

Weston Pickhinke
Comparative Religions
Present Ineffabilities

“Ineffability is relative to one’s knowledge, specialized vocabulary, and linguistic ability. What strikes one person dumb, calls up the other’s eloquence; what to one person is an inexpressible wilderness is to the other an easily described homeland,” (Scharfstein 184).

An unexpectedly permeating reality, ineffability grasps all things. Ineffability may be known, if only by its untouchable grip; it is not graspable in return. There is a presence of ineffability in everything, but the readiest knowledge of its hold on all is in the study and comparison of religions. Popular and expansive are the world religions of Christianity and Buddhism, where the chiaroscuro of ineffability abounds.

Between these two religions exist analogous—but not equivalent—ideas pertaining to the ineffable realm. Supernatural ideals which one is to be enveloped by, or in union with, make themselves known in these religions: Christianity professes the Holy Trinity—the Triune Godhead—while Buddhism recognizes Nirvana. An experience of Reality corresponds to both Christianity and Buddhism: hyper-knowing in the prior and Nirvanic-knowing in the latter. Divine things are inescapably ineffable and are most abundant in Christianity. Divine names are particularly noteworthy, as they are crucial for ascending and descending the ladder of said hyper-knowing. With these present, outstanding ineffabilities comes the all-encompassing notion of silence—unknowing beyond knowing—that pervades both traditions of Christianity and Buddhism.

The Trinity—which is staple to Christian faith—is one God, three persons. The three persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of one substance, yet the relation of each person of the Trinity does not divide the substance of the one

Godhead. Pseudo-Dionysius prays to and praises the Holy Trinity as transcendent at the forefront of his Mystical Theology:

“Trinity!! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness! Guide of Christians in the wisdom of heaven! Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence. Amid the deepest shadow they pour overwhelming light on what is most manifest. Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen they completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty,” (135).

Pseudo-Dionysius represents Christianity as he appeals to the source of their faith—the source of all—as what leads humans to the utterly intangible Reality of realities. As the source that leads us to Reality and wisdom, Pseudo-Dionysius portrays that the faith of all Christians relies upon the Trinity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reinforces Pseudo-Dionysius’ reliance as it states:

“The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the ‘hierarchy of the truths of faith.’ The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means which the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men ‘and reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin,’” (CCC 234).

This spelling out of Christian doctrine points to the veracity of the Trinity’s mystery, its ineffability. How a single substance could be a relation of three persons is beyond complete human understanding, and assistance from the Trinity itself is needed. Christians must seek this understanding from the Trinity itself as only through perception can understanding be had. The only thing that is like the Trinity is the Trinity, and no mere human has perceived this. Only one-substance/one-person with relation to other one-substance/one-persons has been perceived. Such is the similarity with all other knowledge and understanding, it is from the known, existing standpoint of the perceived. Therefore, mystics seek to have a divine encounter—Christians specifically to

perceive the Trinity—in order to understand it, tapping into its own reality to grasp Reality. In this way, unity with the Trinity is had, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church points to in saying, “...unites with himself those who turn away from sin,” to which Pseudo-Dionysius includes, “Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing,” (Dionysius 137).

This knowing by knowing nothing is to come later, as first this unity with a supernatural ideal is to be compared to the like notion of Nirvana in Buddhism. Nirvana and the Triune God being significantly distinct from each other, the comparison lies in the total belonging to Nirvana. This notion necessitates further distinction between early and modern traditions of Buddhism.

In early Buddhism, which is the Theravada tradition, Nirvana is the explicit goal. Breaking out of Samsara—this world—into Nirvana is the ultimate end of life and religion. Harvey says about the Theravada view of Nirvana, “It is beyond mind-and-body. Further, it is said to be beyond this world or any other world of rebirth, and beyond the arising and ceasing of phenomena in the process of life and rebirth,” (62). The given view of Nirvana from Harvey is indeed to say that Nirvana is transcendent, and therefore a permanent or ineffable ultimate in the tradition of Theravada. Like the inability to know the Trinity due to lack of perception, Nirvana is something none on earth—in Samsara—have perceived and therefore is ineffable until partaking in it by becoming one within it.

In Mahayana traditions, the transcendent ‘Nirvana’ is correct thought within Samsara. Nirvana is the actuality of Samsara; all truth is loosed from cognitive conception, the foremost conceptual chain being language. With

conception discarded, Real simply is. An explicit example of this Mahayana reach for the Real is given in Harvey's commentary of Madhyamika teaching:

"For the Madhyamikas, true statements at the conventional level are 'true' because humans agree to use concepts in certain ways; because of linguistic conventions[...] Yet while language determines how we experience the world, it does not bring things into existence; it too is a dependent, empty phenomenon. A particular 'thing' enters the human world by being discriminated through a name or concept, but this exists in relation to a 'something' to which it is applied: both exist in relationship to each other[...] "Emptiness, then, is an adjectival quality of 'dharma,' not a substance which composes them. It is neither a thing nor is it nothingness; rather it refers to reality as incapable of ultimately being pinned down in concepts," (99).

