The Inner Word and Outer Word: Eckhart, Jüngel, and Lonergan on Trinitarian Knowing and Naming of God

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Abstract: Can we know God? If so, how? This essay considers Bernard Lonergan's thoughts on God's inner and outer Words (the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ) and how they are received in human consciousness. It applies these two ways of knowing God to two theologians who each emphasized one of these Words: Meister Eckhart, a medieval, Neoplatonic monk, who focused on union with the inner Word, and Eberhard Jüngel, a recently-deceased Protestant theologian, who focused on the outer Word. It offers the view that by keeping in mind God's revelation through both divine Words, Christians and the Church in general might come to a more comprehensive knowledge of God that will help us face future challenges.

Keywords: Pneumatology • Christology • Epistemology • Eckhart • Jüngel • Lonergan

Introduction

A line from the fifty-sixth chapter of Laozi's *Dao De Jing* presents a challenge that goes beyond the confines of one religion or culture: "Those who know do not talk. Those who talk do not know."[1]

Suspicion about our ability to know and speak of reality, particularly about ultimate reality or God, is a common aspect of contemporary thought. Even if we have not read modern or postmodern philosophers like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (Paul Ricoeur's "masters of suspicion"[2]), there is a good chance that many of us have

[1] *The Daodejing of Laozi*, translated by Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 59.

[2] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press 1970) 33.

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at some point, perhaps as teenagers, discovered that some trusted authority – a parent, teacher, coach, politician, or priest – was wrong or dishonest. And this can lead us to a general suspicion as to whether anyone knows or is telling the truth. A hesitancy to trust our ability to know is found not only among atheists and teens. The Abrahamic faiths, including Christianity, have strong traditions of denying or negating knowledge of God. That God does not have a body, for example, is a common belief among those raised in Christian cultures, whether or not they themselves are Christian. But is it true that we cannot know or cannot speak about God?

For Catholic theologians, Like Thomas Aquinas, human beings can know God to some degree, but our knowledge can never be complete or comprehensive.[3] And we can know God through both natural and graced means. The natural ones would include all of the human ways of knowing, from philosophy to natural science, which we can know God through creation, as one might know a cause through its effects, like an artist through the artist's work.[4] The graced means stem from God's revelation that we receive and affirm through faith. Aquinas writes eloquently on the inadequacy of merely natural means, "Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that humanity should be taught by a divine revelation because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors."[5]

Like Aquinas, twentieth century philosopher, theologian, and economist, Bernard Lonergan, S.J.,

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[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*: Bk. I, Ch. 8; and *Summa Theologiae*, IIa, Q. 2, a. 8, ro.2.

[4] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q. 2, a. 2.

[5] Ibid., Ia, Q. 1, a. 1, resp.

believed that we can know of God and speak truly about God, because God has revealed Godself to us. Lonergan adds the that God has spoken to us not just through one Word (a common way of referring to Jesus grounded in John's gospel) but through two divine Words, namely the divine expressions, missions, or sending of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God's inner Word spoken directly to our souls and the Son is God's outer Word embodied and otherwise mediated in the person of Jesus, his words and deeds, the recordings of these in Scriptures, and the community of his followers called the Body of Christ.

In this essay, we will consider Lonergan's thoughts on God's inner and outer Words and how they are received in human consciousness. The intention here is not to provide an overview of Lonergan's very complicated ideas on the Trinity[6] but rather to isolate one concept from Lonergan—his distinction between God's two trinitarian missions, the inner Word and outer Word.[7] Then we will look briefly two theologians who each emphasized one of these Words: Meister Eckhart, a medieval, Neoplatonic monk, who focused on union with the inner Word and

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[6] See Lonergan, *The Triune God: Doctrines*, Collected Works 11 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) and *The Triune God: Systematics,* Collected Works 12 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

[7] In particular, some advanced readers may be looking for Lonergan's "four point hypothesis" which allows for a more detailed account of salvation and holiness based not on the two trinitarian missions but on the four trinitarian relations and their four created participations in the divine nature (the humanity of Jesus, sanctifying grace, the habit of charity, and the light of glory). See Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics*, 471-73 and Neil Ormerod, "The Four-Point Hypothesis: Transpositions and Complications," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (2012): 127-140. Among the many fruits of this hypothesis is the identification of "invisible" elements of the Son's mission (the indwelling of the Logos) and the "visible" effects of the Spirit's (appearance as a dove or tongues of flame).

