
MYSTICAL DEATH IN THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF ECKHART TOLLE

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Abstract

Eckhart Tolle is one of the representatives of a new trend of ‘spirituality without religiosity’. Among the main motifs of Tolle’s spirituality is the phenomenon of ‘mystical death’ despite the fact that Tolle doesn’t refer to the notion of ‘mystical death’ explicitly. Our study provides a kind of preliminary hermeneutics of mystical death in the teachings of Eckhart Tolle in regard to the traditional meaning of this notion in the history of Christian spirituality. We propose to consider the so-called ‘mystical death’ a turning point in the dynamics of spiritual process related to the phenomena of psycho-spiritual-somatic nature, which resemble dying, where it takes the position of the middle member between two ultimate positions – individual alienation and trans-individual fulfilment.

Keywords: mystical, mysticism, consciousness, spiritual, transformation

1. Introduction

Eckhart Tolle is one of the foremost representatives of a new global trend of ‘spirituality without religiosity’, i.e. spirituality without connection to religion. Among the main motifs of Tolle’s spirituality is the phenomenon of ‘mystical death’. Although Tolle doesn’t refer to the notion of mystical death directly, it is positioned in the very centre of the key epiphany of his life, the ‘spiritual transformation’ event or ‘spiritual awakening’, as he calls it himself, and it belongs among the constituents of his teachings. The aim of our study is to present a specific interpretation of the concept of mystical death in the teachings of Eckhart Tolle in regard to the traditional meaning of this notion in the history of Christian spirituality. In other words, in what relationship is Tolle’s concept of mystical death to the traditional concept of mystical death as it is documented in the history of Christian spirituality?

The methodological core of our research is formed by phenomenological description and analysis of the phenomenon of mystical death in the epiphany of spiritual transformation of Eckhart Tolle, which is primarily concerned with

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identification of the structure of mystical death. Subsequently, using the method of hermeneutical analysis, phenomenal features of the phenomenon of mystical death in the teachings of Eckhart Tolle are identified.

2. Christian context of the notion of mystical death

In our previous articles (*Mystical death in the mysticism of The cloud of unknowing* [1]; *Mystical death in the life and teachings of Ramana Maharshi* [2]), we have described characteristics of the traditional notion of mystical death in Christian spirituality. The first stage of our current study displays traditional Christian view of mystical death as a reference point of our investigation of Tolle's view of mystical death. We have previously defined mystical death as “*a transcending movement of consciousness directed from individualized consciousness (consciousness ‘ontologically’ defined by individual psycho-somatic structure) to transindividual consciousness (consciousness ‘ontologically’ transcending individual boundaries of individual psycho-somatic structure) that is accompanied by processes of a psycho-spiritual-somatic nature resembling dying in the sense of a description of objective, possibly subjective thanatology*” [1, p. 173]. At the same time, we have argued that the structure of this process is expressed by the matrix *death and rebirth*, which corresponds to *mysterium paschalis* – ‘paschal mystery’ in the Christian tradition, which is considered the key event of the Christian faith: death of an old man and rebirth of a new man (see Ephesians 4.22–24) that is represented by the symbolism of Christ crucified and risen. Theological grounding of Christian understanding of ‘mystical death’ is based on the Gospels’ idea about the necessity of being reborn of water and the Spirit (John 3.3–7), along with the Apostle Paul’s interpretation of the death and resurrection of Christ. In this sense, Christians, who are called to follow Christ, attempt at following Him also in this aspect of His life mysteriously represented by His death and resurrection.

Throughout the history of Christian spirituality, *mysterium paschalis* had found its expression in the ‘mysticism of the cross’, which was later identified with the ‘mysticism of the night’ by Saint John of the Cross [3]. According to the teachings of Saint John of the Cross, mystical death is the ‘death’ of the individual I [4]. *Through the act of detachment in the ‘dark night(s)’ human consciousness is liberated from its superficial identifications, that is from everything that can be observed and experienced as related to the individualized understanding of the Self.*

A similar interpretation of mystical death is also found in Karl Weinfurter, one of the representatives of ‘Christian mysticism’ in Czechoslovakia of the pre-war and interwar period, who believes mystical death to be a “*complete death of the old Adam so that Jesus Christ, the new, immortal, eternal Adam, could be born in his place*” [5].

