

Final Paper: Comparisons of Ineffability in Christian Mysticism and Buddhism

1. Ineffability

What can be said about the unspeakable? How does one begin to describe the indescribable? The very act of discussing ineffability questions whether anything can be truly ineffable in the first place. Religion almost always critically depends on the ineffability of some experience or entity. This is a widespread tendency, but some would argue that it is a rule for all religions. That there must be the recognition of something “beyond,” “transcendent” or “pure.”

Prior to judging Christian or Buddhist beliefs, it is necessary to understand ineffability itself. Generally speaking, it is unspeakable. Conceptually, it is not attainable. By our standards, it is beyond our human realm.

To speak is to make distinctions. As soon as you try to explain, it is already not so. This occurs because language is assumed to be limited. Words are merely inference and speculation, a construction we make ourselves. Words cannot accurately present what is true reality. They only give a blurred picture of a filtered reality. We are the filters to our language. Each of us must experience the world from a different light and a different bias. Therefore, how can our descriptions be pure?

It may not be possible to faithfully depict the ineffable nor comprehend it truly. Like language, and possibly with the development of language, our conceptions have also narrowed to exclude what is ultimately real. There is the conventional reality that is accepted within a group of people but it is flawed. The application of categories and

frameworks onto what is real doesn't just make placeholders for thought, but it constrains thinking beyond (Donahue). For each person, reality is different because "Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower" (Hick, 241).

Lastly, ineffability is used to describe something that is transcendent. In order to grasp the ultimate truth, it is necessary to escape the linguistic and conceptual limitations that are part of humanity. To see beyond our filters and ourselves is the only way to experience something purely.

2. Christian Mysticism

In the Christian religions, there is a God. Worshipped and loved, this divinity is three persons in one: the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Ghost. Among the multitude of denominations, and through the ages there have been many types of Christian mystics. The foundation of all religions is arguably set by mysticism, which is as Evelyn Underhill put it, "the direct intuition or experience of God" (Fanning, 2). Those who are identified as mystics in the Christian traditions claim to have had a very intimate, direct connection to God.

This divine communion with God is claimed by mystics to be beyond words. It is not something that can be described to anyone who has not experienced it. That which we have heard it called, includes: "divine possession", "mystical marriage with the deity", and "mystical ecstasy" (Fanning, 7-13). They feel to have become one with God, and that they are God. They say that their way is the only way to properly worship God. Simply knowing of him is not enough; one must truly come to know him through mystical experiences.

In order to achieve such a feeling, devotees must go through some personal growth first. To fill themselves fully and utterly with God, they have to empty themselves of all earthly temporal things by techniques like meditation and asceticism. Pseudo-Dionysius also recommends: “We leave behind us all our own notions of the divine” (Pseudo-Dionysius, 53).** Phillipians This strategy to greater knowledge and understanding is also applied by Buddhists seeking nirvana. Moses, who is recognized as a great mystic, went through a forgetting process on his journey up Mount Sinai. At the top, he spoke directly to God, and even saw the back of God (Fanning, 11). This may be one of the closest accounts of God recorded.

What do these experiences mean? God, as told below, is so beyond our comprehension, so how can a human achieve any understanding of him? One hypothesis is that God is unknowable, but through his grace, he reveals himself to us. Ultimately then, it is not the experience of God that is ineffable, as the mystics say. It is God himself.

Next, we shall focus on the mystical and spiritual claims of Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite. Although his identity is unclear, it has been speculated that he lived between 476 and 532 AD. This man wrote a collection of works for the greater understanding of the nature of God, and the divine hierarchies. Now, we study his works to know who God is for Christian mystics and his relationship to ineffability.

We know God as a three-part unity. Known separately as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, their essence is the same. Pseudo-Dionysius says that anyone fully initiated into knowledge of God, “regarding the divine unity beyond being, assert that the indivisible Trinity holds within a shared undifferentiated unity its supra-essential

subsistence” (Pseudo-Dionysius, 61). Believers may use one name for particular cases, but understand that they are also referring to the trinity.