Eberhard Jüngel, a German Lutheran theologian, who focused on learning from the outer Word. Finally, we will consider whether and how Lonergan's concepts of inner Word and outer Word enable us to better understand, value, and relate the seemingly opposing positions of Eckhart and Jüngel in hopes of coming to a more comprehensive and articulate knowledge of God.

Lonergan on the Inner and Outer Words

For Lonergan, God's grace comes through two words: the inner Word of God that speaks to us directly in our consciousness and the outer Word, mediated physically, historically.

God's inner Word is the Holy Spirit, "the prior word God speaks to us by flooding our hearts with his love. That prior word pertains not to the world mediated by meaning, but to the world of immediacy, to the unmediated experience of the mystery of love and awe."[8] For Lonergan, the Holy Spirit, the inner Word, is at the heart of all genuine religious traditions. And each person's encounter with the Spirit takes place in what is sometimes called a "transcendent" or "mystical" experience.[9]

The outer Word is Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, who was born over two thousand years ago, lived with us, and left his words and deeds as mediated on to us by the community of his followers, called the Body of Christ, including that community's fundamental texts, the gospels and other writings in the New Testament. As something passed on to us to from generation to

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[8] Lonergan, *Method in Theology,* Collected Works 14 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 108. Cf. Rom. 5.5 "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

[9] Ibid., 102-105

generation and received by each of us through our physical senses, this word is historically and culturally conditioned.[10]

While some may choose to favor one of these Words as a preferred way to God, perhaps even to the exclusion of the other, Lonergan affirms our need for both divine Words. He compares them to the inner love between two people and the outward expression of that love: "When a man and a woman love each other but do not avow their love, they are not yet in love. Their very silence means that their love has not reached the point of self-surrender and self-donation."[11] The Spirit is God's gift of love directly to our interiority, our consciousness. The Son is God's expression of that love in a single point in history, concretely and irrevocably in time and space, indicating commitment to us like a wedding vow.

Without God's love in one's soul, without the inner Word, a person may be like a "whitewashed tomb" (Mt. 23:27), seeming outwardly to be seeking and following God's will but missing it. Lonergan calls this "inauthenticity" and provides some examples of it: "the words are repeated, but the meaning is gone. The chair was still the chair of Moses, but it was occupied by the scribes and Pharisees. The theology was still scholastic, but the scholasticism was decadent. The religious order still read out the rules, but one wonders whether the home fires were still burning."[12]

Lonergan affirms that God's love is transcendental, offered to all people at all places and times, regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof. But once that gift of God's love is poured into a person's heart, but it must be nurtured and directed with the help of others, otherwise it is likely to wither and die or be twisted into

[10] Ibid., 108.
[11] Ibid., 109.
[12] Ibid., 78.

something perverse. Thus, Lonergan writes that even a great mystic who has spent "years of sustained prayerfulness and self-denial" would benefit greatly from the outer Word of Jesus, the church community, and its sacred texts: "But then, as much as ever, one needs the [outer] word – the word of *tradition* that has accumulated religious wisdom, the word of *fellowship* that unites those that share the gift of God's love, the word of the *gospel* that announces that God has loved us first, and, in the fullness of time, has revealed that love in *Christ* crucified, dead, and risen."[13]

The two Words of God, "fit" human psyche or consciousness perfectly. Lonergan believes that human knowledge generally begins with experience. By "experience, he does not mean going to concert or traveling to another country. It is more basic than that. He means the raw, basic consciousness of something before our intellect is engaged in understanding it, judging it, or even wondering about it. Experience is twofold. There is the "inner" experience of one's own consciousness, how one feels, thinks, etc. before one has begun to reflect on oneself, to come to know oneself, or even to wonder about oneself. And there is the "outer" experience, which is simply the sensations from our five physical senses, unorganized by other acts that come later, particularly questions, insights, and judgments. Lonergan summarizes, "As outer experience it is sensation as distinct from perception. As inner experience, it is consciousness as distinct from self-knowledge."[14]

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[13] Ibid., 109.

