in which situation is then the supreme universe of *Atzilut*? Given that *Beriah* (Creation) is “something out of nothing”, it is to be deduced that the universe “above”, that is, the supreme universe (*Atzilut*) is the “Nothingness” (*Ain*). That is why, when the Sephirot of *Atzilut* emanated, the *Sefer Yetzirah* and some Kabbalists defined them as Sephirot of the Nothing (*Belimah*).

Thus, the meditative process is conceived as a progressive approach to the Nothing or the Emptiness, until the final nullification of the ego. “This insistence on the absolute Nothingness of the Jewish meditative experience was, and still is, the aim of the true spiritual seeker. Glorious and terrible visions may appear, but they are

nothing more than manifestations of the mind and body of the mediator”¹⁷⁵.

The Nothingness, despite intellectually incomprehensible, represents the disappearance of the ordinary knowledge, understood as a subject-object relationship. Should the process of knowledge involve the three elements, a subject-knower, a known object and the action of knowing, the intuitive knowledge or, strictly speaking, the non-knowledge transcends that personal or individual relationship, unifying those cognitive borders. Within the Nothing, there is no difference between subject and object, not because the subject that knows is at the same time all what is known, but because there is Nobody who knows or Nothing to be known. That is why it is said that God does not know, because within Him there is no separation between subject and object, His non-knowledge is all-encompassing and all-comprehending. Therefore, the only understandable way that the Divinity found to tell Moses who He Is, was to say “I AM THAT I AM”, that is, I Am the Only One who knows and the Only One who is known, with no attributes, no names, no features. But that self-reflection of God, somewhat implying “leaving the Self”, is interpreted by the wise man as a hierophany or a thought equivalent to the Word that unleashes the Creation of the Universe. That is to say, the thought that divides subjects from objects, that creates the world around us and projects us onto something, taking us outside of the world of the intuitive knowledge of God or Paradise. Therefore, the way to return to the Garden of Eden consists in solving or transcending that sense of supervening separateness.

This also explains that, from a metaphysical point of view, all the universes or states of the Being, Sephirot, etc. can be considered as mere instrumental concepts, ideas, that is, imaginary constructions made of something as ethereal, subjective and volatile as the human thought.

¹⁷⁵ P. Besserman, cit., p. 9.

Universe	Contents	Level
<i>Atzilut</i> (Emanation)	Sephirot	Nothingness
<i>Beriah</i> (Creation)	The Throne	Something out of Nothing
<i>Yetzirah</i> (Formation)	Angels	Something out of something
<i>Assiah</i> (Action)	Shadows of physical world	Completion

The visions of Moses, Jacob, Elijah and, especially, Ezekiel have been considered by the Talmudic tradition as descriptions of the meditator's roadmap. When prophet Ezekiel says "And I looked, and beheld, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire enfolding itself; and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst the vision of the Chashmal, out of the midst of the fire" (Ez. 1:4), Kabbalah masters have identified these experiences with certain mystical itineraries. Thus, the Zohar teaches that the "whirlwind", the "great cloud" and the "infolding fire" refer to the three levels of the *Qelippot* or "husks" that stun the mind and are the obstacles that put to the test the determination of the candidate who wishes to ascend. According to the Zohar, these are also the three barriers visualized by prophet Elijah: "A great and strong wind... an earthquake... a fire... and after the fire, a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11-12). As well, the Midrash relates this fire to the ladder of Jacob's dream, on which angels ascended and descended.

According to Ezekiel, the prophetic experience begins with a "whirlwind" (*Ruach Saarah*), concerning the "mental perturbations" that hinder the concentration of the meditator (the thundering trumpet blasts that Moses heard as he was climbing the Sinai are to be reminded). After that, the mind comes up against a "great cloud" (the second *qelippah*), that is, a cognitive state in which the mind cannot see or experience anything. For his part, as Elijah's prophetic experience was auditory instead of visual, he describes the second barrier as an earthquake or "strong noise" (*Raash*). The third barrier appears as a terrifying fire, which should be identified with certain feelings

such as sickness, tachycardia, dizziness or sweat, etc. caused by the momentary physical and mental withdrawal.

If that state of concentration is maintained, the meditator shall reach the *Nogah* level, the “shining”, a light that shines in the darkness, or the *Chashmal* level, in which the sense of individuality is completely annulled. The word *Chashmal* comes from: *Chash* (silence) and *Mal* (speech), and describes the state of “speaking silence” in which the *word* of God can be heard, and the divine vision takes place. It can be compared to the “still small voice” heard by Elijah¹⁷⁶.

4.- *The ten Sephirot.*

The most famous meditative topic of the Kabbalah is the *Sephirot*. The *Sephirot* (singular, *sephirah*) personify the ten attributes, qualities (*middot*) or Names of God that appear in different biblical passages and that, together, form the only one great Name of God. They represent the multiple states of the Being¹⁷⁷, which encompass the whole Universe created by God. They are also called *dibburim* (sayings), *semot* (names), *orot* (lights), *kohot* (powers), *middot* (qualities), *marot* (mirrors), *netiot* (sprouts), *keterim* (crowns). The most common way to depict them is by means of the cosmic Tree of Life.

It must now be specified, even though this may surprise more than one of us, that the *Sephirot* are purely theoretical, ideal, substanceless concepts¹⁷⁸, whose usefulness lies in supporting the meditation on the steps, states, qualities or virtues that those who wish to

¹⁷⁶ The *Samādhi* of the Vedanta tradition.

¹⁷⁷ Regarding this matter, the work by René Guénon, Guénon, René, *The Multiple States of the Being*, Hillsdale (NY), 2001, is still exemplary. The Kabbalah insists that the Sephirot are not aside or outside God, but they are His external aspects: “He is Them and They are Him” (Zohar, 3, 11 b, 70 a).

¹⁷⁸ In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the word *Sephirah* usually appears together with the word *Belimah* (Nothing), in order to reaffirm that the *Sephirot* are theoretical concepts with no reality in comparison with God.

attain Enlightenment must deal with. In this sense, they are an effective discipline program¹⁷⁹. For instance, the Talmud establishes the qualities, associated with each *Sephirah*, that lead to *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*: Study, Prudence, Diligence, Cleanliness, Abstention, Purity, Piety, Humility, Fear to sin, and Holiness. This way, the candidate begins with the study, observation and diligence needed to lead a clean, pious life that, by means of humility and the denial of the ego, will lead to holiness.

The ten *Sephirot* are divided in two groups: The three upper ones are the “long face” (*Arich Anpin*) or “hidden face of God”, that is, the God of Creation before the six days. They are represented with the letters *Aleph*, *Yodh* and *Nun*, which together form the word *Ain* (Nothingness). The seven lower *Sephirot* are the “short face” of God (*Ze’ir Anpin*), the face of God as revealed in the six days of Creation.

The names of the ten *Sephirot* are derived from certain verses of the Scriptures. Specifically, the names of the three upper *Sephirot* can be found in the virtues given to Betzalel, according to Ex. 31:3: “And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in Wisdom and in Understanding and in Knowledge”. These *Sephirot* are referred to as well in Prov. 3:19-20, “The Lord by Wisdom hath founded the earth, by Understanding hath He established the heavens, by His Knowledge the depths are broken up”. Likewise, Prov. 24:3-4 says, “Through Wisdom a house is built, and by Understanding it is established, and by Knowledge shall the chambers be filled”. According to Prov. 9:1, the seven lower *Sephirot* emanate from *Chokhmah* (Wisdom): “Wisdom hath built her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars”. The names of the seven lower *Sephirot* appear in 1

¹⁷⁹ As each one of the three levels of the *pneuma* (*Ruach*, *Nefesh* and *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*) contains ten levels, in order to attain the *Ruach Ha-Kodesh* Enlightenment, the first ten levels of *Ruach* and the ones of *Nefesh* must be previously purified. Regarding this, the work *The Path of the Upright* (*Mesilat Yesharim*), by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1747), is essentially a manual to attain Enlightenment by means of the realization of those ten levels.

Chr. 29:11, “Thine, O Lord, is the Greatness (4.- *Gedulah* or Love, *Chesed*), and the Power (5.- *Gevurah*), and the Glory (6.-*Tiferet*), and the Victory (7.- *Netzach*), and the Splendor (8.- *Hod*), for All that is in the heavens and in the earth (9.- *Yesod*) is Thine; Thine, O Lord, is the Kingdom (10.- *Malkhut*)”.

According to other Kabbalists, *Binah* is considered as the mother of the seven lower *Sephirot*: “yea, if thou callest Understanding mother” (Prov. 2:3). The word *Binah* comes from the verb *Banah*, “to build”, because *Binah* is the one that builds the world with words, ideas, thoughts. Ultimately, the universe is a thought of God sustained by His builders (the “*banay*”).

The *Sephirot* can be distributed in three columns: the left one is the column of Severity, the right one is the column of Mercy, and the central one, the longest one, is the column of Justice. The world of dualities must be resolved into the synthesis or unity of the central column. They can also be related to the two pillars of Solomon’s Temple: “And he set up the right pillar and called the name thereof *Jachin*, and he set up the left pillar and called the name thereof *Boaz*. And upon the top of the pillars was lily work” (1 Kings 7:21-22).

Keter	Crown
Chokhmah	Wisdom
Binah	Understanding
[Daat]	[Knowledge]
Chesed	Love
Gevurah	Strength
Tiferet	Beauty
Netzach	Victory
Hod	Splendor
Yesod	Foundation
Malkhut	Kingship

According to some Kabbalists, “the seven lower Sephirot and their names correspond to the seven centers of energy along the right side of the spine and represent a ‘male’, active energy. ‘Female’, receptive energy resides on the left side. Each has its counterpart in the nervous system, which, like the Sephirot on the cosmic Tree, meet in Crown, the head, and each has its corresponding set of Names, as set out in the Torah. For example, using the Song of Songs as a form of divine acrostic, the Zohar offers symbolic meditations on the energy centers along the spine”¹⁸⁰.

The diagram of the *Sephirot* is still largely used in the meditative Kabbalah. It is to be reminded that the book of *Sefer Yetzirah* is based on the plain and simple meditation on the *Sephirot*. To that effect, they can be used as ways of ascending meditation, climbing the Tree of Life, resting on the *Sephirot*. The *Sefer Yetzirah* (1, 6) clarifies that: “Their vision is like the appearance of lightning” and that they initially appear “running and returning” because, as they are to be visualized with *Chokhmah* consciousness, when trying to reflect or experiment with them, one automatically returns to the *Binah* consciousness. The *Sephirot* could also be visualized under the figure of Adam Kadmon, a Primal Man who also appears in the vision of Ezekiel. Some Kabbalists represent this by writing the letters of the name YHWH in a column, for they certainly seem a human figure.

In this context, *Ain Sof*, the undifferentenced Being, considered as “Nothing” or “Emptiness” from the perspective of the created beings, stays on the edge of all representation. On the contrary, when meditating on the first *Sephirah* (*Keter*), an androgynous human head could be imagined. Likewise, meditation on *Chokhmah* was visualized as a male “face”, and the female “face” corresponded to *Binah*. The right “arm” corresponded to *Chesed*, the left “arm” to *Gevurah*; the trunk of the body with *Tiferet*. *Netzach* matched the

¹⁸⁰ P. Besserman, cit., p. 58

right “leg” and *Hod* the left one. *Yesod* was associated with the genitals and *Malkhut* represented the feet, settled in the physical world.

The *Sephirot* were also an object of prayer, invocations and songs¹⁸¹. Universal mysticism has developed different literary stories that describe the union or intimacy with God (who adopts the form of father or friend) or with the Soul (depicted as the beloved woman). The most significant example of love poetry within the Jewish mysticism is the Song of Songs. Meditation on the Soul or on the Divine Grace (*Shekhinah*), as a feminine aspect of God, led the Kabbalist to visualize a beautiful woman with seventy faces, each of which hid an aspect of the soul. This meditative motif can also be found in antiquity; amongst the ancient Iranians, the *Daena*, as a *Supreme Alter Ego* that is on the *Chinvat* bridge, which leads to the Beyond; the Eurydice rescued from the Hells by Orpheus; the Brunhilda rescued from the fire ring by Siegfried, etc., whose stories are about rescue, salvation, encounter or awakening of the beautiful sleeping princess or White of the Snows by a solar Hero, etc.

The presence or influence of the Three Mothers (*Aleph Mem Shin*) on the anthropomorphic diagram of the *Sephirot* leads, for its part, to certain interesting developments. In effect, when imagined as the Primal Man or Adam Kadmon, *Shin* corresponds with the upper line of the head, between *Chokhmah* and *Binah*; *Aleph* would represent the central line of the chest, between *Chesed* and *Gevurah*; and

¹⁸¹ Joseph Tzayach, a mystic who was the Rabbi of Jerusalem and Damascus in the mid-16th century, wrote this prayer so that it could be recited in the prophetic position (kneeling with head between legs):

“EHYEH ASHER EHYEH (I AM THAT I AM), Crown me (*Keter*).

Yah, give me Wisdom (*Chokhmah*).

Elohim Chaim, grant me Understanding (*Binah*).

El, with the right hand of his Love, make me great (*Chesed*).

Elohim, from the Terror of His judgment, protect me (*Gevurah*).

YHWH, with His mercy, grant me Beauty (*Tiferet*).

YHWH Tzevaot, watch me Forever (*Netzach*).

Elohim Tzevaot, grant me beatitude from his Splendor (*Hod*).

El Chai, make His covenant my Foundation (*Yesod*).

Adonai, open my lips and my mouth will speak of Your praise (*Malkhut*)”.

Mem would be the lower line of the belly, between *Netzach* and *Hod*¹⁸². According to some Kabbalists, such as Abraham Abulafia, the covenant of the tongue is in the head, which, as the source of the flow of thoughts, is considered as the center of the *Binah* consciousness. The heart is in the chest, as a symbol of the soul. Finally, the covenant of the circumcision is placed in the belly region, whose unconscious process is identified with *Mem* and the *Chokhmah* consciousness¹⁸³. That is why some mystics contemplate their own bellies while trying to attain the *Chokhmah* consciousness.

5.- *The Proto-Sephirot and the three mother letters: Mem, Shin and Aleph.*

What was there before the ten *Sephirot*? What was there before God was God, that is, the Creator? What existed before God had a name? This state of unmanifestation or potentiality is called, in Kabbalistic language, the Universe of Chaos (*Tohu*). Thus, whereas in the Universe of Chaos (*Tohu*)¹⁸⁴ the divine Name consisted in the letters AMŠ, in which the ten *Proto-Sephirot* are implied, in the manifested one or Universe of Rectification, the divine Name is the *Tetragrammaton*, YHWH, from which the ten *Sephirot* emanate.

AMŠ are the initials of the letters *Aleph Mem Shin*, the so-called Three Mothers:

“Three Mothers: *Aleph Mem Shin*

A great, mystical secret ...

¹⁸² It is not a coincidence that these zones of the human body respectively match the three signs of the masonic degrees of entered apprentice, fellow craft and master mason.

¹⁸³ Regarding these relations, vid. A. Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, cit., p. 185.

¹⁸⁴ The nature of the mystic who fights against his mental chaos, seeking the union with or contemplation of God, is somehow compared to the process of Creation of the Universe. At the beginning, “the earth was chaos and void” (Gen. 1:2). The state of mental static is also called “chaos” (*tohu*). The word *Tohu* comes from the verb *Tahah*, which means “to be stunned” or “confused”; that is why some Kabbalists associate *Tohu* to *Binah*.

From them emanated air, water and fire,
and from them are born Fathers,
and from the Fathers, descendants” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 3, 2)

According to Kabbalists, *Yodh* is derived from *Mem*, *He* from *Shin* and *Waw* from *Aleph*. Therefore, the three Mother letters represent a mystery that is even bigger than the *Tetragrammaton*, since the latter comes from the former. In the diagram of the Tree of Life, these three letters (*Mem*, *Shin* and *Aleph*) can also represent the three columns in which the *Sephirot* are arranged. *Mem* represents the right column, headed by *Chokhmah*; *Shin* represents the left column, headed by *Binah*, and *Aleph* represents the central column, headed by *Keter*.

In the *Sefer Yetzirah* (1, 12), we find the meditative applications of these three letters, called the three Mothers, in which other of the Kabbalah mysteries lies: the three primordial letters of Creation (*aleph*/air; *mem*/water; *shin*/fire) contain the elements connected to the breath as the power that generates the Word. The three letters YHW, which define the space-time, are in turn derived from *AMŠ*, which are the gate to transcend the space-time and can consequently be used to abolish that difference. For that reason, meditation on these letters is a means by which the meditator may join the whole Creation. The *Sefer Yetzirah* (2, 1) explains how these words can be used as mantras in order to pass from a meditative state to another: “The Three Mothers are *Aleph*, *Mem*, *Shin*. *Mem* hums, *Shin* hisses and *Aleph* is the Breath of air deciding between them”. The humming sound, associated with *Mem* to attain the *Chokhmah* state, must be repeated in a still way, similarly to the Vedanta “*Om*” or the Judeo-Christian *Amen*. The Kabbalists explain that the “still small voice” (*damamah*) that appears in 1 Kings 19:12 as heard by Elijah was a “still hum”; this is also confirmed in Job 4:16, “An image was before mine eyes, there was a hum (*damamah*) and I heard a voice”. Likewise, the letter *Shin*, employed as a mantra or sacred word, has

the sibilant sound “Š” that is used to induce a strong state of *Binah* consciousness. For its part, Ez. 1:14 says that, after visualizing the *Chashmal*, the Prophet perceived the *Sephirot*. And, according to the Talmud, the word *Chashmal* comes from two words: *Chash* (“silence”) and *Mal* (“speech”), which could be translated as “speaking silence”¹⁸⁵, expression that describes a state empty of thoughts in which, therefore, the ego, considered as the sense of appropriation, is absent. This state of detachment is described by some Kabbalists as a liminal place, border state, barrier or threshold, similar to the labyrinth, wall or cliff of the initiatic literature, because it is an impassable obstacle that blocks the way of those who try to pass without the suitable disposition.

The three Mothers may also represent the three successive states of meditation (observation, concentration, contemplation), similar to the three stages of Vedanta meditation (*Dhāraṇā*, *Dhyāna*, *Samādhi*), and, at the same time, they provide the three sacred words or mantras associated with such states. The pronunciation of the initials of the three sacred words (*AMŠ*) will in turn make the passing through the *Chashmal* and the access to the *Chokhmah* consciousness easier for the experienced meditator.

6.- The 32 paths of Genesis 1.

The mystical experiences of the first Kabbalists came to build up a picture of the different ways, states or levels of the cognitive process of consciousness. The Kabbalah, and more particularly the *Sefer*

¹⁸⁵ However, in *Sefer Yetzirah. The Book of Creation. In Theory and Practice*, York Beach (ME), 1997, p. 98, Aryeh Kaplan maintains that both sounds, *M* and *Š*, can also be used as a means to oscillate between the *Binah* and the *Chokhmah* consciousness. And, as *M* and *Š* are the dominant consonants in *Chashmal*, it is possible that this word were used as a mantra when prophet Ezekiel oscillated between the *Binah* and the *Chokhmah* consciousness. That is why Kaplan translated “*Chashmal*” as “speaking silence”, which expresses the dual feeling of experiencing the “silence” of the *Chokhmah* consciousness and the “speech” of the *Binah* consciousness at the same time. The interpretation shown above differs from the one of this author.

Yetzirah, calls them the 32 paths of Wisdom (*Chokhmah*). Nevertheless, as Wisdom is considered as a pure, indivisible thought, that is, a unitive, non-dual experience, the division into 32 paths can only be made from the level of Understanding.

The Torah refers to those 32 paths in the 32 times when the name of God (*Elohim*) appears in the account of the Creation, in the first chapter of the Genesis. Specifically, it appears 10 times under the expression “God said”, referring to the Ten *Sephirot* or to the Ten Sayings or letters of the alphabet by means of which the world was created. Thus, “God said: let there be light”, and “God said: let there be a firmament”. The Word of God manifested in those letters or Sayings was not only responsible of Creation, but also sustains it continuously as well, since, if these letters were removed, the universe would cease to exist: “Forever, O Lord, Thy Word is settled in heaven” (Ps. 119:89).

Out of the other 22 times (which also match the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet or *alephbet*), the expression “God made” appears three times, referring to the three Mothers; other seven repetitions of the expression “God saw” are associated with the seven Double ones, and the remaining twelve names correspond with the twelve Elementary ones, though, according to Deut. 32:8, they also correspond to the twelve pillars that support the universe: “He set the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel”¹⁸⁶. Their nature as paths becomes evident when represented as the lines or strokes that join the ten *Sephirot* together. Genesis 1:

1. In the beginning God created	<i>Keter</i>	Sephirah 1
2. The Spirit of God moved	<i>He</i>	Elementary 1
3. God said, let there be light	<i>Chokhmah</i>	Sephirah 2
4. God saw the light, that it was good	<i>Beth</i>	Double 1
5. God divided the light from the darkness	<i>Waw</i>	Elementary 2
6. God called the light Day	<i>Zayin</i>	Elementary 3

¹⁸⁶ In Deut. 33:27, they are no pillars, but the “everlasting arms”.

7. God said, let there be a firmament	<i>Binah</i>	Sephirah 3
8. God made the firmament	<i>Aleph</i>	Mother 1
9. God called the firmament Heaven	<i>Cheth</i>	Elementary 4
10. God said, let the waters be gathered	<i>Chesed</i>	Sephirah 4
11. God called the dry land Earth	<i>Teth</i>	Elementary 5
12. God saw that it was good	<i>Gimel</i>	Double 2
13. God said, let earth bring forth grass	<i>Gevurah</i>	Sephirah 5
14. God saw that it was good	<i>Daleth</i>	Double 3
15. God said, let there be lights	<i>Tiferet</i>	Sephirah 6
16. God made two great lights	<i>Mem</i>	Mother 2
17. God set them in the firmament	<i>Yodh</i>	Elementary 6
18. God saw that it was good	<i>Kaph</i>	Double 4
19. God said, let the waters swarm	<i>Netzach</i>	Sephirah 7
20. God created the great whales	<i>Lamed</i>	Elementary 7
21. God saw that it was good	<i>Pe</i>	Double 5
22. God blessed them, be fruitful and multiply	<i>Nun</i>	Elementary 8
23. Let the earth bring forth the living creature	<i>Hod</i>	Sephirah 8
24. God made the beast of the earth	<i>Shin</i>	Mother 3
25. God saw that it was good	<i>Resh</i>	Double 6
26. God said, let Us make man	<i>Yesod</i>	Sephirah 8
27. God created man	<i>Samekh</i>	Elementary 9
28. In the image of God created He him	<i>Ayin</i>	Elementary 10
29. God blessed them	<i>Tzadhe</i>	Elementary 11
30. God said, be fruitful and multiply	<i>Malkhut</i>	Sephirah 10
31. God said, behold, I have given you	<i>Qoph</i>	Elementary 12
32. God saw every thing that He had made	<i>Taw</i>	Double 7

7.- *Meditating on the Nothing.*

The biblical texts clearly develop the idea that God cannot be known because He is beyond any speculative comprehension. It is not possible to achieve a religious or rational knowledge about God, even by means of contemplation, since this can only provide us with the experience of the non-separateness, that is, of what I am not and, by *via remotionis*, of the intuitive verification of what I am *in* God. That is why none of the Names of God refers to the Creator Himself, but to qualities or attributes by which God manifests Himself in Creation. This is personified by the first Name of God that appears in the Genesis, *Elohim*, being a plural word, a plurality of forces.

So, how to refer to that *Deus absconditus*, that Absolute, unlimited God that represents the Absolute Perfection or Wholeness? To solve this enigma, Isaac the Blind reused the concept *Ain Sof* (literally, *unending*). *Ain Sof* is not a name of God, but a simple, useful concept that expresses the concealment and recognition that there is no word that can describe or define God. However, some later Kabbalists tended to objectivize *Ain Sof*, transforming it into a Name of God, from which *Ain* (the Nothingness) emanates¹⁸⁷ or is created. That Nothingness is an intellectual barrier that blocks the way of every man who tries to know God in a rational way. That is why, according to other Kabbalistic tendencies, God, who is *Ain Sof* to Himself, is called *Ain* (Nothingness) regarding his first self-revelation.

The Kabbalah defines the states of the Being as an *Ayin*, that is, Nothingness. Likewise, as Creation (*Beriah*) is considered to consist in creating something from the Nothing, it is inferred that the world originated by *Beriah*, that is, the world of *Atzilut*, is that Nothing. That is why Job 28:12 says that “Wisdom (*Chokhmah*) is born from the Nothingness (*Ain*)”. As well, Job 26:7 says, “He stretcheth out the north over the Chaos, and hangeth the earth upon the Nothing (*Belimah*)”, referring to the inanity or mirage of Creation. The word *Belimah* is derived from *Beli*, which means “without”, and *Mah*, which means “something”. That is to say, *Belimah* means “without anything” or “nothing”. Another etymology considers it to be derived from the root *Balam*, which means “to encompass”. Thus, *Belimah* would be the “unencompassable”, what cannot be described, in sum, the “ineffable”. In fact, *Keter*, the supreme *Sephirot*, is also defined with the word *Ain*, which means “nothingness”, being then *Ain Sof* (from which *Keter* emanates) an even more

¹⁸⁷ The doctrine of the Creation *ex nihilo* was defended by arguing that the emanation of God takes place within God Himself. Thus, the whole process of Creation of the *Sephirot* was immanent in God Himself, fact that implied that the Divinity, being One and Only, made the Creation be Nothing; that is why the *Sephirot* are *Belimah* (from the Nothing).

unencompassable metaphysical principle or concept. *Ain Sof* is literally unending, that is, Infinite, the ultimate Nothing:

Ain Sof: End of the Nothing or ultimate Nothing

Atzilut; Nothingness

Beriah; creation out of Nothing

There are certain meditative practices whose goal is to gradually quiet down the mind in order to stay in the *Chokhmah* consciousness. One of them consists in approaching the idea of Infinity: “Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord” (Ps. 130:1). The infinity of time passed, days, years, centuries, even longer cycles ago can be imagined. Or even the future time in an undefined measure. The idea of Infinity can be applied to space: a street, a town, a country, a planet, a solar system, a galaxy... or the opposite trip: a hand, a cell, an atom, an electron, up to the smallest particles. Infinite good and infinite evil can also be imagined, as well as infinite beauty or infinite ugliness. It should be noticed that it is the *Chokhmah* consciousness which prevails in this kind of exercises, that is, the consciousness of pure thought or intuition, since such ideas cannot be verbalized. The same happens when trying to imagine the Absolute, or the idea of *Ain Sof*, or the universe before Creation, or a number before zero: the *Binah* or verbal thought cannot understand such concepts.

Regarding this, one of the most powerful and most difficult-to-use¹⁸⁸ tools a mystic has is the meditation on the Nothing, because, when a meditator denies himself and considers himself as nothing or emptiness, his Being can more easily be opened to God and become receptive to spiritual influences. The Talmud says, a person must

¹⁸⁸ “In classical meditation, the most difficult path is undirected meditation. This is a path where one must totally clear one’s mind of all thought and sensation, whether physical or spiritual. All that one experiences on this level is absolute nothingness... Undirected meditation [...] is one of the most dangerous methods in classical meditation and should not be attempted except under the guidance of a master”, A. Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, cit. p. 299.

“make himself like he does not exist”. For the contemplative, one of the goals of meditation on the Nothing is to verify, that is, to experience, by means of contemplation, the illusion of separateness and the fact that the assumed diversity of forms and modes of individual existence is but a mere appearance, since the only reality is undivided and One. That is why it is written: “Hear, O Israel: YHWH, our God, YHWH is One” (Deut. 6:4). Judah Albotini (1452-1519), recollecting the teachings of Abulafia and Maimonides, explained that the goal of certain kinds of meditation was to “nullify all their faculties in order to allow their hidden intellect to emerge”¹⁸⁹. The nullification of the ego-universe (Nothing) could facilitate the emergence of the presence of God (All, Infinity).

From the point of view of the meditative practice, the “intuition” of *Ain Sof*, which implies experiencing the nothingness of the ‘I’, can be realized by concentrating on rearranging the letters of the word “nothing”, since the Hebrew word that means “I”, *ani* (*aleph, nun, yodh*), once permuted, means “nothingness”, *ain* (*aleph, yodh, nun*)¹⁹⁰. Some Kabbalists recommend referring to the absolute nothing as “what is seen behind the head”, since there is no sight from the nape. Another way consists in tirelessly following the thoughts up to their source or lair, trying to stop the mental flow and become stabilized in that state empty of thoughts, that is, the *Chokhmah* consciousness (that is why it is called “nothing”, regarding the conscious thought or *Binah*).

This way, the *secret of secrets* is achieved; man, as a man, is *nothing*, because *Ain Od Milvado*, “There is none else besides Him [God]” (Deut. 4:35); “the true reality of our existence is *Ain Sof*, Infinite, and thus the sense of separate self that we all have, the notion that ‘you’ and ‘I’ are individuals with souls separate from the rest of

¹⁸⁹ Quoted by A. Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, cit., p. 113.

¹⁹⁰ P. Besserman, cit. p. 48

the universe, is not ultimately true. The self is a phenomenon, an illusion, a mirage”¹⁹¹.

VI.- THE TRANSMISSION OF THE KABBALAH AND THE CHRISTIAN KABBALAH

Like in all traditional teachings, the candidate who was introduced to the Kabbalah was required to be bound to a disciple chain by being accepted by some master. The fact that the initiation into the Kabbalah was initially reserved for the Jews hindered the diffusion of this tradition among the Gentiles, so the mystical teachings barely overflowed the familiar transmission from father to son for centuries. All this made it extraordinarily difficult for the non-Jews to access the Kabbalah.

A Kabbalah master had several ways to admit a new disciple and initiate him into the mysteries of his Art, generally depending on the school he belonged to, as well as on the requirements or qualifications that were demanded. Some Kabalistic texts (for example, *Or neerab* by Moses ben Jacob Cordovero) recount the ethical, intellectual qualities required to be accepted as a disciple, as well as the suitable age to be initiated into the “Tradition”, usually set “in the middle stage of life” (*Gemarah*, Hag. 13 b). The initiation rites to enter the Tradition essentially consisted in the oral, secret transmission (in the form of whispers) of the name of God from master to disciple. Eleazar of Worms (1176-1238) describes this initiation as follows: “The name is transmitted only to the reserved –this word can also be translated as ‘the initiate’– who are not prone to anger, who are humble and God-fearing, and carry out the commandments of their Creator. And it is transmitted only over water. Before the master teaches it to his pupil, they must both immerse themselves and bathe in forty measures of flowing water, then put on white garments

¹⁹¹ J. Michaelson, *Everything is God*, cit., p. 1.

and fast on the day of instruction. Then both must stand up to their ankles in the water, and the master must say a prayer ending with the words: ‘The voice of God is over the waters! Praised be Thou, O Lord, who revealest Thy secret to those who fear Thee, He who knoweth the mysteries’. Then both must turn their eyes toward the water and recite verses from the Psalms, praising God over the waters”¹⁹². In this initiation rite, the transmission of the Name of God over the “baptismal” waters tries to associate the idea of new birth (initiation) with the process of Creation or birth of the Cosmos from the Breath, Voice and Word of God, who was flapping over the primal waters. The transmission of a secret, sacred Word, personalized for each disciple, could be the way other Kabbalah masters accepted and initiated their disciples (the way it is practiced in other initiatic traditions, for instance in India); it is known that each one of Luria’s pupils was transmitted a word or sentence, adapted to his own temperament and capacity, so that he could meditate on it or constantly recite it as a *yichud* or “unification” exercise. There is no clear evidence that Luria employed such Word as an initiation *mantra*, but that possibility cannot be dismissed.

The Kabbalah has not traditionally been a well-spread doctrine, not only for the difficulties of the Hebrew language or for being reserved to those who followed the Jewish religion, but also because, according to the Gentiles of all times (from Rome to the medieval and modern Inquisition), the perseverance of the mystic dedicated to his solitary meditations, to his combinations of numbers and letters, personified the mistrust of the most unknown, strange aspect of the Jewish community. This Jewish community, desperate due to centuries of exile and persecution, turned its face to the Kabbalah as a magical solution by which to sublimate the fears and frustrations of its people, developing modalities of magical Kabbalah, recreating a pantheon of angels, demons and superstitions. However, the fact that

¹⁹² G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, cit., p. 136.

the Christians approached the Kabbalah ended up creating a singular traditional form.

The Christian Kabbalah could be considered to start with the texts written by converted Jews in Spain at the end of the 13th century (Abner of Burgos, Pablo de Heredia, etc.). However, this trend scarcely succeeded. The development of Christian speculations on the Kabbalah really started around the circle of the Medici's Platonic Academy at Florence. Under the supervision and study of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), converts such as Raymond Moncada (Flavius Mithridates) began to translate Kabbalistic texts into Latin¹⁹³. This extraordinary diffusion of the Kabbalistic literature is due to the fact that the Renaissance mystics and philosophers believed to have discovered in it the original revelation, made by God to Moses and the prophets, which had been preserved thanks to some uninterrupted oral and written tradition guarded by the Kabbalists. Not only could the philosophy of Pythagoras, Plato or the Orphism be better understood with this doctrine, but also some aspects of the Catholic faith could be confirmed, such as, for instance, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the dogmas of the Trinity, the Incarnation, etc. Although the Church refused these ideas, the truth is that the Kabbalah vigorously broke into the Christian Platonic circles and, in general, into the European Renaissance intellectual environment.

Continuing the work of Pico della Mirandola, the Christian Hebraist Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) published the first Kabbalah texts written by a non-Jew in Latin: *De Verbo Mirifico* (*On the Wonder-Working Word*) in 1494 and *De Arte Cabbalistica* in 1517. The work of these two authors moved Paolo Ricci, private doctor of Em-

¹⁹³ According to Frances Yates, "Christian Kabbalah thus differs basically from Jewish Kabbalah in its Christian use of Kabalistic techniques and in its amalgamation of Hermetism and Hermetic magic into the system", in *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, New York, 2001, p. 3. Vid. as well François Secret, *Les Kabbalistes Chrétiens de la Renaissance*, Paris, 1964 and G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 196 ff.

peror Maximilian, to translate Joseph Gikatila's (1248-1323) *Gates of Light* (*Shaarei Orah*) into Latin in 1516. Gikatila was a Kabbalist born in Medinaceli (Soria, Spain), disciple of Abulafia, and developed the meditation technique of the ten names of God associated with the ten *Sephirot*. Soon later, Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim published *De occulta philosophia* (1531), giving way to the magical-practical tendency of the Kabbalah. This way, during the first half of the 16th century, Neoplatonic philosophers, Christian theologians, alchemists and astrologers, dazzled by the supposed discovery of an original biblical tradition or by the expectation to manipulate the nature by means of the power of the Hebrew letters and numbers, joined a vast hermeneutical activity in order to adapt the Kabbalistic categories and concepts to fit the Christian dogmatism. For instance, the first three *Sephirot* were interpreted in a Trinitarian way, the *Shekhinah* or feminine aspect of God was identified with Virgin Mary, and Jesus Christ with the Primal Man or Adam Kadmon, etc. Regarding this process, the importance of Cardinal Giles of Viterbo (1465-1532) or the Franciscan Francesco Giorgi Veneto (1460-1541), who published *De Harmonia Mundi* (1525) and *Problemata* (1536), must be highlighted. Among the Jesuits, Athanasius Kircher and his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* doubtlessly stood out. The sources of the Kabbalah were now translated from Hebrew into Latin. Christian mystic Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) published the *Sefer Yetzirah* (1552) and the *Zohar* even before they were printed in Hebrew for the first time in Mantua in 1562.

In this climate, favorable to mystical contemplation and theosophical speculation, Jacob Böhme wrote his theosophical works integrating different esoteric and mystical currents, as well as they had been published years before by Heinrich Khunrath in his *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (1609), which were prolonged as part of a strong publicistic tendency: Abraham von Franckenberg (1593-1652), Robert Fludd (1574-1637), Thomas Vaughan (1622-1666), etc., and which possibly finds its most representative author

in Georg von Welling and his *Opus mago-cabbalisticum* (1735). Christian Knorr von Rosenroth published his *Cabbala denudata* between 1677 and 1684. Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont (1614-1699) published a work with the significant title of *Adumbratio Cabbalae Christianae*, which notably influenced the English Platonic circles. Other important works on Judeo-Christian syncretism were the *Traité sur la réintégration des êtres*, by Martinès de Pasqually (1727-1774), disciple of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, or the *Philosophie der Geschichte oder Über die Tradition*, by Franz Joseph Molitor (1779-1861), who already connected with the most recent tendencies of the 19th and 20th centuries¹⁹⁴.

¹⁹⁴ I will not resist making a record, even though in a footnote, of one of the modernist tendencies that, arisen from the Christian Kabbalah, have evolved into the occultist and spiritist genre or subgenre that has only brought confusion and fraud. Citing the eminent Professor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem G. Scholem, "To this category of supreme charlatanism belong the many and widely read books of Eliphas Levi (actually Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810-1875), Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1868-1916), and Frater Perdurabo (Aleister Crowley, 1875-1946), all of whom had an infinitesimal knowledge of Kabbalah that did not prevent them from drawing freely on their imaginations instead. The comprehensive works of A. E. Waite (*The Holy Kabbalah*, 1929), S. Karppe, and P. Vulliaud, on the other hand, were essentially rather confused compilations made from secondhand sources", in *Kabbalah*, cit. p. 203. A clear, documented denunciation of the frauds of occultism (which must not be confused with esoterism or with the inner core of every religious tradition) was made at the beginning of the 20th century by René Guénon in two of his works: *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion*, Hillsdale (NY), 2004 and *The Spiritist Fallacy*, Hillsdale (NY), 2003, whose reading is vividly recommend to the reader.

THE PYTHAGOREAN MAXIMS

“*sōma-sēma [the body is a tomb]*”
(Orphic maxim)

Pythagoras was born in 569 BC, in the flourishing island of Samos. Since Iamblichus stated that Pythagoras¹⁹⁵ died at the age of ninety-nine, it is possible to place this event in 480 BC. Pythagoras' parents were Mnesarchus, a merchant from Tyre, and Pythais, a native from Samos. The seafaring of Samos, close to the Cyclades and the island of Delos, provided young Pythagoras with the possibility to travel to Asia Minor with his father. During those years, Pythagoras received a careful education and learned how to play the lyre, write poetry, recite Homer, etc. Thanks his father's family and their commercial links, he was accepted by the priests to be initiated into the Phoenician mysteries. Iamblichus confirms that Pythagoras was initiated into all divine rites at Byblos and Tyre. This did not seem to be enough for him, so he carried on with his spiritual quest, visiting the most famous wise men at that time. Amongst them, there were three who notably influenced Pythagoras: Pherecydes, Thales and

¹⁹⁵ Many Greco-Roman writers provide data about Pythagoras. From the Pre-Hellenistic period: Empedocles, Heraclitus, Ion, Xenophanes, Herodotus, Isocrates and Plato must be mentioned. From the Hellenistic age (from the end of the 4th century BC to the 1st century BC), which begins with Aristotle and his work *On the Pythagoreans*, several disciples of Plato, such as Speusippus, his successor in charge of the Academy, talk about Pythagoras, as well as members of it such as Heraclides Pontus, in addition to different writers such as Callimachus, Hermippus, Dicaearchus or Pythagoreans like Aristoxenus. Finally, from the 1st century BC on, when the interest in the Pythagoreans arose in Rome, Plotinus, Nigidius Figulus, Ovid, Nicomachus, Apollonius, Iamblichus, Diogenes Laertius (author of *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*) and Porphyry (author of a late-3rd-century biography of Pythagoras) must be highlighted. Regarding Pythagoras' life and thought, vid. J. Carcopino, *De Pythagore aux Apôtres. Études sur la conversion du monde romain*, Paris, 1956; Peter Gorman, *Pythagoras: A Life*, Boston, 1979; and David Hernández de la Fuente, *Vidas de Pitágoras*, Girona, 2011.

his pupil Anaximander. It was during his visits to Thales at Miletus when young Pythagoras learned the symbolic, metaphysical value of mathematics and astronomy. It was Thales as well who advised him to travel to Egypt, as he himself had already done before, in order to learn more about the mysteries of the universe and the spirit. For his part, Anaximander taught him the astrological doctrines of the Babylonians and the Assyrians.

In the year 535 BC, Pythagoras travels to Egypt in order to be initiated in the “Houses of Life”. His stay in Egypt is confirmed by his three most reliable biographers (Diogenes, Porphyry and Iamblichus), as well as by other Greek authors such as Strabo¹⁹⁶, Plutarch¹⁹⁷ and Philostratus¹⁹⁸. Isocrates, in one of his speeches entitled *Busiris*, 28, states that “Pythagoras of Samos... on a visit to Egypt he became a student of the [Egyptian priests]... and was the first to bring to the Greeks all philosophy, and more conspicuously than others he seriously interested himself in sacrifices and in ceremonial purity”. Pythagoras probably went to Egypt with an introductory letter written by Polycrates, the tyrant-ruler of Samos, since he had established a political, economic alliance with the country of the Nile. According to Porphyry, Pythagoras was refused by several temples due to his quality of foreigner, until he was finally accepted and initiated in Diospolis. There he had to learn the Egyptian language in order to read the sacred texts. About this, the Pythagorean Porphyry provides a revealing piece of information, mentioning that, out of the three kinds of Egyptian writing learned by Pythagoras –epistographic, hieroglyphic and symbolic–, the latter was the one he chose as the basis of his symbolic teaching method. In addition to this, Pythagoras also transmitted to his school other doctrines and customs practiced at the Egyptian temples. Pythagoras stayed in Egypt just over ten years (not twenty, as Iamblichus stated), until the Persian King Cambyses

¹⁹⁶ Strabo XIV, 1.16.

¹⁹⁷ Plutarch, *Is.*, 10.

¹⁹⁸ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius*, viii, 15 ff.

II conquered Egypt¹⁹⁹ and Pythagoras, as well as hundreds of Egyptians, was enslaved and taken to Babylonia (525 BC). In sum, Pythagoras stayed in Egypt “astronomizing and geometrizing, and was initiated, not in a superficial or casual manner, in all the mysteries of the Gods, till at length being taken captive by the soldiers of Camby-ses, he was brought to Babylon. Here he gladly associated with the Magi, was instructed by them in their venerable knowledge, and learned from them the most perfect worship of the Gods. Through their assistance likewise, he arrived at the summit of arithmetic, music, and other disciplines”²⁰⁰. It is not known how Pythagoras broke free in Babylonia. He likely bought his own freedom by asserting his friendship with Polycrates and his quality of native of Samos, ally of Persia. Apparently, Pythagoras went back to Samos in 520 BC.

Back in Samos, he founded a school called the *Semicircle*. Iamblichus writes about it: “he established a school in the city [Samos], which is even now called the ‘Semicircle’ of Pythagoras; and in which the Samians now consult about public affairs, conceiving it right to investigate things just and advantageous in that place which he had constructed who paid attention to the welfare of all men. He also formed a cavern out of the city, adapted to his philosophy, in which he spent the greatest part both of the day and night; employing himself in the investigation of [mathematics]”²⁰¹. Certainly, the Greek mentality has always had a special sensitivity to subjects regarding the political cohabitation and welfare of the city-state, so Pythagoras’ philosophical-political concerns fitted well this cultural horizon. This cannot be said about other practices imported from Egypt by Pythagoras, like withdrawal to a cave with some fellows, since it involved a lack of community spirit. However, this with-

¹⁹⁹ The Egyptian defeat was modestly influenced by the decision made by Polycrates of Samos to give up his alliance and join the Persian fleet by sending forty ships that, during the Battle of Pelusium, close to the Nile Delta, captured Heliopolis and Memphis.

²⁰⁰ Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras (VP)*, ch. IV.

²⁰¹ Iamblichus, *VP*, ch. V.

drawn way of life practiced by Pythagoras will be invoked by other later mystical movements as an example worthy to be imitated. Some writers have legitimized the hermitic life of the Essenes, the ascetic *therapeutai* or the Christian monks who dwelled in the caves and deserts of the Egyptian Thebaid. Of course, Pythagoras just carried on with the way of life he had learned in the Egyptian “Houses of Life”, the same institutions that likely inspired such an attitude among the spiritual people from the territories near Palestine or even Egypt. Thus, from one of the caves in the hills of Samos, Pythagoras taught his teachings to the Samian youth and at the same time he preached the habit of silence and withdrawal, compulsory at the Egyptian temples. This way, Pythagoras clearly set out his decision to cut all his family ties and profane friends, admitting no kinship but the one derived from the spiritual brotherhood. This hallmark of his school meant, for example, refusing to keep any attachment to one’s personal story. It is to be reminded how, for that very reason, Plotinus refused to reveal his race, who his parents were and where he had been born. About 518 BC, Pythagoras left Samos because of the Samians’ incomprehension of the contemplative, asocial way of life of the Pythagoreans. Iamblichus comments that “he [was] endeavored to introduce the symbolical mode of teaching, in a way perfectly similar to the documents by which he had been instructed in Egypt; though the Samians did not very much admit this mode of tuition, and did not adhere to him that according aptitude which was requisite”²⁰². Pythagoras settled with his school in Crotona, Southern Italy, creating great expectations. Actually, soon after his arrival, the city asked him to explain his ideas publicly, fact that led him to prepare four speeches, respectively addressed to the young, the Senate, the women and the children, which would later circulate as the core of his moral teachings. In short time, the Pythagorean Brotherhood became famous for the honesty of its followers, whose heads were known as the *mathēmatikoi*, who had no personal belongings, lived in the school itself, were vegetarians and kept a strict fasting system. On the contrary, the external circle of the Society was formed by the

akousmatikoi, who were allowed to keep their own properties, were not compelled to be vegetarians and lived in their own houses, going to the Society just during the day. Pythagoras used to say that “every wood is not proper to make a Hermes”, so a period of “preparation” (*paraskeuē*) was necessary, lasting between two and five years, during which the novices or auditing students (*akoustikoi*) were subject to the rule of absolute silence, with the aim of developing the faculty of intuition.

The doctrines of the Pythagorean Society spread across other Italian cities, though they adopted different tendencies depending on the ideological and spiritual profiles of their leaders. They were also object of persecution, since they did not submit to the contemporary political demands and did not grant entrance to powerful people who tried to legitimize their political programs with the Brotherhood’s backing. In 460 BC, the Society was even violently persecuted and several Pythagoreans were murdered. Some of its disciples commented that Pythagoras knew that most philosophers before him had ended up their days exiled in a foreign land, and that was why he tried not to provoke the political authorities. However, riots caused by slander and envy could not be prevented. In fact, during one of these popular riots instigated by corrupt politicians who had spread the rumor that the authorities of Crotona had the intention of handing over a neighboring conquered piece of land to the Pythagoreans, it is believed that the rowdy multitude set fire to the house where Pythagoras and some disciple were, until they all died.

I.- SYMBOLIC AND ACOUSMATIC METHOD

Pythagoras’ followers have transmitted us his teachings in a fragmentary way. It is known that the candidates for full entrance into the Brotherhood had to pass through a period of initiation of at least five years, in compulsory, absolute silence. Even once initiated

into the Society, they were compelled to keep strict secret about all received practices and doctrines. Their egalitarian beliefs implied the admission to the Society of either men or women. Even some Pythagoreans, such as Plotinus or Porphyry, renounced to have slaves or servants in coherence with this idea of fraternity. His repugnance for the old tradition of blood sacrifices is also known. That is why some Pythagoreans, such as Empedocles of Acragas, used victims with the shape of animals, made of honey and barley, in order to comply with certain religious precepts.

The background of Pythagoras' philosophy is shown by a famous anecdote recorded by Cicero. During one of his journeys, he visited the famous Leon of Phlius, an important Hellene ruler; "Pythagoras... is reported to have gone to Phlius... and to have discoursed very learnedly and copiously on certain subjects with Leon, prince of the Phliasii; and when Leon, admiring his ingenuity and eloquence, asked him what art he particularly professed, his answer was that he was acquainted with no art, but that he was a philosopher. Leon, surprised at the novelty of the name, inquired what he meant by the name of philosopher, and in what philosophers differed from other men; on which Pythagoras replied that the life of man seemed to him to resemble those games which were celebrated with the greatest possible variety of sports and the general concourse of all Greece [that is, the Olympic Games]. For as in those games there were persons whose object was glory and the honor of a crown, to be attained by the performance of bodily exercises, so others were led thither by the gain of buying and selling, and mere views of profit; but there was likewise one class of persons, and they were by far the best, whose aim was neither applause nor profit, but who came merely as spectators through curiosity, to observe what was done, and to see in what manner things were carried on there. And thus, said he, we come from another life and nature unto this one, just as men come out of some other city, to some much frequented mart; some being slaves to glory, others to money; and there are some few who, taking

no account of anything else, earnestly look into the nature of things; and these men call themselves *lovers of wisdom*, that is, philosophers: and as there it is the most reputable occupation of all to be a looker-on without making any acquisition, so in life, the contemplating things, and acquainting one's self with them, greatly exceeds every other pursuit of life"²⁰².

According to Iamblichus (*VP* ch. XXIII), Pythagoras learned in Egypt the system to formulate abstract truths in a symbolic way by means of short, enigmatic sentences or statements that stimulate the hearer's (acousmaticus) ability of reflection. Pythagoras called such statements *akousmata*, oral instructions with a cryptic form: "The philosophy of the acusmatici consists in *akousmata* unaccompanied with demonstrations and a reasoning process; because it merely orders a thing to be done in a certain way"²⁰³. Iamblichus mentions as an example the following *akousma*: "What are the islands of the Blessed? The sun and moon". With this, Pythagoras encompassed the whole traditional conception about the ascension of the soul passing through the planetary spheres (the symbolic ones, not the astronomical ones) until going through the solar gate and access the islands of the Blessed.

Let us show a selection of *akousmata* followed by some suggestions of interpretation, given that, although some of them were already explained in antiquity, most of them still continue being enigmatic²⁰⁴.

- "Enter not into a temple negligently...", being the *Temple*, according to the Pythagoreans, the heart or inner world of the spirit, this *akousma* refers to the attention, free of images and thoughts, needed to attain a contemplative state.

²⁰² Cicero, *Tusc.*, V, 3, 8.

²⁰³ Iamblichus, *VP*, ch. XVIII

²⁰⁴ Most of them are found in *Life of Pythagoras*, by Iamblichus and Porphyry.

- "... nor in short adore carelessly, nor even though you should stand at the very doors themselves". It refers to the suitable attitude of him who is willing to know himself by means of the contemplative practice, but approaches just for curiosity, or remains attached to the different circumstances of the profane world and does not devote himself to contemplation in an unconditional way.

- "Sacrifice and adore unshod". In order to enter and move around the soul, it is necessary to go barefoot. Feet, symbolizing the lower part of man, that is, the seat of instincts and emotions, must be bared and uncovered. In order to approach the Divinity and remain in His presence, it is necessary to remove all clothing or carnal, psychical and mental attachments. A similar symbolism compelled Moses to take off his shoes and detach himself from himself in order to appear before God.

- "Disbelieve nothing wonderful concerning the gods, nor concerning divine dogmas". That is to say, no concept, metaphor, symbol, definition or form of language is enough to describe the spiritual world, because a human explanation may never account for divine realities.

- "It is not proper to walk in the public ways; walk in unfrequented paths". The symbolism of the wide way and the narrow way is explicit here. The public way, *via lata* or wide way is the one walked by most men who live attached to their wishes and lack the predisposition needed to devote themselves to the world of the spirit. The path is the narrow way or *via arcta* (narrow door) of detachment, effort, perseverance, self-inquiry, self-assessment, etc.

- "Abstain from sepia; for it belongs to the terrestrial gods". As the *sepia* defends itself by rendering the water turbid spreading its black ink, it symbolizes those people who do not sincerely, honestly try to smooth over their imperfections, but they just conceal them.

- “Dig not fire with a sword”. This maxim refers to the impossibility to understand (the sword) the igneous world of the gods in a rational way. That is why, from a metaphysical point of view, it points out the futility of trying to dig, divide or look for duality where there is just the oneness of the flame. From a more practical point of view, it recommends not talking about what is not understood and not trivializing igneous things.

- “Speak not about [God and the divine] concerns without light”. This one goes even further than the last aphorism. It refers here not only to the audacity of those who speak without the “light” of intellectual understanding, but above all to the fraud or chatterbox who dares opine about those matters without having seen the spiritual “light”. In order to talk about the contemplation of God, it is necessary to have experienced that “vision of the light” before, or to approach someone who can witness it.

- “When the winds blows, worship its echo”. This is one of the many sailor’s metaphors that old Pythagoras liked so much. It might mean that, when the favor of the gods rewards you with their glimmer, a moment of lucidity or an episode of inspiration, you must take advantage of that favorable instant until the last moment.

There is another group of aphorisms that teach the importance of living in the present by means of the detachment from the past and the future:

- “Wear not the image of God in a ring”. A precept against idolatry, but also a reminder that, by knocking on the “solar gate” with one’s “knuckles”, one can only enter when there is no preconceived idea (that is, no thought) about the Divinity.

- “Do not step above the beam of the balance”, that is, do not be avaricious, nor alter the balance of things.

- “Do not sit upon a wheat measure”, that is, do not live without working. But it also means that one should not hoard or be worried about tomorrow. Do not try to appropriate anything. Live each day’s fullness, in the now, without projecting any ambition onto a non-existent future. Each moment you live thinking of an imagined future is a moment stolen to the present by the mind, which does not renounces to appropriate the whole time.

- “Do not eat the heart”. Do not let misfortune sadden you. Or, even better, to access the most intimate core of man, his spirit or *heart*, it is necessary to be completely free of intentions. If you want to contemplate the gods, that is, to enter the heart, refuse all personal vanity, ambition or gluttony. “Do not eat the heart” means that you must not approach the spiritual things with worldly desires because, otherwise, your eaten heart will end up among the excrements.

- “Do not let a swallow or a turtle dove nest under your roof”. Clement of Alexandria explained that the swallow and the turtle dove, due to their strident, cooing sound and because they feed on the musical insects that symbolize the mystics, represent the rough, superficial life. The true philosopher must refuse the excess of activity, which leads to an unstoppable inner restlessness, as well as the false peace of those who are settled in the comfort and the cooing of worldly pleasures.

- “When you rise out of bed, wrap the coverlet together, and confound the print of your body”. *Bed* means here either dream or this life, which is like a dream, and the night is the past that is not worth remembering. The suggestion not to leave the print of one’s body is an appeal to remove all satisfaction from this world’s things, especially our memories and the rest of images that strengthen the feeling of identification with a body-mind.

- “*sōma-sēma*”, that is, the body (*sōma*) is like a “tomb” (*sēma*) where the soul is imprisoned. The initiatic teaching has the aim of giving the acceptance of this fact back to man as a previous step to the “understanding” that this situation can be transcended by means of an ecstatic or out-of-body “experience”.

- “Traveling from home, look not back, for the furies go back with you”. This Pythagorean saying refers to the suitable attitude of the spiritual seeker. Not looking back means giving up family ties and the rest of personal ties that block the access to a new life of spiritual fraternity. But from the point of view of the contemplative practice, it points out the need to pay attention to the present instant and not to get distracted by the memories and daydreams of the mind.

- “Do not urinate against the Sun”. In its moral sense, this proverb is similar to our popular saying: “if you spit in the air, it lands in your face”, that is, do not offend the gods. From the metaphysical point of view, it refers to the futility of the thoughts (they are like urine) as a way to access true contemplation. Not urinating against the Sun means not throwing thoughts against the Light.

- “Feed the rooster, but sacrifice it not; for it is sacred to the Sun and to the Moon”. It refers to the Greek custom to sacrifice a cock after the initiation into the mysteries, but just with a symbolic sense. The *Rooster* is here the upper part of the spirit, which is thus capable of recognizing the light of God the same way the Rooster recognizes and announces the Sunrise at dawn.

- “Do not sail on land”. He turns to a sailor’s metaphor again as the art of seeking for the One. Therefore, this aphorism shows the incompatibility between sailing, that is, philosophizing or contemplating, and living at the same time attached to earthly things.

- “Every geometric shape is a platform”. This maxim, transmitted by Proclus, expresses the Pythagorean doctrine that it is only worth studying the geometry that provides each new theorem with aid to make the soul ascend and to separate it from the sensitive objects, in order to be used either as development of natural laws or, above all, as support for meditation.

II.- GEOMETRY AND NUMBER

Pythagoras' contribution to mathematical sciences has been very well summarized by Iamblichus. Pythagoras is the heir of a mathematical tradition of Hellene philosophers such as Thales, of the Egyptians and of the Babylonians or Chaldeans. He was the first to use mathematics and numbers to express abstract ideas, difficult to formulate by means of the verbal language. It can actually be talked about numerical metaphysics or mysticism, since numbers could make subtle realities easier to understand. Even the gods were represented with numbers, because they were pure and free from material changes. The Pythagoreans also maintained that each number had its own personality, male or female, perfect or imperfect, beautiful or ugly²⁰⁵, and even a certain power of transformation should they be

²⁰⁵ A *perfect number* has the property to be equal to the sum of its divisors, excluding itself. For instance, the number 28 has 5 divisors apart from itself: $1+2+4+7+14=28$. The number 6 is perfect as well. The divisors of 6, other than itself, are 1, 2 and 3, whose addition is also 6. Besides 6 and 28, the number 496 can be mentioned, since it is perfect as well. *Triangular numbers* are the sum of the series of natural numbers up to a certain one: For example, $28=1+2+3+4+5+6+7$. That is why it is said that 28 is a triangular number with 7 dots on a side, formulated 28(7). Likewise, 36(8), 45(9), 120(15), 153(17), 276(23) or 666(36). Regarding *square* and *pentagonal numbers*, the concept is similar to that of the triangular ones. 1, 4, 9, 16, 25... are square numbers, whereas 1, 5, 12, 22, 35... are pentagonal. *Amicable numbers* are two different numbers so related that the sum of the proper divisors of each is equal to the other number; for example 12 and 16, 22 and 284. As these pages do not have the aim of explaining the contributions of Pythagoras and his school in matters of geometry and mathematics, if the reader is interested in it, the works by Thomas L. Heath and Scott Loomis may be consulted. Pythagoras also realized that there was a close relationship between musical harmony and numerical harmony. In effect, when a stretched cord is played, a note is ob-

suitably used. Deep down, the same thaumaturgic power has been attributed to certain symbols, especially to the acted symbols or rites. Pythagoreans such as Iamblichus believed that "... The perfect efficacy of ineffable works, which are divinely performed in a way surpassing all intelligence, and the power of inexplicable symbols, which are known only to the Gods, impart theurgic union. Hence, we do not perform these things through intellectual perception; since, if this were the case, the intellectual energy of them would be imparted by us; neither of which is true. For when we do not energize intellectually, the symbols themselves perform by themselves their proper work, and the ineffable power of the Gods itself knows, by itself, its own images... Hence, neither are divine causes precedaneously called into energy by our intellections; but it is requisite to consider these, and all the best dispositions of the soul, and also the purity pertaining to us, as certain concauses; the things which properly excite the divine will being divine symbols themselves" (*On the mysteries* II. 11).

There were also mystical numbers such as the golden number, supposedly discovered by Pythagoras and after which the School took its symbol to let its members recognize each other. It was a 5-pointed star inscribed inside a pentagon or pentalpha (five alphas). In effect, the relationship between a diagonal and a side of a pentagon was called golden ratio. This golden quotient or ratio, known by the Greek letter "phi", is $\varphi = 1.61803398875...$

Proclus, about 450 AD, wrote that Pythagoras was also the discoverer of the theory of irrational numbers, based on the problem of the square root of 2, that is, the calculation of the diagonal of a square. $\sqrt{2}$ was an immeasurable number that could not be defined by a specific amount of figures. And, if the diagonal and the side of

tained, but when the length of that cord is reduced to the half, that is, at a scale of 1:2, an eighth is obtained. Should the length be 3:4, a fourth is obtained, and should it be 2:3, a fifth will be the result.

the square were immeasurable, such diagonal lines were infinitely divisible, as well as the small dots that are part of those lines. Therefore, having such dots no dimension, it could be deduced that there was “something” in the universe that eluded human understanding because it lacked a quantifiable existence.

The Pythagoreans explained the origin and genesis of the cosmos in a numerical style. They even conceived the previous state, which they assimilated to the concept *zero* that Iamblichus and Plotinus (*Ennead* III, 8, 10, 28) called *mēden*. From that mathematical interpretation of the Theophany, the number One was identified with Apollo, whose etymology was meant to be derived from *a-polos* (without duality), or with Zeus too, as father of the gods and creator of the cosmos. The number One was described as the “ship” that plied the space, keeping the powers of existence inside of it. It was also called *sigē* or silence, because in the “region” of the One, beyond the cosmos, the absolute silence rules. It was defined as well with the name of *hysplēx*, a barrier used as starting gate in chariot races. Since the circuit was not straight, but circular and cyclic, with that name did they mean that the One put the cosmic periods into operation around the post or *kampter*. The Greek name of the One or monad is *monas*, which was meant by the Pythagoreans to be derived from the word *menein*, “to stay”, because all cosmic cycles were finally resolved in the One, which always stays. The One is good because it lacks duality. It was also called “friend” or *alter ego* because, as the symbol of the essential oneness of the whole creation and the world of the spirit, it also represented the highest essence of the human being. Empedocles actually defined the state of the cosmos as a perfect unit with the term *philia*, “friendship”. The Pythagoreans assumed the traditional doctrine that there is a universal truth revealed or inspired by God to many wise men.

Iamblichus, as examples of men inspired by the One, mentions Orpheus, Plato, Apollonius of Tyana and Plotinus. Thanks to Aristo-

tle, it is also known that the Pythagoreans believed that Pythagoras himself was the reincarnation of Apollo Hyperboreus²⁰⁶, the One or mystical monad. That may explain why Pythagoras, probably following the Babylonian theology learned from the wise Zaratas, considered the number two, or Dyad, as a *kakos daimon* or “evil spirit”. He also deduced from this the idea of the cosmos as a tension between the forces of good and evil or a combat between the infinite and the finite. The Dyad was identified with the goddess *Rhea*, mother of the gods, because the Greek verb *rhein* means “to flow”. If the One is the spirit that stays, the Dyad is the continuously flowing matter. According to the late Pythagoreanism, the Dyad-Rhea was assimilated to the Egyptian goddess *Isis* due to the phonetic similarity of her name and the Greek word *isos*, “equal”, since duality implies symmetry or equality of two simple units. It was also called *dye* or “suffering”, because duality was the origin of opposing pairs and, therefore, the cause of psychological, mental and moral oscillations of man.

Finally, the Dyad was also known as *tolma*, “audacity” or “temerity”, since its nature transgresses the pure unity of the One. As well, Plotinus summed up the original separation from the One in the audacity. The *tetraktys* was the series of the first four whole numbers, equal to ten. It was also on the sacred four that the Pythagoreans took the oath of their Society: “By that pure, holy, four lettered name on high, nature’s eternal fountain and supply, the parent of all souls that living be, by him, with faith find oath, I swear to you”. The sum of the numerical series up to four is ten ($1+2+3+4=10$). In this sense, ten was the best number because it contained the first four figures in itself.

²⁰⁶ The Hyperboreans, literally the *inhabitants of beyond the north wind*, were a mystical people who lived in the northernmost side of the uninhabited world. It is one of the many ways to refer to the Beyond.

III.- MEDITATION AMONG THE PYTHAGOREANS

It is known that Pythagoras divided his disciples into candidates or acousmatici, and esoterics or geometricians: “He ordered those who came to him to observe a quinquennial silence, in order that he might experimentally know how they were affected as to continence²⁰⁷ of speech, the subjugation of the tongue being the most difficult of all victories [...] Those who appeared to be worthy to participate of his dogmas... after the quinquennial silence, they became esoterics, and both heard and saw Pythagoras himself within the veil” (Iamblichus, *VP*, XVII, 72). However, his esoteric teachings are hardly known because the prohibition to spread them was strictly observed. The symbolic method by which his teachings were explained contributed to it. Even the most extreme or exoteric teachings, since they were also expressed with maxims, were composed “in such a way as not to be easily apprehended by those that read them”, because the Pythagoreans “adopted that taciturnity which was instructed by Pythagoras as a law, in concealing after an arcane mode, divine mysteries from the uninitiated, and obscuring their writings and conferences with each other” (Iamblichus, *VP*, XXIII, 104).

He taught the “contemplative science” by means of the abstinence from “certain foods, which are hostile to the reasoning power, and impede its genuine energies. He likewise enjoined them continence of speech, and perfect silence, exercising them for many years in the subjugation of the tongue, and in a strenuous and assiduous investigation and resumption of the most difficult theorems” (Iamblichus, *VP*, XVI, 68-69).

Given that the body (*sōma*) is like a tomb or prison (*sēma*) where the soul lives chained to the matter, that is, to the rule of the senses, the Pythagorean method proposes the reunification by means of a

²⁰⁷ Regarding this, vid. O. Casel, *De philosophorum graecorum silentio mystico*, Berlin, 1967.

process of detachment or purification by which the soul will recover a certain state of harmony, homogeneity or resonance with the spiritual world, since only *equals* can know each other. Such a resonance is only possible when man resigns himself and *unifies* his senses and powers. How? Almost nothing is known about the Pythagorean ascetic and meditative practices. Thanks to some mentions recorded by Numenius and Plotinus, it is known that a certain kind of concentration and meditation exercises were practiced by means of the repetition of monosyllables to which a magical or thaumaturgic nature was attributed, especially the Greek words *on* (essence or existence) and *hen* (Unit). Thanks to the Orphic legacy, it is known that the Pythagoreans practiced meditation with the rhythm of certain breathing exercises. Regarding Pythagoras and other wise men who attained trance or visions, Porphyry comments that he was “a man of extraordinary wisdom who had been able to acquire a great wealth of *prapides*; he was powerful in all sorts of works. For when he made a great effort in his *prapides*, he easily saw all of the things that had happened in the lifetimes of ten or twenty men” (*VP*, XXX). Being “lungs” the most probable translation for *prapides*, such breathing techniques employed by Pythagoras and other wise men such as Parmenides, Epimenides, etc. would likely consist in a way to control the thought by concentrating on breathing. This technique has accurately²⁰⁸ been related to the Eastern breathing technique known as *prāṇāyāma* or concentration on the *hara* (center of the abdomen).

One of the strangest, most significant concepts of the Pythagorean meditative practices that sought the mystical union with Apollo (the One) is the one called “Leucadian leap”. Leucadia is a Greek island, consecrated to Apollo, with formidable cliffs (from which poetess Sappho took her leap). By turning to that symbol, the Pythagoreans were referring to a crucial moment within the meditative practice when, all senses fully disconnected and all powers resigned, fi-

²⁰⁸ This is the case of Francisco Díez de Velasco, *Los caminos de la muerte*, Valladolid, 1995, p. 117.

nally one must fully dedicate oneself, cede all control and completely devote oneself to meditation. It is the liminal instant previous to the ecstasy or “vision” of the One, that is, of the essential oneness of the Being. In some cases, the psycho-mental resistance to cede control may momentarily cause breathing difficulties, tachycardia, faint (not loss of consciousness), etc., all of which is represented by the fear to take the leap. The spiritual seeker who wishes to contemplate the “vision” of the One must be ready, when the moment come, to take his final leap in order to reaffirm his will to transcend the body ties and the servitude of the matter²⁰⁹. The last obstacle of the contemplative, the cliff, has the same meaning as the Dragon that watches the access to the treasure deposited in the Hells or guards the captive Lady (Orpheus’ descent into the Hells in order to rescue Eurydice is to be reminded), or the hero who must get through clashing rocks (*symplegades*). It is a final test in which the candidate must *risk* his life. The “Leucadian leap”, in sum, is the last test in the spiritual itinerary of those who aspire to defeat themselves.

What became of the Pythagoreans? It is known that Pythagoras’ doctrines continued being taught at Plato’s ancient school²¹⁰, the Athenian Academy and also in Alexandria until well into the 6th century AD. The universalist attitude of the Neopythagoreanism may have been personified by the Alexandrian philosopher Numenius of Apamea (120-180), one of Plotinus’ masters, who stated: “we must go back in time and relate [this matter] to the teachings of Pythagoras, and then call on people of renown, showing their initiations, dogmas and foundations inasmuch as they agree with Plato, and all those the Brahmans, the Jews, the Magi and Egyptians have established” (Plotinus via Eusebius, *P.E.* 9.7.1). It was precisely in Alex-

²⁰⁹ Some Pythagoreans, as well as the followers of other ancient mystic cults, employed certain hallucinogens in order to facilitate ecstasy. However, it must be specified that such an intake only makes it easier to go out of the body, but, by itself, it does not cause the vision of the One.

²¹⁰ Even it has been suggested that the so-called Neoplatonists were Pythagoreans who interpreted Plato as if he were another Pythagorean.

andria where the Neopythagoreanism reached its highest splendor. The letters and the famous Golden verses attributed to Pythagoras were published there. And even though Emperor Justinian closed the Academy and forbid the pagan philosophy to be taught anymore, forcing many Neoplatonists to go into exile in Persia, soon after that, the change in the Byzantine politics towards a higher tolerance allowed the Pythagoreanism, disguised as Neoplatonism, to be freely taught at least during 1,200 years, since the 6th century BC until the 6th century AD and even much longer after that. There might be reasons to suspect that many of the wise men who escaped into Italy (and other regions of Europe) during the decline and final fall of Constantinople at the hands of the Turks in 1453 were Pythagoreans and Neoplatonists, who therefore contributed to the rise of Renaissance.

PURIFICATION OF THOUGHT ACCORDING TO PLATO

“There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing therewith. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled” (Plato, *Letters* VII, 341c).

“... the purification consists... in separating, so far as possible, the soul from the body and teaching the soul the habit of collecting and bringing itself together from all parts of the body” (Plato, *Phaedo* 67c).

Plato was born either in Athens or in Aegina between 429 and 427 BC and died in Athens in 348/347. His name is not known, although he might have been named after his grandfather, Aristocles. His nickname “Plato” (the Broad) was probably due to his physical appearance. The family of his father, Ariston, traced his descent from the last king of Athens, Codrus, fact that makes it easier to understand that Plato’s family tried to give him a good future dedicated to the political career. However, the disaster and excess of the Peloponnesian War, Critias’ tyranny and the violent reaction that took place after him, disappointed young Plato and drove him to look for answers in philosophy. It is known that, when he was about twenty years old, he regularly visited Socrates’ group and that he, following the example of other philosophers, made some journeys. Some sources mention that he, following the example of Pythagoras and other philosophers, visited Egypt, the Cyrenaica, Crete and Delos.

There are documented evidences that he was in Sicily and that, after coming back to Athens about 387, founded the Academy near Colonus.

Almost nothing is known about young Plato's philosophical education. Some of his modern biographers maintain that he, as well as Pythagoras and most philosophers and spiritual elites of that age, was initiated into the Greek Mysteries.

I.- THE INITIATION OF SOCRATES AND PLATO INTO THE GREEK MYSTERIES

In effect, in one of his dialogues, Plato, speaking for Socrates, explains the teachings he received from the priestess Diotima of Mantinea. According to her, the "lover" of the somatic beauty must learn to become separate from his love for one body in order to fall in love with the Beauty itself and the importance of pure Love in the quest for the Beauty as a quality of the Being; "a man finds it truly worth while to live, as he contemplates absolute beauty. This, when once beheld, will outshine your gold and your vesture...". It is then when Diotima reveals that "In these love-matters even you, Socrates, might haply be initiated, but I doubt if you could approach the rites and revelations to which these, for the properly instructed, are merely the avenue. However I will speak of them, and will not stint my best endeavors; only you on your part must try your best to follow" (*Symposium*, 209e-211c). The circumstance that Socrates does not speak on his own behalf, but that he explains the mysteric doctrine taught by Diotima of Mantinea, has been interpreted by modern specialists as a deliberated acknowledgement of the esoteric aspect of Platonic philosophy, argument which would be supported by the last gesture of Socrates before drinking the hemlock: to sacrifice a rooster to the god Asclepius, as it was custom among the newly initiates; "we owe a rooster to Asclepius. Pay it and do not neglect it"

(*Phaedo*, 118a). With this, not only did Socrates try to explain that physical death was but a change of state of his immortal Being, but he also explicitly recognized the spiritual value of certain mysteric cults that still survived despite the naturalistic, materialistic degeneration that flooded the Greek religion and philosophy.

Did Socrates and Plato take the contemplative method perhaps from the traditional mysteric teachings represented by Diotima? It is certainly true that the *via mystica* showed by Plato, which culminates in an ineffable experience described as “vision”, is similar to other Greek mysteric itineraries that require a progressive detachment from the sensory world. Even Plato, in his *Letter VII*, recognizes the existence of the esoteric part of his teachings, which was never to be written. Therefore, when Plato makes Socrates spiritually depend on Diotima, did he mean that his master had been initiated into some of the Greek mysteric traditions? What is more, did not that mean that even Plato had also been initiated into them himself and experienced the contemplative vision that, as Diotima confirmed, was the final goal of the *mystēs*? “The *Symposium* is a mystical work and Plato could only write a work like that as a clairvoyant inspired by the divinity, not as a philosopher; a fact that explains why Socrates does not express these thoughts on his own behalf, but as revelations of the clairvoyant Diotima of Mantinea”²¹¹. The fact that the Platonic philosophy and the Socratic method were not incompatible with the initiation into the Greek mysteries, but rather something complementary or, if preferred, of another order of magnitudes, is demonstrated by the numerous members of the Academy who kept their ties with such cults. A significant example will be mentioned: when Proclus (410-485) entered the Academy, by then ruled by Syrianus, it was the daughter of the latter, Asclepigenia, priestess of the Eleusian cults, who initiated Proclus into the mysteries. Since his conversion, Proclus will defend the compatibility of both teachings, stating that a *philosopher* “should be the *hierophant* of the whole world”.

²¹¹ H. M. Wolff, *Plato: Der Kampf ums Sein*, Bern, 1975, p. 137.

II.- THE QUEST FOR GOD (THE BEING)

All men seek their happiness, even though that yearning, desire or feeling may be expressed in different ways. In some moment of their lives, certain people think about the meaning of existence and their destiny beyond death. They embark then on a spiritual quest, trying to achieve an intellectual explanation that may solve and, so to speak, unify all their doubts. Some desire to be recognized for their merits, most try to achieve happiness by hoarding experiences, wealth and all sort of material objects. But there is also a certain kind of people who are moved to the philosophical quest by a feeling of dissatisfaction that they identify as nostalgia for the original Oneness or for the presence of God. The reason why some men may consider embarking on that spiritual quest, according to Plato, is that “all men seek the reality”, thus that innate reminiscence drives the soul to seek its origin, God, the Being, Peace, the Truth or whatever “the good... which every soul pursues and for [whose] sake does all that it does” (*Republic*, VI, 505d-e) may be called. Anyway, Peace, the Truth, etc. are but the most easily accessible attributes or qualities of the *Being*, that is, the philosophical way to refer to God (*Republic*, VI, 509b-c). Plato defines that state of dissatisfaction or vital anxiety that leads to the quest for transcendence as *metastrophē*, term that could be translated as conversion in the sense of “turn” or “change of direction”. This word comes from two Greek terms: *metanoia* “change of thought” or “regret” and *epistrophē* “change of orientation”. Therefore, conversion implies the return to an ideal, perfect state (*epistrophē*) once one realizes one’s mistake. The philosopher who gets rid of the chains in the cavern of the sensory world is a convert because he has decided to move his attention away from the sensitive objects and look at the light; that is, he has turned his look in a good direction (*Republic*, VII, 518c). In sum, the spiritual seekers will consider a theoretical “understanding” of existence and, above all, acquiring some sort of glimpse or “experience” of the sa-

cred that provides them with the certainty of their transcendence (the immortality of the soul²¹²) or makes them attain some kind of momentary contact with the Divinity (in the classical world, the mystic institutions had theoretically that goal).

III.- SOUL'S REMINISCENCES BEFORE ITS BIRTH INTO THIS WORLD

Which exit can be found by a man who seeks the Good or happiness? Plato points out that the “exit” of man is the same as his “entrance”, because there is “something” within the human being that belongs to or has a close affinity with the celestial or spiritual world. That affinity or resonance appears under the shape of the nostalgia, reminiscence or “memory” of the state in which the soul was before its birth, at that time when it, exempt from all evil, enjoyed the supreme bliss, “being ourselves pure and not entombed in this which we carry about with us and call the body”. However, as “since we came to earth we have found it (the Beauty) shining most clearly through the clearest of our senses” (*Phaedrus*, 250a-c), then it is clear that all men have an innate sense to perceive the beauty of the objects in a spontaneous way. For instance, if a group of people, when watching several geometric shapes, agree on which ones are the most harmonic, elegant ones, then will not that mean that the human being possesses an innate sense to recognize certain standards of beauty?

Following Pythagoras, Plato turns to geometry and mathematics, for they are the only sciences with a universal value (*Meno*, 86e-87; *Republic*, VII, 536d-537a; *Laws*, VII, 819b). Among the different examples expounded by Plato in order to demonstrate this statement, one of the most significant ones is the dialogue between Socrates

²¹² Regarding the difference between spirit and soul, what was said in the introductory note of this work is still valid.

and a slave whom he helps discover that a square drawn on the diagonal of a base square is twice as large as that square²¹³. Nevertheless, “without anyone having taught him [this theorem]... he will understand, recovering the knowledge out of himself” (*Meno*, 85d). This would also imply that, as well as that “law” or geometric principle was already in the slave in a virtual way, so every man would carry other innate principles, essences (*ousia*) or *intelligible ideas* (*eidos*), within him (*Phaedo*, 102a). The discovery and refresh of such *innate essences* precisely constitute the aim of philosophy.

In the discovery of these innate ideas lies the “Socratic” dialogue. The importance of such method does not lie in *what is spoken*, but in *who speaks*. Going back to the last example, the least important thing is the discovery of a geometric theorem; what is important is the fact that the interlocutor understands that *everything* is already within him. Socrates has no intention of teaching “anything” to his interlocutors because the only thing he affirms is that *he knows nothing*.

However, Socrates harasses his interlocutors with questions to help them recognize themselves and understand what they *are* by nature, although they may have forgotten it. The Delphic precept *Gnōthi seauton* (“Know thyself”) means, in its authentic sense, to recover the consciousness of our divinity: “I did not keep quiet, but neglecting what most men care for: money-making and property, and military offices, and public speaking, and the various offices and plots and parties that come up in the state... I tried to persuade each of you to *care for what he is* and his own perfection in goodness and wisdom *rather than for any of his belongings*” (*Apology*, 36b-c).

²¹³ As the size of the diagonal is determined by an “irrational” number (*alogos*), this example is used by Plato to explain the immeasurable nature of certain subtle realities (*Laws*, VII, 819d-820d).

IV.- DOES OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE EXIST?

Certainly, all knowledge that aspires to be scientific must be objective: “what I know is what I am aware of”. However, insofar as it is experienced by me, it is still subjective; for example, “the sweetness, which comes from the wine and pervades it, passes over and makes the wine both to be and to seem sweet to the tongue... But when it gets hold of me in illness... in the tongue the sensation or perception of bitterness, and in the wine a bitterness that is engendered there and passes over into the other” (*Theaetetus*, 159d-e). Therefore, “if a man says anything *is*, he must say it is to or of or in relation to something, and similarly if he says it *becomes*” (*Theaetetus*, 160b). Thus, if the perceptions or experiences that come from the senses are inaccurate and deceptive because they are subject to changes or to the becoming, if the knowledge we interpret by means of the senses cannot provide us with an accurate idea or understanding of reality, in sum, if there is no objective knowledge of the reality that comes from the subject, how can we know the reality? Indeed, how can we achieve a knowledge, deserving that name, which may be pure enough to let the soul or the Being have a glimpse or experience?

Regarding this, Plato finds out that the body senses and the ordinary thought are not enough to walk a path of purification that culminates in the contemplation of God. Firstly, how can we know the Being? According to Plato, the Being is the Cause without cause, what is not born and cannot die, and is not subject to any change, but always stays, unchanging, identical to itself. “What is that eternal Being that has no becoming? ... Everything which becomes must of necessity become owing to some cause; for without a cause it is impossible for anything to attain becoming” (*Timaeus*, 27d-28a). Therefore, if everything were just becoming, there would be no reference at all. Nonetheless, if the Being is just absolute, language and thought are not less impossible, because nothing can be distin-

guished within the One without parts; because to say that “A is A” is already to exceed A. Even to say that the Being is “something” (eternal, permanent, unchanging, etc.) is not less inaccurate, because that would equal to say that the Being is not the opposite of “eternal”, “permanent”, and that, therefore, it is lacking. To say that the Being is “everything” implies affirming that the Being is also “nothing”, which is absurd; “[The Being] neither has become nor became nor was in the past, it has neither become nor is it becoming nor is it in the present, and it will neither become nor be made to become nor will it be in the future... Then the Being is not at all. Evidently not” (*Parmenides*, 141e). However, ultimately, the least incorrect is to state that “The Being is”. Nevertheless, if “the One is”, this implies that the One and the Being are two, so *another* thing is born: multiplicity: “then the being of one will exist, but will not be identical with one, for if it were identical with one, it would not be the being of one, nor would one partake of it” (*Parmenides*, 142b).

On one hand, any thing is being or non-being; if it is non-being, the non-being is already something, which would be paradoxical. On the other hand, even if the non-being is admitted, “it is impossible rightly to utter or to say or to think of non-being without any attribute, but it is a thing inconceivable, inexpressible, unspeakable, irrational” (*Sophist*, 238c). Consequently, no matter how many times we turn this reasoning over in our minds, up to which extent does not this demonstrate the inability of human language to define the essence of the Divinity? And, even once admitted such inability, it is still paradoxical that “What can be thought is also that why there is thought, since without the Being, in which it is explained, you would not find the thinking”. Even though some form of knowledge about the Divinity or some sort of mystical, unitive “experience” of the Being were possible, would not it be unrecognizable, being such knowledge incommunicable? (*Parmenides*, 132b). Plato employs numerous and exhausting reasonings in order to convince the reader that the understanding of God and of the transcendence of the soul

can be achieved, if accepted that, being both of them (which are strictly but one in their essential Oneness) related to each other beyond mind's understanding, the least inaccurate that can be said about it is that the Being is the Being. The Cause without cause, the Only One God, the Being is "what is"; "our soul before it entered into the body existed just as the very essence which is called *what is*" (*Phaedo*, 92d).

Did the seeker get to a dead end? What should he do then? It is logical that the only possible way starts from distrusting his senses, "removing himself, so far as possible, from eyes and ears, and, in a word, from his whole body, because he feels that its companionship disturbs his soul and hinders it from attaining truth and wisdom" (*Phaedo*, 66a). The identification with and attachment to his body is the main obstacle for a philosopher who aspires to develop his contemplative life: "So long as we have the body, and the soul is contaminated by such an evil, we shall never attain completely what we desire, that is, the truth" (*Phaedo*, 66b). The vision through the body senses is imperfect and needed of means, involving a subject, an object and the action of knowing. The vision of the Being is pure, *unitive* and immediate because there is neither subject, nor object, nor action: "And this way, freeing ourselves from the foolishness of the body and being pure, we shall, I think, be with the pure and shall know of ourselves all that is pure" (*Phaedo*, 67a). Therefore, "while we live, we shall, I think, be nearest to knowledge when we avoid, so far as possible, intercourse and communion with the body... and are not filled with its nature, but keep ourselves pure from it until God himself sets us free" (*Phaedo*, 67a).

Consequently, according to Plato, the soul "thinks best when none of these things troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor any pleasure, but it is, so far as possible, alone by itself, and takes leave of the body, and avoiding, so far as it can, all association

or contact with the body, reaches out toward the reality (the Being)” (*Phaedo*, 65c).

V.- THE KNOWLEDGE OF REALITY THROUGH CONTEMPLATION

The Platonic Dialogue in which the author lets us more clearly glimpse his theory and practice of contemplation is the *Phaedo*. It must be said that this work is about the immortality of the soul and about philosophy as a preparation for the physical death, using as its backbone argument Socrates’ sentence of death that forced him to drink the hemlock, falsely accused of corrupting the youth with his ideas. However, behind that first level of the Platonic discourse, another deeper, subtler textual register is hidden, in which he deals with the most esoteric, innermost teachings of the Academy. Nevertheless, as those teachings were not to be written or published, the text confines itself to showing a highly formalist description of the contemplative method without going deeper into the most substantial aspects: “The greatest safeguard is to avoid writing and to learn by heart... For this reason I myself have never yet written anything on these subjects” (*Letters*, II, 314b). Even so, a thorough reading of his work may let us discover what the spiritual itinerary of the divine Plato and his initiated academics was.

As mentioned before, the Platonists, following the Pythagoreans, distrusted the ability of the body senses to capture the essence of the Being. They felt the same disdain for the bodily world, which they considered to have an illusory, deceptive nature.

Plato intends to demonstrate that the body and its senses not only do not help us attain wisdom, but that they are even an obstacle to doing it. Every time the soul tries to attain the truth, it is deceived by the body (*Phaedo*, 65a), whereas, on the contrary, it “thinks best

when none of these things troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor any pleasure, but it is, so far as possible, alone by itself, and takes leave of the body, and avoiding, so far as it can, all association or contact with the body, reaches out toward the reality” (*Phaedo*, 65c), thus if we want to know the truth “absolutely, we must be free from the body and must behold the actual realities with the eye of the soul alone” (*Phaedo*, 66d-e).

Taking back a word game inherited from Orphism and Pythagoreanism, they affirmed that the body (*sōma*) was a *sēma*, that is, a “tomb” or prison for the soul (*Republic*, VII, beginning). They also defended the need to “leave” this world in order to find the true Life. In several passages, Plato compares the worldly existence with a dream (*Cratylus*, 439c). That imperfect way to see the world is similar to that of him who remains in the underwater depth and looks at the sky through all the liquid that blurs his vision (*Phaedo*, 109c-e). It is necessary to get out of the water in order to recover our pure vision. The world can come to be like a hell (*Gorgias*, 523a ff.) or like the Orphic quagmire (*Phaedo*, 69c; *Republic*, II, 363d). And, above all, the world is like a cavern where man is chained since his childhood, fascinated by the game of shadows that an external light projects on the bottom of the cavern; “Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet-shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets” (*Republic*, VII, 514a-b). As these men have never seen another thing in their lives except for the shadows projected by the light, they do not understand or conceive another way of existence different from the one of the shadows. The mission

of *philosophy* consists in freeing them from their chains, getting them out of their ignorance, that is, from the cavern, so that they may see the sunlight. At the beginning, the mere understanding of their situation would make it easier for them to look at the shadows, but, after that, they would dedicate all their efforts to get out of the cavern and directly contemplate the Light. That is the Socratic enlightenment: the death to the world of darkness and the birth into the true light, that of the soul.

Nevertheless, against the opinion of most current researchers, I think that, when Plato talks about the Sunlight as the goal of philosophy, he is not referring to the Light of rational understanding, but to a very different Light that, besides, encompasses and transcends the former. It is about the inner Light of him who, having purified his thought, achieves the “contemplative vision” (the Hindu *Samādhi* or the Christian “beatific vision”).

What happens when he who has gotten out of the cavern decides, after that, to return to it in order to warn his former captive fellows about the deception? Some of those fellows will wake up from their dream, but many others will mock his ideas, branding them as visionary. Recalling the “battle with the giants” described by Hesiod in his *Theogony*, Plato speaks ironically about these discussions between materialists and idealists, describing the former as “sons of the Earth”, because they only understand what they can touch and handle (*Sophist*, 246a).

In another passage, he turns to the metaphor of the auriga to explain the fight for the control of the “earthly” tendencies that hinder the necessary purification of thought that leads to contemplation. In daily life, as well as in the meditative practice, the candidate is constantly struck by all kind of thoughts that prevents him from being suitably concentrated on himself. The candidate’s daily life is, thus, an unceasing fight against the daily mirages, so if he does not make

an effort to maintain the proper constant concentration during the first stages, he will end up being trampled at the quagmire of the world. The perceptions from the senses and the thoughts are like runaway horses that need a good rider who rides them. At the beginning of the meditative practice, the soul is “troubled by the horses and hardly beholding the realities; and another sometimes rises and sometimes sinks, and, because its horses are unruly, it sees some things and fails to see others.

The other souls follow after, all yearning for the upper region but unable to reach it, and are carried round beneath, trampling upon and colliding with one another, each striving to pass its neighbor. So there is the greatest confusion and sweat of rivalry, wherein many are lamed, and many wings are broken through the incompetence of the drivers; and after much toil they all go away without gaining a view of Reality” (*Phaedrus*, 248a).

VI.- METHOD TO PURIFY THE THOUGHT

This being the state of things, Plato introduces an enormous dilemma: Given that the separation from the body takes place only after the biological death, “one of two things must follow: either [wisdom] cannot be acquired at all or only when we are dead, for then the soul will be by itself”, freed from the body-mind prison (*Phaedo*, 66e-67a).

However, Plato points out a third option that he defines as the method of the *purification of thought* and that he declares it was taken up again from a tradition “which has been mentioned long ago”, which consists “in separating, so far as possible, the soul from the body and teaching the soul the habit of collecting and bringing itself together from all parts of the body, and living, so far as it can, both now and hereafter, alone by itself, freed from the body as from fet-

ters” (*Phaedo*, 67c-d). In another moment, he insists that “those men who established the mysteries were not unenlightened, but in reality had a hidden meaning when they said long ago that” purification by means of initiation was a good for man (*Phaedo*, 69c).

This third option is what Plato, speaking for Socrates, defines as death in life or philosophical death²¹⁴. Since the philosophers aspire to wisdom and this is completely attained only by untying the soul from the body, all momentary, partial separation attained in this life by means of the *purification of thought* would be like an advance of the beyond. From this, it is deduced that philosophizing is a sort of preparation for death.

Macrobius, in his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, states, “Plato acknowledged two deaths in a man... Man dies when the soul leaves the body²¹⁵ in accordance with the laws of nature; he is also said to die when the soul, still residing in his body, spurns all bodily allurements under the guidance of philosophy, and frees itself from the tempting devices of the lusts and all the other passions. This is the death which, as we pointed out above, proceeds from the second type of those virtues which befit only philosophers” (1.18.5-6). In effect, Socrates points out that “the true philosophers practice dying”, considering it not something to “be frightened [of] and troubled” about (*Phaedo*, 67e), but something deeply happy, for it consists in an anticipated experience of the life that awaits us in the Beyond.

²¹⁴ From the context of the Platonic Dialogue, it is deduced that the “philosophical death” was a rectified version of the “initiativ death”, dramatized in the Greek mysteries, which had fallen into a certain disrepute.

²¹⁵ Regarding physical death, Macrobius adds that Plato “forbade forcing, inducing or provoking it, and taught that it is necessary to wait for the nature to ply its role...” [1.13.11]. Such a clear condemnation of suicide is justified because we are a property of the gods (*Phaedo*, 62b-c). It only remains to wait until the numerical destiny of the bodily human existence is fulfilled: “It is actually certain that the souls associate with the bodies according to a relation based on certain numbers. While those numbers last, the body remains animated; when they are missing, that arcane force in which the association consisted is dissolved. That is why the wisest prophet: *I will fulfill the number and be given back to the darkness*” (Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, 545).

In another moment, Plato specifies one of the characteristics of such philosophical death. Practicing philosophy implies preparing oneself for the death of individuality, because contemplation, as a goal of philosophy, is essentially a vision that transcends individuality and places itself in universality and objectivity. It consists in the nullification of the subject as an entity separate from the world and in continuous fight for hoarding and appropriating objects. When the subject-object dual relationship is transcended, another form of knowledge takes over, overflowing the ordinary borders. It is the immediate or contemplative knowledge.

Contemplation actually implies passing from a vision dominated by *individuality* to a vision ruled by the *universality* of pure thought. Therefore, a life based on individual emotions and thoughts is an imperfect and even mean form of existence if compared with the contemplative life, because “nothing can be more contrary than such pettiness to the quality of a soul that is ever to seek *integrity* and *universality* in all things human and divine... Do you think that a spirit habituated to thoughts of grandeur and the *contemplation of all time and all existence* can deem this life of man a thing of great concern? (*Republic*, VI, 486a).

Let us return to the initial question: how to get rid of the body? Plato unequivocally answers: by means of the *purification of thought*. Such a purification consists in “that which is called courage... and that which is commonly called self-restraint, which consists in not being excited by the passions and in being superior to them and acting in a seemly way” (*Phaedo*, 68c), since, as well as after the *biological death* takes place a separation from the body, during the posthumous journey of the soul “by the River of Indifference (*Ameles*), whose waters no vessel can contain” (*Republic*, X, 621a), the *philosophical death* (equivalent to the *initiatric death* of the mystic rites) takes place as soon as we practice the detachment

and indifference of the sensible objects. Nevertheless, that *purification of thought* also requires a very specific meditative practice by which the thought may concentrate on itself, unified or free from all distraction. This state is momentarily²¹⁶ induced by the power of the Intellect during those meditative practices whose aim is to disconnect the senses as a previous step to experience the *Oneness*: “The colorless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence, with which all true knowledge is concerned, holds this region and is visible only to the intellect, the pilot of the soul... In the revolution it beholds absolute justice, temperance, and knowledge, not such knowledge as has a beginning and varies as it is associated with one or another of the things we call realities, but that which abides in the real eternal absolute” (*Phaedrus*, 247c-e).

Therefore, the *purification of thought*, according to Socrates and Plato, involves: 1st, a process of self-restraint or detachment from all what is earthly, which facilitates the resignation of the senses so that the soul may “withdraw from these”. And 2nd, a method of concentration of the thought on itself by means of which the soul must “collect and concentrate itself within itself, and to trust nothing except itself and its own abstract thought of abstract existence” (*Phaedo*, 83a-b). This way, the meditation is purer if one “approaches each thing, so far as possible, with the reason alone, not introducing sight into his reasoning nor dragging in any of the other senses along with his thinking, but... employs pure, absolute reason in his attempt to search out the pure, absolute essence of things, and... removes himself, so far as possible, from eyes and ears, and, in a word, from his whole body, because he feels that its companionship disturbs the soul and hinders it from attaining truth and wisdom” (*Phaedo*, 65e-66a).

²¹⁶ In the expedition against Potidaea, Socrates remained “concentrated on his thoughts” a whole day (*Symposium*, 220c). Plato seems to point out that Socrates entered a deep contemplative state, equivalent to the mystical rapture. Marinus of Neapolis, in the biography of the Pythagorean and Neoplatonist Proclus (*Proclus or On Happiness*), comments that the latter “strongly dedicated himself to meditation”.

Finally, all this consists, ultimately, “in separating, so far as possible, the soul from the body and teaching the soul the habit of collecting and bringing itself together from all parts of the body” (*Phaedo*, 67c). Therefore, here is then synthesized the method to *purify the thought* that culminates in contemplation:

- to release the soul from its attachment to the body,
- to move soul’s attention away from all the parts of the body,
- to concentrate and collect itself.

Porphiry summarized the Platonic contemplative tradition even more when he divided it into two exercises (*meletai*): to move the thought away from all what is mortal and sensible, and dedicate oneself to the meditation on the Intellect (*On Abstinence*, 1.30).

What does *thinking oneself* consist in?

When Plato and the members of his Academy refer to the faculties and activities of the Intellect as the pilot of the Soul, they are referring not only to the reflective, rational or thinking activity. From the point of view of the contemplation of the Being, they are ultimately referring to a certain faculty that is higher than any other one and that transcends the individual thought. Proclus defined this faculty, higher than the Understanding, as *the flower of the being*, thanks to which the ecstasy and the knowledge of the One could be achieved by means of a direct experience. This is the faculty that enables a direct knowledge of Reality because it transcends or overflows the apparent consistence or individuality of the objects. The subject comprehends, encompasses and knows everything in everything or, if mystical terms are preferred, Nothing in Nothing, because there is no subject that knows any object, since the subject is the object, that is, the subject is the Everything-Nothing. That is why the Platonic method does not allow *thinking* about objects during the au-

thentic contemplation because the One, the Being, is not accessible by means of this form of thought or any of the senses²¹⁷.

Could it be more specified what kind of process of purification of thought Plato refers to when he recommends the contemplative to relinquish his sensory perceptions? Certainly, when the meditator gives up all sensory information, he ends up remaining at the mercy of his own mental flow. This is an apparently uncontrollable situation, for the direct experience seems to demonstrate that it is impossible to calm down or remove the stream of thoughts. Even the mere fact of trying seems to strengthen them, thus all our tries seem to be headed to fall in that authentic *quagmire* Orphism talked about, made of mental inertia. Nonetheless, how something so chaotic as the stream of thoughts can give way to contemplation? Plato clarifies that, in this situation, after the meditator “removes himself, so far as possible, from eyes and ears, and, in a word, from his whole body, because he feels that its companionship disturbs the soul and hinders it from attaining truth and wisdom”, the way to make the detachment from the thoughts culminate, that is, achieve what Plato himself denominated *pure thought*, lies in concentrating on the thought itself as “pure, dragging with it nothing... gathered itself into itself alone” (*Phaedo*, 80e). That is, the mystical or unitive vision seems to involve, in a first moment, a subject who knows the subject himself as an object. However, this action of a subject knowing himself or thinking of himself is not ultimately a true action, because the authentic contemplation is not the action of thinking, but a different, higher form of direct knowledge that could be described as *intuitive*. Plato defined the *pure thought* as a supraindividual state in which the subject, by thinking of himself, castles and exhausts himself as a subject and as an object. By thinking of himself with such a constant, sustained concentration, the subject, transformed into the object of

²¹⁷ Vid. Pierre Courcelle, “Tradition néoplatonicienne et tradition chrétienne de la ‘region de dissemblance’”, in *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 32 (1957), pp. 5-33.

his own attention, ends up becoming dissolved and transcended, giving way to a higher form of unitive or non-dual knowledge: the *pure* or *contemplative knowledge*. Only there true peace and happiness can be found, because there is no subject who claims any action or the ownership or authorship of anything. A direct knowledge or vision of the Being takes place there, free from the attachments and from the intervention of the body and its senses. It is “the delight of knowing the truth and the reality” (*Republic*, IX, 581e), that is, of knowing not by means of the sensory organs, but thanks to a direct, immediate knowledge that implies the absence, dissolution or “death” of the subject as an individual entity. It is, ultimately, the “good death” of him who has embraced the philosophical life. That is why only a philosopher can enjoy “the pleasure that the contemplation of the Being yields” (*Republic*, IX, 582c).

THE VISION OF LIGHT ACCORDING TO PLOTINUS

“[in order to contemplate], we must turn the consciousness inward and hold it to attention there” (Plotinus, *Enneads* V, 1, 12, 12).

Plotinus was born in 204 AD in the Egyptian city of Lycopolis, currently Assiut. At an early age, it is known that he frequented the Neoplatonic circles of Alexandria as a disciple of Ammonius Saccas (175-242). According to his biographers, the education received by Plotinus at Ammonius' school, influenced by the Buddhist and Hindu tendencies, and in general by the Eastern doctrines that circulated through Alexandria on behalf of the traveling *shākyas*²¹⁸, awakened in him “a vivid desire to experience the ascetic practices of Persian and Indian philosophies”. For this reason, in 242, when he was already thirty-eight years old, he joined the entourage of Emperor Marcus Antonius Gordian III in his expedition against Persia. In 243, the Roman troops managed to reconquer this lost province, but Gordian died the following spring and Plotinus had to escape to Antioch. Later, he settled in Rome and founded a philosophical school whose influence reached even Gallus' imperial court.

During his whole life, Plotinus was an example of asceticism, celibacy and generous dedication to his disciples, so helpful with all of them that “he was able to live at once within himself and for others”²¹⁹. A man of delicate manners, calm and affable, he always defended frugality of food and sleep as one of the many means to discipline the mind and prepare it to face the spiritual path. His mystical experiences had led him to a so strong certainty about the inferiority

²¹⁸ As it is deduced from the evident kinship of some of his ideas with the *Upanishads*; Cf. É. Brehier and M. Gandillac, *La sagesse de Plotin*, Paris, 1952, pp. XVIII ff.

²¹⁹ Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus* 8, 19.

and evanescence of human life that, several times, he declared himself ashamed of being imprisoned in his body. The last words of Plotinus were dedicated to Eustachius, his doctor and disciple: "I am striving to give back the Divine in myself to the Divine in the All"²²⁰.

The most important characteristic of his teachings is that they all are only and exclusively the consequence and reflection of his ecstatic or mystical experiences and that their aim is to explain those states and to teach his disciples how to achieve them. One of his biographers and pupils, Porphyry, assures that, during the years that he lived with him, he witnessed at least four ecstasies of his master: "Sleeplessly alert... pure of soul, ever striving towards the divine which he loved with all his being... And this is why to Plotinus, God-like and lifting himself often, by the ways of meditation and by the methods Plato teaches in the *Symposium*, to the first and all-transcendent God, that God appeared, the God who has neither shape nor form but sits enthroned above the intellectual principle and all the intellectual sphere... For the term, the one end, of his life was... to approach to the God over all: and four times, during the period I passed with him, he achieved this term, by no mere latent fitness but by the ineffable art"²²¹. Therefore, his metaphysics are not a thought system but a "seen" or contemplated system. However, as Plotinus himself explains, only "after" leaving the contemplative trance can a reflection about the mystical "pleasure", its effects and "what has been seen" be made, and only then can it be affirmed that such an experience is valid and may be reproduced (*Enneads* V, 3, 17, 28-29).

In order to build up his doctrine, Plotinus will make use not only of his Neoplatonic masters and the Eastern metaphysical doctrines, but also of certain expressions of the Greek, Eastern and even Egyp-

²²⁰ Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus* 2, 25-27.

²²¹ Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus*, 23, 3-18.

tian mysteric teachings for they were relatively frequently used among the mysteric or esoteric circles of those times. It has actually been pointed out “the scarce importance given by Plotinus to the religion of his time, in his concept of ecstasy and mysticism. He does not demand animal sacrifices or value magical spells. Nonetheless, he values the mysteric cults, up to the extent that it has even been considered that we are maybe dealing with a transposition of the worship of the mysteries into the field of philosophy”²²². Plotinus’ work, the *Enneads*²²³, is composed of fifty-four tractates compiled by Porphyry and grouped in an arbitrary way into six books of nine sections each. Its influence on Western theology, philosophy and religious thought has been decisive, since Plotinus’ Neoplatonism was converted into one of the first sources of Western mysticism, as it was *Christianized* by Saint Augustine and the Pseudo-Dionysius²²⁴.

I.- MAN EXILED IN THIS WORLD

Taking up again the Platonic discourse, Plotinus explains that the human soul²²⁵ is like a foreigner exiled in this world at the mercy of a plurality of objects and experiences whose meaning and goal he does not know. This is because the soul has dived into the sensible world: “It has fallen: it is at the chain: debarred from expressing itself now through its intellectual phase, it operates through sense, it is a captive; this is the burial, the encavernment, of the Soul”. (*En.* IV, 8, 4). In such a state, the “casting of the wings, the enchaining in body” takes place (*En.* IV, 8, 4). However, there is a little reminiscence of that state, previous to the soul’s fall, which makes it wish to return to the principle from which it comes and which teaches it that,

²²² José Alsina Clota, *El neoplatonismo. Síntesis del espiritualismo antiguo*, Barcelona, 1989, p. 65.

²²³ For the English translation of the *Enneads*, the classic version as translated by Stephen MacKenna, London, 1917 has been used.

²²⁴ J. Maréchal, *Études sur la psychologie des mystiques I*, Paris, 1938, p. 427.