Seen in the analyses of Mahayana Buddhist understanding, Nirvana is itself a perception, an experience. One does not 'break out' of Samsara to reach Nirvana, but one reaches the Nirvanic experience of Samsara. A more abstract ineffability of the same idea—unity with supernatural ideals in Christianity and Buddhism—the Mahayana tradition is less a unity with a goal and more of a unity with living Reality. Then rather than perceiving an ideal to understand the incorporeal ideal, the Mahayana teaching holds that perceiving a perception is understanding, fulfillment, incomprehensible Reality.

In the sense that each of these three religions—Christianity and the two Buddhist traditions—has an ideal that is beyond current and ordinary sensing, each has a supernatural ideal. As noted, each supernatural ideal is to be undergone by unity with the ideal in order to be truly fulfilled or enlightened—to grasp.

That Christianity and Buddhism direct their followers to a grasping of Reality beyond reality is an ensured indicator that there is a "higher knowledge" to be obtained. As mentioned earlier, Pseudo-Dionysius is not shy to allude to a knowing beyond knowing which leads to unknowing: "Here, being neither

oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing," (Dionysius 137). Here Pseudo-Dionysius speaks explicitly of mysticism; of uniting oneself with the Divinity in order to perceive it. The effect of unknowing, union with the Divine, seems to be being outside oneself—ecstasy. Fanning embellishes this idea in writing, "...mystical ecstasy, a state of sober intoxication, of being possessed by a divine frenzy like that of the cult of the Great Mother, of having one's soul on fire, when it is 'no longer in itself, but is agitated and maddened by a heavenly passion,'" (Fanning 13). A renowned mystic to Judaism in particular, Philo describes mystical experiences as such:

"I have become empty and have suddenly become full, the ideas descending like snow and invisibly sown, so that under the impact of divine possession I had been filled with corybantic frenzy and become ignorant of everything, place, people present, myself, what was said and what was written," (Fanning 13).

Union with the Christian Divinity follows from this passage that oneself is left empty, yet so filled with incomprehension that natural expression is useless, if even conscious. This is the unknowing which mystics extend the fingertips of their soul to grasp, a knowledge that surpasses knowledge that can only be known by direct perception—union—with the source of this knowledge. The effect is unknowing since the perceived is imperceptible, making it subject to no concept, no expression.

"...when [argument/reason/understanding] has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable," (Dionysius 139). When a person is emptied of knowing and thus transcends the limits and capacities of conception, there is simply nothing to say of the outer space of comprehension. Pseudo-Dionysius further develops this complexity about simplicity:

“The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing,” (139).

Contrary to common description of silence in unknowing, the reality Christian mysticism signifies is not simply being silent, but being enveloped by unknowing – which leaves one without speech of that which is not known; there is no expression for that which has not been definable, but is the font of all definable things.

Silence and emptiness are conceptions in Christianity that draw the mind to omnipresent similarities in Buddhism. As the mystic, Philo, describes becoming empty, cognizance surfaces pertaining to Buddhist ideas of emptiness. Of the Theravada tradition, all things are empty but the teachings of the Buddha. Mahayana tradition asserts all things—even the dharmas—are empty. All things are empty in Buddhism because they are mutually dependent, are lacking. Nothing is self-sufficient—perfect, permanent—except those things that transcend conception. In Theravada, these ultimate permanents are the dharmas and Nirvana. Mahayana tradition would likely subscribe to the idea that the Nirvanic experience—not the experienced—is the transcendent beyond things empty. Yet among Christian and Buddhist traditions, a person is emptied in order to be united to whichever reality is ascribed. This emptying is universally ineffable, as no comprehension can report what is gained in the emptiness. Philo’s account tells of this inexpressibility, and Tilakaratne indicates a comparable connotation regarding Buddhism: “The person who has realized the truth perceives reality differently. In a manner of speaking, we may say that he has destroyed (his old) world and created a new,” (Tilakaratne 72-73).

From the inability to recount the benefits within emptiness comes silence. Silence comes not from a lack of knowledge, but from the wisdom of negation—a stripping away of known things to the root of knowing. Pseudo-Dionysius has made this relatable in the analogy of the ascent up the divine mountain, where at the base of the mountain is all known things and upward beyond the summit is the origin Knowing all known things are known by—that font of all definable things. Again, "...when [argument/reason/understanding] has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable," (Dionysius 139). Further up the mountain of revelation is scarcer of elements than all at and around the base. Therefore, as knowledge increases with the ascent, things left behind are negated, denied, left behind, as they are not what is past the peak above. Indeed, the more that is disregarded in denial allows the simpler to be conceived until infinite simplicity is grasped.