For Květoslav Minařík, another representative of the Czechoslovak mysticism of the 20th century, mystical death represents “*processes of dying that are affecting that part of psychical beingness which is subjected to natural*

influences or forces” [6], while *beingness* is understood as “*a set of physical and mental elements*” of personality of a contingent nature [6, p. 59]. Minařík, like Weinfurter, relates mystical death to ‘mental introversion’, whose outcome is to be *mystical rebirth* as a beginning of the development of consciousness into transcendent states and qualities [6, p. 275]. Minařík includes particularly diverting of attention from the world [7] and moral discipline [6, p. 276] to the conditions of mystical rebirth.

The receptive moment of the transformational process of mystical death is approached by a Czech mystic of the 20th century, Míla Tomášová, when she characterises mystical death as “*the highest degree of surrender to God’s will, return of the individual flow of life to a complete awareness of unity with the Creator*” [8]. According to Tomášová, “*in the supreme phase, a human sacrifices their individual, limited feeling of life. They die within themselves and in their consciousness for God and they are resurrected in Him. They experience mystical death and resurrection.*” [8, p. 38]

In the following part of our study, we will have a closer look at how Eckhart Tolle understands this *transitus of consciousness*, which is expressed by the matrix *death and rebirth* in the Christian spirituality. Finally, we will discuss how his view relates to the traditional Christian one.

3. Phenomenology of mystical death in the story of Eckhart Tolle

Tolle’s notion of mystical death needs to be understood in the context and in regard to the central point of his teachings, which is ‘spiritual awakening’. According to Eckhart Tolle’s own autobiographical description, in 1977 at the age of 29, a profound ‘spiritual transformation’ dissolved his old identity and replaced it with the one of trans-individual nature and radically changed the course of his life. Afterwards, Tolle devoted the following years to understanding, integrating, and deepening that transformation event. Since he is not aligned with any particular religious or spiritual tradition, he developed his teachings on the grounds of his own experience and understanding. It is this context in particular that gives hermeneutical relevance to our research interest in Tolle’s own interpretation of the central point of his spiritual transformation.

Eckhart Tolle describes the course of his transformation in a book entitled *The Power of Now* [9]. Our phenomenological analysis of mystical death is therefore built on Tolle’s own autobiographical description.

3.1. The autobiographical description

Eckhart Tolle writes that up to being 29 years of age he had lived “*in continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression*”, where hatred to existence and “*deep longing for annihilation*” started to dominate over the longing for life [9, p. 3]. The deep existential crisis culminated one night in 1977. Here is how Tolle depicts the story: “*One night not long after my twenty-ninth birthday, I woke up in the early hours with a feeling of absolute dread. I*

had woken up with such a feeling many times before, but this time it was more intense than it had ever been. The silence of the night, the vague outlines of the furniture in the dark room, the distant noise of a passing train – everything felt so alien, so hostile, and so utterly meaningless that it created in me a deep loathing of the world. The most loathsome thing of all, however, was my own existence. What was the point in continuing to live with this burden of misery? Why carry on with this continuous struggle? I could feel that a deep longing for annihilation, for nonexistence, was now becoming much stronger than the instinctive desire to continue to live.

'I cannot live with myself any longer.' This was the thought that kept repeating itself in my mind. Then suddenly I become aware of what a peculiar thought it was. *'Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: the 'I' and the 'self' that 'I' cannot live with.'* 'Maybe,' I thought, *'only one of them is real.'*

I was so stunned by this strange realization that my mind stopped. I was fully conscious, but there were no more thoughts. Then I felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. It was a slow movement at first and then accelerated. I was gripped by an intense fear, and my body started to shake. I heard the words 'resist nothing', as if spoken inside my chest. I could feel myself being sucked into a void. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly, there was no more fear, and I let myself fall into that void. I have no recollection of what happened after that. [...]