²²⁵ Regarding the ambiguous usage of the word “soul”, what was said in the introductory note of this work is still valid.

in this intelligible world, it will only be safe when united with God (*En.* IV, 8, 4, 1-6). Otherwise, should man pour himself into the sensible world and move away from the spiritual world, he will know but ignorance and suffering. This dilemma is not to be easily solved by the seeker, because, deep down, *he wants to be god and keep at the same time his singularity as a man.*

Plotinus turns to the famous mystic episode of Narcissus' death in order to explain how the 'narcissistic' soul sinks into the matter when it confuses its body with the authentic reality, as well as Narcissus drowns in water while trying to reach his own image. In order to avoid that fatal mirage, the soul must start its escape and move its eyes away from the quagmire the matter consists in²²⁶. In effect, swept by the pride of his beauty, Narcissus despised all those who tried to love him²²⁷, until one day he approached a fountain to soothe his thirst and fell in love with his own reflection on the water, fully convinced that it was another person. Ignoring that he had fallen in love with himself, considering himself unable to communicate with whom he loved so much, he died of love at the edge of the fountain. Although the interpretation of this myth contains many registers, Plotinus brings it up in order to show the mistake and harm of con-

²²⁶ The function of the quagmire in Orphism and Eleusian mysteries is to be reminded. The Greek term ὕλη originally meant "forest", "forest land", "forest wood", "firewood"; that is why ὕλο-τόμος is the lumberjack and afterwards this word derived into "metal" or "primary matter". Likewise, the Latin term *materia* comes from *mater*, womb, mother, and *materies*, wood. Thus, *materiatura* is carpentry, and *materiarius* is the carpenter or lumberjack. Plotinus uses the term *mater* of *There* in order to refer to the first principle that is *beyond* the being, as opposed to the matter of *Here*, which is non-being, in the sense of *infra-being* (*En.* II, 4, 16, 24-27). The matter of the sensible world is the "*eidōs* of the non-being" (*En.* I, 8, 3, 4-5), because it has no consistence or permanence. The soul must walk to what was before it in order to find the being; otherwise, it will head for what is after it, the non-being, that is, *what is not* (εἰς τὸ μὴ ὄν). The similarity between the Plotinian concept of *matter* (non-being) and the Hindu *Māyā* (literally, "what is not") is to be pointed out.

²²⁷ The version of Narcissus' myth employed here is the one by Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, III, 339-510, or Photios, *Bibliotheca*, 186, 24.

fusing an image, a reflected shadow, with reality, instead of looking at the highest Eros²²⁸.

II.- BUT MAN CAN RETURN

In different passages, Plotinus uses the expression “primordial happiness” or return to the state “before our birth” (*En.* VI, 4, 14, 17-18). Such references to a previous life do *not* have a chronological sense, because the idea of “falling” into the matter is based on an ontological as well moral conception. From the ontological point of view, the “reincarnation” into the matter is not a “fall”, and does not bring with it any corruption because such processes are not ruled by the human “time” of before and after. In fact, the chronological time is a logical assumption created by our discursive mind, whereas the metaphysical “time” of the intelligible or divine world is out of our understanding. However, there must certainly be a first *natural* condition, an original state of the Being (equivalent to the Jewish or Christian Paradise, or the Greek Golden Age) that explains the current condition of “fall” or “casting of the wings” that justifies the need for “purification” and “return”. But it does not imply an individual existence prior to birth, but the existence of a previous ideal supraindividual state. The soul does not move away from itself, nor does the inferior nature come from anywhere to join the soul (*En.* VI, 4, 12-13). In sum, that previous “moment” implies the non-existence of what “exists” afterwards (this coincides with the Hindu idea of the universe as an illusion projected by the mind). That is why Plotinus adds that we were all pure intelligible (*En.* VI, 4, 14,

²²⁸ There is another episode in the *Odyssey* based on the same argument: whereas Ulysses (symbol of the pilgrim soul) decided to resume his journey back to Ithaca (his true fatherland), giving up the sensible pleasures that he enjoyed beside Circe and Calypso, symbolizing this the return of the soul to the primordial principle (*Odyssey*, X, 550-560), the “narcissistic” soul of Elpenor, Ulysses’ youngest companion, succumbs to such charms because he ignores that the body is just an evanescent, temporary reflection of himself.

19-20), without that diversity contradicting the essential unity of all the forms of the “Nous”²²⁹.

How to return to that state of pureness, grace and happiness prior to human time? On one hand, Plotinus states that we have that happiness “when we but will” (*En.* V, 5, 12, 33) because it is a loving attraction that brings us the presence of the Good. But, on the other hand, invoking the Greek and Egyptian mystical traditions²³⁰, he affirms that that “knowledge” must be reserved to those who have been initiated into the contemplation, those who in turn are obliged to prevent that secret from being revealed unless certain qualifications are not found in the candidates (*En.* VI, 9, 11, 1-4). Man must meditate on that mysterious inner force that causes the nostalgia of the lost unity and the longing for the good. This will lead to the conclusion that there is a spiritual “presence” that constitutes the deepest ‘I’, which can be discovered, experienced and finally realized. Ultimately, it is about God Himself who is in us, though the soul is not aware of the beneficial action of this presence (for instance, *En.* V, 3, 14; VI, 9, 7). Explained in rational terms, Plotinus would say that the Soul can access the One or the Good by virtue of the principle of “the similar through the similar” (*En.* VI, 9, 11, 32); finally, the One can be contemplated by means of the supra-intellective level of the soul.

In order to perceive the One, we need to focus our attention on our own interior by means of meditation, with the hope to be enlightened by the Divinity; “We first invoke God Himself, not in loud word but in that way of prayer which is always within our power,

²²⁹ Saint Augustine was inspired by this idea when stated that, before the creation of the world, we were at the divine mind, even though that does not implies our preexistence as individuals before our birth; *De div. quaest.* LXXXIII, 46, 2 (PL 40, 30); *Epist.* 14 (PL 4, 33, 80). On the other hand, in Eph. 1:4, Saint Paul also accepts the idea that “He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world...”.

leaning in soul towards Him by aspiration...” (*En.* V, 1, 6, 8-11). Man must previously understand that his true nature is like an irradiation of the original unity, so his apparent projection in the intelligible world and his radical loneliness (*En.* VI, 7, 21, 8-10) are but consequences of the identification of the only one being with an illusory multiplicity. That is to say, he must uncover the mirage of separateness and understand that the apparent multiplicity of the beings, including our own assumed individuality, is but an appearance of the Only One Being. Man’s discursive reason needs to “understand by what means it has knowledge of the thing it sees and warrant for what it affirms” (*En.* V, 3, 6, 22-24). Only with that rational certainty will man, who is prisoner of multiplicity, be able to find the balance of his intellectual instability, which will provide him with a “return” to his original fatherland.

However, after that, the rational understanding must be followed by the understanding or vision beyond the sensible world, that is, the *metaphysical experience*. Plotinus considers that all really metaphysical doctrine must be perceived by contemplation, for this is the only way to have access to the intelligible, as the experience of his own and of other mystics confirmed (*En.* V, 3, 14, 9-10). That is why he criticizes the intellectuals who dedicate themselves to philosophy without practicing it because “we seem to desire to be persuaded rather than to see the truth in the pure intellect”.

Ultimately, Plotinus affirms the supremacy of the knowledge acquired through the contemplative way, for it happens in a special state in which the “reduction of all souls to one” is felt and which transforms the consciousness into something higher, once the reason and the body senses have been calmed down: “The spirit understood according to its nature and thought of itself. The resting soul handed

²³⁰ M. Cochez, “Plotin et les Mystères d’Isis”, in *Revue Néo-scholastique de Philosophie (RNPh)* 18 (1911), pp. 328-340, commenting on *En.* VI, 9, 10-11. Also J.-M. Narbonne, *La Métaphysique de Plotin*, Vrin, Paris, 1994.

over its activity to the spirit". The soul needs to "withdraw into itself" (*En.* I, 6, 8, 1-3) and understand the situation of its own original existence (*En.* I, 6, 8, 21). To that end, the consciousness, which is "dispelled because of the two orders of passion", must "withdraw to its own place" (*En.* I, 2, 5).

III.- THERE ARE NO ATTRIBUTES, THOUGHTS OR OTHERNESS IN GOD

The first paradox of the metaphysical experience comes from the difficulty to express transcendence. That is why all the mystics state that contemplation is an experience of an incommunicable nature, since those who have "seen" cannot explain it, and those who have not had the joy to experience it by themselves cannot understand it (*En.* VI, 9, 11, 1-2). After the vision of the One, "we deal with it, but we do not state it"²³¹; "we can and do state what it is not, while we are silent as to what it is" (*En.* V, 3, 14, 6-7). It is considered that, with this discourse, Plotinus inaugurated the path of the negative way, the apophatic mysticism, which will later be prolonged in the work of Dionysius the Areopagite in the 5th century. As it is assumed that the One is beyond all definition, it is only possible an apophatic approach (from Greek *apophasis*, negative statement) to define what God "is not", in contrast to the cataphatic mysticism (or theology), which states what God is. "We see that this can be no thing among things but must be prior to all things... [The One] is none of the things of which it is the source –its nature is that nothing can be affirmed of it–, not existence, not essence, not life" (*En.* III, 8).

According to Plotinus, God is infinite, unique (*En.* III, 9, 4, 7), He has given Himself existence, "He was able at once to make all things and to leave them to their own being. He above" (*En.* V, 5,

²³¹ Plato, *Parmenides*, 142a: "Then the one has no name, nor is there any description or knowledge or perception or opinion of it".

12, 38-39). The One is none of these things, which means that it is “no thing among things” (*En.* III 8, 9, 48-49; V 3, 11, 18), because it is “prior to all things” (*En.* III 8, 9, 54) and is “beyond all statement” (*En.* V 3, 13, 2; V 4, 2, 39-40). It is present everywhere, fills everything without identifying itself as any thing (*En.* III 9, 4, 2-6), statement that separates Plotinus’ doctrines from pantheism²³². Likewise, Plotinus states that God is love and, at the same time, object of love (*En.* VI, 8, 15, 1). Nevertheless, if “Eros” is the desire of what is not possessed, God cannot love, but, for God contains everything without being contained, He is at once subject and object of love, which that is a way to transcend the apparent plurality, solving it into the oneness of the Being²³³. That is why “He Himself is that which He loves... He is what from always He wished and wishes to be” (*En.* VI, 8).

Refusing the Aristotelian principle that the thought is the supreme reality²³⁴, Plotinus uses all his skill to prove that neither is there thought in God, since that would imply subject-object duality. God has no need to think about Himself, which does not mean that it be correct to state that He ignores his own being. To attribute knowledge to God is as inappropriate for Him as to deny it to him. Strictly speaking, “knowledge is a unitary thing, but defined: the first is One, but undefined: a defined One would not be the One... [The One] without knowledge, [since] a knowing principle has duality”, but it transcends all thoughts, requires no mediate cognitive process, because there is no process in God, but a unitive, immediate knowledge (*En.* V, 3, 12; III, 9, 7, 1-6). Precisely, when the subject-object duality disappears, Plotinus explains that there is actually no thought, but “there is mere conjunction, such a contact, without affirmation or comprehension, as would precede knowledge, the Intel-

²³² Supporting this, it is to be reminded that the same words regarding God are found in the LXX version of the Bible (*Ecclus.* 43:27)

²³³ This way, Plotinus picks up again the dilemma set out by Plato in his *Symposium* after Agathon’s intervention.

²³⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 12.1074b.

lect not yet in being, the impinging agent not percipient” (*En.* V, 3, 10, 41-44). And, as the One is “prior to thought and movement” and therefore also prior to human language and knowledge, that explains that it may be conceptually inexpressible. It is not correct even to say that God “is” and even less that He “is something” specific (*En.* VI, 9, 37, 4-9). For all these reasons, Plotinus concludes that God is ineffable: “Thus, He is in truth beyond all statements: any affirmation is of a thing; but all-transcending, resting above even the most august divine Intelligence, this is the only true description, since it does not make it a thing among things, nor name it where no name could identify Him: we can but try to indicate, in our own feeble way, something concerning Him” (*En.* V, 3, 13, 1-6).

The metaphysical consequence of this is that the soul itself, in its state of unity, overflows all thought (*En.* VI, 7, 35, 42-45), fact that also implies that it can only be comprehended by transcending the ordinary thought. Given that the One is beyond Intelligence, it cannot be apprehended except by *that* belonging to Intelligence that is not Intelligence in itself and that is, at the same time, in man’s soul; the center of the soul. In order to make this supra-intellective or supra-individual level be revealed, man needs to be purified, to “cut away everything” (*En.* V 3, 17, 38), and to turn all powers inoperative and asleep. Then, isolated from the outside, the center of the soul will be able to *escape alone to the Alone* (*En.* VI 9, 11, 51), *receive alone the Alone* (*En.* VI 7, 34, 7-8) and *behold alone the Alone* (*En.* I 6, 7, 9).

IV.- THE TRIAD URANUS-KRONOS-ZEUS AND THE ASCENSION OF THE SOUL

In sum, the central topic of Plotinus, as well as of Neoplatonism, is the *escape* and *ascension* of the soul, the *return* conceived as an *entrance into oneself*. It consists in escaping from the world of here

towards the world of there in order to return, as Ulysses did, to the true *Fatherland* (*En.* I, 6, 8, 16-21). For that purpose, every man must go back through the endogenous, triune structure of the soul. In particular, through the three divine Hypostases latent in man's soul: the Soul, the Intelligence and the Good (*En.* I, 1, 8, 1-10; V, 1, 10, 1-6). In order to "recover the wings" and be able to ascend, the soul does not need to go out from itself, since God (through the trinity: Soul, Intelligence, One-Good) is present within it (*En.* I, 1 53, 8, 1-12 and *En.* V, 1, 10, 1-6). Deep down, Plotinus just proposes a philosophical translation of the three great gods of the Hesiodic *Theogony*:

Uranus-One-Good-Father of the gods,
Kronos-Intelligence-Nous,
Zeus-Soul.

Uranus symbolizes the One-Good, due to which he is "King over a king and over kings, and even more justly called father of gods" (*En.* V, 5, 3). This first principle engendered the Intelligence (Nous), which produces all the beings and intelligible forms that it keeps inside of itself in order to prevent them from falling into the matter. That is why it is "saturated" with its entire offspring, the intelligibles, held under its own protection (*En.* III, 5, 2, 19-20). In effect, according to a certain etymology mentioned by Plotinus, Kronos is the god of "satiation" (*koros*) and "intelligence" (*nous*). Once satiated, that is, when the Being achieves its perfection, it is ready to give birth to Zeus, as the Intelligence gives birth to the Soul when it achieves its perfection (*En.* V, 1, 7, 35-37). According to another etymology that Plotinus uses as well, Kronos (Chronos) is the time that, after its union to the world or matter (Rhea etymologically means "to flow"), devours all his "children" except Zeus (Soul of the world). The marriage between Kronos and Rhea symbolizes the union between the time and the world from which all things arise. But the becoming itself, Kronos, devours and destroys everything, except

that which is immortal, that is, Zeus, as principle of life that represents the Soul of the world. The third hypostasis, the Soul (Zeus), is not self-constituted, as its predecessor, just by an act of “audacity”, but also by a wish of contemplation of the Intelligence. From this curiosity and wish of independence of the particular souls comes the so-called “casting of the wings” (equivalent to the Fall or expulsion from the Judeo-Christian Paradise).

How could this hypostatic process that originates the cosmos be explained? Why have these successive hierophanies taken place? There is really no mental answer to this question, that is, from the subject-object point of view. At the most, Plotinus expresses a singular concept: Kronos (Intelligence-Consciousness) is separated from the One by audacity; the Intelligence “is a principle which in some measure has dared secession [from the One]” (*En.* VI, 9, 5, 29). Thus, when the divine *Nous* looks outside, the external objects arise into existence; when the “particular” *Nous* thinks about the objects, it identifies itself and makes itself multiple with them, it turns itself an object, getting lost in the plurality of the sensible world. These metaphors, extracted from the *sacred history*, try no more (and no less) than to explain the inexplicable appealing to intuition... It is impossible to explain it or understand it without living the *mystical* experience, because, strictly speaking, there is nothing outside reality that is not the One. The One is what there is, it is the being that is not, it is that which, being everything that it is, is none of the things it is. Outside the One is there nothing, not even thinkable. All the rest: the “*Nous*”, the Soul, etc., is but mental recreations that try to explain the inexplicable.

The same reasoning is taken to its logical conclusion in order to explain the origin of the soul: “What can it be that has brought the souls to forget the father, God, and, though members of the Divine and entirely of that world, to ignore at once themselves and Him? The evil that has overtaken them has its source in self-will, in the en-

try into the sphere of process, and in the primal differentiation with the desire for self-ownership. They conceived a pleasure in this freedom and largely indulged their own motion; thus they were hurried down the wrong path, and in the end, drifting further and further, they came to lose even the thought of their origin in the Divine. A child wrenched young from home and brought up during many years at a distance will fail in knowledge of its father and of itself: the souls, in the same way, no longer discern either the divinity or their own nature; ignorance of their rank brings self-depreciation" (*En.* V, 1, 1).

V.- WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?

The ordinary process of knowledge successively implies a knowing subject, an object of knowledge and the action of knowing: "A knowing principle must handle distinct items: its object must, at the moment of cognition, contain diversity; otherwise the thing remains unknown" (*En.* V, 3, 10, 40-44). On the contrary, contemplation is a "form of vision", very different from the discursive thought because the former happens after the momentary withdrawal of what one believes one is. That "introversion" leads to a "beyond" that is not properly an "outside", but an "inside" (*En.* VI, 11, 22-24) whose immediate effect is to nullify or exclude the contingent I; in sum, subject and object become one. What is remarkable about this cognitive process is that, by remaining in that "vision", it is discovered that there is something more than a mere "subject"; the soul "has seen that presence suddenly manifesting within it, for there is nothing between: here is no longer a duality but a two in one" (*En.* VI, 7, 34) or, in other words, the soul "becomes that very light... raised to Godhood or, better, knowing its Godhood" (*En.* VI, 9, 9, 58). Here is no knowledge that comes from successive objects or experiences; it cannot even be affirmed that there is knowledge itself, since there is no experiencing subject. And, as there is consciousness, but not an

individual consciousness, it is talked about intellectual or “unitive vision” (because there is an immediate knowledge without a subject-object relationship), transpersonal consciousness (because the frontiers of individual knowledge are overflowed), witnessing and even “simultaneity” in the cognitive process (because “all in all” is known).

That is why one of the most important teachings of Plotinus is that *the Being cannot be understood from individuality*²³⁵, because the part, as a part, cannot understand the All; “you cease to think of yourself as under limit but, laying all such determination aside, you became an All” (*En.* VI, 5, 12). However, the part, as an All, can actually attain understanding for *every being is a part of the absolute Good* (*En.* I, 7, 2, 1-4). In order to understand the All, it is necessary to discover the ‘I’ as a ‘*νοῦς*’: “To admit [soul’s] knowing God is to be compelled to admit its self-knowing... for it is itself one of those given things” (*En.* V, 3, 7, 1 ff.).

The aim of contemplation is that the soul may identify itself with the *Nous* (Superior Intelligence or Consciousness): “the true way is to become *Nous* and be, our very selves, what we are to see” (*En.* VI, 7, 15, 31-32). The application of this metaphysical principle to the level of spiritual realization is presented as one of his latest treatises: *The knowing hypostases and the transcendent* (*En.* V, 3). There, Plotinus maintains that the *Nous* is a unique Consciousness that knows that it itself knows. And when it thinks about itself, there is no duality between subject and object of thought in it anymore, because the thinker, the thought and the action of thinking are identified as one (*En.* V, 3, 3, 4-22); “The Divine Intelligence in its mentation thinks itself; the object of the thought is nothing external:

²³⁵ Here he just develops the traditional Eastern thought, though. Regarding the relationship between Plotinus’ ideas and Hindu thought, vid. García Bazán, *Neoplatonismo y Vedanta*; H. A. Armstrong, “Plotinus and India”, in *The Classical Quarterly* (CQ) 30 (1936), pp 22-28; G. Dandoy, *L’ontologie du Vedanta*, Paris, 1932; P. M. Schuhl, *Essai sur la fabulation plotinienne*, Paris, 1955.

Thinker and thought are one; therefore in its thinking and knowing it possesses itself, observes itself and sees itself not as something unconscious but as knowing: in this primal knowing it must include, as one and the same act, the knowledge of the knowing; and even the logical distinction mentioned above cannot be made the case of the Divine” (*En.* II, 9, 1, 46-52). Therefore, when the Intelligence (*Nous*) practices its knowing activity, it is at once subject, object and action. If it saw a part of itself in other of its parts, there would then be a part that sees and another part that is seen, that is, plurality of objects. However, as it is a whole out of similar parts, where the part that sees is not different from the part seen, when “seeing any given part of itself as identical with itself, it sees itself by means of itself” (*En.* V, 3, 5, 5-6). Strictly speaking, if there is no difference between “the part that sees” and “the part that is seen”, such division “makes no sense” and is but a pedagogic resource (*En.* V, 3, 5, 6-7). Finally, as the self-knowledge implies a triple identity between the Intelligence that knows, the Intelligence that is known and the action of knowing, then *to know is to know oneself*.

With this argument, Plotinus indirectly shows the secrets of the meditation technique that he taught to his disciples and that he likely learned from his Eastern “masters”: quiet down all thoughts but *to be aware that one is aware*, and remain as long as possible in that state of self-inquiry.

VI.- HOW TO CONTEMPLATE?

According to Plotinus, in order to achieve the vision of God, first of all, we must rationally understand what God is. And, in that process, the meditator will assume the absolute inability of the ordinary knowledge. Only this way, the particular mind will give up its arrogant requests and, duly disciplined, it will give way to the intellect. A previous stage of discursive meditation is needed, as well as

“analogies, abstractions, our understanding of its subsequents, of all that is derived from it, the upward steps towards it; Purification has it for goal, so the virtues, all right ordering, ascent within the intellectual, settlement therein, banqueting upon the divine... by these methods one becomes, to self and to all else” (*En.* VI, 7, 36, 6-10), that is to say, a certain ascetic praxis that facilitates the withdrawal of negative, perturbing habits. “There is the method, which we amply exhibit elsewhere, declaring the dishonor of the objects which the soul holds here in honor; the second teaches or recalls to the soul its race and worth... How can a man slight himself and run after other things?” (*En.* V, 1, 1). This purification or internalization process “is not possible unless you separate yourself first from the man you are, and immediately from the *psyche*, after that from the sensations, the desires, the anger and other frivolities that make us incline towards the perishable” (*En.* VI, 9, 9, 2-5). Ultimately, it is necessary to have a strong will and an intense longing to know God in order to relinquish our love for the life of “here” and concentrate all our attention on the One (*En.* VI, 7, 34, 20-21).

By means of certain techniques, Plotinus tries to guide the first steps of the disciple, showing him several alternatives that make the initial goal of emptying his thoughts easier: “the seeker is soul and it must start from a true notion of the nature and quality by which soul may undertake the search; it must study itself in order to learn whether it has the faculty for the inquiry, the eye for the object proposed, whether in fact we ought to seek; for if the object is alien the search must be futile” (*En.* V, 5, 1). In order to overcome this first stage, “we must withdraw from all the extern” (*En.* VI, 9, 7). This way, it will be possible to “close the eyes and call upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use” (*En.* I, 6, 8, 25). It is necessary to suspend the sensory activity and the thought because it is impossible to “witness” even the simplest “form” of the One while the thought is adhered to specific shapes that make it multiple. The concentration on the One

causes the passing from the alienation of multiplicity to the external world: “we must turn the consciousness inward and hold it to attention there” (*En.* V, 1, 12, 12). This way, while sustaining such an attention effort that remains turned inward (*En.* V, 3, 6, 30-31), the flow of thoughts ends up being stopped, for the subject is converted into the only one object (*En.* V, 3, 7, 17). Such an attention must be stable, sustained and concentrated because, as soon as it stops being devoted to itself and pays attention to the external objects, that is, to the thoughts and requirements of the body senses, the implacable Kronos will take us out of meditation and throw us again to the unquietness of the sensible world; “We must turn the consciousness inward and hold it to attention there. Hoping to hear a desired voice we let all other pass and are alert for the coming at last of that most welcome of sounds: so here, we must let the hearings of sense go by, save for sheer necessity, and keep the soul’s perception bright and quick to the sounds from above” (*En.* V, 1, 12).

Plotinus clarifies an important question: “in contemplative vision, especially when it is vivid, we are not at the time aware of our own personality; we are in possession of ourselves, but the activity is towards the object of vision with which the thinker becomes identified; he has made himself over as matter to be shaped” (*En.* IV, 4, 2, 3). Therefore, *when the subject pays attention to himself as an object, that is, when he is aware that he is aware, and remains steadfast in that state of concentration, two events happen simultaneously: thoughts cease and so does the feeling of “I-ness”*. Indirectly, Plotinus is revealing with this statement that the contemplation of the One is not a thought but an absence of thoughts and that, therefore, the meditator must not confuse the fact of not thinking about the One with the contemplation of the One.

In short, “The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is The Father... This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship

to carry you away. You must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use... To any vision must be brought an eye adapted to what is to be seen, and having some likeness to it. Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike, and never can the soul have vision of the first beauty unless itself be beautiful" (*En.* I, 6, 8-9).

VII.- FIRST STEPS IN THE CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

For the true spiritual seeker, *the contemplation of God as the One is the object of our quest* (*En.* VI, 9, 3, 15). But the spiritual path that leads to God must be personally walked, because no one can do it for us. That way may be indicated, showed or suggested, but no teaching or reading can replace the personal effort that the meditative practice represents; "In our writing and telling we are but urging towards Him. Out of discussion we call to vision: to those desiring to see, we point the path; our teaching is of the road and the traveling; the seeing must be the very act of one that has made this choice" (*En.* VI, 9, 4). Not only is not contemplation the result of any reasoning or teaching, but neither is it the consequence of any personal effort, since that would imply the existence of a subject that makes the effort to obtain an object as a prize; "We must not run after it (the ecstasy), but fit ourselves for the vision and then wait tranquilly for its appearance, as the eye waits on the rising of the sun, which in its own time appears above the horizon, out of the ocean, as the poets say, and gives itself to our sight... This advent, still, is not by expectation: it is coming without approach; the vision is not of something that must enter but of something present before all else, before the intellect itself made any movement... No doubt it is wonderful that it should thus be present without any coming, and that, while it is nowhere, nowhere is it not" (*En.* V, 5, 8, 6). If, as Plotinus states, "it is for them (the gods) to come to me, not for me to go to them"

(Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 10, 33-38), then it is enough to persevere with humble meekness. That is to say, when achieving such a state of non-duality, one can just stay in it and await... the rest does not depend on human effort or will.

Certainly, contemplation is not reached through the thought or the discursive reason. Actually, when the contemplative state is accessed, it cannot be described, nor does one even want to, because thought is then a hindrance. This matter can only be analyzed *a posteriori*, once this experience has been mentally recalled. Plotinus warns us about the futility of trying to think during the ecstatic moment, for the soul forgets even the notion of *what it is* during contemplation (*En.* VI, 7, 34, 16-21), though not losing the awareness of being (*En.* V, 8, 11, 23). Even any attempt of individual appropriation of that experience will have the effect of forcing us to get out of contemplation. It is as if Kronos had regurgitated us. And it is then when he who has experienced the Light of the One realizes the evanescence of the ordinary knowledge, which, precisely because of this, is defined by Plotinus as “to be without light”. Those who have lost the state of contemplation discover the unimportance of the ‘I’ and the radical solitude of a man thrown into the plurality of futile objects. But the difference is that a man cultivated in contemplation does not believe himself to be lost in the dominating multiplicity of the ‘I’ because he has witnessed that there is an oasis even in that desert caused by the loss of the own I, considered as the instinct of appropriation of objects and experiences. He has now experienced that, by means of the disregard and unidentification of the ‘I’ (body-mind), the intelligence can go out of itself, dedicate itself (*En.* VI, 9, 11, 23) and be carried away by the One-Good. The contemplative stops being an ‘I’ and becomes that light raised to Godhood or, better, knows his Godhood (*En.* VI, 9, 9, 58). This is the true knowledge about himself: to know his own origin (*En.* VI, 9, 7, 33-34).

The most common obstacle to starting the “inwardness” or turning the attention inwards is precisely the “alteration” or “alienation” caused by the habit of focusing or reflecting our attention on external objects (thoughts, memories, projects, wishes, actions, etc.), configuring that peculiar feeling of identity that we define as “I”. Likewise, the habit of knowing through thought makes us convert it all into “objects”. Thus, the mind converts God in another object, fact that just makes us move away from the final goal, because God cannot be thought. According to Plotinus, “Soul must see in its own way; this is by coalescence, unification; but in seeking thus to know the Unity it is prevented by that very unification from recognizing that it has found; it cannot distinguish itself from the object of this intuition” (*En.* VI, 9, 3). Sooner or later, the spiritual seeker will realize that he is creating a mirage and will refuse to go deeper into contemplation in order to research. He will understand that he cannot remain unaware of this spectacle because the spectacle itself is him. This is connected to another problem. The contemplative experiences, however pleasant and beautiful they may be, are but that: experiences. Therefore, they imply the duality of the subject that experiences and the object that is experienced. The candidate for contemplation must refuse all this and remain unaware of all sensory perception, thought or delight, no matter how spiritual it may seem; “But even there we are not to remain always, in that Beauty of the multiple; we must make haste yet higher, above this heaven of ours and even that, leaving all else aside” (*En.* VI, 7, 16, 1-2). Why should we give up the delights of contemplation? By means of a great example, Plotinus explains that, when a palace is visited, it is inevitable that the guest stops to admire the many beauties that decorate it, but it would be impolite to keep on looking at them, not paying attention to the owner of the palace. This must be the only one who deserves our full attention and is really worth to be contemplated (*En.* VI, 7, 35, 7-10).

VIII.- ECSTASY, ENLIGHTENMENT, VISION AND OTHER CONTEMPLATIVE EXPERIENCES

How to explain what is inexplicable? Plotinus describes the action of departing from oneself in several ways. It is described as a sort of Bacchic warmth, inebriation or delirium (*En.* VI, 7, 22, 9), even as a “wound” that causes pleasant stupor. It also causes an “Eros” loving desire or “fervent desire” to stay in contemplation (*En.* VI, 7, 31, 8) because “no weariness overtakes contemplation, which yet brings no satiety”, since it does not imply an emptiness that must be filled, but flows from fullness to fullness. It is a stable, constant “Eros” that is always available and causes no anxiety. It is a fullness that causes no weariness, because the “Eros” has no limits, since what is loved is unlimited (*En.* V, 8, 4, 31-32). But Plotinus also explains that the language cannot describe something that, by its own nature, is beyond time and space (*ekei*). It is an incommunicable experience, because it cannot be understood until it is realized: “any that have seen know what I have in mind” (*En.* VI, 9, 9, 47-48)²³⁶. Plotinus tries to explain his mystical experience under three aspects that became very famous among later Christian authors: vision, contact and union. The vision of the Light of the One does not take place by means of thoughts, shapes, external objects or any organ different from light, but by means of the light itself (*En.* V 5, 7; V 3, 17, 34-38); it is a vision without seer-seen duality (*En.* VI 7, 34, 13-14; VI 9, 11, 4-6). The contact takes place when the center of the soul coincides with the universal Center because, though being two different centers, they are only one when they unite (*En.* VI 9, 8, 19-20; 10, 16-18). And the union exists when all otherness is removed (*En.* VI 9, 8, 29-35).

²³⁶ As well, Gregory of Nyssa, in his *Life of Moses*, states that the spiritual transformation suffered by Moses at the Sinai can only be understood by the “initiates” (VIII, I).

After contemplation, the soul accepts its nature as a frontier between the material world and the spiritual world. Plotinus defines it as “amphibious” (*En.* IV, 8, 4, 31-35) because it has the ability to live in two worlds: the world of men and the world of gods. As Plato did in his *Phaedrus* (247a-d), Plotinus describes the contemplative state, comparing it with “the life of the gods”. It is a world of light where the individuality is transcended and overflowed in an individual dimension. And it is not a collective state because there is no aggregation of parts, but pure homogeneity where “all is transparent... Every being... contains all within itself, and at the same time sees all in every other, so that everywhere there is all, and all is all, and each all, and infinite the glory” (*En.* V, 8, 4, 4 ff.). All is simultaneously identical to itself... Supreme Identity.

The Platonic metaphysical principle picked up again by Plotinus, by virtue of which *the whole nature aspires to unity* (*En.* VI, 5, 1, 17-18), finds its true sense in contemplation. When the soul achieves contemplation, God “suddenly manifests within it, for there is nothing between: here is no longer a duality but a two in one; for, so long as the presence holds, all distinction fades: it is as lover and beloved here, in a copy of that union, long to blend” (*En.* VI, 7, 34, 12 ff.). It is a unitive vision or, rather, without duality, because “there were not two: beholder was one with beheld; it was not a vision compassed but a unity apprehended” (*En.* VI, 9, 11, 4-6). During the moment of ecstasy, “the soul has now no further awareness of being in body and will give herself no foreign name, not man, not living being, not being, not all; any observation of such things falls away; the soul has neither time nor taste for them; Him it sought and Him it has found and on Him it looks and not upon itself... suddenly manifesting within it, for there is nothing between: here is no longer a duality but a two in one...” (*En.* VI, 7, 34, 16 ff.)²³⁷. Once the soul is deprived of

²³⁷ This description of the enlightenment as something *sudden*, which appears on several occasions (*En.* V 3, 17, 29; V 5, 7, 34; VI 7, 34, 13; 36, 18-19), coincides not only with some of Plato’s statements: *Symposium* 210e 4; *Letter VII* 341c 7), but also with the *epopteia* of the mystic religions.

any particular shape, then there is something like a fleeting lightning (*En.* VI, 7, 33) and “in this seeing, we neither hold an object nor trace distinction; there is no two. The man is changed, no longer himself nor self-belonging; he is merged with the One, sunken into it, one with it: center coincides with center, for centers of circles, even here below, are one when they unite” (*En.* VI, 9, 10). And, when the distinction between subject and object disappears (*En.* VI, 9, 10; VI, 9, 7), a different way of “*seeing*” is recovered (*En.* VI, 9, 11), a way that implies the highest degree of freedom for the soul, since there is no desire, thought or knowledge, but just the pure immovability of those who have entered inside the temple-soul or the center of the esseity, the Supreme Identity: “There were not two; beholder was one with beheld; it was not a vision compassed but a unity apprehended. The man formed by this mingling with the Supreme must, if he only remember, carry its image impressed upon him: he is become the Unity, nothing within him or without inducing any diversity; no movement now, no passion, no outlooking desire, one this ascent is achieved; reasoning is in abeyance and all Intellection and even, to dare the word, the very self: caught away, filled with God, he has in perfect stillness attained isolation; all the being calmed, he turns neither to this side nor to that, not even inwards to himself; utterly resting he has become very rest. He belongs no longer to the order of the beautiful; he has risen beyond beauty; he has overpassed even the choir of the virtues; he is like one who, having penetrated the inner sanctuary, leaves the temple images behind him, though these become once more first objects of regard when he leaves the holies; for There his converse was not with image, not with trace, but with the very God in the view of which all the rest is but of secondary concern” (*En.* VI, 9, 11, 4-21). Plotinus confesses that he cannot say anything about this *mystical* union, so he would rather keep silent. Anyway, the mystic, “once There, he will barter for This nothing the universe holds; not though one would make over the heavens entire to him; than This there is nothing higher, nothing of more good; above going This there is no passing; all the

rest however lofty lies on the down-going path” (*En.* VI, 7, 34, 21-25).

IX.- THE VISION OF LIGHT AND THE UNION IN THE *NOUS*

Plotinus describes ecstasy as the vision of a light. For instance, he states that, during the contemplative practice, a moment comes when the soul “puts aside all the learning; disciplined to this pitch, established in beauty, the quester holds knowledge still of the ground he rests on, but, suddenly, swept beyond it all by the very crest of the wave of the Spirit surging beneath, he is lifted and sees, never knowing how; the vision floods the eyes with light, but it is not a light showing some other object, the light is itself the vision” (*En.* VI, 7, 36, 15-20). “By these methods, one becomes, to self and to all else, at once seen and seer... we no longer see God as an external; we are near now, the next is That and it is close at hand, radiant above the Intellect... The light is itself the vision. No longer is there thing seen and light to show it, no longer Intellect and object of intellection; this is the very radiance that brought both Intellect and intellectual object into being for the later use” (*En.* VI, 7, 36). Or, in other words, “It is certainly thus that the spirit, hiding itself from all the outer, withdrawing to the inmost, seeing nothing, must have its vision, not of some other light in some other thing but of the light within itself, unmingled, pure, suddenly gleaming before it (*En.* V, 5, 7).

Dionysius the Areopagite, as well as Philo or Gregory of Nyssa, will use the term *brilliant darkness*²³⁸. With this paradoxical expression, they refer to the *witnessing* of the Light that is initially perceived as the dark that absorbs it all, since, strictly speaking, there is

²³⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, inspired by Philo (*On the posterity of Cain...*, 5, 14), introduces this term in relation to his commentary on Ex. 24:16-18, describing the Cloud where Moses enters to meet God at the Sinai as a mystical darkness (cf. *The life of Moses*, GNO 39, 3-7; 86, 20-87, 1).

no seeing subject (the soul) or seen object (the Light). God, or the Light, is neither an object nor a subject and, therefore, cannot be seen as something external to us. The cornerstone of the traditional metaphysical doctrines is that the mystic can “see” God when he transcends the subject-object relationship, and this only happens when the subject (I) disappears after *understanding* that the subject is the object (God). Or, in other words, when he sees Himself (as God), absolutely exempt from himself (as “I”). And this is possible because there is “something” in man that is already God and has never stopped being so. It is precisely in that instant of the eternal present when “that presence suddenly manifests within him” (*En.* VI, 7, 34, 17) and, finally, “the soul possesses what it sought” (*En.* V, 3, 17). However, recovering the awareness of that condition that, strictly speaking, has never been lost (there is just forgetfulness and ignorance) does not imply that the “I” annihilates himself or remains unaware, since he *sees himself*. Rather, it happens that the soul breaks its identification ties with an individual being and is no longer aware of itself (*parakolouthesis*), recovering its supra-conscious nature (*synaisthesis*). This way, “the soul in its nature loves God and longs to be at one with Him” (*En.* VI, 9, 9).

Consequently, the soul of every man can attain a mystical union with the *Nous* because there is something common between them, something that unites them and makes them homogeneous. According to Plotinus, the metaphysical conclusion of all this is unequivocal: all souls are one only Soul that includes the Soul of the world as well as the individual souls²³⁹. But, although all of them come from the highest Soul, they all are ultimately only one Soul, they all form one only hypostasis that, though it seems multiple, is *one and undivided* (*En.* IV, 1, 19-22; IV, 3, 19, 30-34; V, 1, 2, 34-38). Strictly speaking, as there is only one subject-object, the multiplicity of the intelligible world is but virtual. Therefore, souls do not have a will

²³⁹ Plotinus tackles this issue in his tractate *Are all Souls One?* (*En.* IV, 9) and in the first book of *Problems of the Soul* (*En.* IV, 3, 1-8).

and a thought of their own. They lack autonomy because they are not objects. They are, as in the example of Plato's cavern, mere shadows or images reflected on the walls by one only light. But they can recover their full, complete autonomy should they leave the cavern of the sensible world and go out to the Light.

A last question still remains, "but how comes the soul not to keep that ground? (*En.* VI, 9, 10, 1). Plotinus thinks about the paradox that is derived from the "enlightenment" or ecstasy; on one hand, it reveals the eternity of the soul, but, on the other hand, man cannot always stabilize that state. The mystical union, sooner or later, is obscured when the mind returns to its ordinary reflective task, because the soul is not able to stay that high. Plotinus describes this return to the profane world as "to unfold again", that is, to return to the habitual situation of the subject-object dialectical knowledge. But, on the other hand, once that kind of esseity has been enjoyed, what we are in the ordinary life does not seem to be tolerable anymore, thus, from that moment on, while recalling the enlightenment's joy, life is reoriented with the only goal of getting ready for a new contemplation. This way, the gnostic, definitely stimulated and inspired, resumes the transformation of the being, with a renewed energy if possible, in order to attain a stable, definitive contemplation.

X.- THE NEOPLATONIC INFLUENCE

Neoplatonism constituted one of the most prolific, spread movements of late antiquity. At the school of Rome, founded by Plotinus, his disciple Porphyry stood out, as well as Ammonius Saccas, Herennius and Origen did at the school of Alexandria, crossroads of cultures. But there were other important circles such as the school of Syria, represented by Iamblichus, the school of Athens with Proclus, Damascius and Simplicius, or the school of Pergamon with Eresius

(Iamblichus' disciple), Eusebius, Maximus and Julian (unfairly called the Apostate)...

The Neoplatonic influence on Eastern Christianity was noticeable in the works of Justin, Clement and Origen, but above all, from the 4th century on, in the school formed by Saint Basil, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus and Saint Gregory of Nyssa. The works attributed to Dionysius the *Areopagite* can be dated back to the 6th century; these works are so faithful to Plotinus and Proclus that some current researchers have even affirmed that the *corpus dionysiacum* had the aim of bringing Christianity and Neoplatonism closer. For its part, in the Western world, the Neoplatonic thought was prolonged by authors such as Porphyry, Calcidius, Macrobius, Marius Victorinus or even Saint Augustine, who “reached Christianity through a Neoplatonic interpretation”. As well, Boethius and Scotus Eriugena. The defeat of the iconoclast movement at the II Council of Nicaea caused an exodus of wise men to the West, which allowed the introduction of the *corpus dionysiacum*, as well as a deeper influence of the Neoplatonic tendencies.

Nevertheless, the great development of Western Neoplatonism will take place during the Renaissance, due to a new exodus of wise men to Italy after a constant Turkish pressure on Byzantium that will culminate in the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Besides the Platonic Academy of Florence, a distinguished group of authors, who were in large part inspired by the classical thought in general and by Neoplatonism in particular, should be mentioned: Gemistus Pletho, Cardinal Bessarion, Chryssoloras, the Lascaris, Demetrios Chalkokondyles, Marsilio Ficino, Nicholas of Cusa, Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno, etc.

THE PRACTICE OF ATTENTION AMONG THE STOICS

“This philosophy is great, it is mystical, not a common thing, nor is it given to every man” (Epictetus, *Discourses*, III, 21, 17-20).

“Men are disturbed not by the things which happen, but by the opinions about the things” (Epictetus, *Manual*, 5).

Nowadays, any “way to see anything” is considered *philosophy* and we actually talk about a *political philosophy*, a *moral philosophy*, a *philosophy of history* and, above all, a *history of philosophy*, considered to be a chronicle of the theories of knowledge. The depreciation of the word *philosophy* has led to the appearance of books about “philosophy of sport”, “philosophy of cooking”, “philosophy of sex”, etc.

On the contrary, Stoicism²⁴⁰ will always use the concept *philosophy* in its strictly etymological sense of *love* or *friendship to wisdom*. But, above all, ancient mentality in general and Stoicism in particular will identify the word *philosophy* with a *praxis*. According to the Stoics²⁴¹, any theory has no value unless it is a preparation for prac-

²⁴⁰ In order to carry out the composition of these pages, mainly the following works have been used: Paul Rabbow, *Seelenführung. Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike*, Munich, 1954; Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life*, Malden (MA), 1995. By the mentioned author, also *The Inner Citadel*, Harvard, 2001; J. Berraondo, *El estoicismo*, Barcelona, 1992; E. Elorduy, *El estoicismo*, Madrid, 1972; Jean-Joël Duhot, *Épictète et la sagesse stoïcienne*, Paris, 1996.

²⁴¹ Besides other works and editions that will be mentioned later, the following ones will be used: Epictetus, *Discourses*, *Enchiridion-Manual*, *Fragments*, *Meditations*, etc. tr. by George Long, London, 1890. Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, tr. by George Long, London, 1862. Seneca, *Moral Essays*, tr. by John W. Basore, London, 1928-35 and *Moral Epistles*, tr. by Richard M. Gummere.

tice. That is why the quality of authentic *philosophy* is denied to every discourse that navigates exclusively through a merely conceptual or speculative terrain and does not have a method to carry out an improvement of man, since “we should exercise ourselves with facts and not with mere logical speculations, which leave us, like the man who has got by heart some paltry handbook on harmony but never practiced” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* IV, 18). “The carpenter does not come and say: -Hear me talk about the carpenter’s art; but having undertaken to build a house, he makes it” (Epictetus, *Discourses*, III, 21, 4-6). In sum, the study of *philosophy* is not a goal itself, but *a way of living* the human existence.

This pragmatic aspect of Stoicism was precisely what constituted one of the causes of its enormous attractiveness in the ancient world. This, together with its tolerance and compatibility with any religious worship and the Stoic membership of distinguished men such as Epictetus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, etc., explains not only the considerable prestige and spreading of Stoicism, but also the fact that it was one of the few ancient legacies accepted by Christianity. It is true that the Stoic monotheism has a great influence on this fact, since, as opposed to the statements of many modern researchers, the Stoics were neither pantheists nor polytheists.

A certain form of pantheism has been deduced from the Stoic assertion that the divine *pneuma* is everywhere. However, pantheism is the belief that God not only is *in* all things, but also He *is* all things, and, on the contrary, according to the Stoics, the things are not God, but they participate in God, each one depending on its own nature. Insofar as pantheism exclusively refers to the manifested nature and denies the transcendence of the Divinity in relation to it, the Stoic idea itself of one Only divine will that works beyond the Universe is incompatible with pantheism. And this very idea explains how absurd it is to define those of the porch as polytheists. The whole universe is brought back to the principle of oneness, which is God, be-

ing the gods mere fantasies invented by poets or, at the most, personifications or allegories of the qualities or attributes of the only one God. This peculiar conception of the Stoic monotheism or henotheism is precisely what made it more attractive to the first Fathers of the Church; “Do you see therefore how from true and valuable physical realities have been evolved these imaginary and fanciful gods? The perversion has been a fruitful source of false beliefs, crazy errors and superstitions hardly above the level of old wives’ tales” (Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II, XXVIII).

The disdain of the Stoics for merely theoretical or speculative issues (such as the digressions on polytheism or pantheism) led them to deal with the existence of God from an exclusively spiritual point of view. On several occasions, the Stoics criticize the habit of representing the gods by means of statues that just move man away from the divinity, because God is not in the statues, but within us. For instance, according to Epictetus, the important question is how man can become aware of his kinship with God: “If a man should be able to assent to this doctrine as he ought, that we are all sprung from God in an especial manner, and that God is the father both of men and of gods, I suppose that he would never have any ignoble or mean thoughts about himself... But since these two things are mingled in the generation of man, body in common with the animals, and reason and intelligence in common with the gods, many incline to this kinship, which is miserable and mortal; and some few to that which is divine and happy... Who am I? A poor, miserable man, with my wretched bit of flesh. Wretched, indeed; but you possess something better than your bit of flesh. Why then do you neglect that which is better, and why do you attach yourself to this?” (Epictetus, *Discourses*, I, 3, 1-6).

But when the Stoic states that God is within us, he is not using any metaphor, but he is revealing an evidence that is so tangible, clear and unequivocal that even the human mind will not be willing

to accept it unless that statement is previously covered with a mysterious veil that it may appropriate. And equally mysterious, because of the simplicity of its method, is the fact that the way to access that natural, pure vision of God is the practice of a neutral vision that is like placed behind our individual vision. Exactly this constitutes the most powerful memory of God: “You are a portion separated from God; you have in yourself a certain portion of Him. Why then are you ignorant of your own noble descent? Why do you not know whence you came? Will you not remember when you are eating, who you are, who eat and whom you feed? When you are in conjunction with a woman, will you not remember who you are, who do this thing? When you are in social intercourse, when you are exercising yourself, when you are engaged in discussion, know you not that you are nourishing God, that you are exercising God? Wretch, you are carrying about God with you, and you know not. Do you think that I mean some god of silver or of gold, and external? You carry him within yourself, and you perceive not that you are polluting him by impure thoughts and dirty deeds. And if an image of God were present, you would not dare to do any of the things which you are doing: but when God Himself is present within and sees all and hears all, you are not ashamed of thinking such things and doing such things, ignorant as you are of your own nature and subject to the anger of God” (Epictetus, *Discourses*, II, 8).

I.- METHOD TO ATTAIN PEACE

As Stoicism incorporates certain ascetic aspects of Pythagoreanism and Platonism, it is not strange that it too conceives philosophy as a therapy to face man’s suffering in order to restore his spiritual balance, that is, his inner peace. Ultimately, all reflection, all research on nature, however elevated it may be, must pursue man’s spiritual balance, because “knowledge of celestial phenomena... has

no other end in view that peace of soul” (Epicure, *Letter to Pythocles*, 85).

According to those of the porch, philosophy provides a theoretical and practical knowledge to interpret the world, to find our place and be in contact with the Creator. The goal of all this is, in sum, to attain a state of peace or happiness that is described as spiritual tranquility (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), absolute absence of passions (*apatheia*), etc. Once attained that peace, “Now no evil can happen to me; for me there is no robber, no earthquake, every thing is full of peace, full of tranquility: every way, every city, every meeting, neighbor, companion is harmless. One person whose business it is, supplies me with food; another with raiment; another with perceptions, and preconceptions. And if he does not supply what is necessary, He gives the signal for retreat, opens the door, and says to you, Go. Go whither? To nothing terrible, but to the place from which you came, to your friends and kinsmen, to the elements: what there was in you of fire goes to fire; of earth, to earth; of *pneuma*, to *pneuma*; of water, to water: no Hades, nor Acheron, nor Cocytus, nor Pyriphlegethon” (Epictetus, *Discourses* III, 13, 13-16).

For that purpose, Stoicism inherited and adapted a set of *ascetic* exercises, practiced for centuries. It is to be specified that the word “exercise” tries to translate the Greek *askēsis* or *meletē*, which mean *inner activity* and whose meaning is far from the sense of *abstinence* or *renunciation* that this word has nowadays. Therefore, the asceticism or *spiritual exercises* consist in a method to favor the introspection needed to gain control of oneself, that is, peace. Paradoxically, many spiritual seekers assume that, in order to find peace, it is necessary to have a life of retreat, ignoring that they must not put their hopes in external events but in a suitable introspective attitude; “Men seek retreats for themselves, houses in the country, sea-shores, and mountains; and you too are wont to desire such things very much. But this is altogether a mark of the most common sort of men, for it is in your

power whenever you shall choose to retire into yourself” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, IV, 3).

Can we figure out what the method of the Stoics was? There is some recent work that has the merit of having called our attention on this difficult issue²⁴². The conclusion is that the Stoics had a method articulated through different practiced inherited from antiquity. Thanks to Philo of Alexandria, we know some of those exercises²⁴³ and their almost daily sequence: The practice begins with the study of a topic (*zetesis*), its deep analysis (*skepsis*), the reading, when appropriate, of texts regarding that topic, the listening (*akroasis*). All this must entail the cultivation of a persistent attention (*prosoche*) that develops the self-control (*enkrateia*) and the indifference to the world’s requests²⁴⁴. Other of the Stoic exercises inherited from the Pythagoreans is the examination of conscience before going to bed; “Never suffer sleep to close your eyelids, after your going to bed, till you have examined by your reason all your actions of the day: Wherein have I done amiss? What have I done? What have I omitted that I ought to have done? If in this examination you find that you have done amiss, reprimand yourself severely for it, and if you have done any good, rejoice”²⁴⁵. Seneca considered it as one of the most fruitful, powerful exercises: “Can anything be more excellent than this practice of thoroughly sifting the whole day? And how delightful the sleep that follows this self-examination, how tranquil it is, how deep and untroubled, when the soul has either praised or admonished itself, and when this secret examiner and critic of self has given report of its own character! I avail myself of this privilege, and every day I plead my cause before the bar of self... For why should I shrink from any of my mistakes, when I may commune thus with

²⁴² This is precisely the aim of the work by Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life*, Malden (MA), 1995.

²⁴³ Philo, *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, § 253.

²⁴⁴ Philo, *Legum Allegoriae*, III, 18.

²⁴⁵ *Golden verses*, attributed to Pythagoras, 40-44

myself: ‘See that you never do that again?’” (Seneca, *On anger*, III, XXXVI).

The mental ascesis had to entail a physical ascesis that helped us discipline the innate tendencies of the body. Among these, the most effective was fasting: “Practice sometimes a way of living like a person out of health that you may at some time live like a man in health. Abstain from food, drink water, abstain sometimes altogether from desire, in order that you may some time desire consistently with reason” (Epictetus, *Discourses* III, 13, 20-21). By means of the body discipline, the will was strengthened, and so was with it the ability of reflection and self-analysis in order to discover the continuous traps set up by the *psyche* and the mind, which resist being ruled by the spirit.

Reflective meditation was one of the favorite practices of the Stoics. The Stoics were actually masters in choosing a specific topic and analyzing it until they had made the most of it. The titles and reading of some of the treatises by Plutarch or Seneca give us a thorough sense of way they approached these exercises: *On the control of anger*, *On the tranquility of soul*, *On fraternal love*, *On parental love*, *On talkativeness*, *On curiosity*, *On love of wealth*, *On complacency*, *On envy and hate*, *On anger*, *On the shortness of life*, *On the deadliness of idleness...*

In order to firmly face the daily routine and make the most of the time given, the Stoics turned to the practice of memorizing (*mnēmē*) aphorisms, sentences, apothegms or vital rules that they unceasingly repeated in their minds until being imbued by them²⁴⁶. With these practices, the Stoic prepared himself to firmly face the setbacks of life, such as illness, suffering, death, etc.

²⁴⁶ Seneca, *De beneficiis*, VII, 2, 1-2; Epictetus, *Discourses*, III, 3, 14-16.

In our times, a recent book has developed the Stoic meditation with a therapeutic goal²⁴⁷. Its starting point is the *Enchiridion* or *Manual* by the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, summarizing his thought in three sentences:

- “Men are disturbed not by the things which happen, but by the opinions about the things” (Epictetus, *Manual*, 5).

- “When then we are impeded or disturbed or grieved, let us never blame others, but ourselves, that is, our opinions” (Epictetus, *Manual*, 5).

- “Remember that it is not he who reviles you or strikes you, who insults you, but it is your opinion about these things as being insulting” (Epictetus, *Manual*, 20).

Based on her own personal experiences, as well as on her patients’, the author of this book explains how inner tensions originate in our discussions with *what is*, showing that anxiety and suffering originate from our bonding to a false thought. And, though meditation reveals that what has already happened cannot be changed, this does not imply that it must be approved or tolerated, but that it must be accepted without resistance or inner struggle. No one wants pain, hunger, fear, wars, etc. But the truth is that suffering is not originated by our thoughts but by our bonding, when we believe without analyzing. In sum, restlessness comes when we believe that we are or it happens what our thoughts say we are or it happens. This way, we believe the sequences of thoughts that constantly recreate our small personal story, based on memories and expectations, that is, on how things should be or why they are not like that. Thus, the small sequences of thoughts generate other bigger stories that in turn generate theories about life, death, fear, destiny, freedom, about the world, the universe, etc. That is why depression, suffering, fear, any prob-

²⁴⁷ Byron Katie, *Loving what Is*, New York, 2002.

lem is an opportunity to examine our thoughts and discover up to which extent we are living an untrue story. In sum, we must unbuild our thoughts by means of a constant discrimination or self-inquiry.

II.- METHOD TO DIVIDE AND DISCRIMINATE

The Stoics taught their disciples the importance of having a good judgment in our lives. By means of meditation exercises, the ability to discriminate was to be developed. For that purpose, it was taught how to divide, decontextualize or relativize any problem or issue in order to deal with it in its most relative dimension. Such technique consists in choosing one thing, isolating it, defining it and dividing it into parts until its nature becomes evident. “Make for yourself a definition or description of the thing which is presented to you, so as to see distinctly what kind of a thing it is in its substance, in its nudity, in its complete entirety, and tell yourself its proper name, and the names of the things of which it has been compounded, and into which it will be resolved” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* III, 11). The Stoic had to be on guard against the apparent magnitude of any thing or problem. Any problem could be reduced to the minimum expression using the force of discriminative meditation: “Do not disturb yourself by thinking of the whole of your life” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VIII, 36). “What kind of universe is this? What kind of use does everything perform in it? What value does everything have with reference to the whole, and what with reference to man?” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* III, 11). This way, “where there are things which appear most worthy of our appreciation, we ought to lay them bare and look at their worthlessness and strip them of all the words by which they are exalted” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, VI, 13). This way, any experience of wakefulness can be reduced to a pure, vain illusion by unceasingly inquiring ourselves how we have been able to take part in those events; “Chiefly a man should exercise himself: As soon as you go out in the morning, examine every

man whom you see, every man whom you hear; answer as to a question: What have you seen? A handsome man or woman? Apply this rule. Is this independent of the will, or dependent? Independent. Take it away. What have you seen? A man lamenting over the death of a child. Apply the rule. Death is a thing independent of the will. Take it away. Has the proconsul met you? Apply the rule. What kind of thing is a proconsul's office? Independent of the will, or dependent on it? Independent. Take this away also: it does not stand examination: cast it away: it is nothing to you. If we practiced this and exercised ourselves in it daily from morning to night, something indeed would be done. But now we are forthwith caught half asleep by every appearance" (Epictetus, *Discourses* III, 3, 14-17). By means of this task of constant mental discrimination, the Stoic ends up distinguishing what is real or permanent and what is a mere ephemeral product of the mind, or fantasy (*phantasiai*).

Emperor Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* are a model of this art of dividing an issue until completely unbuilding it. How to control our excessive appetite? How to resist the uncontrolled sexual desire? Here is an example of discriminative meditation: "When we have meat before us and such eatables we receive the impression, that this is the dead body of a fish, and this is the dead body of a bird or of a pig; and again, that this Falernian is only a little grape juice, and this purple robe some sheep's wool dyed with the blood of a shell-fish; about venereal enjoyments, they are the attrition of a base part of our body, and a convulsive sort of excretion of a mucus" (*Meditations* VI, 13). What are the supposed great men? Who are the politicians, aristocrats and the rest of men of learning and culture that seem so proud at the public square? "Consider what men are when they are eating, sleeping, fornicating, easing themselves and so forth. Then what kind of men they are when they are imperious and arrogant, or angry and scolding from their elevated place (*Meditations* X, 19). Do you worship your body or your personal image? "Such as bathing appears to you: oil, sweat, dirt, filthy water, all things disgusting; so

is every part of life and everything” (*Meditations* VIII, 24). “The things which are much valued in life are empty and rotten and trifling, and like little dogs biting one another, and little children quarreling, laughing, and then straightaway weeping” (*Meditations* V, 33, 2) What is glory? What is power? What is material wealth? “Asia and Europe are corners of the universe: all the sea a drop in the universe... All the present time is a point in Eternity” (*Meditations* VI, 36).

Even man’s activity is but a mere monotony that lasts for centuries, a vain illusion: “Constantly consider how all things such as they now are, in time past also were; and consider that they will be the same again. And place before your eyes entire dramas and stages of the same form, whatever you have learned from your experience or from older history; for example, the whole court of Hadrian, and the whole court of Antoninus, and the whole court of Philip, Alexander, Croesus; for all those were such dramas as we see now, only with different actors” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* X, 27). If this method of division is taken to the extreme, what is then the body or the death but mere concepts or fantasies that the human mind has artificially exaggerated to frighten us? “The body is nothing to me: the parts of it are nothing to me. Death? Let it come when it chooses, either death of the whole or of a part. Fly, you say. And whither? Can any man eject me out of the world? He cannot. But wherever I go, there is the sun, there is the moon, there are the stars, dreams, omens, and the conversation with gods” (Epictetus, *Discourses* III, 22, 19-25).

While escaping from their existential angst, some men strive to be somebody or try to obtain a fictitious immortality by associating their names to their material works. But, what is a name? “Name is sound an echo” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, V, 33), which will not last in the infinity of time (III, 10), since “near is your forgetfulness of all things, and near the forgetfulness of you by all” (VII, 21).

“All that you see will quickly perish, and those who have been spectators of its dissolution will very soon perish too” (IX, 33), because “you will look at human things as smoke and nothing at all” (X, 31). And, as the emptiness of the world and the futility of human actions are accepted, the anxiety to hoard experiences, to stand out of the rest, to fight against a destiny that has already been written, ceases to exist. Should there be any word that defines the attitude of the Stoic regarding life, it is *acceptance*. Those of the porch learn to accept the natural course of things without opposing it. They understand that the fact itself of wishing implies frustration, because the material objects do not provide us with a durable happiness, for they are impermanent.

As life is a theater play, there is no freedom to modify or improvise any role of the play; “Whatever may happen to you, it was prepared for you from all eternity; and the implication of causes was from eternity spinning the thread of your being, and of that which is incident to it” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* X, 5). Therefore, the wisest attitude is to accept each one’s role and play it as naturally as possible; “Remember that desire contains in it the profession of obtaining that which you desire; and the profession in aversion is that you will not fall into that which you attempt to avoid: and he who falls in his desire is unfortunate; and he who falls into that which he would avoid, is unhappy. If then you attempt to avoid only the things contrary to nature which are within your power, you will not be involved in any of the things which you would avoid... You also ought to do something of the kind: eat like a man, drink like a man, dress, marry, beget children, do the office of a citizen, endure abuse, bear with an unreasonable brother, bear with your father, bear with your son, neighbor, companion. (Epictetus, *Manual* 2; *Discourses* III, 21). In sum, the acceptance of one’s predestination is the most powerful pedagogic instrument to tame the predating instinct of the ego that lives and enjoys by hoarding experiences even though exploiting others. According to this, the true indifference, the apathy or control

of the passions, takes place when it is discovered and accepted that there is no other free will than realizing that everything is just a game, as empty or illusory as a theater play.

Nonetheless, if human free will is a mirage and there is no possibility to choose the good and refuse the evil, what is the evil meant for? If everything is determined by God, what is the purpose of the existence itself of the universe and the beings that inhabit it? Does not all this seem a colossal dramatic dream played by automata who believe that they are free and thus suffer for it? Are we before a sadistic God who enjoys seeing how His creatures suffer? If everything is planned by destiny and, thus, man is not liable for his actions, the effort is not worth making. Against this argument justifying sloth, it is to be clarified that man's only free choice is to decide whether he wants to be free (wise man) or remain in the ignorance of the identification of the character he is playing at the festival/drama of life. The Stoic must learn to distinguish what depends on his free will and what does not depend on it and, thus, what he can change and what he cannot change. Regarding that which does not depend on him and cannot be changed, he must learn to accept it by means of the practice of meditation and the control of the appearances, that is, the interpretations that we make about the information that we get from the senses, the imagination and the mind.

An example of the wrong use of appearances is to consider the evilness of some things. According to the Stoics, the evil does not exist by itself, it has no autonomous existence, independent from us. On the contrary, the nature disowns the evil. Only our thoughts about the evil exist, so "men are disturbed not by the things which happen, but by the opinions about the things: for example, death is nothing terrible, for if it were, it would have seemed so to Socrates; for the opinion about death, that it is terrible, is the terrible thing. When then we are impeded or disturbed or grieved, let us never blame others, but ourselves, that is, our opinions. It is the act of an

ill-instructed man to blame others for his own bad condition; it is the act of one who has begun to be instructed, to lay the blame on himself; and of one whose instruction is completed, neither to blame another, nor himself" (Epictetus, *Manual* 5). The true source of the evil lies in ignorance, that is, in the absence of attention or awareness. Consequently, there is no desire for the evil, but a wrong desire, caused by a lack of attention.

Wealth, pleasure, power, etc. are not evil by themselves, but neutral elements of the theater play. The evil appears when the theatrical character binds or identifies himself so much with the role (with his thoughts, desires, expectations, etc.) that considers as true all the actions that he plays, and insists on believing that he can change the storyline. There cannot be true freedom while man is conditioned by the stimuli of the external world, his thought and desires. And, even though most men consider themselves free, that will not make them stop being slaves of their desires.

According to the Stoics, the only free man is the wise man who has learned how to face pain, death, etc. in an impartial and tranquil way, without assigning them any value. Consequently, the only wise attitude is to want what God wants for us, to support His will. But such a decision is not a mental or intellectual action, but the consequence of a complete, deep certainty that God is truly who measures, considers and decides man's destiny. According to Dorotheus of Gaza, "By cutting off his own will he obtains non-attachment (*aprospatheia*), and from non-attachment he comes, with God's help, to complete *apatheia*"²⁴⁸. But if that acceptance and dedication is just mental, then the worldly thoughts and desires will go on calling our attention as tyrants who aspire to rule our inner city.

True freedom, thus, consists in supporting God's will: lacking any will other than God's. In that wanting not to want anything dif-

²⁴⁸ Dorotheus of Gaza, 20, 11-13.

ferent from what God wants is where peace lies, according to Dorotheus of Gaza: “No matter how disinclined he is to fulfill his own will, it turns out that it is always fulfilled. For to one who does not have his own will, everything that happens to him is according to his will”²⁴⁹. Or, as Epictetus said: “Seek not that the things which happen should happen as you wish; but wish the things which happen to be as they are, and you will have a tranquil flow of life” (Epictetus, *Manual*, 8). Or, in other words: when you lose your head (the rational or speculative mind) this way, you gain true freedom, which consists in devoting yourself to God’s will. “My man, as the proverb says, make a desperate effort on behalf of tranquility of mind, freedom and magnanimity. Lift up your head at last as released from slavery. Dare to look up to God and say, Deal with me for the future as you will; I am of the same mind as you are; I am yours: I refuse nothing that pleases you: lead me where you will: clothe me in any dress you choose: is it your will that I should hold the office of a magistrate, that I should be in the condition of a private man, stay here or be an exile, be poor, be rich?” (Epictetus, *Discourses* II, 16, 41-43). All this is neither metaphysical deliria nor philosophical rhetoric. According to Stoics, these descriptions are clearly identifiable with spiritual states or mansions that they perfectly know, because, by dint of meditation and disregard, they already constitute their natural state. If that devotion to God is really wished, then one should ask Him for help: “From yourself, from your thoughts cast away... sadness, fear, desire, envy, malevolence, avarice, effeminacy, intemperance. But it is not possible to eject these things otherwise than by looking to God only, by fixing your affections on Him only, by being consecrated to His commands. But if you choose any thing else, you will with sighs and groans be compelled to follow what is stronger than yourself, always seeking tranquility and never able to find it; for you seek tranquility there where it is not, and you neglect to seek it where it is” (Epictetus, *Discourses* II, 16, 45-47). Even in the most uncertain, uneasiest moments, the simple fact of enduring

²⁴⁹ Dorotheus of Gaza, 102, 12.

implies, deep down, the decision to keep on fighting: “This is the true athlete, the man who exercises himself against such appearances. Stay, wretch, do not be carried away. Great is the combat, divine is the work; it is for kingship, for freedom, for happiness, for freedom from perturbation. Remember God: call on Him as a helper and protector, as men at sea call on the Dioscuri in a storm” (Epictetus, *Discourses* II, 18, 11-29).

The absence of peace is due to the fact that the inner city has been conquered and is ruled by passions, frustrations, fears and thoughts. “How then is a fortress demolished? Not by the sword, not by fire, but by opinion. For if we abolish the fortress which is in the city, can we abolish also that of fever, and that of beautiful women? Can we in a word abolish the fortress which is in us and cast out the tyrants within us, whom we have daily over us, sometimes the same tyrants, at other times different tyrants? But with this we must begin, and with this we must demolish the fortress and eject the tyrants, by giving up the body, the parts of it, the faculties of it, the possessions, the reputation, magisterial offices, honors, children, brothers, friends, by considering all these things as belonging to others. And if tyrants have been ejected from us, why do I still shut in the fortress by a wall of circumvallation, at least on my account; for if it still stands, what does it do to me? Why do I still eject guards? For where do I perceive them? Against others they have their fasces, and their spears and their swords. But I have never been hindered in my will, nor compelled when I did not will. And how is this possible? I have placed my movements towards action in obedience to God. Is it His will that I shall have fever? It is my will also. Is it His will that I should move towards any thing? It is my wish also. Does He not will? I do not wish” (Epictetus, *Discourses* IV, 1).

If we break free from those tyrants that are within us, then we will be able to join our will to God’s and convert the world into a theater play in which one is but another character: “The after receiv-

ing everything from another and even yourself, are you angry and do you blame the giver if He takes any thing from you? Who are you, and for what purpose did you come into the world? Did not He introduce you here, did He not show you the light, did He not give you fellow workers, and perceptions and reason? And as whom did He introduce you here? Did He not introduce you as subject to death, and as one to live on the earth with a little flesh, and to observe His administration, and to join Him in the spectacle and the festival for a short time? Will you not then, as long as you have been permitted, after seeing the spectacle and His solemnity, when He leads you out, go with adoration of Him and thanks for what you have heard and seen?.

-No; but I would still enjoy the feast.

The initiated too would wish to be longer in the initiation: and perhaps also those at Olympia to see other athletes; but the solemnity is ended: go away like a grateful and modest man; make room for others: others also must be born, as you were, and being born they must have a place, and houses and necessary things. And if the first do not retire, what remains? Why are you insatiable? Why are you not content? Why do you contract the world?" (Epictetus, *Discourses* IV, 1).

Given that man is a character who plays in a theater play, according to an assigned role, it makes no sense to try to modify the libretto or change one's character, because that depends on the Director: "Remember that you are an actor in a play, of such a kind as the director may choose; if short, of a short one; if long, of a long one: if he wishes you to act the part of a poor man, see that you act the part naturally; if the part of a lame man, of a magistrate, of a private person. For this is your duty, to act well the part that is given to you; but to select the part, belongs to another" (Epictetus, *Manual* 17). Even when one believes he is exercising his freedom to rebel against the role he has been given, how to know if that very action of rebellion was not already foreseen and was a part of the play? The Stoic re-

signs himself to the role he has been given and, without any attachment to his character, accomplishes his mission as well as possible until he must leave the scene or the curtain drops. To resist this just causes suffering and frustration:

“-For what purpose then have I received these things?

-To use them.

-How long?

-So long as He who lent them chooses.

-What if they are necessary to me?

-Do not attach yourself to them and they will not be necessary: do not say to yourself that they are necessary, and then they are not necessary”. (Epictetus, *Discourses* IV, 1, 86-110).

“Never say about any thing, I have lost it, but say I have restored it. Is your child dead? It has been restored. Is your wife dead? She has been restored. Has your estate been taken from you? Has not then this also been restored?

-But he who has taken it from me is a bad man.

-But what is it to you, by whose hands the giver demanded it back? So long as He may allow you, take care of it as a thing which belongs to another, as travelers do with their inn”. (Epictetus, *Manual* XI).

The question is then the following: if the only freedom that is given to us is that of realizing that everything is like a theater play, what must our character do to wake up? Here, the *prosochē* goes into action: the attention to oneself.

III.- FROM THE ATTENTION TO THE PRESENT TO CONTEMPLATION

Stoics such as Marcus Aurelius establish a tripartite composition of the human being: The body (*sōma*), the soul (*psychē*) and the spir-

it (*hēgemonikon*) or inner guide; this tripartite structure has a clear Platonic origin. The way to invoke the *hēgemonikon* consists in cultivating self-attention. According to the Stoics, as well as the Platonists, it is an evident fact that the world, the waking, is an illusion or fantasy created by the senses. But if most men live deceived in the trap or cavern of the senses is because we do not pay enough attention. Nonetheless, that attention *does not have a mental or intellectual nature*, but a much more basic or natural one. In the first stages, there might be some reflective content: “Everywhere and at all times it is in your power... to exert your skill upon your present thoughts”²⁵⁰. But attention, in its more thorough definition, is *exempt from thoughts*.

Prosochē is attention without tension. It is an attitude of continuous vigilance and constant alertness concerning each and every one of the daily events: “First... to have [this principle] in readiness, and without it not to sleep, not to rise, not to drink, not to eat, not to converse with men”²⁵¹. The Stoic self-attention is a way to live in the now, that is, in the present. Insofar as we do not let the past disturb us and we do not get worried by an uncertain future, we stay in the present, which is, anyway, the only reality we inhabit; “While we are postponing, life speeds by” (Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* I, 1). From the ancient ascetics, the Stoics had inherited the discovery that the ego-mind lives off of memories and expectations, so living in the now will deprive the ego-mind of food until it, once weakened, ends up giving control to the spirit²⁵². In Christian spirituality, this *prosochē* was called *nepsis* or vigilance. Thus, Athanasius, who wrote the *Life of Antony* in 357, stated that the Saint “paid attention to himself”. But this “watchfulness of heart” is not to be confused with the examination of moral conscience, because, whereas reason-

²⁵⁰ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VII, 54, vid. as well III, 12; VIII, 36; IX, 6.

²⁵¹ Epictetus, *Discourses* IV, 12, 7; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* III, 13; Galen, *On the natural faculties* I, 9, 51.

²⁵² Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* II, 14; IV, 26, 5; XII, 26; Seneca, *De benef.* VII, 2, 4.

ing and reflection take precedence in the latter, the *prosochē* consists in the practice of the “attention” without using thoughts or moral judgments. Actually, it is rather about paying attention to oneself, or self-attention, and appropriating the action of thinking until converting it into a mere tool.

This attention to the present could be developed by means of certain concentration exercises that sought to “separate [oneself] from... the times past and future” in order to “make oneself live the present moment”²⁵³. At the beginning, the *prosochē* was achieved just a few minutes a day; later, some hours; finally, all day long. Such an “awake” man is who has, picking up the Platonic language again, gotten out of the cavern toward the daylight because he has woken up from his dream; he is now aware not only of what he does, but, above all, of what he is. He has recovered the memory of his glorious origin and has returned to his divine nature. That is why self-attention is, strictly speaking, to settle oneself in the “memory of God”. Ultimately, it is about maintaining a neutral attention to oneself, to the world that surrounds us, and to the present moment. It is about feeling that the divine vision and His presence is within us. “Let God be at hand to behold and examine every act and deed and word”²⁵⁴.

The contemplative vision is achieved by means of the unceasing practice of physical ascesis (especially fasting), the different forms of reflective meditation (*zetesis*, *skepsis*, *akroasis*, etc.) and the continuous attention. Such a vision is described by some Stoics in terms very similar to the Plotinian ecstasy or the mystical trances of the first Christians. Anyway, in the descriptions by some Stoics, it is very difficult to know how much there is of literary devices or of ecstatic experience. According to Seneca, the contemplative vision is a consequence of the detachment from the body and its senses: “Only

²⁵³ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* XII, 3, 3.

²⁵⁴ Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella* 12

on high are the domains spacious; to their possession the soul is admitted, provided always that it bring with it no taint of the body, but wipe off all stain and pass forth like an armed man, lightly equipped, nimble, modest in his wants... Here at last the soul comes to learn what it has long sought, it begins to know God” (Seneca, *Natural questions* I, 9-11). According to Marcus Aurelius, contemplation is characterized by an unusual widening of the ordinary human vision that seems to transcend the limits of individuality; “[human soul] traverses the whole universe, and the surrounding vacuum, and surveys its form, and it extends itself into the infinity of time, and embraces and comprehends the periodical renovation of all things” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* XI, 1). According to Metrodorus, contemplation involves going out of time and space: “Remember that by contemplation you have reached infinite and eternal nature and beheld that which is, that which will be, and that which was”.

AN INITIATE INTO THE GREAT MYSTERIES: PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA

“Now I bid you, *mystos*, who are purified, as to your ears, to receive these things... and reveal them not to any one... For I myself, having been initiated into the great mysteries by Moses, the friend of God... did not hesitate to become his pupil” (Philo, *Cher.* 49).

Philo was born between 30 and 20 BC, in the bosom of a Jewish family of the community of Alexandria, city that was a melting pot of the Eastern Mediterranean cultures. In fact, Alexandria had replaced Athens as the Greek cultural capital, being at the same time the meeting point between the East and the West. In this sense, Philo represented the epigone of a whole generation that, though open to the Hellenistic influence, kept the Jewish faith anyway. Therefore, Philo can be considered as worthy heir of the spirit that led the LXX to carry out the Greek translation of the Bible. Precisely, the use of the LXX version of the Bible and his spirituality with a Hellenistic signature are the main reasons why Philo is considered as one of the Church Fathers, even though he was never a Christian, but a Jew²⁵⁵.

Philo's family is assumed to have been one of the most important families in the Jewish community of Alexandria, and he himself took part in the Greek social and cultural life. In one of his works, *De legatione ad Caium* he explains how he was appointed as the chief of the embassy sent about 40 AD by the Jews of Alexandria to Caligula in order to ask for his protection against the abuses of the Greek population. Nevertheless, the most noteworthy point of his work was

²⁵⁵ The following is mainly based on J. Daniélou, *Philon d'Alexandrie*, Paris, 1958.

his research on the Scriptures, above all on the Pentateuch, and his contemplative practice. As most of his work consists in glosses on the Pentateuch, authors such as H. A. Wolfson²⁵⁶ have actually assumed that Philo was a preacher at the synagogue, so his treatises were the commentaries that followed the public reading of the Scriptures. The ancient custom of interpreting the Law every Saturday had probably begun in Palestine, from where the Jews took it to Alexandria. This religious custom is even considered to be the origin of the first Christian preaching²⁵⁷.

Philo used several Greek literary genres such as the dialogue or the philosophical treatise with a Platonic or Aristotelian style. After studying his work²⁵⁸, it can be stated that Philo is an author who

²⁵⁶ *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Cambridge, 1962, vol. I, p. 96.

²⁵⁷ The Gospels of Lk. 4:14-18, Mt. 4:12 and Mk. 6:1-5 mention how Jesus followed the custom of preaching at the Synagogue on Saturday.

²⁵⁸ Some researchers divide the Philonean *Corpus* into four categories: 1st *Miscellany*: "historical" or "non-biblical writings": *Hypothetica*; Philo summarizes the constitution given to the nation by the Laws of Moses. *Quod omnis probus liber sit*: bundle of Stoic paradoxes with a list of Essene virtues. *De vita contemplativa*: about the supplicants or *Therapeutae*, monastic order settled near Alexandria, by the coast of lake Mareotis, and about the Essenes. *In Flaccum*: historical treatise about the injustices done against the Jewish population of Alexandria during the rule of Aulus Avilius Flaccus, Roman prefect in Egypt since the year 32 AD, executed in 39. *Legatio ad Caium*: historical and theological treatise about the disturbances that took place in Alexandria and forced the Jews to send an embassy to Rome. 2nd *Explanation of the Jewish Law*: *De vita Mosis*: a treatise on the two aspects of Moses, as a philosopher-king-ruler and high priest-prophet. *De opificio mundi*: commentaries on the ch. 1 of the Genesis, in which he, closely following Plato's *Timaeus*, reflects about the Creation out of nothing, the eternal existence of God, the unity and the providence of God. *De Abrahamo*: reflections about the non-written Laws of Nature, using Stoic arguments. *De Josepho*: allegory about the person of Joseph and about the human way of ruling the city and the non-written Law. *De decalogo*: here he comments the relationship between man and God. He also wrote *De specialibus legibus*, *De virtutibus*, *De praemiis et poenis*, *De providentia* and *De aeternitate mundi*. 3rd *Allegorical commentaries on the Jewish Law*: different treatises in which he comments some passages of the Scriptures: *Legum Allegoriae* I (Gen. 2:1-3, 5-14). *Legum Allegoriae* II (Gen. 2:18-3.1), *Legum Allegoriae* III (Gen. 3:8-19). *De Cherubim* (Gen. 3:24, 4:1), *De posteritate Caini* (Gen. 4:16), *Quod Deus immutabilis sit* (Gen. 6:4-12). *De sobrietate* (Gen. 9:24-27), *De confusione linguarum* (Gen. 9:1-9), *De migratione Abrahami* (Gen. 12:1-3), *De mutatione nominum* (Gen. 17:1-5, 15-22), etc. 4th *Questions and answers on Genesis and Exodus*: only the writings in Armenian have been preserved.

lives and explains the Jewish faith, but writes in Greek and is inspired by the Greek culture, mainly by Plato and Aristotle, and also by the Stoics. New wine in old wineskins? Not at all; the final result is not a syncretism, but a formulation that is loyal to his biblical faith and adopts new metaphors and garments to facilitate its understanding.

Philo even confesses that, in his youth, he “was first excited by the stimulus of philosophy” (*Congr.* 74), and then “There was once a time when, devoting my leisure to philosophy and to the contemplation of the world and the things in it, I reaped the fruit of excellent, and desirable, and blessed intellectual feelings, being always living among the divine oracles and doctrines, on which I fed incessantly and insatiably, to my great delight, never entertaining any low or groveling thoughts, nor ever wallowing in the pursuit of glory or wealth, or the delights of the body, but I appeared to be raised on high and borne aloft by a certain inspiration of the soul (*ἐπιθειασμόν*), and to dwell in the regions of the sun and moon, and to associate with the whole heaven, and the whole universal world. At that time, therefore, looking down from above, from the air, and straining the eye of my mind as from a watch-tower, I surveyed the unspeakable contemplation of all the things on the earth, and looked upon myself as happy as having forcibly escaped from all the evil fates that can attack human life” (*Spec. Leg.* III, 1-2). In large part, this and other contemplative experiences were fruits of his withdrawal periods with the Essenes and the Therapeutae, whom he considered as the true representatives of Jewish mysticism.

That is why, when Philo describes the ideal Judaism, he turns to his vital experience near the Essenes and the Therapeutae monks by the lake Mareotis. According to the author, the authentic Jewish

Vid. *Philonis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt*, preserved in Greek, critical edition by L. Cohn and P. Wendland, with an index by J. Leisegang, 7 vols., Berlin, 1896-1930.

mysticism can be learned there in its double aspect: Essene and Therapeutic: “Therefore they always retain an imperishable recollection of God... And they are accustomed to pray twice a day, at morning and at evening; when the sun is rising entreating God that... their minds may be filled with heavenly light, and when the sun is setting they pray that their soul, being entirely lightened and relieved of the burden of the outward senses, and of the appropriate object of those outward senses, may be able to trace out truth existing in its own consistory and council chamber. And the interval between morning and evening is by them devoted wholly to meditation on and to practice of virtue, for they take up the Holy Scriptures and philosophize concerning them, investigating the allegories of their national philosophy, since they look upon their literal expressions as symbols of some secret meaning of nature, intended to be conveyed in those figurative expressions. They have also writings of ancient men, who having been the founders of one sect or another have left behind them many memorials of the allegorical system of writing and explanation, whom they take as a kind of model” (*De vita contemplativa* 26-29). Without a doubt, he learned from them how to interpret the biblical characters and events allegorically.

I.- THE ALLEGORICAL METHOD

In Philo, the allegorical exposition of the Bible constitutes the soul of the text, whereas the literal meaning is just the body. We must not let us be constrained by the apparent meaning of the biblical narration, because it, as a whole, keeps a hidden or allegorical meaning of a spiritual nature, intended by its writers under God’s inspiration²⁵⁹. Out of all the possible topics, the one that preoccupies and occupies Philo most is the spiritual itinerary of the soul that, ris-

²⁵⁹ Precisely, the fact that he used the Greek version of the LXX and not the Hebrew text is because he considered that such a translation had been carried out by divine inspiration.

ing above the sensory world, wants to reach the world of the Spirit. This is the great topic, the central argument of his work, explained by puzzling out the intimate meaning of the passages of the Pentateuch as it was taught to him by the Essenes. That is why part of Philo's work is, to a large extent, destined to the initiates, that is, to those who want to understand God's mysteries. Already in the first book, *On Dreams* (181), talking about the immortality of the soul, Philo considers the "journey" of the soul toward the body as an exile to a foreign land, and turns to metaphors about the mystical pilgrimage, so common in the Egyptian, Greek and of course Jewish literature, in order to explain the quest for the contemplation of God as a return to the Fatherland. Somewhere else, he mentions, "The races of men are twofold; for one is the heavenly man, and the other the earthly man. Now the heavenly man, as being born in the image of God, has no participation in any corruptible or earthlike essence. But the earthly man is made of loose material, which he calls a lump of clay" (*Leg. All.* I, 31). According to Philo, the heavenly man is the man's archetype. With this, he turns to the classic topic of the Jewish esoterism: Adam as a representation of the heavenly Man or the primal Humankind in its purest state, that is, before knowing the tree of good and evil.

If Adam's exile implied his expulsion from the earthly Paradise and thus the victory of the *earthly man*, the initiation into the spiritual path, which Philo defines as *the Mysteries by Moses*, has the goal to recover the Edenic state, that is, the realization of the heavenly Man.

II.- GOD CANNOT BE THOUGHT

How to return to the lost Paradise? Or, said in other terms, how to recover the intimacy with God? Traditionally, the mystical way has two accesses or, if preferred, two stages: meditation (on God, on

Creation, on human condition, etc.) and contemplation (disappropriation or absence of thoughts). In several parts of his work, Philo develops some classic meditation topics. In fact, the allegory that Philo employs is but a meditation topic that takes as its basis a biblical episode. However, meditation has the final goal to nullify the mind, to lead the initiate to the conclusion that his own mind is unable to access the supreme realities. The spiritual seeker must be firmly convinced that the mind has an instrumental nature only, for he uses it just to apprehend external information. He must confirm the futility of such information in order to enter the world of the spirit. This way, when the mind itself recognizes its own inability and gets withdrawn or nullified, then it gives way to other inner “organ” that does have the possibility to communicate with the higher world. The true contemplative way begins there.

In his work *De mutatione nominum*, he warns: “Do not think that the living God, He who is truly living, is ever seen so as to be comprehended by any human being”, because man, as a man, lacks the sensory means that allow it to him, since God is not sensible. “In real fact, God is not as a man, nor again, as the sun, nor as the heaven, nor as the world, which is perceptible by the outwards senses, but as God, if it is justifiable to assert that also; since that most happy and blessed being will not endure similitude, or comparison, or enigmatic description; nay, rather he surpasses even blessedness and felicity itself, and whatever can be imagined as better than and preferable to them” (*Quest. in Gen. II, 54*).

Philo sticks to the monotheistic orthodoxy of traditional Judaism: “There is one God, the Creator and Maker of the universe; and... He is the Lord of all created things, since all that is firm, and solid, and really stable and sure, is by nature so framed as to be connected with Him alone” (*Spec. Leg. I, 30*). He refuses the polytheistic fickleness of those who “have conceived that the sun, and the moon, and the other stars are independent gods, to whom they have attributed the

causes of all things that exist” (*Spec. Leg.* I, 13), because “the only God is alone to be honored by me (Ex. 20.3); and nothing besides of all the things that are inferior to Him, neither earth, nor sea, nor rivers, nor the nature of the air, nor the nature of the winds, nor the changes of the atmosphere, nor the appearances of any animals or plants, nor the sun, nor the moon, nor the multitude of the stars moving in well-arranged revolutions, nor the whole heaven, nor the entire world. This is a boast of a great and magnanimous soul, to rise above all Creation, and to overleap its boundaries, and to cling to the great uncreated God alone, according to His sacred commands, in which we are expressly enjoined to cleave unto Him (Deut. 30.20). Therefore He, in requital, bestows Himself as their inheritance upon those who do cleave unto Him, and who serve Him without intermission; and the Sacred Scripture bears its testimony in behalf of this assertion, where it says, the Lord Himself is His Inheritance (Deut. 10.9)” (*Congr.* 133-134).

Nonetheless, following the Jewish theology in some parts of his work, Philo places an entity under the Being, which he calls *Logos* (translation of the Hebrew *dabar* by the LXX). On some occasion, he defines it as “the most ancient Word of God” (*Det.* 118), the first-born son of God (*Leg. All.* III, 96). In another passage, he explains that “the divine Logos which is above these does not come into any visible appearance, inasmuch as it is not like to any of the things that come under the external senses, but is itself an image of God, the most ancient of all objects of intellect in the whole world” (*De fuga*, 101). It seems to be positioned at an intermediate level between the Being and the powers that Creation has provided; “And the Father who created the universe has given to His archangelic and most ancient Logos a preeminent gift, to stand on the confines of both, and separated that which had been created from the Creator” (*Her.* 205). The whole Creation, even before being manifested²⁶⁰, is already found in this Logos, which might be identified with the Word of God

²⁶⁰ See also Saint Paul’s Eph. 1 in the Bible.

or Divine Mind (as the world of Platonic archetypes), fact that implies affirming the simultaneity of the whole Creation and, consequently, overcoming man's ideas of predetermination or free will. The powers are below the *Logos*. None of them is separate or independent from God, but they are simply His attributes: "God, being one, has about Him an unspeakable number of powers, all of which are defenders and preservers of every thing that is created; and among these powers those also which are conversant with punishment are involved... It is by means of these powers that the incorporeal world, perceptible by the intellect, has been put together, which is the archetypal model of this invisible world" (*On the Confusion of Tongues*, 171)²⁶¹. Philo identifies the two cherubim of the tale of Paradise that appear in the Bible as a representation of the creating power and the royal or providential power. Specifically, "The one in the middle is the Father of the universe, who in the Sacred Scriptures is called by His proper Name, I AM THAT I AM; and the beings on each side are those most ancient powers which are always close to the living God, one of which is called His creative power, and the other His royal power. And the creative power is God, for it is by this that He made and arranged the universe; and the royal power is the Lord, for it is fitting that the Creator should lord it over and govern the creature" (*Abr.* 121). The origin of the theological conception of powers is no more and no less than the ancient biblical doctrine of the divine names. Judaism had adopted the custom of never pronouncing the sacred *Tetragrammaton* and instead replacing it by alternative names such as *Adonai* or *Elohim*. Anyway, as the sacred Name of God, *Yahweh* or even *Elohim*, was translated by the LXX as *Kyrios* and *Theos*, Philo just followed this tradition in order to explain the doctrine of powers or attributes of God. Thus, whereas *Kyr-*

²⁶¹ See also *Somn.* 1.140: "the purest and most excellent of all... being as it were lieutenants of the Ruler of the Universe, as though they were the eyes and ears of the Great King, beholding and listening to everything".

ios describes the royal power, *Theos* does God as a Creator (*Somn.* 1.230)²⁶².

However, as “God is alone, and by Himself being one, and there is nothing like unto God” (*Leg. All.* II, 1), man can only nobly and sincerely accept his own inability as a starting point to begin his route towards the mysterious spiritual world: “God resembles no created being whatever, but He is superior to everything, so that the very swiftest conception is outstripped by Him, and confesses that it is very far inferior to the comprehension of Him” (*Somn.* 1.184). As already seen, Philo seems to anticipate other important Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa²⁶³ or John Chrysostom formulating the doctrine of the divine incomprehensibility. Even though it is true that this doctrine already appeared in some hermetic and Gnostic texts of his time, it is important to highlight that such statements were considered by the Jewish mysticism as an essential part of its doctrinal core and its praxis, so that, rather than explaining them as cultural borrowings due to external influences, such similarities were considered to be derived from the essential identity of the mystical *experiences*.

But, in addition, our discursive faculties are not only unable to approach *God’s Mysteries*, but also unable to know the subtlest states of the human being: “The intelligence which is in each of us is

²⁶² However, in other passages, he distinguishes up to five powers. Thus, the symbol of these five powers is the Ark of the Covenant: “Five [powers] have had their figures set forth in the Sacred Scriptures, and their images are there likewise. The images of the powers of command and prohibition are the Laws in the Ark; that of the merciful power of God is the covering of the Ark, and He calls it the mercy-seat. The images of the creative power and of the royal power are the winged cherubim which are placed upon it” (*De fuga*, 100).

²⁶³ This way, he will explain the apophatic theology using terms that will be later used by Gregory of Nyssa: “When, therefore, the soul that loves God seeks to know what the one living God is according to his essence, it is entertaining upon an obscure and dark subject of investigation, from which the greatest benefit that arises to it is to comprehend that God, as to his essence, is utterly incomprehensible to any being, and also to be aware that He is invisible” (Philo, *De posteritate Caini* 15).

able to comprehend all other things, but has not the capability of understanding itself” (*Leg. All.* I, 91).

In sum, if man, as an earthly Adam, lacks the qualification required to attain the world of the Spirit, does this mean that we are in this life doomed to an earthly existence, separate from and alien to the world of the higher realities? Certainly, although the essence of God is incomprehensible to the human mind, it cannot be inferred from this that we know nothing about God. He reveals Himself by means of the creation of the sensible world, but *above all* by means of His action within the soul.

This topic, being the central argument of the universal mysticism of all times, is developed in some of his writings. In the work *On the principle that the worse is accustomed to be always plotting against the better* (*Det.*), Philo explains that man cannot know his Creator, but God, considering that this knowledge was useful, has blown some of His divinity into the soul, like “a divine and happy spirit” (90). For that purpose, Philo invokes, among other biblical verses, this one: “Did you not, as it were, call me Home and Father and Originator of your maidenhood?” (*Jer.* 3:4 LXX), in order to demonstrate that, though God has an incorporeal nature (*Cher.* 49), Inside of each man has He put something that can find Him, due to its kinship to God (*Op. Mund.* 145). It is “an impression of, or a fragment or a ray of that blessed nature” (*Op. Mund.* 146).

How can we become aware of or realize that divine spirit? How to find that impression, fragment or ray of the blessed nature that connects us to God? In order to set forth on the mystical or spiritual path of the *Mysteries of Moses*, we must discover the root of the problem that torments man, with the aim of achieving a rational understanding that is previous to the effective spiritual realization.

III.- ADAM (THE MIND), EVE (THE SENSES), ABEL (THE DETACHMENT) AND CAIN (THE APPROPRIATION)

For that purpose, Philo uncovers the hidden meaning of one of the most enigmatic biblical passages. It is about the episode of Adam and Eve, which, according to his explanation, personifies the origin of the differentiation between pure mind and specific mind, or, if preferred, the duality between pure awareness and thoughts.

After eating the apple from the Forbidden Tree, “the Lord called unto Adam and said unto him: where art thou?” (Gen. 3:9). Facing this biblical verse, Philo asks himself: “Why now is Adam alone called, when his wife also was concealed together with him? In the first place, we must say that the mind is summoned, and asked where it is. When it is converted, and reproved for its offense, not only is it summoned itself but all its faculties are also summoned, for without its faculties the mind by itself is found to be naked, and to be absolutely nothing, and one of its faculties is also the outward sense, that is to say the woman. The woman therefore, that is the outward sense, is also summoned together with Adam, that is the mind, but separately God does not summon her. Why not? Because being destitute of reason she is incapable of being convicted by herself. For neither can sight, nor hearing, nor any one of the other senses be taught, and moreover none of them are capable of receiving the comprehension of things” (*Leg. All.* III, 49-50). With this, Philo means to point out that the cause of the Fall and expulsion from Paradise (which is refreshed in each human being’s birth) is not the perception of the sensible world (Eve), but the appearance of the first duality (fruit of the tree of good and evil) and the subsequent *appropriation* of the objects of the sensible world. Eve, “having thus conceived it becomes pregnant, and immediately it is in labor, and brings forth the greatest of all the evils of the soul, namely, vain opinion [Cain], for it conceives an opinion that everything that it has seen, that it has heard, that it has tasted, that it has smelled, or that it has touched, belongs to

itself, and to look upon itself as the inventor and creator of them all” (*Cher.* 57). This way, Man or Humankind debate between being Abel and detaching itself from the sensible world, realizing that everything is vain (Abel means *united with God* or *Nothing*²⁶⁴), or set forth on a hectic race to possess (Cain means *possession*) the knowledge that comes from the senses and that, therefore, brings no true peace at all. “Why then, O soul, since it is right for you to dwell as a virgin in the house of God, and to cleave to wisdom, do you stand aloof from these things, and rather embrace the outward sense, which makes you effeminate and pollutes you? Therefore, you shall bring forth an offspring altogether polluted and altogether destructive, the fratricidal and accursed Cain, a possession not to be sought after; for the name Cain being interpreted means possession” (*De Cherubim* 52). Thus, men who live bonded to the sensible world are like Cain because they believe that life consists in hoarding experiences without realizing that *such possession is not the true possession* of the spirit, since this should be dispossession or disregard. And an even subtler idea: man wrongly believes that the thoughts he experiences are his own, whereas, strictly speaking, there is really nothing of his own at all.

In order to begin the spiritual path towards disregard, there is nothing better than observing how our thoughts and feelings, generated by the sensible world, lash us daily, subjugating us to the alternation of pain and ephemeral peace. Only this way will we realize that all this is but an empty instability without consistence; “The law-giver showing, by this expression, that he who gives way to inconsiderate impulses without any stability or firmness exposes himself to surf and violent tossing, like those of the sea, when it is agitated in the winter season by contrary winds, and has never even a single glimpse of calm or tranquility. But as when a ship having been tossed in the sea is agitated, it is then no longer fit to take a

²⁶⁴ Likewise, in Flavius Josephus, *The Judean Antiquities*, Brill edition by Steve Mason, I.52, translation and commentary by Louis H. Feldman, Leiden, 2000.

voyage or to anchor in harbor, but being tossed about hither and thither it leans first to one side and then to the other, and struggles in vain against the waves; so the wicked man, yielding to a perverse and insane disposition, and being unable to regulate his voyage through life without disaster, is constantly tossed about in perpetual expectation of an overturning of his life" (*Post.* 22). With this, Philo warns about the hard dilemma that the spiritual seeker shall face: either to suffer pain and frustration for being seduced by the unstable, agitated, imaginary world (dream) of senses, or to transcend his situation by devoting himself to the path of true knowledge.

Man's state of agitation is symbolized by the serpent: "And pleasure has been represented under the form of the serpent, for this reason, as the motion of the serpent is full of many windings and varied, so also is the motion of pleasure. At first it folds itself round a man in five ways... The pleasures from sight are various: there is all the pleasure which arises from the contemplation of pictures or statues; and all other works which are made by art delight the sight. So also do the different stages through which plants go... and likewise the diversified beauty of the different animals" (*Leg. All.* II, 74-75). Philo, inspired by the Platonic myth of Phaedo, introduces the spirit as a slave of the senses: "As, therefore, when the charioteer has his horses under command and guides the animals with the rein, the chariot is guided wherever he pleases; but if they become restiff, and get the better of the charioteer, he is often dragged out of his road... So when the mind, which is the charioteer or pilot of the soul, retains the mastery over the entire animal... the life of the man proceeds rightly. But when the outward sense, which is devoid of reason, obtains the supremacy, then a terrible confusion overtakes the man" (*Leg. All.* III, 223-224). In sum, the Cainites (in the sense of those who desire) suffer an illusion or hallucination generated by their own minds, for they are wrongly convinced that they are the authors of their own thoughts and actions. Such an error can be dispelled if it is understood that the mind has two aspects: while looking inwards, it

is purified when meeting the divine spirit, but while looking outwards, it will only find alienation and frustration; “There are two minds, the mind of the universe, which is God, and also the separate mind of each individual; he who escapes from the mind which is in himself flees to the mind of the universe; and, conversely, he who forsakes his own individual mind, confesses that all the things of the human mind are of no value, and attributes everything to God” (Philo, *Leg. All.* III, 29). Fortunately, the stable world of the spirit rises before this unstable world, because “God is who remains unchanged, whereas Creation is change” (*Post.* 24).

Philo goes further on his mysterious proposal of a spiritual path. Man is facing the eternal dilemma: either to trust his thoughts, for he considers them as his own, or to trust in God; “It is best, therefore, to trust in God, and not in uncertain reasonings, or unsure conjectures. ‘Abraham trusted in the Lord, and it was counted to him for righteousness’ (Gen. 15:6)... But if we distrust our own reason, we shall prepare and build ourselves a city of the mind which will destroy the truth” (Philo, *Leg. All.* III, 228). As well: “Being presently to lament over the self-satisfied and arrogant mind in this manner: ‘Woe to thee, Moab’ (Num. 21:29). For, if you give attention to the riddles which arise out of the perception of what is probable, you have destroyed the truth by so doing” (Philo, *Leg. All.* 228, 231). With these and other comments, Philo is not trying to defend the refusal of all critical sense or the *skepticism* as a doctrine, but something much subtler. He is suggesting *the incompatibility between the specific thought and the mystical experience, because the latter, as it is radically supraindividual, transcends the subject-object relationship.*

IV.- BEGINNER’S MISTAKES

According to Philo, one of the most common and counter-productive mistakes of those men who are in a Cainite moral state is

to claim the authorship of their actions and, in general, to claim the ownership of something: "And whoever ventures to assert that any thing is his own shall be at down as a slave for ever and ever" (*Leg. All.* III, 198). Therefore, "Who, then, could be a more determined enemy to the soul than he who out of arrogance appropriate the especial attributes of the Deity to himself? Now it is an especial attribute of God to create, and this faculty it is impious to ascribe to any created being. But the special property of the created being is to suffer" (*Cher.* 77-78). This was the sin of Cain: "It happens then, that there are two opinions contrary to and at variance with one another; the one of which commits everything to the mind as the leader of all reasoning, or feeling, or moving, or being stationary; and the other, attributing to God all the consequent work of creation as his own. Now the symbol of the former of these is Cain, which name, being interpreted, means possession, from his appearing to possess all things; and the symbol of the other is Abel, for this name, being interpreted, means referring to God" (*Sacr.* 2).

Likewise, other of the most widespread mirages is to claim the authorship of the thoughts and feelings; "By the only true God, I think nothing so shameful as to suppose that I comprehend with my intellect, or perceive by my outward sense" (*Leg. All.* II, 68; cf. III, 81). In other passage, he comments: "The sons are the reasonings which take place in portions of the soul; if you pronounce that the sons belong to you, are you speaking reasonably, or are you downright mad for thinking so? For melancholic thoughts, and follies, and frenzies of the mind, and untrustworthy conjectures, and false ideas about things, and empty attractions of the mind, resembling dreams, and bringing with them convulsive agitation, and the disease which is innate in the soul, namely forgetfulness, and many other things beyond those that I have mentioned, take away the stability of your master-like authority, and show that these are the possession of some one else and not of you" (Philo, *De Cherubim* 69). This demonstrates that the mind remains a prisoner of its own conceptualiza-

tions: "Though [the mind] was not only not able to possess even itself steadily, but it did not even know of what essence it consisted, but nevertheless it placed confidence in the outward senses, as being competent to attain the objects perceivable only by them. Let it tell us therefore how it will be able to avoid seeing wrongly, or being mistaken as to its hearing, or to escape even in any other of these outward senses" (*Cher.* 65). This way, Philo will state, with a sentence that recalls the Platonic myth of the cavern but that finds its roots in the Eastern mysticism, that the life of the senses is a so unstable, unreal, illusory world as the world of dreams, so "the deep and long-enduring sleep, in which every wicked man is held, removes all true conceptions, and fills the mind with all kinds of false images, and unsubstantial visions, persuading it to embrace what is shameful as praiseworthy" (*Somn.* 2.162).

Philo summarizes that there are three obstacles that block the self-knowledge. Thus, in *De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini*, he explains the three faults of Cain: "Of those who do not act rightly..., some through forgetfulness of the benefits which they have received, have failed in the great and beautiful virtue of thankfulness, and others form an excessive conceit, have looked upon themselves as the authors of the good things which have befallen them, and have not attributed them to Him, who is really the cause of them. A third class are they who commit an offense slighter indeed than the fault of these latter, but more serious than that of the first mentioned, for though they confess that the supreme Ruler is the cause of the good that has befallen them, they still say that they deserved to receive it, for that they are prudent, and courageous, and template, and just, so that they may well on these accounts be esteemed by God to be worthy of His favors" (*Sacr.* 54). In sum: forgetfulness of God, arrogance of believing oneself a maker, pride of considering oneself to deserve a reward for one's own merits.

Those who forget the benefits received from God are recommended by Philo to meditate on their existence, since “the whole universe of which all these are parts, namely the world, is clearly a complete work, worthy of its Maker. Thus, therefore, putting all these things together, God appropriated the dominion over them all to Himself, but the use and enjoyment of themselves and of each other He allowed to those who are subject to Him; for we have the complete use of our own faculties and of everything which affects us: I therefore... find that not one of all these things is my own property. For where was my body before my birth? And where will it go when I am departed? ... Whence came the soul, and whither will it go? And how long will it remain with us? And what is its essence, or what may we speak of as such? Moreover, when did we acquire it? Was it before our birth? But then we ourselves did not exist. Shall we have it after our death? But then we shall not exist, we who are now a combination... but rather we shall then be hastening to a regeneration... And now, when we are alive we are governed rather than governing, and we are understood ourselves rather than understanding anything else, for our soul understands us without being understood by us, and it imposes commands upon us which we are necessitated to obey, as servants are compelled to obey a mistress; and whenever it chooses to abandon us and to depart to the Ruler of all things, it will depart, leaving our house destitute of life. And even if we attempt to compel it to remain, it will disappear; for its nature is composed of unsubstantial parts, such as afford no handle to the body... By all which I think it is shown that we have the use of possessions which in really belong to others... But having the use of these things, if we are judicious and prudent, we shall take care of them as possessions of God, being well aware beforehand that it is the law, that the Master, whenever He pleases, may reclaim His own property.” (*Cher.* 112-118).