[14] Bernard Lonergan, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Emerging Religious Consciousness of Our Time," in *A Third Collection, Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J. (*Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 57.

To be on the level of pure experience is to be like an infant,[15] conscious of colors, lines, curves, things fading in and out, without our arranging these things into intelligible relations, without naming or understanding them as colors, lines, curves, and things such as people, places, letters, words. One may hear sound but not yet know if it is music. One may see a set of lines and curves on a page, but if one does not understand the language, one will not know what the lines and curves mean. Inner experience is the very basic self-consciousness or self-awareness that comes before self-questioning, self-understanding, and self-judgment. For example, one feels an emotion before the emotion is named, before its causes or ends are identified, before one decides if one should dwell on the emotion, act on it, or move on from it.

Experience, whether inner or outer, gives rise to wonder, to questioning. We seek first to understand what we have experienced, and then to judge what we have understood. This basic pattern of experience, understanding, and judgment are, for Lonergan, the basic pattern of how we as human beings come to know ourselves and the universe in which we live.[16] Put in terms of scientific method, experience provides the data that becomes patterned or related by a hypothesis and ultimately judged in a conclusion. In terms of a courtroom, the witnesses tell of their experience, lawyers seek to understand it by interpreting it in a certain way, and a judge or jury determines which interpretation is valid or convincing.

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[15] The renowned Jesuit spiritual director, Howard Gray, would mention how "infant" comes from Latin *in* which means "not" and *fans*, "to speak." Thus an infant is someone who cannot speak. This is instructive here, because when we operate simply on the level of experience, we do so before logic or even language takes over.

[16] For more on Lonergan's general or transcendental method, see *Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), ch. 14, "Cognitional Structure," and *Method in Theology*, chs 1-2.

Like self-knowledge, knowledge of others, and the world, our knowledge of God begins with experience. And the experience of God is made possible because God has revealed Godself through two divine missions, what Lonergan calls the sending of God's inner Word of the Holy Spirit and the sending of the outer Word of the Son. Fred Crow summarizes how Lonergan's distinction of two types of experience allows us to think in a new way of how God's twofold revelation "fits" human consciousness and enables us to know God in a twofold way. Lonergan matches God's inner Word to our inner experience and God's outer Word to our outer experience: "We may still speak of visible and invisible missions, and always of the Biblical Son and Spirit, but we will have a new understanding of the one as sent into the world we meet through outer, objective data [Jesus], and the other as sent into the world of interior, subjective data."[17] The "one as sent into the world we meet through outer, objective data" is Jesus. And the "other as sent into the world of interior, subjective data" is the Holy Spirit.

Both are important, and they each "fit" part of our consciousness, allowing us to form a helpful, though not comprehensive, knowledge of God. But some people and some theologians, may prefer to emphasize one or the other. I believe Meister Eckhart and Eberhard Jüngel provide excellent examples of this. I offer the following consideration of them in an attempt to explore the theological implications of focusing on God's inner Word and outer Word.

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[17] *Fredrick* E. Crowe, S.J., *Appropriating the Lonergan Idea*, edited by Michael Vertin (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 307.

Eckhart

Since the Spirit was sent first,[18] and Meister Eckhart emphasized the Spirit and wrote centuries before Jüngel, let us begin with Eckhart's theology. In claiming that Eckhart emphasizes the inner Word, I am not saying that he writes a lot about Holy Spirit. However, his theology emphasizes union with God, which is commonly thought to be a work of the Holy Spirit. For example, Eckhart writes that, "The saints say that power is in the Father, likeness in the Son, and union in the Holy Spirit."[19] Despite a relative lack of such explicit statements about the Spirit, I believe that Lonergan's methodological theory of interiority might shed light on the inner Word's mark on Eckhart's mystical theology.