The source of all things originates from the Trinitarian Thearchy. In the Divine Names, Pseudo-Dionysius speaks of God as such: “To sum up. It [God] is the Life of the living, the being of beings, it is the Source and the Cause of all life and of all being, for out of its goodness it commands all things to be and keeps them going” (Pseudo-Dionysius, 51). Since everything comes from it, then there is absolutely nothing that comes before it. There is no predicate to God.

Since God is the precursor to everything, how can we define him? Can we define him at all? What we do know is that God is beyond all that we know. He is transcendent, and hyper-everything. God is not being or non-being but hyper-being. God is not life nor not life, but hyper-life. There is nothing that we can reasonably compare or relate him to. We must be very precise of our attempts to describe God, so as not to make false beliefs of him. “We must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being, apart from what the sacred scriptures have divinely revealed” (Pseudo-Dionysius, 49). This view of Dionysius also portrays the idea that we may know of God only what he gives us. The scriptures, here, are considered heaven sent, and therefore must be truthful. Still though, God is not something so easily understood. Mere words and ideas cannot fully grasp the existence and experience of the divine.

Dionysius takes an attempt at this impossible feat of description. Although “one can neither discuss nor understand the One” efforts were taken to lead to proper thinking of God. He does this because although the Cause of all is “rightly nameless,” “it still has

the names of everything that is” (Pseudo-Dionysius, 53-56). The work of the Divine Names uses many words and Names to describe all the God contains, and all that he is precursor to. In stating all of these things, we know that God is not simply defined by those concepts or words. We may use those words with the realization that God is hyper to all of them. He is not just the trinity, goodness, or being, but beyond all sense of them. Each of them is like a property of God, what God causes, or what is emanated from God. In this positive way, Dionysius can legitimately assert things about that which is divine.

Not only does Dionysius speak of the God-source in his assertions, but also of the hierarchies that govern the world and heavens. The order of our earthly rank is laid out in the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy. The names for each level are precise, as they are of our world, using our language. For the heavens though, the Celestial Hierarchy is laid out, but not as surely. Each of the 9 ranks is called a name in our earthly tongue, but is deemed less than appropriate for such intelligible beings. By looking at these two hierarchies, and seeing God as the ultimate being, we should look into the hierarchies and their relationship with ineffability. It seems that the closer one gets to God, the more ineffable their experience. This sort of spectrum leads to the idea that God is completely ineffable, or perhaps, the most ineffable thing there is. It is said well by Dionysius, “But my argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable” (Pseudo-Dionysius, 139).

The other technique used to approach the reality of God is the apophatic theory. The reasoning is that if you cannot say what something is, it is useful to say what it is not.

If enough is taken away, and all the inaccurate representations are lost, you have reached closer to the true nature. First, one starts “by denying those qualities which differ most from the goal we hope to attain” (Pseudo-Dionysius, 140). For the cause of all is “not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se...” (Pseudo-Dionysius, 141). All that can be said about what God is not is declared. In the end however, we must negate our own perceptions to say that God is “also beyond every denial” (Pseudo-Dionysius, 141).

For Christians, the divine Trinity is something that cannot be truly understood nor spoken of. Through careful consideration, attempts may be made to understand God, but it is clear they are insufficient. There are many different levels to which one can relate to God, and it seems that closeness is proportional to the ineffability of the experience. A mystic will know God in a way that a scholar cannot, just as Cherubim be with God in a way that priests cannot. Any interaction with the divine is something special and cannot be defined. And although words may be insufficient, they are not useless. For these are words: that God is beyond all things, and the Cause of all.