"Now it seems to me that we should praise the denials quite differently than we do the assertions. When we made assertions we began with the first things, moved down through intermediate terms until we reached the last things. But now as we climb from the last things up to the most primary we deny all things so that we may unhiddenly know that unknowing amid all beings, so that we may see above being that darkness concealed from all the light among beings," (Dionysius 138).

"Admittedly, in speaking about God like this, our language is using human modes of expression; nevertheless it really does attain to God himself, though unable to express him in his infinite simplicity. Likewise, we must recall that 'between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying an even greater dissimilitude'; and that 'concerning God, we cannot grasp what he is, but only what he is not, and how other beings stand in relation to him,'" (CCC 43).

Buddhism keeps the pace along with Christianity, as it also teaches denial of known things in order to achieve that wise silence, which best encompasses the incomprehensible. Thurman's translation of the Vimalakirti sutra exemplifies the

wisdom of silence via Licchavi Vimalakirti. After proposing the negations of several expressible dualities, the account follows, “We have all given our own teachings, noble sir. Now, may you elucidate the teaching of the entrance into the principle of nonduality!” Thereupon, the Licchavi Vimalakirti kept his silence, saying nothing at all,” (77). The silence that was kept was the wisest response, denoting the parallel of Pseudo-Dionysius’ account of denying all known concepts until the “unknowing amid all beings” is reached. Silence adorns the rhetoric of unknowing. Naturally, what is known as unknown through silence is deemed ineffable, and holds firmly ineffable in both Christianity and Buddhism.

The reality of silence, however, can indicate something about a peaceful nature of the unity, as Scharfstein tells that, “...‘cessation,’ ...is said to require the union of total insight with total serenity,” (Scharfstein 94). Yet, “...we cannot know God in his nature, since this is unknowable and is beyond the reach of mind or of reason,” (Dionysius 108). Ineffable as God may be, the attribution of Divine Names are employed to attempt a partial knowing of God’s properties as has been revealed in Christian tradition. Such Divine Names are: one, good, God, being, life, and wisdom. God transcends all Divine Names, so is able to possess them. Able to possess the Divine Names, God can source them out as processions to participant beings. In this way, the Divine Names allow beings to have properties of the Divine Names as they emanate down the hierarchy of participant beings. Pseudo-Dionysius explains further:

“The name ‘Being’ extends to all beings which are, and it is beyond them. The name of ‘Life’ extends to all living things, and yet is beyond them. The name ‘Wisdom’ reaches out to everything which has to do with understanding, reason, and sense perception, and surpasses them all” (Dionysius 97).

Since the Divine Names process down through beings from the source, it is possible to know a moment’s whisper of the secrets hidden in God’s mysterious

nature. These remain ineffabilities about the deity, however. Though partial, they do not define God, and so negation of all things, even the Divine Names is necessary for Christian mystics including Pseudo-Dionysius. Once again, the Catechism of the Catholic Church provides an explication of these principles:

“The manifold perfections of creatures—their truth, their goodness, their beauty—all reflect the infinite perfection of God. Consequently we can name God by taking his creatures’ perfections as our starting point, ‘for from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator,’ (CCC 41).

“God transcends all creatures. We must therefore continually purify our language of everything in it that is limited, image-bound or imperfect, if we are not to confuse our image of God—the inexpressible, the incomprehensible, the invisible, the ungraspable”—with our human representations,” (CCC 42).

While Pseudo-Dionysius asserts that the Divine Names attributed to God must be negated as he transcends them also, Pseudo-Dionysius does not relinquish the title ‘Cause.’

“What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being,” (Dionysius 136).

Noticing the reluctance to give up the Triune God as Cause of all betrays Pseudo-Dionysius’ most basic expression of the inexpressible God. He, along with all Christianity, holds steadfast that God “is.” God is “Is” is “Cause,” because without being “is,” nothing else could be. “Cause” and “is” is the simplest and most accurate property man can ascribe to God. This follows with the rest of Pseudo-Dionysius’ assertions that all beings, all divine names, all attributions of the divine names to beings, and the reality within the mysteries of the Sacraments could only be possible by a cause—a supreme Cause. In short, everything perceptible is an effect of the Cause who transcends. “Consider anything which is. Its being and eternity is Being itself. So therefore God as

originator of everything through the first of all his gifts is praised as ‘He who is,’” (Dionysius 99). “He who is” reminds Christian faithful of the unutterable Divine Name for God, “Yahweh,” (I Am He Who Is, I Am Who Am, I Am Who I Am). This name is known to be existence and sustaining existence—in essence, Cause.

“This divine name [YHWH] is mysterious just as God is mystery. It is at once a name revealed and something like the refusal of a name, and hence it better expresses God as what he is—infinately above everything that we can understand or say: he is the ‘hidden God,’ his name is ineffable, and he is the God who makes himself close to men,” (CCC 206).