Three concepts will organize our exposition: the human soul, detachment, and God's distinction/ indistinction.

Eckhart's third German sermon focuses on the problem of how a human being might know and speak truly about God. It is based on Acts 12:11, which states of Peter, "Now I know truly that God sent his angel to me and saved me from the power of Herod and the hands of the enemy." Eckhart suggests turning the topic from the passage's simple, historical affirmation that *Peter* knows *that* God sent an angel into a broader, personal claim that *he,* Eckhart*,* knows the truth *because* God sent an angel. He writes, "Now let us change the words around and say:

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[18] Ibid., 328.

[19] Eckhart, Sermon 3, in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. by Bernard McGinn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 245. McGinn notes that Eckhart bases this on Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q. 39, a. 8, which cites Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.5.

because God sent his angel to me, I know truly."[20] And he does not mean he knows about an angel, but about God.

Such knowledge about God is a gift from God, but it relies on the soul already in some way being divine or possessing some divine element. Eckhart argues for this relying on the authority of Aristotle and Aquinas. He says that "knowledge depends on similarity" and "the soul is composed of all things since it has the potentiality of knowing all things." Consequently, for a person to be able to know about God, they must be similar to God or composed of some divine element.[21] He locates this similarity, and thus one's ability to know, not in our body or physical sensation but in the soul, which as the image of God shares with God a kind of divinity and inexpressibility.: "The soul is so noble at its highest and purest that the masters can find no name for it."[22]

According to Denys Turner, this divine light of the soul is associated with a medieval theme of "the self," which was introduced by Marguerite Porete (a Beguine of Hainault who was burned at the stake for heresy) and systematized by Eckhart.[23] The theme fits Lonergan's discussion of consciousness and his connection of God's inner Word with our inner, subjective experience. Eckhart does not believe that physical, sensory experience is very helpful for coming to know God. In particular, Eckhart is against images derived from sense experience: "Now if, with this power [the mind], the soul sees anything imaged, whether he sees the image of an angel or her own image, it is an imperfection in her. If

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[20] Ibid., 244.

[21] Ibid. Eckhart is relying here on arguments in Thomas Aquinas' *Commentary on the Soul*, 1.4, and Aristotle's *On the Soul*, 3.8 (431b). Cf. Sermon 16b, pp. 276; McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, 247, notes 3 and 4.

[22] Ibid, p. 245.

[23] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God, Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 139.

she sees God as He is God or as He is an image, or as He is three, it is an imperfection in her."[24]

Instead, Eckhart proposes an intellectual union with God that is beyond images.: "Knowledge and intellect unite the soul in God."[25] That union is made possible through a divine element of the soul, given various names such as the "light of the soul," "a spark of the soul," the "ground of the soul," among other things. Sometimes this light, spark, or ground seems natural to the soul, making it divine and even eternal by nature. And sometimes it seems to be a transformative, extra gift from God. Either way, it is a key to understanding Eckhart's theology, anthropology, and epistemology that has been controversial and difficult to grasp.[26] Let us first consider Eckhart's more orthodox writings that favor graced transformation and then return to his controversial thoughts on the self being eternal.

Sermon 3 argues heavily on the side of the transformation. It starts, as mentioned above, with the argument that knowledge comes from similitude and the soul is able to know all things, so it must have some similitude to God. In this sermon, this similitude seems to come as a gift. Eckhart writes that "what causes one to know truly" is "a divine light that deceives no one." This light is from God's dwelling place, and it is brought by an angel: "When God sends his angel to the soul, it knows truly." Once the intellect receives this knowledge, it informs "its playmate, the will… The soul in turn passes it on to its nature and its nature [passes it on] to all the

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[24] Eckhart, Sermon 83, quoted by Louis Roy, *Mystical Consciousness, Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 89. Cf. Sermon 16b, pp. 276-77.

[25] Eckhart, Sermon 3, p. 244.

