
MYSTICAL DEATH IN THE MYSTICISM OF 'THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING'

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Abstract

The aim of our study is to contribute to understanding of the phenomenon of mystical death on the basis of a phenomenological-hermeneutical research of mysticism of 'The cloud of unknowing'. The phenomenological aspect of the study is focused on identification of specific attributes (invariant structure) of the phenomenon of mystical death as it is documented in the corpus of 'The cloud of unknowing' written by an anonymous author. The hermeneutical aspect of our research is aimed at recognition of the meaning of mystical death as a universal process of 'ontological' transformation, in which the archetypal matrix life–death–rebirth re-actualises.

Keywords: mystical death, Christian mysticism, medieval spirituality

1. Introduction

For the purpose of this study we have adopted an understanding of mystical death as proposed by Martin Dojčár. By mystical death we understand a transcending movement of consciousness directed from individualized consciousness (consciousness 'ontologically' defined by individual psychosomatic structure, so called *ego*) to trans-individual consciousness (consciousness 'ontologically' transcending individual boundaries of individual psychosomatic structure) that is followed by a processes of a psycho-spiritual-somatic character resembling dying in the sense of a description of objective, possibly subjective thanatology [1]. The structure of this process is expressed by the matrix *life, death and rebirth* as formulated by Slavomír Gálik [2]. In the Christian tradition this matrix corresponds to *mysterium paschalis* – 'paschal mystery', the key event of the Christian faith – death of the old man and rebirth of a new man (Ephesians 4.22–24) – represented by the symbolism of Christ crucified and risen. The Gospel of John refers to the paschal mystery in the same sense: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12.24). In the Christian spirituality

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mysterium paschalis acquires the form of the ‘mysticism of the cross’. Josef Sudbrack [3] identifies the ‘mysticism of the cross’ with the ‘mysticism of the night’ that finds its complete theological expression in the *spirituality of the dark night* of Saint John of the Cross.

When Slavomír Gálik [2, p. 48] discovers the aim of every mysticism in trans-individual completion of a mystic in the Being that transcends all divine epiphanies and the subject-object division, he argues in favour of universality of the process of mystical death, based on two axioms: (1) “a man is physiologically, socially and psychologically basically the same everywhere, which is expressed by the very term a man” and (2) “in all religions it is acknowledged that there exists a personal and impersonal, unconditional, omnipresent and transcendental Being” [2, p. 49]. These axioms, considered Gálik, draw the thesis about universality of mystical death that remains universal even if articulated in various cultural ways.

In their study, the authors argue in favour of the stance of universality of mystical death while supporting their claim by the in-depth study of *The cloud of unknowing*, the classical work of medieval Christian spirituality, which appears to support such a thesis. The following pages discuss psycho-spiritual ‘experience’ of mystical death in the mysticism of *The cloud of unknowing* from both phenomenological and hermeneutical points of view.

2. Study methodology of the mystical death in ‘The cloud of unknowing’

Our research of the phenomenon of mystical death in the mysticism of *The cloud of unknowing* is based on two assumptions: (1) mystical death represents an autonomous form of spiritual experience that cannot be reduced to other types of human experience, (2) the phenomenon of mystical death can be subjected to rational examination [4].

In our exploration we had drawn our inspiration from both phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches within religious studies. The phenomenological-hermeneutical approach to examination of religious phenomena is different from the approach of other special sciences, including descriptive religion, ideologically rooted in positivism with its ideal of a science without assumptions (‘hard science’) and objectivity. While the empirical-objective character of special sciences focused on objectification, reification of the examined actualities does not allow penetrating into the particularity (invariant structure) and the meaning of the examined phenomena that stand aside the sphere of objectivity, the phenomenological-hermeneutical approach is directed towards understanding of the particularity and meaning of religious or spiritual phenomena, respectively.

Since spiritual phenomena, including the phenomenon of mystical death, transcend empirical experience, escape a positive quantifiable definition and a methodical grasp by Natural sciences, in our effort to capture the particularity of the phenomenon of mystical death, as well as its meaning for those involved, we cannot manage with a ‘standard’ methodology of religious studies derived from

the methodology of Natural sciences and based on the dualistic Cartesian idea of the Universe as a 'mechanism' diversified in constitutive paradigmatic distinction into a presupposed subject and a presupposed object of cognition, mutually clearly differentiated, and an independent subject and object (*idea clara et distincta*). In postmodern interpretation of the sacred poly-semantic model of interpretation of religious experience seems to be preferred [5].