3. Buddhism

Among the multiple branches of Indian Buddhism the existence and interpretation of an ineffable experience is debatable. If there were ever such a thing, the reaching of nirvana would be the epitome of it right? Not necessarily so. In historical Buddhism, enlightenment is understood as something transcendent but not wholly without description. For later Mahayanan schools of thought, a limited ineffability is logical, but there is not one thing that you could describe as beyond all else.

Early Indian Buddhism as taught by the Tathagata has relatively straightforward logic less concerned with duality than later Mahayanan schools. It states that there is suffering, dukkha, and it's cause, attachment. To be free of this pain, a practitioner must work at losing all forms of permanence. This is the way to nirvana, which is free of dukkha. However, if dukkha is in all things, then nirvana is nothing. Indeed, it is empty.

In order to lose all attachments a proposed five hierarchical stages rid one of attachments. These are presented by Forman, and are the levels of absorption that must be overcome in meditation.

The first one states: "By the transcendence of all conceptualizations of form, by the disappearance of conceptualizations based upon sense-data, by paying no attention to conceptualizations of manifoldness, having attained to the sphere of infinite space [the practitioner] remains therein, thinking "space is unending" (Forman, 33). Remember, that concepts are something that inhibits the direct experience of reality. They shape our interpretations so that we see everything through a lens. By losing such attachment to concepts and the instinctual construction of them immediately after information input, one may see the world more clearly. Readily accepting all that we sense for exactly what it is, opens the "sphere of infinite space." This unending space is an aspect of nirvana, and a step towards an ineffable experience.

The next step in realization, after remaining in the "sphere of infinite space," is when a practitioner thinks, "consciousness is infinite" (Forman 33). The complete awareness of this space coupled with the lack of conceptual limitations, means that consciousness is also without end.

Having reached the first two states, one may come to realize that “there is nothing” (Forman, 33). When all of reality washes through your consciousness without attachment, then there is no grasping to anything. For nothing is truly there: because it is impermanent. To attach is to be under the impression that there is something there. To be unattached is to see it all, impermanent and infinite and empty. There isn’t anything there.

The fourth stage states, “By entirely transcending the sphere of nothing at all, having entered the sphere of neither conceptualization nor non-conceptualization, [the practitioner] remains therein” (Forman, 33). At this point, the sphere being entered has a non-dualistic nature, hence: “sphere of neither conceptualization nor non-conceptualization.”

Finally, “having attained the cessation of sensation and conceptualization, [the practitioner] remains therein” (Forman, 33). The practitioner now has progressively removed attachments and concepts and will continue in this way. Forman describes this process as “forgetting,” and in a way it is. Frameworks previously used are lost and unnecessary.

Within these steps, there are many themes of ineffability. What the practitioner is of course seeking is the release from attachment and the pain of permanence. Such a state is of one who has escaped dukkha, and sees the world truly. The achievement of these particular steps is not the end of the path towards, but only the beginning. The scholar Tilakaratne clarifies this point by saying, “what is meant by Samadhi is not any mystical state in the regular sense but a purified and calm state of mind which is a prerequisite of deeper insight meditation or wisdom” (Tilakaratne, 62). Having now cleared the mind a

practitioner must then seek greater understanding through Vipassana insight meditation. Only then can wisdom, and true enlightenment, be reached.

The sphere that is infinite and wise, how can that begin to be comprehended? The true depth of those terms in this usage may not be fully explainable. So too, what is nothing? We can easily describe what it is not, but you can't really peer into its true nature and say what it is.

For those who have a rigid definition of ineffability, it is hard to apply it fully to Indian Buddhism. Tilakaratne is one such scholar. He says that nirvana cannot be a transcendent, ineffable state because it is simply a way of experiencing. What one experiences is considered reality, and others would call it the ultimate reality. His point is that this nirvana is not really beyond human experience (Tilakaratne).