[26] See Turner, *The Darkness of God*, Ch. 6.

bodily senses."[27] This is a process of transformation similar to Lonergan's process of "the way from above downwards."[28]

Eckhart expounds on this transformation. "The soul is formed into the highest purity, into the mold of pure being, where it gets a taste of God before he takes on truth or intelligibility, where all possibility of naming has been cast off. There it knows most purely; there it takes being on its own level. Therefore Paul says: 'God dwells in a light to which there is no access'(1Tm. 6:16).'" In his final paragraph, he concludes, "This is what happens: Whatever comes to God is changed. However worthless it may be, if we bring it back to God, it is emptied of itself…Since God transforms such worthless things into himself, what do you suppose he does with the soul which he has honored with his own image? That we may attain this, may God help us."[29]

Thus, to know God in Godself, one must be changed by God. Eckhart does affirm that human beings are made in the image of God, but he qualifies that angels are "closer" images, and they are sent to human soul "to bring it back to the same image" to make us similar to God and thus able to know God.[30] So knowledge of God and similarity with God are not natural rights, not entirely at least. They are at least to some measure graced gifts. Perhaps sin was what requires us to be transformed, to be "brought back" to similarity and union with God.

In his "Commentary on Exodus," specifically the part in which Moses meets God after the commandments have been given, Eckhart demonstrates even more clearly his

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[27] Eckhart, Sermon 3, p. 245.

[28] Lonergan, "Natural Right and Historical Mindedness," in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 180–81.

[29] Eckhart, Sermon 3, p. 246.

[30] Ibid., 245.

belief that human beings need God's help, which comes in the form of grace.: "We can conclude that the essential vision of God is impossible for a created intellect on the basis of its natural powers, but possible by supernatural aid. Thus when Moses begs, 'Show me your face,' it is significant that he prefixes it with 'If I have found grace in your sight' (Ex. 33:13)."[31] The change that one needs to make in order to know God is given by God through grace.

For Eckhart, the Spirit bears the gift of grace. To see how this is effected, let us turn to Sermon 29, based on Acts 1:4-5, in which Jesus, about to ascend into heaven, comforts his disciples, saying that as the Father has promised, "you shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit." Eckhart writes that the coming Spirit is to be discovered within oneself: "In temporal things, the Holy Spirit can neither be received nor given. When a person turns away from temporal things and turns within himself, he becomes aware of a heavenly light that has come from Heaven."[32]

Eckhart's "self" is not the egotistical, possessive self in common parlance; rather, it is a "nothingness" achieved by turning away from temporal things or achieving "detachment." Eckhart's understanding of detachment is, like his notion of the divine light of the soul, difficult to grasp. It seems to be both a cause of discovering the divine light as well as a resultant condition of living by the divine light. In the above quote, Eckhart is clear that detachment precedes discovery. But a few lines further in the same sermon, detachment remains but as transformed. Here, Eckhart likens iron drawn by a magnet to one's detached will guided by the Spirit. "In whatever direction the [magnetized] stone is

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[31] Eckhart, "Commentary on Exodus," #281, in Bernard McGinn, ed., *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 129.

[32] Eckhart, Sermon 29, p. 287.

turned, the iron turns too. This is what the spirit does." The spirit's direction of a human person's will, however, does not strip that person of their freedom. Rather, it realizes freedom: "God does not force the will, but places it in freedom in such a way that it wills nothing but what God himself is and what freedom itself is." Again, detachment is both cause and result of realizing one's divine self: "The person who has abandoned himself and all things, who seeks nothing for himself in things and performs all his works without a why and out of love, such a person is dead to the whole world and lives in God and God in him."[33] This rich quote summarizes Eckhart's detachment from self and world to God and love.