Regarding the second obstacle mentioned, the arrogance of those who consider themselves as author of works and owner of their

fruits, Philo makes them see that, “for all things belong to God (*θεοῦ γὰρ τὰ πάντα κτήματα*), so he who claims anything is taking away what belongs to another, and receives a very severe blow and one difficult to heal, namely, arrogance (*οἴησις*), a thing nearly akin to imprudence and ignorance” (*Leg. All.* III, 33).

When Philo states, “all things belong to God”, that “all” also encompasses “both things external, and the body, and the outward sense, and the power of speech, and the mind, and the energies and essences of all the faculties. And not you, but all this world also, and whatever you cut off and divide from it, you will find does not belong to you; for you do not possess the earth, or the water, or the air, or the heaven, or the stars, or any of the kinds of animals or plants, whether perishable or immortal, as your own; so that, whatever from them you bring to offer to Him as a sacrifice, you are bringing as the possession of God, and not as your own” (*Sacr.* 97). And, given that “all things belong to God by virtue of possession... created things only have the use of them... being well aware beforehand that... [He] may reclaim His own property” (*Cher.* 108-118). Ultimately, “no mortal is positively and assuredly the master of anything whatever... There must also be a Ruler and Lord in the universe... the One God, to whom it was becoming to say, that ‘all things belong to Him’” (*Cher.* 83). On occasion of his commentary on Lev. 25:23, he insists, “The land shall not be sold for ever, for the land is Mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with Me” (*Cher.* 107). Philo’s conclusion is unequivocal: “You have no good thing of your own, but whatever you fancy that you have, another has bestowed it upon you. From which it is inferred that all things are the property of God who gives them, but that they do not belong to the creature which only existed after Him, and which stretches forth its hands to take them... Even if you take them, take them not for yourself, but think what is thus given you a loan or deposit, and be ready to restore it to Him who has deposited it with, or contributed it to you, requiting an older favor

with a newer one, and an original kindness with one proffered instead of it, as justice and property require” (*Her.* 103).

And, regarding the third fault, given that all what is created comes from God, “they therefore who say that all thinking, and feeling, and speaking, are the free gifts of their own soul, utter an impious and ungodly opinion, and deserve to be classed among the race of Cain, who, though he was not able to master himself, yet dared to assert that he had absolute possession of all other things; but as for those persons who do not claim all the things in Creation as their own, but who ascribe them to the divine grace, are men really noble” (*Post.* 42).

With this discourse, Jewish metaphysics teaches the sterility of the worldly life and points out some of the most common perspective errors. If the candidate for being initiated into the *Mysteries of Moses* has the required qualifications, he will be helped to take the first step. The first step to wake up from that alienating dream is to realize that one is dreaming, that is, to understand that the information that comes from the specific mind is false; “The virtuous and purified mind suffers pain in the least degree, for the outward senses have the least degree of power over it. But passion is exceedingly powerful in the case of the foolish man, inasmuch as he has no antidote in his soul by which he can ward off the evils which proceed from the outward senses and from those objects which can only be perceived by them” (*Leg. All.* III, 200). Once this is understood, “he who had dreamed, waking up, found that all the motions and all the advances of the foolish man are merely dreams that have no portion of truth in them, for the very mind is found to be a dream” (*Leg. All.* 229).

From that moment on, he must deny the validity and authenticity of all experience that comes from the mind and from the senses; “He who is held in bondage by these [senses and the offspring of the

mind: reflection, reasoning, etc.] can never enjoy even a dream of freedom; for it is only by a flight and complete escape from them that we arrive at a state of freedom from fear” (Philo, *De Cherubim* 74). After this initial understanding, he can begin the spiritual path.

V.- STAGES OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Since in his own writings, Philo affirms that he devoted himself to contemplation for years, it is to be assumed that most of his theoretical-practical formulations are based on his personal experience and the teachings received during his cohabitation with the brotherhoods of Essenes, Therapeutae and other Jewish mystical groups.

Following the traditional doctrine, already present in the Egyptian and Greek cultures, Philo distinguishes three stages of the spiritual life: the first stage is characterized by the eagerness to look for knowledge, which leads to a moment of conversion, when the candidate is given some introductory, initial or “initiatric” teachings. In the second stage, the ascesis is deeply practiced in order to facilitate the passing from the sensible world to the intelligible world. In the third stage, the passing from the intelligible world to the presence of God is completed.

In his work *On Dreams* (1.166-188) and above all in *De migratione Abrahami*, Philo personifies these stages in certain biblical characters, specifically in Abraham, Jacob and Isaac.

The first stage of the spiritual life (*Abraham*) starts with an initial conversion that takes place as a triple migration or departure. The candidate or convert who aspires to know himself is intended to stop identifying himself with the body, the senses and the thoughts: “God, wishing to purify the soul of man, first of all gives it an impulse to-

wards complete health²⁶⁵, namely, a change of abode, so as to quit the three regions of the body, the outward sense and speech according to utterance (λόγος κατὰ προσφοράν)... You must... return to your native land, the land of the sacred Logos and in some sense of the father of all those who practice virtue, which is wisdom, the best possible abiding place for those souls which love virtue. In this country you have a race which learns everything of itself, and is self-taught... surnamed Isaac... And the fountain from which good things are poured forth is the union with of the bounteous (φιλόδορος) God (*De migratione Abrahami* 2, 28-30).

Abraham represents this first degree of the spiritual path because, while guided by his faith, he experienced this triple migration: the first one out of his body, symbolized by his departure from Chaldea (*Migr.* 1). But he had to pass from the knowledge about the world to the knowledge about himself. Thus, after studying the celestial phenomena in Chaldea, he travels to Haran, which represents the caverns of the senses (*Abr.* 72 and *Somn.* 1.60); and he finally emigrates from the speech, which is the field of the discursive intelligence (*Migr.* 2). That is why Terah, Abraham's father, "died in Haran" (Gen. 11:32), that is, he died in the body, the "mother-city of the senses", since Haran means "excavated" or "cavern", for the body was dug in order to find the sensory organs (*Somn.* 1.41-42) and thus he never passed that state (*Somn.* 1.48). According to Philo, the journey to Haran represents the "self-knowing", the passing from the research on the nature (Chaldea) to the knowledge of the senses: "This disposition the Hebrews called Terah" (*Somn.* 58). Terah (which means "the investigation of a smell") is called that way because he represents the sensory knowledge that could only smell the virtue. That is why Abraham, when leaving Haran (perception) (Gen. 12:4) after seeing his father (the senses) die, could return to his native land. Abraham renounced himself after knowing him in order to know

²⁶⁵ The word *σωτηρία* is usually translated as "preservation", "salvation", but I consider it more correct to translate it as "health" or "peace".

Him who Is (*Somn.* 60). The soul returns to the intelligible world from which it departed.

Likewise, he interprets the carnal union of Abraham and Hagar, who is the acquired, “profane science”, as the opposite of the God-given, “revealed science”, represented by his marriage with Sarah (*Abr.* 100). Thus, Abraham, the beginner, symbolizes the progress from the knowledge about the world through the senses and the speech (Hagar) to the true knowledge that is given by God without need of senses or thoughts (Sarah). In sum, “the Lord said to Abraham: ‘depart from thy land, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house’ (Gen. 12:1)... Depart therefore from the earthly parts which envelop you... fleeing from that base and polluted prison house of the body, and from the keepers as it were of the prison, its pleasures and appetites... Depart also from your kindred, outward senses, for now indeed you have given yourself up to each of them to be made use of as it will, and you have become a good, the property of others who have borrowed you, having lost your own power over yourself... But now rise up and quit speech according to utterance... that you may not be deceived by the specious beauty of words and names, and so be separated from that real beauty which exists in the things themselves which are intended by these names” (*Migr.* 1-12). When the beginner or convert understand that he, as a Man, does not consist in the body, the sensory experiences or the thoughts, he begins the second stage of the proficient.

The second stage (Jacob) is the path of the proficient who advances in the ascetic effort and in the fight against the passions that lead him to the *apatheia*. “The way that leads to virtue... is accounted rough, and steep, and difficult” (*Post.* 154), so “others, with much endurance and great vigor, supporting the fearful and terrible events of the wilderness, pass through the contest of life... And the cause of this is not merely labor, but also the sweetness with which it is combined; for the scripture says, ‘and the water was made sweet’ (Ex.

15:25)” (*Congr.* 165-166). But such an effort must be made with disregard to the results, without a reason, since everything is ultimately in the hands of God. As most mystics, Philo deals with the apparent paradox between ascetic effort and divine grace. On one hand, the asceticism essentially consists in an effort. However, the fruits of the spiritual life are considered as a Grace of God, not necessarily connected to any human activity. No sum of efforts, no matter how sustained and intense they may be, can ensure us the vision of God. It is not possible to attain any spiritual degree without the Grace of God: “Human intellect would not have dared to mount up to such a height as to lay claim to the nature of God, if God Himself had not drawn it up to Himself... It is right for God to plant and to build up the virtues in the soul” (*Leg. All.* I, 38, 48). Such a process is represented by Jacob’s “mystical journey” from the Well of the Oath to Haran and his stay at Bethel, where he achieves the vision of God at the end of the ladder on which the angels ascended and descended. Those journeys mean that the ascetic cannot stand living in the senses (Haran) except for a short period of time, and that he must return to his home (*Somn.* 1.109-119), towards the contemplation of God.

The third and last stage is the one of the perfect (Isaac). This last stage begins with the search for God beyond the spirit and culminates with the devotion of oneself in the hands of God. The model of this spiritual degree is Jacob, whose name means “laughter”, that is, the joy and happiness that is achieved when one returns to the presence of God.

The detachment practiced by the *perfect initiate* leads him to a complete unidentification with the body, desires and thoughts. Now he knows that such instruments are not his own, and his thirst to appropriate experiences has ceased. Now there is just one last step left: to renounce what remains of oneself after relinquishing the body, the senses and the mind; “Therefore if any desire comes upon you, O soul, to be the inheritor of the good things of God, leave not only

your country, the body, and your kindred, the outward senses, and your father's house, that is speech, but also flee from yourself, and depart out of yourself, like the Corybantes, or those possessed with demons, being driven to frenzy, and inspired by some prophetic inspiration. For while the spirit is in a state of enthusiastic inspiration, and while it is no longer mistress of itself, but is agitated and drawn into frenzy by heavenly love, and drawn upwards to that object, truth removing all impediments out of its way, and making every thing before it plain, that so it may advance by a level and easy road, its destiny is to become an inheritor of the things of God" (*Her.* 69-70). As he has transcended the indirect knowledge derived from the subject-object relationship, he accesses the God-given wisdom, that is, he knows in a direct, intuitive way, because, strictly speaking, it is not him who knows, but God who inspires him. That is why Philo considers him as an *automathēs* or autodidact (*Somn.* 1.168).

When Philo describes this state as a "withdrawal" from the world or a "departure" from oneself, he is not being rhetorical, but he does literally describe the ecstatic experience. When stating that the *perfect* must withdraw his bonding to the intelligible world (body, senses and thoughts) in order to access a transcendent reality, Philo is just describing his own personal experiences about that final state in which the soul is carried away by the divine presence: madness, sober inebriation, love, etc.: "I am not ashamed to relate what has happened to me myself, which I know from having experienced it ten thousand times. Sometimes, when I have desired to come to my usual employment of writing on the doctrines of philosophy, though I have known accurately what it was proper to set down, I have found my mind barren and unproductive, and have been completely unsuccessful in my object, being indignant at my mind for the uncertainty and vanity of its then existent opinions, and filled with amazement at the power of the living God, by whom the womb of the soul is at times opened and at times closed up. And sometimes when I have come to my work empty I have suddenly become full, ideas being, in

an invisible manner, showered upon me, and implanted in me from on high, so that, through the influence of divine inspiration (ὥς ὑπὸ κατοχῆς ἐνθέου κορυβαντιᾶν), I have become greatly excited, and I have known neither the place in which I was nor those who were present, nor myself, nor what I was saying, nor what I was writing... having such an effect on my mind as the clearest ocular demonstration would have on the eyes" (*Migr.* 34-35. Also in *Somn.* 2.250-254, *Conf.* 59). In another fragment, he identifies that ecstatic moment with some biblical passages: "When it calls the soul to itself, it excites a congealing power in everything which is earthly, or corporeal, or under the influence of the external senses. On which account it [the Manna] is said to be 'like the hoar-frost on the Earth' (Ex. 16:14). For when a man who beholds God, meditates a flight from the passions, 'the waves are frozen' (Ex. 15:8), that is to say, the impetuous rush, and the increase, and the haughty pride of the waves are arrested, in order that he who might behold the living God might then pass over the Passion" (Philo, *Leg. All.* III, 172). In other passage, he explains: "As long therefore as our spirit still shines around and hovers around, pouring as it were a noontide light into the whole soul, we, being masters of ourselves, are not inspired (ὄντες οὐ κατεχόμεθα); but when it approaches its setting, then, as is natural, an ecstasy (ἔκστασις), which proceeds from inspiration (κατοκωχή), takes violent hold of us, and insanity (μανία) seizes upon us, for when the divine light sets this other rises and shines, and this very frequently happens to the race of prophets; for the spirit (νοῦς) that is in us is removed from its place at the arrival of the divine πνεῦμα, but is again restored to its previous habitation when it departs, for it is contrary to holy law for what is mortal to dwell with what is immortal" (*Her.* 264-265). It is a supraindividual state of realization. The idea itself of quest or progress has disappeared because the human mind has emptied itself in order to give way to God's inspiration: "He who, by reason of the happy constitution of his own nature and by the prolific fertility of his soul, has attained to wisdom without encountering labor or enduring hardship, stands in need of no

further improvement, for he has at hand the perfect gifts of God, inspired by means of those most ancient graces, and he wishes and prays that they may remain lasting” (*Congr.* 37-38). These three stages describe the initiation and culmination of the *Mysteries of Moses*, the access and effective realization in the spiritual level that come up with the joy of the presence of God. In other passages of his work, Philo synthesizes the three stages of the spiritual ascension, represented by Abraham, Jacob and Isaac, in only one character: Moses.

VI.- MOSES AND THE THICK DARKNESS

Philo interprets the events of Moses’ life in the same metaphysical way. The death of the libidinous Egyptian administrator at the hands of Moses represents the victory against the worldly desires. After that, Moses withdraws in the solitude of the desert (asceticism), where he will free the seven daughters of Jethro (the five senses, the speech and the sexual instinct) from the evil shepherds who want to take them away from the field of the spirit. He also interprets Moses’ marriage with Sephora in an allegorical way, as the union between spirit and wisdom (*Post.* 78). Likewise, his departure from Egypt is “a passing over from the body and the passions... The Passover figuratively represents the purification of the soul” (*Spec. Leg.* II, 147). All these episodes of the life of Moses symbolize the process of purification of the human soul, which tries to see God face to face. Until then, it has only indirectly seen God, that is, through His reflection in Creation, so the images generated by that mirror, no matter how beautiful they might be, are changeable and inconsistent because they are subject to time (change) and space (shape). Meditation, no matter how subtle it may be, as it is based on the separation between meditating subject and meditated object, cannot get out of that mirror. “The spirit beholds God in this as in a mirror” (*Dec.* 105).

But Moses aspires to overcome this indirect knowledge of God (by means of meditation) and then to know Him face to face (contemplation): “Do not you be manifested to me through the medium of the heaven, or of the earth... or, in short, of anything whatever of created things... For the images which are presented to the sight in executed things are subject to dissolution, but those which are presented in the One uncreate may last for ever²⁶⁶” (*Leg. All.* III, 101). This way, interpreting the episode of Moses before the burning bush in a contemplative way, Philo reveals the keys of the last step (the step without step) that precedes the contemplation of God. In effect, Philo describes a contemplative state previous to “enlightenment” or mystical ecstasy, which he describes as “darkness”. Such a state happens *after having refused all information from other things* and is characterized by the most peculiar circumstance that *there is nothing*: neither ideas, nor shapes, nor understanding²⁶⁷. This initially requires an intense, upright attention (*kawwanah*), that is, an attention on oneself (or to pay attention to the own attention) with a complete disregard of the external objects and a “heart directed to heaven” (Talmud, Berakhot I, 5b).

Philo recognizes this state in the biblical passage about the Sinai, where Moses “will now penetrate into ‘the thick darkness where God Was’ (Ex. 20:21), that is to say, into those unapproachable and invisible conceptions which are found of the living Being” (*Post.* 14). This is because “Moses, the spectator of the invisible nature, the man who really saw God (for the Sacred Scriptures say that he entered ‘into the darkness’, by which expression they mean figuratively to intimate the invisible essence), having investigated every part of every thing, sought to see clearly the much-desired and only God; but

²⁶⁶ This metaphor was also used by Saint Paul: “for now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). This argument will be widely developed by Nicholas of Cusa some centuries later.

²⁶⁷ As well, Philo seems to anticipate the descriptions of the state of emptiness of the soul, which will find its most famous expression in the *Dark night of the spirit* of Saint John of the Cross.

when he found nothing, not even any appearance at all resembling what he had hoped to behold, he, then, giving up all idea of receiving instruction on that point from any other source, flies to the very being himself whom he was seeking, and entreats him, saying ‘show me thyself that I may see thee so as to know thee’ (Ex. 33:13)” (*Mut.* 7-8). Such a dark *ousia*, like the dark night of the *senses* and the *soul*, is the last great test that the initiate must overcome in order to empty himself from material impurities and give way to the presence of God. In one of his most remarkable paragraphs, Philo states that “[Moses] so insatiably desires to behold Him, and to be beheld by Him, that he supplicates Him to display to his eye His nature of which it is impossible to form a conjecture, so that he may become acquainted with it, that thus he might receive a most well-grounded certainty of knowledge that could not be mistaken, in exchange for uncertain doubts; and he will never cease from urging his desire, but even, though he is aware that he desires a matter which is difficult of attainment, or rather which is wholly unattainable, he still strives on... At all events, he will now penetrate into ‘the thick darkness where God Was’, that is to say, into those unapproachable and invisible conceptions which are formed of the living Being. For the great Cause of all things does not exist in time, nor at all in place, but He is superior to both time and place... When, therefore, the soul that loves God seeks to know what the one living God is according to His essence, it is entertaining upon an obscure and dark subject of investigation, from which the greatest benefit that arises to it is to comprehend that God, as to His essence, is utterly incomprehensible to any being, and also to be aware that He is invisible” (*Post.* 13-15)²⁶⁸.

²⁶⁸ The knowledge of the Logos is higher than the knowledge of the powers; however, it is lower than the apprehension of the *ousia* in the darkness: “It is very suitable... to desire to see Him; and, if they are unable to do that, at least to see his image, the most sacred Logos” (*Conf.* 97). Thus, “His Logos, which is the interpreter of His will; for that must be God to us imperfect beings, but the first mentioned, or true God, is so only to wise and perfect men” (*Leg. All.* III, 207). This way, Philo seems to grade the meditative and contemplative states hierarchically as follows: the Powers, the Logos, the dark *Ousia* and the Being.

In sum, the mystical union between man and God implies a shapeless, thoughtless *vision* that, precisely because of that, is out of the space-time conditionings, that is, in the *sacred darkness*. Or, in other terms, in a Nothing that implies the complete absence of individuality. Only when the contemplative trusts and accepts, with no reservations, his own sinking and his full, absolute devotion to that darkness or sacred cloud, only then may he see the light that hides within. It is there where he may see the divine Light or hear the soundless “laughter” of Isaac.

SCIENCE AND ART OF MEDITATION IN CHRISTIANITY

“About contemplation, any shepherd or old woman knows more than those well-versed men without experience” (Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, Madrid, 1628, p. 107. 7th Advice).

I.- WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?

According to the medieval Christian tradition, contemplation is an immediate *experience* of God due to the special influence of the Holy Spirit. It has been defined as “the science of ignoring oneself in the ecstasy of God” (*Philokalia*, Diadochus, *Definitions*, 5). It is a *mystical science* (from the Greek verb *myein*, “to be silent”, from where *mystikos*, “silent”, “mute” is derived), not only in the sense that it is a “hidden science, because the divine Master, who wanted to keep this teaching to himself, teaches it in the secret hideout of the heart”²⁶⁹, but also because it implies the *silencing* of the mind and the disappropriation of the thoughts, so “strive to keep your intellect deaf and mute during the hour of prayer; only thus will you be able to pray” (Nilus the ascetic, *On prayer*, 35). It is about *mystical* theology, as Saint John of the Cross clarifies: “It is that contemplation, whereby the understanding has the loftiest knowledge of God, is called *mystical* theology, which signifies secret wisdom of God; for it is secret even to the understanding that receives it. For that reason Saint Dionysius calls it a ray of darkness”²⁷⁰.

²⁶⁹ Juan Bretón, born about 1560, wrote *Mística Theologia*, Madrid, 1614, L. IV, p. 110v.

²⁷⁰ Saint John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, VIII, 6

In effect, it is secret because it is a science that teaches how to shut oneself in or withdraw within oneself²⁷¹, how to “refuse the oars of all understanding, of the five senses and of all capturable things”²⁷², to “shut oneself in the deepest enclosure, where secret things of the divinity are usually found”²⁷³. Precisely, “the contemplatives, as they know the secrets of God and enter His chamber, are called friends of God”²⁷⁴. But, on the other hand, it is a science or art that teaches how to transcend the intellect. As contemplation “is an association of the intellect with God, then in what state must the intellect possibly be, without turning elsewhere, to approach its Lord and converse with Him without the mediation of anything else [such as the thought]?” (Nilus the ascetic, *On prayer*, 3). Being “a secret, inner language with which the soul communicates with God”, such a dialogue requires calmness and inner peace of mind, so that, “should God want to talk to them, He had better not find them so busy talking, or God will keep silence” (Saint John of Ávila²⁷⁵, *Letter* 1). Perfect contemplation happens when there is no appropriation of the information that comes from the senses or the thoughts; “If Moses, in his attempt to approach the burning bush, was hindered until he had removed the sandals from his feet, then should not you who desire to see God and converse with Him, remove and cast out of yourself every sinful thought?” (Nilus the ascetic, *On prayer*, 4). This includes also the thought itself of wanting to contemplate God; “You must arrange all of your exercises in order to really love your God and not just to obtain any news of God, being only interested in his knowledge”²⁷⁶, because one thing is *to think* that one is contemplating God and another different thing is *to contemplate* Him, for the

²⁷¹ Bernardino de Laredo (1482-1540), *Ascent of Mount Zion* III, ch. 31. An English version with translation, introduction and notes by E. Allison Peers, was published by Faber and Faber, London, in 1952.

²⁷² Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent of Mount Zion* III, ch. 7.

²⁷³ Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent of Mount Zion* III, ch. 11.

²⁷⁴ Diego de Estella (1524-1578), *Vanidad del Mundo*, Madrid-Navarra, 1980, p. 231.

²⁷⁵ Saint John of Ávila (1500-1569), *Complete Works* available in Spanish, BAC, vol. IV, Madrid, 2003.

²⁷⁶ Diego de Estella, *Vanidad del Mundo*, p. 320.

latter involves disregard or, when the contemplation is *perfect*, even absence of thoughts, that is, pure attention. According to Francisco de Osuna, contemplation prayer “consists in a most intense attention only on God, without turning the thought anywhere else...”²⁷⁷.

That is why some other mystics also define contemplation as demented, insane or irrational science. Friar John of the Angels²⁷⁸ (1536-1609) defines it like that as well, since the speech ceases in it and the reason is unable to achieve it. That is why it is *true wisdom*²⁷⁹, since it provides a direct, immediate knowledge of God, distant from any mistake, such as the ones that come from speculation. It is a “square knowledge”, that is, complete and all-embracing, on all four sides²⁸⁰. As God has no parts and, therefore, He is inaccessible by means of the deductive knowledge, the meditator must use another form of knowledge, direct and suprarational.

Cassian placed contemplation on top of all the forms of prayer and described it as the “pure prayer” for “we ought to... aim rather at those kinds of prayer which are poured forth either from the contemplation of the good things to come or from love burning as fire” (*Conf.* IX, XVI). That “prayer of fire which is known and tried by but very few... which transcends all human thoughts, and is distinguished, I will not say by any sound of the voice, but by no movement of the tongue, or utterance of words, but which the soul enlightened by the infusion of that heavenly light describes in no human and confined language”, so “the mind, which is advancing to that perfect state of purity... grasping at that hour and ineffably pour-

²⁷⁷ Francisco de Osuna, *Second Spiritual Alphabet* (Seville 1530), letter R, ch. 2.

²⁷⁸ Author of *Triunfos del amor de Dios* (1589-1590), *Diálogos de la conquista del reino* (1595), *Lucha espiritual y amorosa entre Dios y el alma* (1600) and *Consideraciones espirituales sobre el libro del Cantar de los Cantares* (1607), among others.

²⁷⁹ John of the Angels, *Triumphs of the love of God* (Medina 1589-90) part 1, ch. 18 and 15.

²⁸⁰ John of the Angels, *Manual*, p. 579-580 and 597. The same metaphor of the exempt or “square knowledge” is found in Bernabé de Palma, *Via Spiritus* ch. VIII (edit. in Seville in 1532); I use the edition of Salamanca (1541), p. 116.

ing forth in its supplications things so great that they cannot be uttered with the mouth nor even at any other time be recollected by the mind... I have perceived by a sudden illumination from the Lord an abounding revelation of most holy ideas which were formerly altogether hidden from me" (*Conf.* IX, XXV, XV; X, X).

As well, it is defined as prayer or *meditation of recollection* because, as the Jesuit Francisco Arias explained, "the thoughts and desires that the soul had over different things are moved away from them and recollected and concentrated unto God, only thinking about Him...; the thought and love that it had over different things, though good ones, are removed from them and given only to its God, who demands them". And it is said to be a *silent spiritual prayer* "because talking about the soul is thinking... and when one stops thinking about other things, and calms down looking at God alone, and hearing Him, then the soul keeps silence..."²⁸¹, sheltered from the agitation of desire and the hustle and bustle of the thoughts. He who recollects himself is like a turtle, a snail or "a hedgehog that, finding itself pursued by the hounds [the thoughts], curls up into a ball in order to avoid them, so that the hounds that ring it cannot even see its feet or find anywhere to grab but quills; and, after trying to bite them, they get hurt and flee"²⁸².

Such a *recollection* is not immobility, since, as Saint Francis de Sales clarifies, "The repose of the heart consists not in immobility but in needing nothing, not in having no movement but in having no need to move... The blessed ever have repose in their movements and movement in their repose; only God has repose without movement, because He is sovereignly a pure and substantial act... Love seeks that which it has found, not to have it but to have it always...

²⁸¹ Francisco Arias, S. J., *Tratado de la oración mental*, Valencia, 1588, p. 215.

²⁸² Antonio de Rojas, *Libro intitulado Vida del espíritu (A Book entitled Life of the spirit)*, Madrid, 1628, ch. 11, p. 65.

The damned are in eternal movement without any mixture of rest” (*Treatise on the Love of God*, V, III).

The Western Christian describes recollection as *sobriety of the heart*, because “Sobriety is a spiritual method or way that entirely frees the man, with the help of God, from impassioned mental representations and impassioned words and wicked works when it persists and is willingly traveled upon. Traveled upon, it bestows, to the extent that this is attainable, secure knowledge of the God who is inapprehensible and the solution of divine and hidden mysteries... ‘Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God’²⁸³” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius²⁸⁴, *On Sobriety*, 1).

In sum, contemplation is pure attention, deprived of all that is not God²⁸⁵, that is, focused only on the center of the soul (God) and not on the circumference (Creation), since the core of man “is the most concealed secret and the most hidden enclosure”²⁸⁶. It must also be *square*, that is to say, God must be contemplated on all His four sides: depth, height, width and length, “because it is the simplest equality”²⁸⁷. Finally, it must be encouraged²⁸⁸, either by love to know Him or to know oneself, and humble²⁸⁹.

II.- GOAL OF CONTEMPLATION

All men carry within them a feeling of eternity that leads them to look for stable peace or happiness. Only few of them understand that

²⁸³ Mt. 5:8.

²⁸⁴ The author of this treatise, *On Sobriety*, was not the famous Hesychius who was a presbyter of the Church of Jerusalem and died in 433, but another Hesychius, not yet identified, who would have been the hegumen of a monastery at Mount Sinai between the 8th and the 10th centuries.

²⁸⁵ Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent of Mount Zion* III, ch. 25.

²⁸⁶ Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent of Mount Zion* III, ch. 32; II, ch. 39.

²⁸⁷ Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent of Mount Zion* III, ch. 39.

²⁸⁸ Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent of Mount Zion* III, ch. 3.

²⁸⁹ Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent of Mount Zion* III, ch. 35.

that peace cannot be achieved by means of created objects, so they direct their quest to the transcendent. In the *Sacred History* of Judaism and Christianity, the episode of the Garden of Eden is the one that best reflects this anomalous situation of Humankind. Man enjoyed God's friendship and presence in Paradise until, after eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil, he was expelled into the world of duality. His nostalgia for the Paradise drives man to try to recover that lost state by means of a method or way already proven and sufficiently corroborated by many generations of seekers. Regarding this, as the Benedictine García Jiménez de Cisneros explained, "to engage in contemplation" is the most suitable method²⁹⁰. Ultimately, we are *gods* who have forgotten it, hence "The soul... should breathe in God as God in it, in the way of participation. For granting that God has bestowed upon it so great a favor as to unite it to the most Holy Trinity, whereby it becomes like God, and God by participation... Souls have by participation that very God which the Son has by nature, and are therefore really gods by participation" (Saint John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 39, 4, 6). And, as we are One in God, the same divine nature strives to call our attention when we do not attend to its request: "O souls created for this and called to this, what are you doing? What are your occupations? ... Oh, wretched blindness of the children of Adam, blind to so great a light, and deaf to so clear a voice; you do not see that, while seek-

²⁹⁰ The Benedictine García Jiménez de Cisneros (1456-1510) published the *Directory for the canonical hours* and the *Exercises for the spiritual life* (*Complete works* available in Spanish, Alicante, 2007). Whereas the topic of the *Directory* is the oral prayer in community, the *Exercises* talks about the mental, personal prayer: how to meditate, what time, which topics must be considered, which affections must emerge from heart. For that purpose, he invokes teachings of Aristotle, Valerius Maximus, Seneca, Saint Ambrose, Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine, Cassian, Saint Benedict, Cassiodorus, Saint Gregory the Great, Dionysius the Areopagite, Saint Bernard Clairvaux, Richard of Saint Victor, Thomas à Kempis, Jean Gerson, etc. One of the merits of Cisneros was to write in vernacular language "for the simple believers and not for the arrogant learned men" though, in the 15th and 16th centuries, not writing in Latin was considered a dangerous novelty. For that reason, the *Exercises* were listed in the *Index of forbidden books* published by the General Inquisitor Gaspar de Quiroga in 1583. García Jiménez de Cisneros maintained a great friendship with Friar John of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, abbot of Montserrat and author of the *Treatise of the Holy Spirit*.

ing after greatness and glory, you are miserable and contemptible, and unworthy of blessings so great!” (Saint John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 39, 7).

Unlike the wrong opinion of the average people, the practice of meditation or contemplation does not have the aim of moving man away from his setting to make him live withdrawn in a monastery. The practice of contemplation does not consist in the outward appearance of withdrawing behind “completely closed walls or fences, but in love bonds and ties, so that the soul, driven to seek God, decides to seek Him within itself, in the most secret, hidden place of itself”²⁹¹. Regardless of each one’s way of life, contemplation pursues that the external world be not an obstacle when dealing with God²⁹². The goal of contemplation is “for a man to enter into himself, to know his own soul and the powers thereof. By this inward sight thou shalt come to see the nobility and dignity that naturally it had in its first creation; and thou shalt also see the wretchedness and the mischief which thou art fallen into by sin. From this sight will arise a desire with great longing in thine heart to recover again that dignity and nobleness which thou hast lost”²⁹³. To verify, by means of contemplation, that one is beyond the mind or thoughts implies to *find* oneself ab-solved of material and mental conditionings. “As Saint Maximus says: the spirit that obtains the immediate union with God is able, before anything else, to be free and void of all thinking or being thought. But when it destroys that ability, as soon as it thinks about something that comes after God, it becomes proven that the union beyond thought has been interrupted... The pure spirit achieves, by means of the union with its origin, a condition beyond all thought, as soon as the thought has renounced the different

²⁹¹ Juan Bautista de la Concepción (1561-1613), *Obras*, T. II, p. 197.

²⁹² Juan Bautista de la Concepción, *Obras*, T. II, p. 163.

²⁹³ Walter Hilton, Augustinian monk of the 14th century who wrote *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection* (I, 42). The original text can be found in the edition published by the Medieval Institute Publications, 2000. I reproduce here the text in modern English edited by Dom Serenus Cressy, O.S.B. (1659), “by the changing of some antiquated words rendered more intelligible”.

movements and habits that are out of the cause of that being, and it still remains linked only to its origin and is open to that indescribable peace that is beyond the thought and that is put in action by the silence. No word or reflection can say it, but only he who has experienced it may understand it. The sign of those who have been found worthy of that joy beyond the thought is easy to distinguish for everyone: it is a pacified soul that has become indifferent to the things of this world” (Callistus and Ignatius, *Direction to Hesychasts, in a hundred chapters* 70).

Contemplation is the gate to other states of the Being or, as ancient Christians would say, the means to go into the divine mysteries. When one disregards the “thoughts and mind, does so in the hope that the eyes of his heart may be enlightened, God vouchsafes to him mysteries in the greatest sanctity and purity, and imparts to him of His Grace” (Macarius, *Hom. XIV*). The most important goal of the *thoughtless* or *objectless* meditation (that is, contemplation) is to recover a spiritual state beyond plurality that transcends the state of duality (space-time, good-evil, pleasure-pain, etc.). It is about attaining peace, the vision of God, the feeling of eternity, etc. or, using specific symbols of the Judeo-Christian tradition: returning to the lost Paradise, recovering the fellowship, friendship or presence of God, enter the Heavenly Jerusalem, finish the ascent to Mount Zion, etc.

III.- DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION

Christian mysticism traditionally distinguishes between meditation and contemplation. Whereas the former is a form of mental prayer or self-inquiry by means of thoughts, contemplation, on the contrary, pursues the farthest distance from desires and thoughts, and even the elimination of all discursive form.

According to the Franciscan monk Bernardino de Laredo, *meditation* is an active form of prayer that consists in “flowing without stillness”, employing different topics for reflection whose aim is to soften the conceited shell of the meditator until he understands the futility of his arrogance and may *pass* to contemplation. In the 14th century, Walter Hilton stated: “By meditation shalt thou come to see thy wretchedness, thy sins and thy wickedness; as pride, covetousness, gluttony, sloth and lechery, wicked stirrings of envy, anger, hatred, melancholy, wrath, bitterness and imprudent heaviness. Thou shalt also see thy heart to be full of vain flames and fears of the flesh and of the world. All these stirrings will always boil out of thy heart, as water runneth out of the spring of a stinking well... In meditation, likewise, shalt thou see those virtues which be needful for thee to have, as humility, mildness, patience, righteousness, spiritual strength, temperance, cleanness, peace and soberness, faith, hope and charity. These virtues thou shalt see in meditation, how good, how fair, how profitable they be; and by prayer thou shalt thereupon desire and get them. Without which third means of prayer thou canst not be contemplative, for Job saith thus: *‘In abundantia ingredieris sepulcrum’* (Job 5:26); that is in plenty of bodily works and spiritual virtues shalt thou enter thy grave, that is thy rest in contemplation” (*Scale of Perfection*, I, 15).

On the contrary, *contemplation*, since it does not need thoughts or reasonings, is a simpler, more restful form of prayer, because the mental silence does not try to know or reflect about anything, or deal with anything other than waiting for God’s Grace with patience and perseverance; “contemplation is the unspoken, stillest occupation of the will alone, occupied with God alone, recognizing His love without knowing anything about Him, with a so straight stillness that it cannot move; but, even knowing nothing, it desires, as well as the child that, before having knowledge about his mother, asks for her

breast, being this the most tacit, silent request”²⁹⁴. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the Toledan priest Gómez García picked up the medieval contemplative tradition and distinguished between imagination, meditation and contemplation. The first one, “for whatever remote and wandering reason, lazes around here or there, step by step, idly... The second one, with much hard work and diligence, comes from the soul and looks for high, sharp things...; but the third one, in its light flight of wonderful lightness, is attracted to fly in circles over wherever the outburst of the spirit captures it... Imagination crawls; and meditation barely runs; but contemplation flies in circles over all things... Imagination is distraction; meditation implies the seeking for reason; contemplation is admiration... Imagination works by itself; meditation by means of reason, contemplation by means of intelligence”²⁹⁵.

Discursive or reflective meditation is a previous, necessary, useful but also less perfect form of internalization because “The divinity is at all unthinkable, fact from which it must be inferred that our understanding can barely take advantage of this negotiation, but will rather hinder it”²⁹⁶. That non-understanding or state of disappropriation or eviction of desires and thoughts has the potentiality of making the necessary space in the soul so that it may be filled²⁹⁷.

Therefore, inasmuch as the thought implies a mediate, indirect or subordinate form of knowledge (a thinking subject and thought objects), it can only provide us with an objectivized knowledge of God.

²⁹⁴ Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent to Mount Zion* III, ch. 35; III, ch. 8 insists that we must “detach ourselves from all thought that may distract us, even though it comes with a reason”.

²⁹⁵ Gómez García, *Carro de dos vidas* (Seville 1500, Madrid 1988, FVE), p. 129-130.

²⁹⁶ Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent to Mount Zion* III, ch. 7.

²⁹⁷ This way, the soul is *touched* “as by a ray that rips the cloud or a sudden lightning... it is sometimes touched by an unknown movement and it feels that touch, but neither sees nor understands him who touches it; and words without syllables are said within, uncountable for that who hears them, but undeniable, since he who

And, if God is converted into an object, an idea, a mental concept, the meditator will just move away from Him; “Do not tie yourself, as many others, to vocal or compulsory prayers, or even to mental ones, although they may seem very important to you; do not even to those that we give you in writing here, if they are to warn you or to perturb your freedom, since God wants you to give Him your heart clear and pure”²⁹⁸. Mental prayers and the rest of active spiritual practices are beneficial because they soften or weaken the sense of individuality. In addition, contemplation and perfect stillness make it possible for the seeker to see how his actions and thoughts are pure “nothing” in comparison with the immediate, direct knowledge. That is why some mystics, such as John of Ruysbroeck²⁹⁹ (1293-1381), have testified that contemplation is a form of knowledge that is higher than any other ways to know³⁰⁰. It is not about a psychological or mental exercise. It is about developing a faculty latent in every human being, a power higher than reason and any other form of discursive meditation. That is why the greatest mystics advise passing, sooner or later, from meditation (thoughts) to contemplation (thoughtless): “Although it is the opinion of well-versed mystics that, at the beginning, the novices in the spiritual path must not pass from meditation to contemplation until God drags them out and drop them into it... Nevertheless, I am inclined to consider as right the doctrine of some doctors who say that they have experimented with many novices who were well involved in the world and who, at the beginning, without discourses or meditations, and applied to the contemplation of God, were in a few days favored by Him and, *as through an effortless*

requests this is within and touches its depths with an intimate act”, Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent to Mount Zion* III, ch. 8.

²⁹⁸ Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, p. 15, p. 77.

²⁹⁹ John of Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) was born in Ruysbroeck, near Brussels. Once ordained a priest, he withdrew to the hermitage of Groenendael, where he established the Augustinian rule. There he wrote many of his works, such as *A mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, *The Seven Enclosures*, *The Seven Steps of the Ladder of Spiritual Love*, *The Twelve Béguines*, *The Kingdom of the Lovers of God*, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage* or *The Sparkling Stone*. He inspired Tauler and Groote.

³⁰⁰ John of Ruysbroeck, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, London, 1916.

shortcut, were led to where they would not have reached for very long by means of meditation”³⁰¹.

Of course, as Bernabé de Palma would say, “the contemplative mystics must not scorn the active ones” (*Via Spiritus* 3, 1), including those who are devoted to discursive meditation, since, anyway, the wind of the Holy Spirit blows wherever it wants. “Therefore, let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall”³⁰².

IV.- CONTEMPLATION IS ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE

A certain widespread misunderstanding is to be dispelled: the contemplative activity is not exclusive of withdrawn monks or elites formed around monasteries and seminaries. Certainly, it is not an intellectual activity or one that requires a certain cultural level. On the contrary, the contemplatives themselves warn against a mere intellectual or mental approach to contemplation, for it is useless: “I beg you not to judge or try to understand until you have experienced it, for I am certain that with the light of experience you will awake and get so fond of the exercises that you will give your soul to God”³⁰³. On the contrary, contemplation, as an impulse or yearning of the soul, is present in everyone, its blessing being accessible regardless of the activity or labor. At the beginning of the 17th century, Antonio de Rojas stated, “About contemplation, any shepherd or old woman knows more than those well-versed men without experience”³⁰⁴. According to Saint John of Ávila, being the contemplation “a business of grace, He gives it to whomever He wills, regardless of place or condition; thus, He may provide in the plaza what He denies in the cell, and He sometimes gives the laborer what He does not give the

³⁰¹ Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, ch. 12, p. 67 ff.

³⁰² Saint Paul, 1 Cor. 10:12.

³⁰³ Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, Madrid, 1630, foreword to the pious reader.

³⁰⁴ Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, p. 107 v. 7th *Advice*.

monk”³⁰⁵. Since contemplation is love, rather than knowledge, anyone can achieve that state, “Even though you are a farmer or a simple old woman, you might be suitably risen by this high wisdom as a great disciple, depending on what pleased God to give you, either a large or a small amount of that wisdom, according to the preparation you had, since, should you be not prepared and you do not what you must, you shall never come to this wisdom”³⁰⁶.

Regarding this, the science acquired by means of readings or study may be of help to “those who wish to come to the height of contemplation”; but they often become a serious obstacle, “not because of itself, but on occasion of the conceit that comes with it”. Contemplation is “better attained by means of simple humility rather than by great wisdom”. It is “impossible for real contemplation to come through any path other than the path of humility”; that is why “many learned men found this path blocked until they humbled themselves”³⁰⁷.

V.- THE BEGINNING OF MEDITATION IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Contemplative meditation is not a specifically Christian phenomenon. Even the II Vatican Council has recognized that we must “reflect attentively on how Christian religious life might be able to assimilate the ascetic and contemplative traditions, whose seeds were

³⁰⁵ Saint John of Ávila, *Pláticas espirituales* 3, *Complete Works*, vol. III, p. 400. Saint John of Ávila deeply knew the mystical recollection as presented in *Sol de contemplativos* (1514), Spanish translation of *De Mystica Theologia* by Hugh of Balma, and registered in the *Third Spiritual Alphabet* by Francisco de Osuna (1527).

³⁰⁶ García Jiménez de Cisneros, *Exercises for the spiritual life* 32, 34-38.

³⁰⁷ García Jiménez de Cisneros, *Exercises for the spiritual life* 31, 16-19, 41-44; 32, 39-41. Saint Mark the Ascetic (*Philokalia*, vol. I, *On the Spiritual Law*, 86) will add: “He who neglects action and depends on theoretical knowledge holds a staff of reed instead of a double-edged sword (Heb. 4:12); and when he confronts his enemies in time of war, ‘it will go into his hand, and pierce it’ (2 Kings 18:21)”.

sometimes planted by God in ancient cultures already prior to the preaching of the Gospel” (*Ad Gentes*, 18). In effect, the contemplative practices already appear in Brahmanism, Jainism, Buddhism, in the Greco-Roman world, in Judaism, etc. India knows the contemplative techniques at least since the third millennium before Christ, as witnessed by the pre-Aryan seals of Mohenjo-Daro (Western Pakistan), in which an ascetic appears sitting in the lotus position (*padmāsana*). India *has actually been the land of contemplation par excellence* and one of the first civilizations to put in writing the results of their metaphysical experiences and their spiritual devotions (*Vedas*, *Upanishads*, etc.).

The Hellenic world, as well, has played an important role regarding the configuration of Christian monastic profiles. When, in the year 323 BC, Alexander the Great died in Babylonia, broad regions from Egypt to Asia became open to the Mediterranean countries and vice versa: the Hindu ascetics, anchorites and “gymnosophists”, known as “naked” or “air-clad” wise men, became very famous throughout the Hellenistic culture³⁰⁸; together with them, certain religious brotherhoods of Persian magi, Egyptian and Essene priests and Jewish Therapeutae achieved also a great fame.

Very important syntheses appeared thanks to this cohabitation for centuries, such as Gnosticism³⁰⁹ or Hermetism. Pythagoreanism developed some concepts such as the perfect *apatheia* achieved through meditation and the disregard of the things of this world: he “put away all dishes which contain the flesh of living animals, and

³⁰⁸ A.-J. Festugière, *Personal Religion among the Greeks*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1960; P. Jordan, “Pythagoras and Monachism”, in *Traditio*, 16 (1961), pp. 432-441; B. Marqués, “El monaquismo en la comunidad de Pitágoras”, in *Lasallianum*, 16 (1973), pp. 127-144.

³⁰⁹ An example of religious syncretism is the Gnostic universe of the community founded by Mani (216-277) with Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Mithraic and Christian elements. In fact, the terms with which he defines the highest aspiration of the “chosen ones” (*sophia*, *charis* and *agapē*: wisdom, grace and love) are derived from the three concepts with which Vedānta defines *Samādhi* or contemplation: *Sat-chit-ānanda*. Vid. H.-Ch. Puech, *Le Manichéisme*, 1949.

he must forget wine... he went barefoot, let his hair grow long, and wore nothing but linen... and took a vow of perpetual chastity”³¹⁰. Philosophers such as Socrates, Plato or Plotinus taught the cultivation of *catharsis* or *ataraxia* as a means to free the soul from the identification or dependence on the body, letting it enter in communion with God. According to Plato, “to philosophize is to learn how to die”, so philosophy must be a *metastrophē*, a radical *conversion* by which “the soul rises to contemplation”. Likewise, according to Neoplatonists such as Plotinus or his disciple Porphyry, the aim of asceticism consisted in preparing man for contemplation³¹¹.

Precisely, the most fruitful synthesis between Neoplatonic mysticism and Christian dogma provides us with the work of the Pseudo-Areopagite, who, according to many authors, is but the same *Enneads* by Plotinus, only christened. From the writings of this Pseudo-Dionysius starts an immense, vast contemplative tradition that reaches our days. Actually, a certain historiographical sector has even stated, maybe exaggerating, that Christian contemplation is not derived from the Gospel, but it is a pagane borrowing, mainly Hellenic, from which the Greek Fathers started to make new formulations³¹². However, according to other sector of historiography, the origin of Christian asceticism is not to be found in the Greek or Far-Eastern philosophies, but in the reformist tendencies of Jewish mysticism, especially that of the Therapeutae, that is, the Jewish monks, established in Egypt, who lived their withdrawal in the desert under a strict ascesis, and, above all, that of the Essenes. Pliny the Elder describes the Essenes as “a people that live apart from the world, and marvelous beyond all other throughout the earth, for they have no women among them... money have none...”; however, “day after day, their numbers are fully recruited by multitudes of strangers that resort to them, driven thither to adopt their usages by the tempests of

³¹⁰ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* vi, 11.

³¹¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* I, 6, 4.

³¹² This is the opinion of A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, London, 1953.

fortune, and wearied with the miseries of life”³¹³. The admittance to the community was preceded by a test period of almost three years; “If any one hath a mind to come over to their sect, he is not immediately admitted, but he is prescribed the same method of living which they use for a year, while he continues excluded, and they give him also a small hatchet, and the... girdle, and the white garment. And when he hath given evidence, during that time, that he can observe their continence, he approaches nearer to their way of living, and is made a partaker of the waters of purification; yet is he not even now admitted to live with them; for after this demonstration of his fortitude, his temper is tried two more years; and if he appear to be worthy, they then admit him into their society. And before he is allowed to touch their common food, he is obliged to take tremendous oaths”³¹⁴. The Qumran manuscripts have shed some more light on the coenobitic practice of the Essenes³¹⁵, especially through texts such as the *Community Rule*, the *Rule of the Congregation* and the *War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness*, in which they define themselves as the “chosen ones”, the “poor ones” and the “sons of light”. Nonetheless, the Essenes do not constitute, strictly speaking, an original movement regarding their ascetic methods.

In sum, historians have tried to find out the origin of Christian monasticism and their contemplative practices without reaching unanimous results³¹⁶. One of the reasons may be that Christian monasticism does not arise as an organized tendency, located in a specific place, but it appears at the same time in Egypt, Syria and Capadocia, apparently in an autonomous way. All attempts to explain it by extra-Christian influences (the Egyptian worship of Serapis, the

³¹³ Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* 5.15.

³¹⁴ Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* II, 8, 7.

³¹⁵ J. Pouilly, *La Règle de la Communauté de Qumran. Son évolution littéraire*, Paris, 1976; E. M. Laperrousaz, *Les Esséniens selon leur témoignage direct*, Paris, 1982; M. Jiménez Bonhomme, *Los documentos de Qumrán*, Madrid, 1976.

³¹⁶ Especially, from the book by H. Weingarten, *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums*, Gotha, 1877, in which he defended the thesis that Christian monasticism, in its

Therapeutae, the Neoplatonism, Buddhism, Neopythagoreanism, Gnosticism, Manichaeism, etc.) have proven insufficient. It is affirmed that the contemplative way and the Christian monasticism were born in Egypt by the hand of the first Coptic anchorite, Saint Anthony, and of another saint, Coptic as well, Pachomius, founder of coenobitism. The monastic life will spread from Egypt to Palestine, Syria, Cappadocia, Gaul, Rome... Certainly, this historical polemic seems to be about proving that the Christian asceticism is not a daughter of Jewish or pagan parents, but an essentially original, domestic product. However, the influence of other fore-mentioned ascetic currents is not to be forgotten. Nowadays, we know the notable influence of Buddhist or Jainist monasticism. Porphyry talks about the Hindu gymnosophists in his *Letter to Marcella*, and Palladius, in his *Lausiac History*, compares them with the Christian monks³¹⁷. In fact, in the Syrian Churches appeared certain monks who, externally, resembled more the gymnosophists and the Jainists rather than the Anthonian anchorites or the coenobites of Saint Pachomius. The Egyptian or Greco-Egyptian influence should not to be radically refused as well.

Anyway, it is significant that the Christian contemplative tradition arisen in Egypt stands out over the rest. These monks were called *anchorites* because they lived in solitude (*anachoresis* means withdrawal from the world). As the founder of the Coptic monastic tradition, Saint Anthony, decided to live a withdrawn life in the desert, his followers were also defined as hermits (from *eremita* and that in turn from *eremos*, desert). A series of terms derived from the word *monos* (alone) appeared then, such as *monasterion* (dwelling of a solitary man), *monotes* or *monotikos* (solitary life). Regarding this, one of the first discussions of Christianity was the spiritual pertinence of withdrawn life. Some ecclesiastic authorities considered

origin, was a pure imitation of the life of the *katochoi* (recluses) of the Egyptian temples of Serapis.

³¹⁷ *De gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus*, ed. W. Berghoff, Meisenheim, 1967.

that a withdrawn life dedicated to contemplation could conceal an act of egoism that blocked the practice of charity with others or a life committed to remedy social injustices and inequalities. This dilemma was then solved this way: “When the same Abba Anthony thought about the depth of the judgments of God, he asked: ‘Lord, how is it that some die when they are young, while others drag on to extreme old age? Why are there those who are poor and those who are rich? Why do wicked men prosper and why are the just in need?’ He heard a voice answering him: ‘Anthony, keep your attention on yourself; these things are according to the judgment of God, and it is not to your advantage to know anything about them’” (*Apophthegmata Patrum*³¹⁸, Anthony, 2). That is to say, first address yourself, fulfill the duty of knowing yourself, because only that way will you understand the meaning of the happenings, and decide whether you can take part in them or not. Otherwise, the ignorant one who strives to help others runs the risk of adding more confusion to their suffering.

On the other hand, contrary to what might be thought, the anchorites did not live isolated in the desert, but they managed to be located near other hermits in order to visit each other and converse about spiritual topics, ask for advice and build themselves with their example. Neither did they hesitate to undertake a long journey in order to discuss their problems with some famous spiritual father. Hospitality was a typically monastic virtue³¹⁹. The newcomer apprentices actually settled close to the hut of a master in order to learn from his example and advice. The solitary life at the hut or cell had the aim of blocking any way out and making the monk deal with himself face to face. This way, the neglected mind, unable to bear the emptiness and nothingness of its own misery, either would flee scared searching for

³¹⁸ The edition by J. B. Cotelier, *Ecclesiae graecae monumenta* I, Paris 1677, 338-713, was reprinted by J. P. Migne in PG 65, 71-840. The systematic version translated into Latin was reprinted by J. P. Migne in PL 73, 851-1022.

³¹⁹ The composition of these first references owes a lot to the work by M. García Colombás, *La tradición benedictina; ensayo histórico*, vol. I, Zamora, 1989.

distractions, or it would rather devote itself nullified to the quest for the experience of God. This distressing dilemma was continuous during the first stages of the contemplative life. The Fathers of the wasteland called it *taedium cordis* or *akedia*. It was also described as “the noonday demon” about whom it is talked in Psalms 91:6, because he used to assail the anchorites about the midday, when the heat, hunger, depression and disheartenment got worse. This state, masterfully described by Evagrius and his disciple Cassian, could only be fought by means of the *diacrisis*, the “discernment of spirits”, the discrimination, by means of self-observation, that, by discovering the futility of every worldly problem, led into the peace of the soul or *hesychia*. By means of self-observation and continuous attention on his thoughts and emotions, the “solitary one” had to find out that he did not constitute his own real nature. In order to win this constant battle, the monk need discernment (*diacrisis*), which is the only weapon that will help him understand that man is but his bodily appearance, his wishes and his thoughts. That is why the contemplative needs to resist all the blows of fate: “Sit in thy cell and thy cell will teach thee all”, “Eat, drink, and sleep, and toil not, but on no account go out of thy cell”. This way, the monk will end up defeating “the noonday demon”. It was precisely these Desert Fathers who created the first monastic “demonology”, in which the “demons” were attributed a continuous tenacity to block contemplative’s way by means of their favorite weapons: the *logismoi* (thoughts), “suggestions”, “impulses”, “vices” or “passions”. The *logismoi* were the great concern of the monk withdrawn in his cell because, whereas he has left it all behind, his *logismoi* have not left him and he must bear them, analyze them and finally defeat them³²⁰. In a similar way to the “solitary” contemplative monks, it was also developed a contemplative tradition of monks who decided to live in coenobia (*koino-*

³²⁰ Evagrius summarized the thousands of “bad thoughts” that block contemplation in eight famous *logismoi* that Cassian, his disciple, will later call the “eight capital vices”: 1) *gastrimargia* (gluttony), 2) *porneia* (fornicatio, lust), 3) *philargyria* (avarice), 4) *lype* (*tristitia*, sadness), 5) *orgé* (*ira*, anger), 6) *acedia* (*acedia*, listlessness), 7) *kenodoxia* (*cenodoxia*, vainglory) and 8) *hyperephania* (*superbia*, pride).

bios, common life). Certainly, with this form of *fuga mundi* or distancing from the profane society, the monk refreshed the Exodus to return to Paradise. Monastic life was conceived as an imitation of the life of the angels, a prefiguration of the future life. Saint Pachomius is the most prominent of them. About 312-313, Pachomius knocked the door of a well-known hermit called Palaemon, who, admitting him for seven years, taught him the ascetic techniques of nocturnal vigils (sometimes even inside of a grave), fasting, daily unceasing prayer, working night and day, etc. This way, once he learned the mysteries of the contemplative life, he founded several coenobia where emerged what, according to many researchers, will be the precedent of the monastic orders.

As a parallel to the Coptic tradition, a Christian ascetic and contemplative tradition was developed in the territories between Syria and Mesopotamia, strongly influenced by Persia (especially by Manichaeism) and India³²¹. In contrast to the Hellenic and Gnostic philosophers, the Syrian and Mesopotamian “athletes of piety” stand out because of their individual quest by means of an ascesis without extreme austerity. Among other contemplative ascetics of the late 4th and beginning of the 5th century, “Macarius” and Simeon of Mesopotamia are to be highlighted.

Monks such as Jerome, Rufinus, Cassian, etc. traveled all around Egypt and other regions of the East in order to drink directly from the original source. There they went deeper into the life devoted to the ascetic and contemplative practices. Later, when they settled in Western monasteries, they transferred and adapted the Eastern con-

³²¹ Contemporary historiography usually pays more attention to those more eccentric practices such as being enclosed by a wall, living on the trees (*dendritai*) or on top of a pillar until fainting (*stylitas*), always staying standing, feeding only on herbs and roots (*boskoi*), etc. Disgracefully, it does not usually stress the seminal influence that other purer doctrines and practices such as Advaita Vedanta or non-dual metaphysics have had as much on the Western ancient world as on the Near-Eastern one.

templative tradition to the Western mentality³²². Cassian stands out of all these monks because of his subsequent influence. Being a man of Scythian origin, he got to Marseille in 415 with a firm, copious, well-organized doctrine³²³. In fact, Cassian can be considered as the author of the only systematic work about the Christian monastic theory and contemplative practice written in the 4th and 5th centuries, since the *Asketikon* by Saint Basil is unorganized and Evagrius Ponticus almost exclusively wrote works for initiates. Cassian's *Institutes*, composed between the years 420-424, are formed by two different works: the *Institutes of the coenobia* and the *Remedies for the eight principal faults*. The strictly speaking *Institutes* are successively about the symbolism of monks' clothing and, in general, about the behavior of the "external man"; the institutes he describes are the ones of the monasteries of Egypt, Syria and Cappadocia. Books 5-12 subtly and exhaustively analyze the eight capital vices and suggest their corresponding remedies.

Nonetheless, it is to be kept in mind that Cassian's main source is his master Evagrius Ponticus, whom he never mentions, for his work was anathemized, so he took care of changing his master's characteristic terms with other words that were better adjusted to orthodoxy and suitable to the Western mentality. He dissimulated as well, under biblical formulas and quotations of famous Fathers of the wasteland, his tight influence from pagane philosophy. For instance, not a single time does he use the term *apatheia*, which he replaces by *puritas mentis*; he converts the word *nous* into *cor*, the *anagnosis* into *meditatio*. Instead of turning to the easy Latin translation 'impassibilitas', he uses *tranquillitas mentis*, *cor perfectum*, *puritas cordis*, etc. Thanks to such changes, he was able to transmit the most

³²² One of the consequences of this adaptation was the appearance of the first few monastic "Rules", influenced by Roman culture, which was very used to codifying and institutionalizing the different aspects of social life and strengthening the discipline of collectivity under the authority of some supervisors.

³²³ O. Chadwick, *John Cassian. A Study in Primitive Monasticism*, Cambridge, 1950; J.-C. Guy, *Jean Cassien: vie et doctrine spirituelle*, Paris 1961.

fertile elements of the Eastern tradition not only to the Western monastic spirituality, but also to the Latin spirituality in general. Otherwise, it would have been inaccessible. Ultimately, Cassian adopted Evagrius' doctrine so that it could be used by the Western Christian contemplative tradition³²⁴, which, on the other hand, found its own paths and specificities, as varied as the different contemplative monastic orders.

VI.- THE CONTEMPLATIVE METHODS

Throughout history, the Christian contemplative tradition has influenced and, at the same time, has been influenced by other mystical and religious traditions and tendencies. Regarding the contemplative methods, the first thing that attracts attention is the discretion, if not secret, that the contemplative master show in their writings. When going deeper into the works of personalities such as Saint Hildegard, Saint Matilda of Magdeburg, Saint Matilda of Hackeborn, Saint Gertrude of Helfta, Jordan of Saxony, Ulrich and Nicholas of Strasbourg, Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, David of Augsburg, Helwic von Germar, Ludolph of Saxony, Dionysius the Carthusian, Ruysbroeck, Groote, Kempis, Zutphen, Mombaert, Nicholas of Cusa, Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld, Angelus Silesius, Van Esch, Blossius, etc., the scarcity, if not absence, of reflections on the contemplative method seems disconcerting. And, even though it is true that mysticism and contemplation are up to a certain extent incompatible with all process or attempt of rationalization, there also remains the doubt whether a large part of these Christian medieval or modern authors did not really have any hermeneutic method or reflection at all. Domingo de Soto even confesses that he did not manage to think about God unless he was in front of the Gospel, and that he felt envy of

³²⁴ V. Codina, *El aspecto cristológico en la espiritualidad de Juan Casiano*, Rome, 1966, p. 85 ff.; *Giovanni Cassiano ed Evagrio Pontico. Dottrina sulla carità e contemplazione*, Rome, 1936, p. 161.

those who stayed more than two hours kneeling down in front of the altar because he could not do it³²⁵. Already in the 17th century, the Capuchin José Nájera (1621-1684), author of the *Espejo místico* (*Mystical mirror*), feels sorry about the century-old neglect of contemplation even within the religious orders: “When I ask my confessor about something related to mental prayer, it is as if I spoke in Arabic, considering the great embarrassment I cause on him”³²⁶. The truth is that the methods of some monastic orders, if they really ever existed, are unknown to us: “The Franciscan observers of Villacreces and the Benedictine ones of Valladolid systematically practiced a methodical mental prayer in the mid-15th century. We do not know the exact method. They used to call it “the habitual one”³²⁷. On the other hand, it is significant that even a defender of late-medieval Christian contemplation such as Father Osuna recognized that he himself was introduced into that art by apparently “profane” people: “An old man, whose confessor I was and who had been exercising these things for more than fifty years, once told me in great secret...”³²⁸. Osuna adds in his *Third Spiritual Alphabet* that the fact that the mysticism of recollection were practiced by a philosopher and a Hebrew (referring to Plotinus and Abulafia³²⁹) did not tarnish it, comment that implied the recognition of the universality of the art and science of contemplation. Regarding the specific case of Spanish mysticism³³⁰, the following main sources are to be mentioned: Dio-

³²⁵ MHSJ, VIII, *Litterae Quatrimestres*, p. 308.

³²⁶ J. de Nájera, *Espejo místico* (Madrid, 1667), dialogue I, p. 5.

³²⁷ Ernesto Pascual Zaragoza, “La práctica de la contemplación entre los monjes benedictinos reformados españoles durante los siglos XIV y XV”, in *Nova et Vetera*, 2 (1976), pp. 183-199.

³²⁸ *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, tr. 21, ch. 4. In the *Third* (published in 1527) as well as in the *Fourth Spiritual Alphabet*, Francisco de Osuna compiles the doctrine and practice of the contemplative way (also known as the way of recollection) invoking the authority of mystics and theologians of the Middle Ages such as Dionysius the Areopagite, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Gerson, Richard of Saint Victor, Saint Bernard, Saint Bonaventure and other authors.

³²⁹ F. de Osuna, *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, tr. 21, ch.5.

³³⁰ Besides the fore-mentioned bibliography, you may want to consult: L. Cognet, *La spiritualité moderne*, Paris, Aubier, 1966; Ángel L. Cilveti, *Introducción a la mística española*, Madrid, 1974; Manuel Morales Borrero, *La geometría mística*

nysius the Areopagite, Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, Saint Basil, Saint Benedict, Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Bernard, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Bonaventure, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor, Joachim of Fiore, the Lyonnais Hugh of Balma, Jean C. de Gerson, Saint Catherine of Siena, Gerhard of Zutphen, John of Mombaert, etc.

Among the first few texts that describe the contemplative method, the *Treatise of the Holy Spirit* (1498) is to be mentioned. It was written by Friar John of Saint-Jean-de-Luz³³¹, born in Valladolid, abbot of Montserrat and colleague of García Jiménez de Cisneros, the author of the *Exercises* (1500). In 1513, *Arte de contemplar*, written by an anonymous Franciscan³³², was published in Barcelona. In 1514, Saint John of the Kings of Toledo translates into Spanish the *Sun of contemplatives* written by the Carthusian Hugh of Balma and, in 1527, Francisco de Osuna compiles the mysticism of recollection in his *Third and Fourth Spiritual Alphabet or Law of love* (1530). The reading of the following works is also indispensable: Alonso de Madrid (1480-1592), *Arte de servir a Dios* (Seville, 1521); Bernardino de Laredo (1482-1540), *Ascent to Mount Zion* (Seville, 1535); Saint Peter of Alcántara (1499-1562); Diego de Estella (1524-78) and John of the Angels.

Some of them have recorded the essential steps of the contemplative way in simple pedagogic formulas. These are “think nothing”, “pay attention only to God and be happy”, “God alone and soul alone”, “pure love”, “love alone”, “attentive attention on God...”, “know not to act”, “enter within yourself”, “descend within yourself”, “go out of yourself”, etc. Others, such as Osuna in his *Third*

del alma en la literatura española del Siglo de Oro, Madrid-Salamanca, 1975; Guillermo Serés, *Literatura espiritual en los siglos de oro*, Madrid, 2003.

³³¹ This *Treatise (Tratado del Espíritu Santo)* was published by the ed. Sanz y Torres, Madrid, 2010.

³³² *Hun brevisimo atajo e arte de amar a Dios: Con otra arte de contemplar e algunas reglas breves para ordenar la piensa en el amor de Dios*, Barcelona, C. Amorós, 1512, 37 fols.; M. Andrés, *Los recogidos*, p. 64-70.

Spiritual Alphabet, developed an extensive diagram that summarized the method of “recollection” in ten qualities or steps:

“1st It recollects those men who use it, giving them a heart and love.

2nd It recollects man himself from his distracting businesses, and makes him reduce them or moderate them.

3rd It recollects the sensuality under the rule of reason.

4th It induces man to recollect and dwell in the most withdrawn places, and go out not often.

5th It makes the senses recollect.

6th It recollects the limbs.

7th It recollects the virtues from the man who recollects himself.

8th It recollects the senses within the heart.

9th It recollects the powers of the soul into the center, where the image of God is imprinted.

10th It recollects God and the soul into one. God is recollected into the soul as His own house, as if He had no heavens where to dwell”³³³.

For his part, Bernardino de Laredo points out four degrees of internality:

1st *The soul reaches itself*, or recollection of imagination

2nd *It enters itself*, or silence understanding.

3rd *It ascends above all created power* to be quiet down only in God.

4th *It goes out of itself*, in ecstasy, out of itself and into love³³⁴.

In a similar way, Saint Teresa of Jesus describes the contemplative process in five degrees:

³³³ F. de Osuna, *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, p. 244-247.

³³⁴ B. de Laredo, *Ascent to Mount Zion* (1538) (BAC, vol. 44), p. 432-439.

1st *Recollection* or entrance of the powers into the soul, “as a hedgehog or a turtle which retreats into itself” (St. Teresa of Jesus, *Mansions* IV, 3).

2nd *Stillness* originated by the intuition of the presence of God while merging our own will with the divine one.

3rd *Dream of the powers*, once “the will is in captivity” (St. Teresa of Jesus, *Way of Perfection* 31)

4th *Union* derived from the momentary suspension or annulation of the powers, the inner and the outer senses.

5th *Ecstatic union*, that is, complete annulation of the faculties and senses, originated by the intensity of contemplation (St. Teresa of Jesus, *Life* 20).

Although it could be assumed that the issue of the method is something secondary or irrelevant, the truth is that, at least in the first steps or stages, the masters of recollection recommend observing certain pieces of advice and respect certain rules and procedures. Large part of the following pages will be dedicated to this matter.

VII.- THE EXPULSION FROM PARADISE

Man seeks a stable happiness that he cannot find in this world subject to time factors. On one hand, he considers himself as incomplete and conditioned but, on the other hand, he senses a vocation of eternity. His nostalgia for the origin drives him to seek or recover the lost oneness or wholeness. The Judeo-Christian tradition symbolizes this drama by means of the episode of the expulsion from Paradise. In effect, the earthly Paradise symbolizes the “mansion” or spiritual state commonly described by Christian Patristics and theology as unaffected by the eventualities of the profane or external world. Saint Augustine explained that even the Flood was unable to affect the earthly Paradise.

The earthly Paradise symbolizes the center of the World, that is, the most perfect spiritual state of man as an individual being, and access gate to the heavenly Paradise. Therefore, it equals being in the presence of God or, more specifically, inside of God's heart. When man moved away from his original center, he was enclosed in the temporal dimension, that is, he was deprived of his feeling of eternity. Adam (the pure mind, that is, not polluted by the attention on external objects) happily cohabited with Eve (the door to senses and thoughts) because he lacked the sense of duality until she tempted him to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the passing from the state of non-duality to the dual knowledge that implies the appearance of the subject-object relationship); "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it. For in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17), that is, man will lose his awareness of immortality.

The loss of that state of original purity leads them to consider themselves as beings that are separate from God, so that sense of individuality (when they see themselves naked) throw them out of the earthly Paradise, that is, into the world of the appropriation of experiences through the gate of the senses. There, Adam (the mind) and Eve (the door to the senses and thoughts) procreate Abel and Cain, that is, they can opt between understanding that the external objects are nothing, recovering the union with God (Abel means "union" or "nothing"), or persist in the mistake of considering themselves as autonomous beings with the ability to take over the experiences that come from the senses and the thoughts (Cain means "appropriation").

Even though the death of Abel at the hands of Cain might represent man's definitive, fatal choice of the appropriation of objects, the birth of the third son of Adam and Eve, Seth ("stability"), implies a new possibility of redemption. Some texts actually explain how Seth managed to enter Paradise and stay there in the presence of God for

40 years (like the 40 years of Noah in the Ark, the 40 nights of Moses at the Sinai, the 40 years of the exodus of the Israelites, the 40 days of withdrawal of Jesus in the desert, etc.), number that symbolizes the reconciliation or the Edenic return to the original purity (pure awareness without appropriation of thoughts).

What does the Tree of Life, planted in the middle of the earthly Paradise, represent? Firstly, it is to be taken into account that there is not one only tree, but two (or, if preferred, one tree with two aspects). Next to the Tree of Life placed in the center of the Paradise, it is found the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” (Gen. 2:9), which is also in the midst of the Garden (Gen. 3:3). Therefore, whereas the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has a dual meaning (its fruit contains the world of opposed pairs, that is, plurality), the “Tree of Life” represents the *Axis Mundi*, alien to duality, that is, the vision of the Oneness of Creation. The prohibition to eat the fruits of the “tree which is in the midst of the Garden” (Gen. 3:3) clearly refers to the “Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil” (Gen. 2:17), thus, once failed to observe the divine command and happened the “fall”, that is, when Adam knows good and evil and becomes a prey to the time factors, then he moves away from the center, point of the primal unity with which the “Tree of Life” corresponds. That center is inaccessible to the fallen man as long as he considers himself as the author of his own works and thoughts and his sense of appropriation of objects (Cain) persists in him. In order to return to the center (sense of unity) and recover the “original state” or “feeling of eternity”, it is necessary to walk, so to say, an “inverse” path. It is necessary to stabilize (Seth) the disregard or disappropriation (Abel) of the desires and thoughts that come from the doors to the senses (Eve) and to turn the mind or consciousness (Adam) toward the Only One (to transcend the fruits of the Tree of duality) that Is: YHWH.

Niketas Stethatos (1005-1090), in his *De contemplatione Paradisi* 1, 14-15³³⁵, explains that the tree of life represents God as well as man, divinely impassible in a contemplative state, whereas the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* symbolizes a common man involved in the continuous misery of being unceasingly subject to the alternation of pleasure and suffering. “The tree of life is the Holy Spirit that dwells in the faithful man, as Paul says: ‘Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you?’ (1 Cor. 6:19; Rom. 8:11). The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the feeling that bears opposed fruits, a feeling of a double nature [pleasure and pain]” (*De contemplatione Paradisi* 2, 20). Thus, there are two options: either to pay attention to the sensible objects and trust those which bring happiness, or to access a different form of suprarational knowledge (contemplation): “We are two manner of ways, Peter, carried out of ourselves: for either we fall under ourselves by sinful cogitation, or else we are, by the grace of contemplation, lifted above ourselves” (Pope Saint Gregory the Great³³⁶, *Dialogues: Life of Saint Benedict* II, 3).

Man is used to believing that his normal, ordinary state is “to think” or “to have thoughts” because he does not know that his natural state is “without appropriation of thoughts” or even “without thoughts”, that is, pure awareness. As soon as he carefully observe his thoughts, he will notice that he does not think, but that he “is thought”, that is, the thoughts sprout when interpreting what the senses see, hear, taste, smell... or tinge with emotions derived from their cultural or genetic conditionings. “Most of us do not know that all thoughts are nothing other than imaginations alone of sensible and worldly objects” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 154). The thoughts are a so unstoppable instrument that they have even taken over the mind. It is enough to observe our own thoughts

³³⁵ Niketas Stethatos, *Opusculs et lettres*, edited by J. Darrouzès, *Sources Chrétiennes* no. 81, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1961.

³³⁶ Saint Gregory the Great, *Dialogues: Life of Saint Benedict*, published by Edmund G. Gardner, 1911.

to realize that they seem to sprout unceasingly and survive regardless of the human will.

But the problem is not only the thoughts, but also our persistence in appropriating what they provide. If there is no appropriation, the information is neutral, so the thoughts end up being as a distant echo that finally disappears, letting us recover the original Edenic simplicity. “The source and ground of our distractive thoughts is the fragmented state of our memory. The memory was originally simple and one-pointed but, as a result of the fall, its natural powers have been perverted: it has lost its recollectedness in God and has become compound instead of simple, diversified instead of one-pointed... We recover the original state of our memory by restoring it to its primal simplicity, when it will no longer act as a source of evil and destructive thoughts... it has also corrupted all its powers... The memory is restored above all by constant remembrance of God consolidated through prayer” (*Philokalia*, vol. IV, Saint Gregory of Sinai, *Chapters* 60-61³³⁷). Or, said in other words, “[Monks’] work is what was Adam’s also at the beginning and before his sin, when he was clothed with the glory, and conversed freely with God, and dwelled in that place that was full of great blessedness. For in what respect are they in a worse state than he, when before his disobedience he was set to fill the Garden? Had he no worldly care? But neither have these. Did he talk to God with a pure awareness? This also do these” (Saint John Chrysostom, *On Matthew*. Hom. LXVIII, 3).

Being man’s natural or heavenly state that of disappropriation of desires and thoughts, that is, that of *pure awareness*, how can we disregard all of them and recover our original peace? Man is in the middle of two worlds that he perceives as apparently real: the world of the spirit and the world of the senses, the world of what we are by nature, and the world of what we seem to be. According to Saint

³³⁷ Saint Gregory of Sinai, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series graeca*, ed. by J. P. Migne, vol. CL, Paris, 1857.

Bernard, “The knowledge of oneself depends on the knowledge of the dignity of our nature and on the indignity of our state”. Or, in other terms: once understood the causes of the Fall, the lost peace can be recovered.

After the expulsion from Paradise, man inhabits the “region of unlikeness” (*regio dissimilitudinis*) and seems doomed to be indefinitely agitated by the unstable plurality of objects. Man lives in the region of “unlikeness” (Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, 16) but he misses the lost Paradise. Because of a movement of the heart, pride has deformed the *image* of God that is engraved in his being, so just because a movement of the heart will he be able to restore the lost likeness. He must remove his “coats of skins” with which God clothed him to cover his nakedness. As man’s perfection consists in resembling God: “*haec hominis est perfectio similitudo Dei*” (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, III, 25), and he has been created in God’s image and likeness, his only goal is to recover that *image*. Or, expressed by means of another metaphor used in the Bible, to see God’s face... “When Thou saidst, ‘Seek ye My face’, my heart said unto Thee, ‘Thy face, Lord, will I seek. Hide not Thy face far from me’” (Ps. 27:8-9). “Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us” (Ps. 4:6)³³⁸. And this is taken to the extreme of considering the duration of human existence as a mere setback that is bearable with just the hope to contemplate God: “If perchance this loveliness [of God] has grazed the mind and heart of the saints, it left embedded in them a most fiery sting of yearning for it, till at length, as if languishing in the fires of such love and shuddering at this present

³³⁸ Contemplating the face of God in this life equals returning to Paradise, leaving behind the condition of exiled in a foreign land. In late 6th century, Saint Gregory the Great wrote: “I have lost the deep joys of my quiet, and seem to have risen outwardly while inwardly falling down. Whence I grieve to find myself banished far from the face of my Maker. For I used to strive daily to win my way outside the world, outside the flesh; to drive all phantasms of the body from the eyes of my soul, and to see incorporeally supernal joys; and not only with my voice but in the core of my heart I used to say: *My heart has said unto You, I have sought Your face, Your face, Lord, will I seek*”; Saint Gregory the Great, *Epistles* I.5 MGH, Ep. I, 5-6.

life, such as these would say: *When shall I come and appear before the face of God?* (Ps. 42:2)³³⁹. Meanwhile, as Saint Teresa would say, this life is *like a bad night in a bad inn*.

The Bible insists that man possesses the ability to *perceive* the Presence of God, since, having been created in His *image and likeness*, he was placed in a Garden where YHWH walked (Gen. 2:8-15 and 3:8). However, the problem is, as Hugh of Saint Victor³⁴⁰ explained, that man, created with three eyes (a bodily one, a rational one and a third one, the eye of contemplation), had weakened the first one, perturbed the second one and blinded the third one when he left Paradise. That is why being out of Paradise implied no longer perceiving the Presence of YHWH, He who Is. In order to develop the art of seeing God (contemplation), man must learn how to disregard the first and the second eyes. Therefore, if there is in man a secret “memory” in which God has left his impression, the more his soul recover its likeness to God, the more it will know God for it will know itself.

VIII.- THE NON-APPROPRIATION OF THE THOUGHT AS A RETURN TO THE STATE OF NATURE

Christian mystics explain that the best form of meditation consists in withdrawing the thoughts in order to give the heart the opportunity to purify itself once shortly freed from its instinctive inclination to appropriate objects: “No other thing at all, then, constitutes purification of heart, through which both humility and every good

³³⁹ Saint Basil, *Regulae fusius tractatae* 2, 21-22.

³⁴⁰ The Abbey of Saint Victor, monastery of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine near Paris, constituted a great mystical center during the 12th century. Founded in 1108 by the theologian William of Champeaux, its most important representatives were Hugh of Saint Victor (1096-1141) and his disciple Richard of Saint Victor (deceased in 1176). Richard’s theory of the “*scintilla animae*” as a meeting point between the soul and God will notably influence some later mystics such as Meister Eckhart.

are found in us descending from on high, if it is not this: not to permit in any way at all the thoughts which arise to enter into the soul” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 193). That is why, “In the moment of meditation, all imaginative representation must be avoided... until you, fervently and effortlessly, plunge into the divine things, little by little, and achieve the full knowledge of judgment...” (Callistus and Ignatius, *Direction to Hesychasts, in a hundred chapters* 68).

Clement of Alexandria, Christian author who lived during the reign of Septimius Severus (193-211), went deeper into the mysteries of the meditative technique, considering this as the soul’s quest for stability by means of purity and disappropriation of thoughts. The true knowledge (*epistēmē*) is expressed by the derivation of the word *stasis*, which means, to position oneself above the plurality of sensible objects until reaching a suprarational state in which the soul knows itself by itself, by means of no object at all; “For sanctity, as I conceive it, is perfect pureness of mind, and deeds, and thoughts... If, then, we are to give the etymology of *epistēmē*, knowledge, its signification is to be derived from *stasis*, placing, for our soul, which was formerly borne, now in one way, now in another, it settles in objects. Similarly, intuitive knowledge (*pistis*) is to be explained etymologically, as the settling of our soul respecting that which is” (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* IV, 22, 142). *That which is*, that which Saint Paul (1 Tim. 6:16) and Clement of Alexandria, among others, describe as the “light which no man can approach unto” or “the light inaccessible”, defines him who has recovered his Edenic state and has stopped identifying himself with a body because he knows that his true nature *is that which is*: “He has withdrawn his soul from the passions... And on the other hand he lives, having put to death his lusts, and no longer makes use of the body, but allows it the use of necessities, that he may not give cause for dissolution” (*Stromata* VI, 9, 74).

In sum, to trust in duality (Eve) expels man from his original Edenic state and, besides, his persistence in appropriating (Cain) the illusory plurality of objects prevents him from returning. Some medieval theologians even attributed the Fall of Adam not to the mere ingestion of the apple, but to the fact of attributing the authorship of his actions to himself. An anonymous theologian of the 14th century wrote: "This setting up of a claim and his I and Me and Mine, these were his going astray, and his fall. And thus it is to this day. What else did Adam do but this same thing? It is said, it was because Adam ate the apple that he was lost, or fell. I say, it was because of his claiming something for his own, and because of his I, Mine, Me, and the like. Had he eaten seven apples, and yet never claimed anything for his own, he would not have fallen: but as soon as he called something his own, he fell, and would have fallen if he had never touched an apple" (*Theologia Germanica* II-III). This sense of individuality, of considering oneself as a separate being, of attributing the authorship of one's actions to oneself, is really the worst possible mistake of perception, since "when the creature claimeth for its own anything good, such as substance, life, knowledge, power, and in short whatever we should call good, as if it were that, or possessed that, or that were itself, or that proceeded from it, as often as this cometh to pass, the creature goeth astray" (*Theologia Germanica* II). It moves him away from his natural center (God's heart or Paradise) and he is thus converted into a supposed subject that pursues objects that are experienceable by means of the senses. The state of that man, prisoner of the duality of created things, only produces dissatisfaction and anxiety because the experiences are always brief and ephemeral. And, because of his natural tendency, man is compelled by his feeling of eternity to seek a stable, durable state of happiness.

That is why man returns to the path toward his central state when he gets rid of his sense of authorship or possession of his actions, faculties and thoughts; "The less he taketh this knowledge unto himself, the more perfect doth it become. So also is it with the will, and

love and desire, and the like. For the less we call these things our own, the more perfect and noble and Godlike do they become, and the more we think them our own, the baser and less pure and perfect do they become” (*Theologia Germanica* V). Thus, one of the goals of contemplation is to come not only to rationally understand, but also to *experimentally* verify, in an effective and unequivocal way, that his actions, as well as his desires and thoughts, his memories and expectations, are not really “his own”, “for in that way your soul belongs not just to you but to all the brothers, whose souls are also yours, or rather whose souls are not souls along with yours but are one soul, that single soul of Christ” (Saint Augustine, *Ep.* 243.4).

According to the Christian contemplative tradition, thought is our hidden enemy. And the most dangerous one is the thought “I”. Ordinary men cannot even utter a sentence that does not contain the personal pronoun “I” as a claim of a self-sufficiency that aspires to compete and prevail against the “rest”. A certain mystic of the 17th century stated that “the ‘I’ has two qualities: it is unjust in itself since it makes itself the center of everything; it is inconvenient to others since it would enslave them; for each ‘I’ is the enemy, and would like to be the tyrant of all others. You take away its inconvenience, but not its injustice, and so... you render it lovable only to the unjust, who do not any longer find in it an enemy” (Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts* 455). In order to prove this statement, it is enough that the reader tries to practice a simple exercise of self-inquiry that consists in realizing how extremely difficult it is to remove from our vocabulary, *at least for one day*, the word “I”.

The “I”, the “ego”, is insatiable. In its quest for a durable happiness, it strives to hoard experiences, honors, fame, wealth, pleasure, power, etc., without noticing that the sensible world (emotions, feelings, thoughts) is unstable and dual by nature, so that, strictly speaking, it just knows the pleasure when it has previously felt the suffering, and “wealth” is a concept that only makes sense if the idea of

“poverty” exists. Therefore, up to which extent does the “I”, immersed in the world of plurality, confuse the activity with the mere agitation? “They imagine that if they obtained such a post, they would then rest with pleasure, and are insensible of the insatiable nature of their desire. They think they are truly seeking quiet, and they are only seeking excitement. They have a secret instinct which impels them to seek amusement and occupation abroad, and which arises from the sense of their constant unhappiness. They have another secret instinct, a remnant of the greatness of our original nature, which teaches them that happiness in reality consists only in rest, and not in stir. And of these two contrary instincts they form within themselves a confused idea, which hides itself from their view in the depths of their soul, inciting them to aim at rest through excitement, and always to fancy that the satisfaction which they have not will come to them, if, by surmounting whatever difficulties confront them, they can thereby open the door to rest” (Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts* 139). In effect, if true activity is that which helps man uncover his Edenic state, all the rest can be but useless deviation.

IX.- THE RECOVERY OF THE INTIMACY WITH GOD BY MEANS OF SUPRARATIONAL MEDITATION

The essential postulate of the mystical way, given that God is not a thought (He cannot be *thought*), is that it is only possible to access Him by non-thinking. Contemplation is precisely the art and science of quieting the mind so that it may achieve the detachment or void of thoughts. According to Scotus Eriugena³⁴¹, “the Being” is everything that can be perceived by the senses or understood by the understanding, so “the Non-being” is everything that is beyond those means of

³⁴¹ Johannes Scotus Eriugena (810-872), after being called by the Emperor of France, Charles the Bold, to direct the Palatine School, translated the works by Maximus the Confessor, Evagrius Ponticus, Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite into Latin. In this sense, he can be considered as one of the introducers of the apophatic contemplative tradition.

knowledge. Following Pseudo-Dionysius, it can be affirmed that God, simultaneously, “is” and “is not”: “If you ask which thing God is, you will say: a thing whose nature we cannot understand. He is neither land, nor sky, etc. He is that darkness where Moses entered to talk to God and the old men stayed outside. Because, when a soul leaves all created species behind, the understanding stays in the darkness and the candles are out, if you ask which thing God is, it will answer: I do not know. Then, such a soul will be ready to understand and talk about God”³⁴². But that darkness or cloud of unknowing does not consist in accepting a new thought or idea (the idea that the mind is unable to know God), but, on the contrary, in a void of thought.

Certainly, it is firstly to be proven, verified and accepted that the human reason, no matter how complex it may be, is not a suitable instrument to know God. “Here in Christendom, those who are ruled only by their reason are called animals and considered as beasts... because, no matter how high your judgment may be, you must know that you will not know the wisdom of God by means of your knowledge; regardless of how hard you try to stretch out, you will never reach to know the spirit of God, since you cannot know what is part of you; even though you be an Aristotle, that knowledge does not make you better, and it is not enough to know the knowledge of God, unless you deny your knowledge and your reason, and consider that you know and understand nothing”³⁴³. Strictly speaking, the divine nature is unknowable even for itself, since “*God ignores which thing He is, because He is no thing*”. In order to go deeper into the non-being, it is necessary to *unknow*, that is, to transcend the knowledge that comes from the objects (based on the subject-object duality) and access the immediate or direct knowledge in which the subject-object relationship is overtaken. This is achieved by means

³⁴² Saint John of Ávila, *Lecciones sobre la 1ª de San Juan*, Lesson 1; *Complete Works*, IV, p. 373.

³⁴³ Saint John of Ávila, *Sermón* 78, 211 ff., *Complete Works*, III, 249.

of contemplation, that is, when the subject stops paying attention to the external objects and is converted (it turns to itself). Then, the subject pays attention to its own subject, so that, by persisting in this practice, the subject stops being another object and disappears during the meditative practice. There is no subject anymore then, but pure vision, that is, a vision without a seer, pure awareness.

Returning to Paradise, seeing God's face, contemplating Him with what Hugh of Saint Victor defined as the third eye, the eye of the spirit, etc., are metaphors that express the nostalgia for the lost original oneness. All of them involve soul's aspiration to return to its primordial reality, which is the Being. It is about "being in God" or, as stated by William of Saint Thierry, based on the Gospel of Saint John, "*becoming what God is*". In effect, this essential idea, which expresses one of the greatest *mysteries*, appears in different passages of the New Testament: "Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, as We are" (Jn. 17:11). And further on: "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also who shall believe in Me through their word, that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me. And the glory which Thou gavest Me I have given them, that they may be one, even as We are one: I in them and Thou in Me, that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me" (Jn. 17:20-23). In a similar way, Saint Basil: "Just as when a sunbeam falls on bright and transparent bodies, they themselves become brilliant too, and shed forth a fresh brightness from themselves, so souls wherein the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves become spiritual, and send forth their grace to others. Hence comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden, distribution of good gifts, the heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, abiding in

God, the being made like to God, and, highest of all, *the being made God*” (Saint Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 9).

Precisely, from the verses “In Him we live, and move, and have our being” (Act. 17:28) and, above all, “The multitude of those who believed were of one heart and of one soul” (Act. 4:32), Saint Augustine (359-430)³⁴⁴ will deduce the monastic motto that he will record at the beginning of the Rule: “First, the main purpose for you having come together is to live harmoniously in the house [of the Lord] and be of one soul and one heart *in Deum*” (Rule 1). It is to be pointed out that he does not say *in Deo*, “in God”, which would imply rest, peaceful possession, but *in Deum*, which involves movement “unto God”, “in the quest for God”, since “we all shall be one in One [=Christ] unto One [=God]”³⁴⁵.

Expelled to the world of unlikeness and plurality of objects, man aspires to be reinstated in the original oneness. “We are on the road to oneness”, Saint Augustine says, “having plurality as our starting point. Love must gather us together in order to reach the One”³⁴⁶. “This multiplicity perishes, and singleness is observed among the saints of whom it is said in the *Acts*: ‘and of the multitude of them that believed, there was one soul, and one heart’. In singleness, then, and simplicity... we ought to be lovers of eternity, and unity, if we desire to cleave to the one God and our Lord”³⁴⁷. How? “Run from these many to one, gather up thy scattered things into one: flow on together, fence thyself in, abide with one, go not to many things. There is blessedness”³⁴⁸. When man believes that he will be happy by projecting himself on things, he will only find frustration, since the world of plurality is by its own nature as much inexhaustible as

³⁴⁴ A. Manrique, *La vida monástica en San Agustín: enchiridion histórico-doctrinal y Regla*, El Escorial-Salamanca, 1959, in which all the Augustinian texts regarding monasticism are collected and classified by topics.

³⁴⁵ *Expositions on the Psalms*, 147, 29.

³⁴⁶ *Serm.* 282, 4.

³⁴⁷ *Expositions on the Psalms*, 4, 10.

³⁴⁸ *Sermon* 96, 6.

insatiable is the human desire. That quest for the Oneness *in Deum* or reinstatement in the original Oneness is defined by some Christian mystics as the recovery of the *Sancta Simplicitas*, that is, the simplicity of mind as a consequence of the disappropriation of desires and thoughts.

How to recover the *Sancta Simplicitas*? In the year 485, the Bishop of Hierapolis (Mabbūg, Syria) explained in his homilies: “I am not talking about the singleness of the world, which is rather stupidity and nonsense. What I am talking about is the singleness that is characteristic of a single one thought... Because, as the intellectual capacity of a child is not enough to analyze the actions of adults, the capacity of our spirit is as well very limited to be able to explain the divine mysteries... The world considers that the single one is worthless. Do not get upset, my disciple, if it considers you useless” (Philoxenus of Mabbūg, *Hom.* V, 74 and 142)³⁴⁹.

Therefore, we would make a mistake if we thought that the expulsion from Paradise was but a mythical or legendary event of the past. On the contrary, it is a current event, which happens and keeps on happening here and now. Likewise, man can return to the Garden of Eden here and now with the suitable disposition.

³⁴⁹ That is why, “As long as Adam and Eve remained in the singleness of their nature and their faith was not darkened by bodily passions, they accepted and observed God’s commandment as soon as they heard it... [Adam did not] judge or inquire about this at all, by reason of his singleness. But, when the advice of the enemy came and found such a simplicity, it taught him trick and guile, and sowed opposing thoughts in his single mind. And this one coherent being, which would have continued being so, had it remained in its singleness, found itself then divided in two: it did and did not want, it judged and was judged, it doubted whether to do or not to do. The advice (of the enemy), insinuated in him who was single and son, converted him into the judge of God’s precept. However, singleness is completely opposed to duplicity, as its very name shows, because it does not have many thoughts that contradict each other. Singleness has a name that agrees with God Himself: in our profession of faith, we say that God is single because... He does not act with the duplicity of the evil, because there is no room in His head for evil” (*Hom.* 80-82), in Philoxenus of Mabbūg (5th century), *Homilias sobre la sencillez*, Logroño, 1992.

X.- THE CORRECT MEANING OF “THINKING OF NOTHING” AND OTHER TREMENDOUS EXPRESSIONS

Christian medieval psychology and theology established a triple division of man's faculties, depending on whether they belonged to the body (the five senses), to the soul (imagination and desires) or to the spirit (memory, understanding and will). Such a conceptual outline also established the successive steps towards the *objectless meditation*. The first task that the candidate must learn consists “in shutting the doors of all five senses and moving the heart away from all that is not God. The soul, naked of all created things, and God, naked of all the things He created; that is how the soul that can be calmed down will say it is *within itself*; and, if it does not covet anything that is not God, it passes *before itself*, and when everything is forgotten, it *rides above itself*, reaching closer to God”³⁵⁰. This way, “The body withdraws, when all its senses obey and keep silent, and the soul, which is the sensitive part, withdraws its imagination and emotions; and the spirit, which is the highest part, withdraws its memory, its understanding and its will, to devote itself to God alone, without noticing anything else in that moment; and there is no better way to achieve this recollection and this union than dedicating the understanding to the truth of the faith, which is followed by the will, and the will of all the powers, and senses; and, this way, as soon as the soul begins, it will do the rest alone”³⁵¹.

About 1600, Pelayo de San Benito, a Benedictine monk of San Pedro de Arlanza (Burgos, Spain), wrote a *Sumario de la Oración* (*Summary of Prayer*) where he explained that there were three necessary steps to attain contemplation. The first one is the *inner recollection*: “when the soul enters inside of itself to meditate, to contemplate and to love the divine things. Its two feet are understanding and

³⁵⁰ Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent to Mount Zion* III, ch. 4.

³⁵¹ Juan Bretón, *Mística Theologia*, Madrid, 1614, L. I, p. 141.

will, with which it walks and enters inside of itself”³⁵². In order to achieve such a recollection, the soul must be, at least momentarily, free from desire of the things, so that their possession (though not their use) may be removed from the powers. The second step is the *inner silence*: “when the soul, by its own will, keeps quiet and stops its vocal prayer, its discourse of understanding, the indeliberation of its will, the activities of its outer senses, of the imagination and the desires; and, put this way in presence of God, it dare not speak, or move, or make any noise, for the great reverence it bares to its Creator”³⁵³. Once the complete silence of the powers and the withdrawal of the senses have been achieved, it finally comes the third step, the step of the pure attention or nullification, “when you, keeping silence, pay attention and hear and see whatever God may say, signal or make you understand”³⁵⁴.

For his part, Judah Leon Abravanel (also known as *Leo the Hebrew*), in his *Dialogues of love*, explains that, “When the spiritual mind (which is the heart of our heart and the soul of our soul), by the force of desire, withdraws in itself to contemplate an intimate, desired object, it collects the whole soul in itself, restricting itself to its indivisible unity, and making the spirits withdraw in the middle of the head, where the thought is, or in the center of the heart, where the desire is, leaving the eyes without sight, the ears without hearing, and the rest of the instruments with no feeling or movement, diminishing even the necessary activity of digestion of the inner sense of nutrition...”³⁵⁵. Or, in other words, “Give up human senses, discourses, imagination and wisdom, should you want to join God; and, if you do not do it this way, just say goodbye to becoming spiritual”³⁵⁶.

³⁵² Pelayo de San Benito, *Sumario de la Oración*, Burgos, 1626, p. 39.

³⁵³ Pelayo de San Benito, *Sumario de la Oración*, Burgos, 1626, pp. 39-40.

³⁵⁴ Pelayo de San Benito, *Sumario de la Oración*, Burgos, 1626, p. 40.

³⁵⁵ Judah Leon, *Dialogues of love*, translated into Spanish as *Diálogos de amor* by Garcilaso Inca de la Vega (Madrid, NBAE), p. 358.

³⁵⁶ Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, p. 47.

The distinction between meditation and contemplation is quite clear. Whereas the former uses the thought, the discourse, the imagination and the senses to soften the soul, contemplation involves the disregard of the thoughts, no matter how excellent and high they might be. This implies that, in order to approach the Divinity, all idea or image that we may have about It will be an obstacle that we will interpose in the path towards pure contemplation: “Do not imagine any form of God when you pray, or allow any shape to imprint itself in your mind; only approach in an incorporeal manner the incorporeal God” (Nilus the ascetic, *On prayer*, 67). The existence of images, visions, thoughts or any other mental form hinders contemplation: “If you want to ‘be in peace’ and alone with God, you must accept nothing that your senses or your spirit can capture, either within or without: even if it is the image of Christ that is presented to your spirit, or angelic figures, or saints, or light... Therefore, always keep your spirit free of colors, shapes or images, either in quality or quantity” (Callistus and Ignatius, *Direction to Hesychasts, in a hundred chapters* 73).

Thinking of nothing, seeing nothing, desiring nothing, imagining nothing... Any vision, hearing or appearance, no matter how excellent it may seem, must be refused. The meditator must even fight the secret and conceited aspiration to be provided with supernatural visions by the contemplative practice. Regarding this, a certain Augustine monk said: “Visions, or revelations, or any manner of spirit in bodily appearing, or in imagining, sleeping or waking, or also any other feeling in the bodily sense, made as it were spiritually, either by sounding in the ear, or savoring in the mouth, or smelling at the nose, or else any sensible heat, as it were fire glowing and warming the breast, or any other part of the body, or any other thing that may be felt by bodily sense, though it be never so comfortable and liking, yet be they not very contemplation” (Walter Hilton, *Scale of Perfection*, I, 10).

What do the mystics of all the religious traditions mean when they agree that the objectless meditation consists in “thinking of nothing”? Certainly, it has been said: “Draw in thy thoughts into thyself from all bodily things, and then shalt thou find right nought wherein thy soul may rest” (Walter Hilton, *Scale of Perfection*, I, 53). Although the concept of “thinking of nothing” has many registers, from the point of view of the meditative practice, it means dealing with no created thing, not thinking, not desiring, not imagining, not feeling. Though that “thinking of nothing” may seem a scary, tremendous expression, it is but a *seeing oneself without ego*.

In effect, the void or freedom from thoughts is conceptualized as a *nothing* because the sensible world of the objects, that is, Creation or Universe, is pure Nothing in comparison with the Spirit. That “thinking of nothing” is described as a pure, simple, subtle vision through the “single eye”. It is about “seeing nothing”, which implies “seeing everything”, because, once the ordinary vision of the objects has been transcended, the subject who sees that the objects are “nothing” can see himself and, after that, understand that there is no *individual vision*, that there is *nobody*, there is not “anyone” who sees *anything*, but just a pure transpersonal, supraindividual vision. This is what some mystics describe as *intelligence*, *intuition* or *pure awareness*.

That is why Francisco de Osuna clarified that, even though *thinking of nothing* “is when the soul stops all the fantasies and imaginations and species of the visible things and, this way, it silences all created things”, it does not mean that we must find “perfection in thinking of nothing, for, this way, the sleeping ones, when they are not dreaming, and the stunned ones would be perfect; and, therefore, if you somehow find it good to think about nothing, understand that this is just said to the novices so that they may learn to turn their attention away from distractions and dedicate it to God. Know, then, that this thinking of nothing is more than what it seems, and that it

cannot be explained in any way, because God, to whom it is dedicated, is inexplicable; I will rather tell you that this thinking of nothing is thinking about everything, since we, without discourse, think about Him who is everything by His wonderful eminence; and the smallest good that the withdrawn men find in this thinking of nothing is a very simple and subtle attention on God alone. At that time, according to Gerson, the gate to all deception of the devil is closed, since it always comes through some of the senses; and, finally, this thinking of nothing, no matter how low it may be, equals getting ready by breaking free to fly with the heart towards God alone, who asks for it free and whole”³⁵⁷.

Under the formula “*thinking of nothing*”, we find hidden a whole pedagogy of humility as the indispensable virtue to silence the mind. The true humility of the mind is the disregard of the appropriation of thoughts. Humility teaches us our own *nothingness* in comparison with the Being, which is God; and the silence is the *peace of mind*, needed for the *listening* to take place.

This silence is not only what pleases God most, but also the most suitable means He has to work on the meditator. The idea is that, when the contemplative does not think or act, he makes room so that God may “think” or work on him. When, during meditation, “you find stillness and silence and you *think of nothing*, then you act and do the work of the Lord, whose justice is carried out in silence. For I warn you, do not lose the fruit of your good thoughts or, after being your understanding tired, try to force it, but close the door of your memory to everything, and block your senses, and *think of nothing*, for you must, in that complete inner silence, watch and listen to God, and lie in wait in that stillness, even if it were half an hour... with an absolute and total negation...; if you want to please God..., you must piously soften your heart”³⁵⁸. In this same sense, according to Friar

³⁵⁷ Francisco de Osuna, *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, tr. 21, ch. 4.

³⁵⁸ Francisco de Osuna, *Fifth Spiritual Alphabet*, Burgos, 1542, fol. 81v.

John of the Angels, “It is true that the beginners are advised to give up the thought and to present themselves before God, free from imaginations, so that His Majesty may speak to their hearts, as people who turn to Him, away from the vain distractions and representations of the creatures. And this dismissal of distracting thoughts is perfect and needed for recollection”³⁵⁹.

XI.- HOW TO KEEP A CONSTANT ATTENTION?

How to keep the attention fixed and constantly free from thoughts? The mystics are apprehensive about showing the techniques of their art in writing. This practice requires withdrawing to a silent, dark place, so that the hearing and the sight may not distract the attention and the mind can calm down and withdraw into itself. After a few minutes of body relaxation, some mystics recommend facilitating recollection by means of meditation with an object, that is, based on a thought³⁶⁰. Others recommend the observation of the

³⁵⁹ John of the Angels, Dialogues of *The conquest of the divine kingdom*, Madrid, 1595, X, 16.

³⁶⁰ Regarding meditation topics, Bernabé de Palma, among others, recommended: “while recollecting your thoughts within yourself, consider what you would be before you were made. You must keep on reflecting about this until you feel the emptiness or the knowledge of the nothing you were, wondering what you were before the earth where we all were formed were made. You shall come to this emptiness or knowledge when you find nothing on which to base the thought that you were given a beginning” (Bernabé de Palma, *Via Spiritus*, 2, 3). As well, Saint John of Ávila advised: “think what you were before God created you, and you will find out that you were an abyss of nothingness and lack of all goods. Stay a good while *feeling this non-being* until you see and notice your nothingness. And, after that, consider how God... made a creature of you, giving you a true and real being. And look at yourself... as a gift of God. And after being created, ask yourself: Is this creature next to itself or to other? Can it stand by itself or does it need anyone else’s hand? And consider God, who is a being that is, and there is nothing without Him; and who is life of all that lives, and force of all that works, and there is just weakness without Him..., and that all the people are before God as if they were not, and thus they are considered nothing or vanity... and he who thinks he is something, as he is nothing, deceives himself... and I am before you as nothing...”, Saint John of Ávila, “Audi filia”, in *Complete Works*, vol. I, p. 473 (BAC, vol. 302). The conclusion of this meditation topic is clear: “What were we and where were we before we had a being? We were God, because we were at that ideal being of God

own thoughts so that we may see that they unceasingly arise without control. From this state of observation of the own thoughts, little by little, a certain distance from them is set, until the moment comes when the attention can be more easily concentrated on a single thought, word or short sentence. Each time the thoughts arise and distract us, we will turn to that sentence or word in order to focus our attention. Contemplation is but “shutting the door of understanding so that there can be no diversity of thoughts, or discourses, even on holy and good things; for now it is not time for that, but of being as suspended, quiet, still and calm as possible”³⁶¹. It is about resigning the senses and silencing the mind, so “you must neither wish to understand, nor feel, nor look whether you have gotten that or not”; but stay there surrendered and humbled, thinking about no created thing, being certain of this truth: that He alone is who can teach and will teach how to fulfill His will”³⁶². Otherwise, “you will not be able to pray clearly if you are preoccupied with material things and are agitated by incessant cares, because prayer implies riddance of every thought” (Nilus the ascetic, *On Prayer*, 12). “Strive to keep your mind deaf and mute during the hour of prayer. Only thus will you be able to pray” (*On Prayer*, 35).