The empirical (as well as phenomenological) phase of our research, focused on collection of empirical (as well as phenomenological) data, their description and classification, is therefore being expanded to include hermeneutical phase that aims at understanding of the meaning of religious and spiritual matters, respectively. Since the meaning of religious and spiritual matters is not given objectively and therefore, it is not "objectively", i.e. empirically accessible, it requires an "engaged interpretive effort" [6] that finds its prominent expression in participative methods of Religious studies. The "engaged interpretive effort" is on one hand connected to decoding of signs and structures of the interpreted phenomenon and on the other hand, to empathy, similarly as in the case of interpretation of artworks [7].

The "engaged interpretive effort" is inspired by a method of informed empathy by Ninian Smart in our case. Smart's method of 'informed' or 'qualified' empathy is understood as an effort to understand the experience of others from the inside through 'empathy' [8]. The understanding we aim at is thus a synthesis of 'hard' and 'soft' data, an outcome of the application of phenomenological and hermeneutical method.

3. Phenomenology of mystical death in 'The cloud of unknowing'

Our critical reading of *The cloud of unknowing* is based on critical edition of *The cloud of unknowing and The book of private counselling* edited by Phyllis Hodgson, while references in the text are related to the modernized translation of Clifton Wolters.

In the teaching of the anonymous author of *The cloud of unknowing* mystical death appears as a 'breaking point' of the transformation process leading to mystical unification (*unio mystica*), whose completion is to "be united to God in spirit, one with Him in love, and will" [9]. The 'work' of contemplation, the central thesis of author's treatises, presupposes *mystical death*, because right here, in the climactic act of self-submission, in the self-transcending surrender, love reaches its highest point and contemplation its perfection.

The spiritual instruction offered by *The cloud* is a journey to God through loving concentration without words and thoughts; since it is impossible to know God through reason, but only through love – that is the crucial thesis floating through the entire work.

According to the anonymous author of *The cloud of unknowing*, God is not unknowable; however, he cannot be understood through reason. This thesis reminds us of a latter teaching on *docta ignorantia* of Nicolaus Cusanus [10]. A

method directed towards His knowing, lies not in thinking but in concentration. In several repeated statements the English mystic emphasizes that the most important of all is to cooperate with the ‘work’ that God is carrying out in man’s soul, to accept His gift of love and through love to turn to Him in rational darkness constantly. The greatest challenge of contemplation is to persevere in this ‘darkness’, to persist in the ‘cloud of unknowing’ standing between a man and God and in the ‘cloud of forgetting’ that stands between a man and the world.

Awareness is what remains in the cognitive ‘darkness’. Like a pure spirit released from every burden, attention released from objects of attention finally turns to itself.

The author calls it a “naked intention”, this liberating of awareness from constantly changing objects of attention and connects it with the loving desire so often that it even seems they were one. Desire, or love, is the unifying force of practice, it unfolds it and directs it [9, p. 173], concentration as a focus of consciousness is the life-giving force of practice. Both of them are necessary.

The method of turning the awareness to God might seem surprising. “This utter determination, firmly based as it is on true belief, must be the simple recognition and blind acceptance of your own existence, and no more than this, either intellectually or emotionally.” [9, p. 161]

The theological basis of the doctrine of *The cloud of unknowing* about the subject of contemplation is the biblical teaching about God’s likeness. “Our soul has some affinity with Him”, the medieval theologian writes, “of course, because we have been created in His image and likeness” [9, p. 62].

God is “your being, and what you are, you are in him” [9, p. 161–162], the anonymous author of *The cloud of unknowing* develops the ideas further on. The spiritual journey to God’s Being thus leads directly through man’s being (*esse*), the union with God occurs through the naked, in itself resting (‘blind’) consciousness of one’s own existence, “simple, vague consciousness of myself” [9, p. 185].

Therefore, the English mystic strongly encourages his reader: you just “keep in mind (...) that you are as you are” [9, p. 162], concentrate on “the simple fact of your existence” [9, p. 167]. “If you think about anything in particular except your own bare, blind existence (...) – then you are on the wrong track.” [9, p. 174] “So please do no more in this matter than realize quite simply that you are as you are” [9, p. 164], the medieval master of contemplation implores.

The background of the Englishman’s teaching on contemplation reflects a traditional metaphysical difference between ‘the act of being’ (*esse*, as well as *actus essendi*) as the principle of existence, and ‘being’ (*ens*) with its beingness (*essentia*, *quidditas* – what is making being as being) that Martin Heidegger called *ontological difference*. A prerequisite for contemplation in the intentions of the teaching of *The cloud of unknowing* is therefore the understanding of the difference between the act of being and being and its implementation in the process of contemplation.