That day I walked around the city in utter amazement at the miracle of life on Earth, as if I had just been born into this world. [...] I knew, of course, that something profoundly significant had happened to me, but I didn't understand it at all. It wasn't until several years later, after I had read spiritual texts and spent time with spiritual teachers, that I realized that what everybody was looking for had already happened to me. I understood that this intense pressure of suffering that night must have forced my consciousness to withdraw from its identification with the unhappy and deeply fearful self, which is ultimately the fiction of the mind. This withdrawal must have been so complete that this false, suffering self immediately collapsed, just as if a plug had been pulled out of an inflatable toy. What was left then was my true nature as the ever-present I am: consciousness in its pure state prior to identification with form. Later I also learned to go into that inner timeless and deathless realm that I had originally perceived as a void and remain fully conscious." [9, p. 3–5].

What can we learn about the structure of mystical death from the above description?

3.2. Characteristics of mystical death according to the autobiographical description

Eckhart Tolle is clear when describing his awakening experience – it occurred suddenly without being preceded by any spiritual practice. It was not only *immediate*, but it was also *not mediated* by any kind of previous knowledge

as Tolle's own narrative shows. As an immediate and non-mediated 'experience', the awakening event of Eckhart Tolle reminds us of the one of Ramana Maharshi (see *Mystical death in the life and teachings of Ramana Maharshi* [2]).

Following Tolle's narrative, we can distinguish five distinctive features of this transforming event. After **(1) an existential crisis** in a form of anxiety or depression had been intensified, an intense pressure of suffering caused that **(2) the mind stopped** for a moment and **a vortex of energy appeared**, which evoked **(3) a shift of attention** from objects of attention to the very subject of attention. Being **(4) accepted**, the inverted movement of consciousness culminated in **(5) the trans-individual identity**, distinguished and different from any form or ordinary self-image, that is, an identity relying on a connection with something that can be objectified, which we propose to call *individualized identity*. Tolle describes the finality of the transcending movement of consciousness, which we propose to call *trans-individual identity*, as "*consciousness in its pure state prior to identification with form*" [9, p. 5].

In short, Tolle metaphorically describes the finality of his experience "*as if I had just been born*". There is a huge hermeneutical potential in this metaphor for our topic of mystical death, we suppose. It is exactly this metaphor that can be related to the one mentioned in the Gospel of Saint John about being born of water and the Spirit (John 3.3–7), as well as to those concerning rebirth in the letters of Saint Paul (Romans 6.4–6, Ephesians 4.22–24).

Similarly to the spiritual awakening of the Indian *jñānī* Ramana Maharshi, spiritual transformation of Eckhart Tolle appears to be a direct, non-mediated event evoked by intensified existential crisis, which generated introversion and acceptance, and finally culminated in the shift of identity from the one limited to a particular psycho-somatic structure to the one unlimited by a particular psycho-somatic structure, that is a permanent trans-individual identity.

The very structure of the transformation event consists in its core in the shift of the direction of consciousness from objects of consciousness to the subject that is conscious of all objects as the following formulation demonstrates: "[T]his intense pressure of suffering that night must have forced my consciousness to withdraw from its identification with the unhappy and deeply fearful self... What was left then was my true nature as the ever-present I am: consciousness in its pure state prior to identification with form." [9, p. 5]. It is this issue of identity that Tolle deals with in all his teachings in an extensive manner. According to Eckhart Tolle, the human condition is characterized by "*an illusory sense of identity*" [10], *non-authentic identity*, based on identification with objects, body, thoughts and emotions, i.e. with sex, race, nationality, profession, social statuses and roles, opinions and knowledge, memories and desires that together create "my story" [10, p. 28–29] – an individuality constructed from life experiences and expectations for the future. The basic structure of the non-authentic identity is a "*complete identification with form*" [10, p. 22] that Tolle calls Ego in accordance with the broad spiritual tradition.