As seen in the above analogy of the iron and magnet, detachment is not really a complete lack of desire, but a free conformity or union of one's own desires with God's desires. This is to love as God loves. Turner explains: "To be detached is to love 'without a why.' It is to love God as an uncreated, undifferentiated love."[34] Eckhart continues the metaphor of a magnet, likening its attractive force to the desire awakened by loving union with God. Through the Spirit's gift of love,

> It [the soul] does not rest satisfied just with this light [graced knowledge], but presses all the way through the firmament and pierces through the sky until it comes to the spirit that makes the sky revolve. Because of the revolving of the heavens everything in the world turns green and leafs out. Still, this does not satisfy the spirit until it penetrates to the pinnacle and into the source in which the spirit takes its origin.[35]

The Spirit's gifts of divine love and detachment move us to ascend to the heavens and God but they also move

[33] Eckhart, Sermon 29, p. 288.
[34] Turner, 182.
[35] Eckhart, Sermon 29, p. 288.

us to a kind of descent that loves all things. Detachment is not a lack of care or desire; rather, it is a desire for God and created things, but in a different, new way. Divine love and detachment purify our desire and the objects of our desire.: "The person who has abandoned all things where they are lowest and transitory receives them again in God where they are truth."[36]

This quote leads us from Eckhart's thoughts on the soul and detachment to those on God. As were his notions of "the self" and "detachment," Eckhart's writings on God are dialectically difficult to understand. He asserts that God is both distinct and indistinct from creation. In his "Commentary on Wisdom," Eckhart explains that creatures are (1) limited by their forms and (2) numbered by their matter, which makes them individuals. In contrast to this, God is infinite and one. Therefore, God is distinct. However, because God is unlimited, God includes all, and so God is indistinct from all things. "Accordingly, it should be noted that nothing is so distinct from number and the thing numbered or what is numberable (the created thing, that is) as God is. And yet nothing is so indistinct."[37]

More concretely, Eckhart expresses our indistinction from God in a trinitarian formula, saying that through adoptive filiation, God draws humanity into union from within. "Our Lord said, 'Everything that I have heard from my Father, I have revealed to you' (Jn. 15:15)… What the Son hears from the Father he has revealed to us: that we are this same Son."[38] And through this adoptive filiation, we receive the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

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[36] Eckhart, Sermon 29, p. 289.

[37] Eckhart, "Commentary on Wisdom," #154, in McGinn, ed., *Meister Eckhart*, 169. Contrast this with Sermon 29, p. 290: "For this is God's property and nature: that he is dissimilar and is like no one."

[38] Eckhart, Sermon 29, p. 289.

The union is attained at the highest point of the soul, namely the intellect, with a "breakthrough" that allows the birth of the Son in a human soul. This breakthrough involves the Neoplatonic negation of all names for God. Names must be negated because any outward expression is, as seen above, limited and multiple. In its desire to unite with God, the soul's highest point must even deny the names of the trinity and God, Eckhart writes.[39] Regarding our intellect specifically, Eckhart writes, "It does not want God as the Holy Ghost nor as the Son: it flees the Son. Nor does it want God, as He is God. Why? There He has a name, and if there were a thousand Gods it would go on breaking through, it wants to have Him there where He has no name: it wants a nobler, better thing than God as having a name."[40] But abandoning the names of God does not result in atheism. Rather, it is the condition that results from and in a closer union with God.

Because of this union of human soul with God through the Son and Spirit, Eckhart describes the soul with terms typically reserved to God. For example, the soul is no longer simply created: "While I yet stood in my first cause, I had no God and was my own cause."[41] The human soul itself becomes nameless: "The soul is so noble at its highest and purest that the masters can find no name for it."[42]

But if Eckhart denies all names of God, and if he would sense truth in the aforementioned Daoist statement (that "Those who know do not speak. Those who speak do not know."), why then would he write and preach at such length? Denys Turner, mentions a

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[39] Eckhart, Sermon 21.

[40] Eckhart, Sermon 26, quoted by Roy, *Mystical Consciousness*, 90.

[41] Eckhart, Sermon 52, ibid., 88.