Some contemplatives of the 14th century, such as the anonymous author of the book *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Book of the Privy Counsel*³⁶³, recommend concentrating on the feeling “I am” in order to gradually weaken the identification with the thoughts. “Do not think *what thou art* but *that thou art*” (*Privy Counsel*, 2). By means of this easy and old method, it is not about reflecting on what we are or what we should be, but just *focus our attention on the feeling “I am”*; “Forget thy misery and sinfulness and, on that simple

and all that is within God is God”, Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, ch. 11, p. 65.

³⁶¹ Pelayo de San Benito, *Sumario de la Oración*, Burgos, 1626, p. 56.

³⁶² Pelayo de San Benito, *Sumario de la Oración*, cit., p. 115.

³⁶³ A very good English edition is the one published by William Johnston, 1973, reedited several times: 1996, 2005, etc.

elemental level, think only that *thou art as thou art*" (*Privy Counsel*, 2), that is, in the name of God "I AM THAT I AM" (Exodus 3:14). This form of meditation is so simple that "surely it is beginner's fare, and I consider him hopelessly stupid and dull who cannot think and feel *that he is*, not how or what he is, but *that he is*" (*Privy Counsel*, 2). It is not about thinking about what I *have*, that is, my faculties, my body, my intelligence, etc., but about the first of the gifts, which is precisely the gift of being, which, up to a certain extent, originates the rest gifts: "It is the gift of begin itself, the first gift each creature receiveth" (*Privy Counsel*, 3); in sum, the gift "I am". This way, once all thoughts have been withdrawn in only one, the thought "I am", "go no further, but rest in this naked, stark, elemental awareness that thou art as thou art" (*Privy Counsel*, 1). "In this way, thy thought will not be fragmented or scattered, but unified in Him who is All" (*Privy Counsel*, 1). Only this way is the thought unified, "and thus thou wilt bind everything together, and in a wonderful way, worship God with Himself because that which thou art thou hast from Him and it is He, Himself. Of course, thou hadst a beginning, that moment in time when He created thee from nothing, yet thy *being* hath been and shall always be in Him, from eternity to eternity, for He is eternal" (*Privy Counsel*, 5). Finally, the sustained, constant attention on that only one thought "I am" will give way to the feeling of being, and this will gradually open the gates to a state of Being that is above the ordinary mental state based on thoughts. It is about a state of self-attention, self-warning or self-observation that the metaphysical literature of that age defined as pure awareness or pure intelligence, that is, a state free from the appropriation of thoughts that is identified with the original or natural state of man, because such a state has always been there. And this is the original "state" because it supports and from it is witnessed the sensible world and all creations of the thought.

It is not about paying attention to a philosophical or intellectual "nothing", but it consists in a meta-physical activity of emptying the

senses, the understanding and even the own will, so that the mind may remain as *nothing*, that is, empty and clean, without obstacles that may block the pure vision. This vision from the nothing is, however, a full, whole vision, since it is not carried out from plurality but from suprarationality. Therefore, as the Benedictine David Augustine Baker (1575-1641) would say, the soul and God are not *two distinct things, but one only thing*: “Understand and bear in mind this mystick saying, being taken out of the arithmetick, in which one, being to adde together two ciphers, saies, as I have done: ‘Nothing and nothing make nothing’. And now this may be applyed to betoken and expresse mysticall union. For when the soul hath cast out of her understanding all naturall images and apprehensions, and out of her will all loves and affections to creatures, then is she become, as to all naturall things, as if she were nothing: being free, naked, and clean from them all, as if she were indeed nothing. For so she is in that case, and for the time, as to creatures. But when she, being in such case of nothing, apprehendeth God also as nothing, that is to say, as no imaginable or intelligible thing, but as another thing that is above all images and species and is expressible by no species, but as it were nothing as being none of those things which may be understood or conceived by any image or species and that she doth further apply and adde her own foresaid nothing to the said nothing of God: then remaineth there, neither as in respect or the soul nor as in respect of God, anything, but a certain vacuity or nothing; in which nothing is acted and passeth an union between God and the soul. I mean that the said nothing elevating and uniting herselfe to God and apprehending Him according to His totality and without any image of Him there resulteth and ariseth nothing; as I said, that in arithmetick ‘nothing and nothing make nothing’. And indeed, in such perfect union between God and a soul, she hath no imaginary apprehension either of herselfe or of God; but being as truly they are merely spirits, they remain in a nothing, which yet may be termed a totality. And by this you may conceive what an active mystick union is. For it is caused by an application of the soul

being for the time ridd of all images to God, apprehended according to faith, without any image and above all images. And so, in this case of union, there is nothing and nothing make nothing. For the lesse there is apprehended by way of image in such union, the purer is the union; and, if it be perfect, there is neither time nor place, but a certain eternity that is without time or place. So that the soul, in that case, discerneth neither time nor place nor image, but a certain vacuity or emptinesse, both as in regard of herselfe as of all other things. And then is it as if there were nothing at all in being, saving herselfe and God; and God and she not as two distinct things, but as one only thing; and as if there were no other thing in being. This is the state of a perfect union; which is termed by some a state of nothing, and by others is with as much reason termed a state of totality. Because there God is seen and enjoyed in it, and He therein as the container of all things, and the soul as it were lost in Him”³⁶⁴.

This way, “when our understanding ceases from reasoning by meditating on any just, holy thought, and it stops to calmly enjoy what it was meditating on, it is called *intelligence*; and when there is no mixture of any created thing in its stillness, then it is called *pure intelligence*” (Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent to Mount Zion*, XIII). That is, when the mind disappropriates the thoughts and devotes itself to itself, then the state of pure awareness of itself takes place without appropriation of thoughts (the individual intellect). And even more: since it remains in that state, it accesses a state of suprarational consciousness (pure intellect) that is as *thinking of nothing*. Therefore, in that “thinking of nothing”, a very subtle mystery is hidden, a mystery that only a few manage to decipher: “Those who have ears must listen and know that this thinking of nothing encompasses a great world, where perfect contemplation comprises and has within itself all that may be worth loving; and, as this is only God, it is clear

³⁶⁴ This little essay is the fifth of twenty-three miscellaneous pieces of varying length that Augustine Baker assembled in one volume, in 1633, under the title of

that all the rest is nothing in His presence, and like that must it be thought... For about the soul that, by unitive love, finds itself calm by contemplating its God, it can certainly be said that it can think about nothing, since it finds in this thinking of nothing all that it must think” (Bernardino de Laredo, *Ascent to Mount Zion*, XXVII). Such state of *pure awareness* is difficult to understand because man generally lives so identified with his thoughts that he does not trust any kind of knowledge other than the strictly rational³⁶⁵ and individual one.

Paradoxically, this state of pure awareness without thoughts is eloquent because its silence teaches; “Mounted on contemplation, approach God and ask Him for advice and support to carry out your work. And talk to God as a true friend, telling Him the truth of your heart” (Bernabé de Palma, *Via Spiritus*, 3, 1). But that communication is so subtle that it may be interrupted or adulterate if you try to appropriate it or reason about it because, in that very instant, you will have generated thoughts. And you must remember that the thought throws you out of the contemplative state because it is incompatible with the objectless meditation. The practice of meditation must lead the meditator from a merely rational understanding of the matter to an unequivocal verification or metaphysical “experience”.

1.- Constant meditation and the remembrance of God.

Even though the practice of meditation is recommended during certain moments of the day, the rest of the time can be used to prevent the mind from wandering erratically prey to daydreams. Some spiritual masters recommend occupying the mind with the most con-

Remains. There is only one complete copy of this book, viz. MS Downside 22, which was transcribed about the year 1678 by D. Wilfrid Reeve. MS p. 102-103.

³⁶⁵ Some doctors and psychologists have tried to explain such processes; this is the case of C. Albrecht, vid. H. M. Enomiya-Lassalle, “Meditation and the experience of God”, in *Living in the New Consciousness*, Columbus (OH), 1988, chapters 3 to 6; and also K. Kadowaki, *Zen and the Bible*, New York, 2002.

stant possible recitation of a sentence in order to favor a continuous recollection. From the first few centuries of Christianity on, there have been different short formulas of prayer used to facilitate a continuous remembrance. Cassian recommended “O God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me”. The most ancient and common is *Lord, have mercy* or also: *God, be merciful to me a sinner!*³⁶⁶, whose origin was dated back no more and no less than to Adam himself; “He should seat himself facing the East, as once did Adam, and meditate in this way: ‘Adam then sat and wept because of his loss of the delights of Paradise, beating his eyes with his fists and saying: ‘O Merciful One, have mercy on me, for I have fallen’” (*Philokalia*, vol. III, Saint Peter of Damascus, *A Treasury of Divine Knowledge*).

This way, the mind gradually loses its habit of appropriating the thoughts. Thus, after moving away from the thoughts, it will also gradually lose its interest in the thought objects. This is the path of disregard. In sum, “we should try to find the dwelling-place and knock with persistent prayer” [Mt. 7:7] (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Mark the Ascetic, *On those who think that they are made righteous by works* 225). This way, “as God, be always within me, withdraw into God, for the whole night you will be in prayer, or at least it will count as if you were...”. Any moment of the day or of the night is suitable for meditation, including the apparently most trivial moments: “Wherever you may be, if you do have nothing to do, withdraw into God; even dealing with your bodily functions, you must try to be withdrawn”³⁶⁷. True inner peace consists in keeping the heart “always fixed and firm in the love of God because of a constant, uninterrupted desire, so that you may feel like doing no other thing”³⁶⁸. This way, a moment will come when the former habit to “be in the presence of God” will become so natural and spontaneous that it will end

³⁶⁶ Lk. 18:13.

³⁶⁷ Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, 3rd Advice, pp. 104 v.

³⁶⁸ John of the Angels, *Manual of the perfect life*, Madrid, 1609, X, 15, p. 476.

up giving way to a subtle, constant, higher form of existence in which the ego is deactivated and transcended in order to give way to a state of lucid, tranquil self-consciousness.

Constant prayer, also called remembrance of God, is not an excess, but a commandment of the Lord: *You shall always pray tirelessly, pray without ceasing*³⁶⁹. “The essence of the commandments is always to give precedence to the one that embraces them all: remembrance of God, as stipulated in the phrase, ‘Always be mindful of the Lord thy God’ [Deuteronomy 8:18]. Our failure or success in keeping the commandments depends on such remembrance, for it shrouds the commandments in darkness and strips us of every blessing” (*Philokalia*, vol. IV, Saint Gregory of Sinai, *Chapters* 17). The practice of the “remembrance of God” –*mnéme Theou*, *memoria Dei*– has been and is still one of the most useful ways to favor the surrender and nullification of the ego; “When we have blocked all its outlets by means of the remembrance of God, the intellect requires of us imperatively some task which will satisfy its need for activity. For the complete fulfillment of its purpose, we should give it nothing but the Lord Jesus³⁷⁰ (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Diadochus, *Definitions* 59). The remembrance, that is, the habit of keeping the mind busy pronouncing or invoking the names of God, is to be prolonged until it becomes almost unceasing; “when you walk, when you eat, when you drink and when you do nothing”. Its purpose is to withdraw the thoughts that are unfocused because of the earthly concerns in order to lead the spirit, once concentrated and purified, towards God. This way, when the mind is deprived of its ordinary food (the erratic thoughts), it turns to itself. Or, in other terms, when the ego stops appropriating or feeding on desires and thoughts, it becomes weak and ends up dying of starvation; “At all events, when and as often as it happens that wicked thoughts are multiplied in us, let us cast into the middle of them the invocation of our Lord Jesus Christ, and at

³⁶⁹ 1 Thess. 5:17.

³⁷⁰ That is, the prayer “Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 12:3).

that time we shall see them immediately dissolved like smoke in the air, as experience has taught. And the mind alone having been laid hold of, at that time let us again begin the continual attention and invocation. And as often as we suffer this from temptation, let us do in this way... everlasting to keep *hesychia* in the intellect, even, if I may put it thus, from thoughts which appear to be good; and to be diligent that the heart be found empty of thoughts, so that the thieves do not hide” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 98, 103).

Finally, there is another aspect of the remembrance of the name of God. When a Jew pronounces the sacred name of YHWH, he knows that this name is derived from the third person singular of the verb to be, that is, he is saying “He (who) is”. Likewise, the Muslim who pronounces the sacred name of Allāh knows that he is referring to an archaic form of the same verb. Nevertheless, this verbal form of the sacred name of God is but a respectful and pious way to avoid mentioning the name of God the way He defines Himself in the first person singular of the verb to be: “I AM THAT I AM (EHYEH ASHER EHYEH, Ex. 3:14). Being the sacred name of God “I AM”, the devout man must address Him as “He (who) is”. However, from the point of view of the prayer or the remembrance of His sacred name, it would be more correct to use “I AM”. This introduces us into a meditative path, employed by Jewish and Christian mysticism, whose traces can be found in several biblical texts. Thus, when Jesus Christ says “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6), or insists that “before Abraham was, I am” (Jn. 8:58), he is referring to the sacred name of God, since he does not say “before Abraham was, I was”, but “before Abraham was, I am”. And, in another passage, he adds: “I and My Father are one” (Jn. 10:30), making understand that He is “I AM”. Hence, when he says “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me” (Jn. 14:6), it might be interpreted as “I AM (is) the way, the truth, and the life”. As the reader has surely understood, between these lines of the Bible lies, more or less concealed, an ancient method of meditation that has

survived in the Christian monastic tradition and that finds one of its most important and famous medieval works in the text entitled “*The Book of Privy Counsel*”, which is the continuation of “*The Cloud of Unknowing*”.

2.- Hesychastic meditation and breathing rhythm.

Within the Christian tradition, the “Hesychasm”, expression that is derived from *hesychia* (stillness, peace), is the contemplative way that has most developed the psychophysical techniques of meditation. As the immediate aim of this method is to silence the mind, it can be talked about Hesychastic “mysticism”. One of the greatest Hesychastic mystics, Gregory Palamas († 1357), invoked the authority of Moses in order to justify such a practice: “Pay attention to yourself”, says Moses (Deut. 15:9)... How? By the mind, evidently, for by no other instrument is it possible to be attentive to the whole of oneself” (Second Treatise, C.9). Such a method is based on focusing the attention in a special way: “There is a spiritual art or method swiftly leading whoever pursues it to dispassion and the vision of God... I will do my best to show you what attentiveness (*prosochē*) is and how we may acquire it... Some of the saints have called attentiveness the guarding of the intellect, others have called it custody of the heart, or sobriety (*nepsis*), or mental *hesychia* (Symeon the New Theologian). Like in other contemplative traditions, the Hesychastic method³⁷¹ proposes redirecting the mind towards the heart by quiet-

³⁷¹ Although it is difficult to clarify the origin of Hesychasm, one of its most ancient disseminators was Bishop Diadochus, who, in the 5th century, explained in Byzantium the doctrine of Evagrius and Macarius. In the 11th century, Symeon the New Theologian, abbot of St. Mamas of Xerokerkos, taught, in his *On sobriety and attention*, the way to achieve the *hesychia* by means of a way of breathing attuned with prayer. Nicephorus the Hesychast, monk at the Mt. Athos (1261-1282) wrote a work entitled *De sobrietate et cordis custodia*, which had a great influence on later writings as the *Method of the holy prayer and watchfulness*. The Hesychastic practices have always had detractors. One of the most famous ones was the Calabrian monk Barlaam of Seminara, who, in 1330, got to Constantinople attracted by the apophatic tendencies of the Eastern theology. In contact with the Hesychasts and their *psychophysical techniques*, control of breathing, fixation of look, mental concentration, etc., led by his rationalist spirit, accused them of trying to

ing the thoughts, but with the novel incorporation of a simultaneous attention on the own breathing as a means to escape from the flow of thoughts at the same time that the mind is kept busy with the recitation of a prayer: “If you really wish to cover your evil droughts with shame, to be still and calm, and to watch over your heart without hindrance, let the Jesus prayer cleave to your breath, and in a few days you will find that this is possible” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 182). “Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with each breath, and then you will know the value of solitude” (Saint John Climacus, *Scala Paradisi*, step 27.61³⁷²).

This practice is based on the impossibility to breathe in a placid rhythm and fall at the same time prey to wrath, envy, gluttony, lust, sloth, greed and desire in general. It is affirmed that the attention on the breathing has spiritual effects because it helps us control the mind-ego. Certainly, it is a breathing method whose precedents may be found in other meditative traditions such as Taoism³⁷³ or Hinduism (for instance, the *prāṇāyāma*), and that even took root in some Catholic religious orders that distrusted recollection, such as the Society of Jesus. Thus, its founder, Saint Ignatius of Loyola³⁷⁴, recommended, as a way to pray, “that with each breath in or out, one has to pray mentally, saying one word of the *Our Father*, or of another

perceive the unknowable God by means of the senses, as the Messalian heresy had already tried. On behalf of the Hesychasts, Gregory Palamas replied with his work *Triads for the defense of the holy Hesychasts*. In 1341, all the hegumens of the Mt. Athos signed the *Hagiorite Tome* (in PG, CL, 1225-1236), defending their mystical tradition; that very year, the Second Council of Nicaea in Hagia Sophia confirmed the Hesychastic method of prayer. Discredited and isolated, Barlaam returned to Italy.

³⁷² John Climacus (c. 525-c. 606), *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, New York, 1982.

³⁷³ Vid. Henri Maspero, “Les procédés de nourrir le principe vital dans la religion taoïste ancienne”, *Journal Asiatique*, April-September 1937.

³⁷⁴ In his autobiography, Saint Ignatius narrates: “One day he went to the Church of St. Paul, situated about a mile from Manresa. Near the road is a stream, on the bank of which he sat, and gazed at the deep waters flowing by. While seated there, the eyes of his soul were opened. He did not have any special vision, but his mind was enlightened on many subjects, spiritual and intellectual. So clear was this knowledge that from that day everything appeared to him in a new light” (Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Autobiography*, J.F.X. O’Connor, S.J., New York, 1900, p. 57).

prayer which is being recited: so that only one word be said between one breath and another, and while the time from one breath to another lasts, let attention be given chiefly to the meaning of such word, or to the person to whom he recites it, or to his own baseness, or to the difference from such great height to his own so great lowness. And in the same form and rule he will proceed on the other words of the *Our Father*” (Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 258).

Gregory the Sinaite taught this method as the most suitable to quiet the mind and create the space of peace necessary for prayer: “No one can master the intellect unless he himself is mastered by the Spirit. For the intellect is uncontrollable, not because it is by nature ever-active, but because through our continual remissness it has been given over to distraction and has become used to that... Holding the breath also helps to stabilize the intellect, but only temporally, for after a little it lapses into distraction again. But when prayer is activated, then it really does keep the intellect in its presence, and it gladdens it and frees it from captivity... So when thoughts invade you, in place of weapons call on the Lord Jesus frequently and persistently and then they will retreat; for they cannot bear the warmth produced in the heart by prayer and they flee as if scorched by fire” (*Philokalia*, vol. IV). In the 13th century, a Hesychast called Nicephorus the Solitary explained the technique in this way: “First of all, let your life be tranquil, free from all care, and at peace with all. Then enter your room, shut yourself in, and, sitting in a corner, do what I shall tell you: You know that we only exhale our breath, the air that we inhale, because of our heart... [963b] Sit down, recollect your spirit, introduce it –I mean your spirit– into your nostrils; that is the route your breath takes to reach the heart. Pull it in, forcing it to descend to your heart at the same time as the air is breathed in. When it is there, you will see the joy that follows; you will have nothing to regret. Just as the man who returns home after an absence can no longer contain his joy at being able to see his wife and children again, so the spirit when it is united with the soul overflows with joy and ineffable

delight... [964b] When your spirit is there, you must neither be silent nor remain idle. But do not have any occupation or meditation other than the cry: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!’. No truce, not at any price. This practice, by keeping your spirit protected from wandering, makes it impregnable and beyond the reach of suggestions from the enemy, each day it raises it in the love and the desire of God. [965a] While holding it there do not leave your mind idle but give it the following holy words to say: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!’. [966a] And let the mind repeat them day and night... Then when it gets used to it, the mind will be happy and joyful to be there”³⁷⁵.

And, in other work entitled *The Three Ways of Attention and Prayer*, attributed to Symeon the New Theologian, it is recommended: “Then sit down in a quiet cell, in a corner by yourself, and do what I tell you. Close the door, and withdraw your intellect from everything worthless and transient. Rest your beard on your chest, and focus your physical gaze, together with the whole of your intellect, upon the center of your belly or your navel. Restrain the drawing-in of breath through your nostrils, so as not to breathe easily, and search inside yourself with your intellect so as to find the place of the heart, where all the powers of the soul reside. To start with you will find there darkness and an impenetrable density. Later, when you persist and practice this task day and night, you will find, as though miraculously, an unceasing joy”³⁷⁶.

³⁷⁵ Nicephorus the Solitary or Nicephorus the Hesychast, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca*, ed. by J. P. Migne, vol. CXLVII, Paris, 1857. There is a French translation, *Petite Philocalie de la prière du cœur*, ed. by Jean Gouillard, Paris, 1953, p. 204.

³⁷⁶ *Petite Philocalie de la prière du cœur*, ed. by Jean Gouillard, Paris, 1953, p. 216. Or as well: “From early morning sit down on a low stool, about eight inches high; compress your mind, forcing it down from your brain into your heart, and keep it there. Laboriously bow yourself down, feeling sharp pain in your chest, shoulders and neck, and cry persistently in mind and soul: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!’... Control the drawing-in of your breath, so that you do not breathe at your ease. For the current of air which rises from the heart darkens the mind and agitates the intelligence, keeping it far from the heart... Hold back the expulsion of your breath, so far as possible, and enclose your mind in your heart, continually

It is about nullifying the mind by means of the unceasing repetition of some prayer, with the attention fixed on breathing; “Attentiveness is the heart’s stillness, unbroken by any thought. In this stillness the heart breathes and invokes, endlessly and without ceasing, only Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and Himself God” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 5). This way, quieted the mind, it gets used to remaining in the present, in a state of attention on itself without appropriation of thoughts, that is, “freeing the heart from all thoughts, keeping it profoundly silent and in *hesychia*” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 15).

The most complete explanation of the Hesychastic meditation method can be found in a work of the 14th century known as *Centuriare*, written by the monks Ignatius and Callistus (the latter was Patriarch of Constantinople), and which will be used here for further detail. It explains the method of “entering the heart by attention through breathing, which contributes to the concentration of thoughts... So, sitting down in your cell, collect your mind, lead it into the path of the breath along which the air enters in, constrain it to enter the heart together with the inhaled air” (Callistus and Ignatius, *Direction to Hesychasts, in a hundred chapters* or *Centuriae* 18-19).

XII.- STAGES OF THE SPIRITUAL PATH: PURGATIVE, ILLUMINATIVE AND UNITIVE

Vedanta and Hindu philosophy, Buddhism, Taoism, Zen, Jewish mysticism, Greek philosophy, Hermetism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, etc. have employed different metaphors to define the spiritual

and persistently practicing the invocation of the Lord Jesus” (Saint Gregory of Sinai, *On Stillness*, 2). The practice of this method requires a certain moderation habit regarding the intake of food, since “the guarding of the intellect begins with self-control in food and drink, the rejection of all evil thoughts and abstention from them, and stillness of heart” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 165).

process by means of degrees, spheres, successive circles, mansions, states, scales, etc.

For its part, Christian mysticism has also divided the process of the spiritual Path in a certain number of degrees or stages. The most widespread tradition divides spiritualists in three categories: probationer, progressing and perfect, which match with the three stages or states of the Path: purgative, illuminative and unitive. These phases date back, at least, to Evagrius Ponticus. The *purgative path* of the *incipient ones* has the goal of purifying the soul, and he who achieves it, hears “*Well done, thou good and faithful servant... Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord*” (Mt. 25:21). The *illuminative path*, or the path of the *proficient ones*, consists in the development of the inner life until becoming a “friend of God”, as it is said: “*Henceforth I call you not servants, but I have called you friends*” (Jn. 15:15). The *unitive path*, or the path of the *perfect ones*, is the mystical path of union with God according to what Jesus said: “*That they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee*” (Jn. 17:21). The *purgatio* begins when man decides to stop before the multitude of events that overwhelm his existence and seriously, intensely reflects on his spiritual life. This conversion is followed by a higher sensitivity to the transcendental and by a recognition of the own imperfections that “sweep those whom they affect out of themselves” (Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names* IV, 13). Determined to get out of the “house” of appetites, he undertakes the path of purification. In this first stage, the distinction between asceticism and mysticism is usually drawn as two successive stages of the path of perfection, where the latter completes the former³⁷⁷. The word *asceticism* is derived from “exercise” because it teaches the candidate to root out vices and plant virtues instead. It is about showing him the functioning of the outer and inner senses of his body and his mind, as well as

³⁷⁷ The commonly accepted differentiation is the one by Scotus and Saint Thomas, who distinguished between *acquired virtues* and *gifts by grace*; *Asceticism* comprises the acquired virtues, whereas *Mysticism* is not acquired, but given.

of the powers or faculties of the soul, so that he may catch them in their constant alienating activity, and learn how to resign them. In this sense, the *asceticism* has two aspects: a *negative* one and a *positive* one, depending on whether it refers to the denial and purification of the passions, affections or appetites, or it may have the aim of practicing the virtues.

The purgative path is previous or preparatory because it is, in sum, about withdrawing the outer man into the inner one; “Before withdrawing yourself, make whatever actions you may want, but after that... be still, hand yourself to God, the same way this paper was handed to me so that I could do whatever I wanted to do with it. There is no time... to meditate, or to pray, but it is time to be like a still image painted by a painter, which should not move or otherwise he will smudge it trying to paint an eye. Thus, all this doctrine is about making us understand that we, who must let the divine painter paint us, are to paint nothing”³⁷⁸.

When the soul has been purified by the personal effort, it enters the illuminative path or “passive purification”, called like that because man cannot acquire it by himself. Unlike active or ascetic purification, achieved with personal effort and eagerness, in the passive or mystical one, the power of the Grace takes a more intense part. In turn, two different modalities of passive purification are to be distinguished: the one of the sense and the one of the spirit. The purification or *night* of the sense is focused on the lower part of the soul (outer and inner *senses*), whereas the purification of the spirit works on the higher powers (memory, understanding and will).

Finally, the unitive way takes place when the soul entirely “devotes” itself or withdraws in God. That is why this is also called *transforming union* or *spiritual marriage*. All is one there, because

³⁷⁸ Antonio de Rojas, op. cit., p. 106.

God is apprehended in the multiplicity of things as Saint John of the Cross points out (*The Living Flame of Love*, IV, 1).

The important point here is that these stages or states of the Path respectively match three forms of meditation or prayer. Thus, for instance, Bernabé de Palma, in his *Via Spiritus*³⁷⁹, explains that the first degree or stage is called *bodily state*, because its goal is “to humble and tame the flesh and sensuality, by fasting, waking, sleeping on hard and poor beds, avoiding pointless..., hollow..., harmful words..., avoiding hindering friendship...”³⁸⁰. To this state belongs the *external withdrawal* by which it is tried to reduce to the maximum extent possible the information that reaches the body senses: “It means that, once you have closed your bodily eyes and are away from all outer noise, as well as from the inner one, you must start reflecting within yourself or, as common people call it, among yourself. That is why it is called deep, because it happens in the deepest depths of our thoughts. And when this is done for long, always increasing the attentiveness..., it is called very deep”³⁸¹. The second degree is an intermediate, bodily and spiritual state whose main exercise is the called *annihilation prayer* or knowledge about the own nothingness as a method to root out vices and plant virtues, especially humility. In this sense, one of the exercises preferred by Palma, Saint John of Ávila and many other mystics consists in considering what we were before being born. The third and last state of the spiritual Path is the union or stillness, which, precisely because of that, is called supernatural degree. Such union of resemblance, even though it exceeds all understanding, because its nature is suprarational or supernatural, takes place during *perfect contemplation*, “when the two wills, that is, the soul’s will and God’s will, agree both in one, not finding each one anything repulsive in the other”³⁸².

³⁷⁹ Bernabé de Palma, *Via Spiritus*, I will quote the edition of Salamanca, 1541.

³⁸⁰ Bernabé de Palma, *Via Spiritus*, ed. by T. H. Martín, Madrid, 1998, p. 29.

³⁸¹ Bernabé de Palma, *Via Spiritus*, p. 28.

³⁸² Juan Bretón, *Mística Theologia*, Madrid, 1614, L. II, p. 19.

In order to achieve the understanding of the own state, humility is indispensable. Saint Benedict already converted Jacob's ladder into the ladder of humility³⁸³. The abbot of Clairvaux developed this subject in his treatise *The twelve degrees of humility and pride*. One of the images that are most widely used to represent the spiritual ascent is the ladder that the patriarch Jacob saw in his dreams, which "was set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven" (Gen. 28:12).

The Rule of Saint Benedict (RB 7, 8) still uses it as a ladder of twelve steps that leads to the perfect love of God. To ascend on Jacob's Ladder is to practice the *memoria Dei*, that is, to constantly remember God (Jn. 6:38). "*Nihil opera Dei praeponatur*", "let nothing be preferred to the work of God" (RB 43, 3). The Carthusian Hugh of Balma explains in his work *Sol de contemplativos*³⁸⁴ that Jacob got to Bethel (house of God) escaping from Esau's men (the vain), which means that, according to the ancient composers of the Genesis, contemplation implies a *fuga mundi*, that is, the certainty that everything is vain, vacuous, fleeting illusion: "which, through three steps of wonderful doctrine, teaches us to ascend to this contemplation, by applying what is said about the patriarch Jacob in the Genesis. He, escaping from Esau, who was chasing him, arrived at a place called Bethel, where he slept using a stone as his bedhead and, in his dreams, he saw a ladder that, even though it was set up on the earth, the top of it reached to heaven. And the angels ascended and descended on it... And, what is the meaning of Esau, whose name means vain, but the vanities of this world? Therefore, the first thing to do by someone who wants to ascend on this ladder is to move away from the vanities of the world. The second thing that must be

³⁸³ RB 7, 6-9. Cf. Gen. 28:12.

³⁸⁴ Strictly speaking, the work *Sol de contemplativos* is a Spanish translation, made in 1514 by a Franciscan, of the work *On Mystical Theology* or *Viae Syon Lugent*, written by the Carthusian Hugh of Balma, prior of Meyrat, diocese of Lyon, who lived at the end of the 13th century. His main sources are the Pseudo-Dionysius, the Bible, Thomas Gallus, Richard of Saint Victor and Saint Augustine.

done by someone who wants to ascend to this contemplation is to gather all his senses and keep them locked away from the things of the world, and stay only in Christ. This is meant by what Jacob did when he used a stone as his bedhead and then slept after the sun set. What does the stone mean but Christ the Redeemer, about whom Saint Paul says: the stone is Christ? And what means to sleep on the stone, but to stay in Him?" (*Sol de contemplativos* 1).

Besides the ascent on Jacob's ladder, Christian spirituality has always turned to other symbols such as the ascent to Mount Zion, the Heavenly Jerusalem, etc. in order to express the soul's route towards God: "Sobriety is like Jacob's ladder: God is at the top while the angels climb it... Just as *valleys produce copious wheat*³⁸⁵, so this wisdom produces copious blessings in the heart, or, rather, our Lord Jesus Christ produces them, for *without Him we can do nothing*³⁸⁶. At first, you will find that it is a ladder; then, a book to be read; then, as you advance, you will find that it is the heavenly city of Jerusalem, and you will have a clear spiritual vision of Christ, King of the hosts of Israel, together with His co-essential Father and the Holy Spirit, adored in our worship" (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 51, 117). It is significant that the place where the ladder is set up is the same where Melchizedek or Abraham offered their sacrifices and where Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself for the humankind: "The sublimity of Mount Zion exceeds all the rest of the mounts... On this mount did Melchizedek offer bread and wine as a sacrifice, and on it did Abraham build the altar of obedience, where he was meant to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. In that very same place did Jacob sleep and see the ladder that reached to heaven, on which the angels ascended and descended. There was built the altar of the cross, where our gentlest Christ offered himself by his own will. And this Mount Zion, before Abraham, was called Mount Moriah, which means *high land*. And, after building a tower on this mount, it was

³⁸⁵ Ps. 65:13.

³⁸⁶ Jn. 15:5.

called in the Hebrew language *Zion*, which in our language means *watchtower*” (Laredo, *Ascent to Mount Zion* I). In mid-12th century, Peter Cellensis, in his work *De disciplina claustrali*³⁸⁷ (*The school of the cloister*), explains that, thanks to contemplation, the worshiper becomes a citizen of the Heavenly Jerusalem; “citizens of Jerusalem are those whose only desire, affection and longing consists in the contemplation of the heavenly things, among which they dwell, as the Apostle says: ‘we are citizens of heaven’”³⁸⁸. All these symbols come to mean that contemplation is the suitable path to ascend on the ladder-mount and enter a sacred space (lost Paradise, Heavenly Jerusalem, etc.). They are, in sum, metaphors that indicate that the human being contains “something” that constitutes his true spiritual nature, which can be recovered and realized right “now”.

In the second half of the 4th century, John of Lycopolis, also known as John the Solitary, a monk who lived thirty years enclosed in a cave of the Thebaid, wrote a *Dialogue on the soul*³⁸⁹. Invoking Saint Paul as his only authority, he explains the three stages or degrees of the path towards contemplation, using a Gnostic language. According to the monk: “There are three kinds of men mentioned by the Scriptures: the somatic [or carnal] ones, the psychic ones and the pneumatic [or spiritual] ones”. Whereas it is extraordinarily difficult for the carnal one to practice meditation, since he is a prisoner of the sensory experiences, the psychic man shows a good disposition and determination; however, as he still pays attention to the game of the world, he is unable to move his attention away from the thoughts and concentrate in a state of withdrawn, because, deep down, he trusts the external world more than the internal one: “the psychic man feels love for the doctrine, but, when the time comes to withdraw his un-

³⁸⁷ Besides the edition published in PL 202, 1110-1146, it can also be consulted G. de Martel, *Pierre de Celles, L'école du cloître*: SC 240 (Paris, 1977), with a French translation, and H. Feiss O.S.B., *Peter of Celles: Selected works*, Kalamazoo (MI), 1987, in English.

³⁸⁸ *Serm.* 18: PL 202, p. 695. Cf. Phil. 3:20.

³⁸⁹ John the Solitary, *Dialogue sur l'âme et les passions des hommes*, ed. by I. Hausherr, Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, Rome, 1939.

derstanding into prayer, he can manage to do it just after a strong fight; besides, the withdrawal of his understanding has a very limited duration. Why? Pay attention: As his soul is occupied with the movements of distractions, reflections on knowledge or bodily actions, the things become agitated within him during the time of prayer. He is then unable to look at God in a withdrawn way, since his understanding wanders from phantom to phantom, and these are dissolved in each other, above all because he has not attained the level that is higher than the psychic one, in which God is seen by means of something higher than men's understanding" (John the Solitary, *Dialogue on the soul* I, 13).

What is that which prevents man from practicing meditation? John the Solitary presents a masterful discourse on the concerns or problems that block contemplation, for each one of these kinds of men: "The laments of the carnal man, even when he weeps before God in prayer, are caused by the following thoughts: the concern about his poverty, the memories of his troubles, the request of his children, the suffering because of the oppressors, the care for his house, the memories of his deceased, and things of the like... Regarding the carnal man, his jealousy comes from: his wish to dominate others, the wealth of those who are richer than him, the life of those who are happier than him. Each passion of his jealousy is determined by envy..." (John the Solitary, *Dialogue on the soul* I, 20). Likewise, "the psychic man is prey to jealousy because he is elevated over the evil actions of the body but he does not perceive the existence of those who are superior, and therefore he believes that the state in which he finds himself is perfection. And, since all the rest are inferior to him regarding visible actions, he starts experiencing a feeling of jealousy and disapproval of their actions, and that is why he accumulates hatred within himself. His jealousy does not come from envy, but from his ambition for justice..." (John the Solitary, *Dialogue on the soul* I, 21).

In sum, all this makes it very difficult to suppress the thoughts during contemplation; “The laments of the psychic man during prayer come from the following thoughts: his fear of the judgment, the conscience of his sins, the memories of God’s gifts to him, the meditation on death, the promise of things to come, the fear of finding himself deprived of them, and other things of the like. Concerning the laments of the spiritual man, these are the thoughts that determine them: his admiration for the majesty of God, his astonishment before the depth of His wisdom, the glory of the world to come, the deviation of men, and things of the like. However, they are not derived from a feeling of sadness, but from an intense joy” (John the Solitary, *Dialogue on the soul* I, 16).

“The same way that, by closing mouth and nostrils, man’s vital breathing decreases, then by ceasing the [inner] words directed against others, the passion within [man] gets damaged; and after the destruction of this passion, the passion of love takes over” (John the Solitary, *Dialogue on the soul* I, 26). The most important act of love is the disregard of the passions for the love to know God or, what might be the same, to know oneself; “The bodily disregard: the renunciation of the own possessions; the psychic disregard: the eviction of the passions; the spiritual disregard: the elimination of the opinions” (John the Solitary, *Dialogue on the soul* IV, 85). “The carnal man is led to love by the feelings of desire and longing. Desire feeds on the care for the body, and the longing for the good grows with the longing of abundant pleasures. In those who want to be recognized in the world by his force or magnificence arises the love for this or that, which possesses such things. This is the reason why love is not stable in the carnal ones, for it is sparked in their hearts by objects capable of change, and thus their love is founded on non-durable things... Let us talk about the level of the psychic men: there is no love in them; either for truth, or for falseness. The psychic man does not love falseness because he does not have a strong passion for wealth, nor does he long to fulfill the will of his lust. That is why no

reason impels him to love men, for he does not even desires wealth or beauty. Therefore, it is not easy that there be love passion in him. Even though it could be thought that he loves men for the love of God, the truth is that he has not yet approached that level. In effect, the love of God is not acquired by the comprehension of the mysteries, so he, not having yet reached so far, is unable to love men. If the psychic man loves this or that, his love does not come from science, but it has a reason that has not been caused” (John the Solitary, *Dialogue on the soul* I, 19).

XIII.- OTHER MISTAKES AND OBSTACLES OF THE SPIRITUAL SEEKER

As the Pseudo-Macarius warned, one of the obstacles that are most difficult to beat is pride and, above all, spiritual pride, that is, the conceit to have attained a certain mystical state. That is why the main virtue of the contemplative life is humility, which may make us find out our own misery and help us catch ourselves in the arrogant attitude of believing we are “somebody”. Even to consider oneself as humble is a symptom of pride. That is why Saint John of Ávila said that “If you asked me what the way to heaven is, I would have to tell you that it is humility; and if you asked it to me once again... or twice again... or thrice again... or a thousand times again, then a thousand times would I tell you that there is no other way than humility alone”³⁹⁰. According to Friar John of the Angels, humility is the foundation of stillness, and of the ecstasy in God, because “nothing is what we are, and nothing what we can do, and towards the nothing we walk, and we will soon become nothing, if God raises His powerful hand on us”³⁹¹.

³⁹⁰ Saint John of Ávila, “Audi filia”, in *Complete Works*, vol. I, pp. 472-475 (BAC) [An English version of this work can be found in *Audi filia = Listen, O daughter*, tr. by J. F. Gormley, New York, 2006].

³⁹¹ John of the Angels, *Manual*, p. 604, 501.

What is humility? “Humility is the attentive forgetfulness of what one has accomplished” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Diadochus, *Definitions* 6), so it is so spontaneous that no trace of the feeling of being humble can remain. Humility is the best tool for self-inquiry, since “What means, for example, to be truly humble without knowing one’s self? Or rather, what is humility but a knowledge of one’s sins, of one’s miseries, and of one’s unworthiness?”³⁹² The knowledge of ourselves, which brings us humility, gives us the ability to catch our mind in the middle of its activity of appropriation of experiences: “I once caught this mad imposter [the pride] as it was rising in my heart bearing on its shoulders its mother, vainglory. I roped them with the noose of obedience and thrashing them with the whip of humility” (John Climacus, *Scala Paradisi*, step 23.37). It is written that *God resisteth the proud*³⁹³. “It was with reference to this that the Apostle said: *And what hast thou that thou did not receive?*”³⁹⁴ Did you create yourself? And if you received from God soul and body, from which and in which and through which every virtue comes into being, *why dost thou glory as if thou had not been given it?* For it is the Lord who has given you these things. (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 192).

Another common mistake of the contemplative is individualism. He aspires to a solitary life, supposedly renouncing the world, and what he really does is to build a crystal bubble on whose walls he projects his own mirages. But one thing is to renouncing the appropriation of thoughts, another very different thing is to live *thinking* about the disregard: “A self-indulgent monk has achieved nothing through his renunciation. For what he once did through possessions he still does though possessing nothing” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law*, 96).

³⁹² Pierre Nicole (1625-1695), *Of the knowledge of one’s self*, XXXIV.

³⁹³ James 4:6.

³⁹⁴ 1 Cor. 4:7.

Likewise, it is counter-productive to start the path loaded down with prejudices and absurd expectations; "I have often asked God through prayer for something I thought to be good. And I insisted illogically on asking for it, thus violating the divine will. I would not let God provide whatever He knew would be to my benefit" (Nilus the ascetic, *On Prayer*, 32). Others get discouraged right away when they do not obtain what they looked for. Facing this, it is recommended: "Do not be sorrowed if you do not immediately receive from God that which you asked for, because He desires to benefit you even more through your patient perseverance in prayer. Indeed, what is more superior to associating with God and conversing with Him?" (Nilus the ascetic, *On Prayer*, 34).

The suitable attitude of the meditator can be summarized in the expression "desiring nothing", because "where men are enlightened with the true light, they perceive that all which they might desire or choose is 'nothing' to that which all creatures, as creatures, ever desired or chose or knew. Therefore they renounce all desire and choice, and commit and commend themselves and all things to the eternal Goodness. Nevertheless, there remaineth in them a desire to go forward and get nearer to the eternal Goodness; that is to come to a clearer knowledge, and warmer love, and more comfortable assurance, and perfect obedience and subjection" (*Theologia Germanica* X). Said with the words of Saint Gregory the Great: "Moreover desiring nothing, fearing nothing, in this world, I seemed to myself *on a certain summit* of things, so that I almost believed to be fulfilled in me what I had learned of the Lord's promise through the prophet: I will lift you up upon the high places of the earth (Is. 58:14). For he is lifted up upon the high places of the earth who treads under foot through looking down upon them in his mind even the very things of the present world which seem lofty and glorious" (*Ep.* I.5. MGH, *Ep.* I, 5-6).

Again, the apparently mysterious paradox is found: the “desiring nothing” compatible with the “desiring the divine Goodness”, which seems to be solved with *desiring nothing but the presence of God*. In fact, the language of the contemplatives is often paradoxical. On one hand, he is warned against the sense of appropriation of the benefits of meditation, and he is recommended to “desire nothing” or to meditate without a *reason*. On the other hand, he is presented the beneficial results of the meditative practice: “If you wish to pray... forsake all things, so that you may inherit everything” (Nilus the ascetic, *On Prayer*, 37). These paradoxes not only have a pedagogic value because they try to encourage the candidate, but also reflect the dual essence of the world of human mind. The meditator finds out that the effort is not enough to attain the Grace, but it is also necessary to desire nothing in order to find everything; that the ecstasy is not an experience, even though he may live it like that; that the disregard implies living without a *reason*, even though he may live seeking God, etc. This indicates that the realm of the mind cannot be used to explain the world of the spirit, and that only in the latter are the dualities (*coincidentia oppositorum*) resolved. Ultimately, meditation and contemplation must be vivified by a suitable attitude³⁹⁵. By means of virtues such as humility, devotion, acceptance, etc., you must try to “expel your will from yourself and let God’s will and love reign and dwell in your soul”³⁹⁶. According to the 17th-century monk Antonio de Rojas, the *perfect resignation* or dedication consists in collecting

³⁹⁵ The right attitude is defined by the New Testament as *poverty in spirit*: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt. 5:3). As this verse does not refer to economic poverty, a more correct translation might be proposed: “Blessed are the poor according to the spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”, in order to emphasize that it is a blessing accessible to the impersonal men who have disappropriated the desires of the world. Saint Augustine already interpreted this sentence as “Blessed are those who are not swollen with boastfulness”; likewise, Chrysostom affirmed that Jesus Christ meant: “Blessed are those who are humble”. In sum, it is “poor” him who “has nothing of his own” because he has disregarded his sense of individuality. Poor in spirit are, ultimately, those who, having realizing the Nothing as men and having emptied themselves, have then been filled by the Grace; in E. Delebecque, *Bulletin de l’Association Guillaume Budé* III, 4; IV, 1.

³⁹⁶ Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, p. 40.

the external man within himself, into the center of his soul, since God “is in all and within you”. By means of this act of confidence, that is, of faith, “does God in such a soul what He wills, and it cannot hinder Him”³⁹⁷. But, even in this case, although one may believe to be favored by the divine grace or proud of what he has accomplished, or may achieve the peace of mind, he must never think that it has been a result of his effort. He must always remember that it is written: “Without Me ye can do nothing”. “When you have done something good, remember the words: *Without Me ye can do nothing* (Jn. 15:5)” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law*, 41). Realizing that truth implies a total submission of the own will under the will of the Only One. It is then when one understands and proves that *it is God who worketh in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure*³⁹⁸ (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Diadochus, *On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination*, 93).

1.- The suitable attitude.

On the other hand, to affirm that the objectless meditation is an art or a science does not mean that it can be mechanically carried out. It is not a science in the sense that it cannot provide a technique that guarantees certain results. If there is someone who may assume that contemplation or spiritual realization is a consequence of space-time factors subject to a physical rule, he will just collect headaches and anxiety attacks. Universal mysticism insists in the need for a right spiritual disposition before entering the practice of meditation. René Guénon wrote some lucid pages about the differences between the doctrine of the eye (merely rational comprehension) and the doctrine of the heart (the passing from the mental comprehension to the spiritual realization)³⁹⁹. As the Jesuit Jerónimo Nadal said: “if you seek God in the understanding, you will not find Him. It is in the

³⁹⁷ Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, ch. 11, p. 65.

³⁹⁸ Phil. 2:13.

³⁹⁹ René Guénon, “Heart and brain”, in *Symbols of Sacred Science*, Hillsdale (NY), 2004, ch. 70.

heart where the mystical theology lies”⁴⁰⁰. Otherwise, we will be just carrying out a merely speculative activity with no spiritual effects at all. “When you seek God apart from you, you just tire your understanding, and it is the least useful action to receive the soft influence that exceeds our capacity” (Bernabé de Palma, *Via Spiritus* 3, 4).

What is, in sum, the right attitude to advance in the objectless meditation? The mystics highlight the important role of the will to resign all the faculties, so that one can concentrate with a sustained attention. It is about employing all our will power to move away from the desires and thoughts, in a sort of “saintly allowing ourselves to be consumed and annihilated, so that we may not feel, or love, or desire, or enjoy anything but God alone; and all this with a so great serenity and joy that it seems to be carried out without noticing it”⁴⁰¹. This way, “once refused the concepts, the will remains free and easy to enter the open see of the divinity with the most efficient acts of love, and that is why we will here say that the will ascends where the understanding cannot reach”⁴⁰². Therefore, we must “close our understanding to everything, and remain suspended with a very vivid attention on God..., as him who listens to someone who speaks

⁴⁰⁰ In Miguel Nicolau, S. J., *Jerónimo Nadal. Obras y doctrinas espirituales*, Madrid, 1959, p. 250. This loving aspect of the contemplative activity has been even an object of doctrinal speculations that have tried to separate what is merely affective or sentimental (as sensitive manifestations) from what is strictly spiritual. Authors such as Gerard of Liège (14th century), in his work *The Doctrine of the heart*, based on the biblical passage: “prepare your hearts unto the Lord” (1 Sam. 7:3), explains the steps or stages through which the heart gets ready for recollection: 1) *Praeparatio cordis*: The heart is to be arranged like a room, clean and adorned with many virtues for the mystical marriage. 2) *Custodia cordis*: The heart is like an entrenched camp, attentively watched so that the combatants are not carried along by illusions. 3) *Apertio cordis*: The heart is to be opened to regret, joy, charity, etc., the same way as the door of a house, so that the love may embrace God and the neighbor. 4) *Stabilitas cordis*: The understanding of the heart must be strengthened in the testimony of the martyrs, revelations, prophecies, etc. 5) *Datio cordis*: Man must offer his heart in love and obedience. 6) *Elevatio cordis*: Meditation on faith, hope, straight intention. 7) *Scissio cordis*: The rupture of the heart by ecstatic love. Vid. Gerard of Liège, “Un traité inédit de l’amour de Dieu”, in *RAM*, 12 (1931), p. 374.

⁴⁰¹ Pelayo de San Benito, *Sumario de la Oración*, p. 167.

⁴⁰² Pelayo de San Benito, *Sumario de la Oración*, p. 165.

from above, although the understanding is always stalking. And there is no reflection in what he is doing, as a child or whoever listens to an organ and he likes it; he does not know the art and remains still; and he who knows is paying attention to his own mistakes”⁴⁰³. The mystics explain that this form of prayer without the distraction of the thoughts is the one that pleases God most and the most valued by Him: “the attention on God alone with piety and faith, believing that this is a huge work made to please His Majesty; since it is not at our hands to completely restrain the thought, our Lord perfects it, sending His visitation from above and extending the hand of His grace so that there be silence” (*Third Spiritual Alphabet*, tr. 21, cap. 4).

The Franciscan Francisco de Osuna (c. 1492-1540), author of works such as the six *Spiritual Alphabets*, *Gracioso convite*, *Norte de estados* and some collections of sermons, considered *attention* and *happy* as the two pillars of the meditative practice: “Take this two words and use them very much if you want to please God...: *pay attention only to God and be happy*. If you want to use *pay attention only to God and be happy* at any time in that attention dedicated only to Him, be sure that you will obtain a valuable fruit just by paying *attention to God and being happy with such an attention*... The attention only on Him is the eye of the soul, which penetrates and opens the heart of God... it cleaves through all the creatures, it cleaves through the mysteries of God, it cleaves through the favors and gifts that He has given you, it penetrates up to Himself... up to His heart...; warm, repeated, continuous and pure attention on Him alone... Do not seek your happiness in the things of the world..., honors..., favors..., human sciences, since he who reaches God attentive and happy is richer than that”⁴⁰⁴. The meditator who follows the *way of silence* (*mystika*) must quiet his mind so that God may speak to him. He must be like the “little dog that, while its master is at the table,

⁴⁰³ Saint John of Ávila, *Plática 3ª, A los Padres de la Compañía*, 1.228-233.

⁴⁰⁴ Francisco de Osuna, *Fifth Spiritual Alph.*, fols. 57-58.

places itself opposite him and, rising its hands and looking at its master, remains *still without moving*, waiting for him to give it some bit”⁴⁰⁵.

The art of the objectless meditation consists in remaining little by little in the state of consciousness without thoughts (including the thought “I” or “mine”!), that is, with nobody who claims the actions of thinking or meditating. That is why it has been said, “*prayer is then every way complete, when he that prayeth doth not consider that he is before God in prayer*”⁴⁰⁶. Turning to a more radical image, some others compare the meditator’s attitude with that of a dead man who hears, or sees, or feels nothing of this world because his attention is only and exclusively concentrated on the silence of death: “He who prays like this must quiet his understanding... so that, by making this act of faith, he may remain as if he were dead, without knowing any creature or paying attention to the sensible things, in order to devote his understanding only to God, not to phantoms, images, creatures or discourses; thus, at last, dead to what is sensible and created; that is why it is said: ‘*beati mortui*’ (blessed are the dead)”⁴⁰⁷. But it is also necessary a certain predisposed eagerness. Or, rather, no eagerness. For instance, it is not possible to go deep into with the purpose of profiting from it. The meditative practice must not be accessed in order to get any material or spiritual benefit (even though there may be!). That is why Meister Eckhart said that the true quest is an unselfish action made without a *reason*, that is, with a complete devotion and detachment, always accepting God’s will. The meditator must deeply and honestly examine the reasons that drive him to enter the contemplative way so that he may correct his possible perspective errors, since he must keep in mind that “[God] stands contemplating thy mind, thy thoughts, thy intellections, observing how

⁴⁰⁵ Francisco de Osuna, *Fifth Spiritual Alph.*, fols. 57-58.

⁴⁰⁶ Saint Peter of Alcántara (1499-1562), *Treatise on prayer and meditation*, ch. XII, Eight Document (as translated by M. Fithian, Philadelphia, 1844).

⁴⁰⁷ Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, p. 73.

thou sleekest Him, whether with thy whole soul, not indolently, not carelessly” (Macarius⁴⁰⁸, *Hom.* XXXI, 3).

The contemplative way has personified the virtues of persistence and perseverance in Jacob (Gen. 29:25), who was permitted to ask for Leah’s hand after seven years working for Laban. Leah was not beautiful, because she symbolized “our childhood in the spiritual path”. Thus, after seven years more, he finally got married to the beautiful Rachel. Laredo takes up, from *The Book of the Twelve Patriarchs* by Richard of Saint Victor⁴⁰⁹, the mystical exegesis of this biblical episode, interpreting that “Rachel means *graceful vision*: in order to get married to this gracious vision, Jacob worked for twice seven years; those who seek God, who is an ineffable vision, must not consider that twice seven years are too long, since it is a number of perfection” (Laredo, *Ascent to Mount Zion* XII).

Finally, the sustained self-attention attracts the gaze of the Grace. But it is to be understood that the Grace is not the result of any effort. No sum of efforts can lead us to the spiritual realization. In any case, the effort might be a necessary condition, but not sufficient to obtain the Grace. The implicit idea in this assertion is that, ultimately, man cannot completely purify himself, but it is the Holy Spirit which does purify him. “The Lord leads each one as He sees is necessary”⁴¹⁰ and He finally grants His gifts to him “to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him” (Mt. 11:27). On the other hand, the voluntarism belongs to the world of the “ego-doer”, since the “Spirit” needs no effort to be what it is. Every effort is directed to unbuild the ego, that is, the sense of individuality that blocks the spiritual influence.

⁴⁰⁸ The *Lausiac History* gives us the news of a monk who lived at the desert in the 4th century, called Macarius Alexandrinus (contemporary with Macarius of Egypt), to whom some *Homilies* and several treatises (*De perfectione in spiritu*; *De oratione*; *De elevatione mentis*; *De libertate mentis*) are attributed.

⁴⁰⁹ Richard of Saint Victor, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina*, ed. by J. Migne, vol. CXCVI, Paris, 1844.

⁴¹⁰ Saint Teresa of Jesus, *Mansions*, VI, 8, 10.

However, the role that the Grace plays in man's spiritual realization has not been and is not a peaceful issue. Nonetheless, it has triggered intense discussions that found their high point in the controversy known with the name of *De auxiliis*⁴¹¹, which took place after the publication of the *Concordia* by the Jesuit Luis de Molina⁴¹², whose work was criticized in the publication of the Dominican Domingo Báñez⁴¹³. In a simple way, Antonio de Rojas explained that "All the rosettes and noise of the schools regarding the *auxilia* (help) of God can be reduced to saying that God does everything, but not alone. Thus, here we teach how to use the closest, more proportioned, main means to attain the union with God. The soul is nullified and entrusted to God's hands...; in that soul does God what He wills, with no obstacle at all... This way you will become what you are not, if you were not what you are... Think about a hedgehog that, finding itself pursued..., curls up into a ball, withdrawing into itself...

⁴¹¹ Jacques-Hyacinthe Serry, O. P.: *Historia Congregationum "De auxiliis"*, Venice, 1740.

⁴¹² *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobatione, ad nonnullos primae partis Divi Thomae articulos*, Lisbon, 1588.

⁴¹³ The discussion was about the value of the Grace regarding the doctrine of predestination and free will. According to those who believe that God ineffably knows what will happen, all man's actions are predestined by the ineffability of the divine knowledge. This means not only that all things exist because God already knows them, but also that He consents to it. If this is like that, how to explain man's freedom and responsibility, and his sense of salvation? From this can be deduced that, if God promotes the human will, his bad deeds could not be done without the divine agreement. And if the true cause of sin is due to God and not to man's free will, does this mean that God has already decided who will be saved and who doomed? As the discussion had ended up confronting Jesuits and Dominicans, the issue was transferred to the Spanish Inquisition, and from there to the Pope, who, in 1607, declared that none of both stances was to be considered heterodox, so that Dominicans and Jesuits could freely keep their respective opinions, just with the express prohibition of describing the others' doctrine as against the Faith: *Apologia fratrum praedicatorum in provincia Hispaniae Sacrae Theologiae professorum, adversus quosdam novas assertiones cuiusdam doctoris Ludovici Molinae nuncupati, Theologi de Societate Jesu, quas defendit in suo libello cui titulum inscripsit "concordia..."*, et adversus alios eiusdem novae doctrinae sectatores ac defensores eadem Societate (1595), which he signed together with other brethren of the Order: Friar Diego de Yangüas, Friar Pedro de Herrera, Friar Pedro de Ledesma and Friar Diego Álvarez. There is a Spanish translation, *Apología de los hermanos dominicos contra la Concordia de Luis de Molina*, translation, introduction and notes by Juan Antonio Hevia Echevarría, Oviedo, 2002.

In the same way, you, being in the crux of God's will, carried along wherever God wants, bury yourself in being the increate of God... withdrawing yourself into God for faith and love"⁴¹⁴. Medieval authors and later mystics had distinguished between active and passive, natural and supernatural, perfect and imperfect contemplation. Regarding this, numerous distinctions or gradations have been created over time, so many that they may originate more problems than solutions, overwhelming the neophyte.

The distinction between *acquired contemplation* and *infused contemplation* has also been drawn, making understand that, although certain gifts of the Grace could be accessible to everyone (infused), however, there would be others set aside just for a few. However, "acquired" does not mean that it is achieved by means of the own strength, but that "this contemplation is the normal development of the sanctifying grace, and that the soul can achieve it, helped by God, using a suitable method"⁴¹⁵. Nevertheless, current Catholic theologians agree that there is no other contemplation than the infused one, that is, the one which is carried out under the action of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, being accessible to all believers, and not only to a few favored ones.

XIV.- THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING AND THE RAY OF DARKNESS

When the recollection in the objectless meditation is complete, that is, when the activities of the senses and the understanding cease and the will is firmly determined to "think nothing", an extraordinary phenomenon, very difficult to explain, may happen: the consciousness seems to penetrate an intense, silent, bottomless and impressive

⁴¹⁴ Antonio Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, Madrid, 1630, p. 80-81.

⁴¹⁵ Melquiades Andrés, *Historia de la mística de la Edad de Oro en España y América*, Madrid, 1994, p. 381.

darkness that seems to dilute all barriers and limits, including the own sense of individuality; precisely for that reason, it puts the determination of the contemplative to the test. Also for that reason, it is called *the cloud of unknowing*, because it is a preliminary state bordering on the supraindividual states in which there is forgetfulness of oneself. The contemplatives have called it *supra-essential nothing*, *mystical darkness* or *cloud of unknowing*, given that *nothing* is known there because the relation of a subject that knows objects is transcended. Some philosophers have used a more intellectual vocabulary when affirming that this “profound abyss of darkness... was termed... *nothing*, *non-end*, *non-entity*” (Robert Fludd⁴¹⁶, *Mosaical Philosophy* I, 1). The Kabbalists defined it dark *aleph*, because it hides the brilliant *aleph*, and also *Ain Sof* (Cesare della Riviera, *The Magical World of the Heroes*, Milan, 1603, I, 8).

At the beginning, that darkness is terrifying because it forces the meditator to face his deepest fears and anguishes. It is like a thick dark room where one fears risking his life passing through it. Only he who has experienced that emptiness and darkness can understand the description that Jacob did of it as a “startling” place. Saint John of the Cross has a golden rule to pass through that time-place or night of the spirit: “I will gather no flowers, I will fear no wild beasts, and I will pass over the strongholds and the frontiers” (*Spiritual Canticle*, 3), that is, appropriating nothing. In some Eastern as well as Western literary traditions, that dark cavern is the dwelling of a dragon that guards its small gate, blocking the way to the people who do not possess the suitable qualification, that is, who intend to enter being “somebody”. *Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it*⁴¹⁷. It

⁴¹⁶ He was born in Milgate (Kent) in 1574, studied in Oxford and traveled through Europe. He died in 1637. Besides publishing *Philosophia mosaica* (1638), he also wrote *Medicina catholica* (Frankfurt, 1629), *Monochordon mundi symphonicum* (1620), *Philosophia sacra* (1626), *Integrum morborum mysterium* (1631) and *Clavis philosophiae et alchimiae Fluidianae* (1633).

⁴¹⁷ Cf. Mt. 7:14.

can only be accessed by desiring and thinking nothing, that is, being *nobody*. “But thy darkness is not restful, not quiet to thee by reason of thy uncleanness and unacquaintedness with it, and therefore use it often, and in process of time through feeling of grace it will be more easy and more restful to thee, and that is when thy soul through grace is made so free, and so able and so good and so gathered into itself that it listeth to think on just nothing, then is it in a good darkness” (Walter Hilton, *Scale of Perfection*, II, 24). Although it is a “dark silence in which all lovers lose themselves” (John of Ruysbroeck, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, III, 4), we must endure inside this darkness until it cleanses and frees us from all restlessness.

This darkness is the antechamber of Paradise. And, as Paradise is within every man, the darkness is associated to the spiritual heart that can be accessed through the suitable recollection: “Adam... after this transgression... his thoughts became base and material... The closing of Paradise, and the placing of the cherubim with the burning sword to prevent his entrance (Gen. 3:24), must be regarded as actual events; but they are also realities encountered inwardly by each soul. A veil of darkness... surrounds the heart” (*Philokalia*, vol. III, Symeon the Metaphrast, *Paraphrase of the Homilies of St. Macarius of Egypt* 37). It is a place that leads to another mansion. Only when one cedes control and devotes himself to it unreservedly, that dark cloud shows its true friendly essence. Night becomes day and darkness becomes light, “for within this nought is Jesus hid in His joy, whom thou shalt not find with all thy seeking, unless thou pass this darkness of conscience” (Walter Hilton, *Scale of Perfection*, I, 54). Behind the dark cloud of the sensory self-deprivation is the Light hid, because “the Light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not” (Jn. 1:5).

It is precisely the abundance of light that creates the darkness itself. It is the called *ray of darkness*, an exquisite light that emerges,

happens or is *seen* by those who pass through the cloud of unknowing: “doing this by yourself, you will be led to the ray of the divine darkness. Thus, what you must do is to position yourself in that dark faith”⁴¹⁸. It is a “bright ray that is beyond all thought about this most divine light, which is touched by the heart in a supernatural way” (Callistus and Ignatius, *Centuriae* 68). Therefore, it is verified that “*he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father*” (Jn. 14:9). In effect, “illumination is an ineffable activity which is unknowingly perceived and invisibly seen” (John Climacus, *Scala Paradisi*, step 7.55). It cannot be understood because the mind cannot attain that state. The mind does not understand it because it was not. It is the prize of those who have transcended the senses and the intellectual activities, the sensible and the intelligible, in order to attain, by virtue of this denial, the union with God, who dwells in the darkness, and be there enlightened by the “inaccessible light of God”⁴¹⁹. Some mystics connect this spiritual state with a state previous to the holy *places* of the Christian tradition: the heavenly Paradise, the Heavenly Jerusalem, Mount Zion: “This is that Jerusalem and that Kingdom of God hidden within us, according to God’s will. This place is the cloud of

⁴¹⁸ Antonio de Rojas, *Vida del espíritu*, p. 47.

⁴¹⁹ It is the Grace that is granted to those who persevere guarding the intellect, since “The guarding of the intellect may appropriately be called *light-producing*, *lightning-producing*, *light-giving* and *fire-bearing*, for truly it surpasses endless virtues, bodily and other... And when they have become contemplatives, they bathe in a sea of pure and infinite light, touching it ineffably and living and dwelling in it. They have tasted that the Lord is good (Ps. 34:8), and in these harbingers are fulfilled the words of David: *Surely the righteous shall give thanks unto Thy name, and the upright shall dwell in Thy presence* (Ps. 140:13)” (*Philokalia*, vol. I, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 171). That is why it has been said: “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts” (2 Cor. 4:6); in Jerónimo Nadal, *Anotaciones et meditationes in Evangelia, Dominica III post Pascha*; adnot., 439 b. One of its characteristics is that it produces the intuitive vision that sees “all in all”, because the separation between I and That has been beaten; “Standing there, all of a sudden in the dead of the night, as he looked forth, he saw a light that banished away the darkness of the night and glittered with such brightness that the light which shone in the midst of darkness was far more clear than the light of the day. During this vision, a marvelously strange thing followed, for, as he himself afterward reported, the whole world, gathered together, as it were, under one beam of the sun, was presented before his eyes” (Saint Gregory the Great, *Life of Saint Benedict*, ch. 35).

God's magnificence, where only the pure of heart may enter to contemplate God's face" (Callistus and Ignatius, *Centuriae* 68).

Is this the end of the path? The Christian tradition is unanimous when it affirms that any vision in this life will never be as pure and beatific as that which will take place after death, when all the veils fall: "*Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, whom no man hath seen nor can see...*" (1 Tim. 6:16). But, in any case, the *visions* or *states* experienced in our life are not so far or separate from us, but they constitute a foretaste of our true nature. We are the *light*, because "*whatsoever doth make manifest is light*" (Eph. 5:13), so that all the creatures already have it by nature (*datum*) and can verify it in this life by grace (*donum*). In the Gospel of Saint John it is said: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came as a witness to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe" (Jn. 1:6-7). That "Light Unchangeable" (Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, 10) is the light of the Grace that is achieved in the *osculum contemplationis*, the *cognitio secretorum*, that is not acquired by "understanding", for God is incomprehensible, unknowable and inaccessible. It is a so direct and verifiable mode of knowledge that some mystics define it as a God's "touch" to the soul.

Make that state your dwelling and "you will then attain a vision of the Holy of Holies and be illuminated by Christ with deep mysteries. For in Christ *the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Col. 2:3) are hidden, and in Him *the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily* (Col. 2:9). In the presence of Christ you will feel the Holy Spirit, spring up within your soul. It is the Spirit who initiates man's intellect, so that it can see with *unveiled face* (2 Cor. 3:18)" (*Philokalia*, vol. 1, Hesychius, *On Sobriety*, 29).

XV.- THE REVIVAL OF THE MEDITATIVE PRACTICE IN THE 20TH CENTURY: THOMAS MERTON, THOMAS KEATING, WILLIGIS JÄGER, FRANZ JALICS...

The age-old mistrust that the Western rationalistic culture has always had of the forms of mental prayer and contemplative practices has been one of the reasons why the Christian traditional methods of internalization were gradually relegated to a few monasteries, until being practically forgotten. That is why, by the middle of last century, a Trappist monk called Thomas Keating, determined to provide a Christian method of contemplative prayer comparable to the Hindu, Buddhist or Islamic ones, confessed that “In the 1970s very few were coming to Christian monasteries while many –10,000 every summer according to some estimates– were going to India in search of a guru. They did not find comparable spirituality in the Christian tradition either in catechism classes, high school, college, the local parish, or even in religious life. This seemed to me to be tragic because through my studies and experience in the monastery, I realized the rich treasures that the Christian contemplative heritage possessed”⁴²⁰. His experience as an abbot had led him to know some of the perspective errors of the monastic life. One of them was the assumed incompatibility of active life and contemplative life, and the subsequent reduction of the latter to the monasteries, depriving lay people of the benefits of the forms of mental prayer⁴²¹. Likewise,

⁴²⁰ Thomas Keating, *The Better Part: Stages of Contemplative Living*, New York, 2000, p. 47.

⁴²¹ For example, the research made by Marilyn May Mallory on the contemplative prayer has shown that, in the Spanish version of the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, in one point at least there is a serious mistranslation of the original text. According to the mentioned translation, the text read: “We must be detached *from* all our desires in order to reach divine union”. But what the Pseudo-Dionysius actually wrote was that we must be detached *in* all our desires. Thus, this mistranslation, popularized by Saint John of the Cross, made people believe that it was necessary to break free from all desire, which reduced the contemplative practice to the monastic life. On the contrary, to be detached *in* our desires implies a radically different point of view, which places the center of attention on the motivations of the false *I*; Marilyn May Mallory, *Christian Mysticism. Transcending Techniques*, Assen, 1977.

Keating himself demanded a reappraisal of the sacred symbols and the attention on breathing as means to turn attention away from the thoughts⁴²² until entering the complete recollection, which he defined as *centering prayer*. “There is no *I* to enjoy the experience during the time it perdures. If there is self-reflection, this grace is not full union. When we emerge from the experience, there may be the sense of a gap”⁴²³. Finally, after his contact with the Indian metaphysics, Father Keating took up again the contemplative methods practiced in the original Christianity. Of course, the example of Keating is not an isolated case. Thomas Merton, another Trappist monk, had already pointed out the similarities between the contemplative experience of Eastern and Western monks⁴²⁴. Another Benedictine abbot, Willigis Jäger⁴²⁵, immersed himself in Zen Buddhism in order to vivify the ancient Christian contemplative practices, which caused then-Cardinal Ratzinger to forbid him from speaking in public.

Paradoxically, it was a Jesuit priest (order that has traditionally undervalued the contemplative practice), Franz Jalics, who, in his *Contemplative Retreat*, explained one of the most complete contemplative methods, letting the Christian tradition regain recitation (*mantra*), body postures, breathing, etc. as means to move away from the mental flow and attain inner peace. These and many other examples that could be mentioned of the recognition of the efficacy of meditation⁴²⁶ or contemplation have an even higher value for they come from people who practice a religion, Catholicism, which is so

⁴²² Thomas Keating, *The Better Part*, cit., p. 86.

⁴²³ Thomas Keating: *The Better Part*, cit., p. 92.

⁴²⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, New York, 2004.

⁴²⁵ Willigis Jäger, *Contemplation: A Christian path*, Liguori (MO), 1994, among other works by the same author.

⁴²⁶ In the last few decades, it has been developed some important movements that have adapted the traditional meditation methods to the Western format. One of them, arisen in the *Massachusetts General Hospital* with the aim of studying its beneficial properties against stress, anxiety and other psycho-mental problems, is

little inclined to open itself to a possible external influence on its own tradition. Anyway, as the works of the mentioned authors are of easy access, the interested reader is referred to them.

After this tight synthesis of the contemplative method in the Christian tradition, it is time now to stop to study the works of some authors who more explicitly put the fruit of their metaphysical experience in writing.

the *Mindfulness*, whose experimentation has also spread through different universities.

SEEING IN NON-SEEING; A NON-HUMAN FORM OF KNOWLEDGE: SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA

“Here is the true knowledge of what has been sought and here is the seeing that consists in not seeing... that is to say, to realize that nothing known by human comprehension can be known about Him” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 163, 166).

Gregory of Nyssa was born in the region of Caesarea of Cappadocia about 335-340⁴²⁷. The education level of his father, who had the profession of rhetorician, as well as the availability of economic resources in his family, contributed to provide young Gregory with a solid philosophical education. Although he was professor of Rhetoric, his mystical vocation and the influence of his friend Gregory of Nazianzus, drove him to withdraw to the monastery on the Iris, in Pontus, in order to dedicate himself to his ascetic practices and to the study of Theology. His brother Basil, metropolitan of Caesarea, consecrated him as Bishop of Nyssa in 371 and, in 372, he was appointed as the Archbishop of Sebaste. He had a prominent role in the First Council of Constantinople of 381, which completed the First Council of Nicaea.

He wrote different works, such as *Commentaries on Song of the Songs* or *On Christian perfection*. One of them, the *Life of Moses*, written about 392, is particularly important because of his description of the contemplative way. This text is divided in two parts.

⁴²⁷ Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et Théologie mystique. Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse*, Paris, 1944; A. Spira (ed.), *The Biographical Works of Gregory of Nyssa*, Philadelphia, 1984.

Whereas the first one talks about the most noteworthy events of Moses' life, narrated in the passages of the *Exodus* and *Numbers*, the second part, *Theoria (Contemplation on the Life of Moses)*, makes an allegorical interpretation of such episodes from the point of view of the contemplative route. For this purpose, Gregory starts from the *Life of Moses* as a perfect model of the soul that makes an effort and finally attains the union with God. Although he starts from the works of Philo of Alexandria and Origen, he is also inspired by Plato, Plotinus, Proclus and the Stoics.

Man aspires to perfection by means of the virtue. But, deep down, "the person who goes after true virtue participates in nothing except God, who is absolute virtue" (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, I, 7-8). Nonetheless, given that the virtue consists in *resembling God*, since "There is none good but One, that is, God" (Mk. 10:18), how to find God if He is infinite and exceeds all knowledge? With this question, Gregory introduces us into the contemplative way: "Neither sight nor hearing produce contemplation of God nor is it grasped by any of the usual perceptions" (*Life of Moses*, II, 157), "*Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard*" (1 Cor. 2:9). It is about a *non-human* or *theological* knowledge, that is, a direct knowledge "not in mirrors and reflections" (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 232).

Gregory of Nyssa takes as his main theme of his metaphysical teachings the biblical episode of Moses' ascent to Mount Sinai, where YHWH, "He who Is", show and reveal His Sacred Name. As the ascent of Moses to Mount Sinai that is described in the Exodus 19:16 is a mystical trance or ecstasy, Gregory of Nyssa⁴²⁸ lays out in his work the possibility that such a trance can be reproduced by

⁴²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa relates how Moses, after entering the darkness, felt that "his soul was seized with terror and his body trembled with fright, so that the emotion of his soul was not hidden from the Israelites. He admitted to them that he was terrified at what appeared to him, and his body was not without trembling" (*Life of Moses*, I, 43).

those who have the suitable disposition and find the hidden keys of the process in certain biblical passages. Gregory explains that the way to access the Divinity is a different process of knowledge from that of *human comprehension*: “to realize that nothing known by human comprehension can be known about Him” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 166). Using a strictly etymological meaning, he defines this way or gnosis as *theognosia* (theology, knowledge about God): “The mountain of the knowledge of God (*theology*)... Truly the mountain of God is steep and difficult to climb” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 152, 158). More specifically, in order to explain this route, Gregory takes his time to describe the three *theophanies* or “appearances” of God to Moses: the burning bush (Ex. 3:1-15), the thick cloud (Ex. 19:16-25) and the cleft of the rock (Ex. 33:18-23).

This *mystical* (that is, secret or silent) theology is, therefore, a *non-human* form of knowledge showed by Moses, which initially consists in disregarding the information that comes from the senses, since “in the contemplation of the perceptions we transcend the knowledge which has its root in the senses” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 156) and in the own understanding, that is, the thoughts (the clamor of the trumpets that harass the ascent to the mount according to Exodus 19:19). Certainly, that way to know God also requires certain qualities and virtues that only a few are able to cultivate, since most people give up the ascent just at the base because of their fear to die to (the vanities of) this world.

Common people are accustomed to an ordinary, human form of knowledge, that is, the kind of knowledge that is processed by the five senses and is interpreted by the understanding. They are so clung to their small world of sensations and concepts that they cannot or they do not want to conceive any other form of *non-human* (supraindividual) cognition. A state without such human sensory (that is, individual) experiences would simply be unbearable, so “All

the people could not bear what had appeared and was heard. A common request was brought to Moses in order that the Law be arbitrated through him” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, I, 45). In order that they may approach, ascend and reach the summit of the Sacred Mountain, God commands him to wash their clothes: “the garments represent for us the external figure of life” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 155). Likewise, they need to take their sandals (the understanding) off, since it is necessary to completely strip the soul: “The voice from the light prohibited Moses to approach the mountain who was weighed down with lifeless sandals... The dead and earthly skins... must be removed from our soul’s feet” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, I, 20, 22).

Reaching the summit of Mount Sinai, the second theophany takes place, represented by the image of the *mystical* darkness⁴²⁹. “Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was” (Ex. 20:21), reached the “tabernacle, not made with [human] hands” (Heb. 9:11), where “Moses was instructed by a type in the mystery of the tabernacle which embraces the universe”⁴³⁰.

Gregory of Nyssa wonders, “What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God?” (*Life of Moses*, II, 162). What mysteries are there in the “tabernacle which embraces the universe”? Certainly, when it is said that *Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was* (Ex. 20:21), that *He made darkness His secret place* (Ps. 18:11), it is to be understood that he is beyond the senses and the human intelligence. This way, “Having left behind everything visible, not only regarding what sense grasps but what the mind thinks it sees, he continues to advance deeper until by the pur-

⁴²⁹ J. Daniélou, *Mystique de la ténèbre chez Grégoire de Nysse*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, II, Paris, 1952-1995, pp.1872.1885.

⁴³⁰ “This tabernacle would be Christ, who is *the power of God and the wisdom of God* (1 Cor. 1:24), who in His own nature was not made with hands, yet capable of being made when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected among us” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 174).

suit of the mind he gains entry to the invisible and incomprehensible and there he sees God” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 163). In this way, “Once he entered the inmost sanctuary (*adyton*) of the divine *mystagogia*, there while concealed from sight, he was with that which was invisible, I think he teaches that, by what he had done, that the person wishing to associate with God needs to leave all visible things, raising his mind to the invisible and incomprehensible as to the top of a mountain, believing that there is the Divinity in which comprehension does not attain” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, I, 46).

Once the senses and the intelligence have been suspended, the soul remains at an astonishing darkness where, paradoxically, there is a *non-human* way of seeing or understanding. It is about a seeing in non-seeing: “Here is the true knowledge of what has been sought and here is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Thus that profound Evangelist, John, who penetrated into this luminous darkness, tells us that *no man hath seen God at any time*⁴³¹, defining by that negation that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but by every intelligent creature” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 163). And, as that supra-essential darkness allows “seeing without seeing”, that darkness is *luminous*.

Finally, the third theophany takes place when Moses begs God to show him His face (Ex. 33:18) and then he is replied: *thou canst not see My face, for there shall no man see Me and live* (Ex. 33:20). However, He allows him to see His back: “And the Lord said, ‘Behold, there is a place by Me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock. And it shall come to pass, while My glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with My hand... and thou shall see My back parts, but My face shall not be seen’ (Ex. 33:21-23).

⁴³¹ Jn. 1:18.

This indicates that the perfect vision of God can only take place after *death* and that, therefore, the most excellent vision in this world can only be that of *the back parts of God*⁴³². However, it is to be reminded that this previous “death”, necessary to see the face of God, also has another meaning. It is about the “death” of him who dies to the created world, that is, of him who no longer believes the sensible objects at all because he understands that his true nature, “our kingdom”, *is not of this world*. He who wishes to die (to the vanities of the world) before dying (biological death) knows that only that death (of the ego) is the one which will give him Life in this life.

⁴³² This is used by Gregory of Nyssa to introduce us into the symbolism of “seeing the back of God, after those lofty ascents and fearful, glorious theophanies” (*Life of Moses*, II, 255) as equivalent to following God (*Life of Moses*, II, 220). Saint Gregory of Nyssa insists that the Lord says, *if any man will come after Me* (Lk. 9:23), and not “if any man will come before Me”. *Come, follow Me* (Lk. 9:23). He who follows Him sees His back, “therefore, now Moses, who seeks to see God, now is taught how he can behold Him: to follow God wherever He might lead is to behold God. For his passing signifies He is leading the one who follows. For a person who does not know the way cannot finish it safely except by following behind his guide. Therefore, He who leads by His guidance shows the way to the person who is following. He who follows, then, will not turn aside from the right way if always he keeps the back of his leader in sight. (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 252).

SAINT AUGUSTINE AND THE METHOD OF SELF-ATTENTION

“What man is at present able to live as he wishes, when it is not in his power so much as to live?” (*City of God*, XIV, 25).

“You were within and I was without, and I sought You out there” (*Confessions*, X, 38).

“I am still a burden to myself because I am not yet filled by You” (*Confessions*, X, 39).

Augustine was born in Thagaste (Numidia) on November the 13th, 354 in a well-off family that facilitated him to complete all the three scholastic degrees in Thagaste, Madaurus and Carthage. The first of the mentioned degree involved the children’s elementary lessons of reading, writing and mathematics. The second degree, which was attended from twelve to sixteen years old, covered the study of the Latin language through the texts of historians and poets. Finally, the third degree, taught to students of sixteen to twenty years old, encompassed rhetoric and philosophy. In Carthage, he specialized in in eloquence, a discipline that was traditionally recommended to those who wanted to work in the law or teaching. Despite the attempts of his mother, Monica, to educate him in Christianity, the inquisitiveness of young Augustine led him to frequent the company of certain esoteric and philosophical personalities and groups, reading every text that fell into his hands (Virgil, Cicero, Sallust, Horace, Varro, Apuleius, Terence, Quintilian, Homer, Aristotle, Plato, the Neoplatonists, etc.). Augustine himself indicates the moment when he began his spiritual quest, at nineteen, after the reading of Cicero’s *Hortensius*. “It was this book which quite definitely changed my

whole attitude and turned my prayers toward You”⁴³³ because it undoubtedly laid out that happiness does not consist in the satisfaction of the senses or the possession of wealth, but in contemplation. This seeking for a contemplative way drove him to become a member of a Manichaean community, though he quit before passing the first degree (*Conf.* V, 13; V, 18). Already in those years, he cherished the project to form a group of people who devoted themselves to the monastic life⁴³⁴. Disappointed by Manichaeism, he tried with a group of friends the way it had been practiced since ancient times by some movements of Epicurean inspiration⁴³⁵. It is known that the Epicureans advocated a sort of withdrawal in communities that lived apart from the worldly social life with the aim of devoting themselves to ascetic exercises and to the practice of philosophy, in the shelter of a fraternal cohabitation. “Many in my band of friends, consulting about and abhorring the turbulent vexations of human life, had often considered and were now almost determined to *remoti a turbis otiose vivere* (undertake a peaceful life, away from the turmoil of men). This we thought could be obtained by bringing together what we severally owned and thus making of it a common household, so that in the sincerity of our friendship nothing should belong more to one than to the other; but all were to have one purse and the whole was to belong to each and to all” (*Conf.* VI, 24).

When he was about thirty, the reading of Plato and Plotinus causes a new spiritual crisis on him. He himself would years later admit that, even though his vision of Neoplatonism made him disregard materialism, it also filled him with pride, because he was unable to see that the human soul cannot heal itself, no matter how much ascetics, philosophy or fraternal cohabitation he practiced. Thus, un-

⁴³³ *Conf.*, III, 7; VI, 18; VIII, 17. The Spanish translation of the *Complete Works* of Saint Augustine has been edited by the BAC.

⁴³⁴ Project from which he gained important experiences for his later plans. Regarding this, Lope Cilleruelo (O.S.A.) studied the similarities and differences of the Neoplatonic ascetic and contemplative method and the one set out later by Augustine; *El monacato de san Agustín*, Valladolid, 1966, p. 51 ff. and pp. 76-81.

⁴³⁵ A.-J. Festugière, *Épicure et ses Dieux*, Paris, 1946, p. 69 ff.

covered the tyranny caused by the vanity of the merely intellectual knowledge, the experience of the ecstasy described by Plato or Plotinus became an obsession that will cause Augustine further spiritual crises: “For now full of what was in fact my punishment, I had begun to desire to seem wise. I did not mourn my ignorance, but rather was puffed up with knowledge” (*Conf.* VII, 26). The reading of Saint Paul and, above all, the conversations and example of Bishop Ambrose, drove him to convert to Christianity. Some years later, he will have the opportunity, in *On True Religion*, to unmask the false religious worships and the distortions of the *vera philosophia* (true philosophy), noting one of the essential points of his disagreement: the necessary intervention of the Grace and, therefore, the need to resign the own will and devote oneself to a Higher Will. It has been discussed that, against the way of purification and withdrawal from temporary things and the practice of virtue proposed by the Platonists, Saint Augustine’s proposed way is the one of the Grace (*City of God*, X, 32). He insists, on several occasions, that he was only able to find himself when God helped him do it, since only He can restore his condition of a fallen man. All the rest is but vanity and pride caused by knowledge: “For thus we see pride wearing the mask of high-spiritedness, although only You, O God, are high above all. Ambition seeks honor, whereas only You should be honored above all, and glorified forever... Thus the soul commits fornication when she is turned from You, and seeks apart from what she cannot find pure and untainted until she returns to You” (*Conf.*, II, 12, 14). That is why he will insist several times that humility is the main virtue of the spiritual seeker who aspires to reach the summit of the contemplative way: “In that way (for seizing and holding the truth), the first part is humility, the second, humility, the third, humility, and this I would continue to repeat as often as you might ask direction” (*Letter* 118, 22). After his ordination, he will return to Thagaste, where he reorganized the monastic life of the Christian community. In 391, despite having to give up the monastic life for being appointed as the auxiliary bishop of Valerius, he managed to

introduce the monastic life into the Episcopal see. About 395, he was consecrated as the Bishop of Hippo. He died on August the 28th, 430.

I.- SAINT AUGUSTINE'S ECSTATIC EXPERIENCES

There is no doubt that Augustine's teachings regarding contemplation were the fruit of his own mystical or ecstatic experiences, even though some authors have doubted it or relativized it⁴³⁶. However, from some paragraphs of the work of Saint Augustine (specifically, *The greatness of the soul*, 33, 76), some authors deduce that he never experienced a mystical ecstasy and that he talked about it according to the narrations of Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, Ambrose or Manlius Theodorus, and that, therefore, the supposed experiences at Ostia Tiberina and Milan described by Saint Augustine were merely rhetorical⁴³⁷. Certainly, in the mentioned text, Augustine confines himself to talking, not in the first person but in the third person, about the mystical experiences of the last few mansions of the spiritual path. But that could be owing to the saint's modesty. It is enough to read the researches by Father Fulbert Cayré⁴³⁸, Gustave Combès or P. C. Jean van Lierde to be convinced that Saint Augustine is one of the greatest ascetics and mystics of the Christian tradition.

Out of his ecstatic experiences, the so-called "vision of Ostia" (*Conf.* IX, 23) has come to be the most explicit⁴³⁹. This experience is described as a wondrous mystery to which one can only react with

⁴³⁶ The Augustinian Ephraem Hendrikx (O.S.A.), in his day, examined some of the many interpretations that have been expressed regarding this issue: *Augustinus Verhältnis zur Mystik*, Würzburg, 1936.

⁴³⁷ Lope Cilleruelo, *El monacato de san Agustín*, Valladolid, 1966, p. 97.

⁴³⁸ Fulbert Cayré, *La contemplation augustinienne*, Paris, 1927.

⁴³⁹ Thus, P. Henry, *La vision d'Ostie. Sa place dans la vie et l'œuvre de Saint Augustin*, Paris, 1938. Connected with the descriptions of the Plotinian "ecstasy" in A. Mandouze, "L'extase d'Ostie, possibilités et limites de la méthode des parallèles textuels", in *Augustinus Magister*, Paris, 1954, vol. I, pp. 231 ff.

horror and fervor –*inhorresco et inardesco*– (*Conf.* XI, 11). Here is one of those ecstatic descriptions: “And thus by degrees I was led upward from bodies to the soul which perceives them by the bodily senses, and from there on the soul’s inward faculty, to which the bodily senses report outward things, and this belongs even to the capacities of the beasts; and thence on up to the reasoning power, to whose judgment is referred the experience received from the bodily sense. And when this power of reason within me also found that it was changeable, it raised itself up to its own intellectual principle, and withdrew its thoughts from experience, abstracting itself from the contradictory throng of phantasms in order to seek for that light in which it was bathed. Then, without any doubting, it cried out that the unchangeable was better than the changeable. From this it follows that the mind somehow knew the unchangeable, for, unless it had known it in some fashion, it could have had no sure ground for preferring it to the changeable. And thus with the flash of a trembling glance, it arrived at *that which is*. And ‘I saw Your invisibility understood by means of the things that are made’” (*Conf.* VII, 23).

Augustine admits that, in order to take the last step and penetrate the seventh mansion, we need God’s help. Only that way is it possible to see that light which is different from all the rest that the eyes or the mind may see: “And being admonished by these books to return into myself, I entered into my inward soul, guided by You. This I could do because You were my helper. And I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, saw above the same eye of my soul and above my mind the Immutable Light. It was not the common light, which all flesh can see; nor was it simply a greater one of the same sort, as if the light of day were to grow brighter and brighter, and flood all space. It was not like that light, but different, yea, very different from all earthly light whatever... You did beat back the weakness of my sight, shining forth upon me Your dazzling beams of light, and I trembled with love and fear. I realized that I was far away from You in the land of unlikeness (*et contremui amore et*

horrore: et inveni longe me esse a te in regione dissimilitudinis)” (*Conf.*, VII, 16). Suffice these two examples to understand why Saint Augustine is described as the metaphysician of the inner being.

II.- TRACES PREVIOUS TO HUMAN EXISTENCE

Saint Augustine assumes the Platonic concept of philosophy as *the silent and secret conversation of the soul with itself about the being*. In its quality of “effective science”, he defines philosophy as the wisdom that is aimed at contemplation (*On the Trinity*, XII, 22). This is really the *vera philosophia* in the sense of *amor sapientiae* (love of wisdom), because, “if wisdom is God, who made all things, as it attested by the divine authority and truth, then the philosopher is a lover of God” (*City of God*, VIII, 1). And, as the supreme goal of the *vera philosophia* is to know and love God and our neighbor by love to God, it is firstly necessary that the soul detaches itself from all earthly things. That is why it has been said: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*. In sum, Augustine understands the *vera philosophia* like the Platonic tradition (*Phaedo*, 81a) did, as a “learning to die” to the world of the sensible things, in order to be reborn in the heavenly world (*Letters* 9 and 19).

In Saint Augustine, therefore, an already classic point of view is found: “*Man has no other reason for philosophizing than that he may be happy*” (*City of God*, XIX, I), since “You all will to be happy, you do not will to be wretched” (*On the Trinity*, XIII, 6). Besides, “No one is wise unless he is happy” (*The happy life*, II, 14). Adapting the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus, Saint Augustine affirms that there is in man an *instinctus naturalis* that drives him to seek happiness. This idea of “happiness” is something *previous* to human existence, it is a *recollected* idea. Let us remind that, according to Plato, “Seeing then that the soul is immortal... it is no wonder that it should be able to recollect all that it knew before about vir-

tue... since, it would seem, research and learning are wholly recollection (Plato, *Meno*, 81c-d). Given that the fall is a consequence of the forgetfulness that we are gods (*Phaedrus*, 248c), the recovery of that condition requires a learning that is but recollecting. In sum, “what we call learning is recollection”, so that “there is no teaching but only recollection” of our original Fatherland⁴⁴⁰. Augustin himself, in the book VII of his *Confessions*, mentions that the Neoplatonism helped him take his first steps from that region of unlikeness toward contemplation, by means of the disregard of passions and the resignation of the senses. Saint Augustine calls this innate ideas the *vestigia Trinitatis* or “traces of the Trinity” (*On the Trinity*, IX-XV)⁴⁴¹, so that, through those embers or traces, we can re-know our condition of beings made *in the image of God* and be transformed *in Him* by means of the Grace. But, taking into account that, “when man is said to have been made to the image of God, it is said with reference to the interior man, where reason is to be found and intelligence” (*The literal meaning of Genesis*, I, 28). This way, taking up likewise another Neoplatonic idea that conceived man as a “*microcosm*” supplied with a divine spark, the Bishop of Hippo explained man as a “*microtheos*” or *deus creatus*.

But, although man “was made from nothing”, he does not come from anything or anyone, but he is created by Him who Is. That is, as the creator of man, God is *in* man. And it is precisely that footprint or image which drives him to long for happiness. And it is also that footprint, memory or image which inspires him the consciousness of his own immortality. In effect, “I would not exist, I would simply not be at all, unless You were in me” (*Conf.*, I, 2). His peace, his durable happiness and his consciousness of immortality imply a return to his point of Origin, an encounter with his Creator. But that

⁴⁴⁰ Plato, *Meno*, 81e-82a; *Phaedrus*, 278a; Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 6, 7; V, 1, 6.

⁴⁴¹ The one and triune Christian God with the Platonic hypostases, or the Plotinian ones (the One, the *nous* and the soul), with God, the angels and the soul (cf. M.J.B. Allen, “Marsilio Ficino on Plato, The Neoplatonists and the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity”, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 37, 1984, pp. 555-584).

return to God is firstly a gradual *return to himself*, “for if you wish more and more to exist, you will draw near to Him who exists supremely” (*On Free Will*, III, 21).

To distance himself from God leads man to the “region of unlikeness”, that is, to the world subject to space-time factors: “If, then, one is nearer to God the liker he is to Him, there is no other distance from God than unlikeness” (*City of God*, IX, XVII). To return to himself in order to return to God implies to resemble God, so that, the more eager the soul is for temporary things, the more unlike it will be (*City of God*, IX, XVII). He invokes again the wisdom of the Greek masters: “At present, it is sufficient to mention that Plato determined the final good to be to live according to virtue, and affirmed that he only can attain to virtue who knows and imitates God” (*City of God*, VIII, VIII). This is the right meaning of the Socratic precept of the “autognosis” (self-knowledge). But the famous apothegm “know thyself” must not be a goal, but the starting point of the spiritual path: “*noli foras ire, in te ipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas; et si animam mutabilem inverteris, transcede te ipsum*”⁴⁴² (*On true religion*, 39, 72). When man refuses that return (*redire*), he incurs pride (*superbia*); “Be she confounded that she may return (to her origin), who was vaunting herself that she should not return. It was pride then that hindered the soul’s return... As she had gone away from herself, so went she away from her Lord” (*Sermon* 142, 3). Then, the question is, how to escape from the world of unlikeness and resemble God? (*City of God*, IX, XVII).

Man places himself in the world of unlikeness when he lives paying attention to external things. Most times, it is because of his pure eagerness for novelties, mere “lust of the eyes” (1 Jn. 2:16), wish experiencing and knowing (*Conf.*, X, 35), that is, he is carried along by his instinct of appropriation of the things. Thus, he believes that the

⁴⁴² “Do not roam abroad, return unto yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man. And, if you find your soul changeable, transcend yourself”.

things serve him, but it is him who lives alienated by them, that is, forced to go out of himself. He assumes that happiness lies in hoarding possessions and other external objects, but “men who desire what is outside are exiled from themselves” (*Expositions on the Psalms*, 57, 1). The problem is that many people are confident that they can gain happiness by means of the possession of wealth, the enjoyment of all kinds of pleasures, etc. Nonetheless, all these joys are unstable, since they go by; and they are not full, for they drive us to desire them more intensely. Therefore, man lives as a slave of his desires and of the faith he has placed in the perceptions that come from the senses. When he questions whether such perceptions may be wrong and distorting the reality, generating mirages that stupefy the soul, man will be starting to wake to the true freedom. As well as Plato explained in his myth of the cavern, freedom can only be achieved when one breaks free from the heavy sleep of the senses.

III.- THE QUEST

Man feels impelled to inquire about his origin and about his destiny, that is, to assure himself of his transcendence. However, he soon realizes that everything that is subject to change (*mutabilia*) does not really exist. Therefore, he cannot count on the changeable if he wants to finish his internalization. We hear Plotinian echoes again: “‘Everlasting’ was adjoined to ‘Being’, and ‘Being’ to ‘Everlasting’, and we have ‘Everlasting Being’. We must take this ‘Everlasting’ as expressing no more than Authentic Being” (*Enneads*, III, 7, 6). Augustine adapts even to the most rationalist positions, adding that, even admitting that the things may last long, the truth is that human life does not (*Sermon* 109). The death itself is presented to us as the end of our quest for eternal happiness and impels us to guess what will happen with us after the final door⁴⁴³. Thus, we aspire to

⁴⁴³ The fact itself of the spiritual quest seems paradoxical, since it involves the existence of a seeker, what is sought and the action of seeking. And while I seek my-

experience the state that we will have after death, in order to be convinced of our own immortality.

Nevertheless, in this quest for the own transcendence, for happiness or for God, what instruments do I have? If every man already possesses *something intimate* that links him to God, we do not have to seek anything outside of us, but we must carry out a process of internalization that facilitates the detachment of all those things which are blocking our way, a process that connects us with what we ourselves are. In sum, when I have sought God, "I have not found anything about Him, except what I had already retained in my memory from the time I learned of Him" (*Conf.*, X, 35). The soul seeks itself because, in some way, it already knows itself. "Wherefore, the very fact that the soul seeks itself argues convincingly that the soul is more known than unknown to itself. For the soul, as it seeks to know itself, knows its own seeking and its own unknowing" (*On the Trinity*, X, 5). Nonetheless, "how can soul come into soul, as though it were possible for the soul not to be in the soul?" (*On the Trinity*, X, 6). How is it possible to seek something that has not been lost because it is always present within us? Regarding this, Augustine distinguishes between knowing oneself and thinking of oneself. The soul knows itself, it is always conscious. But it is not always thinking of itself or recalling itself, because the soul remains forgotten by

self, who am I then? Where am I while I seek myself? Can I find myself out of me? And if what is sought is out of me, am I not converting my spiritual quest into a mere appropriation of external objects? Likewise, if I want to know myself, the fact itself of knowing already alienates me from the essential oneness of the spiritual knowledge, because it implies a knower, a known object and the action of knowing. In order to explain the paradoxes of the spiritual knowledge, Saint Augustine turns to the example of love: "Well then, when I, who make this inquiry, love anything, there are three things concerned: myself, and that which I love, and love itself" (*On the Trinity*, IX, 2). How to solve this plurality in order to favor the necessary withdrawal of the senses, the will and the imagination? Saint Augustine does not solve the paradox, but he subsumes them in the rhetoric employed to explain the mystery of the Trinity: "But in these three, when the mind knows itself and loves itself, there remains a trinity: mind, love, knowledge; and this trinity is not confounded together by any commingling: although they are each severally in themselves and mutually all in all, or each severally in each two, or each two in each. Therefore all are in all" (*On the Trinity*, IX, 8).

itself when it is focused outside, on the external objects that enter through the windows of the senses. “But the mind errs when it so lovingly and intimately connects itself with these images, as even to consider itself to be something of the same kind” (*On the Trinity*, X, 8). Consequently, so that the soul may find out itself, “let it withdraw that which it has added to itself” (*On the Trinity*, X, 11), and thus it will be able to return from the attention on the plurality of objects to its essential, transcendent oneness.

IV.- THE METHOD OF SELF-ATTENTION

All the works by Saint Augustine contain references to the stages of the spiritual life and the internalization method, but it is *The greatness of the soul* where we can find the greatest development about these topics. In it, he enumerates the seven stages or levels of the spiritual path, although he clarifies that the seventh one is not strictly a level, but a *dwelling* or *mansion*: “*neque iam gradus, sed quaedam mansio, quo illis gradibus pervenitur*”⁴⁴⁴ (*The greatness of the soul*, 33, 76), since there is no change or evolution, but pure contemplation or rest in the eternal life. As well, in other of his writings (*Christian Doctrine*, II, VII), he explains the characteristics of each successive level that must be passed in solitude: *Cum nobis solis loquimur*⁴⁴⁵ (*Soliloquies*, II, 14):

1st To be converted –*converti*– to God with the aim of knowing Him and attach ourselves to Him.

2nd To humble oneself –*mitescere*– for piety, subduing our ego to another authority.

3rd To exercise –*exercere*– in *science* by means of the study of the Scriptures.

⁴⁴⁴ “Here we no longer have a level but in reality a mansion at which one arrives via those levels”.

⁴⁴⁵ “We speak to ourselves alone”.

4th To persist in *science* so that the spirit may detach from the temporary things and guide its love to the eternal ones.

5th With the detachment from the temporary things is the purification of the senses and the soul attained.

6th Then you die to the earthly world in order to be reborn in the life of the spirit.

7th Finally, you access true wisdom, peace or pure contemplation.

Nevertheless, this arrangement of the stages or states of the spiritual path can be simplified even more. For this purpose, Augustine takes up the three moments of the Neoplatonic introversion that summarize the process of internalization that starts with the detachment from the sensible objects and the withdrawal of the senses and leads us to concentrate all our attention on the quest for our spiritual core. Actually, in *Against the Academics*, he praises the Neoplatonists for having clarified that contemplation implies to overcome the senses in order to access the *intelligible world*. Thus, he will talk about the three moments of *aversio*, *introversio* and *conversio*. And, in *On true religion*, he goes over it again, synthesizing the three steps of the contemplative step in these terms: 1st Do not spill out of yourself. 2nd Return to yourself, for there is where the light of God dwells. And 3rd Transcend yourself, guiding your steps towards the light itself (*Soliloquies*, II, 19, 33).

First of all, the process of internalization implies the inquiry about what is corporeal. The first question lies in understanding that the external objects are concepts or words that are formed in the mind by the action of thinking. The question is, which ones of all those objects defined by words are real? The human mind lives fed on concepts and words that are like labels that it assigns to the different pieces of information that come from the senses, but, up to which extent is all the information that reaches the mind through the senses real or true? Following the Platonic method, Augustine concludes with the impermanence of the external knowledge and the

need to delimit or mark out the world of reality or permanence, for it is where the soul (spirit) moves.

How? The first step consists in disregarding the external attachments that keep it confused and out of itself: "As therefore the soul is within, it goes forth in some sort from itself, when it exerts the affection of love towards these, as it were, footprints of many acts of attention. And these footprints are, as it were, imprinted on the memory, at the time when the corporeal things which are without are perceived" (*On the Trinity*, X, 11). Saint Augustine defines this turning of the attention to the external world as *dispersion*. The first dispersion is the one of the senses, because each one of them calls for attention, forcing me to be *outside of myself* and to be what I am not. Secondly, the dispersion of the mind: the imagination that sinks me into an endless multitude of worldly experiences. Such a dispersion leaves man at the mercy of an undefined sequence of "I's" that strive to call for attention, displacing the true "I", that is to say, that which can affirm "I am". One can doubt everything; one can even doubt his doubt. But he cannot doubt his own existence: "Yet who ever doubts that he himself lives, and remembers, and understands, and wills, and thinks, and knows, and judges? Seeing that even if he doubts, he lives; if he doubts, he remembers why he doubts; if he doubts, he understands that he doubts; if he doubts, he wishes to be certain; if he doubts, he thinks; if he doubts, he knows that he does not know; if he doubts, he judges that he ought not to assent rashly" (*On the Trinity*, X, 14). In sum, one can doubt everything but that "I am" or "I exist". And this is the starting point, because it is that "I" on which the process of internalization converges.

The spiritual seeker must find out that, being permeable to the external things, his attention is spilled and identified with the objects, so that it forgets itself and the "I": *tanquam sui sit oblita, sic agit*⁴⁴⁶. The mind must withdraw its attention from outside and pay attention

⁴⁴⁶ "As if forgetful of itself, it acts in this way".

to itself: "Go not abroad but enter into yourself: truth dwells in the inner man; and if you should find your nature mutable, transcend yourself. But remember, in doing so that you must also transcend yourself even as a reasoning soul" (*On true religion*, 39, 72)⁴⁴⁷. For that purpose, we must withdraw within ourselves: "*Alibi non inveniet quam penes se ipsum*"⁴⁴⁸ (*On the Trinity*, XIV, 8), since "*Semper foras exis, intro redire detrectas. Qui enim te docet intus est*"⁴⁴⁹ (*Exp. on the Psalms*, 139, 15). It is about taking a healthy, necessary distance from the sensible world and the information that comes from the senses and the mind.