The argument of Tilakaratne does not argue as well against Theravadan Buddhism as it does later Mahayanan Buddhism. One of the key differences between the two Buddhist philosophies is the definition of nirvana. For the historical Buddha, nirvana is a separate, transcendent state from the cyclic dukkha that plagues all things. That means that the enlightened state is empty in a way that cannot be fully described. Theravadan Buddhism could not accept that nirvana is just a way of experiencing the world as it is because they see nirvana as a distinct, otherness that is beyond samsara.

Mahayanan Buddhism refuses to make distinctions from anything. The cycle of rebirth, samsara, is the same as nirvana or enlightenment. So the suffering of life and the escape into enlightenment are not separate.

“Is there ineffability in Mahayanan Buddhism?” is not the proper question towards understanding the philosophy. A better phrasing of the debate would be: “Are

all things expressible or are all things ineffable?” There cannot be one thing that is separate, beyond or transcendent of all-else. Mahayana drives home the point that everything is interdependent.

That being said, the Vimalakirti Sutra, a Mahayana scripture, has innumerable references and suggestions of ineffability. How can this be? It is plausible to say that, a great many things that could be described as ineffable, then all things are ineffable to some degree.

An example of something so incomprehensible and beyond words is the dharma. In his correction of Maudgalyayana, Vimalakirti says the Dharma “is free of words and letters; it is inexpressible, and it transcends all movement of mind” (Thurman, 25). His overall point here is that the Dharma is empty, and that all Dharmas are. He does not restrict this emptiness to one thing, but speaks of people like this too: “no teacher of the dharma, no one to listen and no one to understand” (Thurman, 25).

Later, the emptiness and ineffability of all things is reinforced, after a lengthy attempt by bodhisattvas to describe the entrance into non-duality. Here, Manjusri says that to fully understand the concept of non-duality is “to know no one teaching, to express nothing, to say nothing, to explain nothing, to announce nothing, to indicate nothing, and to designate nothing- that is the entrance into non-duality” (Thurman, 77). That is the way of realizing ultimate reality, duality, and the world. To see it as it is and not comment on it. Here, Vimalakirti suggests that to see the ineffability of all things is to understand reality directly and completely.

The take of the Vimalakirti Sutra is that there are definitely some things fully worthy of the term “ineffable.” Therefore, due to the Mahayana principles, all things are

in a sense ineffable. Perhaps not to the extent of enlightenment and such, but that we can't ever fully describe reality as such. A Theravadan Buddhist interpretation of nirvana is also deservingly "ineffable." However, in recognition of points made by Tilakaratne, both types of ineffability are limited.

4. Comparisons

In the two religions studied here, there is always something that clearly exhibits the highest form of ineffability. For Christian mysticism, any communion with God is partially ineffable, but the most ineffable thing is God himself. In Theravada Buddhism, nirvana is a state that is quite ineffable, while Mahayana Buddhism claims that all of reality as such is ineffable.

To the claims of Robert Forman concerning the existence of a pure consciousness event in all religions, we must address (Forman). Although not studied in this paper, it seems all religions have their roots in a mystical, divine experience. In the context of Buddhism and Christianity, there is also always a state of consciousness that is described as ineffable; whether that is communion with God or nirvana or even experiencing reality as it is.

There is also the idea that all mature religions share a belief in "the Real," ultimate, infinite, and ineffable. John Hick would argue it is a quality that presents itself in all traditions (Hick). In Christianity, there is God, who is that which is beyond all else, and is the cause of all things. Nirvana in Early Buddhism is the state of emptiness but also wisdom for which practitioners strive. Lastly, Mahayana Buddhism recognizes everything and reality as it is, to be ineffable.

Now, these two large religions have different philosophies on ineffability itself. Their experiences or beings that contain this indescribable quality are also not exactly the same. Both Christianity and Buddhism are very concerned with the special things that they describe as the ineffable. Since ineffability cannot be complete and is actually relative, the ultimate being or experience for each religion postulates the maximum imaginable ineffability. Despite the many forms it may take, the ultimate, transcendent reality is the ineffable core of every religion.

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