However, while attachment to form generates the non-authentic identity, non-attachment to form is a precondition of deconstruction of the illusory image of one's Self. In Tolle's conception, the principle of spiritual transformation is the shift of identity from the state of identification with form to the state without the identification with form in a non-intentional act of self-presence, which can be verbally expressed as "I am and I know that I am". This non-intentional act of self-presence is an act of self-transcendence in which the non-authentic image of one's Self based on the identification with form ceases and the primordial unity of Being and Knowing is recognized. In the words of Eckhart Tolle: "*When forms that you have identified with, that gave you your sense of self, collapse or are taken away, it can lead to a collapse of the ego, since ego is identification with form. When there is nothing to identify with anymore, who are you? When forms around you die or death approaches, your sense of Beingness, of I Am, is freed from its entanglement with form: Spirit is released from its imprisonment in matter. You realize your essential identity as formless, as an all-pervasive Presence, of Being prior to all forms, all identifications.*" [10, p. 56–57].

Stimuli that encourage self-transcendence are, according to Tolle, primarily limit situations, existential crises of any kind. Often "*only a critical limit-situation has the potential to crack the hard shell of the ego and force them [note, humans] into surrender and so into the awakened state*" [9, p. 218].

Eckhart Tolle describes several ways how to transcend the identification with form and restore the authentic identity, and metaphorically calls them "portals into the Unmanifested" [9, p. 129]. He finds the key to all 'portals' in acceptance or surrender, or let's say non-resistance [9, p. 134–135]. According to Tolle, authentic surrender or acceptance of what is a precondition of self-transcendence *sine qua non*, "*Facing deep pain, allowing it to be, taking your attention into it, is to enter death consciously*", he explains the idea by relating surrender to death. "*When you have died this death, you realize that there is no death – and there is nothing to fear. Only the ego dies.*" [9, p. 223].

Here, in this central point of his teachings, the idea of death explicitly appears and is developed in more detail by two metaphors that he introduces in order to describe surrender. They are the *metaphor of the way of the cross* and the *metaphor of a ray of sunlight reversing to the sun* [9, p. 223]. The following quotations suggest why he did so. We must bear in mind that all of Tolle's methods of transcendence have a common moment of termination of Ego, that is the image of one's Self based on the identification with form. "*Every portal is a portal of death, the death of the false self*", he explains and continues, "*[w]hen you go through it, you cease to derive your identity from your psychological, mind-made form. You then realize that death is an illusion, just as your identification with form was an illusion. The end of illusion – that's all that death is. It is painful only as long as you cling to illusion.*" [9, p. 143] "*Death is a stripping away of all that is not you*", Tolle concludes. Therefore, "*[t]he secret of life is to die before you die – and find that there is no death*" [9, p. 46].

4. Conclusions

By having a closer look at how Eckhart Tolle himself understands the fundamental transition of consciousness, which made his own spiritual transformation possible, and on which he based his teachings, we came to a conclusion that there is a ‘turning point’ in the dynamics of this process that is related to the phenomena of psycho-spiritual-somatic nature resembling dying. Even though Tolle himself doesn’t denote these processes by the term ‘mystical death’, he explicitly refers to death in regard to the shift of identity, which stands in the very centre of his teachings. His metaphor of the *way of the cross*, which he uses in order to describe surrender, is also significant in this regard.

Now, the question is: How is his view related to the traditional Christian view of mystical death? Let us take into consideration another example from the Western Christian tradition – a 16th century Spanish mystic, Doctor of the Church, Saint Teresa of Avila. Saint Teresa mentions mystical death implicitly in her book entitled *The Interior Castle*. The book was written in 1577, five years before she passed away. At that time, Teresa was already recognized a great mystic.