It is necessary to move away from the external objects, to close our eyes, our ears, and withdraw in our own inner being (*On Order*, I, 13), refusing all product of imagination so that we may not take a seat on anything foreign (*Conf.* X, 12). Once established that distance from the sensible world, it is the moment when it takes place the suitable calm or *tranquillitas animi*, from which we will begin the process of internalization, since "I cannot taste and love that pure good unless I enjoy a certain carefree repose. Believe me, there is a need of a great withdrawal from the tumult of perishing things in order to produce in a human being a freedom from fear... This also produces that solid joy that is absolutely not to be compared with any delight in the smallest degree" (*Letter* 10, 2). In this process of recovery of the original oneness and return to the world of likeness, Saint Augustine advises us to invoke the One God so that "He may gather me up out of those fragments in which I was torn to pieces" (*Conf.* II, 1). Ultimately, through the first step of recollection or meditation, the attention must detach the sensory information, must close its eyes, its ears, and grow apart from the thoughts. This way,

⁴⁴⁷ This texts synthesizes the philosophical methods of Plato and Plotinus (*En.*, I, 6, 7; V, 1, 6; V, 1, 12).

⁴⁴⁸ "He will find it nowhere else but in himself".

⁴⁴⁹ "You always go out, and chafe at returning inside. Now he who teaches you is found inside".

when the mind is emptied of external objects, it remains momentarily purified.

Secondly, once withdrawn the attention from the external objects, the next step consists in looking within familiarly, in internalizing: “It is bidden to become acquainted with itself, let it not seek itself as it were withdrawn from itself” (*On the Trinity*, X, 11). Augustine compares the self-attention with the thinking or recollecting oneself, being such recall (of Platonic resonance) a “gathering myself out of my fragments”, gradually ascending on “the fields and spacious halls of memory” until finding “Him who made me” (*Conf.* II, 11; X, 11-12).

More specifically, one of the keys of the Augustinian contemplative method lies in making *the soul think of itself: se ipsam cogitet* (*On the Trinity*, X, 7). But, in this process, it must not confuse itself with what it possesses, because the soul is not what comes from the senses, that is, it does not consist of shapes, colors, fragrances, sounds, flavors. In that *thinking of itself*, the soul must detach from all memories, since otherwise “[the images of sensible things] have marvelously cohered with it by the close adhesion of love. And herein consists its uncleanness, since while it strives to think of itself alone, it fancies itself to be that, without which it cannot think of itself... Because it is in those things which it thinks of with love, and is wont to be in sensible, that is, in corporeal things with love, it is unable to be in itself without the images of those corporeal things. And hence shameful error arises to block its way, while it cannot separate from itself the images of sensible things, so as to see itself alone” (*On the Trinity*, X, 11). The key of the method is not in the profusion of reflections or reasonings, or in the hoarding of experiences, because the soul is not a warehouse, but rather quite the contrary; the key is to evict everything that comes from the external world and empty the soul until making it receptive to the power of the Grace. In sum, in order that the soul may know itself, it must not seek itself

outside. And, as the soul is already here and now, it just needs to internalize itself, that is, to disregard what has been added to it, withdrawing its attention from the external objects and paying attention to itself: “Let the soul... fix upon itself the act of voluntary attention, by which it was wandering among other things, and let it think of itself. So it will see that at no time did it ever not love itself, and at no time did it ever not know itself; but by loving another thing together with itself it has confounded itself with it, and in some sense has grown one with it. And so, while it embraces diverse things, as though they were one, it has come to think those to be one which are diverse” (*On the Trinity*, X, 11). It is to be clarified that the contemplation that is to lead us to the *supreme vision* does not consist in an intellectual comprehension of God, but in a vision that transcends the information coming from the senses and the reflective mind (*Sermon* 243, 6, 5: PL 38, 1146), since, as it is only possible to see God through the mirror we are, it is necessary to erase from the mind all the sensible images that block the true vision so that the image of God becomes sharper and clearer.

Finally, the third step consists in staying or dwelling as constantly as possible in that state in which *the attention is focused on itself*. Initially, in the first stages of the practice of self-recollection, in order to maintain a *continuous attention on oneself*, the own thoughts are to be observed with a longer distance each time. But, after that, once that distance from the thoughts has been consolidated, the attention is to be turned inward in a so natural, spontaneous way that, “when it is said to the mind: ‘know thyself’, then it knows itself by that very act by which it understands the word ‘thyself’, and this for no other reason than that it is present to itself” (*On the Trinity*, X, 12).

Dwelling in that state of original simpleness or innocence, it can only stay there in a *tensionless attention*, humbly waiting for God to see where I am and “have mercy upon me... heal me” (Ps. 6:2). It is

in that state of internalization free from distractions when it is easier that the spiritual influence works on us as an “inner master”; “do not love to live the Temple, but to live in Him who has built it”, since “*in interiore homine habitat Christus*”⁴⁵⁰ (*On the Gospel of John*, XVIII, 10). It is in that state of deep internalization when, once the soul has gotten rid of all its sensory attachments, a luminous presence or consciousness is revealed; it is not a product of our imagination or of our thought, but it is pure intellect or spirit (the soul): “For it knows these things in itself, and does not imagine them as though it had touched them by the sense outside itself, as corporeal things are touched. And if it attaches nothing to itself from the thought of these things, so as to think itself to be something of the kind, then whatsoever remains to it from itself, that alone, is itself” (*On the Trinity*, X, 16). It also finds out that this luminous presence has not emerged from anywhere outside, but it has always been there, concealed by the prattle of the mind.

Of course, this *attention* must not only be exercised during the moments of meditation and recollection, but during most of the day. Nonetheless, it is true that, by firstly exercising that ability to withdraw during the meditative prayer, man will more easily be able to extend that habit of self-attention or self-recollection to the rest of the day, while he acts or thinks, while he has contact with others, in sum, while he pays attention to the present, to the now.

⁴⁵⁰ “In the inner man dwells Christ”.

**KALĒ APODĒMIA (THE BEAUTIFUL MIGRATION):
THE CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE ACCORDING TO
EVAGRIUS PONTICUS**

“You are not able to pray purely if you are enmeshed in material affairs and shaken about by constant cares, because prayer is the putting aside of thoughts” (Evagrius, *On Prayer*, 71).

Evagrius was born about 345 in the city of Iberia, in Pontus. His religious vocation led him at an early age to frequent the company of monks and to start a close friendship with Gregory of Nazianzus, whom he accompanied to the First Council of Constantinople. A little later, he is reported to be in Jerusalem. However, disappointed by the relaxed atmosphere of the cities, about 383, he will embrace the monastic life and move to Egypt, to the mountains of Nitria, from where he later went to the desert of Kellia, where he stayed until his death in the year 399. His intellectual education facilitated him the access to a wide range of manuscripts. In fact, during a large part of his life, Evagrius subsisted on his own work as scribe, selling copies of manuscripts with the Oxyrhynchus style. He also wrote some notable works that make him be considered one of the most important Desert Fathers⁴⁵¹. Out of them, maybe the most important one is *On*

⁴⁵¹ Very interesting studies have been dedicated to Evagrius' doctrine: G. Bunge, “Évagre le Pontique et les deux Macaire”, in *Irenikon* 56 (1983), pp. 215-227; A. Guillaumont, *Un philosophe au désert; Évagre le Pontique*, Paris, 2004. Of the same author, “Les Kephalaia Gnostica d'Évagre le Pontique et l'histoire de l'Origénisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens”, *Patristica Sorbonensia* 5, Paris (1962), pp. 124-159. I. Hausherr, “Contemplation et sainteté: une remarquable mise au point par Philoxène de Mabboug” in *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 14, Toulouse-Paris (1933), pp. 171-195; of the same author, “Ignorance infinie” in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 2, Rome (1936) pp. 351-362. Under the title of *Obras Espirituales*, it has been published the *Praktikos*, *For Monks, Exhortation to*

Prayer (Or.). Likewise, the hundred chapters of *The Praktikos (TP)* stand out. In this introductory work to the monastic life, it is explained the nature and means to defeat the eight evil thoughts in order to achieve *impassibility*. In another work, the *Gnostikos (G)*, he writes to the already initiates and impassible, who will access contemplation. In the so-called *Chapters* or *Kephalaia Gnostica*⁴⁵² (KG), he develops some aspects of his teachings with a deliberate crypticism. For its part, his *For Monks (M)* and *Exhortation to a Virgin (V)* are two short collections of sentences inspired by the biblical book of Proverbs. Other works by him have also been preserved, such as *Bases of the monastic life*, several exegetic *Commentaries* and more than 60 *Letters*. Because of his ideas about the nature of Jesus Christ and the Gnostic, Neoplatonic and Buddhist influence on his doctrine, he was accused of Messalianism and condemned of heresy at the Second Council of Constantinople of the year 553⁴⁵³. In order to avoid the destruction of Evagrius' writings, his disciples safeguarded some of them by signing them over to other people (for instance, under the name of Nilus of Ancyra); thus, the *Treatise to the Monk Eulogius*, *Treatise on various evil thoughts* and *On the eight spirits of evil*.

Despite his blemish of heresy, Evagrius' work had a great influence on the theologians of that age. This is the case of Maximus the Confessor, who, even having attended the Lateran Council (649), which confirmed Evagrius' sentence, owes him most of his spiritual ideas. He was also imitated by John Climacus, despite openly criticizing him. But the most significant examples are his disciples Cassian and Saint Macarius of Egypt. The latter will connect with the tradition of the Eastern Byzantine Christianity, whereas Cassian will

a Virgin and *On Prayer*, preceded by a remarkable introductory study by José I. González Villanueva, Madrid, 1995.

⁴⁵² A. Guillaumont, *Les six siècles des Képhalaia Gnostica d'Évagre Pontique*, critical ed. of the common Syriac version and edition of a new Syriac version, with a French translation, Paris, 1958.

⁴⁵³ Messalianism had already been condemned at the Synods of Side (390) and Constantinople (426) and the Council of Ephesus (431).

divulge the synthesis of Evagrius in the West. Cassian introduced Evagrius' thought and his contemplative doctrine in Europe without mentioning him even once in his writings, in order to avoid the suspicion of heresy. For that purpose, he confined himself to disguising the most characteristic and recognizable concepts of the discourse of the Pontic, attributing their authorship to the Egyptian monks in general. This way, Evagrius' doctrine was suitably adapted to be used within an Orthodox context, especially his teaching about the mystical way and the practice of "pure prayer"⁴⁵⁴. The main contribution of Evagrius was a certain diffusion of the techniques and attitudes that were suitable to enter meditation and, from that, to access contemplation, basically using the Neoplatonic language, especially the contents of Plotinus' *Enneads*.

Certainly, the mystical ecstasy appears as a vision that transcends the subject-object duality (*Enneads*, VI, 7, 36), in which everything becomes pure light (*Enneads*, VI, 7, 9). And, although that vision may be momentary, it is still a short advance of a state of the Beyond (*Enneads*, VI, 9, 10). Facing the question of how to achieve such an experience, Evagrius assumes the way proposed by Plotinus, which is that the meditator must detach from everything (*Enneads*, V, 3,

⁴⁵⁴ For that reason, it is possible to rebuild part of Evagrius' contemplative technique through Cassian's works. Thus, according to Cassian's *Conferences* (I use the translation by Edgar C. S. Gibson, New York, 1894), "Wherefore for this highest learning also, by which we are taught even to cleave to God, I have no doubt that there are some foundations of the system... These are its first principles: that we should first learn by what meditations God may be grasped and contemplated, and next that we should manage to keep a very firm hold of this topic whatever it is which we do not doubt is the height of all perfection" (X, VIII). By insisting with the right attitude, the gates of contemplation will be opened. Likewise, he recommends practicing the remembrance of God by means of a model formula that he borrows from the Psalms: "This formula then shall be proposed to you of this system, which you want, and of prayer, which every monk in his progress towards continual recollection of God, is accustomed to ponder, carelessly revolving it in his heart, having got rid of all kinds of other thoughts... This is a secret of incalculable value that was delivered to us by a few of those who were left of the oldest Fathers... And so for keeping up continual recollection of God this pious formula is to be ever set before you: '*Deus in adiutorium meum intende. Domine ad adiuvandam me festina*' (O God, make speed to save me. O Lord, make haste to help me) (Ps. 70:1) (X, X)".

17), so that the intellect (the consciousness) may cover with a thick veil every object of this world and be withdrawn into itself (*Enneads*, V, 5, 7).

I.- ENTRANCE TO THE BEAUTIFUL MIGRATION

Evagrius defines “beautiful migration” (*kalē apodēmia*) as the way that leads to contemplation through the perfect *apatheia* (TP 60-61). He also describes it as a Gnostic immigration (*gnostikē endēmia*) (*Eul.* 24) into a place or state that, in another work, he also defines, turning to a Platonic concept, as the “region of the incorporeal beings” (*KG* I, 85).

How can we access that subtle state? By means of purification, through meditation (pure prayer). Meditation is the most suitable means to facilitate the encounter with the darkest part of our being and favor the self-inquiry, the acceptance of our faults and the wish to detach ourselves from them. In this examination of conscience whose aim is to soften the ego, repentance (which is born from true humility) is not to be confused with the feeling of guilt, which comes from pride. According to Evagrius, the objectless contemplation or, as he calls it, the “pure prayer”, is the most effective way of the mystic or the spiritual seeker because the contemplative vision can be attained through it: “Among tasty things none is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb, and the knowledge of God is said to be superior to these things” (*KG* III, 34). But it is to be understood that the summit of perfection is not the mystical ecstasy. This is an event by which we verify the true nature of the soul and we understand the futility of all that which hinders the intellect from being itself (*Or.* 117).

In the treatise *On Prayer* and in the *Skemmata*, he explains the nature and steps to come to see the “Light” or the face of God. First

of all, it is essential to be a “Gnostic”, that is, to have acquired the spiritual science. In *Skemmata* 2, he writes: “If you would see the state of their intellect, let them deprive themselves of all concepts and then they will see themselves like a sapphire or the color of heaven”. To describe this vision of the intellect by the intellect itself, he takes up a certain passage of the Exodus (24:9-11) in which the Seventy replaced the word “God” with the expression “place of God”. The intellect is the “place of God” and, when it sees itself in fleeting moments, it sees itself with His light: “The intellect would not see (the place of) God in itself unless... the light [of God] has been manifested to it” (*Skem.* 23). According to Evagrius, “A monk becomes the equal of the angels through true prayer, desiring to see the face of the Father who is in heaven” (*Or.* 113). But, in order to attain that “vision” of the face of God, it is necessary to have achieved the *apatheia* or *imperturbability*⁴⁵⁵, that is, the “soul’s health” (*TP* 56). The characteristics of the authentic peace, typical of the true *impassibility*, are humility and a limitless longing for God (*TP* 57). Humility helps us understand the uselessness of all own effort because the result always depends on God’s will (*Or.* 131-136). Regarding the limitless longing for God, only when it is sincere, the intellect stops being interested in the things of the external world and withdraws into itself, turning to the “prayer without distraction” (*TP* 63; *Or.* 118).

⁴⁵⁵ *Apatheia* is usually translated as apathy but, given the pejorative meaning this term has, it is more suitable to translate it as *impassibility* or *imperturbability*. According to Evagrius, the *impassible* (*apathēs*) or the perfect (*teleios*) is not who still makes the effort to exercise the virtues of perseverance and temperance (*TP* 68), but who does not make that effort to acquire them because “a man who has established the virtues in himself and is entirely permeated with them no longer remembers the law or the commandments or punishment” (*TP* 70). He has achieved the perfect impassibility and he is in the excellent condition (*ariste hexis*). Christian authors started from the concept of *apatheia* that the Stoic philosophers had previously established. According to the Stoics, every passion is a *disease* that alters the soul (*alterity*, otherness, that is, it forces it to be another different thing from what it must be) and moves man away from himself. Peace is only achieved by breaking free from passions.

Some of the ideas of Evagrius make him the precedent of the *apophatic way* and the path of the *learned ignorance* of Christian authors such as Gregory of Nyssa, the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Anselm, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Champeaux, Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor, Saint Bonaventure, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Eckhart, Saint John of the Cross, Nicholas of Cusa, Miguel de Molinos, etc. The essential core of the doctrine of Evagrius Ponticus starts from the total and absolute impossibility to understand God by means of the *natural knowledge* (KG I, 71), since God is ineffable. As the object of *knowledge* of God is infinite, so is the ignorance of those who try to understand Him. “He whose knowledge is limited, his ignorance is also limited; and he whose ignorance is unlimited, his *knowledge* is also unlimited” (KG III, 63). According to Evagrius, as man is an image of God, the contemplative acquires, by the Grace, an unlimited *knowledge* that makes him enjoy the unlimited science of God. That *knowledge* or “*gnosis*” is acquired by means of the contemplative or *pure prayer*. The contemplative prayer aspires to establish an intimate relationship with God, it is “the ascent of the intellect to God” (Or. 36); “If Moses was hindered when he attempted to approach the bush burning on earth, until he had taken off the shoes from his feet, do you not think that, if you wish to see the One who is above every concept and perception, and to converse with Him, you should cast away from yourself every impassioned mental concept?” (Or. 4).

II.- OBSTACLES THAT HINDER CONTEMPLATION: THE *LOGISMOI*

According to Evagrius, the most important obstacle that hinders us from attaining contemplation is the thoughts or *logismoi*. Not only the evil thoughts, but, ultimately, all kind of thoughts that distracts the concentration of the pure intellect.

The technical term *logismoi* is taken by Evagrius from the allegorical interpretation that Origen does of Deut. 7:31⁴⁵⁶, identifying them as demons. However, the Jewish source that Origen himself cites is *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. Origen, in his commentary on Matthew 15:19, also states that “The source and origin of every sin is the evil *thoughts*”⁴⁵⁷. The personification or “objectification” of the thoughts as odd, evil or diabolic products is found in different Eastern Mediterranean cultures. In Genesis 8:21, the word *yaser* (thought) has a pejorative meaning: “The Lord said in His heart: ‘I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake, for the thought of man is evil from his youth’”. The *yaser* appears as an autonomous and negative entity: “He created humanity at the beginning, and He left them to the power of their *yaser*” (Ecclus. 15:14). But the text that has conditioned the pejorative meaning of the term *logismos* most is Matthew 15:19 (also Luke 2:35; 5:22; 6:8; 9:46 ff.; 24:38). Evagrius’ genuine point in this issue is that, since he states that the *thoughts* do not come from the human nature or from the objects themselves, he has placed their origin in the demons. This way, the fight against the thoughts is not a combat of man against himself, but against an external adversary that is continuously *altering* him, that is, making him be another one who he really is not.

In the Evagrian doctrine, the process of cognition begins with the subject-object relationship. The perception of the objects causes sensations, which, in turn, cause desire. For their part, the memories of the pleasure that the possession of the object provided us (*TP* 4) in-

⁴⁵⁶ This passage mentions the seven peoples that Israel confronted before taking possession of the Promised Land. The Egyptians, already defeated, are missing, so the number of enemies would be eight. Cassian assumes this tradition in his *Conferences* (V, XVII-XVIII). Origen takes up this topic to maintain that each one of the seven nations also represented the vices of Israel (*Hom.* 12, *on Joshua*). Whereas in the East, the tradition preserved in a basic way the Evagrian outline of the eight evil thoughts (*gluttony, lust, greed, sadness, wrath, acedia, vainglory and pride*), in the West, Saint Gregory the Great (13th century), who knew it through Cassian, will definitively fix it in the *seven deadly sins* that are still preserved.

⁴⁵⁷ *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 21, ed. Benz and Klostermann, GCS 40, p. 58.

cite us to retain it. If that “phantom” was passionately embraced, the memories will be passionate (*TP* 34; 37). As if he were using a fine scalpel, Evagrius dissects the hidden, confusing aspects of the eight evil thoughts, insisting once and once again that their aim is to besiege man in order to hinder him from pure prayer. The eight evil thoughts agree in one thing: their hatred to prayer (*Or.* 50-51). It is to be warned that Evagrius analyzes the eight *logismoi* from the point of view of the meditative practice, that is, of the obstacles that hinder contemplation. Thus, for instance, the sadness (*lypē*) (*TP* 10) or the demon of gloominess (*TP* 19) put the idealized memories of past moments into our mind as if they were being lived, so that, after the desire to recover those instants, comes the frustration for realizing that they have already gone by. The acedia (*akēdia* in ancient Greek means annoyance, torpor, sloth, indifference, listlessness) was identified by the Desert Fathers as the noonday demon, because it mainly fights at that time, when the fast is harder and the desert sun burns in sharp and hot. The most dangerous *logismos* is pride. When he who follows the spiritual path reaches a certain state of spiritual realization (Evagrius describes it as imperfect *impassibility*), this demon suggests him that it has not been a gift of God, but the result of his own effort (*TP* 14; 33). Because of this deception, man believes that the peace is due to his merits and to the fact that he has defeated the demons. In reality, the *logismoi* have only momentarily withdrawn in order to give way to spiritual pride and vainglory (*TP* 57; *Or.* 133-134). In this subtle way, when the contemplative notices that no demon is fighting against him, he can fall in vainglory (*TP* 57; 31), losing what he had achieved. “The demon of pride conducts the soul to its worst fall. It urges it not to admit God’s help, and to believe that the soul is responsible for its own achievements, and to disdain the brethren as fools because they do not all see this about it” (*TP* 14). Evagrius insists that the results of the meditative *practice* have a certain limit beyond which the “*gnosis*” can only be granted by God. No human effort, no virtuous life, no merit can guarantee that achievement. Actually, they might rather become an obstacle if such

meritorious deeds are done not because they are intrinsically good, but to obtain some end⁴⁵⁸. Therefore, given that pure contemplation is not a state that can be attained by the own forces, it is only possible to persevere in it with patience and humility, waiting for God to grant us such a precious “*charisma* (Or. 87; TP 32). In sum, the “*gnosis*” is a gift of God.

III.- HOW TO COMBAT THE *LOGISMOI*

The Desert Fathers turned to certain methods to fight against the *thoughts* in general: reading, vigils, prayer, toil, solitude, psalmody, patience, mercy... (TP 15). On the other hand, the reflections about the eight evil *logismoi* led to develop a scale of eight (or seven) virtues corresponding the stages of the spiritual life. Clemens of Alexandria already mentioned faith, fear, hope, repentance, temperance, perseverance... They are also found in the *Epistle* of Pseudo-Barnabas. The most complete text of Evagrius is found in the preface of the *Praktikos*, encompassing the three stages of the spiritual life: “Faith (*pistis*), o my child, is steadied by the fear (*phobos*) of God, and this in turn is strengthened by temperance (*enkrateia*); this latter is made unshakable by perseverance (*hypomonē*) and hope (*elpis*). From these is born impassibility (*apatheia*), which brings into being charity (*agape*). Charity is the door to knowledge of nature (*gnosis physikē*), which leads to theology (*theologia*) and the supreme blessedness (*makariotes*)”.

The cultivation of these virtues leads man to understand the futility of the world, the evanescence of life and the uselessness of desires. This way, as the intellect loses interest in the surrounding external objects, its ability to concentrate on the inner life increases. That is why it is affirmed that, “if you wish to pray laudably, deny

⁴⁵⁸ That is why “It is just to pray not only for your own purification, but also for your own kindred, so as to imitate the angelic way” (Or. 40).

yourself every hour” (*Or.* 18), because your thoughts are not really yours, your imagination is not really yours, your memories are not yours, but just suggestions, incitements or additions coming from outside. Only by breaking free from all kind of desires will we attain the state of *apatheia*. And the first quality that shows the possession of *impassibility* is the “prayer without distraction” (*TP* 63; 69).

IV.- THE METHOD OF THE OBJECTLESS PRAYER

What Evagrius defines as “*pure prayer*” is a traditional form of meditation in which the mental flow is stopped or cut. The subject, lacking objects of perception, plunges itself into the emptiness, exempt of thoughts, that leads to contemplate the face of God. But the main enemy of this objectless meditation is precisely the thought (*Or.* 10; 47). In order to hinder this kind of meditation, the demons of phantoms get into the meditator’s memory and suggest him concepts or ideas (*Or.* 64), sometimes even brilliant ones (*Or.* 10), weakening the intellect and thus preventing it from praying (*Or.* 45). On other occasions, they attack the flank of vanity, making him believe that he has more than enough merits to see God (*Or.* 41) or that he has already seen God (*Or.* 68; 73-74).

In effect, some contemplatives aspire to literally see fabulous images of God, of the angels and all kind of extraordinary phenomena. Evagrius warns against these mistakes, so “do not in any way seek to receive any form or shape or color in the time of prayer” (*Or.* 114). It is a radical contradiction to try to perceive sensations and, at the same time, enjoy the immaterial contemplation of the divinity. They are two opposing things. “Do not desire to see angels or powers or Christ visibly, in case you become completely mad, accepting a wolf instead of a shepherd and worshiping your enemies, the demons” (*Or.* 115). “Once the intellect is praying purely unwaveringly, and truly, completely apart from the passions, the demons no longer in-

sinuate themselves from the left, but from the right⁴⁵⁹. They set before it the appearance of God and shape it in the form of things beloved by the senses, so that the intellect will believe it has perfectly achieved its goal concerning prayer. An admirable and knowledge-filled man explained that this is caused by the passion of vainglory and by the demon that attaches itself to a particular place in the brain and makes the veins pulsate” (*Or.* 73)⁴⁶⁰. Certainly, in the deepest states of meditation, “the demon touches that place thus manipulating the light surrounding the intellect however it wishes” (*Or.* 74), giving way to phenomena we should mistrust, since they will just move us away from our final goal. “Noises, crashes, voices and tortured screams will he hear, the person carefully attending to pure prayer, but he will not cave in or surrender his rationality” (*Or.* 97).

What is the perfect form of meditation like, according to Evagrius? “Exert your intellect to stand at the time of prayer as if deaf and dumb, and then you will be able to pray” (*Or.* 11).

1.- Praying without thoughts.

The foundation of the Evagrian method is that, once we have emptied ourselves from thoughts (*Or.* 3; 9; 10-12; 21-22; 24; 26-27; 41; 54 etc.), we achieve *impassibility*. The *thoughts* darken the intellect (*TP* 74) and hinder it from acting according to its nature, which is to know God. Any thought hinders pure prayer (*Or.* 4; 9; 11; 54). “You are not able to pray purely if you are enmeshed in material affairs and shaken about by constant cares, because prayer is the putting aside of thoughts” (*Or.* 71). In order to meditate, the thought is required to withdraw in God (*Or.* 4), the mind must be empty of all

⁴⁵⁹ The left eye is used for the contemplation of the beings, and the right one contemplates the light of the Holy Trinity.

⁴⁶⁰ The stratagems of the demon to defeat the contemplative include getting into his body and altering his brain so that he believes to perceive the divine light.

appearances, and on guard against every sensible shape of the Divine (*Or.* 67-74).

2.- *Praying without images.*

Mental silence implies getting rid of visual thoughts, that is, of images, no matter how elevated they may be: “Do not give any shape to the Divine in yourself when you pray, nor should you permit any form to stamp an impression on your intellect: instead, approach immaterially what is immaterial, and you will understand” (*Or.* 67). It is not possible to receive the contemplation of God with preconceived images, since God has no shape. Nothing in this world, no sensible shape can resemble God; therefore, to turn to them will only block the pure vision of the intellect, which “is strong when it does not imagine any worldly thing at all during the time of its prayer” (*TP* 65). Ultimately, the worshiper must be fully devoted to God during his meditation, so that nothing may disturb him (*Or.* 67-68).

3.- *Praying without memories.*

But not feeling passion for the objects is not enough (*TP* 67; 64; 65): it is necessary to break even with the memories or to remain imperturbable (*atarachos*) to them. “The soul possesses *impassibility* not when it is unmoved by matters, but when it remains undisturbed by the memory of them” (*TP* 67), no matter how elevated they may be, since they are really generated to move you away from meditation; “When the demons see that you are eager to truly pray, they insinuate mental concepts of certain affairs that seem to demand attention; and within a short time they arouse the memory of these things and move the intellect to seek them out” (*Or.* 10). This way, the mind is incited to give up meditation when it allows itself to be invaded by the plans, projects and expectations of daily life, when it remembers something that it left undone or when it speculates about future events.

How can we stop the mental flow? How to block the evocation of memories? How to maintain pure prayer? The truth is that Evagrius, who uses a so colorful language when showing us the obstacles that hinder meditation, keeps this secret as part of the oral teaching of his doctrine. In some moments, he seems to indicate some hints, as when he insists in the watchfulness (*nepsis*) (*Bases*, XI) that is required by pure prayer, or when he advises the worshipper: “Hold your eye from wandering while you pray; deny your flesh and your soul, and live the life of the intellect” (*Or.* 110). But the truth is that Evagrius did not want to go beyond what his sense of caution and his discretion marked. Anyway, he was one of the first monks to reveal in writing the secrets of the contemplative life and practice, adopting for that purpose a literary style that was deliberately cryptic. Thus, in the *Praktikos*, as well as in the *Gnostikos* and the *Kephalaia Gnostica*, and especially in his treatise *On Prayer*, he will warn: “And some things I have concealed and shadowed over, so that we do not throw holy things to dogs nor cast pearls before swine (Mt. 7:6). But this will be clear to those who have embarked on the same quest”⁴⁶¹. Therefore, Evagrius only speaks to the initiate, that is, to those who take their first few steps in the anchoretic life, to the Gnostics.

Only from this “Gnostic” perspective can Evagrius’ words make sense when he states that, ultimately, the true monk, the authentic contemplative who has seen the Light of God, “is one who is both separated from all and yet united with all” (*Or.* 124), and who understands that the *salus* (health) of each man is the *salus* of all; “Blessed is the monk who sees the salvation and progress of all with perfect joy, as if it were his own” (*Or.* 123).

⁴⁶¹ *TP*, Prologue: Letter to Anatolius, 9.

AN ANCIENT SECRET OF INCALCULABLE VALUE: THE FORMULA OF SAINT JOHN CASSIAN

“The formula for this recollection, by which we may conceive and ever keep the idea of God in the mind... is a secret of incalculable value that was delivered to us by a few of those who were left of the oldest Fathers” (Cassian, *Conferences*, X, VIII-X).

Cassian⁴⁶² was born around the year 360 in Lesser Scythia (current Romania). According to what is mentioned in one of his works, between the years 378 and 380, his religious vocation led him and his friend Germanus to Palestine, travel which they “undertook for the sake of spiritual service, as also in the pursuit of the monastery” (*Conf.* XVI, I). They both became monks there and received the rudiments of the coenobitic life, after which they started a pilgrimage through the most important centers where the hermitic life was practiced. Thus, in Egypt they went across the desert of *Panephysis* (*Conf.* XI, II) and “*Diolcos*, lying on one of the seven mouths of the river Nile” (*Conf.* XVIII, I). They also visited the monks of the desert of *Nitria*, the *Cells* and finally *Scetes*, where they met Evagrius Ponticus. “We came urged not so much by the necessities of our journey as by the desire of visiting the saints who were dwelling there” (*Conf.* XVIII, I). However, the expulsion of the Origenist Christians forced Cassian to leave *Scetes*. Soon after that, attracted by the fame of John Chrysostom, he settled in Constantinople. In

⁴⁶² J. Daniélou, “San Juan Casiano y sus maestros orientales”, in *Cuadernos Monásticos* 27, no. 101 (1992), pp. 201-211. I. Gómez, “Maestros de oración en el monacato latino (3). Juan Casiano (360-435)”, in *Schola Caritatis*, 7 (1995), pp. 24-32. J-C. Guy, *Jean Cassien. Vie et doctrine spirituelle*, Paris, 1961. A. de Vogüé, “Para comprender a Casiano. Una ojeada a las Conferencias”, in *Cuadernos Monásticos* 27, no. 103 (1992), pp. 437-462.

404, he was ordained a deacon and later received the priestly ordination. In 416, he returned to the West, specifically to Provence, founding two monasteries in Marseille according to the teachings of his master Evagrius, but suitably adapting his doctrine to the Christian orthodoxy. In order that the monks of his monasteries could access the coenobitic theory and practice, between 420 and 430, he wrote his *Spiritual Conferences* (or *Collationes*). These writings had the merit of transferring to the West a large part of the contemplative tradition that was lived at the Near East. Cassian died in Marseille about 434-435.

In reality, his *Institutes* and *Conferences* are two parts of the same discourse. Whereas the *Institutes* (*De Institutis Coenobiorum et de octo principalium vitiorum remediis*⁴⁶³) are about the outer man, the *Conferences* or *Collationes Patrum*, which Cassian subtitles as *Verba Seniorum* (the words of the elders) inspired by the twenty-four elders of the Revelation, are about the inner man⁴⁶⁴. In the preface, he specifies: “Let us therefore pass from what is visible to the eye and the external mode of life of the monks, of which we treated in the former books (that is, in the *Institutes*), to the life of the inner man, which is hidden from view” (*Conf.* preface). According to Cas-

⁴⁶³ *Institutes*, translated by B. Ramsey, New York, 2000; *Conferences*, translated by C. Luibheid, New York, 1985; besides the classic edition translated by Edgar C. S. Gibson, New York, 1894. The *Institutes* are about the dress of the monks (I), the nocturnal prayers in Egypt (II), the daily prayers practiced in Palestine and Mesopotamia (III), the learnings for the community life (IV), the eight vices against which the candidate for the purity of heart must fight: gluttony or *gastrimargia* (V), lust or fornication (VI), greed, covetousness or *philargia* (VII), anger (VIII), dejection or sadness (IX), acedia (X), vainglory or *kenodoxia* (XI) and pride (XII). The *Conferences* are about the goal of the monk and the means to achieve it (*Conf.* I-III), the obstacles that hinder us from achieving that goal (*Conf.* IV-VI), the soul's spiritual fight (*Conf.* VII-X), the tactics used by the demons through the thoughts (*Conf.* VII), the different forms of prayer and the contemplative life (*Conf.* IX-X), clarification about perfection (*Conf.* XI-XIV), the virtue of charity (*Conf.* XI), the “*apatheia*” (*Conf.* XII), complete perfection and its signs (*Conf.* XV-XVII), modalities of monastic life (*Conf.* XVIII-XIX), about the spiritual life (*Conf.* XX-XXIV).

⁴⁶⁴ For that purpose, he presents several real or imaginary conversations with Moses, Serapion, Abraham, Joseph, Nesteros, Paphnutius, Abbot Daniel, Abbot Serenus, hundred-year-old Cheremon, etc.

sian, the quest for God implies the purification of the whole spirit and the most complete detachment from everything (ascesis). That final state, which he calls “purity of heart”, can be attained by means of contemplation.

What is contemplation? According to Cassian, it is a science and an art: “Wherefore for this highest learning also, by which we are taught even to cleave to God, I have no doubt that there are some foundations of the system... These are its first principles: that we should first learn by what meditations God may be grasped and contemplated, and next that we should manage to keep a very firm hold of this topic whatever it is which we do not doubt is the height of all perfection” (*Conf.* X, VIII). What Evagrius calls *pure prayer* is defined by Cassian as *igneous prayer*. In the *Conference IX*, Cassian explains that the “igneous” prayer is fully effective when the meditator attains impassibility or “*apatheia*”, that is, “an immovable tranquility of soul and a perpetual purity”⁴⁶⁵. Evagrius, Cassian and the hermitic tradition defined it as such an absence of passions that caused the perfect integration of body and soul, resembling the angelic state⁴⁶⁶.

The best symptom of detachment from the passions or carnal bondings is the ability for contemplation in the moment of contemplative prayer, since “no one will persevere lastingly, if anything of carnal affections still survives in him, because ‘thou canst not see My face, for there shall no man see Me and live’⁴⁶⁷” (*Conf.* I, XV). How to detach ourselves from the thoughts? Given that the mind needs its daily portion of thoughts and initially refuses to be “domesticated”, the first aim is to occupy the mind with suitable readings and meditations. In effect, “It is impossible for the mind not to be approached by thoughts, but it is in the power of every earnest man

⁴⁶⁵ Cassian is very careful to avoid the term *apatheia* because of the way the Pelagians used to employ it. He translates it with “immovable tranquility of soul”.

⁴⁶⁶ *Col.* XII, 6, and XXII, 3.

⁴⁶⁷ Ex. 33:20.

either to admit them or to reject them... For this purpose frequent reading and continual meditation on the Scriptures is employed that from thence an opportunity for spiritual recollection may be given to us... that the mind may be brought low and not mind earthly things” (*Conf. I, XVII*). Likewise, “if we do not want anything to haunt us while we are praying, we should be careful before our prayer, to exclude it from the shrine of our heart... We must leave no room for not merely the care but even the recollection of any business affairs” (*Conf. IX, III*). But the problem is that, in the first few stages of meditation, the mind is so agitated and uncontrolled that it is unable to calm down and focus its attention on one only thought for long. Thus, the meditative practice becomes an endless, exhausting fight between our intention to meditate and the mind’s desire to take us out of meditation in order to entertain itself with its daydreams. This way, we find that, “when we have wandered away from our spiritual speculations and have come back to ourselves as if waking from a deadly sleep, and, being thoroughly roused, look for the subject matter, by which we may be able to revive that spiritual recollection which has been destroyed, and we are hindered by the delay of the actual search before we find it, and are once more drawn aside from our endeavor, and before the spiritual insight is brought about, the purpose of heart which had been conceived has disappeared” (*Conf. X, VIII*). No matter how many times we may try to discipline the mind by means of concentration on only one thought, we will soon see how dozens of them call our attention, so “it comes to pass that as the mind is constantly hindered by this want of knowledge and difficulty, and is always tossed about vaguely, and as if intoxicated, among various matters, and cannot even retain firm hold for any length of time of anything spiritual which has occurred to it by chance rather than of set purpose: while, as it is always receiving one things after another, it does not notice either their beginning and origin or even their end (*Conf. X, VIII*).

How to avoid distractions during meditation? How can we solve the lack of concentration? According to Cassian, such problems can be solved by means of a formula: “This trouble is certain to happen to us for this reason: because we do not keep something firmly set before our eyes like some formula to which the wandering thoughts may be recalled after many digressions and varied excursions; and, if I may use the expression, after long storms enter a quiet haven” (*Conf. X, VIII*).

The immediate question is: what can be that “formula for this recollection, by which we may conceive and ever keep the idea of God in the mind”? (*Conf. X, VIII*). Cassian confesses that this formula “is a secret of incalculable value that was delivered to us by a few of those who were left of the oldest fathers” (*Conf. X, X*). In order that the thought of God may unceasingly dwell in the meditator, Cassian reveals that the formula of devotion, extracted from Psalms 70:1, is this: “*Deus in adiutorium meum intende. Domine ad adiuvandam me festina* (O God, make speed to save me. O Lord, make haste to help me)” (*Conf. X, X*). But even to get this formula work little by little, it is to be employed not only to make concentration easier during meditation, but also the rest of the day. This way, “Let sleep come upon you still considering this verse... When you wake let it be the first thing to come into your mind... Let it... send you forth to all your work and business, and let it follow you about all day long... This you should write on the threshold and door of your mouth, this you should place on the walls of your house and in the recesses of your heart” (*Conf. X, X*).

The goal of such a formula is that the monk’s mind may be constantly focused on the *remembrance of God*, making of this a habit that ends up disregarding the rest of the thoughts. And, in effect, it is a traditional method to facilitate detachment, since, ultimately, the combat against vices, faults, tendencies, or whatever they may be called, is the fight against the thoughts. Therefore, by defeating the

thoughts, the path of virtue is smoothed. And, according to the Desert Fathers, the best and easiest way to resign the thoughts consisted in reducing them just to one. This way, the unification of the thought gradually gave way to the disappropriation of the thought and, from there, to the suprarational states⁴⁶⁸.

⁴⁶⁸ Taking up Plotinus again: "Such logic is not to be confounded with that act of ours in the vision; it is not our reason that has seen; it is something greater than reason, reason's Prior, as far above reason as the very object of that thought must be. In our self-seeing There, the self is seen as belonging to that order, or rather we are merged into that self in us which has the quality of that order. It is a knowing of the self restored to its purity. No doubt we should not speak of *seeing*; but we cannot help talking in dualities, *seen* and *seer*, instead of, boldly, the achievement of unity. In this seeing, we neither hold an object nor trace distinction; there is no two. The man is changed, no longer himself nor self-belonging; he is merged with the Supreme, sunken into it, one with it: center coincides with center, for centers of circles, even here below, are one when they unite, and two when they separate; and it is in this sense that we now (after the vision) speak of the Supreme as separate. This is why the vision baffles telling; we cannot detach the Supreme to state it; if we have seen something thus detached we have failed of the Supreme which is to be known only as one with ourselves" (*Enneads*, VI, 9, 10, 5-20).

THE MYSTICAL DARKNESS ACCORDING TO SAINT DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE

“That Mystery Itself we strive to apprehend by casting aside all the activities of our intellect” (*On the Divine Names*, 645A).

The identity of the so-called Areopagite is still a mystery. He presents himself as if he were that Dionysius converted by Saint Paul in the Areopagus (central square) of Athens: “When they [the Athenians] heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked... However, certain men cleaved unto him and believed, among whom were Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (Act. 17:32-34). Therefore, Dionysius could be a cultivated, wealthy Athenian who, as many other people who frequented or lived near the Areopagus, “spent their time in nothing else than telling or hearing some new thing” (Act. 17:21). However, contemporary historiography considers that this Dionysius the Areopagite could not be the person converted by Saint Paul, though, on the other hand, there is no unanimity in identifying him with any other historical person⁴⁶⁹. Probably, he was a Syrian monk, maybe a bishop (because of the great regard he shows to have for the episcopal dignity), who lived around the year 500, since he knew the custom of singing the *Apostle’s Creed* in mass, which was introduced by the Monophysite Peter the Fuller in 476 and used by Proclus (†485) in his *De malorum subsistentia*. And it is also known that he wrote before 553,

⁴⁶⁹ Hilduin (9th century) identified him with Saint Dionysius (Denis) Martyr, Bishop of Paris. Father Stiglmayr thought that the Pseudo-Dionysius was Severus of Antioch. Monsignor Athenagoras and B. Romeyer supposed that he was Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria. For his part, Father Elorduy proposed the candidacy of Ammonius Saccas, one of Plotinus’ masters. Vid. E. Elorduy, “¿Es Ammonio Saccas el Pseudo Areopagita?”, in *Estudios Eclesiásticos*, 18 (1944-1945), pp. 501-557.

when the work of the Areopagite was alleged by the Monophysites of Constantinople.

H. Koch and J. Stiglmayr explained the parallelisms between Dionysius and Proclus, finding up to four hundred passages that are almost identical in both authors⁴⁷⁰. Nonetheless, whereas according to Stiglmayr, Dionysius “has brazenly abridged” Proclus, other authors think that they both drank from the same sources: Plotinus’ work. For his part, E. Elorduy identifies the Pseudo-Dionysius with Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus’ master. The truth is that they all maintain a common line of thought regarding practical metaphysics, the ineffability of ecstasy and the mystical union. It is to be reminded that, for instance, the ineffability of ecstasy is derived from the union itself between the seer and the object of sight, when the distinction between them disappears. That is why the seer sees “nothing”⁴⁷¹.

Why did our author write under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite? Probably, by dating his works in the time of Saint Paul, he tried to lend a certain authority, almost apostolic, to his writings. But, in addition, by not recording his name, he was also doing an act

⁴⁷⁰ J. Stiglmayr, S. J. “Das Aufkommen der Pseudo-Dionysischen Schriften und ihr Eindringen in die christliche Literatur bis zum Lateranconcil 649. Ein zweiter Beitrag zur Dionysios-Frage”, in *IV. Jahresbericht des öffentlichen Privatgymnasiums an der Stella matutina zu Feldkirch 1894-95*, Feldkirch, 1895, p. 78-82; H. Koch, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in seinen Beziehungen zum Neuplatonismus und Mysterienwesen*, Mainz, 1900.

⁴⁷¹ And this ineffability is inexplicable and inapprehensible because “Thus The One is in truth beyond all statement: any affirmation is of a thing; but all-transcending, resting above even the most august divine mind, this is the only true description, since it does not make it a thing among things, nor name it where no name could identify it: we can but try to indicate, in our own feeble way, something concerning it... How, then, do we ourselves come to be speaking of it? No doubt we deal with it, but we do not state it; we have neither knowledge nor intellection of it. But in what sense do we even deal with it when we have no hold upon it? We do not, it is true, grasp it by knowledge, but that does not mean that we are utterly void of it; we hold it not so as to state it, but so as to be able to speak about it. And we can and do state what it is not, while we are silent as to what it is... But... it is none of these, but a nobler principle than anything we know as being; fuller and greater; above reason, mind, and feeling; conferring these powers, not to be confounded with them” (*Enneads*, V, 3, 13-14).

of humility beyond personal references and individual prominences that, precisely in that time, were ravaging Christianity. Surely, in order to avoid the discussions that took place after the Council of Chalcedon, in his seventh Epistle, he clarifies: “I do not wish to spark polemics; I simply speak the truth, I seek the truth”. Regarding the doctrine of the Pseudo-Dionysius, all the researchers agree that, though his philosophical background is Neoplatonic, the projection of his discourse takes place within the Christian orthodoxy. In effect, in his *Letter to Polycarp* (VII), he confesses to be making the effort to place the Neoplatonic philosophy in the service of the Christian Faith. The writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius, who will here be called Dionysius the Areopagite as a courtesy to this author, were mentioned as authentic for the first time in 533, in a colloquium celebrated in Constantinople between Catholics and Monophysites; however, it was Maximus the Confessor who, with his epistles, contributed most to spread the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite through the East. In the West, the work of the Areopagite was accepted by several Popes such as Saint Gregory the Great and Saint Martin I, who invoked him as an authority in the Lateran Council of the year 649. Thus, the *Corpus Dionysiuacum* or *Corpus Areopagiticum*⁴⁷² is made up of the following treatises: *The Heavenly Hierarchy* (119-369), *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (370-584), *On the Divine Names* (585-996), *The Mystical Theology* (997-1064), and ten letters (1065-1120).

Another enigma, laid out by the researchers on the Areopagite, concerns the nature of his contemplative experiences. According to

⁴⁷² The quotations from Dionysius’ treatises are based on the Greek text established by the edition of B. Cordier, reproduced in the vol. 3 of the *P(atrologia) G(raeca)* by Migne, Paris, 1857, used by the Spanish translation with which I work: Teodoro H. Martín, *Obras Completas del Pseudo Dionisio Areopagita*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos (BAC), Madrid, 1990, which cites the texts according to the Migne edition, that is, by columns and paragraphs. For instance, 648A means column 648, paragraph A [An English version of the text following the Migne edition can be found in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibhéid and Paul Rorem (New York, 1987)].

some authors, the descriptions of the mystical route followed by Dionysius the Areopagite came from his personal experience and corresponded with the contemplative states achieved during meditation. However, according to other authors, the Syrian monk did not experience ecstasy, so that the images described in his work just have an allegoric value⁴⁷³. This last statement is based on a sentence in which the Areopagite explains that “the Divine Darkness is the unapproachable light in which God is said to dwell” (*Letter V*, 1073A). However, although this “is said” seems to point out that Dionysius speaks from hearsay and not by own experience, it is also true that such use of language might be due to the literary custom that he had to fulfill, according to the Christian modesty. Therefore, this would be just another evidence, as well as his anonymity, of the humility of the Syrian monk.

I.- THE INEFFABILITY OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

The Areopagite affirms that, being God absolutely transcendental, since He is above not only the beings but also above the Being Itself, which is the first participation of God, it is to be inferred that the divine essence *is inaccessible to the senses as well as to the rational speculations*: “But if any one should say that Divine manifestations were made directly and immediately to some holy men⁴⁷⁴, let him learn, and that distinctly, from the Scriptures, that no one has seen⁴⁷⁵, nor even shall see, the hidden of Almighty God as it is in itself” (*The Heavenly Hierarchy*, 180C – IV, 3). Following the wake

⁴⁷³ This is the case of Henri-Charles Puech, “La ténèbre mystique chez le Pseudo-Denys l’Aréopagite et dans la tradition patristique”, in *Études carmélitaines* 23 (1938), p. 33-53, later compiled in *En torno a la Gnosis I*, Madrid, 1982, pp. 165-189.

⁴⁷⁴ Saint Augustine says that Moses and Saint Paul were exceptionally granted to see God in “trance” (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, XII, 26-27). According to the Areopagite, it is “normal” to achieve the experience of God “hidden in a darkness more luminous than silence”. But this vision is still, by definition, a “non-vision”.

⁴⁷⁵ Jn. 1:18; Ex. 33:20-23; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 Jn. 4:12.

of Plotinus, Dionysius categorically affirms that “God cannot be spoken or thought”. Precisely because the language is useless when trying to approach God, any attempt to approach His nature is radically a Mystery. This has already been pointed out by some researchers on the Areopagite, such as Vanneste, who defines Dionysius’ style as laborious and esoteric, taken from the ancient Mysteries⁴⁷⁶. And, even though this may be an obstacle to the exact understanding of Dionysius’ doctrine, it is true that it comes from the ineffability itself of the Divine Nature, since He is beyond all affirmation and all negation. But this obstacle is, at the same time, the first key to the mystery, since it determines the attitude that the mystical subject must adopt. The mystic must break free from all his ties, from the activity of the senses and the intelligence, until abolishing, though momentarily, the duality between subject and object: “He made darkness His secret place, His pavilion round about Him” (Ps. 18:11); however, although it is impossible to “know” God by means of concepts, He has wanted to reveal Himself to men through His many Names (*On the Divine Names*, 596) that appear in the Holy Scriptures. This provides Dionysius with a rational method to know God that, by removing the traces of anthropomorphism, purifies the understanding and prepares it for a higher form of knowledge that he defines as angelic and that closely approximates the knowledge God has about Himself.

Therefore, to those who long for elevating themselves more (*The Mystical Theology*, 1000) or for having a purer knowledge of God does Dionysius propose a double method (positive and negative), with Platonic resonances, which analyzes the divine names.

⁴⁷⁶ J. Vanneste, S. J., *Le Mystère de Dieu*, Paris, 1959 and “La théologie mystique du pseudo-Denys l’Aréopagite”, *Studia Patristica* 5, 3 (1962) 401–415. It can also be consulted R. Rocques, *L’Univers Dionysien*, Paris, Aubier, 1954; Y. de Andia, “Neoplatonismo y cristianismo en Pseudo Dionisio Areopagita”, in *Anuario Filosófico* XXXIII, (2 vols.), Pamplona, Universidad de Navarra, 2000 and J. Rico Pavés, *Semejanza a Dios y divinización en el Corpus Dionysiacum: platonismo y cristianismo en Dionisio el Areopagita*, Toledo, 2001.

The *affirmative* rational way consists in attributing (affirming) all the positive attributes or qualities such as holiness, wisdom, benevolence, light, life, truth, power, justice, redemption, salvation, etc. to God: “They attribute many manes to Him when, for instance, they speak of Him as declaring: ‘I am that I am’⁴⁷⁷, or ‘I am the Life’⁴⁷⁸, or ‘the Light’⁴⁷⁹, or ‘God’⁴⁸⁰, or ‘the Truth’⁴⁸¹... Him that is ‘the same’⁴⁸²... while remaining Himself, He is at the same time within the world, around it and above it, above the sky and above existence⁴⁸³, and they call Him a Sun⁴⁸⁴, a Star⁴⁸⁵, and a Fire⁴⁸⁶, and Water⁴⁸⁷, and Wind⁴⁸⁸, a Dew⁴⁸⁹, a Cloud⁴⁹⁰, the Head Stone of the corner⁴⁹¹... and All Creation, who yet is no created thing⁴⁹²” (*On the Divine Names*, 596B). And this enumeration could go on *ad nauseam*, until the mind surrenders and admits its inability. Only then will it stop playing with the concepts and conclude that God is Nameless, *Sine Nomine*: “And is not this Name that is above every name⁴⁹³ in reality wonderful: the Nameless?” (*On the Divine Names*, 596A). “Nameless” can only be comprehended without thoughts, without bodily senses... And, as well as it is understood that the Divinity has no end and cannot be constrained by adjectives, the same can be said about the names preceded by the prefix *arch-*, which belong to the positive or affirmative theology.

⁴⁷⁷ Ex. 3:14; Rev. 1:4, 8.

⁴⁷⁸ Jn. 11:25; 14:6 and 1:4; 5:26.

⁴⁷⁹ Jn. 8:12 and 1:4-9; 9:5; 1 Jn. 1:5.

⁴⁸⁰ Gen. 28:13; Ex. 3:6, 15; Is. 40:28.

⁴⁸¹ Jn. 14:6.

⁴⁸² Ps. 102:27.

⁴⁸³ Ps. 113:4.

⁴⁸⁴ Mal. 4:2.

⁴⁸⁵ 2 Pt. 1:19; Rev. 22:16.

⁴⁸⁶ Ex. 3:2.

⁴⁸⁷ Jn. 7:38.

⁴⁸⁸ Jn. 3, 5-8.

⁴⁸⁹ Is. 18:4; Hos. 14:5.

⁴⁹⁰ Ex. 13:21-22; 24:16; 33:9; Job 36:27-32; Is. 4:5; 1 Cor. 10:1.

⁴⁹¹ Ps. 118:22; Mt. 21:42; Mk. 12:10; Act. 4:11.

⁴⁹² Statement that Eckhart takes pleasure in repeating, and one out of the list why he was condemned in Avignon in 1329: “*omnes creaturae sunt unum purum nihil: non dico quod sint quid modicum vel aliquid, sed quod sint purum nihil*”.

⁴⁹³ Phil. 2:9.

Therefore, if we want to attain a deeper knowledge of God, we must deny those names (*negative theology*), because, even though we may use them to rationally elevate ourselves towards Him, strictly speaking, none of them really expresses His essence. That is why there is another way, the *negative way*, to know God, considering that any idea that we may speak about Him is unsuitable. The names or attributes of God that begin with *hyper-*, or those that are preceded by *α*, belong to this negative theology that tries as well to express His ineffability. “If He is greater than all reason and all knowledge, and has His firm abode altogether beyond mind and being... and cannot be reached by any... name, discourse... or understanding... how then is our discourse concerning the Divine Names to be accomplished, since we see that the Godhead is unutterable and nameless?” (*On the Divine Names*, 593A). Nevertheless, according to the Areopagite, there is a way to solve, sublimate or transcend the negative (*apophasis*) *theo*-logy (knowledge of God), as well as the positive one (*cataphasis*). It is the *superlative theology*, which preaches that God is not a being, but a super-being; He is not life, but super-life; He is not goodness, but super-goodness; and so on. Strictly speaking, it is not a rational or speculative method, but the contrary: a way to admit the mind’s inability to access supraindividual forms of knowledge. Thus, once the mind and the senses have yielded, man finds the most suitable spiritual predisposition to focus his attention.

In what consists this superlative (suprarational) way or theology that, in its quest for the Divinity, aspires to reach beyond the divine attributes?

II.- HOW TO ACHIEVE THE SUPRARATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

First of all, Dionysius does not understand God as a Being that is far away from and totally inaccessible to man, but, on the contrary,

he conceives Him as an immediate, present Being in him: “Furthermore, we must ask how it is that we know God when He cannot be perceived by the intellect or the senses and is not a particular being. Perhaps it is true to say that we know not God by His nature, for this is unknowable and beyond the reach of all reason and intuition, yet by means of that ordering of all things which are projected out of Him” (*On the Divine Names*, 869C).

Taking up the ancient Platonic metaphor, developed by Plotinus, according to which *every being, as a being, is light*, Dionysius will state that that light⁴⁹⁴ of God is present in each and every one of the beings (*On the Divine Names*, 820), which implies that all individual, despite the limitations and conditionings derived from his personal circumstances, has the possibility to connect or access that Divine essence.

The motive principle of this process of quest for God that drives man to go out of himself as an individual and detach himself from his thoughts, from the information that comes from his sensory organs, from the result of his actions... and forget it all, is the love to know God (*On the Divine Names*, 869; *The Mystical Theology*, 1034). Love is the force that leads man to ecstasy, to go out of his psycho-mental stronghold and his bodily shape in order to access a supraindividual state that is described by Saint Paul when he states that only then “I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Gal. 2:20). With this quotation, the Areopagite explains the mystical ecstasy of him who “was and being beside himself unto God, and not possessing his own life but possessing and loving the life of Him for whom he loved” (*On the Divine Names*, 712A). For that purpose, he insists that “We must be transported wholly out of ourselves and given to God. For it is better to belong unto God and not unto our-

⁴⁹⁴ The metaphor of the spirit as light will also be used by Scotus Eriugena, Robert Grosseteste, Saint Bonaventure, etc.

selves, since thus will the divine bounties be bestowed, if we are united to God” (*On the Divine Names*, 868B).

But this leap cannot be taken just out of curiosity, or eagerness for knowledge, or, in sum, out of desire to experience. Such a leap, as it implies a (momentary) cession of the sensory control and, therefore, a surrender of the I, it can only take place by love: “The Divine Love brings ecstasy, not allowing them that are touched thereby to belong unto themselves but only to the beloved. And hence the great Paul, constrained by the Divine Love and having received a share in its ecstatic power, says, with inspired utterance: ‘I live; and yet not I, but Christ liveth in me’” (*On the Divine Names*, 712A).

In sum, there are two forms of knowledge. Firstly, there is an ordinary subject-object knowledge, based on the straight reason, language, shapes, etc., which is indispensable to survive in the world. There is an ordinary and merely human knowledge that, “through the partial and manifold activities of their complex nature, are inferior to the unified intelligences” (*On the Divine Names*, 868C) because it is based on the division or duality of the subject who knows and the plurality of objects that are known⁴⁹⁵.

⁴⁹⁵ Based on 1 Cor. 8:7; Mt. 13:11; Lk. 8:10: “For any one might say that the cause why forms are naturally attributed to the formless, and shapes to the shapeless, is not alone our capacity which is unable immediately to elevate itself to the intelligible contemplations, and that it needs appropriate and cognate instructions which present images, suitable to us, of the formless and supernatural objects of contemplation; but further, that it is most agreeable itself to the revealing oracles to conceal, through mystical and sacred enigmas, and to keep the holy and secret truth respecting the super-mundane minds inaccessible to the multitude. For it is not every one that is holy, nor, as the Scriptures affirm, does knowledge belong to all” (*The Heavenly Hierarchy*, 140B). The “secret”, the “revealing oracles”, are part of the method of the School of Alexandria. Thus, Philo will say that they are not to be revealed to anyone unless “his head has been anointed with oil” (*On flight and finding*, 110). That is why Origen recommended the priests not to “betray the mysterious declarations of God’s wisdom” by revealing them openly (*Hom. IV*, 3), and, in a similar way did also Gregory of Nyssa (*Life of Moses*, II, 161), emulating Jesus Christ, who spoke in parables to let him who sees, see more, and him who does not see, see less (Mt. 13:13 ff.).

But there is also a subtle knowledge that needs no concepts or activity of the senses and that is only accessible to the “lovers” of God: “We ought to know, according to the correct account, that we use sounds, and syllables, and phrases, and descriptions, and words, on account of the sensible perceptions; since when our soul is moved by the intellectual energies to the things contemplated, the sensible perceptions by aid of sensible objects are superfluous” (*On the Divine Names*, IV, 11). Certainly, the ordinary or discursive knowledge is important because it helps us reflect on the most spiritual meaning of the Holy Scriptures or decipher the correct meaning of the allegories and the rest of the symbols. But that rational or discursive knowledge is not enough to access God because it is based on the senses. Ultimately, both the positive and the negative way to discourse about the Names or attributes of God are insufficient: “We must not then dare to speak, or indeed to form any conception, of the hidden super-essential Godhead” (*On the Divine Names*, 585). As a consequence, Dionysius insists, “That Mystery Itself we strive to apprehend by casting aside all the activities of our intellect” (*On the Divine Names*, 645A).

That is why, besides the knowledge of God that is fruit of a process of philosophical and theological speculation, there is another higher form of knowledge of God: the *contemplative knowledge*, which is a *superlative knowledge*, as it transcends or overflows the activities of the senses and the mind. Nonetheless, “The lack of intellect and sensation must be predicated of God by excess and not by defect... Thus the Mind of God embraces all things in an utterly transcendent knowledge” (*On the Divine Names*, 869A). In what consists that modality of superior “knowledge” that transcends knowledge, intellect and sensation? Dionysius attempts a first approach when stating that “The angelic minds derive their blessed simple perceptions, not collecting their knowledge of God in partial fragments or from partial activities of sensation or of discursive reason, nor yet being circumscribed by aught that is akin to these, but

rather, being free from all taint of matter and multiplicity, they perceive the spiritual truths of Divine things in a single immaterial and spiritual intuition. And their intuitive faculty and activity shines in its unalloyed and undefined purity and possesses its Divine intuitions all together in an indivisible and immaterial manner... through the working of the Divine Wisdom” (*On the Divine Names*, 868C).

This other higher modality of knowledge, in which the subject-object duality disappears, happens when the subject concentrates on only one object. This is precisely the modality that the angels possess: “yet they too, through the concentration of their many faculties, are vouchsafed intuitions like unto those of the angels” (*On the Divine Names*, 868C). Nonetheless, there is only one case in which the subject is identified or concentrated on one object. This happens when the subject makes God or himself his object of attention or concentration. Only that way, the subject is object or, rather, the subject-object duality disappears. The subject is dissolved into the “object” God, or transforms into his own object of knowledge (himself). This is what the Areopagite calls superior or transcendent knowledge: “And thus the Mind of God embraces all things in an utterly transcendent knowledge... knowing all other things inwardly and, if I may so put it, from the very beginning, and thus bringing them into existence... And methinks this is taught by the Scripture when it says ‘O eternal God, who knowest hidden things, who knowest all things before they come to pass’⁴⁹⁶. For the Mind of God gains not Its knowledge of things from those things, but of Itself and in Itself It possesses” (*On the Divine Names*, 869A). Ultimately, “[God] cannot be grasped by intuition, language, or name... He is all things and nothing in any... The Divinest knowledge of God, which is received through Unknowing, is obtained in that communion which transcends the mind, when the mind, turning away from all things and then leaving even itself behind, is united to the dazzling rays, being from them and in them, illumined by the unsearchable

⁴⁹⁶ Dan. 13:42.

depth of Wisdom” (*On the Divine Names*, 872A). Of course, such a *contemplative way* requires a certain previous work or effort of purification of the senses and discrimination of the mind by means of meditation and reflection. In that unceasing activity of discrimination, the candidate must distinguish what is real and what is a vain illusion, so that, “In the earnest of mystic contemplation, you leave the senses and the activities of the intellect and all things that the senses or the intellect can perceive, and all things in this world of nothingness, or in that world of being, and that, your understanding being laid to rest, you strain, so far as you may, towards a union with Him whom neither being nor understanding can contain” (*The Mystical Theology*, 999). As God is above all relative knowledge, the mystical subject that aspires to an immediate, direct knowledge must suspend all the activity of the senses and the intelligence. This *anenergēsia* (*The Mystical Theology*, 1001A) comes together with the closing of the mouth, *aphthenktos*, that is, not only the verbal silence but also the silence or emptiness of thoughts, with the closing of the eyes, *ablepsia* (*The Mystical Theology*, 1925A), as Moses did, symbolizing that the contemplative soul “plunges... unto the Darkness of Unknowing wherein he closes his eyes (*apomyei*) to all the apprehensions of his understanding”. In sum, Moses “breaks forth, even from the things that are beheld and from those that behold theme” (*tōn horōmenōn kai tōn horōntōn*) as a previous step to access the “ray of darkness” (*The Mystical Theology*, 997B-1000A, and 1001A).

The less the thoughts intervene, the purer and more concentrated the meditation is, up to reach a state of mental silence that the Areopagite describes as *thinking of nothing*: “The more that we soar upwards, the more our language becomes restricted to the compass of purely intellectual conceptions... We shall find ourselves reduced not merely to brevity of speech but even to absolute dumbness both of speech and thought” (*The Mystical Theology*, 1033). And that mental silence is the base on which is built the beginning of the path or the ladder of contemplation. That silence, fruit of the detachment

from the thoughts, is what pleases God more, because, through it, He can manifest the way He wants, free from obstacles that may stain, distort or influence His presence. When the faculties of the contemplative are empty of all human knowledge, when the human mind has been *emptied* of itself, of the creatures and the rest of the objects, thrives the necessary *mystical silence*, so that God may pour His light. In sum, the mental silence is the previous, necessary condition for the divine attainability (*On the Divine Names*, 696B; 724B; 949A). When that inner effort is made by the “lovers”, God “gives them first a moderate illumination; then, when they taste the Light and desire it more, He gives Himself in greater measure and shines in more abundance on them, *because they have loved much*⁴⁹⁷, and ever He constrains them according to their powers of looking upwards” (*On the Divine Names*, 701A). To achieve the mental peace or silence, closing the gates of the senses and giving up the intellectual activities momentarily, implies a certain abandonment of oneself, that is, a renunciation of that part of our being that enjoys the pleasures of the senses. Only that way, “by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of yourself and all things, you shall in pureness call all things aside, and be released from all, and so shall be led upwards to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceeds all existence” (*The Mystical Theology*, 1001A).

III.- THE THREE STAGES OF THE MEDITATOR

Dionysius the Areopagite compares the stages of the mystical way with Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai up to the vision of the burning bush and the revelation of God. What does it mean that God commanded Moses to take his shoes off? To leave the shoes behind symbolizes the need to detach oneself from the thought (mind and body) because everything is spare in the presence of God. Free from bodily and mental clothing, concentrated on oneself, one, like Mo-

⁴⁹⁷ Lk. 7:47.

ses, heads toward the nothing: “[Moses] plunges unto the Darkness of Unknowing... belonging wholly to Him that is beyond all things and to none else, whether himself or another, and being through the passive stillness of all his reasoning powers united by his highest faculty to Him that is wholly unknowable, of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding” (*The Heavenly Theology*, 121 and 140). As it has been said, according to Dionysius the Areopagite, neither the affirmative nor the negative way can be used to know the *Being* Itself, because they have just a preparatory nature. However, there is a way to make the *Being* reveal to our soul: the way of the *contemplative prayer*. Before the three classic ways (purgative, illuminative and unitive) were set, the Areopagite explains that the contemplative prayer or meditation has three degrees⁴⁹⁸, matching the stages of the ascension process of detachment from the senses. Vanneste⁴⁹⁹ already affirmed that Dionysius’ work explained the three degrees or stages of the soul’s path toward God: a first logical stage of successive denials, which is the *aphaeresis*; a second stage that is the completion or finishing of the first one, the *agnosia*; and, finally, the end of the Way, which is the union with God or *enōsis*.

The aim of the first degree is the *sensory purification* by means of asceticism. It consists in a pedagogy about the body and the mind, in order to learn how to control and detach oneself from the activity of the senses and the mind in a natural way, until one becomes purified and plunged into the luminous, silent darkness (*The Mystical Theology*, 1033). “Methinks he has shown by these words how marvelously he has understood that the Good Cause of all things is eloquent yet speaks few words, or rather none, possessing neither

⁴⁹⁸ According to Dionysius, these stages of the spiritual progress match the three successive motions of the soul: circular, straight, and oblique or helical, which, in turn, match the three steps of the ecclesiastical hierarchy: catechumens (purified ones), believers who have received Enlightenment (enlightened ones) and monks who have managed to attain perfection (perfect ones).

⁴⁹⁹ J. Vanneste, S. J. “La théologie mystique du pseudo-Denys l’Aréopagite”, in *Studia Patristica* 5,3 (1962), pp. 401-415.

speech nor understanding because it exceeds all things in a super-essential manner, and is revealed without veil to those alone who pass right through the opposition of fair and foul, and pass beyond the topmost altitudes of the holy ascent and leave behind them all divine enlightenment and voices and heavenly utterances and plunge into the Darkness where truly dwells, as says the Scripture, that One which is beyond all things (*The Mystical Theology*, 1000-1001). In sum, with this purification of the senses, one accesses the *mystical silence* (*The Mystical Theology*, 997).

The second degree is defined as *enlightenment*, because the spirit establishes communication with the highest states of the Being (which are called *angelic* by Dionysius). In this stage, the contemplative ascetic must take precautions against certain phenomena that usually go along with the meditative practices but that are to be refused if one wants to correctly go deeper into this way. Thus, for instance, in *The Mystical Theology* 1000C, the Areopagite expressly warns against the divine lights and the rest of shining phenomena: lightings, burning mountains, flames, sounds, trumpet blasts, etc., that may appear before the mystic as they did before Moses⁵⁰⁰ when he was heading toward the burning bush (Exodus 19:13, 16; 20:18). Such phenomena, strictly speaking, do not constitute the true mystical experience. They are rather obstacles, evidences or at the most symptoms of the increasing detachment from the profane world and the gradual settlement on the spiritual world.

⁵⁰⁰ “For not without reason is the blessed Moses bidden first to undergo purification himself and then to separate himself from those who have not undergone it; and after all purification hears the many-voiced trumpets and sees many lights flash forth with pure and diverse-streaming rays, and then stands separate from the multitudes and with the chosen priests presses forward to the topmost pinnacle of the Divine Ascent. Nevertheless he meets not with God Himself, yet he beholds, not Him indeed, for He is invisible, but the place wherein He dwells. And this I take to signify that the divinest and the highest of the things perceived by the eyes of the body or the mind are but the symbolic language of things subordinate to Him who Himself transcends them all. Through these things His incomprehensible presence is shown walking upon those heights of His holy places which are perceived by the mind” (*The Mystical Theology*, 1000-1001).

Finally, the third degree is the *perfection*, also described as *true contemplation, union with God, divinization, sanctification*, etc. because the spirit goes out of its darkness and completely unites God for love (*The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 392). “Then [Moses] breaks forth, even from the things that are beheld and from those that behold them, and plunges... unto the Darkness of Unknowing wherein he renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible, belonging wholly to Him that is beyond all things and to none else, whether himself or another, and being through the passive stillness of all his reasoning powers united by his highest faculty to Him that is wholly unknowable, of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding (*The Mystical Theology*, 1001A). It is a state that is the “fruit of the intimate union with a sublime light that is irradiated on the soul and enables it to plunge into the bottomless depths of the divine wisdom” (*The Mystical Theology*, 1033). *One* is His name, “and the title *One* implies that He is all things under the form of Unity through the Transcendence of His single Oneness... And without the One there can be no multiplicity; yet contrariwise the One can exist without the multiplicity” (*On the Divine Names*, 912D).

IV.- THE MYSTICAL DARKNESS

Different explanations have been given to define the mystical Darkness of Dionysius the Areopagite⁵⁰¹. And that diversity of interpretations precisely proves the ignorance, or even incomprehension, of some modern researchers regarding the metaphysical phenome-

⁵⁰¹ Regarding the different interpretations given to Dionysius' Darkness: B. Corder, *adnotationes* of his edition, P. G., 3, 1002-1007; P. Porrat, “*La spiritualité chrétienne*, vol. I, Paris, 1921, p. 351; Gabriel Horn, *Amour et extase d'après Denys l'Aréopagite*”, in *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, 6 (1925), pp. 278-289; G. Horn, “Le ‘miroir’ et la *nuée*, deux manières de voir Dieu d'après S. Grégoire de Nysse”, in *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, 8 (1927), pp. 113-131.

non in general, and the work of the Areopagite in particular, for example, when they state that the Darkness mentioned by the Areopagite only represents the mental or intellectual limitation of the human being when experiencing the sacred.

What does then the unknown Syrian monk mean when he mentions the mystical Darkness? First of all, there is a Darkness where God dwells or that is even God Himself, for it is above all knowable reality (Ps. 18:12). In Psalms 18:11, it is explained that God's "pavilion round about Him was... thick clouds", wherein only those who truly love Him may enter. This is adapted by Dionysius when he states that "the Divine Darkness is the unapproachable light in which God is said to dwell" (*Letter V*, 1073A). Therefore, the Divine Darkness is a liminal zone where the Divinity tells man how he can and how he cannot pass through the Cloud. And, contrary to what could be supposed, such a Cloud does not constitute an opaque or impassable barrier that hides God. On the contrary, it is a place, mansion or state that indicates the correct disposition that must be adopted by those who long for knowing their Creator. In sum, we can pass through the Cloud, but only when we have the necessary qualifications of disappropriation of the senses and the thoughts.

On the other hand, regarding Exodus 20:21, the Areopagite explains that God cannot be perceived by the sight, since He is *atheatos* (invisible) (*The Mystical Theology*, 1000), so the Cloud and the Darkness would symbolize the impossibility to know God as an object among others because God is neither an object nor, strictly speaking, objectifiable. Precisely for that reason, being God the Light or even superior to the Light, He seems, to the eyes of man, a Darkness or Gloom. But it is to be understood that it is not being described here a merely intellectual human state derived from the ordinary form of knowledge through the usual relationship of a subject that knows by apprehending objects. Dionysius is referring to another

er higher form of knowledge that transcends, for it unifies, the subject-object relationship.

How to define a direct, immediate form of knowledge in which the knowing subject tries to know an object that is itself inconceivable and inapprehensible? What is more, how to know God without converting Him into an object? Therefore, how to define that form of knowledge that surpasses or unifies the subject-object relationship? How to describe a form of knowledge in which the subject knows himself without converting himself into an object of his own knowledge? How to define, in sum, a form of knowledge in which the supposed knowing subject has momentarily disappeared? Dionysius the Areopagite defines this peculiar, paradoxical form of knowledge as “*unknowing*”, “*non-knowing*”, *agnōsia* (*The Mystical Theology*, 1001A; *Letter I*, 1065A). But that *agnōsia* is not a mere privation of knowledge or a simple ignorance, but a *luminous* or *learned ignorance* (*docta ignorantia*⁵⁰²), since, thanks to it, “enters every one deemed worthy to know and to see God, by the very fact of neither seeing nor knowing” (*Letter V*, 1073A). Thus, once purified by this humble *agnōsia*, the most spiritual *part* of man is considered equal to the Being and then receives the Light. And even though that *cloud of unknowing* represents the culmination of the absolute denial, only there, paradoxically, He “is revealed without veil”: *aperikalyptōs* (*The Mystical Theology*, 1000C). Thus, the *agnōsia*, the unknowing, becomes a true knowing. It is not a great paradox based on the irrationality of the mystical knowledge; it is the access to another state or degree of existence in which *nothing is known* because the ordinary knowledge has been transcended. It is a previous or higher than the ordinary knowledge.

⁵⁰² As it would be said by Saint Bonaventure in *Breviloquium*, P. 5, ch. 6, and *Commentary on the Sentences*, L. II, d. 23, a. 2, or by Nicholas of Cusa in his work *De docta ignorantia* (*On Learned Ignorance*).

This way, it is clear that the apophatic way is not only an intellectual activity, but it is a progress of purification toward the union that takes place in the *agnōsia*: “And, if any one, having seen God, understood what he saw, he did not see Him... And the all-perfect ignorance, in its superior sense, is a knowledge of Him, who is above all known things” (*Letter I*, 1065A). Therefore, gloom and darkness define a state that deprives man of his human inclination that obstruct or interfere with knowledge. The *agnōsia* consists in an immediate, direct knowledge, in knowing without a subject who knows. Therefore, in such a state, the contemplative knows neither that he is contemplating, nor that he is enlightened, because the true light “escapes those who possess existing light” (*Letter I*, 1065A). It is not known because it is been. There is no individual knower, but a supraindividual knowledge. From the point of view of the individual or subject, such knowledge equals Nothing, unknowing. But from the supraindividual or spiritual point of view, that unknowing is the All. Dionysius invokes Ps. 36:9, “in Thy light shall we see light”, to define a non-dual or unitive state of the non-knowledge of God in which there are no mental discourses or reflections: “And, if any one, having seen God, understood what he saw, he did not see Him” (*Letter I*, 1065A). On the contrary, when that degree of the Darkness where God dwells is achieved, the contemplative disappears as a subject and then *he knows that he knows*, because there is no subject to whom he may attribute the action of knowing or who claims the appropriation of any knowledge. That knowledge of *nothing from nothing*, which equals All in All, is the natural state of the spirit when it is free of corporal, sensory and mental ties (which equals the state of every man in the earthly Paradise). And all this without forgetting that, ultimately, the divine essence is above knowing and unknowing, as well as above darkness (*The Mystical Theology*, 1048A).

The ineffability of the mystical knowledge does not prevent Dionysius from explaining his ecstatic experiences with precision. By

means of the purification of the senses and the control over the thoughts, the first few fruits of the contemplative prayer are attained: “By the unceasing and absolute renunciation of yourself and all things, you shall in pureness cast all things aside, and be released from all, and so shall be led upwards to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceeds all existence” (*The Mystical Theology*, 1001A). The contemplative must persevere in that dark Darkness, since, as the Areopagite explains, the higher we ascend on the Darkness, the closer we are to the source of the divine Light. In fact, it is “in the darkest” of the Cloud, “in the absolutely intangible and invisible”, where enlightenment happens. That is why the contemplative must frequent that Darkness of the senses and the thoughts if he aspires to see the light that blinds, which is now defined as the *Luminous Darkness*.

There seems to be, thus, two Darknesses or, rather, a Darkness with two aspects: a dark Darkness and a luminous Darkness or Ray of Darkness that, should the comparison be allowed, are a precedent of the night of the senses and the night of the spirit of Saint John of the Cross. In effect, by means of the Darkness or night of the senses, the mind is disciplined and purified until detaching itself from the attraction of the objects and the rest of requests of the world; by means of the Darkness or night of the spirit, the contemplative forgets even himself, his own will and everything other than what God wants. This way, “By the unceasing and absolute renunciation of yourself and all things, you shall in pureness cast all things aside, and be released from all, and so shall be led upwards to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceeds all existence” (1001A).

What is the Ray of Darkness? Doubtlessly, it is the enlightenment or vision of the light already described by the Platonism and that was called many names by the Christianity⁵⁰³. It is clear that it is

⁵⁰³ Vid. Plato, *Republic* 7.518a and *Phaedo* 99e. In the patristic tradition, the *obumbratio* (darkening) of the spirit was admitted by Tertullian (*Adversus*

not, strictly speaking, a vision with the physical eyes, since Dionysius himself explains that enlightenment frees man from “the heavy burden of darkness” (*tōi pollōi barei tou skotous*) (*On the Divine Names*, 700D-701A) that keeps our eyelids closed. That is to say, enlightenment takes place while the eyes are closed, being the blindness of *The Mystical Theology* 1001A a consequence of the voluntary disconnection of the senses. Therefore, the dazzle of the “Ray of Divine Darkness which exceeds all existence” (*The Mystical Theology*, 1001A) describes an extra-sensory state that takes place in the most intimate place within the contemplative.

That supra-personal knowledge of God is not accessed through the reading and study of books, or through any human effort, but it is a divine gift. It could be inferred that this requires a certain preparatory ascesis that, in any case, would be a necessary but not sufficient condition to attain a *contact* with the divine essence. Therefore, there is an active contemplation that is the consequence of the human will and efforts, but there is also a passive contemplation that is a gift or grace of God (*On the Divine Names*, 648), since “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him” (1 Cor. 2:9; cf. Is. 64:4). Dionysius often defines that eminent knowledge of God as “enlightenment”. Such metaphors were profusely used by the Platonists and Neoplatonists, but also by Christians: “God is Light” (1 Jn. 1:5), “God is Light and those who are granted His vision see Him as light; we see Him as light, because the light of His glory comes before His face and it is impossible that He appears in a different way than as light; those who have not seen that light have not seen God, since God is Light”⁵⁰⁴. “God is Light, an infinite, incomprehensible light”⁵⁰⁵. The light is not a mere metaphor for the Eastern Church, but a real aspect of the divinity: “In Thy Light shall we see

Marcionem, IV, 22, P. L., 2, 413C, and *De anima* 45, P. L., 2, 726B) as a symptom of ecstasy.

⁵⁰⁴ Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *Homily LXXIX*, 2.

⁵⁰⁵ Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *Theological Discourse*, III.

Light” (Ps. 36:9). As well, according to Dionysius, the light comes from God “From the Good comes the light which is an image of Goodness; wherefore the Good is described by the name of Light... The image of the Divine Goodness, faintly reechoing the activity of the Good, illumines all things that can receive its light while retaining the utter simplicity of light, and expands above and below throughout the visible world the beams of its own radiance... Even so does the light... draw together all things and attract them unto itself... those that can receive its light and warmth, those that are merely held in being by its rays” (*On the Divine Names*, IV, 4). It is in this Light, which exceeds the intellect and the senses, under the shape of “invisible fire” or “burning bush”, that God makes Himself known. There, the body does not hinder the mystical experience anymore, since, not for nothing, man was created in the image and likeness of God. The Grace is Light; it is “the splendor of things all holy, which sheds its light clearly and without symbol to men inspired, as being congenial to the thing contemplated” (*The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, IV, III, 2). And, as this mystery is beyond all theological speculation, it is only possible to keep a respectful mental silence.

V.- LATER INFLUENCE OF DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE AND THE TOPIC OF THE MYSTICAL DARKNESS

The metaphor of the Darkness or Cloud that appears in the Areopagite’s *Corpus* comes from Ex. 19:16 and 20:21, which describe Moses’ ascent to Mount Sinai. As well, other biblical passages (2 Chr. 6:1; 2 Sam. 22:12; Ps. 18:9-12; 97:2) turn to the darkness in order to represent the cloud that covers God (Job 22:14; 26:8-9) or marks His presence (Ex. 40:34-38, Num. 9:14:14; 15-23; Deut. 1:33; 31:15; Neh. 9:12-19; Ps. 78:14; or even Lev. 16:2; 1 Kings 8:10-11; Ez. 10:3-4). Certainly, this topic also appears in Plotinus (*Enneads* V, 3, 13), Proclus and other Neoplatonists.

The image of Moses passing through the Cloud had been used before by Philo of Alexandria in order to symbolize the “invisible, shapeless and incorporeal” nature of God (*Vit. Mos.* I, 158; *De Mutat. nomin.*, 7) that can only be passed by the initiates into “the most sacred mysteries” (*De gigant.*, 54). It was also used by Gregory of Nyssa (*Exhortation to a Virgin*, P. G., 46, 413C; *In Hexaem.*, P. G., 44, 65B-C), above all in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, to symbolize the progressive renunciation of the sensible and intelligible objects: “Having disregarded the sensible, the soul is surrounded by the Divine Night, looking for Him who is hidden in the Darkness. She has the love of Him who she looks for. But this Lover escapes all attempt to be captured by her thoughts” (VI, 892D-893A). After persevering in the Darkness, the vision of the Ineffable is attained. But, even so, the vision is not complete in this life. That is why the Exodus says that God refuses to show His face and confines Himself to showing only His back, because the created being cannot know God but through His later manifestations.

Anyway, during the Middle Ages, the work of Dionysius the Areopagite reached a high prestige for being the object of notable commentaries by Saint Maximus the Confessor (PL 91, 1031-1060), who can be considered its main promoter. Maximus (582-662) was born in Constantinople, in a noble family. Though he was an imperial civil servant, he gave up this life and withdrew to a monastery when he was about 30 years old. After that, he traveled through Alexandria, Carthage and Rome. His thought, with a Neoplatonic background, dates back to Origen through Evagrius Ponticus. He is also profusely mentioned by John of Damascus, Saint Theodore the Studite, Gregory Palamas, George Pachymeres, etc.

In the West, his works were very appreciated by Saint Gregory the Great and Johannes Scotus Eriugena. Saint Bonaventure explained, “it is called darkness because the intellect does not see; however, the soul is extremely illuminated!”. *The Book of Twenty-*

Four Philosophers (13th century) had also a special influence. It affirms, “God is the darkness in the soul being left after all light” and “God is that which the mind only knows in ignorance”⁵⁰⁶. But, most of all, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, whose anonymous author presents himself as based on Dionysius: “And truly, whoso will look in Dionysius’ books, he shall find that his words will clearly affirm all that I have said or shall say, from the beginning of this treatise to the end” (LXX). Hugh of Saint Victor (1095-1141) wrote one of the most important commentaries on *The Heavenly Hierarchy*: the *Corpus Dionysiacum Parisiense*, which was the base of the Neoplatonic thought during the 13th and 14th centuries. As well, Richard of Saint Victor (who died in 1176), Hugh’s disciple, is inspired by the *agnōsia* of Dionysius when he explains ecstasy, rapture or *alienatio mentis*. Saint Albert the Great (1206-1280), who mentions Dionysius 1,200 times, started to study *The Heavenly Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* in Paris about 1246, believing that Dionysius was a disciple of Paul and, above all, because he considered him a truly inspired man.

For his part, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1221-1274) studied the commentaries on *The Heavenly Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* in Paris until 1248. Dionysius is the only author about whom Saint Thomas publicly proclaims that he follows his teachings, and he mentions him 1,700 times. As well, the Franciscan mystic Angela of Foligno (1248-1309) knows and uses the Areopagite’s language⁵⁰⁷. Likewise, Dante (1265-1321) states, “Here we must ob-

⁵⁰⁶ Anonymous, *The Book of Twenty-Four Philosophers*, XXI and XXIII. Vid. *El libro de los veinticuatro filósofos*, Madrid, 2000.

⁵⁰⁷ “Once my soul was elevated, and I saw the light, the beauty, and the fullness that is in God in a way that I had never seen before in so great a manner. I did not see love there, I then lost the love which was mine and was made non-love. Afterward, I saw Him in a darkness, and in a darkness precisely because the good that He is, is far too great to be conceived or understood. Indeed, anything conceivable or understandable does not attain this good or even come near it. My soul was then granted a most certain faith, a secure and most firm hope, a continual security about God which took away all my fear. In this good, which is seen in the darkness, I recollected myself totally. I was made so sure of God that in no way can I

serve that in a certain way these things dazzle our intellect, insofar as certain things are affirmed to exist which our intellect cannot perceive: namely God, eternity, and primal matter... But given the nature of their essence, we cannot understand them: only by negative reasoning can we approach an understanding of these things, and not otherwise” (*Convivio*, III, 15). In the same direction, Dionysius inspired Peter Olivi, Thomas Gallus of Vercelli, Eckhart, Tauler and Ruysbroeck. In fact, Dionysius van Rijkel the Karthusian (1402-1471) affirmed that “John [of Ruysbroeck] can be named, due to his most excellent wisdom, the *alter Dionysius*”.

The Flemish Franciscan Hendrik Herp (1420-1477) reproduces some of Dionysius’ paragraphs almost literally in his *Golden Directory of Contemplatives*⁵⁰⁸. It would be pointless to mention here the list of authors that belong to the school of the Areopagite: Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Saint Francis de Sales, Fénelon... Concerning the Spanish mysticism, the following authors are to be highlighted: Peter of Hispania, Francisco de Osuna, Saint Teresa of Jesus, Saint John of the Cross, Miguel de Molinos...

ever entertain any doubts about Him or of my possession of Him. Of this I have the utmost certitude. And in this most efficacious good seen in this darkness now resides my most firm hope, one in which I am totally recollected and secure... The soul sees nothing and it sees everything... And the many, indescribable displays of friendship, and all the words which God spoke to me, and also everything you have written, I understand that they are so inferior to that good which I see with such great darkness; consequently, I do not place my hope in them; indeed, my hope is not in them. In fact... in no way should I diminish my hope, my most secure hope, which remains certain in the All-Good seen by me with such great darkness... And when I am in that darkness, I do not remember anything about humanity or the God-Man, or anything that has form. Yet I am in that darkness, I see everything and I see nothing”, Angela of Foligno, *Book of Life* ch. XI. Vid. *Libro de la Vida*, Salamanca, 1991.

⁵⁰⁸ “... gathered the intellectual powers inside the unity of the spirit and crossed the unity of the spirit until being immediately before God, a light emerges from the divine unity, radiating in the elevated unity of our spirit, manifested under a triple likeness. Firstly, as a darkness, about which we will speak later. After that, a great stillness appears... Thirdly, this light manifests itself as an absolute emptiness... It is so bright that the understanding is dazzled and blinded, as anyone would be if he tried to reach for the Sun itself” (*Golden Directory of Contemplatives*, ch. 58).

ECKHART AND CONTEMPLATION

“If I did not exist, then neither would God have existed as *God*. I am the cause of God’s existence as *God*”. (Meister Eckhart, Sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu...*).

Little is known about the life of Meister Eckhart (1260-1328). When he was very young, he entered the Dominican monastery of Erfurt and, before 1280, he had already attended Theology lessons in Cologne. He finishes his studies as a “Bachelor of Theology” in Paris in 1293 and, at the beginning of the academic year 1293-1294, he is known to be a lecturer of the *Sentences* (*Collationes*) at the Sorbonne. A few months later, he is appointed as Prior of the Dominicans of Erfurt and Vicar of Thuringia. During this period (1294-1298), he will write his *Talks of Instructions*, following the style of the ancient monastic *collationes* that were held between a spiritual director and the young postulants.

Around 1302, he is promoted to ordinary professor of Theology at the University of Paris (*Magister Actu Regens*), in a chair reserved for non-French professors. Once finished that academic year in September 1303, he returns to Erfurt as the responsible for the new religious province of Saxony, in order to manage the spiritual and administrative direction of nearly fifty monasteries and participate in different general chapters (Toulouse 1304, Strasbourg 1307, Piacenza 1310). Precisely, in the General Chapter of Toulouse, he was appointed as General Vicar of the Order for the province of Bohemia. In the Chapter of 1311, he is exempted from this duty in order that he may hold a chair in Paris again, an honor that, until that moment, had only been granted to Saint Thomas Aquinas. Between 1323-

1324, he will teach from his chair of Theology at the *Studium Generale* of Cologne.

His academic success and his increasing prestige provoked the suspicion and envy of some brethren of the Order, who finally denounced the suspicious contents of certain statements written in his works. For this reason, in 1326, the Archbishop of Cologne, Heinrich II of Virneburg, receives from Hermann von Summo and Wilhelm von Nidecke a list of suspicious sentences extracted from the writings by Eckhart. In those years, the inquisitorial activity was particularly focused on the spiritual movements of Beghards, Beguines⁵⁰⁹ and mystics who were on the edge of the institutional church. Once the process was started, Eckhart died at the beginning of the year 1328 in Avignon, waiting for a resolution that would come on March the 27th, 1329 by means of the Bull “*In Agro Dominico*”⁵¹⁰. Despite the surprising and opportunistic papal condemnation, only explicable by the particular conditionings of that time, Eckhart’s work was perpetuated by his disciples, the Dominicans Henry Suso and Johannes Tauler, and it influenced different authors, among whom it is to be mentioned John of Ruysbroeck (1291-1381), Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), Saint Teresa of Jesus, Saint John of the Cross, etc.

Eckhart had conceived a united plan for his works written in Latin that had the name of *Opus Tripartitum* and consisted of the *Opus Propositionum*, composed of more than a thousand propositions ar-

⁵⁰⁹ One year before Eckhart’s arrival in Paris, the Beguine Marguerite Porete, author of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, was executed. Even though there are evident similarities between Porete and Eckhart, the German Meister fiercely criticized certain excesses of the Beguine movement in his famous sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu...* and in his short treatise *On the Noble Man*.

⁵¹⁰ The limited information that we have about Meister Eckhart precisely comes from the documents and news that were part of this inquisitorial trial. A study on such proceedings and the suspicious sentences can be consulted in Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, *Master Eckhart and the Rhineland Mystics*, New York, 1957, pp. 135-155; and also in G. Faggin, *Maestro Eckhart y la mística medieval alemana*, Buenos Aires, 1953, pp. 95 and 107.

ranged in fourteen treatises, out of which only the preface and a development of the topic *Being is God* are preserved. After that comes the *Opus Quaestionum*, whose plan is similar to the *Summa* by Saint Thomas; he actually planned to answer “Questions” related to the *Summa*. Finally, the *Opus Expositionum*, where, following the discursive model of the *Questions* by Saint Augustine, he would expound his main ideas by commenting some texts of the Holy Scriptures. The second part of this *Opus Expositionum* was composed of Latin sermons with different levels of development. From the *Opus Expositionum*, only six Commentaries are preserved: on the Genesis (two), Exodus, Ecclesiastes, Book of Wisdom and on the Gospel of Saint John.

Whereas the Latin works by Eckhart that have survived are few, on the contrary, numerous manuscripts written in German have been preserved, in their majority sermons that, according to the main specialist and researcher about Eckhart, Prof. Josef Quint, can be counted to be more than two-hundred⁵¹¹.

Eckhart’s sources are many, and most times expressly mentioned. Thus, he cites Saint Albert and Saint Thomas, the Neoplatonists, Saint Augustine, the Pseudo-Dionysius, Scotus Eriugena, the thinkers of the School of Chartres, the Victorine mystics... He also invokes Muslim and Jewish writers such as Averroes, Avicenna, Algazel, Maimonides, etc. Eckhart also mentions Hermes Trismegistus even before Marsilio Ficino edited the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

⁵¹¹ A complete Spanish edition of Meister Eckhart’s works is the one co-edited by Sanz y Torres/Ignitus, *Tratados espirituales*, Madrid, 2008 and *Sermones*, Madrid, 2009, which is based, in turn, on the critical edition written in German by Josef Quint: *Meister Eckhart, Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, composed with the support of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (W. Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart), and the edition revised by Largier, *Meister Eckhart, Werke*, 2 Vol., Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, Frankfurt a. M., 1993 [An English edition of Eckhart’s complete works can be found in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, translated by Bernard McGinn, Crossroad, 2010, as well as some selections such as the ones published by Oliver Dates (1994) or David O’Neal (2005)].

I.- SUFFERING CAUSED BY THE SEPARATION FROM GOD

What is the starting point of the teachings of Meister Eckhart? If there is any starting point, it is man's suffering. Where does this suffering come from? Its origin is found in man's separation from or unlikeness to God, caused by his expulsion from "Paradise" and his subsequent entry into the realm of unlikeness. This situation is explained with the following example: "If I placed a piece of red-hot coal in my hand, then that would cause me pain. This comes solely from nothingness", that is, from what my hand does *not* have (Sermon *In hoc apparuit charitas Dei...*). Consequently, I suffer because there is *no* likeness to God, I suffer because of my unlikeness to God. And precisely that suffering is a call of attention of the soul: "The fastest animal that brings you to perfection is suffering" (Treatise *On Detachment*), so that "The greater the suffering, the less we suffer" (Sermon *Praedica verbum...*). Here begins the path of the seeker, of the pilgrim who longs to return to his original Fatherland and recover his happiness. Many seekers spend their lives hoarding experiences that provide them with objects; "Therefore we want first one thing and then another. Now we practice wisdom and now some art or other. It is because the soul does not possess the One that she will never find rest until all things are one in God. God is one; this is the blessedness of the soul, her adornment and her peace" (Sermon *Unus Deus et Pater omnium*). But man is still dissatisfied because he does not obtain a full satisfaction in the external world. Then, the moment comes when he realizes that it is not about experiencing, but about *being*... and that the way to *be* is not outside, in the external objects and experiences, but inside. It is not about possessing, adding or hoarding things by oneself, but about detaching oneself from what is accessory.

Eckhart insists that there is something sweet that drives man to disclose or uncover that "little spark" that is within him: "When the

soul is borne into God by His divine wisdom, she is clarified and sublimed in light and in grace, all that is foreign to the soul being detached and shelled away, together with a portion of herself. Further, I related how the soul, not thoroughly purged of soul accretions, is carried up and flows back into the son as pure as she flowed out in Him. The Father created the soul in the Son, so if we are ever to get into the ground of God, into His innermost heart, we must take the lowest place in our own ground” (Sermon *Our Lord lifted up...*). And, in another sermon, he elaborates: “There is something very pleasant that moves and impels and drives all things to return there from where they emanated, while that something remains still in itself. And the nobler a thing is, the more constant its flow will be. Their original ground impels them all. Wisdom and goodness and truth add something; the One adds but the ground of the being” (Sermon *Vidi supra Montem Syon*).

On another occasion, he compares man’s anxiety, restlessness or desperation to find his Creator with a hound scents the rabbit. Not all the hounds will reach the prey because not all of them have the same eagerness or determination. This example is used by the German Meister to distinguish the many psychological profiles of the spiritual seekers: “The hound, when it sees the rabbit and catches its scent, rushes after the rabbit. The other hounds, when they see the first one running, rush after it as well, but they soon get tired and give up. This is what happens to a man who has seen God and has scented Him: he does not give up, he rushes all the time after Him. That is why David says: ‘O taste and see that the Lord is good’ (Ps. 34:8). That man will not get tired, but the other ones will soon get tired. Some people rush so fast that they overtake God, some others run beside God, some follow God. Those who overtake Him are the ones who follow their own will and do not want to accept God’s will; this is absolutely wrong. Others, those who run beside God, say: ‘O Father, I want nothing as I will, but as Thou wilt’ (cf. Mt. 26:39); but, when they are ill, they wish God want them to become healthy. The

third kind of men follows God wherever He want to go; they follow Him with good will, and these ones are perfect” (Sermon *Prophet Daniel says: And now with all our heart we follow...*).

II.- THE QUEST FOR THE HIDDEN GOD

Nevertheless, this quest for happiness in God also contains certain paradoxes. First of all, God seems to avoid us, but “The fact that He is concealed is entirely our own fault. We are the cause of all our obstacles” (Sermon *In hoc apparuit charitas Dei...*). One of those obstacles, maybe not the most important one but indeed the first one a seeker must face, is to represent God as an object that is to be located and grasped by the subject. This way, God is converted into something external to oneself, and the quest is imagined as a method, path or process full of the most laborious stages and tasks. The seeker’s mind ends up projecting its own speculations on that object that it believes it is God, moving further and further away from Him. According to Eckhart, “There are people who savor God in one way but not in another, and they want to possess God according to one manner of devotion and not another. I can tolerate this, but it is quite wrong... Therefore you should not confine yourself to just one manner of devotion, since God is to be found in no particular way, neither this one nor that. That is why they do it wrong who take God just in one particular way. They take the way rather than God. Remember this then: intend God alone and seek Him only” (Sermon *In hoc apparuit charitas Dei...*). To think in God purely implies to relinquish the idea to approach God with the purpose of obtaining any benefit. The idea itself of “purpose” is contrary to the mentioned purity. Even the persistence of thought (that is, an I as a subject who thinks about separated objects) is another ballast we must throw out. And rather than seeing God as an object, we should consider that he who sees God in such a way is but another object, since he depends on God: “Know that when you seek anything of your own, you will

never find God, because you do not seek God purely. You are seeking something along with God, and you are acting just as if you were to make a candle out of God in order to look for something with it. Once one finds the things one is looking for, one throws the candle away. This is what you are doing: Whatever else you are looking for in addition to God, it is nothing, no matter what it might be, whether it be something useful or reward or devotion or whatever it might be. You are seeking nothing, and so you also find nothing. The reason why you find nothing is that you are seeking nothing. All creatures are a pure nothing. I do not just say that they are insignificant or are only a little something: They are a pure nothing. Whatever has no being is not. Creatures have no being because their being depends on God's presence. If God were to turn away from creatures for an instant, they would turn to nothing. I once said, and it is true: if someone were to have the whole world and God, he would not have more than if he had God alone. All creatures have nothing more without God than a gnat has without God, just the same, neither less nor more. (Sermon *Omne datum optimum...*).

Then, how can an object or a nothing become united with God? No way. As God is not an object, it is only possible to "approach" Him through that part of man that is not an object. That is what Eckhart calls "little spark" or ground of the soul. To discover what is that part of man equals to discover who or what God is; "Twenty-four philosophers came together and wanted to discuss what God is"⁵¹²... One said: ... God is something that is of necessity above being... Whatever has being, time, or place does not touch God; He is above it. God is in all creatures, insofar as they have being, and yet He is above them... God is neither being nor goodness. Goodness adheres to being and is not more extensive. If there were no being, neither would there be goodness. Yet being is purer than goodness. God is neither good, nor better, nor best of all. Whoever would say that God

⁵¹² Eckhart refers to the *Liber XXIV Philosophorum* by the Pseudo-Hermes Trismegistus.

is good would be treating Him as unjustly as though he were calling the sun black” (Sermon *Quasi stella matutina...*). *God is neither this nor that*. Eckhart thus connects with that lineage of Christian mystics that associated their intellective discourse and their ecstatic experience with the overcoming of opposites by means of a “negative” (apophatic) way. God is Nothing, that is, He is out of our intellectual categories. According to the German Meister, God is “the One where all multiplicity is one and homogeneous” (*Table Talk: Solitude and God-Getting*), because “where there are two, there is lack” (Sermon *Hoc est praeceptum meum...*). All the attributes belong to God and He is none of them: “God is neither being nor rational being, nor does He know either this or that. Therefore, God is free of all things, which is why He is all things” (Sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu...*). And the Meister himself asks: “And if He is neither goodness nor being nor truth, what is He then? He is nothing. He is neither this nor that” (Sermon *Jesus constrained His disciples...*). “However, He is neither this nor that, and thus the Father is not satisfied with it. Rather, He returns to His origin, to His innermost heart, to the ground and core of the Father-being where He has eternally been, within Himself, in His Fatherhood, where He delights in Himself, the Father as the Father of Himself in the Only-begotten Son. There, all blades of grass, wood, and stone, all things are One” (Sermon *Hec dicit Dominus...*). In sum, no name fits God. Even the formula found in the Exodus, “I AM THAT I AM”, means, according to Eckhart, that God wants to be considered without attributes, and that it is not possible to add any predicate to the verb “to be”. “God is neither good, nor better, nor best”. He is (the only one) who Is. God is one, the One, the Only One. “One is the negation of negation... With God there is a negation of negation: he is one and negates all else, since there is nothing outside God” (Sermon *Unus Deus et Pater omnium*). Nonetheless, God has given Himself certain names so that we can think, reflect and meditate on the *divine names*. “David says: ‘The Lord is His name’ (Ps. 68:4)... But I say that if someone perceives something in God and gives it a name, then that is not God. God is

above names and nature... There is no name we can devise for God. But some names are permitted to us, with which the saints have addressed Him and which God has so consecrated in their hearts and bathed in a divine light... We should learn that there is no name we can give God so that it might seem that we have praised and honored Him enough, since God is above names and is ineffable” (Sermon *Misit dominus manum suam...*). He is *Deus absconditus*, the unmentionable, and that is why Eckhart recommends: “listen and keep silence”.

The essence of this *via remotionis* or *negative theology* (God is neither this nor that) is that “God, who is nameless, since he has no name, is ineffable, and the soul in her ground is also ineffable, as He is ineffable” (Sermon *Qui odit animam suam*). If it can be found out that “Verily Thou art a God who hidest Thyself” (Is. 45:15) is because the soul witnesses it, it is present there to understand that there is a place, which is non-place, and a moment, which is non-moment, where and when God and Soul are alike: “In the ground of the soul, where God’s ground and the soul’s ground are one ground. The more one seeks you, the less one finds you. You should so seek Him that you find Him nowhere. If you do not seek Him, then you will find Him” (Sermon *Homo quidam nobilis...*).

In order to approach God, to become united with God, one must know what God is. And what God is, is known through what He is *not*. But that personal inquiry or reflection must also be used as a means of introspection or internalization about what our real nature is, that is, the deepest ground of the soul. That meditation must *re-form* the meditator, helping him to absorb himself; “we should be informed back into the simple goodness, which is God” (Sermon *Misit dominus manus...*). Such in-formation, that is, the return of the creature to its Creator, implies not only a change or conversion of the idea of God, but also an overcoming of the mere discursive or dual thought (subject-object) into another spontaneous, natural, unitive

form of cognition. Already in his *Talks of Instruction*, Eckhart points out that: “A man should not have, or be satisfied with, an imagined God... Rather, one should have an essential God, who far transcends the thought of man and all creatures” (*Talks of Instruction*, 6), so that “The more He is known as One, the more He is known as All” (Sermon *Our Lord lifted up...*). In order to achieve that goal, we must approach the “naked” God: “Strip away from God therefore everything which clothes Him and take Him in His dressing room where He is naked and bare in Himself” (Sermon *Manete in me...*). What is left? That which is left is the immanent God... the Soul. Said with Eckhart’s words, the quest of God (the little spark of the Soul) implies a process of “uncreation” (*Ungeschaffenheit*) by which the soul loses its name or personal attributes in order to become united with That who is beyond all names. To assume and verify that we are not the body, that we have neither a past nor a future, that we are neither this nor that... is to lose our name, to lose our being (*Entwerdung*) in order to attain God’s being, which is identical to His Name (Ex. 3:13-14).