Divine Names do not apply well to Buddhism. The closest similarity to draw from is that as Divine Names are ineffable—and thus proceeding names also ineffable—words are ineffable in the sense that they do not tell anything of the subject. The equation between names and words is that words are primarily names given to things, labels to denote objects, signs for the signified. Buddhism is a heavy proponent of the rejection of language. This is noted by Scharfstein, and here liberally applied to an embrace of the Buddhist traditions:

“In order to escape the bonds of conceptuality, the Buddhists propose a hierarchical series of meditations by means of which one is supposed to be able to rise beyond words and into the ineffable state of ‘emptiness,’” (86). “Here we find the origin of the Buddhist theory of different levels of truth and, maybe, of the ‘linguaphobia’ of Buddhist philosophers, who regard reality as nameless, indescribable, and, to the ordinary intellect, impossible to conceive,” (90).

Because language is seen as such a disservice to reality, it is to be rejected in Buddhism, mainly by meditation. The famous tale of the Buddha holding a flower for a sermon where only one disciple smiled in understanding illumines the idea of being as is, not as prescribed. Another notable lesson is in the Vimalakirti sutra. A Buddha-field where understanding comes from the fragrance that emanates from trees shows the limitation of our language-driven

Buddha-field. This scene, whether real to Buddhist followers or not, stands as a linguistic lesson in uniform perception—which is not possible with language. Words spring varied meanings to various minds. If a direct, unalterable perceiving were at human disposal, expression would be forgone though not without true understanding. In fact, understanding would be enhanced through direct, uniform perception. This is the ideal in Buddhism seen in the fragrant Buddha-field and rejection of language.

Following these notions is the Buddhist concept of “tathata” — thusness or suchness. Ineffable as the idea of uniform perception would be ineffable is the Reality of things as they are. Words to describe the tathata of anything are like the clinging of barnacles to a sailing vessel. It must be left in its actuality, Reality, and not constrained by concept. Since no word can justify thusness, tathata is ineffable. The “infinite simplicity” of God via negation of all terms and names is the nearest relation to Buddhist thought behind language rejection and tathata.

Perennialists look at all such information in comparison as a pure experience universal to all religions, Christianity, Buddhism, and beyond. Pure consciousness is commonly the cause to discern the existence of a common core among religions. At the heart of pure consciousness is Pseudo-Dionysius’ unknowing or Buddhism’s tathata—reality as it is. This notion—Reality—can be and has been seen as the goal and definite ineffability of both Christian and Indian Buddhist traditions. Forman proposes what is seen as common practice and teaching in Buddhism as meditation in relation to Christianity toward the divine, ineffable core:

“To achieve an interior act, a man must collect all his powers as if into a corner of his soul...hiding away from all images and forms...Here, he must come to a forgetting and an unknowing.’ The key technique by means of which Eckhart here instructs his listeners to bring about the experience he advocates is a turning away from ideas and conceptual forms, a gelazin—letting them go. It denotes a

retreat from thought; a coming to forget all things in what Pseudo-Dionysius called an 'unknowing,'" (31).

Fanning continues, invites rather, the dialogue of possible Perennialism as he says, "...among the seemingly myriad differences of Christian denominations and the competing claims of the world's faiths, it is in mysticism that they meet on a common ground of the experience of the divine," (Fanning 5). It is in mysticism that Perennialism is possible, but in theology where tension lives.

Fanning elaborates this idea, offering a distinction between the two:

"One Christianity emphasizes human intellect and reason and is a theology, a set of beliefs to be accepted and rules to be followed, a creed that is proclaimed. The other Christianity is that of the mystics, who seek the experience of the God of the former and stress the inability of human reasoning to know the incomprehensible deity," (Fanning 1).

Following Fanning's addition here, the question is left whether one theology transcends the rest or if theology is valid at all, as it uses too much reasoning to get to the core tathata or unknowing. However this web is spun, the same instrument is used in determining divinity up until its own negation—the mind. All comparative studies look toward and with the mind as the vehicle toward understanding. Scharfstein leaves behind words, which may be key to the source of religions, the practice of Perennialism—the mind's source.

"To turn the light of the mind towards the mind's source—that is contemplating the mind. This means that one does not reflect or examine whether conceptual signs are in movement or not, whether they are pure or not, whether they are empty or not. It also means not to reflect on nonreflection. This is why the Vimalakirti Sutra explains: 'Non-examination is enlightenment,'" (Scharfstein 97).

As the mind and its grasping are left to ponder the mind and its grasping, a final comparison between the Christian teaching, "Even when he reveals himself, God remains a mystery beyond words: 'If you understood him, it would not be

God,'" (CCC 230), is made with the old Buddhist adage: "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him."

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