The method of the mystical author of *The cloud of unknowing* thus consists in “the simple recognition and blind acceptance of your own existence” [9, p. 161]. The union with God occurs through consciousness of own existence [9, p. 185]. Contemplation finally culminates in self-transcending surrender, in the act of mystical death, when a soul is “lovingly making itself nothing and exalting God as all in all” [9, p. 178]. “You will come to this experience by the way”, *Epistle of privy counsel* teaches, “without ceasing relax in the naked awareness of your self, ever giving your self up to God as the most precious offering you can make” [9, p. 198].

The contemplative method of the author of *The cloud of unknowing* has a non-object or objectivity transcending character, because it does not actualize in the medium of thinking or the medium of relating to an object of consciousness, but in turning the awareness of consciousness to the consciousness itself through ‘feeling’ of one’s own existence or the ‘idea of self’ (*ego*). The result of the transcending movement of contemplation is self-surrender, in which the human condition ‘breaks’ (mystical death) and “unconditioned mode of being” is established [11].

4. Conclusions

If the notion mysticism denotes a renewal or “reintegration of the torn unity of being” [12], the phenomenon of mystical death represents a ‘turning point’ in the dynamics of this ontological metamorphosis. The structure of the transformation process of mystical death is expressed by the matrix *life, death and rebirth*, where the phenomenon of mystical death takes the position of the middle member between two ultimate positions – mystical unification and individual self-alienation. Consequently, in mystical death, as in the ‘turning point’ there occurs a qualitative ‘transformation’ of consciousness in the context of dynamics of its transit from a conditioned (*ego*) to a nonconditioned mode (*Self*).

Since mystical death presupposes “consciousness as a dynamic act, released from the contamination of contents” [13], its precondition is an optimal reduction of sensory perceptions and psycho-mental processes [14]. The very reality of consciousness is not created by the contemplating, in contemplation in no way; on the contrary, it is contemplated directly. While in three states of consciousness (wakeful consciousness, dreaming, dreamless sleep) our awareness is absorbed by observing various contents of consciousness, in mystical contemplation it releases itself from the absorption by its correlates and it turns to itself, so that observing itself, it gets to know itself as unconditioned consciousness that is a precondition of a possibility of every awareness. As a transcendental precondition of the possibility of every cognition, consciousness is not objectively given; it escapes every attempt for reification, grasp in an intentional act of knowing. Indirectly, consciousness can be thematized in a relation to the precondition of the possibility of knowing, wanting and acting; however, directly, i.e. non-mediate, consciousness is only available to

consciousness. Therefore, the essence of every effective introspection, as well as the core of the teaching on contemplation by the anonymous author of *The cloud of unknowing*, consists in turning the awareness away from everything that can be observed, and subsequently, turning the awareness on awareness itself. Primordial ‘experience’ of subjectivity in the form of a ‘pure consciousness event’ expresses itself as the non-mediated act of observation of awareness as such.

“Pure consciousness event” represents a central category of neo-essentialist discourse of Religious studies and Philosophy of religion, defined by Robert K.C. Forman as “a wakeful but contentless (non-intentional) consciousness” [15]. Precisely through non-intentionality, through the fact that “the subject is awake, conscious, but without an object or content of consciousness – no thoughts, emotions, sensations, or awareness of any external phenomena” [16], the pure consciousness event is to be differentiated from a ‘common’ experience that is in its focus on an object (intentionality) always an experience of ‘something’.

Our examination of mystical death in the mysticism of *The cloud of unknowing* shows that the final ‘experience’ of contemplation is typical of non-intentionality – it is a state of wakeful but contentless consciousness [17].

The effort to understand the phenomenon of mystical death in the background of the teaching of an anonymous author of *The cloud of unknowing* leads us to a philosophical question about its universality. The assumption that the aim of every mysticism is a trans-individual completion of a mystic in a transcendent Being, transcending the subject-object distinction [18], parallel to the postulated unity of human nature [2, p. 48], entitle us to draw a justifiable conclusion about the universality of the phenomenon of mystical death as a psycho-spiritual process of the transit from the conditioned to the unconditioned mode of being.

The teaching of the anonymous author of *The cloud of unknowing* certifies that the final aim of mystical spirituality is transcendence of the human condition, actualization of the “unconditioned mode of being” [11]. Various mystics, regardless of the time and place, attest a transition through a psycho-spiritual process of ‘dissolving’ of the sensational “existence” [*Dasein*] [19], known as ‘mystical death’ in the Christian spiritual tradition. Together with mystics we can conclude that it is the end of the sense of separateness, so called mystical death, Eliade’s ontological ‘break’, characterized by liberating from every conditionality, which enables rebirth in the unconditioned mode of being [20].

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