III.- GOD AND GODHEAD

It is to be specified that one of the most noticeable distinctions that Meister Eckhart draws is that, when referring to God, he distinguishes between the completely inapprehensible and ineffable “Godhead”, and “God” as He is presented to man. This distinction refutes any suspicion of pride when Eckhart affirms: “If I did not exist, then neither would God have existed as God. I am the cause of God’s existence as *God*” (Sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu...*); without the creatures, “God would not be God”, so that, “when I... received my created being, I came into the possession of a God for, until creatures came into existence, God was not *God*”. He was “the eternal abyss of divine being”. More specifically, “God and Godhead are as far apart from each other as heaven and earth... All creatures speak

God forth... And why do they not speak of the Godhead? All that is in the Godhead is One, and of this no one can speak. God acts, while the Godhead does not act. There is nothing for it to do, for there is no action in it. It has never sought to do anything. The difference between God and Godhead is that one acts and the other does not” (Sermons *Beati pauperes spiritu...* and *Nolite timere eos...*). Based on this metaphysical distinction between God and Godhead, Eckhart thus expounds one of his subtlest conclusions: “When I existed in my first cause, I had no God and I was my own cause. I willed nothing and desired nothing, for I was naked being and I knew myself by the savor of truth. Then I desired myself and nothing else. What I desired, that was myself, and I was myself what I desired, and I was free both of God and of all things. But when I emerged by free choice and received my created being, I came into the possession of a God for, until creatures came into existence, God was not *God*, but was rather what He was. Then, when creatures emerged and received their created being, God was not *God* in Himself but in creatures” (Sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu*). In sum, man is the cause of himself, insofar as he is an unborn (*ungeborn*). And, from that perspective, either timeless or previous to Creation, it makes no sense to speak about God. That is why, when Creation takes place, it makes no sense as well to speak about Godhead. This is used by Eckhart to explain the key to retrace the path back to the original poverty or simplicity: “They who are to have this poverty must live in such a way that they do not know that they do not live either for themselves, for truth or for God. They must rather be free of the knowledge that they do not know, understand or sense that God lives in them. More even than this: they must be free of all the knowledge that lives in them, for when we were contained in the eternal essence of God, there was nothing other than God in us, but what was in us was ourselves” (Sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu...*).

Keeping in mind this distinction, we can understand Eckhart’s statement that the final goal of man cannot be the God of Creation,

but the Godhead that is beyond God's being and the creatures. And only from this viewpoint does it make sense the assertion of those mystics that, like Eckhart, stated that man must aspire to break free from God (*Gotes ledic werden*), "... to make me free from God", since only the created being is subject to time, that is, to birth and death. But the heavenly man, as an essential being previous to time, is an unborn (*ungeborn*) and, therefore, he can never die; his eternity consists in this. This return to the Godhead implies an ontological journey through Creation in order to reach the Godhead being absolutely free from himself, and become one in it; in sum, to realize the Supreme Identity.

What hinders that vision of God? The most common error is to consider oneself as separated from God. "Many simple people imagine that they must consider God over there and themselves here. This is not the way it is. God and I are one" (Sermon *Iusti autem in perpetuum vivent*). The saying of Saint Paul: "One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:6), is used by Eckhart to explain that "One is that to which nothing has been added. The soul takes the Godhead where it is purified in itself, where nothing has been added to it, where nothing has been thought. One is the negation of negation. All creatures contain a negation within themselves: one creature denies that it is another. One particular angel denies that he is another. But with God there is a negation of negation: He is one and negates all else, since there is nothing outside God. All creatures are in God and are His own Godhead, which signifies the fullness of which I spoke above" (Sermon *Unus Deus et Pater omnium*). Ultimately, "All that God does is One; this is why he gives birth to me as His Son without any difference" (Sermon *Iusti autem in perpetuum vivent*). He uses this idea to conclude that *alle créatûren sint ein wesen*, "all creatures are one being" (this was one of the incriminated theses).

Then, if there is just one Being, what is the "I"? Eckhart distinguishes three modalities of "I", equivalent or symmetrical to the no-

tions of Godhead, God and Creation: a) as unborn, b) as only son of the Father, and c) as a mortal, illusory entity:

a) In effect, commenting Paul's statement that "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10), the German mystic expounds: "Now if you ask me, since I am an only son whom the heavenly Father has eternally borne, if then I have eternally been a son in God, then I say: yes and no. Yes, a son, as the Father has eternally borne me, and not a Son, as to being unborn". With the biblical expression "*In principio*"⁵¹³, "we are given to understand that we are an only Son whom the Father has been eternally begetting out of the hidden darkness of eternal concealment, indwelling in the first beginning of the primal purity which is the plenitude of all purity. There I have been eternally at rest and asleep in the hidden understanding of the eternal Father, immanent and unspoken" (Sermon *Ave Gratia plena*...). Insofar as I am unborn and previous or external to Creation, I did not know a "God". In that pure and original state, there was nobody or nothing; "When I dwelled in the Ground, in the Bottom, in the Stream, and in the Source of the Godhead, no one asked me where I was going or what I was doing. There was no one who could have asked me... When I enter the Ground and the Bottom, the Stream and the Source of the Godhead, no one asks me where I came from or where I have been. No one missed me there, for there even God disappears" (Sermon *Nolite timere eos*...). That is why, as I am unborn, "therefore I am my own self cause according to my essence, which is eternal, and not according to my becoming, which is in time. There I am unborn, and according to the manner of my unbornness, shall never die. According to the manner of my unborn nature, I have been eternal, as I am now and ever shall be" (Sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu*...).

b) "I" as only son of the Father makes understood that "we are an only son whom the Father has eternally borne. When the Father be-

⁵¹³ "In the beginning" (Jn. 1:1).

got all creatures, He begot me and I flowed forth with all creatures while remaining within the Father” (Sermon *Ave Gratia plena...*). “Many years ago, I did not exist yet: a little later, my father and my mother ate meat and bread and vegetables that grew in the Garden, and that way I became a man” (Sermon *Hec dicit Dominus...*). Insofar as I am born and creature, “what I am according to my nature which was born into the world, that shall die and turn to nothing, for it is mortal. Therefore it must decay with time. In my birth, all things were born, and I was the cause of my own self and of all things. Had I wished that I should not exist, then neither would anything else have existed. And if I did not exist, then neither would God have existed as *God*. I am the cause of God’s existence as *God*” (Sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu...*).

c) But there is also a mortal, illusory “I” that is precisely that identity that pretends to be the most real, tangible and consistent one. It is paradoxically the most evanescent one, because man does not possess the being by himself, but his being comes from the Only One “who Is” (Ex. 3:14). First of all, “*Ego*, the Latin word for ‘I’, can be used properly by God alone in His unity. *Vos*, which means ‘you’, says that you should be one in this unity. This means that *ego* and *vos*, ‘I’ and ‘you’, refer to unity” (Sermon *Ego elegi vos de mundo*). In addition, metaphysically, that “I” would imply an otherness (*Anderheit*), which is something intolerable for God. “That who says ‘I’ has to do the best deed imaginable. No one can utter this word in its proper meaning unless the Father” (Sermon *Ecce ego mitto angelum meum*). That imaginary, non-existing ‘I’ is a ‘nothing’ unable to achieve the union with God, simply because He is the only existing ‘I’. Nonetheless, the important point is that there is a place and a moment where and when the ‘I’ of God and the ‘I’ of man are alike; that is when the eternal birth takes place in the ground of the Soul.

IV.- GOD IS IN THE GROUND OF THE SOUL

As aforementioned, man suffers because he has been thrown out to the world of unlikeness. But when everything seems to be lost, all will be saved because God is looking after His creatures. This is because there is “something” in man that incites him to find out where he comes from, who he is and where he goes. It is from that “something” from where God pulls us and calls us; “A person can turn away from God; but no matter how far a person goes from God, God stands there on the lookout for him and runs out to meet him unawares” (Sermon *Surge illuminare Iherusalem...*).

How to define or describe that *something*? “Sometimes I have said that there is a power in the soul that can alone be said to be free. Sometimes I have said that it is a refuge of the spirit and sometimes I have said that it is a light of the spirit. Sometimes I have said that it is a spark. But now I say that it is neither this nor that, and yet still it is a something which is as far above this or that as heaven is above earth” (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum...*). Certainly, “there is a power in the soul, which is not merely a power but is rather being, and not just being, but rather something that liberates from being. It is so pure, exalted and sublime in itself that no creature can enter into it, but only God, who dwells within it. In truth, God Himself cannot enter in there in so far as He has a particular manner, in so far as He is wise or good or rich. Indeed, God cannot enter there with an particular manner of being but rather only with His naked and divine nature” (Sermon *Adolescens, tibi dico: surge*). That non-place of the Soul where God dwells without attributes is what urges or drives us “to know from where this being comes. It wants to penetrate to the simple ground, to the still desert, into which distinction never peeped, neither Father, Son nor Holy Spirit. There, in that most inward place, where everyone is a stranger, the light is satisfied and there it is more inward than it is in itself, for this ground is a simple stillness which is immovable in itself. But all things are

moved by this immovability and all the forms of life are conceived by it which, since they possess the light of reason, live of themselves” (Sermon *All things which are alike*).

In another sermon, he invokes the Gospel of Saint John 15:14: “Henceforth I call you not servants... but I have called you friends” in order to deal with another subtle aspect of our relationship with God: “Whoever accepts something from another is a servant; and whoever rewards, a master. I was wondering the other day whether I should accept something or wish something from God. I shall consider this carefully, for if I accepted something from God, I would be inferior to God like a servant, and He, in giving, would be like a master. But in eternal life, such should not be our relation” (Sermon *Iusti vivent in aeternum*). And not only friends, since that friendship can become a loving intimacy. Based on Saint Paul, Saint Peter and Saint John (Gal. 4:7; Gal. 2:20; Rom. 8:29; 2 Pet. 1:4; 1 Jn. 3:1-2), Eckhart will affirm that the ground of the Soul is the ground of God and Christ⁵¹⁴: “Here God’s ground is my ground, and my ground is God’s ground. Here I live from what is my own, as God lives from what is His own. Whoever has looked for an instant into this ground, to such a man a thousand marks of red, minted gold are no more than a counterfeit penny” (Sermon *In hoc apparuit charitas Dei...*).

Does that mean that I am God? According to the German Meister, “Now should we say that if we love God, we become God? That sounds like paganism. The love that someone gives contains not two but one and oneness, and when I love I am more God than I am in myself. The prophet says: ‘I have said ye are gods and all of you are children of the Most High’ (Ps. 82:6). It may sound strange to say that we can become God in such a way in love, and yet this is true in the eternal truth. Our Lord Jesus Christ proves it” (Sermon *In hoc apparuit charitas Dei...*). And, in other sermon, he invokes an indis-

⁵¹⁴ The identification of the purest part of the soul with Christ Himself was one of the objections of the inquisitors.

putable authority: “Saint Augustine says⁵¹⁵: ‘The soul becomes like that which it loves. If it loves earthly things, then it becomes earthly’. We might ask: if it loves God, does it then become God? If I said that, it would sound incredible to those whose understanding is too limited to grasp this. But Augustine says: ‘I do not say it, but I refer you to Scripture, where we read: ‘I have said that you are gods!’ (Ps. 82:6)’” (Sermon *In illo tempore missus est angelus...*). The spiritual seeker discovers and realizes that statement by means of a “process” of introspection by which our divine essence is freed from the ‘I’ or, said in other words, the ego is emptied until becoming the nothing it is. Only that way does the soul withdraw into its ground and is nullified in God.

V.- OBSTACLES TO DETACHMENT

In several writings, Meister Eckhart constantly points out which are the obstacles that hinder the disregard or detachment from oneself and the surrounding world. In one of his most notable sermons (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in Templum...*), he compares the process of detachment and emptying of that inner temple that is the soul with the episode of the New Testament about the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple. To empty the Temple from merchants and commodities equals to defeat the obstacle of the attachment to the *I* in all the deeds with which man just seeks material benefits. That is why Jesus Christ said in the Temple: “Take these things hence!”.

But man, obsessed with the idea that his happiness comes from the accumulation of material objects, also experiences that this kind of pleasure is as temporary as mutable and evanescent are all objects. As soon as an object is enjoyed, the *ego* is already coveting a new experience on which to project its dissatisfaction. Thus, man’s life consists in a crazy race to get things with which to attain a happiness

⁵¹⁵ Cf. Saint Augustine, *On the Letter of John to the Parthians*, tr. 2 n. 14.

that will never be satiated. He can only put an end to this agitation if he realizes that he is chasing a mirage created by his own ego. The ego needs the time, that is, the past (memories) and the future (projects, expectations) to survive, because it disappears in the present. It needs objects to keep on being the central subject and thus maintain the duality of knower and known, that is, the plurality of objects that may bring it endless experiences. Subtly, Eckhart points out the three main obstacles to detachment: “Somehow, three things hinder man from recognizing God. The first is time, the second corporality, the third multiplicity. While these three things are within me, God cannot be inside of me or truly act within my innermost heart. Saint Augustine⁵¹⁶ says that it is because of the soul’s concupiscence that it wants to grasp and possess many things, and that is why it stretches its hands to time, corporality and multiplicity. By doing it, it loses precisely what it possesses, since, as there will be more and more things within you, God will never dwell or act inside of you. If God is to enter, then those things must be expelled” (Sermon *Impletum est tempus Elizabeth...*).

But it is to be noticed that to empty the temple (soul) of objects does not necessarily mean to carry out an action of material renunciation that may imply a withdrawal from the world or a hermitic life, but indeed a suitable orientation to face the world, because the objects are not neutral. The problem does not lie in the objects, but in our own attitude toward them: “these are not to blame for the fact that you are held back by devotional practices and by things; rather it is you as you exist in these things who hold yourself back, for you do not stand in the proper relation to them” (*Talks of Instruction*, 3). That is why it is not about refusing the external goods, but about refusing the ego, detaching ourselves from the idea that there is an ‘I’ that does and desires: It has been said, “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself” (Mt. 16:24); “Start with yourself therefore and take leave of yourself. Truly, if you do not depart from yourself,

⁵¹⁶ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* X, 41.

then wherever you take refuge, you will find obstacles and unrest, wherever it may be. Those who seek peace in external things, whether in places or devotional practices, people or works, in withdrawal from the world or poverty or self-abasement, however great these things may be or whatever their character, they are still nothing at all and cannot be the source of peace. Those who seek in this way, seek wrongly, and the further they range, the less they find what they are looking for. They proceed like someone who has lost their way: the further they go, the more lost they become. But what then should they do? First of all, they should renounce themselves, and then they will have renounced all things” (*Talks of Instruction*, 3).

The withdrawn life, the spiritual quest in far and exotic countries, to frequent the company of certain people or to undertake social works are all useless if the ego is still intact. “This cannot be learned by taking flight, that is by fleeing from things and physically withdrawing to a place of solitude, but rather we must learn to maintain an inner solitude regardless of where we are or who we are with. We must learn to break through things and to grasp God in them, allowing Him to take form in us powerfully and essentially” (*Talks of Instruction*, 6). Eckhart speaks ironically about the surreptitious arguments adduced by the ego, which is reluctant to be tamed: “People say: ‘O Lord, I wish that I stood as well with God and that I had as much devotion and peace with God as other people, and that I could be like them or could be as poor as they are’, or they say: ‘It never works for me unless I am in this or that particular place and do this or that particular thing. I must go to somewhere remote or live in a hermitage or a monastery’. Truly, it is you who are the cause of this yourself, and nothing else. It is your own self-will, even if you do not know it or this does not seem to you to be the case” (*Talks of Instruction*, 3). And, in what is maybe his most substantial treatise, he reaffirms that the external objects, the external works (and our attitude toward them) only have the aim to help us achieve the understanding of the true nature of man: “All the external works have been

instituted and prescribed in order that the external man may orientate himself through them to God, and may be led to the spiritual life and the goodness, so that he may stop going astray from himself due to his excessive efforts, and he may have a curb that prevents him from fleeing out of himself toward foreign things. Or, in other words: when God wills to carry out His work, let Him find man ready; otherwise, He will have to withdraw him first from the far, rude things. For the greater the eagerness for the external things, the harder to move away from them: the greater the love, the greater the suffering when we must separate. Thus, either prayer, or reading, or songs, or wakefulness, or fast, or expiation exercises, or other things of the like, all the devotional practices have been invented in order that, through them, man may steady himself and keep himself far from foreign, non-divine things. That is why, when man realizes that the Spirit of God is not acting within him or, rather, that his inner man has been detached from God, it is then when it is more necessary that the external man deal with the devotional practices, above all those that are the most efficient and beneficial ones for him; but not to take advantage of them, but the contrary: truly speaking, to avoid being led astray by what is close at hand and to help him intensely grasp God, so that He may find him really close” (*Treatise On the Eternal Birth*). And, in the same treatise, he insists that “Fasting, wakefulness, prayer, genuflections, mortifications, rag clothing, sleeping on a hard surface and all the things of the kind have been invented because the body and the flesh are always opposed to the spirit: the body is too strong for it, and there is always a living, eternal battle between them. Here below, the body is audacious and strong, since here below it is at home, the world supports it, the earth is its homeland, and all his allies: food, drink, amenities, are against the spirit. The spirit, here below, is a foreigner; it is in heaven where it has its allies”. Ultimately, “Those who are in the right state of mind, are so regardless of where they are and who they are with, while those who are in the wrong state of mind will find this to be the case wherever they are and whoever they are with. Those who are rightly disposed

truly have God with them” (*Talks of Instruction*, 6). And the way to restrain the ego has many names: humility, love, detachment... “but if you would capture and curb it in a thousand times better fashion, then put on it the bridle of love! With love you overcome it most surely, with love you load it more heavily” (*Treatise On the Eternal Birth*).

VI.- HOW TO UNDERSTAND? THE MODELESS MODE

Even the spiritual language, including its poetic form, is unable to express that which is ineffable by nature. That is why obscure expressions and equivocal or paradoxical metaphors are plentiful in it. First of all, it is talked about spiritual way, steps, levels, journey, pilgrimage, etc., which implies to conceive the soul as something movable and foreign to God that goes from one place to another, an object that moves in a non-existing space. It uses verbs of action or movement such as reach, make, meditate, purify, realize, rise, etc. that seem to present the soul as an imperfect, incomplete entity that needs experiences in order to mature. It is talked, ultimately, about a process, a method, a way to reach God, as if the soul were not already *in* God; because, in effect, if it were true, while the soul has not yet arrived *to* God, where is it then? In a place that is foreign and different from God? Is that otherness or alienation maybe possible? The paradox is rationally unsolvable; therefore, it is only possible to attain a spiritual understanding that transcends the knowledge based on the subject-object relationship, that is, a unitive or supraindividual knowledge. On several occasions, Eckhart’s mystical language comes across these paradoxes and solves it in the only way it can. The route towards God is a “Way without way” (*wec âne wec*), because “God is to be approached as a *modeless mode* and a *beingless being*, since He has no mode” (Sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra...*). Certainly, a certain subtleness is required to understand the mystical language. For instance, when it is talked about going out of

oneself (*ûzgân*), it does not mean to project anything outside, for, in that case, “The further they range, the less they find what they are looking for. They proceed like someone who has lost his way: the further they go, the more lost they become. But what then should they do? First of all, they should renounce themselves, and then they will have renounced all things” (*Talks of Instruction*, 3). It is a “modeless” mode (*âne wise*) of understanding. Only those who seek God without a mode will apprehend Him as He Himself is, without reasonings, or reasons, or *whys*. “If someone asked life for a thousand years, ‘*why* do you live?’, then, if it could answer, it would say nothing other than ‘I live because I live’”. In sum, there is no true knowledge if the subject is not transformed into the object of understanding. This is the circle of eternity, a centerless circle in which subject and object are transcended not only in the *oneness* but rather in the *uniqueness*. There we will find perfect peace and stability, because there is no longer a desire to be anyone or to get anywhere, since we Are; “No man still on the ascent, still growing in Grace and in Light, has ever yet come into God. God’s light does not grow, but it is by growth that we attain Him. Not that we attain God in the process of growing. If God is at all to be seen, it must be in a light that is God Himself. A master says: In God there is no more nor less, neither this nor that. As long as we are still in the ascent we do not attain into Him” (Sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra...*). But man allows himself to be deceived by the mirage of the appearance of the objects, considering them as true.

The cause of the problem is that we believe to see duality where there is only a timeless, spaceless oneness. The German Meister brings up the biblical passage of the *conversion* of Mary Magdalene, *altered* because she is in the world of duality until she turns over, that is, she looks inside herself. In that unitive fullness, “where there is neither day nor night. In it that which is more than a thousand miles away is as near to me as the spot where I am now standing. There is the fullness and abundance of the Godhead; there is one-

ness. As long as the soul knows difference, things are not right with it. As long as anything peers out or peers in, there is no oneness. Mary Magdalene sought our Lord at the grave and sought a dead person but found two living angels; but she was still inconsolable. Then the angels said, ‘Why are you troubled? What are you looking for? A dead person, and you have found two alive’. And she said, ‘That is exactly why I am troubled. I have found two but am looking for one’ (cf. Jn. 20:11 ff.). As long as any differences from created things can gaze into the soul, it is troubled” (Sermon *Convalescens praecepit eis...*). Fortunately, there is always a gardener who, like Jesus, will go to meet us in order to guide our quest.

In another sermon, Meister Eckhart stresses the importance of the constant attention that we must pay in order not to make the mistake of considering ourselves as a different being, separated from the rest, since *we all are one being*. Duality implies to consider oneself as different, that is, to believe that one is an autonomous individual who has being by himself and lives comparing himself to others in order to foster those differences. With that arrogant attitude, we just harm ourselves; “If you want to be one Son, separate yourself from all *not* because the *not* causes distinction. How is that? Note the following: That you are *not* a certain person, it is the *not* which differentiates you from this person. If you want to be without distinction, rid yourself of *not*. There is a power in the soul which is separated from the *not* since it has nothing in common with any things. Nothing is in this power but God alone” (Sermon *Haec est vita aeterna*). Or, explained with another example, we are not the eye that sees, but the sight or, rather, we are that which understand or transcends the subject who sees, the seen objects and the action of seeing, that is, pure sight, light...: “When my eye is open, it is an eye, but if it is closed, it is still the same eye. Nor does a block of wood decrease or increase in size by being looked at. Now listen carefully: If it now happens that my eye, which is one and simple in itself, is opened and directed towards the piece of wood in the act of seeing, then both remain

what they are and yet both are so united through the act of seeing that we can truly say: 'eye-wood', the wood is my eye. But if the wood had no material form and was as immaterial as the seeing of my eye, then we could truly say that the piece of wood and my eye share a single being in the act of seeing. If this is the case with material things, then how much more so with spiritual ones! And you should also know that my eye has far more in common with the eye of a sheep which exists beyond the sea and which I have never seen, than it does with my own ears with which it actually coexists. This stems from the fact that the eye of a sheep exercises the same function as my own eye, and therefore I say that these have more in common with each other than my eyes do with my ears, which are distinct in their functions... This light has more unity with God than it does with any of the soul's faculties, although it coexists with these. For you should know that this light is not nobler in the being of my soul than the lowest or most basic faculty, such as hearing or sight or some other of the senses which fall victim to hunger or thirst, cold or heat. This is so because of the homogeneous nature of being" (Sermon *All things which are alike*). Man can "find" God because it exists in him a divine and uncreated "something" that is able to touch Him directly. In this does man's nobleness consist, since "God is with us in our inmost soul, provided he finds us within and not gone out on business with our five senses" (Sermon *Gaudete in domino...*).

VII.- HOW TO ACHIEVE THE ETERNAL BIRTH? THE REFUSAL OR DETACHMENT

The Meister analyzes his own spiritual experience in the light of other mystical texts and, with a clear simplicity, notes that the union with God, "when it does not take place *in me*, what do I care? However, that it takes place *in me* is the whole matter!" (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*). Metaphysics, theology, philosophy... must not be just

theoretical or speculative sciences, but empiric ones, so that they may be used by the wise man, the true philosopher, theologian or whatever name he may be called, to testify to that fullness of time with his experience. It is useless that he tells us what one or another thinks if that knowledge does not indicate us the right direction. True metaphysics is about me, only and exclusively about how to realize my Selfness. Otherwise, knowledge is a mere intellectual entertainment or a way among hundreds to earn a living.

Eckhart dedicates one of his treatises to explain this inner journey from the earthly man to the heavenly man, “where God... planted His image and likeness and where He throws the good seed... the Son of God, the Word of God (Lk. 8:11)” (Treatise *On the Noble Man*). For this purpose, Eckhart turns to the Apostle’s account: “A certain noble man went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return” (Lk. 19:12). Following a literary tradition that starts with Jacob’s vision, he compares this spiritual pilgrimage with the ascent on the steps of a ladder. More specifically, he is inspired by Saint Augustine’s *On True Religion* when he points out the levels of ascension of the heavenly or noble man. At the first step, the noble man is like a child who feeds on milk and follows the example of the adults. At the second level, he turns his back on the world and seeks the face of God. At the third step, he loses his fear and approaches God by love. At the fourth one, he calmly accepts suffering. At the fifth one, he achieves silence, peace of spirit and detachment. And at the sixth one, he is transformed beyond himself in the eternity of God. Saint Augustine described a seventh level of supreme rest and eternal blessedness, so that, even though Eckhart does not talk about the seventh level, the truth is that he talks about eternal rest and blessedness in similar terms to the ones used by the Saint of Hippo. That “state” or “place” of rest is the house of God. That is the sacred place where Jacob rested and slept, and was overawed by the divine presence. That is why he called it “house of God” (Bethel). Eckhart adds that “Jacob wanted to rest in the place. The

place is God... The place has no name, and no one can utter a word concerning it that is appropriate" (Sermon *Then the same day at evening...*). The place is the ground of the soul.

How to go deeper into the soul? How can man return to the lost Paradise? According to Eckhart, "the surest foundation for this perfection is humility, for he whose nature here creeps in deepest depths shall soar in spirit to highest height of Godhead, for love brings suffering and suffering brings love. And, therefore, he who wishes to achieve pure detachment must pursue humility, and thus he will approach the Godhead" (Treatise *On Detachment*). In another passage, he insists that "if we are ever to get into the ground of God, into his innermost heart, we must take the lowest place in our own ground, in our own innermost self... When the soul enters into her ground, into the innermost recesses of her being, divine power suddenly pours into her, producing much activity, both manifest and secret, and the soul grows big and high in favor with God" (Sermon *Our Lord lifted up...*). Both grounds or abysses, the divine one and the humane one, involve and unite with each other because they share a similar nature.

What are the conditions required in order that that singular moment, which is defined by the German Meister as "enlightenment", "union with God", "eternal birth", "fullness of time", "blessedness", etc., may take place? Eckhart confesses: "I have read many works of both heathen masters and prophets... and have sought earnestly and with the utmost diligence to find out what is the best and highest virtue, with the aid of which man could be most closely united with God, by which man could become by grace what God is by nature, and by which man would be most like the image of what he was when he was in God, when there was no difference between him and God, before God had created the world. And when I search the Scriptures thoroughly, as far as my reason can fathom and know, I just find that pure detachment stands above all things, for all virtues

pay some regard to the creatures, yet detachment (*Abegeschiedenheit*) is free from all creatures” (Treatise *On Detachment*).

With the expression *Abegeschiedenheit*, coined by Eckhart himself and later used by his School, he tries to reflect not only the indigent condition of the spirit that detaches itself from all the created things, but also the process of mystical knowledge par excellence: the objectless knowledge, the unknowing, or what more than a century later would Nicholas of Cusa call *docta ignorantia*. It is an experience of estrangement by which the ‘I’ is deprived of food (objects), so that it starves to death and may not hinder the nullification of the soul. By means of the release or detachment (*Abegeschiedenheit*), man must renounce himself completely and aspire to nothing, not even to the heavenly kingdom. Eckhart invokes Saint Paul in order to affirm that it is necessary even not to desire God. “Therefore I beg God to make me free from God”, because the soul that has emptied itself of absolutely everything will necessarily be flooded by God (Eckhart’s distinction between God and Godhead is to be reminded).

In the mystical language in general and in Eckhart’s language in particular, the nothingness that leads to detachment has at least three definitions that must be clarified: firstly, there is an *ascetic* nothingness, since the soul must totally empty or detach itself from its powers and from itself in order to reach God. Secondly, there is a *cosmological* nothingness, because Creation is nothing if compared with God, and comes from the nothing. And finally, there is an *ontological* or *metaphysical* nothingness that refers to the oneness of the Being: the Identity with itself, which equals the fullness beyond time, space and all qualities.

On different occasions, Eckhart refers to that first meaning. For example, when he comments the ecstatic experience that made Saint Paul fall from his horse (Act. 9:3-8) and see a blinding light in which

he *saw nothing*; “And Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. Saint Augustine says: when Saint Paul saw nothing, he saw God... because, when the soul reaches the one and enters there in a pure refusal of itself, it finds God as if in the nothing” (Sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra...*). That is, when he renounced and emptied himself from himself, when he saw the nothing of his ‘I’, only then could he see God. Regarding the second meaning, the German mystic explains that “All things are created from nothing; therefore their true origin is nothing, and so far as this noble will inclines toward created things, it flows off with created things toward their nothing... All the creatures cause impurity since they are nothingness and nothingness is a deficiency which sullies the soul. All creatures are pure nothingness; neither angels nor creatures can be said to be something... They touch all things and cause impurity, since they are made of nothingness. They are and were nothingness. Nothingness is what is counter to all creatures and displeasing to them” (Sermon *In hoc apparuit charitas Dei...*). Finally, there is a nothingness that is fullness: “We should be at one within ourselves and distinct from all things, and should be unshakably at one with God. Outside God there is only nothingness. Therefore it is impossible that there could be any change or instability. Whatever seeks a place beyond itself, undergoes change. But God contains all things in Himself in fullness; therefore God seeks nothing beyond Himself but seeks something only in the fullness in which it already exists within Himself. And no creature can comprehend anything as it exists in God” (Sermon *Unus Deus et Pater omnium*).

It is useless to devote oneself to the practice of detachment while trying to imagine it, define it or think it, because that implies a mental process in which the ego will try to obtain some benefit. “Now I ask: What is the object of pure detachment? I answer that neither this nor that is the object of pure detachment. It aims at a mere nothing and I will tell you why: pure detachment aims at the highest goal in which God can work entirely according to His will” (Treatise *On*

Detachment). Those who have finished the full detachment and emptying that adorns the heavenly man are “those who have wholly gone out of themselves, and who do not seek for what is theirs in anything, whatever it may be, great or little, who are not looking beneath themselves or above themselves or beside themselves or at themselves, who are not desiring possessions or honors or ease or pleasure or profit or inwardness or holiness or reward or the kingdom of heaven, and who have gone out from all this, from everything that is theirs...” (Sermon *Iusti vivent in aeternum*). That is how the noble man returns home; “Such a man returns richer than when he departed. He who had ‘departed’ from himself like that will be restored to himself in the most proper sense. And all the things that he had abandoned in multiplicity will be restored to him in simplicity, because he finds himself and the things in the present ‘now’ of the oneness. And he who had ‘departed’ like that will return nobler than when he ‘departed’. Such a man lives then with a more independent freedom and in a pure nakedness, because he must not worry about anything or undertake anything, much or little, because he possesses everything that God possesses” (Sermon *Homo quidam nobilis...*).

Eckhart shows us that the model or key to explain the spiritual conversion of man is found in the passage of Ex. 3:14: “I AM THAT I AM” (*Ego sum qui sum*), without modes or attributes. If the being of God is beyond all attributes, likewise, those who wish to realize the being will have to refuse their personal modes or attributes, for they are accessory and evanescent, since nothing external to the Being may have any entity. Such spiritual detachment, simplicity or poverty is the only thing that can cause “the temple to be empty... as when it was not yet”. That is why that inner emptying equals a return to the virginal state previous to Creation and to the born being; “The soul cannot become pure unless it be reduced to its initial emptiness, as God created it” (Sermon *Vidi civitatem sanctam Ierusalem*). In order to *return* to that state of purity, that is, to be “an only son of the Father”, the individual features must disappear, “for [the individual]

man is an accident of nature” (Sermon *Haec est vita aeterna*). The renunciation of all what is external is justified because created things have no essential value. “All creatures are pure nothing”. Nothing can hinder the detached man, the heavenly man, because he pursues or seeks nothing outside God. And, as multiplicity cannot distract him from anything, he is only one in the One, where all multiplicity is dissolved into the oneness; “God must enter into your being and powers, because you have bereft yourself of all possessions, and become a desert, as it is written: ‘The voice of Him that crieth in the wilderness’ (Is. 40:3). Let this eternal voice cry out in you as it lists, and be a desert in respect of yourself in all things” (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*). Whereas on another occasion did the Meister extol the virtue of love as the essential impulse to reach God, in another passage, he qualifies his statement: “But I extol detachment above any love. First, because, at best, love constrains me to God, but detachment compels God to love me. Now it is a far nobler thing my constraining God to me than for me to constrain myself to God... because God is more readily able to adapt Himself to me and can more easily unite with me than I could unite with Him That detachment forces God to me, I can prove thus: everything wants to be in its natural place. Now God’s natural place is unity and purity, and that comes from detachment. Therefore God is bound to give Himself to a detached heart” (Treatise *On Detachment*). As no one can force God to do anything, this paragraph can only be understood in a metaphysical context in which man, detached and dead to the world, remains abandoned or suspended between Heaven and earth, at the mercy of the Lord. The essential point is that, when man has wholly emptied himself, then God fills him with His Grace. That is why, in another paragraph, Eckhart makes it understood that all this spiritual process is wholly directed by God from beginning to end, and that its eventual end depends on the Grace. On one hand, it is an entirely free gift of God but, on the other, God not only does not skimp on His Grace, but He is even eager to give it to those who seek Him with the suitable attitude: “But however great this eradication and

reduction of self may be, it remains insufficient if God does not complete it in us. For our humility is only perfect when God humbles us through ourselves. Only then are they and the virtue perfected, and not before" (*Talks of Instruction*, 23).

VIII.- WORK TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND THE DETACHMENT FROM THE OWN WILL

"Saint Augustine states, 'A loyal servant is him who seeks nothing in all his works other than the Glory of God' (cf. *Confessions*, X, 26)" (Sermon *Qui mihi ministrat...*). But, how to work for the Glory of God? In some prayers, such as the Our Father, we exclaim: "Thy Will be done!". However, when His Will does not satisfy us, we get angry and look for some argument to justify our stubbornness; "Now sometimes a thought comes to you and you say: 'Alas, if it had only turned out differently, things would be better', or, 'If it had not happened this way, things might perhaps have turned out better'. As long as you think this, you will never gain peace. You should take it as the best" (Sermon *Omne datum optimum*). Paradoxically, the straight intention is that which is realized without intention. In one of his sermons, Eckhart even teaches his audience that it would be better to tell God: "The Will Itself be Thine" rather than "Thy Will be done", because, this way, human will is completely nullified. Quoting his words: "The Our Father [says]: 'May Your Will be done' (Mt. 6:10). But it would have been better to say: 'May Will Itself be Yours', that my will be His Will and that I may be Him" (Sermon *Praedica verbum...*). That is to say, *I become Him* when I renounce the idea that there is an "I" with an autonomous will, which is author of works. Therefore, this is not about the conceited belief that works are done in the name of God as mere instruments in His hands. It is not that "I do" in the name of God, because that implies the idea that there is an 'I', different from God, which is the author of the works; on the contrary, it is God who *does* (in His ineffable metaphysical

immovability), that is, we must accept or understand that there is nothing outside God. According to Eckhart, “This is what a good man must be like, so that he, in all his works, may not seek his own, but only God’s honor. Insofar as you, with all your works, tend toward yourself or more toward one person than toward another, God’s will has not yet become your will. Our Lord says in the Gospel: ‘My doctrine is not Mine, but His that sent Me’ (Jn. 7:16). A good man must proceed in the same way, thinking: ‘My work is not mine, mi life is not mine’” (Sermon *Moyeses orabat...*). Ultimately, am I really the author of my works? Can I claim the authorship of the results of my works? Eckhart brings up two verses of the New Testament regarding this subtle issue: “Without Me ye can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5), and any work I do, if “I have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2).

But Eckhart takes one more step to explain his ideal of *detachment*, affirming even that true detachment implies *to detach oneself from the desire of detachment*. True liberation consists in breaking free from the idea that there is an ‘I’ that seeks liberation; it implies to renounce the idea that there is an ‘I’ that renounces. It is not only about renouncing the own will, but even renouncing the idea that there is an ‘I’ that wishes to fulfill God’s will. According to Eckhart, it is clear that “as long as it is someone’s will to carry out the most precious will of God, such a person does not have that poverty of which we wish to speak. For this person still has a will with which he wishes to please God, and this is not true poverty. If we are to have true poverty, then we must be so free of our own created will as we were before we were created. I tell you by the eternal truth that as long as you have the will to perform God’s will, and a desire for eternity and for God, you are not yet poor. They alone are poor who will nothing and desire nothing” (Sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu...*).

In several sermons, Meister Eckhart elaborates on one of the features of true detachment: inner poverty. True poverty implies the re-

nunciation of the own “I”, that is, of the own will, including the appropriation of the consequences of the own actions. According to the Meister, there are two kinds of poverty: outer and inner poverty. Jesus Christ refers to the latter when he states, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt. 5:3). According to Eckhart, this is the poverty of him who “desires nothing”, which implies not to do the works aiming at a result, even though this could be spiritual, because, in this case, it is the “I”, the “ego”, which is behind working out whether such a penance will be enough to achieve the salvation of our soul. However, there are “some people... who cling to their own egos in their penances and external devotions... These people are called holy because of what they are seen to do, but inside they are asses, for they do not know the real meaning of divine truth” (Sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu...*). The renunciation of the own will means that one only desires and works that which pleases God and not the “ego”, “but if there is to be true poverty of spirit, someone must be so free of God and all His works that if God wishes to act in the soul He must Himself be the place in which He can act” (Sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu...*). The philosophy of detachment implies that, when one accepts that there is no subject of the action, the soul loses interest in the external objects and the attention is turned 180°, that is, it is turned inward.

What is the suitable attitude before the world of works? Or, more correctly, what is the right action? According to the German Meister: “The just person does not seek anything with his work, for every single person who seeks anything with his works is working for a why and is a servant and mercenary. And so, if you want to be informed and transfigured into justice, then intend nothing in your works and figure no why in yourself, neither in time nor in eternity, neither reward nor blessedness, neither this nor that; for these works are all truly dead... And so, if you want to live and want your works to live, you must be dead to all things and have become nothing. It is a characteristic of creatures that they make something out of some-

thing, while it is a characteristic of God that He makes something out of nothing. Therefore, if God it to make anything in you or with you, you must first have become nothing. Hence, go into your own ground (*Grund*) and work there, and the works that you work there will all be living” (Sermon *Iustus in perpetuum vivet*).

On several occasions, Eckhart turns to the motto “to live without why”, to live with no intention or goal. The only good intention is the absence of intention, which can only happen within the ground of the soul: “It is out of this inner ground that you should perform all your works without asking *why*. I say truly: So long as you perform your works for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, or for God’s sake or for the sake of your eternal blessedness, you are going completely astray” (Sermon *In hoc apparuit charitas Dei...*). “Thus turn away from all things and apprehend yourself purely in being, for what is outside being is *accident* and all accidents give rise to why and wherefore” (Sermon *Iustus in perpetuum vivet*). Certainly, the first *why* could be the incentive to initiate our quest but, at the end of the quest, we find out that the answer is *sine quare*, without *why*: “The end is universally the same as the beginning, or principle. It does not have a *why*, but is itself the *why* of all things and for all things” (*Commentary on John*). Once the thought has been transcended, there is no longer “reason” of the reason. Attained the *mystical union* and overcome the subject-object distinction, who is there to be asked about anything? Who is there to consider himself *doer* of anything? Who is there to contemplate what?

The detachment from action includes the renunciation to consider oneself as author, as well as to appropriate the consequences of such an action. It implies the acceptance that the will does not participate in that process because there is no other will than God’s. The argument with which Eckhart justifies the need for detachment or renunciation to have an own will is, certainly, indisputable and convincing: *God never gives Himself to an alien will*. “We must learn to free

ourselves of ourselves in all our gifts, not holding on to what is our own or seeking anything, either profit, pleasure, inwardness, sweetness, reward, heaven or our own will. God never gives Himself, or ever has given Himself, to a will that is alien to Himself" (*Talks of Instruction*, 21). Otherwise, "if you are intent on anything other than God, if you expect anything else than God, whatever your work may be, it is neither yours nor God's" (Sermon *Impletum est tempus Elizabeth*). And if there is any purpose, this must be, in any case, the *mystical union*. There is another argument as clarifying as the previous one: If you renounce your will in order to put yourself in the hands of God, then God wills on your behalf and through you: "If then, you want God to be your own in this way, make yourself His own and have as your intention nothing but Him; then He is the beginning and the end of all your activity, just as His Godhead depends on His being God. The person who in all his works considers nothing but God and loves nothing but God, to him God gives His divinity (Sermon *Surge illuminare Iherusalem...*). In another passage, he elaborates on the same idea; "When we go out of ourselves through obedience and strip ourselves of what is ours, then God must enter into us; for when someone wills nothing for themselves, then God must will on their behalf just as He does for Himself... And so in all things I do not will for myself, God wills on my behalf" (*Talks of Instruction*, 1).

Strictly speaking, what Eckhart sets out is a way to discipline the pride of the "ego" by making it see that it is not the author of anything and that it lacks a decision-making ability. Therefore, it is not an annihilation of the will, but a total change of perspective. The "I" must gently cede control. The outer man must give his will to the inner man. Only that way will man detach or free himself from the servitude of the body, the conditionings of time and the illusion of considering himself as separate from God: "The will is perfect and right when it has no selfhood and when it has gone out of itself, having been taken up and transformed into the will of God. Truly, the

more this is so, the more the will is right and true" (*Talks of Instruction*, 10). Certainly, from the metaphysical point of view, when one renounces *the own will* and *works*, one renounces nothing, since these are futile before God, but this is the path towards the emptying of the "ego": "And nothing makes us true so much as the giving up of our will. Truly, without giving up our will in all things, we can achieve nothing at all for God. Indeed, if we went so far as to give up the whole of our will, daring to abandon all things for God's sake, both inner and outer, then we would have accomplished everything, and not before" (*Talks of Instruction*, 11). And, in effect, only the love understood as desire of God can drive man to give up his own will and accept God's will.

On the other hand, the common idea that the contemplative life is incompatible or contrary to the active life was a topic to which Eckhart paid special attention because it affected an essential aspect of detachment as a spiritual path. Essentially, the question is that action and contemplation are complementary aspects, on condition that the former inspires the latter, that is to say, that the works only have a true significance if they are done with detachment. "How about those works of love which are wholly external, such as teaching and comforting, those who are in need? ... One pours out the love he has received in contemplation. Yet it is all one, for what we plant in the soil of contemplation we shall reap in the harvest of action and thus the purpose of contemplation is achieved... It is still a single process with one end in view, that God is, after which it returns to what it was before. If I go from one end of this house to the other, it is true, I shall be moving and yet it will be all one motion. In all he does, man has only his one vision of God. One is based on the other and fulfills it. In the unity one beholds in contemplation, God foreshadows the harvest of action. In contemplation, you serve only yourself. In good works, you serve many people" (*Treatise On the Eternal Birth*). Ultimately, the right action is so because it takes place in contemplation, that is, with no sense of "I" author or doer that appropriates an-

ything. Otherwise, the works and their consequences, no matter how magnificent they may be, are futile, including those that pretend to be externally inspired by God; "Nothing is to work in the just person other than God. All works are surely dead if anything from the outside compels you to work. Even if it were God Himself compelling you to work from the outside, your works would be dead. If your works are to live, then God work from the inside, from the innermost region of the soul... There is your life and there alone you live and your works live" (Sermon *Iustus in perpetuum vivet*). Following the mystical contemplative tradition, Eckhart turns to the well-known biblical passage of Luke 10:41-42 to affirm the superiority of the contemplative life (Mary listens to Jesus by His feet) over the active life (meanwhile, Martha prepares the food and complains about Mary's passiveness); "That is why she said: 'Lord, tell her to help me'... Christ answered her by saying: 'Martha, Martha, thou art anxious and troubled *with* many things, but one thing is needful, and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her'" (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum...*). The episode of the dispute between Martha (the active life) and Mary (the contemplative life) is used by the German mystic to explain that one thing is to be *with* the things, that is, attached or identified with the works, and another very different thing is to be *in* the things, without being affected by them. "Therefore Christ says: 'You stand *with* things and *with* concern', meaning thereby that [Martha] was exposed to troubles and depression with her lower faculties since she was not swamped by the enticements of the Spirit. She was with things and not *in* them" (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum...*). Certainly, Martha (the active life) is the perfection that is achieved when the inner action is exercised. But, in order that Martha's life be not sterile, she must previously be Mary, because the action just makes sense after the understanding, and not before.

Ultimately, the true contribution to the Glory of God does not consist in doing, but in Being. As Eckhart would say: "People should

not worry so much about what they *do* but rather about what they *are*. If they and their ways are good, then their deeds are radiant. If you are righteous, then what you do will also be righteous. We should not think that holiness is based on what we do but rather on what we are” (*Talks of Instruction*, 4).

IX.- OBJECTLESS CONTEMPLATION

It is to be warned that Eckhart’s discourse does not pursue a merely theoretical or speculative goal. On the contrary, it is due to his own contemplative experience. The Meister constantly shows that only detachment may lead to the contemplation of God. During the first steps, the contemplation of God requires a very specific practice that is generally called contemplative prayer. Under this practice hides a specific teaching and even, if the expression may be used, a precise technique. Above all, it is a unitive prayer that leads to God. It is not only necessary to withdraw the senses, but also to forget all desires and thoughts, no matter how spiritual it may seem, and to subordinate everything that comes from the created world to the vision of God.

Why to keep the powers of the soul suspended and stopped? Strictly speaking, when the attention is focused on the external objects, the powers get distracted and dispersed, that is, they are weakened. On the contrary, when we collect what is dispersed, we can focus all our attention on the ground of the soul: “The soul, with all its powers, has divided and scattered itself in outward things, each according to its functions: the power of sight in the eye, the power of hearing in the ear, the power of taste in the tongue, and thus they are the less able to work inwardly, for every power which is divided is imperfect. So the soul, if she should work inwardly, must call home all her powers and collect them from all divided things to one inward work” (*Treatise On the Eternal Birth*). It is an attitude of pure con-

centration or attention in which the soul, free from thoughts and from attachments to objects, becomes completely empty and gives itself to God. This way, he who prays “is untroubled and unfettered by anything, which has not bound his best part to any particular manner of being or devotion and does not seek his own interest in anything but is always immersed in God’s most precious will, having gone out of what is his own... We should pray with such intensity that we want all the members of our body and all its faculties, eyes, ears, mouth, heart and all our senses to turn to this end; and we should not cease in this until we feel that we are close to being united with Him who is present to us and to whom we are praying: God (*Talks of Instruction*, 2).

Therefore, it is a prayer that not only is not oral, but that is not even mental. It is an objectless prayer because its goal is to lack a goal, that is, a pure and selfless prayer. In fact, we should not even pray. Eckhart clarifies the nature of contemplative prayer a bit more: “What is the prayer of the detached heart? I answer that detachment and purity cannot pray. For if anyone prays, he asks that something be given him, or asks that God may take something away from him. But the detached heart does not ask for anything at all, nor has it anything at all that it would like to be rid of. Therefore it is free of all prayer, and its prayer is nothing else than to be uniform with God. On this alone the prayer of detachment rests. In this sense we may understand what was said by Saint Dionysius on the words of Saint Paul: ‘There are many of you who all run for a crown, and yet only one can win it’ (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24). All the powers of the soul run toward the crown, and yet only one being can obtain it. Dionysius says in this connection⁵¹⁷: ‘The race is nothing but a turning away from the creatures and unification with uncreatedness’. When the soul comes to this, she loses her name and God draws her into Himself, so that she becomes nothing in herself, as the sun draws the dawn into itself, so that it is annihilated. Nothing brings man to this but pure

⁵¹⁷ Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*, IV, 9 and XIII, 3.

detachment. Here we may cite the words of Augustine: ‘The soul has a heavenly entrance into the Divine nature in which all things become nothing to her’. On earth this entrance is simply pure detachment. When the detachment reaches its highest perfection, it becomes unknowing through knowledge, loveless through love, and dark through light” (Treatise *On Detachment*).

Eckhart’s teachings mean the subordination of meditation to contemplation. Indeed, when he expounds “what it does a man to do in order to deserve and procure this birth to come to pass and be consummated in him: is it better for him to do his part towards it, to imagine and think about God, or should he keep still in peace and quiet so that God can speak and act in him while he merely waits on God’s operation?” (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*), he unequivocally pleads for the superiority of contemplation. “Thus a man must abscond from his senses, invert his faculties and lapse into oblivion of things and of himself. Anent which a philosopher apostrophized the soul: ‘Withdraw from the restlessness of external activities!’ And again: ‘Flee away and hide you from the turmoil of outward occupations and inward thoughts for they create nothing but discord!’” (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*). But, in order to prevent the candidate from comfortably settling in false conceptualizations, the Meister undermines again the argumentative building of those who try to absolutize the contemplative life: “Truly, when people think that they are acquiring more of God in inwardness, in devotion, in sweetness and in various approaches than they do by the fireside or in the stable, they are acting just as if they took God and muffled His head up in a cloak and pushed Him under a bench. Whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden. But whoever seeks God without ways will find Him as He is in Himself” (Sermon *In hoc apparuit charitas Dei...*).

X.- EMPTYING THE TEMPLE OF THOUGHTS

Guided by his own mystical experience, Eckhart advocates the suspension of the senses and the thought, that is, the detachment from the ordinary knowledge, as a means to transcend individuality. He explains that: "The soul has two eyes: an inner and an outer eye. The inner eye of the soul is the one which perceives being and receives its own being directly from God" (Sermon *In diebus suis placuit Deo...*). The predominance of one of these two forms of sight produces two kinds of men: the inner man, whose longing for God drives him to contemplation by means of withdrawal or suspension of the powers of the soul, and the outer man, who lives identified with the objects of thought; "But there are people who squander all the soul's powers on the outer man. They are those who apply all their intelligence and reason to perishable goods, and who know nothing about the inner man" (Treatise *On Detachment*).

Pure meditation requires the withdrawal of the powers of body and soul (the senses and the thought), disregarding all external distraction and focusing all our attention inward: "Whoever wants to understand the doctrine of God must withdraw and enclose himself within himself and detach himself from any care and failure and agitation of inferior things. He must overcome the powers of the soul, which are so many and so divided, when they are in the thought and when the thought, acting by itself, works wonders. He must even overcome this thought, in order that God may speak in all powers without division" (Sermon *Videns Iesus turbas...*). In the contemplative practice, the emptying of oneself equals the silence of the mind, the absence of thoughts (*gedenken*); "you must cease being active and must draw all your powers to a point of stillness, if you truly desire to experience this birth to take within yourself; if you wish to find the new-born king, you must ignore everything which you might otherwise find, and cast it aside" (Sermon *Ubi est qui natus est...*). "Therefore a master says: If someone is to perform an inner

work, he must draw in all his powers as if in the corner of his soul, hiding from all images and forms, and then he shall be able to act. He must thus enter a forgetfulness and an unknowing. Where this word is to be heard, there must be stillness and silence. We cannot serve this word better than with stillness and silence; there it can be heard and properly understood, and there we are in a state of unknowing. Where we know nothing, there it reveals itself and makes itself known" (Sermon *Ubi est qui natus est...*). The episodes of Moses before the burning bush and Saint Paul's ecstasy are used by the German mystic to rationalize his contemplative experience: "Here the spirit had so entirely absorbed the faculties that it had forgotten the body: memory no longer functioned, nor understanding, nor the senses, nor even those powers whose duty it is to lead and feed the body; vital warmth and energy were arrested" (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*).

All what comes from the senses, all what can be apprehended or experienced, must not be part of our true nature because it implies that there is a subject who acquires something that he did not have before. And, as the ground of the Soul is self-sufficient, pure essence and oneness, all what the "I" may acquire, including knowledge, constitutes something superimposed and skin-deep onto the soul as an accessory husk. Consequently, the true peace cannot come from something that is so mutable as knowledge because "If I have wisdom, I am not myself wisdom. I can gain wisdom and also lose it. But whatever is in God, is God; it cannot be removed from Him" (Sermon *Nunc scio vere...*). "If you visualize anything or if anything enters your mind, that is not God; indeed, He is neither this nor that. Whoever says that God is here or there, do not trust him. The light that is God shines in the darkness. God is a true light. To see it one must be blind" (Sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra...*). That is why the knowledge through the external powers (the senses and the understanding) is imperfect, because, as it is based on the subject-object duality, it does not allow knowing the essence and ground of

things. On the contrary, the knowledge in God or *like* God allows discovering the unitary essence of everything because the subject is at the same time the object of attention or, said with other words, it is an objectless, pure, direct knowledge that transcends the apparent plurality of objects when it they are contemplated in their essential oneness; “To know something of exterior things is to be invaded by it, or, at the very least, to have received an impression of it. To obtain a representation of a thing, for example of a rock, I do not draw into myself what is grossest about it; abstraction leaves that outside. It is found in the ground of my mind in its highest and noblest form, as nothing other than a spiritual image. Something alien falls into my soul with everything it learns about the outside. But what I know of creatures in God introduces into my soul nothing but God alone, for in God there is only God. When I know all creatures in God, I know them as nothingness” (Sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra...*). By invoking John 17:3, “And this is life eternal: that they might know Thee, the one true God”, he affirms the futility of all knowledge in which God is not the subject-object: “If I knew all things but not God, I would have known nothing. But, if I knew God and knew no other thing, I would have known all things. The more insistently and deeply we know God as “one”, the more we know the root from which all things have germinated. The more we know the root and core and ground of Godhead as “one”, the more we know all things. That is why He says: ‘to know Thee, the one true God’. He says neither ‘wise God’, nor ‘righteous God’, nor ‘mighty God’, but only ‘one and true God’, and He means that the soul must be detached and shelled away from all what is added to God in the thought or in the knowledge, and that she should take Him naked, as He is a pure being: that is a true God” (Sermon *Our Lord lifted up...*).

But, is then there any infallible form of *knowledge*? Man must understand that God cannot be known through the senses. The peace and the happiness of the vision of the face of God cannot be experienced through the powers of the understanding. Man wrongly be-

believes that he can fulfill himself by means of the senses and the thoughts, and throws himself into a crazy race to hoard experiences, desires, possessions. He believes that the more things he has, the more fulfilled he will be. But, as the objects of the thoughts, by their own nature, come and go continuously, the pleasure that they provide him is as well intermittent. Happiness itself is a state or feeling that only makes sense in relation to another state of non-happiness (suffering, turmoil...). Happiness is experienced when it is accessed from a state of non-happiness. That is why nobody is *always* happy, because, in that case, there would be no feeling or sensation with which to compare it. The anxiety and frustration caused by the transience of happiness or any other state impels man to seek stability in the spiritual world: "Our Lord said: 'Only in me ye might have peace' (Jn. 16:33). To the extent that one is in God, one is in peace. Whatever of a person is in God has peace; whatever of a person is outside of God has turmoil. Saint John says, 'Everything that is born of God overcometh the world' (1 Jn. 5:4)" (Sermon *Populi eius qui in te...*). Whoever insists on reaching God by means of the human reason will just build a thought God. And the world of thought is the vain realm of objects and duality. Strictly speaking, there are no objects, but concepts created by the mind. "Happiness", "peace", "Soul", "God", etc. are mere conceptualizations created or imagined by the mind and classified among the thousands of files or little drawers of its memory. From the moment we convert them into "objects" of thought, we convert them into something external and foreign to us. That is why the thought is an imperfect, alienating (that is, it converts us into "another") form of knowledge because it sees duality where there is only oneness.

In effect, "God" is also another thought generated by the mind to feed the duality of a subject (I) who prays and obtains services from an object (God). The problem of thinking or remembering God is that we stay in the duality and the separation from God. While we think about God, we move away from ourselves because we see Him

as something different and distant. Thus, the spiritual path may never be finished; “We should not content ourselves with a God of thoughts for, when the thoughts come to an end, so too shall God. Rather, we should have a living God who is beyond the thoughts of all people and all creatures” (*Talks of Instruction*, 6). The Meister comes here to an essential conclusion: the man who aspires to unite with God must transcend the level of thoughts, no matter how noble and positive they may be. Also the images, since they are but thoughts of a visual nature: “Now perhaps you will say: ‘But there is nothing innate in the soul save images!’ No, not so! If that were true, the soul would never be happy... No image represents and signifies itself; it stands for that of which it is the image. Now seeing that you have no images save of what is outside you, therefore it is impossible for you to be beatified by any image whatsoever” (*Treatise On the Eternal Birth*).

Therefore, “soul” is also another instrumental concept that is to be transcended because, as its nature is not mental, it cannot be thought or conceptualized. The mere fact of trying to convert it into a thought, that is, a concept, hinders us from understanding it. That is why, when commenting the verse of Jn. 12:25: “He who hateth his soul in this world preserveth it for eternal life”, Eckhart clarifies that “The word ‘soul’ refers to the soul as it resides in the dungeon of the body. Thus he wants to say that the soul, with that part of its being which it can make into an object of its thought, remains in its dungeon. Wherever it has still some regard for these things of here-below and where it draws something into itself through the senses, the soul feels altogether constrained. Indeed, words are unable to give a name to what lies beyond it” (Sermon *Qui odit animam suam*). Therefore, the dungeon of the soul is not only constituted by the body (and by time), but also by the soul itself, as long as it expresses itself by means of the conceptual thought.

The biblical passage of the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple is used by Eckhart to weave one of his best sermons. He identifies the Temple with man, and the merchants with all the obstacles that we must face in order to empty and detach ourselves. “We read in the Gospel (Mt. 21:12) that our Lord went into the Temple and cast out all them that sold and bought, and said to them that sold doves: ‘Take these things hence!’ (Jn. 2:16)... God wants this Temple cleared of everything but Himself. This is because this Temple is so agreeable to Him, and He is so comfortable in this Temple when He is there alone” (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in Templum*). Why is it necessary to clear the Temple? “After all, light and darkness cannot coexist any more than God and creatures can. If God is to enter, then the creatures must leave” (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in Templum*). In order that enlightenment takes place, the merchants must be identified and expelled. They are those who approach God in search of prizes and rewards for their works. “The merchants are those who only guard against mortal sins. They strive to be good people who do their good deeds to the glory of God, such as fasting, watching, praying and the like, all of which are good, and yet do these things so that God will give them something in exchange. Their efforts are contingent upon God doing something they ardently want to have done. These are all merchants. They want to exchange one thing for another and to trade with our Lord. But they will be cheated out of their bargain, for what they have or have attained is actually given to them by God. Lest we forget, we do what we do only by the help of God, and so God is never obligated to us. God gives us nothing and does nothing except out of His own free will. What we are we are because of God, and whatever we have we receive from God and not by our own contriving. Therefore God is not in the least obligated to us, neither for our deeds nor for our gifts. He gives to us freely. Besides, Christ Himself says: ‘Without Me, ye can do nothing’ (Jn. 15:5). People are very foolish when they want to trade with God. They know little or nothing of the truth... If you want to be rid of the commercial spirit, then by all means do all you

can in the way of good works, but do so solely for the praise of God. Live as if you did not exist” (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in Templum...*). Eckhart sarcastically criticizes those who love God as they love a cow that gives milk and cheese; “They for whom God is not enough are greedy. The reward for all your works should be that they are known to God and that you seek God in them” (*Talks of Instruction*, 16). Even the good works become dead if made with any goal or without detachment: “These are good people who do their works solely for God’s sake, not seeking to serve their own interests thereby, but still linking them to the self, to time and number, to a before and an after. In their works they are impeded in the attainment of the best truth of all” (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in Templum...*). Of course, the metaphysical path has its results, but the suitable attitude of renunciation of oneself implies to approach God without selfish trade and without eagerness for profit, even though that profit may be obtained anyway: “The more detached you keep yourself, the more inner light, truth and penetration you will have!” (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*), since Jesus already said: “And everyone that hath forsaken [everything] for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold and shall inherit everlasting life” (Mt. 19:29).

Ultimately, to be “empty of oneself” and give way to God, “one should shun and free oneself (*ledic machen*) from all thoughts, words and deeds, as well as from all mental images” (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*). Insofar as we withdraw our powers and empty ourselves from ourselves, we cede control to God and give Him room to enter our inner Temple and pour His Grace: “Truly, when man calms down completely and draws his active mind to a point of stillness, God becomes in charge of the work, He Himself will work” (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*). In effect, *when I empty myself of thoughts, what appears is not put by me*. Then, where does it come from? “Saint Augustine says: ‘Whoever without thought of any kind, or without any kind of bodily likeness and image, perceives within himself what no external vision has presented to him, he knows that

this is true” (Treatise *On the Divine Comfort*). “Now I ask: How can it be that separation of the understanding from form and image understands all things in itself, without going out from or changing itself? I reply: This comes from its simplicity, for the more purely simple a man’s self is in itself, the more simply does he in himself understand all multiplicity, and he remains unchangeable in himself” (Sermon *Homo quidam nobilis...*).

We reach here one of the decisive points of the German Meister’s thought: the *eternal birth*, that is, the enlightenment or spiritual realization. Such an *eternal birth* is a gift granted by God alone: “It is a special favor and a great gift to be able to fly up with the wing of knowledge and make the understanding rise to reach God”⁵¹⁸ (Sermon *Jesus constrained his disciples...*). The conquest of immortality can only take place in the innermost part of the temple. That place in the ground of the soul is, paradoxically, a non-place beyond time, in the eternity previous or beyond Creation: “The ground of God is my ground and my ground is God’s ground” (Sermon *In hoc apparuit charitas Dei...*), “My house and the house of God is the being itself of the soul, wherein dwells God alone”. In order that this eternal birth or awakening happens, the temple needs to be exempt and empty. Only after that emptying or detachment from oneself does God deign to enter it and speak the Word.

In order that God may speak, there must be absolute silence. The Temple must be empty of thoughts: “You should know that if someone else wishes to speak in the temple, then Jesus must be silent, as if He were not at home, and indeed He is not at home in the soul for there are strangers there with whom the soul speaks. If Jesus is to speak in the soul, then she must be alone and must herself be silent if she is to hear Jesus. Now then, in He comes and begins to speak” (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in Templum...*). In sum, God does not need thoughts or images to communicate with the Soul. Therefore, all

⁵¹⁸ cf. 2 Cor. 3:18.

thought, desire or memory is an obstacle that stands in the way between God and the Soul: "God works without instrument and without image. And the freer you are from images the more receptive you are to His interior operation; and the more introverted and oblivious you are the nigher you are thereto. Dionysius exhorted his disciple Timothy in this sense saying: 'Dear son Timothy, do you with untroubled mind swing yourself up above yourself and above your powers, above all modes and all existences, into the secret, still, darkness, that you may attain to the knowledge of the unknown super-divine God'. All things must be forsaken. God scorns to work amongst images" (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*). Ultimately, "If we are to know God, it must be without mediation. Nothing foreign can be mixed with it" (Sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra...*). Besides, "Yet know that God requires every spiritual man to love Him with all the powers of his soul. Of this He said: 'Love thy God with thy whole heart'⁵¹⁹" (Treatise *On Detachment*).

In sum, in order that the vision of the face of God takes place, the mind must be absolutely silent. That silence or void implies the detachment from the external world, including beloved people, family, friends... including oneself; "This was Christ's meaning when He said: 'Whoever loves anything but me, whoever loves father and mother and many other things is not worthy of Me. I did not come upon earth to bring peace, but a sword to cut away all things, to part you from sister, brother, mother, child and friend that in truth are your enemies' (cf. Mt. 10:34-36). For what is familiar to you is in truth your enemy. If your eye is to see all things, your ear to hear all things and your heart to consider all things, then truly your soul must be divided and dissipated among all these things" (Sermon *Ubi est qui natus est...*).

⁵¹⁹ Deut. 6:5; Mk. 12:30; Lk. 10:27.

XI.- THE DARKNESS THAT COVERS THE FACE OF GOD

As already mentioned, the first step of the contemplative practice consists in learning to withdraw all the powers of the soul and stabilize the silence of the mind. When that emptiness of thoughts is stable and reaches the suitable intensity⁵²⁰, then it is attained a singular state, very difficult to describe, in which all the senses are disconnected and any identification with the body or the mind is stopped. That deep state in which there is no trace of anything other than a pure awareness is what Jacob describes as “startling place” or what the mystics define as cloud of unknowing, which heralds the vision of the Light or face of God. By those who have never experienced it, this state of absolute darkness can only be described as an essential Nothingness, a Cloud of unknowing or an ignorance or forgetfulness of oneself. This is the darkness that covers the face of God. Eckhart even reflects the confusion of the candidate for contemplation whose expectations are something very paradoxical, that is, to attain the knowledge of God by means of unknowing: “You might say: ‘Sir,

⁵²⁰ It must be the highest, most intense and sustained attention, so that it may not be stopped by any thought. In order to explain the level of concentration required, Eckhart gives this example: “There was once a pagan master who was devoted to the science of calculation. He had directed all his powers to this and, seated by the glowing embers of a fire, was calculating and exploring this art. Then someone approached him and drew a sword, not knowing that it was the master, and said: ‘Tell me quickly who you are, or I shall kill you!’ The master was so entirely immersed in his thoughts that he neither saw nor heard his enemy and could not answer him, not even by saying: ‘My name is such and such’. After the enemy had shouted for a long time without getting an answer, he struck the master’s head off. Now this happened as the result of the pursuit of a natural science. How much more should we remove ourselves from all things, gathering our powers together, in order to see and to know the sole, immeasurable, uncreated and eternal truth? For this you should gather all your senses, all your faculties, the whole of your intellect and memory, drawing it all into the ground in which this treasure lies buried. If this is to happen, then know that you must strip yourself of all other works and must enter a state of unknowing, if you are to succeed in finding this” (Sermon *Ubi est qui natus est...*). Only with the suitable concentration on God can the inner man walk on the waters of agitation, corporality and time, since, otherwise, if he lives attached to the external objects and pays attention to the thoughts, he will be swallowed by the turbulences of the world: “While his thoughts were concentrated and focused on God with simplicity, the sea joined his feet so that he walked on the

you place all our salvation in ignorance'. That sounds like a lack. God made man to know... But here we must come to a transformed knowledge, and this unknowing must not come from ignorance, but rather from knowing we must get to this unknowing. Then we shall become knowing with divine knowing, and our unknowing will be ennobled and adorned with supernatural knowing" (Sermon *Ubi est qui natus est...*). But this is the only possible path toward the eternal birth, since, "Call it as you will an ignorance, an unknowing, yet there is in it more than all knowing and understanding without it, for this outward ignorance lures and attracts you from all understood things and from yourself. This is what Christ meant when He said: 'Whosoever denies not himself and leaves not father and more and is not estranged from all these, he is not worth of Me'. As though to say: he who abandons not creaturely externals can neither be conceived nor born in this divine birth" (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*). Ultimately, "God is born in us when all the powers of our soul, which previously were bound and imprisoned, are set free, and an intentionless silence happens in our innermost heart, and our conscience does not condemn us anymore; then the Father causes His Son to be born in us. When this happens, we must keep ourselves naked and free from all images and forms, just as God is, and we must accept ourselves as naked and unlike as God is naked and free in Himself. When the Father causes His Son to be born in us, we know the Father together with the Son, and, in both them, the Holy Spirit, and the mirror of the Holy Trinity, and in it all things, as they are pure nothingness in God... There are no number and no quantity" (Sermon *Iustus in perpetuum vivet*). That place where the nullified and detached soul meets God seems a "desert" (*Einöde*), a startling "silence", a bottomless darkness, but also a "knowing without knowing" (*wîse âne wîse*), "ground without ground" (*Grunt âne Grunt*)... and endless accumulation of paradoxes that shows the futility of any name for this state or mansion. Eckhart really establishes a triple

water (cf. Mt. 14:29 ff.), but, when he focused his thought on what he had below, he started to sink..." (Sermon *Jesus constrained his disciples...*).

consideration of the mystical darkness: firstly, as detachment or withdrawal from the world; secondly, as a blinding light of God; and, finally, the ineffable Godhead beyond all attributes, which can only be described as supra-essential darkness; “What is this darkness? Firstly, we should be attracted to nothing and hold on to this nothing, we should be blind, and we should know nothing of creatures. I have said before: The one that would see God must be blind. Secondly, God is a light that shines in darkness. He is a light that blinds us, and this means He is a light of such nature that is not understood. And it is endless. In other words, He does not have an end in sight and much less knows any end. The blinding of the soul means that it knows nothing and of nothing has knowledge. The third darkness is the best of all and means that there is no light whatsoever. A master says that in Heaven there is no light, that it is too lofty for any such thing: it does not shine and it has no hot or cold in itself. Thus in this darkness the soul lost all sight, having overcome all that we call warmth and color” (Sermon *Videns Iesus turbas...*).

The darkness (*vinsternisse*) symbolizes the state of self-negation and annihilation of the ego previous to the contemplation of the light of the face of God (Jn. 1:5-9). This process of purification or ascent on the steps of virtue, from the point of view of the human “I”, is seen as a negation of oneself, a “dark night of the senses and the spirit” in which the soul does not apparently find support in anything. But from the ontological or metaphysical point of view, that darkness is eloquent and full, because it reveals the nature of the Being, which is the pure light and Grace. According to Eckhart, the mystical darkness “is the hidden darkness of the eternal divinity, and it is unknown, and it was never known, and it will never be known. God remains there within Himself, unknown, and the light of the eternal Father has eternally shone in there, and the darkness does not comprehend the light (cf. Jn. 1:5)” (Sermon *Ave Gratia plena...*). “So does the light of God, it eclipses all other lights. Whatever we seek in creatures, all that is night. I mean this: whatever we seek in any

creature is but a shadow and is night. Even the highest angel's light, exalted though it be, does not illumine the soul. Whatever is not the first light is all darkness and night" (Sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus de terra...*).

Eckhart shows to perfectly know the mystical fact described in the Old Testament regarding Moses' ecstasy after passing through the darkness that surrounded the face of God: "'Moses drew near unto the thick darkness' and, climbing the mountain, 'there he found God', and in darkness he found the true light (cf. Ex. 20:21)" (Sermon *Hec dicit Dominus...*). And there did Moses die to the earthly things because *there shall no man see God and live*. "This is why Saint Paul⁵²¹ says: 'God dwells in a light to which there is no access' (1 Tim. 6:16)... which is in itself a pure One. That is why man must be mortified and completely dead, and be nothing in himself, entirely detached from all likeness, and be equal to nobody; then he truly is equal to God" (Sermon *Convalescens praecepit eis...*). Until that moment, he has a name, a personal story, individuality, ego... But, after passing through the darkness, he understands that the individuality, the memories of the past and the projects of the future are but evanescent mirages, a mere appearance, because he is one in God: "Now Paul says: 'Once you were in darkness, but now a light in the Lord' (Eph. 5:8). If we explore the Latin word *aliquando* fully, then we see that it means 'once' and refers to time, which is what keeps us from the light. For nothing is as opposed to God as time. Not only time is opposed to God, but even clinging to time" (Sermon *Eratis enim aliquando tenebrae*). This psychological and mental death (that is, as a separate individual), which implies to pass through the darkness, represents the total detachment from the plurality (the attach-

⁵²¹ According to Eckhart, the three havens of Saint Paul refer to: 1st the unidentification with the body, 2nd emptiness of thoughts and of all plurality of objects, 3rd no subject-object duality: "Saint Paul was caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2). Observe which are the three heavens. The first is detachment from all bodily things, the second is estrangement from all imagery, and the third is a bare understanding in God without intermediary" (Sermon *Jesus constrained his disciples...*).

ment to the surrounding things), from corporality (the attachment to one's body and mind), and from time (the attachment to one's memories and expectations to do something or to be someone). In such a state of forgetfulness of oneself, we can pass through the darkness because even the darkness cannot see us. The being is identical to itself, it is the essential Identity: "There is no process of becoming in God, but only a present moment, that is a becoming without becoming, a becoming-new without renewal and that this becoming is God's being. There is in God something so subtle that no renewal can enter there. There is something subtle in the soul too that is so pure and fine that no renewal can enter it either, for all that is in God is an eternal present time without renewal" (Sermon *Eratis enim aliquando tenebrae*). It is in that atemporal, aspatial moment when the eternal birth, the enlightenment, the awakening to immortality happens. When the temple of the Soul has been emptied of everything, including the light of our powers, and remains in the dark, it is filled with the Light and the Grace of God; "When the temple becomes free of hindrances, that is from attachment to self and ignorance, then it is so radiantly clear and shines so beautifully above all that God has made and through all that God has made that no one can match its radiance but the uncreated God alone" (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in Templum...*). This way, what was anticipated by Sirach 50:6-7 comes true: "Like the morning star among the clouds, like the full moon at the festal season, like the sun shining on the temple of the Most High".

What is experienced when the Soul passes through the cloud of unknowing and contemplates the face of God? As other mystics, Eckhart finds it difficult to express his ecstatic experience by means of language. First of all, it is inexact to describe it as an "experience" because There is no duality between a subject that experiences and an object that is experienced; there is no "I" who may appropriate anything. It is when one returns to the sensible world and rationalizes that "experience" when he shapes it as memories. But the truth is

that there is no memory while one is There. And when one realizes that he is There, that is, when the sense of individual identity appears, trying to appropriate the experience, that state is automatically lost. There is consciousness, but what is paradoxical is that there is no consciousness of being an isolated individual with a name and a personal story, but there is a full integration of all into all or, said in other words, of nothing into nothing. Eckhart vividly describes the rapture of the Soul that accesses the state of supraindividual consciousness: “Now pay attention! What a wondrous involvement both outwardly and inwardly: understanding and being understood; seeing and being seen; holding and being held; that is the last stage where the spirit perseveres in rest, united to beloved eternity”⁵²² (Sermon *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum...*). There “God shines in the darkness, where the soul overcomes all light; in its powers can it receive light, sweetness and grace, but nothing can enter the ground of the soul other than God alone” (Sermon *Videns Iesus turbas...*). That ground of the soul is a so pure, subtle and homogeneous place that it accepts even neither light nor darkness, because it is beyond duality. Even that light that is God loses its attributes: “there is a light above lights where the soul overcomes all the lights ‘on the mountain up there’, where there was no light anymore” (Sermon *Videns Iesus turbas...*). There happens the mystical rapture, which Eckhart calls *eternal birth* because, even though for some instants beyond ordinary time, man glimpses his true immortal essence and drinks the water of the river that flows from Paradise. However, as Eckhart clearly explains, the matter now is how to stabilize or stay in that vision of God: “Now a question about this birth arises: Does it take place uninterruptedly or only here and there, when man is ready and

⁵²² Which is not contradictory to the following statement: “With all certainty, no one can experience this birth, or even approach it, without a mighty effort. None can attain this birth unless he can withdraw his mind entirely from things. And it requires a main force to drive back all the senses and inhibit them. Violence must be offered to them one and all or this cannot be done! That is why Christ said: ‘The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force’ (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*). This kind of warnings is another sign that the mystical rap-

strives to forget all things and to know nothing else? ... The vision and experience of God is too much of a burden to the soul while it is in the body, and so God withdraws intermittently, which is what Christ meant by the saying, ‘A little while and ye shall not see me’” (Treatise *On the Eternal Birth*). That is why Jesus Christ says, ‘before Abraham was, I AM’ (Jn. 8:58), ‘abide in Me!’ (Jn. 15:4), that is, abide in “I AM”.

Of course, the teachings of the German Meister are much more extensive than these succinct pages that never intended to replace the reading of his treatises and sermons. On the contrary, they only aspire to be an introduction to his spiritual universe and to his particular manner to express his spiritual experiences by means of an extraordinary usage of allegories and metaphors applied to the metaphysical order. Anyway, we must not lose sight of a capital circumstance: Eckhart was a “friend of God”, a man who, emptied of himself, had been filled by the Grace. He devoted most of his writings to explain this way, which he calls non-way and which culminates in the “awakening”, the “enlightenment”, the “spiritual realization”. That is why Eckhart’s writings are not about temporary morals or speculations about the world; they are an exteriorization of his mystical “experiences”, that is, of what happens when the detachment from the own detachment takes place; of what one feels when there is no “I” who demands or claims that experience; of what is seen from an unnamed place and time; of what happens when, in sum, as the German Meister says, to know is to Be.

tures of the German Meister were the consequence of a method or way that, at least in the first stages, implied a great mental effort.

**PRIVY COUNSEL OF AN
UNKNOWN ENGLISH MONK TO
PASS THROUGH THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING**

“But since God in His goodness stirreth and toucheth different people in different ways... Who dareth to say that He may not be touching thee and others like thee through the instrumentality of this book? I do not deserve to be His servant, yet in His mysterious designs, He may work through me if He so wisheth, for He is free to do as He liketh. But I suppose after all that thou wilt nor really understand all this until thy contemplative experience confirmeth this (*The Book of Privy Counsel*, 11).

This unknown English monk, author of the works entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Book* (or *Epistle*) of *Privy Counsel*, explains, in a masterful and meticulous way, the method of pure meditation⁵²³ followed by certain monastic orders in the 14th century. His doctrine and technique is connected with the contemplative tradition represented by Dionysius the Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine of Hippo, Cassian, Gregory the Great, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Champeaux, Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor, Saint Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, etc... In fact, the expression *cloud of unknowing* was taken from the work *The Mystical Theology* by Dionysius the Areopagite (I, 3), whose

⁵²³ *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling*, edited by W. Johnston, New York, 1973, reprinted in 2005. The original title, *The Cloude of Unknowyng*, was actually translated into Latin as *Nubes Ignorandi* (“The Cloud of Ignorance”) at that time, since the word *know*- matches the Latin *gno*- of *gnosis* or *cognoscere*, and thus drawing a difference between *knowing* and *witting*.

tradition is explicitly taken by our author⁵²⁴. As it is known, Dionysius the Areopagite was inspired by several biblical passages concerning the mystical darkness in order to describe a spiritual state with a particular nullification. In effect, “Cloud and darkness are round about Him” (Ps. 97:2); “At the brightness that was before Him, His thick clouds passed” (Ps. 18:12); or, in the consecration of Solomon’s Temple described in the Book 1 of the Kings, “The cloud filled the house of the Lord... for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord. Then spoke Solomon: ‘The Lord said that He would dwell in the thick darkness’” (1 Kings 8:10-12). Whereas the first of the mentioned treatises is addressed to the beginners, *The Book of Privy Counsel* is a short treatise, much more explicitly about the essential aspects of meditation.

I.- THE ROOT OF MAN’S UNHAPPINESS

The cause of man’s suffering lies in the sense of the own existence as an individual separate from God and expelled from Paradise, that is, moved away from His Presence: “All men have matter of sorrow: but most specially he feeleth matter of sorrow, that wotteth and feeleth *that he is*. All other sorrows be unto this in comparison but as it were game to earnest. For he may make sorrow earnestly, that wotteth and feeleth not only *what he is*, but *that he is*. And whoso felt never this sorrow, he may make sorrow, for why, he felt yet never perfect sorrow... And the whiles that a soul is dwelling in this deadly flesh, it shall evermore see and feel this cumbrous cloud of unknowing betwixt him and God” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 44 and 28). In Paradise, man was the lord of all creatures, but *succumbed to the suggestion of the created things* and then he found himself at the

⁵²⁴ Precisely, out of the six works attributed to this unknown author, we find the *Denis Hid Divinite* (a translation of the Areopagite’s *The Mystical Theology*) and an adaptation into English of the *Benjamin Minor* by Richard of Saint Victor. Finally, the short reflections on the contemplative prayer entitled *The Epistle of Prayer* and *The Epistle of Discretion in Stirrings* must be mentioned as well.

mercy of the thought, so that, “in pain of the original sin, we shall evermore see and feel that some of all the creatures that ever God made, or some of their works, will evermore press in our remembrance betwixt us and God” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 28). But the paradox of all this is that, though our existence (outside Paradise) is the cause of our suffering, however, we do not wish to stop existing, that is, to experience the sense of separation: “And yet in this sorrow he desireth not to un-be... But him listeth right well to be; and he intendeth full heartily thanking to God, for the worthiness and the gift of his being, for all that he desire unceasingly for to lack the witting and the feeling of his being” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 44). At the same time that there is a consciousness of an “I” that feels joy and gratitude, there is also a consciousness of an “I” that causes anxiety because it constantly aspires to attain an eternal, constant happiness that it never attains. It is then when he finds out that his anxiety is not caused *by the fact of existing*, but *by the fact of believing in a separate existence*. Or, said in other words, the existence is not the cause of suffering⁵²⁵, but the belief that man is a limited being destined to extinction. And, in effect, man, as a man, is a finite being, an incomplete “I” that suffers.

But there is *something* in his nature that transcends that limitation: it is the imprint of God, who reveals Himself as an “I AM” without attributes. In order that this “I” may reveal itself, it is necessary to renounce the other “I”, to “flee from self as from poison. Forget and disregard thy self as ruthlessly as the Lord demandeth. Yet do not misunderstand my words. I did not say thou mustest desire to un-be, for that is madness and blasphemy against God. I said that thou mustest desire to lose the knowledge and experience of self. This is essential if thou art to experience God’s love as fully as possible in this life. Thou mustest realize and experience for thyself

⁵²⁵ A distinction should here be drawn between pain and suffering: the existence causes pain as a physical, biological fact, but not necessarily suffering considered as an emotion added to the biological fact.

that unless thou lovest self thou wilt never reach thy goal. For wherever thou art, in whatever thou dost, or howsoever thou triest, that elemental sense of thine own blind being will remain between thee and thy God. It is possible, of course, that God may intervene at times and fill thee with a transient experience of Himself. Yet outside these moments, this naked awareness of thy blind being will continually weigh thee down and be as a barrier between thee and thy God, just as in the beginning of this work the various details of thy being were like a barrier to the direct awareness of thyself. It is then that thou wilt realize how heavy and painful is the burden of self" (*Privy Counsel*, 13). Therefore, man must understand that his true "I" is not something subject to development or knowledge, and that no experience coming from the senses will ever provide him with the definitive peace. The true peace is not in the separation from all, but in the *mysterious* union with God, since "He is thy being and in Him thou art what thou art", "He is thy being, but thou art not His" (*Privy Counsel*, 1).

II.- WHAT SHOULD WE DO? THE WAY OF THE *MYSTICAL THEOLOGY*

Based on the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, our anonymous monk explains that, besides the rational knowledge of God, which is obtained by means of the *speculative theology*, there is another form of knowledge of God by means of the *mystical contemplation* (*mystikon theama*), which is infinitely higher than any other modality of knowledge; it is the *mystical theology*: "Believe me, if a contemplative had the tongue and the language to express what he experienceth, all the scholars in Christendom would be struck dumb before his wisdom. Yes, for by comparison the entire compendium of human knowledge would appear as sheer ignorance⁵²⁶. Do not be surprised, then, if my awkward, human tongue faileth to explain its

⁵²⁶ cf. Saint John of the Cross, *IS*, 4, 5; *CB*, 26, 13.

value adequately” (*Privy Counsel*, 11). Thus, contemplation “is the work of the soul that most pleaseth God” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 3) because it has the potentiality to reform the soul “by grace to the first state of man’s soul, as it was before sin” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 4). That is, contemplation is the way to return to Paradise and recover our intimacy with the Creator.

Nonetheless, what is that Cloud of Unknowing after which is named the work of this anonymous author? Our unknown monk defines it as a liminal meditative state between the vision of God and the sensible world. In the course of the meditative practice, it comes a moment when the mind, focusing all its attention on itself and stopping the mental flow, is internalized or gathered in a state of intense darkness: “And ween not, for I call it a *darkness* or a *cloud*, that it be any cloud congealed of the humours that flee in the air, nor yet any darkness such as is in thine house on nights when the candle is out. For such a darkness and such a cloud mayest thou imagine with curiosity of wit, for to bear before thine eyes in the lightest day of summer; and also contrariwise in the darkest night of winter, thou mayest imagine a clear shining light. Let be such falsehood. I mean not thus. For when I say *darkness*, I mean a *lacking of knowing*, as all that thing that thou knowest not, or else that thou hast forgotten, it is *dark* to thee; for thou seest it not with thy ghostly eye. And for this reason it is not called a cloud of the air, but a cloud of *unknowing*, that is betwixt thee and thy God” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 4). In other passage, he explains that “it is the cloud of unknowing, the secret love planted deep in an undivided heart, the Ark of the Covenant. It is Dionysius’ mystical theology⁵²⁷, what he calleth his wisdom and his treasure, his luminous darkness, and his unknown unknowing. It is what leadeth thee to a silence beyond thought and words” (*Privy Counsel*, 11).

⁵²⁷ cf. Saint John of the Cross, 2S, 14, 4-11.

But this darkness is not a consequence of a mere sensory privation that could be experienced by any person who covered his ears and his eyes, but it implies a void of thoughts and the suspension of all the senses. It is to be noticed that, even when we close our eyes, we can still see, literally, the black color. The cloud of unknowing, therefore, is a specific state of the meditative process, similar to a deep sleep but with full awareness: “At the first time when thou dost it, thou findest but a darkness; and as it were a cloud of unknowing, thou knowest not what, saving that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God. This darkness and this cloud is, howsoever thou dost, betwixt thee and thy God, and letteth thee that thou mayest neither see Him clearly by light of understanding in thy reason, nor feel Him in sweetness of love in thine affection. And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness as long as thou mayest, evermore crying after Him that thou lovest. For if ever thou shalt feel Him or see Him, as it may be here, it behoveth always to be in this cloud, in this darkness. And if thou wilt busily travail as I bid thee, I trust in His mercy that thou shalt come thereto” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 3).

What happens when we stay in that cloud or darkness, paying attention and not letting the thoughts flow? In such a state, when the mind stops identifying itself with the external objects and pays attention to itself, that is, when the mind pays attention to the thinker, it finds out that a pure awareness is left. This discovery is surprising: there is awareness without thoughts or, in other terms, there is an “I” or “that” which does not consist of thoughts, memories or expectations, but of pure awareness.

The anonymous monk insists that, in order to attain that state of concentration, “thou shalt loathe and be weary with all that thing that worketh in thy wit and thy will... for why, surely else, whatsoever that it be, it is betwixt thee and thy God... And therefore break down all witting and feeling of all manner of creatures; but most busily of thyself. For on the witting and the feeling of thyself hangeth witting

and feeling of all other creatures; for in regard of it, all other creatures be lightly forgotten” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 43).

III.- THE CONTEMPLATIVE WAY IS AT EVERYONE’S DISPOSAL

Pure meditation, that is, contemplation, is not an elitist form of prayer, only accessible by a few. According to the English monk, it is an easy, simple way to approach God that is at everyone’s disposal: “It is not hard to master this way of thinking. I am certain that even the most uneducated man or woman, living in a very primitive way, can easily do it” (*Privy Counsel*, 2). In any case, the excess of reading or, rather, the pride that is caused by the bookish knowledge, can become an obstacle. That is why pure meditation is “a practice so simple that even the most uneducated peasant may easily find in it a way to real union with God in the sweet simplicity of perfect love. Unfortunately, these sophisticated people are no more capable of understanding this truth in sincerity of heart, than a child at his ABCs is able to understand the intricacies of erudite theologians. Yet, in their blindness, they insist on calling such a simple exercise deep and subtle” (*Privy Counsel*, 2). The contemplative practice is completely compatible with daily life. Any kind of daily work can be carried out with no need to renounce the world, withdraw into a monastery or devote oneself to the *fuga mundi*. “This simple work is not a rival to thy daily activities. For with thine attention centered on the blind awareness of thy naked being united to God’s, thou wilt go about thy daily rounds, eating and drinking, sleeping and walking, going and coming, speaking and listening, lying down and rising up, standing or kneeling, running and riding, working and resting. In the midst of it all, thou wilt be offering to God continually each day the most precious gift thou can make” (*Privy Counsel*, 7).

What is the right disposition or attitude to carry out the contemplative practice? “For as it is said before, that the substance of this work is nought else but a naked intent directed unto God for Himself” (*Cloud of Unknowing*, 24). And such an intent must be sincere and selfless. All spiritual merchandise must be removed. It is not about calculating the efficiency or the benefits that can be obtained depending on the time dedicated to meditation. Neither is it about facing meditation as a selfish relationship or a negotiation between God and me in which I dedicate “my” time to “Him”, up to the extent that He repays me with His “gifts”; “Lift up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love; and mean Himself, and none of His goods” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 3). Contemplation is attended without expecting any prize; one is unconditionally devoted because of one’s need to find a spiritual room and, in many cases, because of the desperation caused by unknowing the meaning of life, of “my” life. This way, if the attitude is suitable, when you put your love in Him and “forget all the creatures that ever God made and the works of them... all saints and angels have joy of this work, and hasten them to help it in all their might” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 3).

IV.- HOW TO DETACH OURSELVES FROM THE THOUGHT?

The first *counsel* that is given to us so that we may access contemplation is this: “When thou withdrawest to be alone for prayer, remove from thy mind everything thou hast been doing or planning to do. Reject all thoughts, be they good or be they evil” (*Privy Counsel*, 1). The ideal of contemplation is that the mind be not distracted following the thoughts. We must not pay attention to the objects of the mind, that is, to thoughts, imaginations or reflections. In order to achieve contemplation, the meditation on shapes, images or thoughts, no matter how high they may be, is useless; “Imaginative and speculative meditations, by themselves, will never bring thee to

contemplative love. Be they ever so unusual, subtle, lovely, or deep; be they of thy sinful past, the Passion of Christ, the joys of our Lady, or the saints and angels in Heaven; or of the qualities, subtleties, and states of thy being, or God's, they are useless in contemplative prayer. For myself, I choose to have nothing except that naked, blind sense of my self which I spoke of earlier. Notice that I said *of my self* and not *of my activities*" (*Privy Counsel*, 14). The suspension of the mental activity implies not to pay attention to the positive thoughts, no matter how noble or spiritual they may be: "For peradventure He will bring to thy mind diverse full fair and wonderful points of His kindness, and say that He is full sweet, and full loving, full gracious, and full merciful" (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 7). But, when our commitment is to the task of contemplation, "it profiteth little or nought to think of the kindness or the worthiness of God, nor on our Lady, nor on the saints or angels in Heaven, nor yet on the joys in Heaven... as thou wouldest by that beholding feed and increase thy purpose. I trow that on nowise it should help in this case and in this work. For although it be good to think upon the kindness of God, and to love Him and praise Him for it, yet it is far better to think upon the naked being of Him, and to love Him and praise Him for Himself" (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 5).

Why is the stimulus of the thoughts useless in the contemplative practice? Simply because "every particular thought of creatures that entereth thy mind... draweth thee back to the business of thy subtle, inquisitive faculties. Then thou art no longer totally present to thyself or to thy God, and this amounteth to the fragmentation and scattering of any deep concentration on His being and thine (*Privy Counsel*, 7). Thus, "do that in thee is to forget all the creatures that ever God made and the works of them, so that thy thought nor thy desire be not directed nor stretched to any of them, neither in general nor in special, but let them be, and take no heed to them" (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 3). The mind must be fully concentrated on itself, so that "nought work in thy wit nor in thy will... And try for to fell all

witting and feeling of aught under God, and tread all down full far under the cloud of forgetting. And thou shalt understand that thou shalt not only in this work forget all other creatures than thyself, or their deeds or thine, but also thou shalt in this work forget both thyself and also thy deeds for God" (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 43). And there is nothing in this forgetfulness or unknowing that may be considered as a form of meditation that sounds to pre-quietism. The suitable attitude of the meditator and his explicit *will* to long for the presence of God and allow the action of His Grace is a constant in all the works of the English monk: "See that nothing remaineth in thy conscious mind save a naked intent stretching out toward God. Leave it stripped of every particular idea *about* God (what He is like in Himself or in His works) and keep only the simple awareness *that He is as He is*. Let Him be thus, I pray thee, and force Him not to be otherwise. Search into Him no further, but rest in this faith as on solid ground. This awareness, stripped of ideas and deliberately bound and anchored in faith, should leave thy thought and affection in emptiness, except for a naked thought and blind feeling of thine own being. It will feel as if thy whole desire cried out to God and said: *that which I am I offer to Thee, O Lord, without looking to any quality of Thy being, but only to the fact that Thou art; this, and nothing more*" (*Privy Counsel*, 1).

It is not about working with the faculties, but about a non-working work carried out by the will, because it precisely consists in longing and allowing the action of God. It is an effort that does not finally require any effort because it amounts "to a rupture and dispersion of that wholeness so necessary to a deep union with God. Therefore, keep thyself recollected and poised in the deep center of thy spirit and do not wander back to working with thy faculties under any pretext, no matter how sublime" (*Privy Counsel*, 3).

Ultimately, if you want to see the pure awareness of your own being, "be sure that it is naked and not clothed in any ideas about the

attributes of thy being. Thou mightest be inclined to clothe it in ideas about the dignity and goodness of thy being or with endless considerations of the intricate details relating to man's nature or the nature of other creatures. But as soon as thou dost this, thou hast given meat to thy faculties and they will have the strength and opportunity to lead thee on to all sorts of other things. I warn thee, before thou knowest it, thine attention will be scattered and thou wilt find thyself distracted and bewildered. Please be wary of this trap, I pray thee" (*Privy Counsel*, 9).

V.- WHY DOES CONTEMPLATION REQUIRE THE SUSPENSION OF THE MENTAL ACTIVITY?

The answer is clear: "For why He may well be loved, but not thought. By love may He be gotten and holden; but by thought never... And thou shalt step above it stalwartly, but mistily, with a devout and a pleasing stirring of love, and try for to pierce that darkness above thee. And smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love, and go not thence for thing that be-falleth" (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 6). "For by thine eyes thou mayest not conceive of anything, unless it be by the length and the breadth, the smallness and the greatness, the roundness and the squareness, the farness and the nearness, and the colour of it. And by thine ears, nought but noise or some manner of sound. By thy nose, nought but either stench or savour. And by the taste, nought but either sour or sweet, salt or fresh, bitter or liking. And by thy feeling, nought but either hot or cold, hard or tender, soft or sharp. And truly, neither hath God nor ghostly things none of these qualities nor quantities. And therefore leave thine outward wits, and work not with them, neither within nor without; for all those that set them to be ghostly workers within, and ween that they should either hear, smell, or see, taste or feel, ghostly things, either within or without, surely they be deceived, and work wrong against the course of nature" (*The*

Cloud of Unknowing, 70). “Therefore travail fast in this nought, and this nowhere, and leave thine outward bodily wits and all that they work in, for I tell thee truly, that this work may not be conceived by them” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 70). It is to be understood that the senses can only be used to know objects. We do not actually know the things as they are in themselves, but we just know what the mind itself can receive from them once it has converted them into “objects” by means of the thought.

The Divinity Itself is converted into another “object” or thought that is suitably classified and thrown into one of the thousands of little drawers that human memory uses to interpret the world. But God is not an “object”. He is nothing separate from man, He is nowhere and, at the same time, He is everywhere. He is not anything, and thus He is nothing.

In the contemplative way, the thought and the imagination are our enemies. The suitable concentration requires us not to pay attention to the mental flow. Nonetheless, it is true that it is enough to decide to suspend the mental activity so that the mind itself rebels and myriads of thoughts arise, trampling each other calling our attention. If you do it, you will be immersed again into the whirlwind of the mental agitation. Your consciousness will have identified itself with the thoughts and will wander immersed into its daydreams or personal vicissitudes. We must face the thought: “And if thou wilt hear him, he coveteth no better; for at the last he will thus jangle ever more and more till he bring thee lower... for soon after he will let thee see thine old wretched living, and peradventure in seeing and thinking thereof he will bring to thy mind some place that thou hast dwelt in before this time. So that at the last, or ever thou wit, thou shalt be scattered thou wottest not where. The cause of this scattering is that thou heardest him first wilfully, then answeredst him, receivedst him, and lettest him alone.... And receive none other thought of God. And yet not all these, but if thou list; for it sufficeth

enough a naked intend direct unto God without any other cause than Himself” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 7)⁵²⁸.

Certainly, the reflective meditation with objects or concepts can be occasionally useful or even necessary to dissolve the mirages of the mind but, at the end, it is an obstacle to attaining the intimacy with God. “For although it be full profitable to think of certain conditions and deeds of some certain special creatures, nevertheless yet in this work it profiteth little or nought. For why? Memory or thinking of any creature that ever God made, or of any of their deeds either, it is a manner of ghostly light, for the eye of thy soul is opened on it and even fixed thereupon, as the eye of a shooter is upon the prick that he shooteth to. And one thing I tell thee, that all that thou thinketh upon, it is above thee for the time, and betwixt thee and thy God: and insomuch thou art the further from God, that aught is in thy mind but only God” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 5). “My dear friend in God, go beyond thine intellect’s endless and involved investigations” (*Privy Counsel*, 3). Therefore, in order to gently settle in the Cloud of Unknowing, it is necessary to remove the thoughts, but it is to be warned that, at the beginning of the meditative practice, there is a subtle obstacle that the candidate must dodge: he must not confuse the emptiness of thoughts with the thought of emptiness. That is why the thought, even though it is about God, must be refused; “Insomuch, that when thou weenest best to abide in this darkness, and that nought is in thy mind but only God, and thou look truly, thou shalt find thy mind not occupied in this darkness, but in a clear beholding of some thing beneath God. And if it thus be, surely then is that thing above thee for the time, and betwixt thee and thy God. And therefore purpose thee to put down such clear beholdings, be they never so holy nor so likely” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 9). Many spiritual seekers have squandered enormous time and effort because they did not

⁵²⁸ As well, Richard of Saint Victor stated, “To enter the Cloud of Unknowing is to rise above mind, and by means of the cloud of forgetfulness, to hide from the mind the awareness of whatever lies at hand” (*Benjamin maior*, V, 2).

realize this subtle difference: it is not about thinking of the emptiness or the nothingness, but about gathering the senses and suspending the thought. Therefore, when trying to pass through the Cloud of Unknowing in order to see the face of God, the candidate may get lost in the labyrinths of reason and convert all this into another thought.

VI.- IT IS NECESSARY TO PASS FROM MEDITATION TO CONTEMPLATION

It has to be clarified that these reasonings are not criticizing the mental activity and supporting an irrationalistic spiritualism, but they are simply pointing out the natural limitations of the thought when trying to access a reality that transcends and exceeds all mental activity; “I say not that such a naked sudden thought of any good and clean ghostly thing under God pressing against thy will or thy witting, or else wilfully drawn upon thee with advisement in increasing of thy devotion, although it be letting to this manner of work, that it is therefore evil. Nay! God forbid that thou take it so. But I say, although it be good and holy, yet in this work it letteth more than it profiteth. I mean for time. For why? Surely he that seeketh God perfectly, he will not rest him finally in the remembrance of an angel or saint that is in Heaven” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 9). What is being affirmed here is that contemplation is a higher, most powerful option than any other form of discursive meditation.

By this, our author expressed his opinion and also anticipated the fratricidal fights between actives and contemplatives of later centuries: “Thou hast reached a point where thy further growth in perfection demandeth that thou dost not feed thy mind with meditation on the multiple aspects of thy being. In the past, these pious meditations helped thee to understand something of God. They fed thine interior affection with a sweet and delightful attraction for Him and spiritual

things, and filled thy mind with a certain spiritual wisdom. But now it is important that thou seriously concentratest on the effort to abide continually in the deep center of thy spirit, offering to God that naked blind awareness of thy being” (*Privy Counsel*, 5). Thus, “now thou hast come to a time when thou wilt no longer profit by... gathering into thine awareness of naked being any or all of its particulars, by which I mean thy fruits, upon which thou hast laboriously meditated for so long... Leave the awareness of thy being unclothed of all thoughts about its attributes, and thy mind quite empty of all particular details relating to thy being” (*Privy Counsel*, 3). Only that way, as King Solomon said, *thy presses shall burst out with new wine*⁵²⁹ (Prov. 3:10).

VII.- HOW TO GATHER THE DISPERSED BY MEANS OF THE MEDITATION ON “I AM”?

The anonymous English monk reveals the essence of the contemplative method when he tells us that it consists in focusing our attention on the feeling “I am”: “Do not think *what thou art* but *that thou art*” (*Privy Counsel*, 2). It is to be noticed that this is not a reflection about what we are or what we should be, but only about the naked and elemental awareness of knowing that we exist; “So, now forget thy misery and sinfulness and, on that simple elemental level, think only that *thou art as thou art*” (*Privy Counsel*, 2), or, said with the words of the Old Testament, we must focus our attention on “I AM THAT I AM” (Ex. 3:14), which, small wonder, corresponds to the sacred Name of God, since, in effect, Yahweh (which is derived from the third person of the verb *to be*) literally means “*He who Is*”.

⁵²⁹ “These presses are thine internal spiritual faculties. Formerly thou forcedst and constrainedst them in all kinds of meditations and rational inquiry in an effort to gain some spiritual understanding of God and thyself, of His attributes and thine”. But now they are full and burst out with new wine, that is, with “that spiritual wisdom distilled in the deep contemplation and high savouring of the transcendent God” (*Privy Counsel*, 5).

Even though at the beginning it might seem a complicated or strange labor, the truth is that every man possesses a natural ability, coming from his spiritual nature, for contemplation; “Remember that thou also possesses an innate ability to know that thou art and that thou canst experience this without any special natural or acquired genius” (*Privy Counsel*, 2). Ultimately, the form of meditation proposed by the English monk is so simple that it is “as clear and plain as the lesson of a beginner. I consider him hopelessly stupid and dull who cannot think and feel *that he is*; not how or what he is, but *that he is*. Such elemental self-awareness is obviously proper to the dumbest cow or most unreasonable beast (I am being facetious, of course)” (*Privy Counsel*, 2). A sustained, stable state of self-attention or alertness is to be maintained until it becomes still, calm and effortless, that is, natural.

In the first moments of the practice of this traditional form of pure meditation, the meditator may feel inclined to think, “I am; I see and feel that I am. And not only do I exist but I possess all sorts of personal talents and gifts” (*Privy Counsel*, 2), or that he may even reflect on his goals in life. But, as all that must be left behind in order to be able to enter the contemplative practice, the anonymous monk proposes an easy prayer to help the meditator calm and gather his thoughts: “That which I am and the way that I am, with all my gifts of nature and grace, thou hast given to me, O Lord, and thou art all this. I offer it all to thee, principally to praise thee and to help my fellow Christians and myself” (*Privy Counsel*, 3). By this, if the meditator feels inclined to reflect on his gifts, qualities and so on, he must gather and redirect it all to the first gift that he possesses and that, in a certain sense, causes the rest of them: “It is the gift of being itself, the first gift each creature receiveth” (*Privy Counsel*, 3). In sum, the gift “I am”.

Thus, gathered all the thoughts in one, the thought “I am”, and reduced this thought to a plain state of self-awareness or self-attention, the next step is the simple offering or delivery of what you are, that is, of the awareness “I am”, to God: “That which I am I offer to Thee, O Lord, for Thou art it entirely”. Because, actually, “He is thy being and in Him thou art what thou art, not only because He is the cause and being of all that existeth, but because He is *thy* cause and the deep center of *thy* self... Therefore, in this contemplative work think of thy self and of Him in the same way: that is, with the simple awareness that He is as He is, and that thou art as thou art. In this way, thy thought will not be fragmented or scattered, but unified in Him who is all” (*Privy Counsel*, 1). The rest of the task just consists in remaining attentive to that elemental awareness “I am”; “Go no further, but rest in this naked, stark, elemental awareness that thou art as thou art” (*Privy Counsel*, 1). It is to be emphasized that, strictly speaking, this is not a discursive or speculative meditation, but, on the contrary, a simple means to pass from discursive meditation to contemplation.