Considering the concept of the book, Saint Teresa claims that she received an inspiration about how to methodologically process the grades of prayer from above: “*While I was begging our Lord today to speak for me, since I knew not what to say nor how to commence this work which obedience has laid upon me, an idea occurred to me which I will explain, and which will serve as a foundation for what I am about to write. I thought of the soul as a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal, and containing many rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions.*” [11] Following the progressive structure of the prayer through ‘seven mansions’ Teresa describes the spiritual ascent of the soul to God from the first to the seventh chamber.

The idea of spiritual ascent was not new in Christian spirituality at the time. Actually, it was widely spread across spiritual writings in the Middle Ages, and Biblically well rooted in the narrative of *mystical ladder of patriarch Jacob*. Classical triadic description of spiritual journey is attributed to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. His three stages of *purification, illumination and unification* (Latin *purificatio, illuminatio, unio*) had become traditional.

Following the traditional triadic structure of spiritual ascent, *The Interior Castle* relates the first three mansions to purification, while the fourth, fifth and sixth mansions are related to illumination, and finally, the seventh mansion is related to the stage of unification.

Even though spiritual transformation begins in the fourth mansion, the very transcendence, which we call *mystical death*, takes place in the fifth mansion, according to Saint Teresa. Teresa describes the very core of spiritual transformation as follows: “*This is a delicious death, for the soul is deprived of the faculties it exercised while in the body: delicious because, (although not really the case), it seems to have left its mortal covering to abide more entirely*

in God. So completely does this take place, that I know not whether the body retains sufficient life to continue breathing.” [11, p. 54]

Teresa of Avila also illustrates the idea of mystical death on an example of the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly [11, p. 58]. A caterpillar has to die in order to be reborn as a butterfly. The idea is similar to the one of Saint Apostle Paul about the death of the old man and birth of the new one (Romans 6.4–6), and Teresa puts it as follows: “*Now let us see what becomes of the ‘silkworm’, for all I have been saying leads to this. As soon as, by means of this prayer, the soul has become entirely dead to the world, it comes forth like a lovely little white butterfly!*”

Spiritual transformation is completed in the seventh mansion, when the soul is united with God through transformational processes of mystical death. Symbols of *drop in the sea* or *light inside light* are used by Saint Teresa to illustrate transcendent state of *unio mystica* as unity without distinction.

When we compare these ideas of *mystical death* and *unio mystica* with those of Eckhart Tolle, which display a similar meaning, we can come to the following conclusions. While Teresa of Avila speaks of the ‘*drop in the sea*’ or ‘*light inside light*’ in regard to *unio mystica*, Eckhart Tolle speaks about ‘*essential identity*’ in regard to *spiritual transformation*. While Saint Teresa speaks of a ‘*delicious death*’ in regard to *mystical death*, Tolle speaks about ‘*way of the cross*’ in regard to transcending ‘*an illusory sense of identity*’.

Despite a bunch of multiple differences in historical, cultural, and religious background between the notions of mystical death in Christian spirituality and in the spirituality of Eckhart Tolle, there are still some common features between the two. First and foremost, it is the idea of self-transcendence as the very core of both spiritualities where the so-called mystical death is a ‘turning point’ in the dynamics of spiritual process related to the phenomena of psycho-spiritual-somatic nature, which resemble dying.

If the traditional Christian understanding of mystical death can be expressed by the matrix *death and rebirth*, the same is true for Tolle’s understanding of spiritual transformation, where the phenomenon of ‘mystical death’ takes the position of the middle member between two ultimate positions – *individual alienation* and *transindividual fulfillment*. Eckhart Tolle seems to understand this transition of consciousness in a way similar to understandings of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila, which we mentioned above, that means, through the act of detachment human consciousness is liberated from everything that can be observed and is experienced in itself as conscious being: *I am and I know that I am*.

Although spiritual processes are uniquely conceptualized in distinct religious and spiritual traditions, it seems that there is a common denominator inherent in different interpretations, the transcendence of human destiny [12].

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