The point is to focus our attention on the fact of being so that, afterwards, we may pass from feeling “I am” to paying attention to God. Nonetheless, as God is unconceivable and the existence of thoughts during the contemplative practice is not desirable, it is enough to concentrate or focus our attention on only one thought: God is who He is, with no attributes. He defines Himself this way when Moses asks for His name: “I AM THAT I AM” (Ex. 3:14). Therefore, “I want thee to understand clearly that in this work it is not necessary to inquire into minute details of God’s existence any more than of thine own. For there is no name, no experience, and no insight so akin to the everlastingness of God than what thou canst possess, perceive, and actually experience in the blind loving awareness of this word: *is*. Describe Him as thou wilt: good, fair, Lord, sweet, merciful, righteous, wise, all-knowing, strong one, almighty; as knowledge, wisdom, might, strength, love or charity, and thou wilt

find them all hidden and contained in this little word: *is*. God in His very existence is each and all of these. If thou spokest of Him in hundred like ways thou wouldest not go beyond or increase the significance of that one word: *is*. And if thou usedst none of them, thou would have taken nothing from it” (*Privy Counsel*, 5). Only this way will you unify your thought and “thus thou wilt bind everything together, and in a wonderful way, worship God with Himself because that which thou art thou hast from Him and it is He, Himself. Of course, thou hadst a beginning, that moment in time when He created thee from nothing, yet thy being hath been and shall always be in Him, from eternity to eternity, for He is eternal” (*Privy Counsel*, 5).

What is the aim of the meditation on the naked awareness “I am” without attributes of any kind? Obviously, it is to make it easier for the meditator to draw into the Cloud of Unknowing and to attain the final vision of the face of God. It is about leading the contemplative through Jacob’s ladder: “So I let thee climb toward it by degrees... And ultimately, in this work, that must be thy single abiding desire: the longing to experience only God” because “God is thy being”! (*Privy Counsel*, 12).

In the course of the practice, there will be moments of crisis, when everything seems to conspire against us, forcing us to consider giving up. These ups and downs will accompany us during these first steps and we must learn to resist them; “Great storms and temptations shall doubtlessly arise during this journey, leaving thee bewildered and wondering which way to turn for help... Then, for as long as it remains, thou wilt think thou art healed and that all is well. But when thou least expectest, it will be gone again, and again thou wilt feel abandoned in thy ship, blown hither and yon, thou knowest not where” (*Privy Counsel*, 20). As every cloud has its silver lining, the English monk presents such crises as a topic of reflection to the candidate, who must learn to overcome such obstacles by interpreting them as tests that God puts in his spiritual route: “Remember, all He

doth, He doth with wise intent; He desireth that thou becomest as spiritually supple and shaped to His will as a fine roan glove is to thy hand” (*Privy Counsel*, 20). His aim is to stimulate the contemplative in order to make him sensible and receptive to the mystery of the vision of God. This has, in sum, a therapeutic goal: to pass through the Cloud of Unknowing: “And so He will sometimes go and sometimes come, that by both His presence and His absence He may prepare, educate, and fashion thee in the secret depths of thy spirit for this work of His. In the absence of all enthusiasm He will have thee learn the real meaning of patience” (*Privy Counsel*, 20). This way, “by pursuing thy meditation to the farthest reaches and ultimate frontiers of thought, thou wilt find thyself in the end, on the essential ground of being with the naked perception and blind awareness of thine own being” (*Privy Counsel*, 3).

VIII.- THE TECHNIQUE TO DETACH OURSELVES FROM THE THOUGHT

We come here to a crucial point of the contemplative practice: How to suspend the thought? How to stop the mental flow or prattle? How to stop identifying ourselves with the thoughts? The first counsel that our anonymous monk gives us is to reinforce our will or determination not to allow ourselves to be captured by the mental static. When beginning to meditate, we must have the strong resolution not to allow ourselves catch by the thoughts; “And if any thought rise and will press continually above thee betwixt thee and that darkness, and ask thee saying ‘What sleekest thou, and what wouldest thou have?’, say thou that it is God that thou wouldest have: ‘Him I covet, Him I seek, and nought but Him’” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 7). We must disregard them, since they are to be considered as an imperfect activity of the human being; “Do that in thee is, to let be as thou wist not that they press so fast upon thee betwixt thee and thy God. And try to look as it were over their shoulders, seeking another

thing: the which thing is God, enclosed in a cloud of unknowing. And if thou do thus, I trow that within short time thou shalt be eased of thy travail” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 32).

If the suitable concentration cannot sometimes be attained because the thoughts are too difficult to resist, “another device there is: prove thou if thou wilt. When thou feelest that thou mayest on no wise put them down, cower thou down under them as a caitiff and a coward overcome in battle, and think that it is but a folly to thee to strive any longer with them, and therefore thou yieldest thee to God in the hands of thine enemies. And feel then thyself as thou wert foredone for ever. Take good heed of this device I pray thee, for me think in the proof of this device thou shouldest melt all to water... And this meekness obtaineth to have God Himself mightily descending, to venge thee of thine enemies, for to take thee up, and cherishingly dry thine ghostly eyen; as the father doth the child that is in point to perish under the mouths of wild swine or wode biting bears” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 32).

There is another technique to facilitate the concentration and the access to the emptiness of thoughts. It consists in symbolizing in just one word the firm intention to keep on fighting against the thoughts until becoming stabilized in the mental stillness. Thus, in order to attain that mental stillness every time we may lose concentration and realize that we have allowed ourselves to be taken by the torrent of the thoughts, we must mentally repeat that word until recovering again the attention on ourselves; “And if thee list have this intent lapped and folden in one word, for thou shouldest have better hold thereupon, take thee but a little word of one syllable: for so it is better than of two, for ever the shorter it is the better it accordeth with the work of the Spirit. And such a word is this word GOD or this word LOVE. Choose thee whether thou wilt, or another; as thee list,

which that thee liketh best of one syllable⁵³⁰. And fasten this word to thine heart, so that it never go thence for thing that befalleth. This word shall by thy shield and thy spear, whether thou ridest on peace or on war. With this word, thou shalt beat on this cloud and this darkness above thee. With this word, thou shalt smite down all manner of thought under the cloud of forgetting. Insomuch, that if any thought press upon thee to ask thee what thou wouldest have, answer them with no more words but with this one word” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 7).

Many are the psychological, cultural or mental obstacles and barriers that hinder contemplation. The first obstacle that attacks the beginner is the lack of faith in the method: “No doubt, when thou beginnest this practice, thine undisciplined faculties, finding no meat to feed upon, will angrily taunt thee to abandon it. They will demand that thou takest up something more worthwhile, which meaneth, of course, something more suited to them... They think thou art wasting thy time. But their dissatisfaction, inasmuch it ariseth from this, is actually a good sign, since it proveth that thou hast gone on to something of greater value” (*Privy Counsel*, 3). But the most dangerous one is the vanity and pride of those who enter meditation pursuing success and public recognition of his spiritual merits, considering that the *beatific vision* might be another medal in his career; “But then is the use evil, when it is swollen with pride and with curiosity of much clergy and letterly cunning as in clerks; and maketh them press for to be holden not meek scholars and masters of divinity or of devotion, but proud scholars of the devil! and masters of vanity and of falsehood! And in other men or women whatso they be, religious

⁵³⁰ It is usually pointed out that this technique is similar to the Hindu mantra, but the truth is that it is not necessary to turn to cultural borrowings in order to explain it. In any case, it is closer the relation between the monosyllabic prayer and the magical exclamations of the Celts, the *loricae*, which were used by Saint Patrick to introduce mottos such as “Christ with me! Christ before me! Christ behind me! Christ in me! Christ on my right! Christ on my left! Christ where I lie! Christ where I sit! Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me! Christ in every eye that sees me!”.

or seculars, the use and the working of this natural wit is then evil, when it is swollen with proud and curious skills of worldly things, and fleshly conceits in coveting of worldly worships and having riches and vain plesaunce and flatterings of others” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 8). Our anonymous monk will insist once and once again that the only way to pass through that Cloud of Unknowing is to be Nothing, to know Nothing, to accept that one is Nothing and that only when one is truly empty and detached from everything is when that empty “room” can be occupied or vivified by *Him who Is*.

Another terrible mistake or prejudice comes from assuming that contemplation is a merely intellectual activity by which the human mind can capture the nature of the Being. Those who think so, deep down, are dominated by frivolity, since they just want to accumulate experiences to feed their ego. They try to take a sort of spiritual touristic trip, imagining that contemplation is like to carry a booklet where to portray God with the only goal of boasting about it! For, after all, what is the point of achieving anything if you cannot tell others about it? However, He cannot be apprehended by our intellect or by any man’s. “For whoso heareth this work either be read or spoken of, and weeneth that it may, or should, be come to by travail in their wits, and therefore they sit and seek in their wits how that it may be, and in this curiosity they travail their imagination peradventure against the course of nature, and they feign a manner of working the which is neither bodily nor ghostly, truly this man, whatsoever he be, is perilously deceived. Insomuch, that unless God of His great goodness shew His merciful miracle, and make him soon to leave work, and meek him to counsel of proved workers, he shall fall either into frenzies, or else into other great mischiefs of ghostly sins and devils’ deceits; through the which he may lightly be lost, both life and soul, without any end. And therefore for God’s love be wary in this work, and travail not in thy wits nor in thine imagination on nowise, for I tell thee truly, it may not be come to by travail in them, and therefore leave them and work not with them” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 4).

In sum, if that Cloud of Unknowing is considered as the wall or the borderline between the human space-time and the aspatial, atemporal state previous or beyond Creation, the mind can neither recount it nor get There, because the mind simply *was not*.

Some candidates imagine that contemplation is a form of understanding that provides miraculous powers, trances, and believe that, for that purpose, it is necessary to submit oneself to fasts and mortifications as if they were merits, or even imagine enlightenment as a fabulous firework spectacle designed for personal pleasure. Such athletes of the pseudo-spirituality believe that the stronger their efforts the more copious their reward will be; “In this work may a young disciple that hath not yet been well used and proved in ghostly working, full lightly be deceived... And as fast as in a curiosity of wit they conceive these words not ghostly as they be meant, but fleshly and bodily, and travail their fleshly hearts outrageously in their breasts. And what for lacking of grace and pride and curiosity in themselves, they strain their veins and their bodily powers so beastly and so rudely, that... they merit for ghostly blindness, and for fleshly chafing of their nature in their bodily breasts in the time of this feigned beastly and not ghostly working” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 45). They do not know that there is nowhere or non-place beyond that Cloud, Nothing to enjoy and Nobody to enjoy anything. That is why any mental representation of what is beyond the Cloud of Unknowing is useless and idle, because one imagines oneself here and not there. And There is no imagination, or thoughts, or anyone who meditates on anything. This idea is explicitly stated by the anonymous monk: “although in the beginning I told thee to forget everything save the blind awareness of thy naked being, I intended all along to lead thee eventually to the point where thou wouldst forget even this, so as to experience only the being of God” (*Privy Counsel*, 12). Even the mere assumption that there is “someone” meditating or trying to collect his thoughts is already an obstacle in itself.

Another common mistake is to assume that the gifts of contemplation are the exclusive consequence of the effort of him who prays. This attitude implies to consider spirituality as a merely psychophysical fact, assuming that the results are achieved just dedicating certain hours to the method. Those who think so just deceive themselves, because the human effort can certainly be valuable during the first stages of contemplation, but it is useless for the final goal. In order to go through the veil of the tabernacle, in order to pass through the Mist of Unknowing, we must be invited and, so to speak, led. That is why we must “refute the ignorant presumption of certain people who insist that man is the principal worker in everything, even in contemplation... God alone is the chief worker here, and He will act in no one who hath not laid aside all exercise of his natural intellect” (*Privy Counsel*, 17). The anonymous spiritual director invokes the convincing, unequivocal biblical quotation “without Me ye can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5) in order to remind the meditator to bear always and everywhere in mind that “without Him, it is all so much wasted effort” (*Privy Counsel*, 16). Nevertheless, if everything depends on God, what can man do? Since the anonymous monk insists that God is the *principal* worker, implying that man’s work is non-principal, we may wonder, what does that secondary role consist in? “Almighty God Himself, independently of all techniques, must always be the chief worker in contemplation. It is He who must always awaken this gift in thee by His grace, and what thou (and others like thee) must do is make yourselves completely receptive, consenting and suffering His divine action in the depths of your spirit. Yet the passive consent and endurance ye bring to this work is really a distinctively active attitude” (*Privy Counsel*, 11). Ultimately, since “God alone is the chief worker and He alone taketh the initiative, while man consenteth and suffereth His divine action” (*Privy Counsel*, 17), the most suitable attitude is the total and absolute absence of any attitude, which can be translated with one word: acceptance of that which *Is*.

The ideal of meditation is that the meditator does not realize that he is meditating. True contemplation is carried out effortless; “And on the same manner, where another man would bid thee gather thy powers and thy wits wholly within thyself, and worship God there – although he say full well and full truly, yea! and no man trulier, an he be well conceived– yet for fear of deceit and bodily conceiving of his words, me list not bid thee do so. But thus will I bid thee. Look on nowise that thou be within thyself. And shortly, without thyself will I not that thou be, nor yet above, nor behind, nor on one side, nor on other. ‘Where then’, sayest thou, ‘shall I be? Nowhere, by thy tale!’ Now truly thou sayest well; for there would I have thee. For why, *nowhere* bodily, is *everywhere* ghostly. Look then busily that thy ghostly work be nowhere bodily; and then wheresoever that that thing is, on the which thou wilfully workest in thy mind in substance, surely there art thou in spirit, as verily as thy body is in that place that thou art bodily. And although thy bodily wits can find there *nothing* to feed them on, for them think it nought that thou dost, yea! do on then this *nought*, and do it for God’s love” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 68).

IX.- HOW TO PASS THROUGH THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING?

That *Nought* means detachment or forgetfulness of oneself. But that forgetfulness also affects the own awareness of believing oneself a separate, individual entity. This way, the monk shows us a paradoxical fact: in order to pass through the Cloud of Unknowing, that naked awareness, that feeling of oneself must be transcended. God cannot be reached with a specific name. It is written that no man has ever seen God and lived (as a man). The sense of individuality is the last obstacle: “when thou hast forgotten all other creatures and all their works –yea, and thereto all thine own works– that there shall live yet after, betwixt thee and thy God, a naked witting and a feeling

of thine own being: the which witting and feeling behoveth always be destroyed, ere the time be that thou feel soothfastly the perfection of this work” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 43). How to destroy the identification with a separate being? How to transcend that last stronghold of individuality that consists in believing oneself as an individual awareness?

According to the anonymous monk, the answer is clear: the access to the supraindividual state of the Being is a work of the Grace: “But now thou askest me, how thou mayest destroy this naked witting and feeling of thine own being. For peradventure thou thinkest that an it were destroyed, all other lettings were destroyed: and if thou thinkest thus, thou thinkest right truly. But to this I answer thee and I say, that without a full special grace full freely given of God, and thereto a full according ableness to receive this grace on thy part, this naked witting and feeling of thy being may on nowise be destroyed” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 44). The individual, *as such*, can do nothing; even any effort in that direction would be an obstacle or resistance. The suitable attitude is to consent to the absolute devotion of oneself and to refuse any vision, feeling or emotion, no matter how excellent it may seem; “Wonderfully is a man’s affection varied in ghostly feeling of this nought when it is nowhere wrought... Sometime him think that it is paradise or heaven, for diverse wonderful sweetness and comforts, joys and blessed virtues that he findeth therein. Sometime him think it God, for peace and rest that he findeth therein. Yea! Think what he think will; for evermore he shall find it a Cloud of Unknowing, that is betwixt him and his God” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 69).

Ultimately, how to open the door of the *Sanctum Sanctorum*? How to pass through the thick cloud that surrounds the tabernacle? “Here the Lord Himself is not only the porter but the door. As God, He is the porter; as man, He is the door” (*Privy Counsel*, 15). That is why the Gospel says: “I am the door of the sheep... by Me if any

man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture... He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber”⁵³¹. Some “will try to get past the door with all sorts of clever speculations, indulging their unbridled and undisciplined faculties in strange, exotic fantasies, scorning the common, open entry I spoke of before”. There will be those who, “full of presumption, he trusteth his own personal insights and whims more than the sound advice of the security of that common, clear path I described”. (*Privy Counsel*, 15). But they all are wrong. The truth is that, “if Christ is the door, what should a man do once he hath found it? Should he stand there waiting and not go in? Answering in thy place, I say: yes, this is exactly what he should do... until the Spirit himself stirreth and beckoneth him within. This secret invitation from God’s Spirit is the most immediate and certain sign that God is calling and drawing a person to a higher life of Grace in contemplation” (*Privy Counsel*, 16). But we can only pass through the Cloud of Unknowing that is between God and man by renouncing being “someone”, that is, being nobody and nothing; because only the nothing can be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Only a soul that is “gentle and sincere in its effort to make self as nothing” (*Privy Counsel*, 8) reaches the goal. Only renouncing the thought can the intellectual vision of God be attained. God embraces you in intimacy if you have previously expelled, from your inner temple, the merchants and thieves (that is, the thoughts) that were keeping it far from its true aim. “Let be this *everything* and this *ought*, in comparison on this *nowhere* and this *nought*. Reck thee never if thy wits cannot reason of this nought; for surely, I love it much the better. It is so worthy a thing in itself, that they cannot reason thereupon. This nought may better be felt than seen: for it is full blind and full dark to them that have but little while looked thereupon. Nevertheless, if I shall soothlier say, a soul is more blinded in feeling of it for abundance of ghostly light, than for any darkness or wanting of bodily light. What is he that calleth it

⁵³¹ Jn. 10:1.

nought? Surely it is our outer man, and not our inner. Our inner man calleth it *All*; for of it he is well learned to know the reason of all things bodily or ghostly, without any special beholding to any one thing by itself" (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 68). The devout, patient meditator manages to understand that that darkness and that Nothing is eloquent because it teaches the value of humility, patience, perseverance and love for knowing oneself and knowing Him.

The Cloud softens the iron yoke of the passions and the arrogance of the ego, it imperceptibly shapes the true original face of man, it polishes the stone, removing the superfluous attachments until converting it into a suitable stone for the construction of the temple. The best recommendation that can be made to the meditator is that he learn to "taste" that nothing as if it were his own house or, even more, *as if it were* the closest to our true nature; because the still and unselfish stay in that darkness provides peace of spirit, purges and cleanses the soul and regenerates the nervous system. Those who consider this state as another stage to be passed as soon as possible make a serious mistake, since it cannot be passed by means of any intervention or action of the personal will. On the contrary, you are invited to pass the threshold when that Nothing has finished its purification task within you. That Nothing is the most powerful universal solvent. "And let not therefore, but travail busily in that nought with a waking desire to will to have God that no man may know. For I tell thee truly, that I had rather be so nowhere bodily, wrestling with that blind nought, than to be so great a lord that I might when I would be everywhere bodily, merrily playing with all this ought as a lord with his own (*Cloud of Unknowing*, 68). There is perceived "the unity of His essential presence in all things and the oneness of all things in Him" (*Privy Counsel*, 8). There is intuitively understood that "just as God is one with His being because they are one in nature, so the spirit, which seeth and experienceth Him, is one with Him whom it seeth and experienceth, because they have become one in Grace" (*Privy Counsel*, 21).

How long does it take to finish the Way? The anonymous master clarifies that “This work asketh no long time or it be once truly done, as some men ween; for it is the shortest work of all that man may imagine” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 4). It is enough to realize...

TO SEE HIM IS TO SEE YOU; THE VISION OF GOD ACCORDING TO NICHOLAS OF CUSA

“In beholding me, Thou givest Thyself to be seen of me, Thou who art a hidden God. None can see Thee save in so far as Thou grantest a sight of Thyself, nor is that sight aught else than Thy seeing him that seeth Thee” (Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, V).

Nicolaus Chrypffs (1401-1464) was born in Cusa (Kues, Germany). His first few years studying with the *Brethren of the Common Life* inspired in him that Platonizing mysticism with a Plotinian signature that he would never abandon. Later, he studied in Heidelberg, Padua and Cologne, where he had access to the works of the Neoplatonists, particularly Proclus and Dionysius the Areopagite. He also became familiar with the work of Meister Eckhart, Johannes Scotus Eriugena, the Augustinian and Franciscan mystics, etc. After being ordained a priest in 1430, his decisive role in the Council of Basel in favor of the Pope and against Conciliarism earned him the fame as a good mediator. For this reason, in 1437, he was sent to Constantinople by the Pope with the purpose of unifying the Western and Eastern Churches; even though his mission did not achieve the desired result, his long stay there allowed him to come in contact with the forms and methods of the Eastern spirituality. In 1448, he was appointed as a Cardinal, and two years later as a Bishop.

He wrote several treatises⁵³², out of which *De Docta Ignorantia*, *On Seeking God* and *On the Vision of God (VD)* are to be highlight-

⁵³² It is to be mentioned: *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Writings*, Classics of Western Spirituality, tr. by Bond, H. Lawrence, New York, 1997; *De concordantia*

ed. I will use especially the latter in order to summarize Cusanus' theory and method.

I.- THE INABILITY OF KNOWLEDGE

According to Nicholas of Cusa, it is useless to approach God in a rational way because He is before reason; He is beyond or above it. For instance, if we conceive God as an end without an end or an end of itself, that is, as an infinite end, "this eludeth all reason, because it implieth a contradiction. Thus, when I assert the existence of an end without an end, I admit darkness to be light, ignorance to be knowledge, and the impossible to be a necessity", which forces us to accept the coincidence of contradictions.

But, according to Cusanus, God is beyond all dualities and contradictions. Should it be stated that God is everything, and thus He is neither "nothing" nor "something", it is meant that "God is beyond nothing and beyond something... for nothing obeyeth God in order that something may come into being". It is also meant that He cannot be named, but that He is not ineffable for that reason, since then He would stop being "effable" or expressible in a higher degree than all things. That is why God is not "effable" and "ineffable" at the same time, "for God is not the root of contradiction, but rather He is the simplicity itself prior to every root" (*Dialogue on the Hidden God*). Precisely, the only way the Absolute is not opposed to anything (being all in all) is through the overcoming of the opposites; "Hence I

catholica (*The Catholic Concordance*), tr. by P. Sigmund, Cambridge, 1991; *Metaphysical Speculations*, vol. 2, tr. J. Hopkins, Minneapolis (MN), 2000; *Sobre la paz de la fe* (*De pace fidei*), translation and notes by Lucio A. Burucúa, with an introductory study by Lucio A. and José E. Burucúa, Cuadernos del Alarife series, Buenos Aires, 2000; *On Learned Ignorance*, tr. by J. Hopkins, Minneapolis (MN), 1985; *Nicholas of Cusa: The Layman on Wisdom and the Mind*, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies Translation Series, 4; tr. by M. L. Fuhrer; Pegasus Press, 1989. His sermons and brief treatises have also been published in several volumes. The critical edition of Cusanus' work published in Leipzig by F. Meiner in 1932 is very notable.

observe how needful it is for me to enter into the darkness, and to admit the coincidence of opposites, beyond all the grasp of reason, and there to seek the truth where impossibility meeteth me. And beyond that, beyond even the highest ascent of intellect, when I shall have attained unto that which is unknown to every intellect, and which every intellect judgeth to be most far removed from truth, there, my God, art Thou... Thou makest plain to me that there is none other way of approaching Thee than that which to all men, even the most learned philosophers, seemeth utterly inaccessible and impossible. For Thou hast shown me that Thou canst not be seen elsewhere than where impossibility meeteth and faceth me... I have learnt that the place wherein Thou art found unveiled is girt round with the coincidence of contradictories, and this is the wall of Paradise wherein Thou dost abide” (*VD*, IX).

Turning to one of his favorite metaphors, Nicholas of Cusa defines God as an Absolute Sight. From this sight come all sights of those who see, since it is a sight that exceeds any individualized perspective, no matter how perfect it might be. That is why only the Absolute Sight, that is, ab-solved or untied “from all limitation, embraceth at one and the same time each and every mode of seeing” and points of view. The *visio absoluta* is “the most adequate measure of all sights, and their truest pattern... for all limited modes of seeing exist without limitation in Absolute Sight... and thus Absolute Sight existeth in all sight, because through it all limited sight existeth, and without it is utterly unable to exist” (*VD*, II). Consequently, God or the Absolute can be defined as *seeing itself*, as *seeing the seeing*, whereas man would then be a *seeing that sees not the seeing*, which is already *seeing the non-seeing*, that is, the darkness. And, as to see is to know, then *to know that one does not know* is already something more than ignorance, that is, a *learned ignorance*.

II.- THE MIND CANNOT SEE

Man can see everything, except the seeing. The Absolute Sight would be equivalent to infinity, which encompasses or is above all the possible modes of seeing. Whereas the Absolute is seeing itself, without subject or objects, the ordinary sight through the *mens* is not a pure seeing itself, but a contingent seeing that happens through partial, successive sights of objects. The *mens* is an originated seeing and not the pure and simple origin, because, strictly speaking, all face or look comes from or is an image of the unlimited, original face of God. Only in God does it happen that, when looking upon the absolute face, He beholds nothing other or differing from Himself (*VD*, VI). This statement leads to a subtle question: is the face that wants to look at the absolute face a true face? In effect, it is just an image, “because it is not the truth itself but an image of absolute truth”, but, in that image, the face of God is also found, to the extent that, “in my face the image coincideth with facial truth so that inso-much as my face is image it is true” (*VD*, XV).

On the other hand, as God is infinite, He is unattainable to the human understanding. Therefore, as infinity cannot be captured, the first step to let the intellect try to see the infinity is that it be aware of its ignorance: “How can the intellect grasp Thee, who art infinity?”. That is why all attempt to contemplate the divine infinity in a *human* way implies that all that is *contemplated* is the invisibility, that is, “I know not what I see, for I see naught visible. This alone I know, that I know not what I see, and never can know”. Anyway, as the infinity is unconceptualizable, “I behold Thee as infinity. By reason of this, Thou mayest not be attained, or comprehended, or named, or multiplied, or beheld” (*VD*, XIII). This way, when the intellect (intuition) knows and accepts that it is ignorant and that it cannot capture God due to His infinity, it takes the first step in order to know what is unknowable by means of the ordinary mind. Ultimately, since God is incomprehensible, man can only comprehend the incomprehension

itself, fact that implies that the true knowledge of the Absolute is the unknowing, that is, the Socratic or Platonic “I only know that I know nothing”, a knowing unknowing. It is not an absence of knowledge, but it is rather to know that that one does not know and, therefore, a learned ignorance. This attitude is the only way to *try* to approach God.

The learned ignorance is not skepticism, because it knows that it does not know with a total certainty, as a kind of “I only know that I know nothing”. The learned ignorance accepts its inability to know the essence of the Being in a human way but, concurrently, it is stated that the overcoming or transcending of those limitations is found in God as a *coincidence*. Therefore, the *docta ignorantia* itself is a means to leave the sensible world and attain the vision of God.

III.- BUT GOD WANTS TO BE KNOWN

Turning to Plotinus’ discourse, Nicholas of Cusa affirms that it is impossible that God had sent man to this world so that he could seek Him if He had not given him at the same time any way to find Him. The apparent paradox of the mystical way lies in that, on one hand, God wants to be found; but, on the other, since He transcends all the intellectual capacities of man, this can only achieve his goal by finding the divine part that man has.

The etymology of the word “God” gives cause for a suggestive explanation: “*Theos*” is a word that comes from “*theōrō*”, *to see* and *to run*. According to an etymological interpretation already employed by Aristotle (*On the soul*, II, 7, 418 b 26), the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (*On the divine names*, XII, 2-3) and some Church Fathers, and taken up again by Cusanus, the root *Theos* originates two different verbs: *to see* and *to run*. This indicates that those who seek God “must run by means of vision, in order to be able to

advance to the all-seeing *theos*” (*On Seeking God*, I). God is the so-called *Theos* because He sees everything. God would be to all things what the sight is to the visible things; God is what vision is in the domain of color: “God is in our domain as vision is in the domain of colour. Colour can only be attained through vision, and so that any colour whatsoever could be attained, the centre of vision is without colour. In the domain of colour, therefore, vision is not found that is without colour. Hence, in regard to the domain of colour, vision is nothing rather than something. For the domain of colour doth not attain being outside its domain, but rather asserteth that everything, which is, is inside its domain. And there it doth not find vision. Vision, which existeth without colour, is therefore unnameable in the domain of colour, since the name of no colour correspondeth to it. But vision giveth every colour its name through distinction. Hence all denomination in the domain of colour dependeth on vision, and yet we have discovered, that the name of Him, from whom all names exist, is nothing rather than something. Therefore, God is to everything as sight is to the visible” (*Dialogue on the Hidden God*). According to this example, the created, the creature, merely consists in a being seen by God. Even more, in a pure vision in which there is no difference between a subject who sees and the seen objects. There is just a unitive, homogeneous vision because there is nothing between the action of seeing and the seen object. There is no difference between to see, to speak, to like, etc. because there is no plurality of actions; it cannot even be said that there may be a subject and an object of any action. It could only be said that there is an impersonal acting; “I stand before this image of Thy face, my Lord... and it seemeth to me, Lord, that Thy glance speaketh. For with Thee speech and sight are one” (*VD*, X), because, in the absolute simplicity, which God is, speech and sight are not different. The Absolute speaks, seeing him to whom he speaks, and with that sight and speech does He call all things into existence (*VD*, X). The absolute seeing is to create. That is why the identification between to see and to create implies the identification between to be seen and to be cre-

ated; to say that God *sees* everything equals to point out that the Absolute creates everything in the same way that to name things equals to bring them into existence, as the *Genesis* explains.

IV.- THE VISION OF GOD. IF HE SEES ME, I SEE HIM TOO

The Absolute does not have two forms of vision: one to see Himself and other to see the created things, because God is an Absolute Identity that admits no otherness. This way, by seeing the Creation, He sees Himself; and seeing Himself, He sees the created things. In God, sight is creation, since in the action of seeing is it implicit the action of going across the space (to measure is to establish proportions). And that seeing and measuring are identical, since the Absolute is the measure of Himself, the same way that such a vision is at the same time vision of Himself and of all things. "If Thy sight is Thy creation, and Thou seest nothing different from Thee, but Thou art the object of Thyself... how then dost Thou create things different from Thee? It seemeth, therefore, that Thou createst Thyself, the same way Thou seest Thyself" (*VD*, XII), since God simultaneously possesses "both" visions: the vision as a Creator and the vision of the man who aspires to see God. Said in other terms, I am insofar as God looks at me: "If Thou didst turn Thy glance from me, I should cease to be" (*VD*, IV), but does it mean that God is God insofar as Creation looks at Him as well? Is there maybe God without Creation?

The most significant point of all this is: "in that Thou seest all, Thou art seen of all; for otherwise creatures could not exist, since they exist by Thy seeing. If they saw not Thee who seest them, they would not receive from Thee being" (*VD*, X). Therefore, "in beholding me, Thou givest Thyself to be seen of me, Thou who art a hidden God. None can see Thee save in so far as Thou grantest a sight of Thyself, nor is that sight aught else than Thy seeing him that seeth Thee" (*VD*, V).

V.- HOW TO SEE THE FACE OF GOD? THE LEARNED IGNORANCE

Due to every man being created or seen by God, he can also see the face of God insofar as he transforms his individual vision in a unitive vision. But, how is it possible to attain the vision of God, who is the Absolute Sight? In order to see the look of God or the face that transcends all faces, man needs to transcend his condition of subject who sees objects and to join the absolute, unitive vision. Certainly, the intellect that understands senses itself to understand, “*intellectus intelligens se sentit intelligere*” (*Sermon CCLXIII*, 13) because man is only allowed to be aware that he is aware. But that step itself already implies a knowledge of oneself in which subject and object overlap, originating another form of vision, witnessing or knowledge. From there, one takes the first step to approach the incomprehensible Absolute, and such a step is a non-step, because it is taken incomprehensibly. That is why the more man accepts he cannot comprehend God, the closer he will be to the vision of His face (*On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, 12). This implies to renounce the discursive faculty in order to extend the intellectual vision as if, from it, we were making an ascending ladder toward the “suprarational”, “supraindividual” knowledge beyond the *Coincidentia Oppositorum*, towards the original oneness. By ascending on this intellectual or unitive ladder, step by step, is God found.

According to Nicholas of Cusa, the face of God, which is the face of faces, “howbeit unveiled, it is not seen, until above all faces a man enter into a certain secret and mystic silence where there is no knowledge or concept of a face. This mist, cloud, darkness or ignorance into which he that seeketh Thy face entereth when he goeth beyond all knowledge or concept, is the state below which Thy face cannot be found except veiled” (*VD*, VI).

Only the learn ignorance or darkness is the way to access the invisible, absolute face of God; “For him, then, who must go beyond all light, the place he entereth must needs lack visible light, and is thus, so to speak, darkness to the eye. And while he is in that darkness which is a mist, if he then know himself to be in a mist, he knoweth that he hath drawn nigh the face of the sun; for that mist in his eye proceedeth from the exceeding bright shining of the sun. Wherefore, the denser he knoweth the mist to be, by so much the more truly doth he attain in the mist unto the light invisible. I perceive that ‘tis thus and not otherwise, Lord, that the light inaccessible, the beauty and radiance of Thy face, may, unveiled, be approached” (*VD*, VI). And, since God is beyond all concepts and beyond (individual) consciousness, the only way to pass through the darkness of unknowing is to transcend every visible light, every aspiration and every creature, for while something is sought, even if it is a light, its visibility is sought as well, and all this is about attaining a Light that is not visible. In sum, to see the non-seeing is like to see Nothing, to want Nothing... Nothing... with absolute acceptance and devotion.

SAINT TERESA OF JESUS AND THE REVELATION

“I AM, BE NOT AFRAID”

“A soul finds itself in the midst of all the tribulation and disturbance... darkened and dry; but it is set at peace, freed from all fear and filled with light merely by hearing the words: ‘*I am, be not afraid*’” (Teresa of Jesus, *Mansions* VI, 3, 7).

“She was frightened by this vision... but she found it impossible to disbelieve in it, especially when she heard the words: ‘*I am; be not afraid*’. These words were so powerful that for the time being she could not doubt their truth. She felt much encouraged and rejoiced at being in such good company” (Teresa of Jesus, *Mansions* VI, 8, 3-4).

The founder of the discalced Carmelites, Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda Dávila y Ahumada, better known as Teresa of Jesus (Ávila, Spain, March the 28th, 1515 – Alba de Tormes, Salamanca, Spain, October the 4th, 1582), was one of the deepest, clearest writers who have written about the mystical path. The mystical writings by Saint Teresa of Jesus unequivocally have a testimonial value. She not only reflects on it the contemplative *experience* of others (she invokes the authority of the Holy Scriptures, the Carmelite *Rule* and *Constitutions*, Cassian’s *Conferences* and books of other authors such as Saint John of Ávila, Louis of Granada, Francisco de Osuna, Bernardino de Laredo, Bernabé de Palma or Francisco de Evia), but above all her *own experience in the paths of the spirit*; “A feeling of the presence of God would come over me unexpectedly, so that I could in no wise doubt either that He was within me, or that I was wholly absorbed in Him. It was not by way of vision; I believe it was what

is called mystical theology” (Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, X, 1). Despite the difficulties implied in the description of the ecstatic experiences, the Saint uses a simple language and with abundant examples.

During her youth, Teresa of Jesus read and consulted the masters of recollection. Therefore, “on the way there [to Becedas, Ávila], that uncle of mine [from Hortigosa, 1537-1538] gave me a book called *Third Alphabet*, which treats of the prayer of recollection... I was therefore much pleased with the book, and *resolved to follow the way of prayer it described with all my might*”⁵³³. A certain time later, she would try to confirm her mystical experiences with other readings: “Looking into books to see if I could find anything there by which I might recognize *the prayer I practiced*, I found in one of them, called the ‘*Ascent of the Mount*’ [*Ascent to Mount Zion*, by Friar Bernardino de Laredo], and in that part of it which relates to the union of the soul with God, *all those marks which I had in myself, in that I could not think of anything*”⁵³⁴.

Regarding her written works⁵³⁵, besides her memories or *Life* (1562-1565), the most important one is the *Interior Castle* or *treatise of the Mansions* (M), which was first published in 1588. For their

⁵³³ Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, IV, 6

⁵³⁴ Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, XXIII, 12.

⁵³⁵ Her work can be consulted in *Complete works and bibliography*, Madrid, 1951, BAC, vol. 74. Her *Complete works* have also been published by Tomás Álvarez in the Monte Carmelo Editorial, Burgos, 2004. In order to get into the huge bibliography about the Saint, it can be consulted M. Jiménez Salas, *Santa Teresa de Jesús, Bibliografía fundamental*, Madrid, 1962. As already classic studies, we count Father Silverio de Santa Teresa, *Preliminares*, in *Obras de Santa Teresa de Jesús*, typography of “El Monte Carmelo”, Burgos, 1915-1926, vol. I, pp. XI-CXIV; Efrén de la Madre de Dios-O. Steggink, *Tiempo y vida de Santa Teresa*, Madrid, BAC, 1968. Tomás de la Cruz, *Santa Teresa de Jesús contemplativa, Ephemerides Carmeliticæ* 13 (1962) 9-62. VV. AA., *Sancta Theresia, doctor Ecclesiae: historia, doctrina, documenta*, Rome, 1970. Patricio Peñalver, *La mística de Santa Teresa en La mística española (siglos XVI y XVII)*, Madrid, 1997, pp. 59-76. Salvador Ros García (coordinator), *La recepción de los místicos. Teresa de Jesús y Juan de la Cruz*, Salamanca, 1997. Daniel de Pablo Maroto, *Dinámica de la oración. Acercamiento del orante moderno a Santa Teresa de Jesús*, Madrid, 1973. Otger Steggink, *Experiencia y realismo en Santa Teresa y San Juan de la Cruz*, Madrid, 1974.

part, the *Accounts of Conscience* are unconnected fragments of the text of the book of her *Life* where she explains some spiritual phenomena she experienced in first person. In *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (MC), also entitled *Concepts of the Love of God*, Teresa describes the feelings or, rather, meditations that the reading of the *Song of Songs* suggested her. She wrote as well the *Way of Perfection* (1562-1564), the *Book of the Relations*, the *Book of the Foundations* (1573-1582), the *Book of Constitutions* (1563) and *Advices* among others. Because of her writings, at the end of 1574, she was denounced before the Holy Office and investigated in Seville; for this reason, in 1575-1576, she was forced to write her works again, among them, *Way*. That is why I will cite as CE in order to refer to the first composition of the *Way* (Codex of El Escorial) and CV to the second one (Codex of Valladolid). In all of her works, she develops many aspects that are especially important to exercise and go deeper into the prayer of quiet and union.

I.- VOCAL AND MENTAL PRAYER. PRAYER OF QUIET

Teresa lived in a time of deep religious changes, as well as of extreme mistrust of recollection. There was also the persecution of the *Alumbrados*⁵³⁶ and the *Dejados*, cultivators of different forms of mental prayer who were victims of the monopoly of the faith in the hands of supposedly orthodox tendencies, characterized by their *anti-prayer* or their anti-mysticism. We are witnessing the polemic between mental prayer and vocal prayer, similar to the polemic about the superiority or supremacy between meditation and contemplation. It is to be reminded that the disdain for empty rituals and mechanical vocal prayers had driven the *Erasmism* to defend "inner Christianity" and mental prayer, with the subsequent polemic. Bartolomé Carranza, following Saint Thomas, admitted a certain hierarchy of

⁵³⁶ Antonio Márquez, *Los alumbrados*, Madrid, 1972. Melquiades Andrés, *Nueva visión de los alumbrados*, Madrid, 1973.

“three forms of attention in vocal prayer”. One based on “the words that are said during prayer”, which is “good”; another one, more reflective, which pays attention “to the meaning of the words”, and which is “better”; finally, there is a third one that pays attention “to the goal of prayer, which is God”, and which is “better than the other two”. Even one of the official theologians of the Inquisition, the Dominican Domingo de Baltanás, published in 1556 an *Apology* of mental prayer, in which he stated: “... And I say that to say that there is no mental prayer is a mistake against the divine history, which in many parts teaches that there is mental prayer”⁵³⁷. However, in the *Index* of Valdés, many books about prayer are condemned, such as the ones written by Louis of Granada, Bartolomé Carranza, Saint Francisco de Borja, Saint John of Ávila and Saint Peter of Alcántara. Likewise, Melchor Cano criticized Bartolomé Carranza and Louis of Granada for having universalized mental prayer among the people, who, due to their socioeconomic role, should not practice the contemplative life. As well, Saint John of the Cross wrote a book in defense of vocal prayer⁵³⁸.

Saint Teresa moves in the domain of good sense and moderation when asserting the value of vocal prayer (considering it as worthy as the mental one) for those souls that are distracted during pure mental prayer, “since it is a way that God may use to lead them to contemplation”. Of course, she does not want the people to be taught only the vocal prayer. On the contrary, as a strong supporter of mental or contemplative prayer, she will criticize the official opinion of the “learned men” and the “Inquisitors”, about whom she states: “there are a great many people who seem terrified at the very name of contemplation or mental prayer” (*CV*, 24, 1), which is even more surprising if it is taken into account that such censors did not know what it was really about, since “you do not understand... you cannot know

⁵³⁷ It has been published by A. Huerga in the collection of *Espirituales Españoles*, A-series, no. 12, Barcelona, 1963, p. 137.

⁵³⁸ *Diálogo sobre la necesidad y obligación y provecho de la oración y divinos loores vocales...*, Salamanca, 1555.

what mental prayer is, or how vocal prayers should be said, or what is meant by contemplation" (CV, 22, 2). The truth is that, when she wrote "If you were told that it is not good to have any prayer other than the vocal one, do not despair... for vocal prayer can never be taken away from you" (CE, 73, 1, suppressed in CV), the censor wrote down on the margin of the manuscript: "she seems to reprimand the Inquisitors who forbid books of [mental] prayer". And, in effect, the sentence was censored and did not pass to CV. Likewise, this sentence was also censored: "And even though they take books away from us, they cannot take this book away from us, for it is said by the Truth itself, and thus it cannot err" (CE, 73, 4, suppressed in CV). Her strong belief in the efficacy of mental prayer drives her to advise not paying attention to those who affirm the contrary, even if they are theologians: "pay no heed, then, to anyone who tries to frighten you or depicts to you the perils of the way" (CV, 21, 5), "if anyone tells you it is dangerous, look upon that person himself as your principal danger and flee from his company. Do not forget this, for it is advice that you may possibly need" (CV, 21, 7).

Therefore, in this matter, Teresa of Jesus was speaking based on her own experience: "for my own part I must confess that, until the Lord taught me this method, I never knew what it was to get satisfaction and comfort out of prayer" (CV, 29, 7), because it is a mode of prayer that helps "the soul not wander lost and the powers not be agitated, as time will tell you" (CE, 50, 2, suppressed in CV). In sum, the common forms of prayer such as the vocal or the discursive ones, which involve thinking, considering or reflecting, have their certain value, but are not so pure and suitable to achieve contemplation. Nonetheless, true mental prayer does not consist just in praying mentally; "You must know, daughters, that *whether or no you are practicing mental prayer has nothing to do with keeping the lips closed*" (CV, 22, 1). On the contrary, mental prayer, understood as the suspension of the thoughts and the understanding, is a more effective means to enjoy the "living water of contemplation": "Men may at-

tain more quickly to the state of contemplation if they persevere by this way of inability to exert the intellect”⁵³⁹. What is more: to attain that state of temporary detachment from the thoughts is an unequivocal sign that we are in the right way, since “the understanding ceases from its acts, because God suspends it” (*Life*, XII, 8). In addition, the practice of contemplation is not necessarily more difficult than other forms of prayer, but, on the contrary, it is accessible to anyone, no matter his cultural education. In fact, there are religious devotees who have dedicated their lives to contemplation with no result, so “what the poor soul, with the labor, perhaps, of twenty years in fatiguing the understanding, could not bring about, that the gardener accomplishes in an instant”⁵⁴⁰. Therefore, in order to contemplate, we do not need intellectual knowledge, but a longing for God⁵⁴¹.

This is an important point: whereas the forms of prayer or meditation based on reflection require a certain intellectual talent or imply a mental effort that, as time passes, causes even spiritual boredom or unease, thoughtless prayer becomes restful, relaxing and deeply transforming. The Saint confesses that, while she was practicing these reflective forms of prayer, she had “been troubled by this turmoil of thoughts... It puzzled me... We think everything is lost, and that the time spent in God’s presence is wasted”⁵⁴².

In sum, Teresa of Jesus, adopting the mystical tradition, considers that mental and vocal prayer are “*two parts or differences of the same prayer*”. The mental one is “convenient and necessary” as the culmination of the spiritual way, but, on the other hand, also “the words in prayer are convenient and reasonable in order to stir and stoke the fire of the spirit and to hold God to both natures”. On some occasion, she admits that vocal prayer is more appropriate for begin-

⁵³⁹ Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, IV, 8.

⁵⁴⁰ Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, XVII, 2.

⁵⁴¹ “The whole soul is occupied in loving Him whom the understanding has toiled to know” (Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, XXII, 9).

⁵⁴² Teresa of Jesus, *M*, VI, 1, 8-9.

ners, whereas mental prayer is more suitable for the resourceful and perfect ones. But these distinctions are dangerous because they cause frustration among those who are not capable of passing from one form of prayer to another. That is why the soul has to humbly accept that God is the one who grants it “the living water of contemplation” or makes it remain at the first few steps. In order to explain this difference, the Saint turns to the example of the basin of water (*M.*, IV, 2, 3 ff.). Those who practice the prayer based on the thought are those “who obtain consolation by meditation, since we gain it by our thoughts, by meditating on created things, and by the labor of our minds”, which she symbolizes by means of a basin that is filled by water “from a distance flowing into it through man pipes and water-works”. But there is another basin, placed at the same fountain, which is God, which is filled quite noiselessly, with “the greatest peace, calm and sweetness in the inmost depths of our being”, that is, of the *center of the soul*.

II.- A DETERMINED DETERMINATION; THE WILL GUIDED BY HUMILITY

Teresa explains that the contemplative prayer “is called recollection because the soul collects together all the faculties and enters within itself to be with its God. Its Divine Master comes more speedily to teach it, and to grant it the prayer of quiet, than in any other way”⁵⁴³. The key word to access recollection is only one: *detachment*. It is “self-detachment, both interior and exterior, from all things created” (*C*, 8) or, what is the same, “let him deny himself” (cf. Mt. 16:24).

How is detachment caused? How is it possible to deny oneself without reaching a point of such refusal that may drive us to the deepest despair and anxiety? The weapon is modesty, *modus-stare*,

⁵⁴³ Teresa of Jesus, *Way of Perfection*, 28, 4.

the “know how to be”, described in the spiritual Way as “humility”; “Once, while I was wondering why our Lord so dearly loves the virtue of humility, the thought suddenly struck me... that it is because God is the supreme Truth and *humility is the truth*, for it is most true that we have nothing good of ourselves but only misery and nothingness: whoever ignores this, lives a life of falsehood. They that realize this fact most deeply are the most pleasing to God, the supreme Truth, for they walk in the truth” (*M*, VI, 10, 7). It is the best weapon to gradually weaken the pride of willful actions that unlimitedly rely on the success of the own actions without realizing that nothing can be without Him. But that humility is not that of him who feels proud of being “humble” and constantly needs to demonstrate his humility and boast about it. The true humble person is glad of being set at nought; he “will have a genuine desire to be thought little of” (*C*, 15, 2). The mystic’s excessive trust in his own faculties to practice contemplation can lead him to the mistake of trying to force things.

Such an attitude is not only useless, but also counterproductive and a sign of arrogance, for “it is a want of humility to desire what you have never deserved”. Against this, the Saint warns: “it would be very presumptuous of me to choose a way for myself without knowing what is good for me” and says that it is right to “leave our Lord, who knows my soul, to guide me as is best for me” (*M*, VI, 9, 15). But, on the other hand, there is another aspect of man’s will that constitutes his highest power: “Do not suppose that [God] has need of any works of ours; He only expects the determination of our goodwill”⁵⁴⁴. Such a resolute attitude of devotion to the contemplative prayer is defined by Teresa as a “determined determination”. When it is explained that, in recollection, “the understanding stops talking and the will works”, it is referring to the determination to remain recollected without any aspiration or desire other than accepting God’s will. There, “it leaves the will so inebriated and the mind so transported out of itself that... such a person is incapable of at-

⁵⁴⁴ Teresa of Jesus, *Mansions*, III, 1, 7.

tending anything but what excites the will to love”⁵⁴⁵. This way, “The soul which begins to walk in the way of mental prayer with resolution... has already traveled a great part of the road” (*Life*, XI, 13).

III.- STEPS TO ATTAIN RECOLLECTION AND THE HELP OF “*I AM*”

Continuing the Christian contemplative tradition, Saint Teresa of Jesus establishes three steps to attain the perfect contemplation:

In the *first degree*, we must learn to take away the attention paid to the senses, especially sight and hearing: “Of those who are beginners in prayer, we may say, that they are those who draw the water up out of the well... for they must be wearied in keeping the senses recollected... It is necessary for beginners to accustom themselves to disregard what they hear or see... they must be alone, and in retirement think over their past life... abandon the amusements of the world... and the understanding is wearied thereby”⁵⁴⁶. Once the attention has been withdrawn from the external objects, it must be turned within: “This is a gathering together of the faculties of the soul within itself, in order that it may have the fruition of that contentment in greater sweetness”⁵⁴⁷.

In the *second degree*, thus, it starts the fight or game to remain concentrated and detached from the senses with no tie but the will to stay in prayer. The main obstacle to continuing prayer is the flow of thoughts or, as the Christian contemplative tradition says, the activities of the two superior powers: the understanding and the memory. Memories and thoughts assail us with no chance to avoid it. Only

⁵⁴⁵ Teresa of Jesus, *Mansions*, VI, 4, 14.

⁵⁴⁶ Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, XI, 9.

⁵⁴⁷ Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, XIV, 2.

our determination to continue meditation ends up making them lose their strength until they finally give up. Since, “as the will abides in union with God, so its peace and quiet are not disturbed; on the contrary, the will by degrees brings the understanding and the memory back again”⁵⁴⁸. When the memories and the rest of the thoughts hinder us or expel us from meditation, the Saint advises adopting a sentence or motto that may help us resume the attention and dispel the thoughts: “A soul finds itself in the midst of all the tribulation and disturbance I have described... darkened and dry; but it is set at peace, freed from all fear and filled with light merely by hearing the words: ‘*I am, be not afraid*’” (*M*, VI, 3, 7).

Who is “I am”? It is clear that Saint Teresa refers to the Sacred Name of God that was revealed to Moses in the episode of the burning bush: “I AM THAT I AM”, that is, the Being, conditioned by no attribute at all. The importance and strength attributed to the Sacred Name explains that it be used as a supporting formula to remain concentrated and, in addition, that such a Name, as Saint Teresa herself confesses, were revealed to her during one of her mystical ecstasies. This way, by means of the contemplative practice, after weeks or months, the understanding and the memory gradually follow the will, remaining almost still, so that, resigned or united, “the faculties of the soul now retain only the power of occupying themselves wholly with God”⁵⁴⁹.

Every attempt to consider meditation as an effort that has to be rewarded and to have a result is heading for disaster. No spiritual process is achieved by personal effort. Could not a simple and sincere prayer, product of man’s despair, have more echo than a lifetime of ascetic efforts? “It is not by dint of labor on our part that we can converse to any good purpose with God”⁵⁵⁰, under penalty of

⁵⁴⁸ Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, XV, 1.

⁵⁴⁹ Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, XVI, 3.

⁵⁵⁰ Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, XV, 6.

losing our health. It is necessary to have a loving “preparation for hearing, as advised by some books, [that] we should keep our minds at rest, waiting to see what the Lord will work in our souls. But unless His Majesty has begun to suspend our faculties, I cannot understand how we are to stop thinking, without doing ourselves more harm than good” (*M*, IV, 3, 4). Thus, a day comes when we learn to resign the senses and the powers of the soul. Then, the mysterious contemplative life begins, since “this might seem impossible: if the powers and senses were so absorbed that we might call them dead, how does the soul understand this mystery? I cannot tell; perhaps no one but the Creator Himself” (*Mansions*, VI, 4, 4).

Finally, the *third degree* of contemplation or maximum passive purification is attained “when the rapture is at the highest... when the faculties are lost... for then it neither sees, nor hears, nor perceives... for the faculties, though not completely suspended, are so disposed that they are scarcely active, being, as it were, absorbed, and incapable of making any reflections”. Even, “if the rapture has been deep, for a day or two, and even for three days, the faculties may remain so absorbed... as to be in appearance no longer themselves”⁵⁵¹. By persevering in that state of contemplative detachment, it may happen what some define as “ecstasy” (“to go out of oneself”), perhaps improperly, since it involves no otherness at all, but rather an inwardness or intimate contact with our true nature or essence. Saint Teresa, who experienced many ecstatic trances by herself, explains them in a very clear way: “Once, I understood how the Lord was in all things and also in my soul, and I thought of the comparison with a sponge that soaks up the water within it” (*Relations*, 45). On other occasions, she explains the mystical union as a form of direct knowledge in which the sense of individuality is momentarily abolished by an all-encompassing totality: the subject is dissolved and transcends its relationship with the objects because there is nothing or nobody knowing; everything is an impersonal knowing: “Once, when in

⁵⁵¹ Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, XX, 21; XXV, 4; XX, 15.

prayer, I had a vision, for a moment... how all things are seen in God and how all things are comprehended in Him" (*Life*, 40, 9). Once broken the barriers of the corrosive individuality, the Being flows in a natural way in loving peace; "Once, when I was with the whole community reciting the Office, my soul became suddenly recollected, and seemed to me all bright as a mirror, clear behind, sideways, upwards, and downwards; and in the center of it I saw Christ our Lord, as I usually see Him. It seemed to me that I saw Him distinctly in every part of my soul, as in a mirror, and at the same time the mirror was all sculptured... in our Lord Himself by a most loving communication which I can never describe" (*Life*, 40, 5).

IV.- THE SEVEN MANSIONS OF THE INTERIOR CASTLE

Saint Teresa turns to the metaphor of the interior castle or palace in order to explain the spiritual pilgrim's route towards the center of the soul: "I thought of the soul as resembling a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal, and containing many rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions" (*M*, I, 1, 1). Let us remind the passage of the Gospel according to which *in my Father's house are many mansions* (Jn. 14:2). Therefore, "let us compare God to a very spacious and magnificent mansion or palace and remember that this edifice is, as I say, God Himself" (*M*, VI, 10, 3). This interior castle "is only about what He is" and thus about God's call to man. He calls him by means of a thousand "communications and inspirations" (*M*, II, 1, 3) and with His *personal whistle*, as the Good Shepherd, He summons those who are willing to be reinstated in His interior palace or castle, to return "to His mansion" (*M*, IV, 3, 2). The mansions⁵⁵² are passed not thanks to intellectual knowledge

⁵⁵² Where did Teresa of Jesus take the model of the interior castle divided into seven mansions? Diego de Yepes, confessor and biographer of the Saint, during the process of Madrid of 1595, declared: "among the things she told him was a vision that she had had, desirous of obtaining some insight into the beauty of a soul in grace. Just at that time, she was commanded to write a treatise on prayer, about

or good deeds, but by means of love. Said in other words, the different interior mansions correspond with the degree of intensity of the love of the soul, that is, to its longing to know Him, since, “to reach the mansions we wish to enter, it is not so essential to think much as to love much” (*M*, IV, 1, 7). As a commentary to the way to ascend on the mansions of the interior castle of Saint Teresa, Saint John of the Cross explains that “love is the inclination, strength, and power for the soul in making its way to God, for love unites it with God. The more degrees of love it has, the more deeply it enters into God and centers itself in Him. We can say that there are as many centers in God possible to the soul, each one deeper than the other, as there are degrees of love of God possible to it. A stronger love is a more unitive love, and we can understand in this manner the many mansions the Son of God declared *were in his Father’s house* (Jn. 14:2)” (Saint John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 1, 13).

In sum, the metaphor of the interior castle is used by the Saint to make the pilgrim consider his “soul as resembling a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal” that cannot be reached by means of the understanding (*M*, I, 1, 1). The “boundaries of the castle” of the soul are “these bodies” of ours (*M*, I, 1, 3). Just like there are many mansions in heaven, “there are many mansions

which she knew a great deal from experience. On the eve of the festival of the Most Holy Trinity, she was thinking what subject she should choose for this treatise, when God... granted this desire of hers, and gave her a subject: He showed her a most beautiful crystal globe, made in the shape of a castle, and containing seven mansions, in the seventh and innermost of which was the King of Glory, in the greatest splendor, illumining and beautifying them all. The nearer one got to the center, the stronger was the light; outside the palace limits, everything was foul, dark and infested with toads, vipers and other venomous creatures. While she was wondering at this beauty, which by God’s grace can dwell in the human soul, the light suddenly vanished. Although the King of Grace did not leave the mansions, the crystal globe was plunged into darkness, became as black as coal and emitted an insufferable odor, and the venomous creatures outside the palace boundaries were permitted to enter the castle, and in that state remained the soul that is in sin. From this vision, she said, did she learn four things of capital importance... The fourth thing Mother Teresa learned from this vision was the subject of the treatise she was commanded to write, which she entitled *Mansions*” (*Vida, virtudes y milagros de la bienaventurada virgen Teresa de Jesús*, Zaragoza, 1606).

in this castle, of which some are above, some below, others at the side, in the center; in the very midst of them all, is the principal chamber in which God and the soul hold their most secret intercourse" (*M*, I, 1, 3). And, "although I have only mentioned seven mansions, yet each one contains many more rooms" (*M*, Epilogue, 3). However, most people do not feel the need to enter the interior palace or castle. They do not even know what there is "in that most delightful place" (*M*, I, 1, 5). Some, at the most, prowl about the outer battlements by mere curiosity. This is due to them preferring "to think of nothing but external matters, that there seems no cure for them; it appears impossible for them to retire into their own hearts", because of which they will end up becoming "pillars of salt for not looking inwards, just as Lot's wife did for looking backwards" (*M*, I, 1, 6).

How can I enter within myself? First of all, the question itself contains a paradox, since, what distance is there between I and myself? How is it possible to suggest the quest for what has not been lost because it has always been here? That is why the Doctor of the Church clarifies: "this castle is the soul, clearly no one can have to enter it, for it is the person himself: it would make no sense, just like one might as well tell someone to go into a room he is already in" (*M*, I, 1, 5). But the truth is that, even though one may be in a mansion, the noises and external objects prevent us from realizing it, and thus it seems that we are outside. That is why "there are, however, very different ways of being in this castle; many souls live in the courtyard of the building where the sentinels stand, neither caring to enter farther, nor to know who dwells in that most delightful place, what is in it and what rooms it contains. Certain books on prayer that you have read [she refers to the *Third Alphabet* by Osuna and to the *Ascent to Mount Zion* by Bernardino de Laredo] advise the soul to enter into itself, and this is what I mean" (*M*, I, 1, 5). In order to explain this process, Teresa of Jesus goes on with the simile of the castle: the senses and powers of the soul are the inhabitants of the castle,

who have been for years dealing with odd people, even with enemies of the castle.

Faced with the hostility of the exterior of the castle, its inhabitants wish to come back inside, but, as they do not finally manage to do it because they are hindered by the force of the habit of being outside, they end up prowling around. Then, the King-Lord-Shepherd “whistles so sweetly that, although scarcely hearing it, they recognize His call and no longer wander, but return... to His mansion. So strong is this Pastor’s power over His flock that they abandon the worldly cares which misled them and re-enter the castle” (*M*, IV, 3, 2).

The Saint warns against certain deviations in the practice of contemplation, such as “that the very effort to think of nothing excites our thought to think more”, as we lose ourselves in the benefit we expect to obtain from the practice. She also warns the “glutton” contemplatives: “I wish to warn you here of a special danger... they allow themselves to be fascinated. The more they lose self-control, the more they get fascinated... and in their brains it seems to them a rapture; but I call it daze, which does nothing but waste their time and injure their health (this state lasted with a certain person for eight hours)” (*M*, IV, 3, 8). That is why she recommends the Superior to “prevent such a nun from spending more than a very few hours in prayer... God only calls her to the active life. There must be such people in monasteries: employ her in the various offices and be careful that she is never left very long alone, otherwise she will entirely lose her health” (*M*, IV, 3, 13). She herself confesses to have fallen for “the deception... in that fascination, awaiting for that gift. I recognized clearly that I was going wrong, for as I could not always keep in this state, my thoughts wandered hither and thither and my soul seemed like a bird, ever flying about and finding no place to rest. Thus I lost much time” (*M*, VI, 7, 15) until she was advised by Saint Francisco de Borja or Diego de Cetina. In sum, not only the

contemplative life is not incompatible with the active life, but it is even necessary to find a certain balance in order that “your foundation must not consist of prayer and contemplation alone: unless you acquire the virtues and praise them, you will always be dwarfs” (*M*, VII, 4, 9).

V.- THE FIRST THREE MANSIONS

This way, those who seek the gate of the castle in order to enter themselves use the key of prayer (*M*, I, 1, 7; II, 1, 11), so that, with a bit of perseverance, they manage to enter the first mansions. What are these first mansions like? The Saint explains: “The light which comes from the King’s palace hardly shines at all in these first mansions... because the number of snakes, vipers, and venomous reptiles from outside the castle prevent souls entering them from seeing the light” (*M*, I, 2, 14) or *the beauty of the castle, and from having peace and calm* (*M*, 1, 1, 8). They are people who are still “very worldly, yet... at times... commend themselves to God’s care”. “Although full of a thousand businesses, they pray a few times a month” because they are clung and attached to the thoughts in such a way that their heart goes wherever their treasure may be.

Therefore, in this first stage, the senses and the mind must be calmed down in order to predispose them to quiet. We must be like a dumb who cannot hear. All kinds of thoughts, desires and day-dreams, the same as vermin, are the main obstacle to concentration. As soon as the senses and the powers quiet, the mansions are passed, since the soul approaches the origin of the light that is emitted by the center, where the King is.

Those who persevere in the art of contemplation by means of the detachment from the thoughts and the disregard of the external senses go into the second mansions. Due to practice, the powers are more

"skillful" to see and hear the King of the castle; the understanding "hastens to this Lord's presence" (*M*, III, 2, 8). In sum, these are the mansions of those "who have begun to practice prayer" but do not yet have enough determination as to pass to other mansions (*M*, II, 1, 2). In the second mansions begins a process of inner purification because, during meditation, once a certain distance from the thought is gotten, old traumas and psycho-mental knots arise. As long as we do not solve them, they will be presented to us during meditation together with all kind of inclinations, personal problems, internal contradictions, etc. It is about opening our inner drain in order to clean it, that is, about apologizing for our trespasses and forgive those who trespassed against us. Without this previous, sincere reconciliation of the soul, we cannot advance towards inside the castle.

Our perseverance in the contemplative art makes it easier to enter the third mansions. The prayer still needs here the help of the thought, so that the souls "are nearly always using their understanding and reason in making meditations. This is good for them, for they have not been given grace for more" (*M*, IV, 1, 6). In these mansions, the soul must learn the value of humility. Some of those who dwell here are characterized by the desire not to offend God, the dedication to recollection, the practice of religious duties and, in addition, "they exercise themselves in works of charity to their neighbors" (*M*, III, 1, 5). This is good, except if, by doing it, they are hiding a certain form of spiritual voluntarism that places their expectations on external acts, establishing a causal, quasi-commercial relationship between their own effort and the result they expect to obtain. Every moment of recollection is considered and analyzed as an investment, so that a meditation session without any perceptible fruit is seen as an unfair, useless annoyance. This is no more than a bad-dissimulated lack of humility; "Oh, humility, humility! ... Do not pursue so much as to catch nothing. Think of the saints, who have entered the chamber of this King, and you will see the difference be-

tween them and ourselves. Do not ask for what you do not deserve” (*M*, III, 1, 6). Here begins the period of dryness of prayer.

The Saint dedicates several pages to the core topic of the *dryness* in prayer that is suffered even by “*well-ordered*” souls (*M*, III, 1, 7). After months or years of meditation, they cannot manage to find the “clean waters”, and thus their impotence becomes constant reproaches to God, whom they condemn for not having awarded them with the vision of the Light. They do not notice that this *aridity* they believe to see outside is only inside of them, and, as they consider them as good, living in a deception, they approve their faults, canonizing them as saint conducts, and want “others to canonize them” as well (*M*, III, 2, 3). In many cases, they are even blind to any kind of help, since all “advice is useless; having practiced virtue for so long, they think themselves capable of teaching it, and believe that they have abundant reason to feel those things” (*M*, III, 2, 1). But what they lack is humility.

VI.- THE FOURTH MANSIONS: THE BEGINNING OF RECOLLECTION OR PRAYER OF QUIET

Although, in the fourth mansions, “these matters begin to be supernatural and it will be most difficult to speak clearly about them”, one of its characteristics is that “the poisonous reptiles rarely come into these rooms, and, if they enter, do more good than harm” (*M*, IV, 1, 3). The “I” is deactivated, as a cartridge without dynamite; it is an “I” without me. The thought stops harassing with its chaotic and unceasing requests because the soul has established the necessary distance between them; it is already a neutral observer of the thoughts. It is in these mansions where it properly begins the art of resigning the senses and the powers, especially the thought, that is, where the contemplative practice really begins. In these rooms, “it is not so essential to think much as to love much” (*M*, IV, 1, 7). Saint

Teresa herself confesses how much it took for her not only to understand what the thoughtless prayer was in a theoretical way, but also to attain that state of emptiness: “I myself have sometimes been troubled by this turmoil of thoughts. I learned by experience, but little more than four years ago, that our thoughts (or it is clearer to call it our imagination), are not the same thing as the understanding. I questioned a theologian on the subject and he told me it was the fact, which consoled me not a little. As the understanding is one of the powers of the soul, it puzzled me to see it so sluggish at times, while, as a rule, the thought takes flight at once, so that God alone can control it by so uniting us to Himself that we seem, in a manner, detached from our bodies. It puzzled me to see that while to all appearance the powers of the soul were occupied with God and recollected in Him, the thought was wandering elsewhere” (*M*, IV, 1, 8). Precisely, one of the most wonderful moments of the beginnings of the contemplative practice takes place when one experiences pure awareness, free from thoughts, for the first time. Such an experience is a powerful incentive to go on with the daily practice, since “[it] disturbs my prayer when unaccompanied with ecstasy, but when it is ecstatic, I do not feel any pain, however great” (*M*, IV, 1, 11). The Saint draws a distinction between the state of “learned” recollection and the quiet, being the former a prelude and “beginning to come” to the latter (*M*, IV, 3, 1). The “supernatural” quiet or recollection happens after the resignation or suspension of all the senses and “the powers within themselves”.

How to achieve the prayer of quiet? In order to attain that recollection, it is useful to begin by *imagining* that God is within the soul as a king is in his palace, so that, to access his privacy, one must disregard all external things. The password is simply this one: “Humility, humility!”. And how is it known whether we possess the required humility? Quite easy: the proof “is that you neither think you now deserve these graces and consolations from God, nor that you ever will as long as you live... The water does not flow through aque-

ducts... if the spring [(God)] does not afford it, in vain shall we toil to obtain it. I mean, that though we may meditate and try our hardest, and though we shed tears to gain it, we cannot make this water flow. God alone gives it to whom He chooses, and often when the soul is least thinking of it" (*M*, IV, 2, 9). But this *imagining* God is meditation with consideration, *not contemplation*. Certainly, such meditation can be suitable for those who do not know how or cannot access contemplation. But it can also be effective to facilitate contemplation. This does not consist in "thinking of God dwelling within you, or by imagining Him as present in your soul: this is good practice and an excellent kind of meditation, for it is founded on the fact that God resides within us; it is not, however", but, strictly speaking, "trying not to work with the understanding" (*M*, IV, 3, 3-5). The devotional path seems to be her preferred way to enter recollection. First of all, we must choose a meditation subject based on Jesus Christ so that we may be inspired by it, mainly Jesus Christ's love when he redeemed man in His crucifixion. This way, once the mind is quieted by means of love feelings, the momentary drowsiness or suspension of the senses takes place little by little and the soul (consciousness) go deeper into the spirit. He who has tasted the delights of contemplation "sees that those of the world are garbage" (*M*, IV, 3, 9), which is an even bigger incentive to detach himself from them.

The purification of the character entails the acceptance of sufferings and problems, which is not an invitation to a lazy resignation. He must fight to overcome them, but accepting that, ultimately, such a fight and its eventual result do not depend on him, but on God. That is why, insofar as he knows the mysterious greatness of God, he considers himself more insignificant (*M*, IV, 3, 13). Ultimately, it is in these fourth mansions where the soul finds out the transforming power of humility.

VII.- THE FIFTH MANSIONS: THE SIMPLE UNION

In the fifth mansions, it is explained by which means the soul achieves the prayer of union with God, its symptoms and the way to distinguish it from other deceptive states. In these rooms, there are “riches, treasures and joys” hard to explain, though here, the Saint, using one of the constant paradoxes of the mystical route, seems to make a pedagogical excess when she explains that such gifts can only be achieved when our devotion is absolute and the soul keeps nothing to itself, since God “will have it all” (*M*, V, 1, 4). That is, if you want to be rich, then renounce everything; if you want to live, renounce your life; if you want (to contemplate) God, renounce yourself. Actually, the Saint recalls one of the revelations received during a mystical trance: “Do not labor to hold Me within yourself enclosed, but enclose yourself within Me” (*Relations*, 18).

Invoking the well-known verse of the New Testament, *multi vocati, pauci electi*, “many are called, but few are chosen” (Mt. 20:16), the Saint uses one of her splendid metaphors to explain the spiritual transformation that takes place in these mansions. Thus, she explains that the soul is similar to a silkworm that lives attached to the branches of the tree until it turns into a butterfly; “when the silkworm is full-grown... it begins to spin silk and to build the house wherein it must die... I mean Christ”, so that “this large and ugly worm leaves the cocoon as a lovely little white butterfly” (*M*, V, 2, 2-3). The Saint insists: “in any case the silkworm must die and it will cost you more in this way. In the former manner, this death is facilitated by finding ourselves introduced into a new life; here, on the contrary, we must give ourselves the death-blow” (*M*, V, 3, 5), that is to say, that you must kill (the I) if you want to live (in Christ). Otherwise, we will just extend the agony of him who aspires to become a butterfly not willing to stop being a caterpillar, and this way, “*I die because I do not die*”. It is clear that such a death is rather a transformation, since, in order that the butterfly can arise, strictly speak-

ing, it is not necessary for the worm to die, because the worm is... the butterfly! Devoted to the *transforming emptiness* of contemplation, the soul accesses the inner cellar where it gets drunk with the presence God. That is why there is another “*I die because I do not die*” even more supreme: the one of the nostalgia and longing to be always a butterfly and definitely leave the stage of worm.

In these mansions, she explains the *delightful union* by means of which “God spiritually espouses souls” (*M*, V, 4, 3). Also the *active union* or *union of conformity*, in which the will is aimed to have no will: a new spiritual paradox that is solved by the Saint by explaining that it consists in willing what God wills, “With the help of God’s Grace, true union can always be attained by forcing ourselves to renounce our own will and by following the will of God in all things” (*M*, V, 3, 3). As the suspension of the powers and the acceptance are total, that disposition or receptivity “allows” God to work within the soul (*M*, V, 2, 2). This acceptance consists in handing over our will to God’s: “its chief value lies in the resignation of our will to that of God without which it could not be reached” (*M*, V, 3, 3). The most important consequence of the paradox “I want not to want” or “I want Your will to be done in me” is that the prayer of union is unattainable, no matter how much effort the mystic may make. Regarding the matter of the prayer of union, “the habit of recollection is not to be gained by force of arms, but with calmness” (*M*, II, 1, 11), for there it is God who introduces us into the center of the soul or “inner cellar” (of wine, from the *Song of Songs* 2:4) there; “The happy soul which has attained it will live in this world and in the next without care of any sort. No earthly events can trouble it... neither sickness, poverty, nor the loss of any one by death affect it” (*M*, V, 3, 3). How is this possible? Certainly, being all these *earthly events* just mere thoughts processed by the mind, the detachment from them, during the wakefulness, make them be observed with pure neutrality.

Once the soul has settled in these mansions, “although there is little chance of the poisonous reptiles entering here, yet agile little lizards will try to slip in, though they can do no harm, especially if they remain unnoticed. These, as I said, are trivial fancies of the imagination” (*M*, V, 1, 5) and remain outside making no impression on the soul; “[these feelings of sorrow] soon pass away, for... they do not affect the depths of the soul but only its senses and powers” (*M*, V, 3, 4).

And, during the prayer of simple union (term used to distinguish it from the full union of the sixth mansions), insofar as it happens because of the resignation of the senses and the thought, there will be no room for them, since “neither the imagination, the understanding, nor the memory has power to hinder the graces bestowed on it... for His Majesty is so joined and united with the essence of the soul, that the devil dare not approach, nor can he even understand this mystery. This is certain, for it is said that he does not know our thoughts, much less can he penetrate a secret so profound that God does reveal it even to us” (*M*, V, 1, 5). This nothingness of the powers and the thought is like *to be dead* to the world, since it implies that “the soul can love it knows not how, nor whom it loves, nor what it desires” (*M*, V, 1, 4). That is why it is a *delightful, delicious* death, “for the soul is deprived of the faculties it exercised while in the body” (*M*, V, 1, 4). This death facilitates the access to the heavenly regions. The mystical rapture seems a physical death because, “as it is beyond its powers, it is so astounded that, if consciousness is not completely lost, at least no movement is possible: the person may be compared to one who falls into a dead faint with dismay” (*M*, V, 1, 4). The ecstatic experience of those who settle in these fifth mansions is so supernatural that “it doubts what really happened to it, whether it was nothing but fancy, or it was a sleep” (*M*, V, 1, 5). But there is an unequivocal sign for the momentary union, and it is the strong certainty of the authenticity of that unitive experience, no matter if it is inexpressible and intransmissible. Thus, “God visits the

soul in a manner which prevents its doubting, on returning to itself, that it dwelt in Him and that He was within it, and so firmly is it convinced of this truth that, although years may pass before this favor recurs, the soul can never forget it nor doubt the fact" (*M*, V, 1, 9). On the contrary, "a soul which does not feel this assurance has not been united to God entirely, but only by one of its powers, or has received one of the many other favors God is accustomed to bestow on men" (*M*, V, 1, 11). In the simple union, the rapture has a short duration, since "it is never as long as half an hour" (*M*, V, 2, 7; *Life*, 18). There, God is "united with the essence of the soul" (*M*, V, 1, 5), once the powers are temporarily suspended (*Life*, 18) and the soul is freed and purified from all the bodily activities, apprehensions, affections and passions. It is the "not to understand by understanding" that "deprives the soul of all its senses in order to better imprint in it true wisdom" (*M*, V, 1, 9).

The Saint concludes by warning that, even though the delights of contemplation favor the mystic's inwardness and captivation, such an attitude is counter-producing, since it is selfish and egoist. The contemplative life is not opposed to the active life. Indeed, they counterbalance each other⁵⁵³.

VIII.- THE SIXTH MANSIONS: THE FULL UNION

In the sixth mansions, the soul, touched by the divine love, is taken "to supernatural things and perfect contemplation" (*M*, VI, 7,

⁵⁵³ "When I see souls very anxious to know what sort of prayer they practice, covering their faces and afraid to move or think lest they should lose any slight tenderness and devotion they feel, I know how little they understand how to attain union with God since they think it consists in such things as these. No, sisters, no; our Lord expects works from us. If you see a sick sister whom you can relieve, never fear losing your devotion; compassionate her; if she is in pain, feel for it as if it were your own and, when there is need, fast so that she may eat, not so much for her sake as because you know your Lord asks it of you. This is the true union of our will with the will of God. If some one else is well spoken of, be more pleased than if it were yourself" (*M*, V, 3, 11).

11). More specifically, the Saint refers to the prayer of quiet. And, although, in order to attain the state of quiet, "there are some principles, and even means, which some souls have" (*M*, VI, 7, 13), the truth is that, in these last mansions, there is no means or method that can be explained; "I am at my wit's end, sisters, as to how to make you understand this operation of love: I know not how to do so... The inhabitants of the other mansions, the senses, the imagination and the powers, dare not stir" (*M*, VI, 2, 3), but, "even by the imagination, nothing is seen in this prayer that can be called sight. I speak of it as 'sight' because of the comparison I used" (*M*, VI, 1, 1), because, in this mansion, as well as in the seventh one, God commands to close not only the doors of the mansions, save the one He dwells in, but also "those of the keep and the whole castle", that is, the body senses. Nonetheless, as nothing is seen or understood or felt, how can there be a memory of that experience that may later be transmitted to other people? "This might seem impossible; if the powers and senses were so absorbed that we might call them dead, how does the soul understand this mystery? I cannot tell; perhaps no one but the Creator Himself can say what passes in these places" (*M*, VI, 4, 4).

The Saint distinguishes between the imaginary vision and the intellectual vision. In the former, as the thought works in it, the meditative experience runs the risk of being conditioned by our lower tendencies. The Saint, according to the Catholic doctrine, points out the danger of suffering autosuggestion or, above all, the devil's deception (*M*, VI, 9, 15). And, since "it is safer to wish only what God wishes, who knows us better than we know ourselves and who loves us" (*M*, VI, 9, 16), she recommends us "never to pray nor desire to be led by this way yourselves" (*M*, VI, 9, 14). But, unlike the imaginary vision, which does not last any long, the intellectual vision "lasts for several days and even sometimes for more than a year" (*M*, VI, 8, 3). This vision, which "is called an intellectual vision, I cannot tell why" (*M*, VI, 8, 2), consists in a unitary vision "without the sight of the bodily eyes... I cannot tell whether the soul dwells in the body

meanwhile or not; I would neither affirm that it does nor that the body is deprived of it" (*M*, VI, 6, 8). It happens when it suddenly takes place "a suspension, during which the Lord makes [the soul] discover so sublime mysteries, that it appears to see within God Himself... I cannot rightly say the soul 'sees', for it sees nothing; this is no imaginary vision but a highly intellectual one, wherein is manifested how all things are beheld in God and how He contains them within Himself" (*M*, VI, 10, 2). This non-dual experience of the vision of God in all, or of all in God, is called rapture because God kidnaps the spirit once He has closed the doors of the senses, for "He will allow of no obstacle from the powers or the senses but bids that the doors of all the mansions" (*M*, VI, 4, 9). In this sudden rapture of the spirit, the soul really appears to have quit the body, though, on the other hand, the person is certainly not dead... [The soul] feels that it has been wholly transported into another and a very different region" (*M*, VI, 5, 7) and, after that, "no word can be uttered; sometimes, however, the person is at once deprived of all the senses, the hands and body becoming as cold as if the soul had fled... When this suspension diminishes, the body seems to come to itself" (*M*, VI, 4, 13), leaving us without strength and "the limbs all disjointed... so that, for two or three days afterwards, the suffering is too severe for the person to have even the strength to hold a pen" (*M*, VI, 11, 4). Nevertheless, despite these dramatic descriptions, the Saint adds that this is a "delicious pain", for it announces the presence of God and, therefore, it "is not really pain", so that, with the aim of enjoying His presence again, the soul "remains longing to suffer anew its loving pangs" (*M*, VI, 2, 4) and with a passionate desire "of serving God in any way He asks of it" (*M*, VI, 4, 15). The joy caused by the mystical rapture is so sublime, "lovely and delightful" that no one could imagine it "even though he lived a thousand years and spent all that time in trying to picture it" (*M*, VI, 9, 5).

In the full union, God descends and draws up the soul "as the clouds, so to speak, gather the mists from the face of the earth... and,

as a cloud, rising up to heaven, takes the soul with Him, and begins to show it the treasures of the kingdom which He has prepared for it" (*Life*, XX, 2), because the powers and the inner senses are completely fascinated and symbolically dead to themselves but alive in and to God (*Life*, XX; *Mansions*, VI, 2). This betrothal, previous to the marriage, is another form of ecstatic union, going out of oneself or "rapture" of the soul that is attained when God, "touched with pity by what He has seen it suffer for so long past in its longing for Him... entirely inflamed like a Phoenix..., unites it to Himself in a way known only to them both" (*M*, VI, 4, 3). There, the soul does not understand, but it is "awake" to all divine things and "more careful than before to avoid offending Him in any way" (*M*, VII, 1, 8). This grace or gift is explained by the Saint with the example of the opening and closing of the window shutters in a room; it is "as if a person were in a very well lighted room and some one were to darken it by closing the shutters; we should feel certain that the others were still there, though we were unable to see them. You may ask: 'Could we not bring back the light and see them again?' This is not in our power; when our Lord chooses, He will open the shutters of the understanding" (*M*, VII, 1, 9).

The Saint explains the different forms and intensities of these mystical raptures, especially the *flight of the spirit*, because it causes a "big fear" due to the trepidation of seeing his "soul being raptured" (*M*, VI, 5, 1). She compares this trance with "a lightning... because its splendor resembles an infused light like that of the sun covered" (*M*, VI, 9, 3), or with the vigor of a so powerful wave that sweeps along "the little vessel of our soul", leaving her without a pilot (*M*, VI, 5, 3). The Saint relates that, in order to endure such attacks, she said to herself, "be not afraid, I am", name of God revealed to Moses before the burning bush with which the Saint confesses to have been entrusted by an inner voice in one of her mystical ecstasies: "These words were so powerful that for the time being she could not doubt their truth. She felt much encouraged and rejoiced at being in such

good company” (*M*, VI, 8, 3). On several occasions, the Saint reminds that all this sublime and mysterious process is carried out *kindled by the Holy Spirit* as a *mediator* between the soul and God: “It seems to me the Holy Spirit must be a mediator between the soul and God, the One who moves it with such ardent desires, for He enkindles it in a supreme fire, which is so near” (*MC*, 5, 5).

Those who settle in these sixth mansions and have experienced the vigor of the waves, the dart, the lightning of ecstasy, feel “a strange loneliness, finding no companionship in any earthly creature”, since they see themselves “like one suspended in mid-air, who can neither touch the earth nor mount to heaven” (*M*, VI, 11, 5). They are then called up for the last mansion.

IX.- SEVENTH MANSIONS: THE STABLE AND INDISOLUBLE UNION

“Thoroughly detached from all things” (*M*, VII, 3, 8), the soul is introduced into the seventh mansion, “for its will and appetite are so united with God that it considers the fulfillment of God’s will to be its glory” (Saint John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 2, 28), since it is written that “he who is joined unto the Lord is one spirit with Him” (1 Cor. 6:17). The Saint compares this state or mansion with the state of Adam in the earthly Paradise, because “Adam in the state of innocence... does not understand evil, nor does he judge anything in a bad light” (Saint John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 26, 14) and also with the state of the soul in Heaven, because “God places the soul in His own mansion, which is in the very center of the soul itself. They say the empyreal heavens, in which our Lord dwells”. Innocence, detachment, peace... are some of the words that describe this supreme or unconditioned state of the soul. And, even though the powers and the senses are not always at peace and “there are still times of struggle, suffering and fatigue..., peace is not lost by

them... Though tumults and wild beasts rage with great uproar in the other mansions, yet nothing of this enters the seventh mansions, nor drives the soul from it. Although the mind regrets these troubles, they do not disturb it nor rob it of its peace, for the passions are too subdued to dare to enter here where they would only suffer still further defeat” (*M*, VII, 2, 9-11). In effect, this absence of “aridity” and “interior troubles” (*M*, VII, 3, 8) causes the deep peace “of the innermost part of the soul” because “neither the world nor the flesh nor the devil will dare attack it, for... [the soul] enjoys now in this state habitual sweetness and tranquility that is never lost or lacking of it” (Saint John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 24, 5). The worm *dies* and is transformed into a butterfly, but now, “the little butterfly of which I spoke dies with supreme joy, for Christ is its life” (*M*, VII, 2, 5).

It takes place here a clearer vision than in the sixth mansion, since “our pitiful God removes the scales from its eyes” (*M*, VII, 1, 6) in order to grant it an intellectual vision, “like a most dazzling cloud of light”. But the raptures also gradually cease; “when the soul arrives at this state, it does not go into ecstasies; even then they are not like the former trances and the flight of the spirit” (*M*, VII, 3, 12). On the contrary, the rapture “passes by with such a stillness and so quiet, that it seems to me that it is like the building of Solomon’s Temple, where no sound was heard. It is thus with this temple of God, this mansion of His, where He and the soul rejoice in each other in profound silence. The understanding need not act nor search for anything” (*M*, VII, 3, 11). What is more, “the powers are not here lost but only cease to work, being, as it were, dazed with astonishment” (*M*, VII, 3, 11), that is, they do not remain suspended or resigned, but awake and in the state of witnessing. It is a very peculiar state of pure awareness or attention that does not have a *human* origin, but “it comes from the center of the soul, whose powers it excites”, widening them (*M*, VII, 3, 8).

After the simple union of the fifth mansions and the full union or betrothal of the sixth mansions, finally, in the seventh mansions, the *spiritual marriage* is achieved, that is, the transforming, definitive and indissoluble union, because, unlike the betrothal, which is transitory, the transforming union leads to an invariable stability, since “he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit with Him” (1 Cor. 6:17). “This secret union takes place in the innermost center of the soul, where God Himself must dwell”. Even though every mystic union is “to make two things one”, in the full union or betrothal, “separation is still possible and each part then remains a thing by itself”, so that, “the soul remains without that company”. It is as if “two wax candles, the tips of which touch each other so closely that there is but one light... But one candle can again be separated from the other and the two candles remain distinct”. On the contrary, “this is not so in the spiritual marriage... where the soul always remains in its center with its God”. It is “like rain falling from heaven into a river or stream, becoming one and the same liquid, so that the river and rain water cannot be divided” (*M*, VII, 3-4). In this moment, the Saint stops referring to the experiences of the soul and introduces a subtle distinction between them and the experiences of the spirit⁵⁵⁴. Specifically, she explains that, in the spiritual marriage, “the soul, I mean, the spirit of this soul, is made one with God... for He has thus deigned to unite Himself to His creature, and has bound Himself to it as firmly as those who cannot separate anymore” (*M*, VII, 2, 3). In this stable union, the spirit of the soul is delighted at the tabernacle of God (Rev. 21:3; 7:15-17; Ez. 37:27-28) and is burned and renewed like a Phoenix.

Among the most significant effects of the spiritual marriage, Saint Teresa highlights the imperturbability of the inner peace or

⁵⁵⁴ “... for certain, there is a positive difference between the soul and the spirit, although they are one with each other. There is an extremely subtle distinction between them, so that sometimes they seem to act in a different manner from one another, as does the flavor given to them by God. It also appears to me that the soul and its powers are not identical and just one thing” (*M*, VII, 1, 11).

calm of the souls, since “peace is not lost by them” (*M*, VII, 2, 10) and “the soul itself... never moves from this center, nor loses the peace” (*M*, VII, 2, 6). The Saint clarifies that, even though there might be disturbances, pain, diseases, etc., the soul is still at peace because “the dryness and disturbance felt in all the rest at times hardly ever enter here, where the soul is nearly always calm” (*M*, VII, 3, 10).

Finally, the result of this transforming union is the *forgetfulness of oneself*, because the soul “no longer recognizes itself, nor does it remember that heaven, or life, or glory are to be its, but seems entirely occupied in seeking God’s interests”. The soul “seems no longer to exist, nor does it wish to be of any account of anything... [but] the honor and glory of God” (*M*, VII, 3, 2). And it is in that absolute forgetfulness of oneself, the total detachment, including the detachment from the longing for detachment, when it comes true that “I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (*Gal.* 2:20), the final paradox of the mystical route that summarizes the emptiness of the world in comparison with the fullness of what is Beyond, since “I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father” (*Jn.* 16:28).

MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION ACCORDING TO SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS

“However elevated God’s communications and the experiences of His presence are, and however sublime a person’s knowledge of Him may be, these are not God essentially, nor are they comparable to Him” (Saint John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 1, 3).

The work by Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591) owes much to that patristic tradition represented by Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus or Gregory of Nyssa, who, as well as Dionysius the Areopagite, adopted a positive attitude towards Neoplatonism with a Plotinian footprint. Precisely because of that, they showed their reservations about the possibilities of knowledge and of merely intellectual actions to reach God, given that true knowledge just happens in the “darkness” of “forgetfulness” or “unknowing”. He could have accessed the works written by the spiritual men of his order, such as John Baconthorpe and Miguel de Bolonia, but also the ones written by Saint Bonaventure, Saint Bernard, the Victorine Hugh and Richard, as well as Gerson, Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler and John Ruysbroeck, Diego de Estella, Louis of Granada, etc. From Saint Alonso de Orozco (1500-1591), author of *Vergel de Oración* and *Monte de Contemplación*, did he take the emblematic Carmel as the topmost place of the *Ascent*. Likewise, it is clear the influence of works such as *Third Spiritual Alphabet* by Osuna (1527), *Ascent to Mount Zion* by Laredo (1535) or *Meditaciones devotísimas del amor de Dios* by Estella (1576).

But it is not to be forgotten that, regardless of these and other more or less formal or substantive influences, the very core of Saint John's work is his own contemplative experience. In this sense, the work of the Saint constitutes a methodic and systematic exposition (should it be possible to talk about a "system" regarding mystical matters) to initiate the candidate into the metaphysical way and lead him to the mystical union in a soft, organized way.

On several occasions, Saint John of the Cross warns that his teachings are not about the meditation and the stage of beginners. Regarding this, he refers to the books and authors that deal with it, "because there are many writings for beginners". He prefers to explain the superior aspects and places of the spiritual quest that have been less treated, so that, "passing over the more common effects, I will briefly deal with the more extraordinary ones that take place in those who with God's help have passed beyond the state of beginners" (*Spiritual Canticle*, Prologue, 3).

This process must be carried out *in an organized, soft, "soulish" way*, because the Wisdom of God "orders all things softly" (Wis. 8:1). Saint John will remember this objective in all his works; thus, in 2*S*, 28, 1, he will insist that "the discreet reader has ever need to bear in mind the intent and end which I have in this book, which is the direction of the soul... to divine union with God"⁵⁵⁵.

⁵⁵⁵ The texts by Saint John of the Cross are quoted from his *Complete Works*, ed. by Lucinio Ruano de la Iglesia (11th ed.), Madrid, BAC, 1992 [there are several English editions of his works, for instance *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, by the Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, 1991 or *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross*, tr. by Edgar Allison Peers, 1953]. The commonly accepted abbreviations are: *S* = *Ascent to Mount Carmel* (1*S*, 2*S*, 3*S*), *N* = *Dark Night of the Soul*, *CA* = *Spiritual Canticle* (1st composition), *CB* = *Spiritual Canticle* (2nd composition), *LA* = *The Living Flame of Love* (1st composition), *LB* = *The Living...* (2nd composition), *D* = *Advices or Sayings of Light and Love*. I will quote the "minor works" with the first verse of the poem.

I.- THERE IS A PATH BECAUSE GOD IS WITHIN US

As man is made in the image and likeness of God, he possesses, inside of him, an indelible, subtle footprint left by the Creator as a sort of “road map” that indicates the correct spiritual route; “God dwells secretly in all souls and is hidden in their *substance*” (LB, 4, 14). This “footprint” pulls man inside and constantly drives him to inquire into the cause of his existence and the purpose of life. Man guesses that he may *naturally* “be equal to God for love” (CB, 38, 3) and give an end to the anxious feeling of loneliness and separation from his spiritual origin. Man knows that he is “divine”, but finds himself expelled from Paradise and exiled in the realm of unlikeness, so he strives to return to the original oneness and union; “until attaining this..., the soul is dissatisfied” (CB, 38, 4). Because of ignorance, the soul tends to seek God outwards, without realizing that, by nature, God dwells within oneself. For that purpose, “we may proceed from the lesser to the greater, and from the more exterior to the more interior, until we reach the most interior recollection wherein the soul is united with God” (2S, 12, 1). That is why the mystical way consists in the detachment and loss of interest in the external things, and in the progressive penetration until reaching the “deepest center” of the soul, where, once achieved the union by likeness or participation, is God known and enjoyed. “The soul’s center is God. When it has reached God with all the capacity of its being and the strength of its operation and inclination, *it will have attained its final and deepest center in God*, it will know, love, and enjoy God” (LB, 1, 12). That center where God was like asleep, that place where He “secretly dwells”, that “ground” refers to the most spiritual and innermost part of the soul, where the union with the divinity takes place, even though Saint John himself warns that it is but a metaphor, since, strictly speaking, the soul has no parts. In sum, the first step of the soul is to know itself.

II.- IT IS NOT THE PATH OF KNOWLEDGE, BUT THE SECRET SCIENCE OF LOVE

That way or path introduces us into the Wisdom of God until contemplating Him. That is why, starting with the terminology coined by Dionysius the Areopagite, he defines it as “science of God”, because it is an “admirable”, “perfect”, “true science”, “supernatural learned science” or “science of Light”... it “is the *mystical theology*, the *secret science of God* that spiritual persons call contemplation. This science is very delightful because it is a *science through love*. Love is the master of this science and what makes it wholly agreeable. Since God communicates this science and intelligence in the love with which He communicates Himself to the soul, it is very delightful to the understanding since it is a science belonging to it, and it is delightful to the will since it is communicated in love, which pertains to the will” (CB, 27, 5). In his *Advices*, Saint John of the Cross insists that “the language that God hears the most is only the silent love”, because just love makes it possible that such a union with the Wisdom of God, beyond human knowledge and beyond the logic of the causal events and links, can take place within the soul. It is not the path of human knowledge: “any soul that makes account of all its knowledge and ability in order to come to union with the wisdom of God is supremely ignorant in the eyes of God and will remain far removed from that wisdom”, “in order to come to union with the wisdom of God, the soul has to proceed rather by unknowing than by knowing”. We must become ignorant in order to be wise (IS, 4, 5). It is the path of the emptiness that the Kabbalists called *sheket* and the Sufis *sukūt*⁵⁵⁶, the void, abyss or cloud of un-

⁵⁵⁶ It is not my aim to enter the matter of some possible Sufi influences on Saint John's works. Let it be enough to refer the interested reader to Miguel Asín Palacios, “Un precursor hispanomusulmán de San Juan de la Cruz” in *Al-Andalus I* (1933), pp. 7-79; “El símil de los castillos y moradas del alma en la mística islámica y en Santa Teresa” in *Al-Andalus XI* (1946), pp. 263-274 and “Šāḍīlies y alumbrados” in *Al-Andalus IX-XVI* (1944-1951). These two last ones have been joined together under the title of *Šāḍīlies y alumbrados*, Madrid, 1990. By the same author, vid. *El Islam cristianizado. Estudios del “sufismo” a través de las obras de*

knowing from which the words and letters come. That is why, strictly speaking, the method of this science, whose only logic is love, has no method. It is a method without method: “The Wisdom of God, wherewith the understanding is to be united, has no mode or manner, neither is it contained within any particular or distinct kind of intelligence or limit, because it is wholly pure and simple. And as, in order that these two extremes may be united... *it will be necessary for them to attain to agreement, by means of a certain mutual resemblance*, hence it follows that the soul must be pure and simple, neither bounded by, nor attached to, any particular kind of intelligence, nor modified by any limitation of form, species and image” (2S, 16, 7). In effect, the knowledge that the creatures have (that is, by means of objects of thought) is useless to the soul to reach God. On the contrary, “the soul knows creatures through God, and not God through creatures. This amounts to knowing the effects through their cause and not the cause through its effects. The latter is knowledge a posteriori, and the former is essential knowledge” (LB, 4, 5).

III.- THE PATH IS BEYOND THE UNKNOWNING

There is only one path; the path of renouncing everything for love to God, that is, for the longing to know Him. And that renunciation necessarily implies “that man may know himself” and convert himself into an essential Nothing that provides the suitable room so that God may reveal Himself. Nonetheless, God is not comparable to anything else, whereas “all the being of creation, then, compared with the infinite Being of God, is nothing. And therefore the soul that sets its affection upon the being of creation is likewise nothing

Abenarabi de Murcia, Madrid, 1931, in which the author exaggerates the influence of Christianity on the Islamic mystics (which he would later rectify). As well, in *La espiritualidad de Algazel y su sentido cristiano*, 4 vols., Madrid-Granada, 1935 and *Huellas del Islam. Santo Tomás de Aquino, Turmeda, Pascal, San Juan de la Cruz*, Madrid, 1941. From another viewpoint, vid, Luce López Baralt, *Huellas del Islam en la literatura española*, Madrid, 1989 and also *San Juan de la Cruz y el Islam*, Madrid, 1990.

in the eyes of God, and less than nothing” (*IS*, 4, 4). This way, in order to go forth on the path and attain the contemplation of God, the soul must give it all up. Before God, “all things *are nothing to it*, and it is nothing in its own eyes; God alone is its all” (*LA*, 1, 32). That is why the spiritual path is “*interior detachment*, which is spiritual poverty and renunciation of all things that you may possess” (*3S*, 40, 1), including the knowledge that comes from the senses and the powers. This is the abyss of “unknowing” that, paradoxically, encompasses the “supreme knowledge”, the “supreme science” that consists in an “elevated feeling of the divine Essence”. Only this path of “unknowing” will allow the soul to transform and see itself full of God, “since these souls exercise themselves in knowing and apprehending nothing with the powers, they come in general... to know everything” (*3S*, 2, 12). The deeper it goes into the darkness, the more it approaches the light: “the more the soul is darkened, the greater is the light that comes to it, for it is by blinding that it gives light” (*2S*, 3, 4). Given that God is the final destination of the soul (*2N*, 9, 5), He is also the end of all knowledge, that is, “Wisdom”. This is the path of “unknowing” that leads to true *knowledge* or wisdom of God: the *mystical theology*.

The soul may turn either to God or to the sensible things. And even once turned to *the sensible*, the structure of the soul presents two parts: the “lower” or “sensual” one, which is “more exterior”, and the “higher part..., more interior and more obscure” (*2S*, 2, 2). In the *lower part* are found the *external senses* (sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch), in charge of receiving impressions from the surrounding material world. But, together with them, there are the *inner senses* (imagination and fantasy), which, when they receive the experience from the external sense, store that information under the shape of memories, or project it towards an imagined future under the shape of expectations. In any case, as the *sense* is the “lower part of man”, it is to be understood that it “is not, neither can be, capable of knowing or understanding God as God is” (*3S*, 24, 2). That is

why, in the contemplative way, the soul needs to reach the “height of the spirit, that cannot be attained unless the *bodily sense* remains outside” (LA, 2, 14), that is, detached from the apprehensions⁵⁵⁷ and from the outer and inner senses.

Likewise, the soul also possesses a *higher part* or “spirit”, which is the dwelling of the spiritual powers (memory, understanding and will) whose function consists in “reflecting and acting... upon some form, figure and image” (3S, 13, 4) apprehended by those other outer and inner senses. However, they are also useless to the contemplative practice because, in order to realize them correctly, it is necessary that “in all the spiritual powers, namely the understanding, the memory and the will, let there be no other consideration or affection or digression; and in all the senses and faculties of the body, such as the imagination and the fancy, and the five external senses, let there be no other forms, images or figures of any natural objects or operations” (CA, 25, 6).

Once the senses and the powers have been tamed, the soul can more gently turn towards God. This is the second structure of the

⁵⁵⁷ According to Saint John, the apprehensions are the information processed by the senses and powers. They are “the first knowledge that the intelligence receives from the things” and also “what the understanding or the memory receive from the objects”. Such apprehensions can be natural, supernatural and spiritual. The *natural apprehensions* (which come from the natural function of the five external senses) can only serve “as remote means to beginners in order to dispose and habituate the spirit to spirituality by means of sense” (2S, 13, 1). But, as “no thing, created or imagined, can serve the understanding as a proper means of union with God” (2S, 8, 1), it is preferable to leave them aside and not to appropriate them. Regarding the *supernatural apprehensions* (which are passively received by the inner senses), the contemplative experience demonstrates that the soul, in order to attain the mystical union, must be “detached, free, pure and simple, without any mode or manner”. For this purpose, “the understanding must not be embarrassed by... or feed upon” any kind of apprehensions that may “present themselves beneath some particular kind of knowledge or image or form” (2S, 16, 6). The same mistrust is shown by Saint John concerning the *spiritual apprehensions*, since, even though they serve as a stimulus and sign that one is on the right path, the candidate must not allow himself to be entertained or caught by anything other than the final goal of contemplation.

spirit, “detached from its intentional activity and completely turned towards God”.

IV.- OLD MAN’S DEATH (THE DETACHMENT FROM THE MEMORY AND THE UNDERSTANDING)

The fundamental postulate of the contemplative practice, according to Saint John of the Cross, is that, if God decides to communicate with the soul, He will not through the senses or powers, “but through the pure spirit”. Therefore, regarding the goals of the contemplative, the knowledge received from them must be refused as inadequate.

Saint John of the Cross connects the process of detachment or death to the world with the biblical image of the “old man” and the “new man”. The old man is the one who only uses his natural faculties and lives on “the use of the powers, memory, understanding and will, engaged in the things of the world”. The contemplative way implies the death of the old man: “What the soul calls *death* is all that goes to make up the old man, that is, the use of the powers, memory, understanding and will” (*LA*, 2, 33).

To pass from the old man to the new man implies to refuse the knowledge that comes from the natural senses and powers and give way to what comes from the supernatural source. At the beginning of the third book of the *Ascent*, Saint John writes: “it is necessary to proceed by this method of disencumbering and emptying the soul, and causing it to reject the *natural* jurisdiction and operations of the powers, so that they may become capable of infusion and illumination from *supernatural* sources, for their capacity cannot attain to so lofty an experience, but will rather hinder it, if it be not disregarded” (3S, 2, 2). The goal of this purgation is to “calm down” the powers, to attain the “quiet recollection that every spiritual man pursues, in which the activity of the powers ceases, keeping silence, to receive

the voice of God” (*LB*, 3, 44). The new man rises after “making the natural acts of the powers fail... without activity of the senses” (*LB*, 3, 54), because the supernatural source is “foreign to every human way” (*2N*, 9, 5).

For its part, the understanding is the power that serves the soul in interpreting the information provided by the senses. However, as God cannot be perceived by the natural understanding, “the understanding must be blind to all paths” (*2S*, 6, 8). Only the path of purification can lead to true knowledge: “emptiness and darkness with respect to understanding” (*2S*, 6, 2). The path of emptiness, of nothingness, of the “thick darkness”, can only be reached through that “understanding while not understanding, transcending all science” (*I entered in, not knowing where*).

Concerning memory, in order to enter contemplation, all information must be refused because it just consists in memories of forms and names, and “no supernatural forms or kinds of knowledge which can be apprehended by the memory are God, and, in order to reach God, the soul must void itself of all that is not God”. But “the memory must also strip itself of all these forms and kinds of knowledge, that it may unite itself with God in hope, for all possession is contrary to hope” (*3S*, 7, 2). With this statement, the Saint introduces us into a crucial subject: the memory, the idea of the past, is but an appropriation of experiences. The memory is the faculty by means of which man is attached to time and takes possession of all what enters through the windows of the external senses, that is, it is an instrument of identification that he uses to claim the actions as their subject. With it, he gradually builds an image of himself. These two dimensions of the memory: temporality and appropriation, are, according to Saint John, the two elements that constrain the soul to its human condition and block the way that leads to the new man. “In order that the soul may come to union with God in hope, it must renounce every possession of the memory, for, in order that its hope in

God may be perfect, it must have naught in the memory that is not God” (3S, 11, 1). The ego can only survive while the feeling of past and future, that is, the useful time, remains. The ego cannot survive if that timeline is shortened and then it is forced to live in the present. Or, in other words, as the present disappears or the sense of “I” is weakened, there is no longer an appropriation of experiences, that is, there is almost nobody who is identified with memories. That is why it is stated that the soul that wants to advance on the spiritual path must be annihilated in its oblivion to all memories or past that identifies it with a body with a personal story (3S, 4, 1). At the most, it might remember the spiritual knowledge, but of course “not that it may be dwelt upon, but that it may quicken the soul’s love and knowledge of God. But, unless the recollection of it produces good effects, let the memory never give it even passing attention” (3S, 14, 2). In sum, the detachment from the memory means the destruction of man as a *temporal individual* because his union with God transcends all individuality and precisely because of that does it take place outside time, that is, once the sense of appropriation of the memories has been transcended and the habit of projecting expectations on the future has ceased.

V.- THE SUITABLE ATTITUDE TO CONTEMPLATE

What is the suitable attitude to recollect in prayer? During the first few stages of the contemplative practice, the beginner makes an effort to take a sensible advantage of prayer. Thus, he seeks pleasing feelings that may satisfy his eagerness to hoard experiences. Saint John of the Cross will criticize those who pray seeking their pleasure in God until ending up equaling “gratifying and satisfying themselves” and “serving and satisfying God” (IN, 6, 3), because “to seek oneself in God is clean contrary to love” (IS, 7, 5). It is not about condemning pleasure and happiness themselves, but the possessive mood with which the meditator applies himself to prayer as if it were

a cow that gives milk or even a sort of honeycomb; “It is a great evil to have one’s eye more on God’s goods than on God Himself” (*D*, 137). The mistake is to be absorbed by the means, moving away from the goal, thinking that it must *always* be like that (*2S*, 12, 5-6; 17, 6; *LB* 2, 14). “There are many persons who rejoice rather in the [means]... than in what they represent” (*3S*, 35, 2). This way, they “are prompted to act not by reason but by pleasure” (*IN*, 6, 6). “And, as they have come under the influence of that sensible pleasure, it follows that they soon seek something new, *for sensible pleasure is not constant*, but very quickly fails” (*3S*, 41, 2). One of the problems of believing that “the whole matter of prayer consists in looking for sensory satisfaction and devotion... when they do not get this sensible comfort, they become very disconsolate and think they have done nothing” (*IN*, 6, 6). This attitude is unreservedly condemned; “*What I condemn in this is possessiveness of heart and attachment to the number, workmanship, and over-decoration of these objects*” (*IN*, 3, 1). As long as the meditator may apply himself to prayer seeking experiences to appropriate, he will just feed his own egoism and sense of individuality. The own quest for God is converted into a process that must be experienced and delighted by the individual, without realizing that true happiness is in the fact that the individuality be nullified, overflowed and transcended. Only the detachment from the desire of appropriation of experiences brings true peace, but it needs to be cultivated among certain virtues such as constancy, patience and humility; “True devotion and spirit lie in distrust of self and in humble and patient perseverance *so as to please God*” (*IN*, 6, 6). But the most important of all virtues is, in the opinion of Saint John of the Cross, Faith. Faith is a special attitude or disposition of the soul, which is willing to renounce everything in order to know God. It is the longing to know oneself by knowing the Creator.

When the discursive meditation has fulfilled its task and the candidate is initiated into the contemplative practice, the Faith plays a decisive role in the following stages of the spiritual route. The fact

that the individual accepts that, in order to reach God, the soul can only walk the path of the darkness of unknowing, can only happen when the soul puts its *con-fidence* on God. That faith is the attitude that drives us to renounce all the *natural* ways of knowledge, because we are confident that we may access the true knowledge of God. Paradoxically, it is the anxiety to know what makes the soul head for plunging into the cloud of unknowing. In Saint John's language, that walking on the emptiness of darkness takes place during "the night of faith". And contemplation is dark because it implies going forth with a special disposition of renunciation and devotion (2*N*, 17), so that we may finally attain the vision of God, symbolized by the full light. But the moment comes when the soul must plunge into the thick darkness of unknowing and accept the eventuality of the death of the ego. That step is only taken in the faith that the lover has in the Beloved. "Faith" is, therefore, synonymous with "love", "longing" or "will" to see God. That is why, "the greater is the faith of the soul, the more closely is it united with God" (2*S*, 9, 1).

Saint John of the Cross also tackles the issue of the usefulness or not of the senses and powers. As they are an obstacle to contemplation, once they have been subdued, what happens with them after achieving the vision of God? The powers of the soul pass through a certain death (the darkness or void of unknowing), but are not annihilated, but transformed after being filled with the infinity that is God⁵⁵⁸. Nonetheless, if it has been affirmed that the memory, as a

⁵⁵⁸ "These caverns are the soul's powers: memory, understanding and will. They are as deep as the boundless goods of which they are capable since anything less than the infinite fails to fill them" (*LB*, 3, 18). "All the inclinations and activity of the appetites and powers... become divine" (*LA*, 2, 33). This way, the soul that is united with God "lives life of God" because it has "its activities in God". More specifically, "The *understanding*... is now moved and informed by another higher principle of supernatural divine light, and the senses are bypassed. Accordingly, the understanding becomes divine, because through its union with God's understanding both become one. And the *will*... is now changed into the life of divine love, for it loves in a lofty way with divine affection, moved by the strength of the Holy Spirit... By means of this union, God's will and the soul's will are now one. And the *memory*, which by itself perceived only the figures and phantasms of creatures, is changed through this union so as to *have in its mind the eternal years* men-

power of the soul, given that man is limited by time and bound to past, must be disregarded and purified by means of the forgetfulness of all things, how is it possible that, after the mystical union, a power whose main function is to remember may remain? Why does the soul need to remember when it is united with God, in whom all things are at the same time? Accurately, Saint John of the Cross clarifies that it is not about having or not having memories. In fact, it is impossible not to have memories. One thing is to have memories and another different thing is to amass them as our own and allow them to feed our sense of individual identity separated from God; “in order that the soul may come to union with God in hope, it must renounce every possession of the memory, for, in order that its hope in God may be perfect, it must have naught in the memory that is not God” (3S, 11, 1). Regarding the understanding, in perfect contemplation, God is the light of true knowledge. That implies that the understanding does not have to use the “doors” of the senses to receive the forms and images because now it is God who teaches in another way: “this knowledge is not produced by the understanding that the philosophers call the agent understanding, which works on the forms, fantasies and apprehensions of the corporal faculties; rather, it is produced in the possible or passive understanding, which, without the reception of these forms, and so on, receives passively only substantial knowledge, which is divested of images and given without any work of active function of the understanding” (CB, 39, 12).

VI.- THE THREE STAGES: SENSITIVE, PURGATIVE, UNITIVE

In general lines, Saint John assumes the three successive stages with which the Christian monastic tradition describes the spiritual way and which match the three modes of knowledge: discursive

tioned by David [Ps. 77:5]... The understanding of this soul is God’s understanding; its will is God’s will; its memory is the eternal memory of God” (LB, 2, 34).

(meditation), passive (purgative meditation) and unitive (perfect or unitive contemplation).

The sensitive stage, or human or natural phase, defines the soul that, longing to know itself and God, begins its quest even though it is still bound to the external and sensible things. The second stage corresponds with an “intermediate phase of purgation”, characterized by the soul’s effort to detach itself from all what hinders it from contemplating God. Finally, the unitive stage is the one of the soul that is “completely turned towards God” after having passed through the emptiness and the darkness of the successive purifications.

These three stages of the spiritual process are linked to three different *modes of knowledge*. The first one, meditation, is an active or discursive knowledge, based on the reflection through the apprehension of images, forms or species of the objects. But, as there is no information or “species”, even the ones that come through the supernatural way, that is, without the intervention of the external senses, can be employed to contemplate God, any knowledge coming from them must be disregarded. The second mode of knowledge, the contemplative one, is considered as “passive” because it is received without the activity of the senses and powers, and as “substantial” because it is produced without the mediation of any form or figure. The natural activity of the discursive or meditative knowledge is followed by the passivity of the soul that does not have to concern, except about receiving what God may communicate it. That is why it is also talked about learned science or knowledge.

Finally, there is a unitive knowledge that happens in an extreme stage of contemplation that Saint John calls perfect contemplation or *supreme contemplation*.

VII.- MEDITATION (WAY OF THE SENSE) AND CONTEMPLATION (WAY OF THE SPIRIT)

Saint John of the Cross follows the Christian mystical tradition that distinguishes two general categories of prayer: *meditation*, “which is a discursive action wrought by means of images, forms and figures that are fashioned and imagined by the said senses” (2S, 12, 3), and *contemplation*, which “is communicated and infused into the soul through love. This communication is secret and dark to the work of the understanding and the other powers” (2N, 17, 2).

Meditation is the *way of the sense*, since it involves a form of cognition through the senses and powers. It is part of the first stage of the spiritual route of the candidates, probationers or novices, whom Saint John calls *beginners*. This stage ends when they overcome a crisis that is described as “passive night of the sense” (1N).

The step from meditation to contemplation introduces us into the *way of the Spirit* or illuminative way; it is “the way of the spirit, which is contemplation”. In the contemplative way, there are, in turn, two successive stages: a stage of initial or purgative contemplation, characteristic of the so-called proficient ones, and a final stage of perfect or unitive contemplation, characteristic of the so-called profited ones. “The soul went out in order to *begin* its journey along the *way of the spirit*, which is that of the proficient and profited ones and which by another terminology is referred to as the illuminative way or the way of *infused contemplation*” (1N, 14, 1). The transition from the purgative contemplation to the supreme or perfect contemplation is marked by a major crisis, characterized by the acceptance of the own nothingness; it is the “passive night of the spirit” (2N) that opens the doors to the unitive way of the “supreme recollection” or “supreme contemplation” that leads to the transforming union. The Saint mentions another higher form of contemplation, the *beatific vision*, but it only takes place in the afterlife.

What is meditation? According to a classic definition⁵⁵⁹, it is the intellectual consideration or discourse about some mystery, or about some moral matter, with the purpose of obtaining some fruit for the soul. According to Saint John of the Cross, it implies that “the soul makes use of its sensible powers” (2S, 14, 6). Therefore, the meditation is connected with the “two interior bodily senses, which are called imagination and fantasy”, or “powers”. “To these two powers belongs meditation, which is a discursive action wrought by means of images, forms and figures that are fashioned and imagined by the said senses” (2S, 12, 3). Meditation is, therefore, the first way beginners have to deal with God (IN, 1, 1). In effect, “the practice of beginners is to meditate and make acts and discursive reflection with the imagination” (LB, 3, 32). At the beginning of the spiritual route, the discursive meditation is necessary for the beginner “in order that they may gradually feed and enkindle their souls with love by means of sense” (2S, 12, 5), so that they may detach themselves from other worldly “delights”. Thus, the soul “becomes detached from worldly things and gains some spiritual strength in God” (IN, 8, 3). That is why meditation serves to “dispose and habituate the spirit to spirituality by means of sense, and in order to void the sense, in the meantime, of all the other low forms and images, temporal worldly and natural” (2S, 13, 1). It is to be understood that Saint John of the Cross neither refuses nor criticizes meditation; he just confines himself to following the doctrinal line that affirms that meditation is a necessary stage that must give way to contemplation.

Meditations are useful for the *beginners*, because they “may profit by them, and indeed *should* so profit...; for there are souls that are greatly moved by objects of sense to seek God” (3S, 24, 4). That is why, “in this state, the souls should be given matter for meditation and discursive reflection” (LB, 3, 32). “It is certainly lawful, and even convenient, for beginners to find some sensible sweetness and pleasure in images... since they have not yet weaned or detached

⁵⁵⁹ *Diccionario de Autoridades*, RAE, 1734.

their desire from things of the world, so that they can leave the one pleasure for the other” (3S, 39, 1). That is why the beginners must be treated “like a child holding something in one of his hands; to make him loosen his hold upon it, we give him something else to hold in the other hand lest he should cry because both his hands are empty” (3S, 39, 1). To that effect, meditation is like a thorn that is used for removing another thorn stuck under the skin; it is scrapped once fulfilled its task.

In sum, the Saint advises that, “as long as they find sweetness in meditation, and are able to reason, they should not abandon this” (2S, 13, 2) because, although “the things of *sense*, and the knowledge that spirit can derive from them, are the business of a child” (2S, 17, 6), the truth is that God leads the soul as well, and He communicates it His spirit through “forms, figures and *particular intelligences*” through meditation. The “sweetness” can be used, this way, as a stimulus and incentive to advance on the spiritual way.

Although “the discursive meditation as carried on through the imaginations and forms and figures” (2S, 13, 1) is the only way to understand and work with the understanding in a natural way and, certainly, through meditation can one obtain “some knowledge and love of God” (2S, 14, 2), it is wrong to “think that the whole business consists in a continual reasoning and learning to understand particular things by means of images and forms” (2S, 14, 4). “One who would go to God relying on natural ability and reasoning will not be very spiritual. There are some who think that by pure force and the activity of the senses, which of itself is lowly and no more than natural, they can reach the strength and height of the supernatural spirit. One does not attain to this peak without surpassing and leaving aside the activity of the senses” (LA, 2, 14). In effect, through meditation, “the soul cannot make much progress” (LA, 3, 31) because “the sense of the lower part of man... is not, neither can be, capable of knowing or understanding God as God is” (3S, 24, 2). The reason is

quite simple: “neither the sense nor its function is capable of spirit” (*LA*, 3, 54); “God cannot be grasped by the senses” (*LA*, 3, 73), “God is unintelligible” (*LA*, 3, 49), “God comes beneath no definite form or kind of knowledge whatsoever” (*3S*, 2, 4). And, since God has no “image that can be comprehended by the memory” (*3S*, 2, 4), these are useful to reach God.

No “thought” thing can be used by man as a means to unite with God (*2S*, 8, 1) because, at the moment when God is thought, He is changed into an object outside ourselves. Thus, our soul will remain blind “insofar as it is *enjoying* something else” other than God (*LA*, 3, 72). That is why “God transcends the understanding and is incomprehensible and inaccessible to it. Hence, while the understanding is understanding, it is not approaching God but withdrawing from Him” (*LA*, 3, 48). Consequently, as God scarcely listens to the prayer of those whose “desire and pleasure are bound” to the sensible objects (*3S*, 40, 1), we can just follow the path of “renunciation and self-emptying of forms”, the refusal of all possession of sensory experiences, in order to be given “the possession of the union” (*3S*, 2, 13). We must renounce the merely natural or human knowledge, since “all the wisdom of the world and all human ability, compared with the infinite wisdom of God, are pure and supreme ignorance” (*IS*, 4, 5); “all things are nothing to [the soul], and it is nothing in its own eyes; God alone is its all” (*LA*, 1, 32).

VIII.- THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SENSES; THE TRANSITION FROM MEDITATION TO CONTEMPLATION

If meditation is what it must be, it will help the beginner realize his own faults, especially the triviality and pride of his worldly life and the selfish, mercantilist nature of his relationship with God, with whom he only speaks in order to ask Him for favors in return for

prayers and good deeds. Then, meditation must become an act of pure, unselfish devotion used to strip the soul of pride and vanity.

However, a moments comes when the meditator “can *no longer* meditate... neither can take pleasure therein as he was wont to do *aforetime*” (2S, 13, 2). It seems that meditation has run out of possibilities, because, even though “it is necessary that at this season the soul must not take pleasure in other and different objects of the imagination, which are of the world” (2S, 14, 5), the truth is that the soul is filled up with thoughts, images and forms. Perhaps, in some way, it senses that, in order to receive this “general loving knowledge”, it needs to have the spirit “silent and detached from discursive knowledge and gratification” (LB, 3, 37).

It is then when the stage of beginner is finished. The *mystic* has been spiritually strengthened by the meditative practice when he has come to understand that the desires of the senses and the knowledge that comes from the external objects are pure nothing in comparison with the knowledge of God, and that “the perfection and value of their works do not depend on quantity or the satisfaction found in them but on knowing how to practice self-denial in them. These beginners *ought to do their part* in striving after this self-denial until God in fact brings them into the dark night” (IN, 6, 8).

What is the dark night of the sense? When the nothingness of man has been understood, then a deep apathy or disinterest in the things of the world occurs; “we here describe as ‘night’ the privation of every kind of *pleasure* which belongs to the desire”, including the spiritual ones (IS, 3, 1). “For that reason we call this detachment ‘night’ to the soul, for we are not treating here of the *lack of things*, since this implies no detachment on the part of the soul if it has a desire for them, but we are treating of the detachment from them of the *taste and desire*” (IS, 3, 4). The nuance is to be noticed: it is not

about renouncing things, but about understanding that all of them are pure nothing. It is not a denial of the world, but a *way* to approach it.

Deprived the spiritualist of such external objects, the same detachment that has led him to accept his nothingness forces him to dwell and face the nothing itself. As the world is not interesting for him anymore, but he does not perceive the honey of the spirit, he will feel the *horror vacui*. Believing himself abandoned by God, he will find himself between heaven and earth, prey to despair. But it is God Himself who causes the crisis in order to strengthen the meditators and prepare them so that, “more abundant and free of imperfections, they become capable of a communion with God” (*IN*, 8, 3). Ultimately, He prepares them to enter the practice of contemplation: “Souls begin to enter this dark night when God, gradually drawing them out of the state of beginners –those who practice meditation on the spiritual path–, begins to place them in the state of proficients – those who are already contemplatives–” (*IN*, 1, 1). However, the mystical lives this experience as something negative and believes that “everything has turned upside down” because, where he used to find “satisfaction and pleasure” before, now he just finds confusion, “distaste and bitterness”.

Saint John of the Cross explains that the dark night of the senses has a specific goal in the spiritual route: “God wants to lead them ahead”, He “darkens all this light and closes the door and the spring of sweet spiritual water... and leaves them in such darkness... that they not only fail to receive satisfaction and pleasure from their spiritual exercises and works, as they formerly did, but also find these exercises distasteful and bitter, because... when God sees that they have grown a little, He weans them from the sweet breast so that they might be strengthened, lays aside their swaddling bands, and puts them down from His arms that they may grow accustomed to walking by themselves. This change is a surprise to them because everything has turned upside down for them” (*IN*, 8, 3). After over-

coming this obstacle, man reaffirms his certainty about the nothingness of the world and “he will acquire liberty of soul, clarity of reason... He will find greater joy and recreation in the creatures through his detachment from them, for he cannot rejoice in them *if he looks upon them with attachment to them as to his own*, because this attachment... ties the spirit down to the earth and allows it no enlargement of heart” (3S, 20, 2). Of course, not all people pass through the dark night of the sense with the same intensity or suffer the same symptoms. That is why Saint John of the Cross enumerates some of the most significant signs to identify the moment when the meditator must start the practice of contemplation: Impossibility to meditate, general affective apathy that finds no consolation in godly things, desire to be alone with God, etc. (2S, 13, 15 and IN, 9).

It is then when the *beginner* must give up meditation and devote himself to contemplation, since here “*begins* God to communicate Himself... not through the senses as He did before, by means of the discursive analysis and synthesis of ideas, but through pure spirit” (IN, 9, 8). It is then started the way of the spirit, the science of contemplation, characteristic of the *proficient* and the *profited* ones.

IX.- THE SWEET SCIENCE OF CONTEMPLATION

Saint John of the Cross describes contemplation as a “sweet science” (CA, 18), “highest wisdom and language of God” (LB, 3, 37), “science of love” (CA, Prologue, 4). Employing a very descriptive term that has not been as lucky as it would have deserved of being preserved, he defines it as “prayer of detachment” (D, 137), because its goal is the denial and detachment from all that is not God; “He alone is our company”; “If you want to come to the holy recollection, you shall not come admitting, but denying” (D, 52). It is also defined as prayer of recollection because it “consists in the fixing of the whole soul, according to its powers, upon the one incomprehen-

sible good, and in withdrawing it from all things that can be apprehended” (3S, 4, 2). The contemplative or *proficient* is the one who “has come to the way of the spirit, which is contemplation, where the activity of the senses and of discursive reflections terminates, and God alone is the agent who then speaks secretly to the solitary and silent soul” (LB, 3, 44). That is why, in order to achieve contemplation, “it is sufficient that the understanding should *be withdrawn from all particular knowledge...* and that the will should not desire to think with respect to either..., for this is a sign that the soul is *occupied*” (2S, 14, 12).

Whereas meditation provides a mediate knowledge of God, contemplation provides an immediate knowledge, that is, without mediation, of the Divinity. Human or natural knowledge is mediate because it needs external objects. In order to interact with the world, it needs to convert it all into objects of knowledge; that is why it only conceives God and the spirit as mental concepts, that is, as objects that are different and separate from itself. But, as God and the spirit are not objects, how can it get to know them? Man must understand that, by his own natural means, he is unable to access the true knowledge of God, which is unitive and immediate because it transcends the subject-object duality. “The faculties of the soul cannot, of their own power, reflect and act, save upon some form, figure and image, and this is the rind and accident of the substance and spirit” (3S, 13, 4). Concepts, ideas and feelings, which are products of our natural ability, cannot help us unite with *God* “immediately” (2S, 8, 5; 9, 4). For this reason, between the soul’s work “in a human (natural) way” and God’s work in contemplation, “there is as much difference... as there is between a human work and a divine work, between the natural and the supernatural” (LB, 3, 45).

Assuming that the outline of natural knowledge is not useful to understand the so-called unitive knowledge, how is the mode of knowledge that allows the spirit to penetrate the divine truth? Surely,

the most comprehensive definition of mystical knowledge is that *to know is to be*. It is a unitive knowing because it does not imply doing, thinking or anything that can be conceptualized. It is unitive because, by means of contemplation, with the purpose of establishing a direct communication without intermediaries, God ends up cleansing the soul of all what is unlike Him. God takes man out from the realm of unlikeness, from the world, and leads him to the paradise of perfect contemplation, where the “language of God to the soul, *of pure spirit to pure spirit*” emanates (2N, 17, 4). God is all to the soul, which, “since it has God’s view of things, it regards them as God sees” (LB, 1, 32). Inside God and united with Him, the soul can perceive the essence of Creation; “and here lies the remarkable delight of this awakening: the soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures. This amounts to knowing the effects through their cause and not the cause through its effects. The latter is knowledge a posteriori, and the former is essential knowledge” (LB, 4, 5). Saint John of the Cross is generous when describing the supreme contemplation or mystical ecstasy. In that contemplative state, the time coordinates are transcended so that one thousand human years could be like a single day to the soul (we should now remember the legends that tell us about mystics and anchorites who found themselves in a much later time after leaving meditation). The natural or ordinary process of cognition based on the sequential and successive access to the objects is replaced by simultaneity and instantaneity: the things are known at the same time and in an immediate, direct way; “O abyss of delights! ... where one attribute is so known and enjoyed as not to hinder the perfect knowledge and enjoyment of the other” (LB, 3, 17). Through that intuitive knowledge does the soul see “what God is in His creatures in only one view” (LB, 4, 7); “the soul tastes here all the things of God... because God is all these things, *the soul enjoys them in only one touch of God*” (LB, 2, 21).

Nevertheless, the Saint warns that supreme contemplation, even though it may be the most perfect knowledge possible in this life, is

not a final vision. This supreme or beatific vision can only be possible after death, in the afterlife. By means of the mystical union in this life, “the soul sees that God is indeed its own and that it possesses Him”; “the soul is somehow God through participation, although it is not God as perfectly as it will be in the next life, it is like the shadow of God” (*LB*, 3, 78). But, despite all that, the perfect vision in this life is hindered by a sort of veil that will only be removed in the afterlife.

The “touch” is a form of *knowledge* that expresses the action of God on the soul. The contemplative tradition takes this expression from the Pseudo-Dionysius, but only Saint John of the Cross articulates a whole explanation of his concept, nature, goal, opportunity, etc. The “touches” are the manifestation of the “intimate and secret communications there between the soul and God”. They are also called “substantial touches of divine union between God and the soul” (2*N*, 23, 11). Even though God seems an active agent, the union of natures is so deep that the soul moves within God as well, “because it is equivalent to *a certain touch with the Divinity which the soul experiences*, and thus it is God Himself who is perceived and tasted therein. And, although He cannot be experienced manifestly and clearly, as in glory, this touch of knowledge and delight is nevertheless so sublime and profound that it penetrates the substance of the soul... for such kinds of knowledge savor of the divine essence and of eternal life” (2*S*, 26, 5). On the other hand, although that “most subtle touch that the Beloved gives to the soul... makes its heart burn in a fire of love” (*CA*, 15, 5) and may seem “strong and impetuous”, it is, at the same time, a “delicate touch; the more delicate, the stronger and more powerful it is”. Given the high spiritual nature of these touches, their knowledge cannot reach the soul through the senses or by means of the natural knowledge; it “is a touch only of Divinity in the soul, *without any intellectual or imaginative form or figure*”, since it is the highest way in which God works on the soul (*LB*, 2, 8). Saint John calls it *substantial touch*

precisely because it can only happen in the substance of the soul, that is, in its most spiritual part, which is “*stripped of accidents and phantasms*” (CB, 14-15, 14). “This is a touch of substances, that is, of the substance of God in the substance of the soul”. It is an intimate, direct and most subtle communication beyond all modes, forms, figures and accidents. “This divine touch has the less volume, because the Word that grants it is alien to every mode and manner, and free from all the volume of form, figure, and accident that usually encircles and imposes boundaries or limits to the substance” (LB, 2, 20-21). Thus, how can man achieve the knowledge of it if his powers are suspended? Saint John explains that such knowledge reach the contemplative through the *passive understanding*: they are touches “of intelligence” received in the “receptive passion of the understanding” (2N, 13, 3) because they do not reach him by ordinary or natural means, but by supernatural ones; “since the soul desires the highest and most excellent communications from God, and is unable to receive them in the company of the sensory part, it desires God to bestow them apart from it” (CB, 19, 1)⁵⁶⁰.

When do these signs happen? The Saint explains that, “at certain times, when the soul is least thinking of it and least desiring it, God is wont to give it these *divine touches*, by causing it certain remembrance of Himself” (2S, 26, 8). More specifically, as such communications are “very strong, intense and spiritual”, they just occur in a soul that has already passed through the passive night of the sense and through the night of the spirit. Otherwise, as it is not sufficiently purified, it runs the risk of having to face “raptures and transports and the dislocation of bones, which always occur when the commu-

⁵⁶⁰ Nonetheless, taking into account Saint John’s mistrust of all kinds of information, including that which is received through the supernatural way, why should not those touches be refused as well? He establishes here an exception concerning the spiritual supernatural information, that is, that which lack any form or image, and come from God; “as we said above, it produces touches and impressions of union with God, which is the aim towards which we are directing the soul. And by no form, image or figure which can be impressed upon the soul does the memory re-

nications are not purely spiritual, that is, communicated to the spirit alone” (2N, 1, 2).

What is the goal of these divine communications? During contemplation, they strive to complete the purification of the soul; “communications that are truly from God have this trait: they simultaneously exalt and humble the soul” (2N, 18, 2). They humble or empty it of all worldly things in order to exalt it to the divine. This way, “these bear such an effect on the soul that it ardently longs and faints with desire for what it feels hidden there in that presence” (CA, 11, 4), and God “makes them more fervently and further prepare them for the favors He wishes to grant them later” (CA, 11, 1), that is, not only in this life, but above all in the afterlife. After all, this life is just a temporary place, a transitory stage in which the pilgrim cannot detach himself completely from the dust of the road, no matter how much effort he may make.

X.- STAGES OF CONTEMPLATION

Once the stage of beginners has been finished and the meditative life has been practically exhausted, “God takes from this soul its swaddling clothes” (1N, 12, 1). The soul manages to overcome the crisis or *night of the sense* because it has understood not only that the senses are not the suitable means to know God, but also that they must be darkened in order not to block the spiritual path. Thus, the *dark night of the senses* marks the beginning of the access to the contemplative knowledge and is the prelude or advance of the major crisis, which is called *dark night of the spirit*; “Hence, the dark night... is the means to the knowledge of both God and self. However, the knowledge given in this night is not as plenteous and abundant as

call these, for these touches and impressions of union with the Creator have no form, but only by the effects which they have produced upon it” (3S, 14, 2).

that of the other night of the spirit, for the knowledge of this night is as it were the *foundation* of the other” (IN, 12, 6).

There are two different stages or moments in the contemplative practice: the initial contemplation, which is imperfect or purgative, and the perfect contemplation. The first one is “the *beginning* of a dark and dry contemplation” (IN, 9, 6); the second one is luminous and fruitive. Through the first stage, the proficient “who are *beginning* to enter upon this general knowledge” (2S, 15, title) must walk toward God, in a progressive distancing, from the external things (the senses) to the most spiritual things, given that, even though the whole contemplative path is in the hands of God (“Without Me ye can do nothing”, Jn. 15:5), in its first few moments, the divine action will predominantly purify the soul’s miseries. It is only later, after overcoming a new crisis (the night of the spirit), when perfect contemplation takes place, leading the soul to the intellectual-affective union with God.

The initial or purgative contemplation “suspends in the soul the exercise of all its powers, both natural and spiritual”, and “it is sufficient that the *understanding* should be withdrawn from all *particular* knowledge” (2S, 14, 12). For that reason, this void of sensory information is perceived as negative by the contemplative, who considers it a “dry and dark night” (IN, 13, 3), “dark and secret contemplation” (IN, 10, 6), “purgative contemplation” (N, declaration), etc. And, certainly, contemplation *is* initially night and nothingness. But that “night” is eloquent, because it is the suitable means by which God may teach the soul and show it His most mystical and hidden wisdom: “Contemplation is dark, and for that reason is also called with the name of mystical theology, meaning the secret or hidden wisdom of God, in which, without the sound of words, and without the help of any bodily or spiritual faculty... God teaches the soul very quietly and secretly, without its knowing how” (CB, 39, 12). That is why this initial contemplation, “*beginning* of a dark and dry contempla-

tion” (IN, 9, 6), is also described by Saint John of the Cross as *infused* or *passive*, “for here the powers are at rest, are working not actively, but passively, by receiving that which God works in them” (2S, 12, 8). It is called purgative because it has the goal of “releasing the subjection” of the senses by depriving the ego of food. When that emptiness or night of the sense is intense enough, it drives the soul to reflect and know its own miseries and faults, such as pride, vanity, arrogance... After that, during the passive night of the spirit, the soul goes deeper into the knowledge of its imperfections, until “the soul feels so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against it and it is against God” (2N, 5, 5). The important point is that the discovery of that truth ends up uprooting pride and vanity, and generating sincere humility. And with humility do the rest of the virtues emanate (3S, 23, 1); thus, “it is no longer moved to act by the delight and satisfaction it finds in a work... but *only by the desire of pleasing God*... itself and its neighbor” (IN, 13, 7-12).

One of the problems of this initial state, which even drives many to give up the contemplative practice, is that they think that nothing useful can be obtained from the inactivity of the powers, so that, as “they do not work with the powers of their soul” (LB, 3, 67) and “they see that it is doing nothing” (IN, 10, 4), they believe they are wasting their time or, even worse, “destroying the path of spiritual practice” (3S, 2, 1). Others will be dazzled when they see themselves in the middle of the darkness of unknowing and realize their impossibility to access it in a rational and discursive way; “You will say, ‘it does not understand anything *in particular*, and thus will be unable to make progress’. And, certainly, “if it would have particular knowledge, it would not advance”, for the simple reason that God is incomprehensible. It is only possible to go to Him “not by understanding... but by believing”, “guided by faith” (LB, 3, 48). That is why confidence is so important; “in order to be effectively guided by faith to supreme contemplation”, the soul “must be in darkness” (2S, 4, title), that is, it must remain passive, with the senses suspended

and doing nothing and understanding nothing, with the certainty that God is hidden in that darkness and manifests Himself by purging and enlightening the soul. That is why one must not be alarmed right at the first hesitation of the contemplative practice; instead, one must persevere, accept and understand that, in order to attain “supernatural transformation, it is clear that he must be plunged into darkness and carried far away from all contained in his nature” (2S, 4, 2), because, “to the end that God may of His own accord work divine union in the soul, it is necessary to proceed by this method of disencumbering and emptying the soul, and causing it to reject the natural jurisdiction and operations of the powers, so that they may become capable of infusion and illumination from supernatural sources, for their capacity cannot attain to so lofty an experience, but will rather hinder it, if it be not disregarded” (3S, 2, 2). In sum, as the soul “only knows how to act by means of the senses and discursive reflection, it thinks it is doing nothing when God introduces it into that emptiness and solitude where it is unable to use the powers and make acts” (LB, 3, 66) and, in effect, “the activity of the senses and of the discursive reflection of the soul terminates” (LB, 3, 44), as well as the “working actively”; only then it is when the soul gets closest to God. Said with the Saint’s words: “the farther the soul progresses in spirituality, the more it ceases from the operation of the powers in particular acts, since it becomes more and more occupied in one act that is general and pure” (2S, 12, 6).

Therefore, if the *mystic* persists with his effort, he will sooner or later achieve perfect contemplation. There, he will access a “supernatural” knowledge, that is, “all that is given to the understanding over and above its natural ability and capacity” (2S, 10, 2). That is the true “secret or hidden wisdom of God, in which, without the sound of words, and without the help of any bodily or *spiritual* faculty... God teaches the soul... in darkness to all sensory and *natural* things” (CB, 39, 12).

1.- *The Night of the Spirit.*

The transition from purgative contemplation to perfect contemplation is marked by a deep crisis that Saint John of the Cross calls *night of the spirit*. “This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorance and imperfection... and which the contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology. Through this contemplation, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how this happens” (2N, 5, 1). Although this passive night of the spirit is the prelude to the entry of the *profited* ones into the state of union (IS, 1, 3), the truth is that it is experienced as a stage of crisis that “commonly occurs toward the end of the illumination and purification of the soul, just before the attainment of union” (LB, 3, 18) and takes place when the powers of the soul are purified and the understanding, empty and detached, interprets its separation and bearing from God as an abandonment. The soul recalls then the trauma of the *night of the sense* and the purgation because it now feels pain for it believes that God “has changed to be cruel toward it” (LB, 1, 20; cf. Job 30:21). In other passage, the Saint writes: “the soul feels so unclean and wretched” (2N, 5, 5), “clearly beholding its impurity”, because “this divine purge stirs up all the foul and vicious humors of which the soul was never aware; never did it realize there was so much evil in itself, since these humors were so deeply rooted”, and now they are “seen clearly through the illumination of this dark light of divine contemplation, although the soul is no worse than before, either in itself or in its relationship with God, for it sees in itself what it did not see before” (2N, 10, 2).

However, the goal of this night of the spirit is thaumaturgic, like a symbolic death, because “it is fitting that the soul be in this sepulcher of dark death in order that it attain the spiritual resurrection for which it hopes” (2N, 6, 1), so that the soul may definitively remain “empty” and “detached” from all “affection for creatures”, that is,

from all that is not God (*LB*, 3, 18-23); “If a man is to enter this divine union, all that lives in his soul must die, both little and much, small and great, and that the soul must be without desire for all this, and detached from it, even as though it existed not for the soul, neither the soul for it” (*IS*, 11, 8). And, even though it is a definitive stage of union or *marriage* with God, the truth is that it is inevitable, since “no soul can reach this high state and kingdom of espousal without first undergoing many tribulations and trials” (*LB*, 2, 24). The light of wisdom is cleansing the last few impurities and strengthening “the spiritual eye with the divine light” (*LB*, 1, 22). This way, “because of their weakness, the soul feels thick darkness and more profound obscurity the closer it comes to God, just as it would feel greater darkness and pain, because of the weakness and impurity of its eyes, the closer it approached the immense brilliance of the sun. The spiritual light is so bright and so transcendent that it blinds and darkens the natural understanding as this latter approached it. Accordingly, David says [in Ps. 18:11] that God made darkness his hiding place and covert” (*2N*, 16, 10).

Darkness will weaken, giving way to “the rising dawn”, a peculiar liminal spiritual state in which “it is not entirely night or entirely day, but is, as they say, at the break of day”, because, “just as the rise of morning dispels the darkness of night and unveils the light of day, so this spirit, quieted and put to rest in God, is elevated from the darkness of natural knowledge to the morning light of the supernatural knowledge of God. This morning is not clear, as was said, but dark as night at the time of the rising dawn” (*CB*, 14-15, 23). Saint John of the Cross turns to the metaphor of the lightning in order to explain this sudden meeting with the divine Grace: “And it is at times as though a door were opened before it into a great brightness, through which the soul sees a light, after the manner of lightning flash, which, on a dark night, reveals things suddenly, and causes them to be clearly and distinctly seen” (*2S*, 24, 5). That is the “ray of darkness” Dionysius the Areopagite talked about: it is a “dark light”,

from the limited perspective of the soul, full of miseries; but, in reality, it is “very clear and pure” because it is divine light. It is an eloquent light that guides, teaches and transforms the soul. It is that very light that “strikes the soul” and is initially perceived as a “spiritual darkness”, but that, little by little, transforms the soul lovingly (2N, 10, 3) in order to prepare the “*unitive contemplation*” (2N, 23, 14) or perfect contemplation. In effect, after betrothal comes *marriage*, the “union and transformation of the soul with God that comes from love” (2S, 5, 3). That union is not the “substantial union” that characterizes the relationship between the Creator and His creatures, but a union that Saint John of the Cross calls “union of likeness” because it takes place when there is nothing in the soul that disgusts God. It is a loving passive union, infused by likeness, because, “when the soul reaches a certain degree of interior *union of love*, *the powers are no longer active*” (CB, 16, 11).

2.- *Perfect or luminous contemplation.*

By means of the initial or purgative contemplation, the initiate had to learn how to “remain quiet, without care or solitude about any interior or exterior work” until God produces “an inclination to remain alone and in quietude, unable to dwell on any particular thought and unwilling to do so” (IN, 9, 6), “not by understanding... but by believing” (LB, 3, 48). “Thus, the soul also should proceed only with a loving attention to God, without making specific acts. It should conduct itself passively, without efforts of their own but with the simple, loving awareness, as when opening one’s eyes with loving attention” (LB, 3, 33). Once stripped the soul and dissolved all its imperfections into the dark nothing, it feels to be between heaven and earth; on one hand, it perceives the emptiness of the previous life that it has left behind and, on the other hand, the worrying, unknown abyss that opens at its feet and threatens to plunge it into despair and even madness. It is then when God takes charge of the process.

The powers or the spirit are not moved according to the ordinary, natural process, that is, “by way of the outward bodily senses” and through the multiplicity of particular acts, but by loving, supernatural goods or knowledge; “this loving knowledge is received *passively* in the soul *according to the supernatural mode of God*, and not according to the natural mode of the soul”, because “the goods that God communicates *supernaturally*” “are no longer accorded through the senses as before”, but “in the spirit” (*LB*, 3, 33-34). And, since such knowledge is “no longer accorded through the senses”, contemplation is “stripped of accidents”, like a “silent music”: “It is silent to the natural senses and powers, it is sounding solitude for the spiritual powers. When these spiritual powers are alone and empty of all natural forms and apprehensions, they can receive” the highest wisdom of God (*CB*, 14-15, 26). In effect, perfect contemplation, once the rational, “discursive” or sensory mode of communication, by means of the *natural* way of knowing, has been abandoned, God manifests Himself “through pure spirit” (*IN*, 9, 8), “without specified acts” (*LB*, 3, 33) or, at the most, through an “general loving knowledge” that, precisely for this reason, is “*supernatural*”. In contemplation, “God works supernaturally in the soul” (*LB*, 3, 45), “At this time, God begins to communicate Himself... by an act of simple contemplation” (*IN*, 9, 8). “Pure contemplation lies in receiving” (*LB*, 3, 36), but this has only been possible when the soul had already become similar to Him.

As there is no cause-effect connection between personal effort and access to pure contemplation, Saint John of the Cross follows the doctrinal line that considers that the vision of God or contemplation is always a Grace and not a personal achievement. “No matter how much the soul does through its own efforts, it cannot actively purify itself enough to be disposed in the least degree for the divine union of the perfection of love. God must take over and purge it in that dark fire” (*IN*, 3, 3). Certainly, it is necessary to make an effort and cultivate virtues, but that guarantees nothing, because contem-

plation is out of the causal ties and the space-time relationships. Once assumed this, the contemplative can only consent to the action of God. Saint John of the Cross considers that the soul keeps its freedom to consent even though, strictly speaking, that ultimate free will on its actions is but a form of devotion to God: "Thus all the movements of this soul are divine. Although they belong to it, they belong to it because God works them in it and with it, for it wills and consents to them" (*LB*, 1, 9). Nonetheless, ultimately, "let it be known that these motions are motions of the soul more than of God, for God does not move... although here below God seemingly moved within it, He does not in Himself move" (*LB*, 3, 11).

Ultimately, whereas in the purgative or imperfect contemplation, the object of knowledge was the soul itself and its miseries, the goal of perfect contemplation is the direct, immediate knowledge of God in the union with Him, "for in the transformation of the soul in God, it is God who communicates Himself with admirable glory, the two become one" (*CB*, 26, 4). Strictly speaking, God has always been the goal of the soul since the initial stages of the spiritual quest; however, in order to reach Him, it was necessary to pass a previous stage of purification of the veils that hindered the pure vision of the soul.

In *perfect contemplation*, God appears as an agent and, at the same time, as an object of knowledge. God is the agent or true guide that shows the way and also impels the contemplative above soul's possibilities: "the breeze of the Holy Spirit moves and arouses the strong love to make its flight to God. Without this divine breeze to stir the powers to the exercise of divine love, the virtues do not produce their effects, even though they are present in the soul" (*CB*, 31, 4). God is the *one* agent and doer of contemplation: "God alone is the agent", "He is the supernatural artificer". In contemplation, "He will construct *supernaturally* in each soul the edifice He desires" because man, with his natural operations, "has neither ability nor strength to build the *supernatural* edifice" (*LB*, 3, 44-47). Only God

is the “agent” who communicates with the soul, as “patient”, through the passive understanding.

Nevertheless, no matter how clear and spiritual the vision or contemplation of God may be in this life, the perfect or unitive contemplation is still a “dark contemplation” in comparison with the “clear contemplation” of the *beatific vision* that happens in the afterlife (CB, 39, 13). The most intimate closeness or union with God, which the Saint calls *beatific contemplation*, “light of glory” (2S, 24, 4) or “essential vision of God” (CB, 39, 13), can only take place in the afterlife, when the soul leaves the body (2N, 20, 5). Unlike this most ultimate vision, the mystic vision attained in this life is still “night” if compared with the *vision of God* in the Beyond. But this colossal issue is out of the field in which Saint John of the Cross offers his spiritual guidance.

MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION ACCORDING TO MIGUEL DE MOLINOS

“It was while he was living at that hospital that the following strange event took place. Very frequently on a clear moonlight night there appeared in the courtyard before him an indistinct shape which he could not see clearly enough to tell what it was. Yet it appeared so symmetrical and beautiful that his soul was filled with pleasure and joy as he gazed at it. It had something of the form of a serpent with glittering eyes, and yet they were not eyes. He felt an indescribable joy steal over him at the sight of this object. The oftener he saw it, the greater was the consolation he derived from it” (Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius*, New York, 1900, pp. 40-41).

Miguel de Molinos was born in Muniesa (Teruel, Spain), in 1628⁵⁶¹. He studied with the Jesuits and was ordained in 1652. In 1663, he traveled to Rome⁵⁶², where, a few years later, he would be considered an “authority” due to his labor as a preacher, confessor and counselor, and thus having the confidence of important personal-

⁵⁶¹ The main biographic sources about Miguel de Molinos are the bundles of papers of the Inquisition and a manuscript found at the Embassy of Spain in Rome entitled *Vida del Doctor D. Miguel de Molinos, aragonés condenado en Roma por el Sacrosanto y Tremendo Tribunal de la Inquisición*. It has been published by J. Fernández Alonso, “Una bibliografía [sic. ‘biografía’] inédita de Miguel Molinos”, in *Antologica Annua*, 12 (1964), pp. 293-321.

⁵⁶² cf. R. Lluch, “En torno a Miguel de Molinos y los orígenes de su doctrina. Aspectos de la piedad barroca en Valencia”, *Antologica Annua*, 18 (1971), pp. 420-422. Pilar Moreno Rodríguez, *El pensamiento de Miguel de Molinos*, Madrid, 1992. For a general vision about Molinos, vid. J. I. Tellechea, *Molinosiana (Inves-*

ities of the Roman court and curia, such as the former Queen Christina of Sweden, Cardinal Petrucci, Archbishop Jaime de Palafox y Cardona, Cardinal D'Estrées and even the Pontiff Innocent XI. As a fruit of his contemplative experience, he published *Guía espiritual que desembaraza el alma y la conduce por el interior camino para alcanzar la perfecta contemplación y el rico tesoro de la interior paz*⁵⁶³ (*The Spiritual Guide that frees the soul and leads it along the interior path to reach perfect contemplation and the rich treasure of interior peace*), with the aim of explaining some of the most empiric aspects of meditation and contemplation, since “this is a (mystical) science of practice, not theory”.

For decades, the Church had been facing numerous visionaries, mystics and quietist movements, relaxed ones, illuminated ones, etc. that defended forms of contemplation that were close to heresy. For this reason, everyone who supported any contemplative method immediately attracted suspicion against him. It did not matter at all that the Church already had saints and beatified (Saint Teresa of Jesus, Saint John of the Cross, etc.) who had written the theoretical and practical foundations of an orthodox way towards contemplation.

I.- THE FIGHT BETWEEN MEDITATORS AND CONTEMPLATIVES

Molinos was one of the victims of the conflict that, in the bosom of Catholicism, set the followers of the meditative method against the contemplatives and other individual or “subjective” forms of spiritual practice that could not be suitably corroborated and controlled by the orthodoxy of the faith. Already in the 25th session of the Council of Trent, the Pope was requested to publish a Breviary and a Missal that were standardized, which was done in 1568 and

tigaciones históricas sobre Miguel de Molinos), Madrid, 1987 and P. Moreno Rodríguez, *El pensamiento de Miguel de Molinos*, Madrid, 1992.

⁵⁶³ *The Spiritual Guide*, tr. and ed. by Robert P. Baird, New Jersey, 2010 (from now on, *GE*).

1570 respectively, as a necessary step to establish the predominance of the liturgy based on external prayer and the imposition of a “common” liturgical language (Latin) that was actually incomprehensible for most believers and that seemed to imply a certain disdain or even refusal of any individual mystical option. The most significant defender of this reform was the Society of Jesus, which took the Ignatian meditation as a model, against the forms of contemplative prayer.

In effect, in the 16th century, the tensions between the diverse ways to live the religious experience are prolonged. We are basically witnessing an underground fight between the passivity of the contemplative method and the active method of meditation (taking the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola as a model), respectively defended by Carmelites and Jesuits⁵⁶⁴. Nevertheless, despite the canonization of Saint Teresa (1622) and the beatification of John of the Cross (1675), the indiscriminate attacks of the Society of Jesus against contemplative prayer continued. Alonso Rodríguez already pointed out that contemplation should neither be taught, because “it is one of His most liberal graces and thus He communicates it to whom He wills”, nor be talked or written about, and the books that deal with it must be prohibited⁵⁶⁵. But recollection and contemplative mystic was still winning followers such as Falconi, Malaval⁵⁶⁶, the first few works by Petrucci, and even among the Jesuits themselves (such as Cordeses, Baltasar Álvarez and Miguel de Molinos himself). The generals of the Order, like Fathers Oliva and Mercuriano, provided precise instructions to fight against the forms of meditation or prayer that did not comply with the Ignatian standard. Mercuriano prohibited even the reading of Tauler, Ruysbroeck, Suso, Herp, etc. Faced with this panorama, *The Spiritual Guide* of the

⁵⁶⁴ Ignacio Iparraguirre, *Historia de los Ejercicios de San Ignacio (Evolución en Europa durante el siglo XVII)*, vol. III, Rome, 1973.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ejercicio de perfección y virtudes cristianas*, Seville, 1614, I, Treatise V, 4.

⁵⁶⁶ F. Malaval, *Pratique facile pour élever l'âme à la contemplation*, Paris, 1664 and 1670.

Jesuit Molinos can be considered to be in the vanguard of the Tridentine resolutions, for it proposes the most radical alternative to “mental” prayer ever formulated within the spirit of the Counter-Reformation. However, the persecution of quietism and the process against Molinos reflected a contrast of tendencies and influences that was inserted into the fight between France and Spain, being the Holy See one of its scenes⁵⁶⁷. In relation to the moves on the chessboard of international politics, “Molinism was the house of Austria”⁵⁶⁸, the enemy to defeat. After he was captured on July the 18th, 1685, Innocent XI, in 1687, published the encyclical *Coelestis Pastor*, condemning sixty-eight Molinist propositions for being heretic⁵⁶⁹.

Nonetheless, the fact that Molinos was not a quietist was proven by his own *Spiritual Guide* and, above all, by his later *Defense of contemplation*⁵⁷⁰, in which he denied the accusations that had been leveled against him. Whereas the doctrine of absolute passiveness⁵⁷¹ and quietism, whose immediate precedent was the Central European movements of Free Spirit or the Spanish illuminated, denied the existence of human will, Molinos affirmed that the taming of the ego depended on a voluntary act that, far from being based on passiveness and quietism, required full activity: “You will never get up the mountain of perfection, nor to any high throne of peace internal, if you are only governed by your own will. This cruel and fierce enemy of God, and of your soul, must be conquered”⁵⁷². And even more clearly: “All you have to do is to do nothing by your own choice

⁵⁶⁷ G. Bandini, “Cristina di Svezia e Molinos”, in *Nuova Antologia*, 442 (1948), p. 61.

⁵⁶⁸ R. Urbano, *Miguel de Molinos*, foreword to his edition of the *Guía espiritual* (Barcelona, 1911), p. 22.

⁵⁶⁹ The complete text of the Sentence can be read in Paul Dudon, *Le quiétiste espagnol; Michel Molinos (1628-1696)*, Paris, 1921, pp. 274-292. Paradoxically, due to a political-judicial juggling, Molinos’ *Guide* was never condemned.

⁵⁷⁰ *Defensa de la contemplación*, published by Francisco Trinidad Solano, Madrid, 1983 (from now on, DC).

⁵⁷¹ D. T. Suzuki, “Pasividad absoluta y libertinaje”, in *Ensayos sobre Budismo Zen*, Buenos Aires, 1995, pp. 293-299.

⁵⁷² GE, II, 9, 67.

alone”⁵⁷³. It is to be noticed that he does not just say, “all you have to do is to do nothing”, since there is a short clarification that changes it all: “by your own choice alone”. Even just “wanting” not to be (not to think, not to feel, not to want, not to act) can let the Being work. Only the non-interference of the Being’s work in the emptiness and silence of the nothing will bring the *Aletheia*. But the *kenosis* of the soul and its transformation into the Being by emptying itself also implies the will to “be detached from God Himself”. Only this last one is the perfect form of detachment and recollection. In that time, this was one of the differences that justified the distinction between quietism and recollection. In this sense, the *Spiritual Guide* does not follow the suspicious quietism, but the purest collected tradition that was practiced by Tauler, Kempis, Bernabé de Palma, Laredo, Saint John of Ávila, Saint John of the Cross, etc.

Three main periods have been distinguished regarding recollection in Spain⁵⁷⁴. The first one, from 1523, with the arrangement of the houses of prayer and the examples of Saint Teresa, Saint John of Ávila, Saint Francisco de Borja, Saint Peter of Alcántara and some Jesuits and Dominicans, until the publication, in 1559, of the famous *Index of forbidden books* by Fernando de Valdés, which represented the anti-mystical movement, with the prohibition of not only the already classic works by Osuna, Laredo and Palma, but also other spiritual works of that time such as Archbishop Carranza’s *Catechism*, Friar Louis of Granada’s *The Book of Prayer and Meditation* and *The Sinner’s Guide*, John of Ávila’s *Audi Filia*, Francisco de Borja’s *The Practice of Christian Works*, the translations of Tauler and Serafino da Fermo, Giorlamo Savonarola’s *Commentary*, Erasmus’ *Enchiridion*, *Colloquia* and *Modus orandi*, etc. Then a second period, which lasted from 1580 to 1625, in which we should highlight Nicolás Factor, Friar John of the Angels, Antonio Sobrino, Baltasar

⁵⁷³ *GE*, I, 7, 44.

⁵⁷⁴ Melquiades Andrés Martín, *Los recogidos; Nueva visión de la mística española (1500-1700)*, Madrid, 1976.

Álvarez, Bartolomé de los Mártires, Pelayo de San Benito, Falcón, Antonio de Rojas and Miguel de la Fuente. And finally a third period of splendor of recollection, in which we should mention the Franciscans Andrés de Guadalupe and Antonio Panes, the Capuchins Gaspar de Viana, José de Nájera, Pedro de Aliaga and Isidoro of León, the Mercedarians Pizaño and Serna, the Benedictines Antonio de Alvarado and José de San Benito, as well as Archbishop Palafox and others. From the bibliographic point of view, recollection can be symbolized by the two anonymous works that respectively marked the beginning and decline of this movement: *Hun brevísimo atajo e arte de amar a Dios: con otra arte de contemplar* (1513) and *Atajo espiritual para llegar el alma segura y en breve a la íntima unión con Dios* (1837).

This way, the *wonderism* was developed up to the extent that Pope Urban VIII promulgated a decree in 1625, ratified in 1634, by which he forbade the printing of any work that spoke about revelations and special holiness without the previous authorization of the ecclesiastic authority, fact that “isolated theology and, conceptually, mysticism for about two centuries”⁵⁷⁵. For his part, Innocent XI, through a decree on August the 28th, 1687, followed by the encyclical *Coelestis Pastor* on November the 19th, 1687, condemned the *quietism* in general and Molinos’ works in particular, fact that had a devastating effect on those who practiced the ascetic and contemplative life, sowing distrust among them. Paradoxically, the first consequence of this decree was actually the “creation” of quietism in Spain, since just “illumunism” had existed before. This way, Catholic mysticism began a sad, long way of gradual enclosure within itself and isolation from society. “It seems as if the Treaties of Westphalia—consecration of our decline— had also affected spirituality”⁵⁷⁶.

⁵⁷⁵ Melquiades Andrés, *Historia de la mística de la Edad de Oro en España y América*, Madrid, 1994, p. 380.

⁵⁷⁶ Melquiades Andrés, *Historia de la mística*, cit., Madrid, 1994, p. 380.

And the truth is that “Molinos’ *Guide* does not contain any proposition that is openly wrong. Those which could be daring regarding meditation, prayer of silence and quiet, interior way, overcoming of ladders, degrees and methods, valuation of laws or transformation into God are frequently found also in the works of the great mystics of the past”⁵⁷⁷. Precisely, in his work *Defense of contemplation*, Molinos will be mainly based on the contemplative doctrine of Saint John of the Cross. It could even be said that the Molinosism is not other than a commentary of the work of the mystic of the *nothings*, from whom he takes many concepts: from the differences between “the inner and the outer man”, that match those who walk on the external path of beginners and those who do on the internal one of contemplative recollection, up to his concept of the Nothing. It is undeniable that Molinos adopts the contemplative practice of Saint John exactly as it was understood by the disciples of the Mystical Doctor. That is why one of the current greatest experts in Molinos, a discalced Carmelite, affirms that “the heterodoxy of Molinos’ writings is not larger than a few logical incongruities, in the context of synthesis, or certain theses that may seem arguable. Even though he went too far in their pastoral application, that fact does not affect the doctrinal contents, which essentially agrees with the spiritual theology prevailing in his time throughout the Catholic world”⁵⁷⁸. Certainly, this author insists that Molino’s work, “of course, did not contribute any intentionally deforming new idea. Despite this, it was used as the spark to unleash a confrontation: that which is known with the name of ‘quietism’. I am glad to repeat once again that quietism, in general, was a dramatic fight between Teresian spirituality and Ignatian spirituality, between ascetics and mysticism”⁵⁷⁹. Although Molinos’ spirituality was condemned at that time as a simple repetition of the mysticism

⁵⁷⁷ Melquiades Andrés, *Historia de la mística cit.*, Madrid, 1994, p. 459.

⁵⁷⁸ Eulogio Pacho, in his article “El misticismo de Miguel de Molinos. Raíces y proyección”, published in Luce López-Baralt and Lorenzo Piera (coords.), *El sol a medianoche. La experiencia mística: tradición y actualidad*, Madrid, 1996, p. 101.

⁵⁷⁹ Eulogio Pacho, “El misticismo de Miguel de Molinos. Raíces y proyección”, cit., p. 107. Regarding this matter, vid. I. Iparraguirre, *Historia de los Ejercicios de San Ignacio*, t. III, Rome, 1973, p. 221 ff.

of the illuminated that he himself had denounced, the truth is that Molinos was neither “brilliant nor original; neither was he heretic, nor a liar. He simply called for a permanent moderation, balance and agreement among mysticisms”⁵⁸⁰.

The recollected ones, connected with Neoplatonism⁵⁸¹, Eastern Christian contemplative tradition and Sufism, propose the liberation from the internal disorder of our senses until reaching the bottom of the secret mansions of the soul, where the ineffable communication with God takes place. That is why the suspension or recollection of the senses in the upper powers, and of the latter in their center, constitutes one of the central concepts of the method. Only that way will the *prayer of annihilation* lead to the essential humility. There is a previous active annihilation that consists in the reconnaissance and acceptance of the own human limitation, of the own nothing, that gives way to the passive annihilation, which can only be accessed through the emptiness and detachment, by means of the absolute and total devotion to the divine will. *Recollection* is thus connected with the Augustinian *noli foras ire* and with the apophatic thought or negative theology of Plotinus, Evagrius, Dionysius the Areopagite, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Eckhart, Saint John of the Cross, Nicholas of Cusa, etc. God is “beyond the Being” (*Enneads*, V, 5, 6), “beyond the Essence” (*En.*, VI, 8, 19), “beyond the mind” (*En.*, III, 8, 9), so that the soul can only detach itself, “*et posuit tenebras latibulum Suum*”⁵⁸², and “advance forward with its love, leaving all its understanding behind” (*GE*, Preface, 1st adv., 4), bearing the darkness “without acting, knowing, or desiring to understand any

⁵⁸⁰ Eulogio Pacho, “El misticismo de Miguel de Molinos. Raíces y proyección”, cit., p. 108.

⁵⁸¹ The mystical tradition of recollection, in which Molinos is involved, has been related to the Andalusí *Shadhili* Sufi doctrine of renunciation. As God is inaccessible, He is nothing that we can feel, imagine, think and want. Therefore, all that the soul may do to reach God will be a hindrance. In order to attain the union with God, we can just renounce all that is not God and empty ourselves of every desire, egoism, inclination, etc. Vid. Asín Palacios, “Un precursor hispanomusulmán de S. Juan de la Cruz”, in *Selected Works* in Spanish, Madrid, CSIC, 1946, pp. 245-326.

⁵⁸² *GE*, I, 7, 40 (Ps. 18:11, “and He made darkness His secret place”).

thing”⁵⁸³, quietly and peacefully waiting for the dawn within the shadows. This confident waiting of the unknown is similar to the way “a son who has never seen his father, but fully believing those who have given him information of him, loves him, as if he had already seen him”⁵⁸⁴.

II.- THE INSUFFICIENCY OF MEDITATION AND THE NEED TO PASS TO CONTEMPLATION

Regarding the polemic concerning the best form of prayer, Molinos defends a prudent, realistic thesis: “contemplation and meditation are not two different paths; there is only one path, but with this difference: meditation is practiced to begin and contemplation is practiced to advance forward and persevere. The spiritual path starts with meditation, then we pass to the affective prayer; from here, we pass to the purgative prayer; after that, active contemplation, so that all this is just one path, a real, safe path. But the same path, at its beginning, is called meditation, after that affective, after that, if we advance, it is purgative, and after that, if we pass through annihilation, perfection and union, it is called active contemplation” (*DC*, XVII). Therefore, as there is only one path according to Molinos, it is necessary to pass from meditation to contemplation in order to culminate or surmount the way. Given that prayer is an elevation of the mind in God (*elevatio mentis in Deum*), “in order to focus our mind on God, which is contemplation, it is necessary to give up all considerations and discourses, no matter how high they might be, which are meditation. Meditation is also a means to reach the end and the goal, which is contemplation. Contemplation is to find the thing, it is to taste and settle the divine delicacy in the stomach, it is the end and the goal, and it is to understand and know God” (*DC*, I).

⁵⁸³ *GE*, I, 7, 46. Molinos draws a distinction between the virtue of “waiting”, characterized by a docile acceptance, and “hope” (*elpis*) as an aggressive, greedy attitude that projects one’s expectations on the future.

⁵⁸⁴ *GE*, Preface, 1st adv., 4.

Molinos alleges various arguments in order to prove that meditation is an imperfect form of prayer are various. Firstly, because meditation, as it is motivated by the individual objectives or interests of the meditator, is not a pure act: “The multiplication of the acts and affections in prayer is originated in self-love rather than in pure love for God, because the soul does not purely seek God through them, but it rather seeks satisfaction, desiring, with those acts and affections, to assure itself of and savor the faith and the love of God, and resignation, all of which is but satisfaction, property, self-love and desire to know and see what it can do with that harmful reflection... because, in our discourses, meditations (even though the most holy ones), acts and sensitive affections, our self-love rules more than the love of God. The soul does not purely seek God and His most holy will in these considerations, but its delight, pleasure and satisfaction” (*DC*, XVII). True meditation must happen without a reason, it must be an objectless, aimless meditation in which it must not even exist the consciousness of a subject who meditates on objects. Only this way, the nullification of the ego, that is, contemplation, takes place.

Secondly, meditation implies to recreate with the thoughts and emotions a series of images about God, scenes of the life of Jesus Christ, or reflections about the faults and virtues of man and about certain classic topics such as the brevity of life, death, the Beyond, etc. Certainly, the meditation on thoughts or images (visual thoughts) is a form of prayer that is necessary and almost indispensable to soften or tenderize the crust of the mind, but it is not the most suitable means to “contemplate” God. “Those who imagine God under some figures, such as light, fire and radiance, think they are similar to Him, because the creatures are not proportional to the being of the Divine Creator, and thus those similarities cannot be the right means to unite with Him. Even though the beginners profit from these considerations and meditations that make them fall in love through the senses, these are wrong means to unite with God, because God is incorporeal and invisible; nevertheless, they usually need to pass

through them in order to reach the end, the spiritual rest, so that they may not always work by those means, for otherwise they will never arrive to the end” (*DC*, XVII). If God has no form, how can the meditator approach Him through the recreation of images? “Neither should we fear that the memory be empty of forms and figures, for God has no form or figure; it is safe being empty of form and figure: the closer it gets to God, the safer it is, because the closer it may get to the imagination, the farther it will move away from God and the more endangered it will be, since God, as He is unknowable, cannot be imagined” (*DC*, XVII)⁵⁸⁵.

Therefore, “If we are just thinking about sensible, intellectual, temporal, corporeal and external objects and about their images and likenesses, we will never reach the end, which is contemplation and perfection” (*DC*, XVII). “God is extremely incorporeal and has no likeness to corporeal things. Therefore, as long as the soul is occupied with the knowledge, images and corporeal figures, it will be incapable of contemplation or union with the purest and most spiritual God... Therefore, the most perfect and proportioned disposition that man may adopt to get ready for the sublime union with God lies in emptying his understanding and stripping himself from all unnecessary knowledge and from all natural, corporeal, sensible, intelligible, imaginary and representable images” (*DC*, XVII). This means that “the more detached the soul may be from all sensible things, the readier it will then be to receive the divine light. This is what Saint Thomas says with the following words: *The more detached the soul is from all sensible things, the readier it is to receive the divine influence*” (*DC*, XVII).

Consequently, “vocal prayer is a means to achieve mental and interior prayer; thus, the latter is more perfect than the former, according to the opinion of all the saints and theologians”, because “the place and center of God is neither in the mouth nor in the tongue: it

⁵⁸⁵ Cf. Saint John of the Cross, *LA*, 3, 42-45.

is in the innermost center of the soul, and it would be impolite and even mad, while God is there within us, to go out to talk to Him” (*DC*, XXIII).

III.- THE PRACTICE OF THE PRAYER OF QUIET: THE SILENCE OF THE MIND

The “prayer of quiet” or prayer of “interior recollection” consists in focusing the eyes of the understanding on the Truth, “beholding it sincerely with quietness and silence, without any necessity of considerations or discourses”⁵⁸⁶. That is to say, quiet happens together with the silence of the mind and the detachment from the thoughts.

According to Molinos, there are three kinds of silence: “the first is of words, the second of desires, and the third of thoughts. The first is perfect, the second is more perfect, and the third is the most perfect”⁵⁸⁷. In any case, these three kinds of silence constitute a progressive scale: “By not speaking, not desiring, and not thinking, one arrives at the true and perfect mystical silence, wherein God speaks with the soul, communicates Himself to it and, in the abyss of its own depth, teaches it the most perfect and exalted wisdom... You are to keep yourself in this mystical silence if you would hear the sweet and divine voice. It is not enough for gaining this treasure, to forsake the world, nor to renounce your own desires, and all the things created, if you wean not yourself from all desires and thoughts. Rest in this mystical silence, and open the door, that so God may communicate Himself unto you, unite with you, and transform you” (*GE*, I, 17, 129). Our author dedicates the whole chapter 17 of the first book of his *Guide* to the subject of the “mystical silence”.

⁵⁸⁶ *GE*, Preface, 2nd adv., 11.

⁵⁸⁷ *GE*, I, 17, 128.

In sum, silence is the first condition to attain contemplation, since “how is it possible to hear the sweet, inward and powerful voice of God in the midst of the noise and tumults of the creatures? And how can the pure spirit be heard in the midst of considerations and discourses of artifice?”⁵⁸⁸. In order to be able to hear God in the Temple of the soul, we must remove everything that makes noise and takes room. “By not speaking, not desiring, and not thinking, one arrives at the true and perfect mystical silence, wherein God speaks with the soul, communicates Himself to it and, in the abyss of its own depth, teaches it the most perfect and exalted wisdom”⁵⁸⁹.

IV.- THE SUSPENSION OF THE SENSES AND THE THOUGHT

In order to confirm the benefits of contemplation and dispel all suspicions of heretic “quietism”, Molinos invokes the authority of numerous distinguished contemplative. Thus, he cites Saint Jerome (*super cap. 6 Mat.*) when he states, “it seems to me that what we are most requested to do is to pray to the Lord stopping our thoughts and closing our lips” (*DC*, XXIV). He also transcribes a paragraph of the *Dark night* of Saint John of the Cross (*IN*, 10) in which the quietness of him who aspires to contemplate God is compared with the necessary immobility of him who is being painted by an artist: “They must not be given the chance to think or meditate, even though they may believe they are doing nothing but wasting their time and they may not feel like thinking of anything due to their laziness. They will have gotten a lot if they are patient and perseverant enough as to free their souls and detach it from all knowledge and thoughts, not minding at all what they will think of or meditate on. And even though they may feel remorse for wasting their time and may consider that it would be good to do any other thing, since they cannot do or think

⁵⁸⁸ *GE*, III, 13, 131.

⁵⁸⁹ *GE*, I, 17, 129.

anything there, they must then stay calm and suffer, for they have not gone there to enjoy. If they worked with their powers, that would be like to hinder or even to lose the goods that God, through that peace and idleness of the soul, is settling and imprinting in its face. And, if that face shook while trying to do something else, it would not let the painter do anything, hindering his work. Therefore, when the soul is that idle, any operation, interest, concern or attention that it may want to have will distract it and thus hinder that God may work anything in it". Molinos insists that pure prayer of true recollection is that which is practiced without any discourse or reflection. He bases his statement on his own experience and also on that of many saints and theologians such as Saint Thomas and other mystical masters that support it as "a sincere, sweet, and still view of the eternal truth without discourse or reflection"⁵⁹⁰, while the senses remain temporary suspended.

Nevertheless, according to Molinos, the complete suspension of the powers, besides being a very difficult task, for "images and species continually come in because the external senses are opened to the objects", is absolutely "useless, since, in order to deserve, it is necessary to act, believe, know and love, and these operations cannot be done if the soul is suspended with a total cessation or suspension. To try to achieve, thus, this total suspension is a waste of time" (*DC*, XVIII). The mental silence and the suspension of the senses must be accompanied by an attitude of devotion and silent trust⁵⁹¹. Otherwise, we would have but a mere mental exercise that would cause but a headache.

⁵⁹⁰ *GE*, Preface, 2nd adv., 11.

⁵⁹¹ "Internal recollection is faith and silence in the presence of God. Hence you ought to be accustomed to recollect yourself in His presence, with an affectionate attention, as one that is given up to God, and united unto Him, with reverence, humility and submission, beholding Him in the most inward recess of your own soul, without form, likeness, manner or figure, in the view and general nature of a loving and obscure faith, without any distinction of perfection or attribute", *GE*, I, 11, 54).

V.- SOME OBSTACLES TO MEDITATION

The first few stages of meditation are usually the hardest, because the mind is not used to control or stop the thoughts. It will actually fight against quietness with all the available means, the same way a horse is reluctant to be broken in. At this point, Molinos describes the strategies employed by the body and the mind in order to hinder meditation: “No sooner will you have given yourself up to your Lord in this inward way, but all Hell will conspire against you... War is very usual in this internal recollection”⁵⁹². Symptoms of this internal fight are the desire to finish prayer soon, the annoyance of the thoughts, the body tiredness, the inopportune sleepiness, etc. In sum, subterfuges of the ego-mind.

But “this monster must be vanquished. This seven-headed beast of self-love must be beheaded, in order to get up to the top of the high mountain of peace”⁵⁹³. In order to overcome these obstacles, it is necessary to adopt some measures, such as dedicating always the minimum amount of time to meditation, regardless of the results. If the mind knows that there is a fixed amount of time for prayer, it will not want to shorten it. In addition, we must not give up meditation even though we may not obtain any result; “Though you cannot get rid of the anguish of thoughts, have no light, comfort, nor spiritual sentiment, yet be not afflicted, neither leave off recollection... You may believe, when you come away from prayer dry, in the same manner as you began it, that that was because of want of preparation and that you obtain no fruit”⁵⁹⁴. All these are strategies of the ego, who tries to approach God as a merchant eager for benefits and results. But the merchants must be expelled from the Temple so that it may be absolutely empty; “As many times as you exercise yourself, calmly to reject these vain thoughts, so many crowns will the Lord

⁵⁹² *GE*, I, 11, 67, 71.

⁵⁹³ *GE*, III, 3, 20.

⁵⁹⁴ *GE*, I, 11, 69-70.

set upon your head, and though it may seem to you that you do nothing, be undeceived, for a good desire with firmness and steadfastness in prayer is very pleasing to the Lord”⁵⁹⁵. At those first few moments, it is indispensable to make an effort and devote ourselves to prayer so that we may find the right position and the suitable mental and psychic attitude; but it is very important to keep in mind that the contemplative quietness, as an essentially interior activity, strictly speaking, does not require any effort. In fact, true contemplation requires no effort at all; “The effort, which you yourself may make to resist thoughts is an impediment and will leave your soul in greater anxiety”⁵⁹⁶.

Anyway, some authors point out that Molinos, despite profusely giving advice about how to practice contemplation, did not want to reveal in writing the specific technique to quiet the mind and achieve the inner silence. At the most, he offers the usual method of the short prayer (similar to the Hindu mantra) that had to be employed for a minimum period of three years, “repeating it as often as he breathed”, at the same time that one said, “Thy will be done in time and eternity” until attaining the most perfect peace and inner silence. If this were the key –question about which there are no judgment criteria to decide whether it is or is not true–, it would have been one of the best-kept secrets, since it was not explained by any of his disciple.

According to Molinos, contemplation is “a known and inward manifestation which God gives of Himself, of his goodness, of his peace, of his sweetness, whose object is God, pure, unspeakable, abstracted from all particular thoughts, within an inner silence”⁵⁹⁷. However, “there are moreover two ways of contemplation: the one is imperfect, active and acquired; the other infused and passive. The

⁵⁹⁵ *GE*, I, 11, 75.

⁵⁹⁶ *GE*, I, 11, 68.

⁵⁹⁷ *GE*, III, 13, 131.

active... is that which may be attained to by our diligence, assisted with divine grace, we gathering together the powers and senses, and preparing ourselves by every way that God would have”⁵⁹⁸. Passive or infused contemplation is an “admirable gift, which the Divine Majesty bestows to whom He will, as He will, and when He will, and for what time He will”⁵⁹⁹.

In any case, acquired or active contemplation prepare us for the infused and passive contemplation: “You will know that, when once the soul is habituated to internal recollection and acquired contemplation –that we have spoken of–, when once it is mortified and desires wholly to be denied its appetites, when once it efficaciously embraces internal and external mortification and is willing to die heartily to its passions and its own ways, then God uses to take it alone by itself and raise it, more than it knows, to a complete repose, where He sweetly and inwardly infuses in it His light, His love and His strength, enkindling and inflaming it with a true disposition to all manner of virtue”⁶⁰⁰.

VI.- HOW TO ENTER THE TEMPLE OF THE SOUL: THE DETACHMENT AND THE NOTHING

On several occasions, Molinos compares the soul with a temple that must be looked after in order that God may dwell inside of it. The soul is “the tabernacle of the divinity”⁶⁰¹, so that “you may keep pure that temple of God”⁶⁰². Contemplation is the key to enter “that supreme region and sacred temple of the soul (where) the greatest good takes its complacency, manifests itself and creates a relish from

⁵⁹⁸ *GE*, Preface, 3rd adv., 20. The similarity between this distinction and the two kinds of *Samādhi* described by the Vedic literature is to be noticed.

⁵⁹⁹ *GE*, III, 13, 131.

⁶⁰⁰ *GE*, III, 13, 127.

⁶⁰¹ *GE*, I, 16, 123.

⁶⁰² *GE*, I, 1, 1.

the creature in a way above sense and all human understanding”⁶⁰³. It is also a city, properly ruled in the image of the Heavenly Jerusalem. That “city of quiet” is a divine city, the center of the being, from where the soul must rule its subjects (that is, all the intellectual and sensory faculties⁶⁰⁴): “You are to know that your soul is the center, habitation and the kingdom of God”⁶⁰⁵. This center or heart⁶⁰⁶ is a sacred place and a privileged place of the theophanies⁶⁰⁷ because, “when the soul attains to this state [contemplation], it ought wholly to retreat within itself, in its own pure and profound center, where the image of God is”⁶⁰⁸. In order that true contemplation may take place, the impostor king that tyrannizes his subjects must be overthrown. Once the throne is empty, it can be occupied by God as the rightful king: “To the end the sovereign King may rest on the throne of your soul, you ought to take pains to keep it clean, quiet, void and peaceable; clean from guilt and defects; quiet from fears; void of affections, desires and thoughts; and peaceable in temptations and tribulations”⁶⁰⁹. If that change of sovereignty takes place and the rightful rule is established, we will obtain true spiritual peace. That center, heart or throne of the soul is also compared by Molinos with “that Edenic state of innocence forfeited by our first parents”⁶¹⁰ that can be recovered or reestablished by turning back to the original simplicity.

How to access that neutral Edenic state? How to evict the impostor that unrightfully occupies the throne of the soul? The keystone is

⁶⁰³ *GE*, III, 13, 129.

⁶⁰⁴ The symbol of the city is particularly developed in the book of *Revelation*. Regarding this subject, vid. René Guénon, “The divine city”, in *Symbols of Sacred Science*, Hillsdale (NY), 2004, pp. 443 ff. From other point of view, vid. C. G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, Princeton, 1967).

⁶⁰⁵ *GE*, I, 1, 1.

⁶⁰⁶ René Guénon, “Heart and brain”, in *Symbols of Sacred Science*, cit., p. 405 ff.

⁶⁰⁷ René Guénon, *Symbols of Sacred Science*, cit., p. 57 ff. Regarding the symbolism of the center, vid. as well Mircea Eliade, *Tratado de Historia de las Religiones* (*Treatise on the History of Religions*), Mexico, 1979, pp. 335-339.

⁶⁰⁸ *GE*, Preface, 2nd adv., 17.

⁶⁰⁹ *GE*, I, 1, 1.

⁶¹⁰ *GE*, III, 20, 204.

one word: *Nothing*. “The way to attain that high state of mind reformed, whereby a man immediately gets to the greatest good, to our first origin and to the highest peace, is the Nothing... Walk, walk in this safe path, and endeavor to overwhelm yourself in this Nothing, endeavor to lose yourself, to sink deep into it, if you have to be annihilated, united and transformed”⁶¹¹. It is the true elixir of life that emanates from Paradise; “O what a treasure will you find if you shall once fix your habitation in Nothing! And if you once get into the *center* of the Nothing, you will never concern yourself with anything that is without (the great ugly large step that so many thousand souls do stumble at)”⁶¹². In effect, *Nothing* is the magic word that unlocks the sealed door of the most unexplored chamber of the temple of man. “The soul keeps within its Nothing... lives transformed into the supreme good... lives plunged into God”⁶¹³. And, insofar as man dwells in the Nothing, that is, he detaches himself from the things, it is then when he makes room for God. Such is the case that, ultimately, even the attachment to God can become an obstacle in the way of spiritual detachment⁶¹⁴.

On several occasions, Molinos turns to the metaphor of the door in order to symbolize the separation and limit between two worlds or states: from the profane world to the sacred one, from the human to the divine. To pass through the threshold equals to pass from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge. This symbol having been employed by all the religious traditions, in the Christian tradition, Jesus Christ presents Himself as the true door (Jn. 10:9); “He

⁶¹¹ *GE*, III, 20, 196, 205.

⁶¹² *GE*, III, 20, 200.

⁶¹³ *GE*, III, 20, 199.

⁶¹⁴ “Know that he who would attain to the mystical science must be denied and detached from five things. 1. From the creatures; 2. From temporal things; 3. From the very gifts of the Holy Spirit; 4. From himself; 5. From God Himself. This last is the most perfect of all, because the soul that only knows how to be so detached is that which attains to being lost in God, and only that soul that is so lost is that which knows how to find itself” (*GE*, III, 18, 185). It is then taken back again one of the Meister Eckhart’s arguments: in order to find God, we must detach ourselves from God. “Therefore I beg God to make me free from God”.

(the Son of Man) is near, at the *door*” (Mk. 13:29); “Behold, I stand at the *door* and knock. If any man hear My voice and open the door, I will come to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20). To open it, it is first necessary to close the door to the world: “Keeping yourself in the Nothing, you will bar the *door* against everything that is not God; you will retire also your own self and walk toward that internal solitude where the divine spouse speaks in the heart of His bride, teaching her high and divine wisdom”⁶¹⁵. Once closed the doors of the senses, a door is opened to the happy land of the living. “By this door you must enter into the happy land of the living, where you will find the greatest good, the breath of charity, the beauty of righteousness, the straight line of equality and justice and, in sum, every joy and title of perfection”⁶¹⁶.

How to pass through the door of the Nothing? The answer is invariably the same: by being the Nothing, one already is, because man, as man, is nothing, the same way God is everything. The path is arduous and hard. Actually, “many are the souls that have arrived and do arrive at this *door*, but few have passed or do pass it”⁶¹⁷. Perseverance, prayer, silence and acceptance of the own nothingness are the keys; “Walk, persevere, pray and be silent, for where you find not a sentiment you will find a *door* whereby you may enter into your own nothingness”⁶¹⁸. Rest in this mystical silence and open the *door*, that so God may communicate Himself unto you, unite with you, and transform you”⁶¹⁹.

The apophatic contemplative tradition is aware that the quickest annihilation of the ego is not gotten with the roughness of the spiked belt nor with other physical or psychical mortifications, but through the total acceptance of the Nothing. Molinos places David himself in

⁶¹⁵ *GE*, III, 20, 203.

⁶¹⁶ *GE*, III, 20, 204.

⁶¹⁷ *GE*, Preface, 1st adv., 6.

⁶¹⁸ *GE*, I, 12, 77.

⁶¹⁹ *GE*, I, 17, 128.

this tradition: “That is the way [the Nothing] that David got a perfect annihilation, ‘*et ego ad nihilum redactus sum et nescivi*’ (Ps. 73:22)”⁶²⁰. “If you persevere constantly, He will not only purge you from affections and attachments to natural and temporal goods, but in His own time also He will purify you with the supernatural and sublime, such as are internal communications, inward raptures and ecstasies, and other infused graces, on which the soul rests and enjoys itself”⁶²¹. Only this way can one settle in the true humility; “Creep in as far as ever you can into the truth of your nothingness, and then nothing will disquiet you: nay, you will be humble and ashamed, losing openly your own reputation and esteem”⁶²². “The Nothing is the means to die to yourself” because, when one see that all the things of this world are nothing, the desire and pride of wanting to be someone cease.

The Nothing or void conceptually represents a state characterized by the inexistence of a subject or “I” who may be experienced as something real. It implies the verification that there is not any individual subject who can achieve or possess anything. It seems paradoxical, since, when one is There, there is no one who may claim anything. And when the individual consciousness appears and, with it, the subsequent sense of appropriation, one stops being There. The Nothing does not allow duality or feeling of separateness. That is why it is a state that, unable to be described by the intellect, is defined as “empty”. But the *Nothing* is not a didactic resource, but a metaphysical principle with formidable effects that cleanse the *heart* of all vanity and expectation in this world, since it indicates what the true nature of the soul is by defining it precisely for what it is not; “perfect and true dominion only governs in the Nothing”⁶²³ because that *nothing* marks the transition toward what is Not *nothing*. It is, as Dionysius the Areopagite would say, a “supra-essential darkness” or

⁶²⁰ *GE*, III, 20, 203.

⁶²¹ *GE*, I, 7, 43.

⁶²² *GE*, III, 20, 198.

⁶²³ *GE*, III, 20, 201.

“darkness of Unknowing”, insofar as it has no limits or particularities, but, precisely because of that, it is perfect fullness, since infinity has no limits or definition. As Meister Eckhart would say, the Nothing shows the way that must be walked by the soul *until attaining a state in which it was when it yet was not*.

SUFI EPILOGUE

“So remember Me and I will remember you”
(Quran, 2:152).

It is to be pointed out that, despite the disagreement or even hostility that has characterized the relationship between Christians and Muslims throughout history, beyond all dogmas and beliefs, we can still find certain fields or spaces of tolerance and fraternization based on common elements. Islam considers Muḥammad as the last messenger sent by God, that is, the *last of the prophets* (Quran, 33:40). In this prophetic mission, the Quran recognizes some predecessors such as Noah, Abraham, Moses or Jesus as chosen ones to receive a revelation and transmit it to men: “We have inspired you [O Muḥammad] as We inspired Noah and the prophets after him; We also inspired Abraham, Ismael, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons, Jesus, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms” (Quran, 4:163). It is not a new revelation, but the *remembrance* of or return to the original revelation. In the case of Muḥammad, the divine message was transmitted by means of the Archangel Gabriel (Quran, 42:52; 53:4-9). Through His revelations to the prophets, God keeps alive and pure the only *straight religion according to God’s Creation* (Quran, 30:30). That is why, according to Islam, the message of the prophets is always one and the same.

The Quran explicitly agrees with Abraham’s religion, that is, original Judaism: “Follow the religion of Abraham” (Quran, 3:95), since “there has been an excellent example for you in Abraham and those with him” (Quran, 60:4). It also accepts the prophetic labor carried out by Moses: “God spoke to Moses directly” (Quran, 4:164) and entrusted him with His commandments: “We gave Moses the

Book... explaining all things in detail and a guidance and a mercy” (Quran, 6:154). Likewise, It accepts, admits and recognizes the prophetic mission and teachings of Jesus as a chosen one sent by God to announce the Gospel, to whom “We gave clear signs [of his mission] and supported him with the Holy Spirit” (Quran, 2, 86)⁶²⁴. Nonetheless, even though original Christianity is accepted, certain adherences and formal dogmas that came later are refused, since they are considered to be deviations caused by man. But I do not mean to highlight what separates us, but what unites us beyond the external shapes and clothes: that common element cannot be other than fraternal love. As the Sufi Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240) said:

“My heart can take on all form:

A meadow for gazelles, a cloister for monks.

For the idols, sacred ground, Ka‘ba for the circling pilgrim,

The tables of the Torah, the scrolls of the Quran.

I profess the religion of love,

Whatever its caravan turns along the way,

That is the belief, the faith I keep”.

In effect, according to certain Islamic tendencies, the discussions about religions and dogmas move us away from the true thing, which is to experience the sacred or, rather, the Oneness. Out of the spiritual, mystical and esoteric movements and tendencies of Islam, Sufism (word that comes from *ṣūf*, wool, of which the garments of the early ascetics were made of, symbolizing humility) is one of the most traditional ones. They gather in brotherhoods or fraternities around a

⁶²⁴ The Quran refuses the claim –maintained by Jews and Christians– that they are the only ones who possess the true religion (Quran, 2:135-140; 3:65-68). Once accepted the legitimacy of origin of Judaism and Christianity, Islam considers that both religious traditions have moved away from their source and that it is necessary to rectify or return to the original message. Muḥammad reproached Christians for the dogma of the Trinity, since it contradicts monotheism, and he therefore denied the divinity of Jesus. Given that “God is one, God is eternal” (Quran, 112:1-2), Jews and Christians “took their rabbis and their monks and also the Messiah, the son of Mary, to be their lords besides God. They were not commanded except to worship one God. There is no god but Him, praise be to Him, above whatever

master that “initiates” the candidates directly or through his delegates, transmitting them the spiritual influence (*Baraka*). Each brotherhood has its rule or *tarīqa*, “path, method”, not only about organizational matters, but also concerning the ascetic and meditative practices. As it is known, the most spread one is the recitation or remembrance of God (*Dhikr*): “And remember your Lord when you forget Him” (Quran, 18:24). Out of the formulas or verses of the Quran, the preferred one is “There is no god but God” (*lā ilāha illa Allāh*).

I do not mean to cover the whole history of Sufism in this epilogue, nor will I even try to present its profuse variety of “paths”, subject about which I do not consider myself competent, by the way. I will just confine myself to showing the characteristics of some Sufis, especially those belonging to one of the Sufi brotherhoods or “paths” (*Turuq*) that have had the greatest influence on Spain: *Shadhili* Sufism⁶²⁵, which owes its name to Abū-l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḍilī, a Rif who lived in the 13th century in the village of Šāḍila (Tunisia), following an austere life. Abū-l-Ḥasan was the disciple of Ibn Mašš the Rif, who in turn had received the *Baraka* from the Sevillian Abū Madyān. Out of the main Sufi writings, I should mention: Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī, *At-Tanwīr fī-isqāṭ at-taqdīr*, about “disregard”; “*Miftāḥ al-falāḥ wa-miṣbāḥ al-arwāḥ*”, about mental prayer and the prayer of “quiet” and “solitude”; Abū-l-‘Abbās al-Mursī, *Laṭā’if al-minan*, about the contemplative way; and *Kitāb al-Ḥikam*, under the shape of short sentences about eremitic life.

According to Abū-l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḍilī, insofar as we have been expelled from Paradise, this world is not a real fatherland. That is why man longs to achieve a state (or mansion) that may give him back his original condition or nature (*Laṭā’if*, 1, 202). Likewise, the Sufi Abū

they associate with Him” (Quran, 9:31), and, as well, “It is an infidel who says: ‘God is the third of three’” (Quran, 5:73), since “there is no god but God”.

⁶²⁵ For this purpose, this epilogue is mainly based on the selected texts published by Miguel Asín Palacios, *Šāḍīlīs y alumbrados*, Madrid 1990.

‘Abd-Allāh Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abbād (born in Ronda in 1371) explains, in his work *Šarḥ al-Ḥikam*, that man, as a man, is like a cast-away in the middle of the sea or like a traveler lost in the desert, who depends on God’s help to survive (*Šarḥ al-Ḥikam*, 2, 71). Before God, the pilgrim must understand his nothingness, since “Man existed after not having existed, and will stop existing after having existed. Therefore, we find the nothing in both ends” (*Laṭā’if*, 1, 207). Creatures are pure nothing before God; “Every created thing is darkness and is only illuminated with the appearance of God in it” (Ibn ‘Abbād, *Šarḥ al-Ḥikam*, 1, 15-16). Not only creatures are nothing, but also Creation itself, since just the One Being, who is God, is the Only Transcendental Reality. The Being is One and Unique; from its supreme Oneness is deduced the inexistence of all the rest of things, which, consequently, are illusory, false and vane (*Šarḥ al-Ḥikam*, 1, 93).

Therefore, the knowledge of the mysteries of God cannot come from the created things, since they are illusory, but, initially and as a previous step, from the detachment from them; “Do not move from creature to creature, since you will be like the donkey of the mill, which does walk, true, but the place where it moves to is the same as the place where it came from. On the contrary, move from the creatures to the Creator, since your Lord is the end and the goal” (*Šarḥ al-Ḥikam*, 1, 32). It is not the same *to lie* in the world, that is, to identify ourselves with Creation, and *to be* in the world, understanding the inanity of everything; “It is very different whether you are with the things or the things are with you. That you are with the things equals that you are subject to them and that you need them, that is, that you are their slave and they may later abandon you when you may have most need of them. You are with the things while you are not contemplating Him who has given them the being. However, while you are contemplating Him who has given them the being, then the things are with you” (*Šarḥ al-Ḥikam*, 2, 63-65).

If only the *Being* is, and there is nothing other than the *Being* (*lā ilāha illa Allāh*), then the beings are mere appearances with illusory freedom and will. Whoever may try to claim his autonomy and freedom is not only ignorant, but also idolatrous, since he would be claiming for himself what is an exclusive property of God. To believe that there are more beings other than the *Being* is, therefore, a mistake that, as all the rest of mistakes, can be solved. As Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240) said: “Beloved! Let us go towards the union. And if we find the way to separation, let us destroy separation!”.

1.- Recollection

In order to successfully walk on the Way (and experience) of the Oneness, we must understand which things cause separation and which human instruments or faculties cannot, due to their nature, be used as aids. Like in other initiatic or metaphysical traditions, the seeker must experiment until he understands that speculation and reasoning are not the right means to pray *with the heart*, since “how can we get to know, by means of rational knowledge, Him through whom this knowledge is known? How can we get to know, by means of any thing, Him whose Being precedes the being of all things?” (*Laṭā’if*, 1, 198). The body senses cannot be used either, for we use them to get around the external world. On the contrary, in order to enter the mansions of the *Being*, we must suspend or nullify the senses.

Regarding such a conclusion, Islam not only is the heir of the Eastern and Western contemplative traditions, which it unashamedly accepts, but it will also reformulate and reinforce the hermeneutics of the sacred (old wine into new wineskins). Against dispersion (*tafrīqa*) before the created things, recollection (*ḡam‘*) is explained as the practice of collecting, gathering and devoting all the senses, thoughts and concerns to or in God (*Hayya*, 2, 278). First of all, we

must leave aside all concerns and interests that come from the world. Next, once we have lost the interest in the created things, we must suspend all the powers and senses in order to free the soul from the body ties. Finally, we must focus our attention on the *real essence of the heart*, plunging into it. “This way, by remaining in this state longer every time, the inner vision will gradually become clearer and purer until opening to the intuitive contemplation of the Lord” (Kamaṣṭhānawī, *Ġāmi* ‘, 119). The heart is a sort of subtle or “narrow door” that gives access to the Spirit, that is, to the *real essence of the heart*. It is there where *He* dwells. As Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) explained:

The cross of the Christians, from end to end,
 I surveyed; He was not there.
 I went to the Hindu temples and to the ancient pagodas.
 No trace was visible there.
 I went to the mountains of Herat and Kandahar.
 I looked; He was not in hill or dale.
 With unswerving purpose I reached the Mount Qāf;
 There was only the abode of ‘Anqā’.
 I bent the reins of search to the Ka‘ba;
 He was not in that refuge of old and young...
 I gazed into my own heart;
 There I saw Him; He was nowhere else.”

The Sufis insist that the method to attain mental quiet and silence consists in putting away all the thoughts by using concentration and focusing on only one thought: God (*Maḥāḥir*, 130-132). Islam gives a great importance to the previous formalities and to the posture of the body during prayer, which, depending on the case, must be carried out in a purified place, with a humble attitude and facing the *Qibla*, with both hands palm up on the knees (*Maḥāḥir*, 130-132), closed eyes, considering oneself as a dead man, and looking for shelter in God (Kamaṣṭhānawī, *Ġāmi* ‘, 170). Prayer must be carried out

with humility. And the highest degree of humility is achieved “when we do not claim any merit for ourselves, even the ones coming from deeds of humility, which, rather than ours, are God’s” (Aḥmad Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī, *Miftāḥ al-falāḥ wa-miṣbāḥ al-arwāḥ*, 204).

First of all, we must move away from the thoughts by means of the vocal recitation of the quick prayer “There is no god but God” (*lā ilāha illa Allāh*), uttered with energy and recollection. Over time, when the thoughts completely stop, our attention will move from our mind to our heart, the recitation will become sweeter and deeper, and we will be able to pass from oral to mental prayers. A moment will come when we can even skip mental recitation, remaining calm and silent. However, “you will be able to achieve this result just for one or two hours at the most, since foreign thoughts will soon crowd together in your spirit again. If you can disregard them only with your resolution and move away from everything that may suggest them, you shall do it. But, if you cannot, then return to the mental remembrance of the quick prayer, trying to understand the meaning of the words, but without representing the form of the letters with your imagination. And if increasingly numerous and more intense foreign thoughts pile in, then add the vocal prayer to the mental one, with decision and constancy at most moments. This way, the nakedness of your spirit will increase and grow, and you will defeat distractions” (Kamaṣṣhānawī, *Ġāmi‘*, 172).

2.- *Dhikr or remembrance of God*

The remembrance of God is a fire that, when entering a room, says: “I and no other than I...”. If there is firewood in that room, it converts it into fire, and if there is darkness, it lights it up (*Miftāḥ al-falāḥ wa-miṣbāḥ al-arwāḥ*, 93). The aim of the remembrance of God (*Dhikr*) is to break free from ignorance and suffering by means of the constant presence of God in the heart (*Miftāḥ*, Preface). There are three stages. Firstly, there is a prayer or remembrance, exclusively

vocal or external, with which we struggle not to wander outside the heart around the valleys of the vane thoughts (*Miftāh*, 92). After that comes the mental prayer with effort; then, the spontaneous and natural mental prayer. Finally, we reach the thoughtless prayer of quiet, in which we lose the consciousness of being praying because God has taken over our heart up to the extent that we do not notice the existence of our remembrance or our own heart. That is why, if we pay attention to the fact of remembering or to our heart, this return to the consciousness will involve the rise of a thought that will act as a veil that covers God and makes us go out of the ecstatic contemplation. In such a state, “the contemplative forgets himself, stops feeling and is unaware of his own body and of the external world; he has gone toward God and has gotten lost in Him. However, if he, in such a state, gets the idea that he has wasted his time with ecstasy, this means that his ecstasy was still unclear and impure” (*Miftāh*, 94).

As in Christianity, we find in Islam similar discussions about the preeminence of contemplation over meditation⁶²⁶. Unlike vocal prayer and pious reflections or meditation, mental prayer, concentrated and sustained in the only thought of God, “is nobler and higher, since the contemplative loses the consciousness of his own prayer and of all created things due to its intensity, to his absolute self-control and to his attention to nothing or nobody but the remembrance of God, until he is touched by God Himself”, since “the true

⁶²⁶ On one hand, it is affirmed that the begging prayer to God may be irreverent and impolite toward Him, insofar as this petition implies that the person who asks believes that God either does not remember or is neglecting what He is asked for (Ibn ‘Abbād ar-Rundī, *Šarḥ al-Hikam*, 2, 11). But, on the other hand, no petition can alter God’s will, since what the prayer asks for was already decreed by Him from eternity past and, therefore, its cause cannot be a man’s prayer, because God’s decrees would then lose their highness and their sublime independence, insofar as they would depend on an efficient, occasional cause. Being God the absolute and only one cause of all events, “No disaster strikes upon the earth... except that it is written before We bring it into being. Indeed, for God, this is easy” (Quran, 57:22), so “never will we be struck except by what God has decreed for us” (Quran, 9:51; cf. 16:61; 25:2; 27:57). In sum, God’s Grace does not depend on whatever the believer does or does not do, because, “where were you when you did

essence of mental prayer is that the remembrance of God and of every other being must cease to exist, so that only the remembered object may exist” (Aš-Šuštārī, *Šarḥ Rā’iyya*, 127-128).

In the Islamic tradition, the most powerful Dhikr is: “There is no god but God” (*lā ilāha illa Allāh*). Etymologically, the word *Allāh* would come from the third person singular of the verb to be with the affix *hu*. In Arabic, this verb is usually omitted in the present tense, and thus it is not conjugated in a usual way. That is why *Allāh* would be derived from the union of the article (*Al*), the particle *li* (what belongs to *him*) and the affix *hu*. According to all this, it is considered that God has no grammatical person, neither is He masculine nor feminine, neither plural nor singular. Thus, *Allāh* would mean “He who Is”, “The (Only) Being” or “His”, that is, all is His and all comes from Him. In this sense, His name would have the same etymology as Yahweh (He who Is).

When reciting “There is no god but God”, the first part causes a purgation of everything that is not God, that is, the false idols that revolve around the “I” or ego; and the second part, the affirmative one, brings His illumination (*Miftāḥ al-falāḥ wa-miṣbāḥ al-arwāḥ*, 122-136). This prayer cleanses the heart of everything that is not God, since, as the room must be cleaned before the King’s arrival, the same has to be done in the heart (*Miftāḥ*, 177). In an anonymous mystical commentary on a certain *ḥadīth*, it is stated, “My castle is ‘there is no lord but God’. Whoever may enter my castle is surely free of suffering... The clause ‘there is no lord’ is like a broom that sweeps the dust of all the things different from God... so that you may be an apt subject to become the throne [of God]... and the object of God’s look at the heart” (*Escorialense Manuscript*, 1566, page 9, V). This way, through the practice of recitation, “if the authority of ‘There is no lord by God’ absolutely rules the citadel of your human-

not yet exist in eternity?” (*Šarḥ al-Hikam*, 2, 9). When the *believer* understands this paradox, he turns towards a purer prayer.

ity, there will be in your house no other mansions, and no being but God will walk through it, and these other beings will have no permanent and stable dwelling in it" (*Escorialense Manuscript*, 1566, page 15, R).

3.- *On ecstasy (fanā') and other non-dual states*

The ecstatic trance or rapture is one of the most sought-after goals for many Sufis. Such a seeking is full of dangers and frustrations for those who attempt to enter this Way with the only aim of appropriating something, without understanding that it is precisely about the opposite: the detachment from oneself, emptying oneself, detaching oneself even from the desire itself of ecstasy. Anyway, as well as in the Hindu or Christian mysticism, the Sufi Abū-l-'Abbās al-Mursī, in *Laṭā'if*, 1, 216, distinguishes two kinds of ecstatics: those who, during ecstasy, are with the ecstasy itself; and those who, during ecstasy, are with Him who causes it. The former are servants of the ecstasy, because they just seek an experience, and the world of experiences is the world of the ego, whereas the latter are servants of Him who causes it (God). A feature of the former is that they feel sad when losing ecstasy and happy when falling into it. A feature of the latter is that, on the contrary, they do not feel happy when falling into it nor sad when losing it, because they are settled in a perfect quiet. One thing is to rule over things, without the things possessing you, and another different thing is to live clung to the experiences of the things. Whereas the former provides true knowledge, that is, permanent and imperturbable knowledge, the latter, no matter how much ecstasy we may put into the task, is but a mere state, something that is not durable. That is why there is a clear difference between *state*, which is temporary because all things that change must cease, and *mansion*, that is, a permanent condition that has no backward step.

The detachment must be so deep that it involves a disinterest in life or, rather, a lack of longing to exist. If, as Saint Paul explained, “*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*” (Gal. 2:20), there is not “someone” who lives, so that, as Abū Madyan said: “Whoever has not died will not see the Truth”. According to the 11th-century Persian mystic Baba Tahir, the highest knowledge is that “which comes from the union of the Gnostic with his Object of knowledge, of the contemplative with his Object of contemplation, and from the absolute non-existence of his being in the sacred Essence of the Beloved”. But what happens when the contemplative object of knowledge is the subject himself? What is more, what happens when the “I” dies out? How to explain the experience of a “subject” that has no sense of individuality? What “I” can claim the authorship or the experience of anyone who has no sense of the “I”? We are still in the field of mystery and paradox, since “what is this sense of duality, believing that I am I and that you are you? ... Since you are, let all else cease to be” (Ḥakīm Sanā’ī, died in 1150, *Ḥadiqat al-Ḥaqīqa*). If *there is no being but the Being*, all references to an “I” separated from a “you” or a “he” are illusory. As there are no “I’s” other than the Only One I (God), to perceive oneself is to perceive Him: “I have not created perception in you but that you may be my object of perception. If you perceive me, then you perceive yourself. But you will not perceive me through yourself. It is through my look that you see me, and you see yourself” (Ibn ‘Arabī, 1165-1240). Islamic metaphysics actually explains the height of detachment as a self-annihilation of the “I” (*fanā’*), as a return or unification (*ittiḥād*) with God. In addition, as the Paradise, which, according to some, implies the duality God-I, is a golden prison, they even talk about the *extinction of the extinction*, referring to a mansion that is not experienceable and is beyond human comprehension, since, insofar as the barriers of individuality are transcended in such a state of union and takes place the reinstatement or identification with the Oneness, then it is not possible to talk about an “I”, a “you” or even a “He” as separate entities. That is why Ḥusayn Maṣṣūr Ḥallāğ (857-

922) stated, “I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart and asked Him: Who are you? He answered me: You! ... And now I am Yourself, Your experience is my experience and also my love”. The same mystery is explained by Abū Yazīd Baṣṭāmī (11th century): “I was contemplating my Lord... with the True eye and asked Him: Who are you? He answered: neither I nor other than I... When I finally contemplated the True through the True, I lived the True through the True and survived in the True through the True in an eternal present, without breath, without words, without hearing, without science”, then, in the Oneness, “the consciousness of the *others* disappears, that is, the consciousness of the beings that are not God; there is a relationship of intimacy with Him” (Ibn ‘Abbād ar-Rundī, *Šarḥ al-Ḥikam*, 2, 90). Given that such mansions are inexpressible, the descriptions made by the Sufis, employing metaphors and literary turns of phrase that seem to affirm the *divinity* of the contemplative, were seen with suspicion, if not with open hostility, by the religious authorities. One of the most famous examples of this was the mystic Maṣṣūr Ḥallāḡ, sentenced to die for affirming “*anā al-ḥaqq*” (I am the truth). Several centuries after him, the Sufi Jalaluddin Rumi tried to explain that there was no trace of heretic arrogance, but, indeed, of self-humiliation, in the statement, “I am the truth”, since he who identified himself that way with God was assuming “I am nothing, He is everything, there is no being but God”. But, on the contrary, he who said, “I am the servant of God” was committing a fault of pride because he was affirming two existences: his own one and God’s one.

Thus, we reach the end of the metaphysical Way with a dilemma that summarizes the mystery and the paradox of the seeker: While there is an “I”, there is experience, but it is false because it prolongs and perpetuates the duality between a subject who seeks experiences and an experienced object. On the contrary, without an “I”, the experience itself is useless. In effect, every experience, insofar as it implies the belief in an experiencing subject different from the Being

(God), is erroneous. But, on the other hand, the only real and everlasting “experience” (the contemplation of God) is not, strictly speaking, an experience, because there is no “I” who may experience anything and, consequently, there is nobody who may enjoy or use that experience.

Surrendered the existence, we can only obey the Lord’s intentions and await the moment when the veil of existence will fall as a prelude to the eternal Union. Then:

I shall roll up the carpet of life when I see
 Your dear face again, and shall cease to be,
 for the I will be lost in that rapture, and all
 the threads of my thought from my hand will fall;
 not me will You find, for this I will have fled:
 You will be my soul in my own soul’s stead.
 All thought of me will be swept from my mind,
 and You, only You, in my place shall I find,
 more precious than heaven, than earth more dear,
 myself were forgotten if You were near”.

[Nūr ad-Dīn ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Jāmī (1414-1492), *The I dies in love*].

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