[42] Eckhart, Sermon 3, p. 245.

possible answer presented by Oliver Davies in his book, *God Within*: Eckhart, as a Neoplatonist thinker, uses language, particularly paradox, to bring about silence. "We have seen that for the mainstream apophatic tradition in Western Christianity, the strategy of the apophatic consisted in a deliberate practice of straining to speak about God in the purposive stretching of the discourse of theology to those limits at which it snaps, in the contriving of that paradox and contradictoriness on the side of which there is only silence."[43] Turner himself rejects this idea and argues instead that we must take Eckhart's words seriously for their content, and not reduce them to merely a means to silence. Turner's solution is to examine whether or not Eckhart followed the traditional Christian assertion that any divine element that humanity may have is given by God as a grace. In Turner's judgment, Eckhart did break from the tradition. Eckhart's own words, however, as demonstrated above, present contradictory evidence to Turner's conclusion. I believe the difficulty in reading Eckhart's writings arises from Eckhart's own difficulty in expressing the fruits of his encounter with the inner Word, the Holy Spirit.

To make sense of Eckhart's seeming equivocacy regarding the three themes we selected (the soul's relationship with God, detachment's relation to things, and God's relation to creation and names), we should consider the thought that these relations and this identity may not be merely an addition to what was, not merely a recovery of what was lost, but a transcending discovery of what was already there yet is now transformed. The human soul was always divine, created things were always desirable, and God was always indistinct, but it takes period of selfless, detached

[43] Turner, 149.

abandonment of our self and created things, and a total distinction, a seemingly heretical denial of at least our names for God, before we are able to discover the truth, unity, and divinity of all we first valued and affirmed, then abandoned and denied. This discovery is not merely passive or subjective. Rather, it in some ways makes the discovered reality real. In other words, as Eckhart says, "being and knowing are completely one."[44] We "realize" our divinity in two senses of the word: to understand and to achieve or make real.

While this is my opinion, it is equally reminiscent of the Taoist abandonment of the perhaps illusory strength of the yang for the perhaps illusory weakness of the yin, in order to discover the truly strong and weak Tao, which was there all along. This may, however, oversimplify Eckhart's thought. The Christian abandonment of the body, to become pure soul, and then finally to resurrect to body and soul, could very well better represent Eckhart's thought. This model may better allow for a true abandonment, and a truly graced recovery rather than discovery.

In any case, let us leave Eckhart's seemingly ineffable theology, which focuses on the subjective (in the sense of being revealed to our consciousness, not in the sense of being "untrue"), inner Word and turn to Jüngel's more readable focus on God's objective (in the sense of openness to our physical senses), outer Word.

Jüngel

Our consideration of Jüngel will begin with his thoughts on God's relation to creation, particularly in the Incarnation, then move to the implications of the Incarnation on human knowing and speaking, and

[44] Eckhart, Sermon 3.

conclude with our best word for God, "love" and love's relation to the Holy Spirit.

For Jüngel, our knowledge of God is based on faith in the scriptural event that, "the Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14). He summarizes:

> Christian theology arose as the explication and self-criticism of faith in Jesus of Nazareth. To believe in Jesus means to understand him as that person through whom and in whom God has become definitely accessible. Our access to God is thus really understood as an event in which God brings us to himself, 'retrieves us.' The thought of God results from this event.[45]

Jüngel is, consequently, critical of Descartes, who attempted to base certain knowledge purely on his subjective reason, the "I think." Jüngel is also critical of a kind of "philosophic theology" that attempts to construct theological propositions without presuppositions. "Evangelical theology," which he advocates, makes three fundamental hermeneutical decisions: (1) that thinking about God must take place before thinking about thought, (2) that "a very special experience of God," the event of Jesus, gives resultant thought claims a "general validity," and (3) Biblical texts guide theological thought.[46]

In other words, Christians may know and speak of God, because God sent God's Son, about whom, they may read in the Bible. Basing our thought on the event of Christ as revealed in scripture, we may speak positively about God. Because of the incarnation, Christians should not, like strict Neoplatonists believe that God is entirely

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[45] Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, translated by Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 155.

[46] Ibid., 154-55.

"above us." In fact, we can affirm that God is in the midst of a natural struggle "between nothingness and possibility."[47] All living things must face death, and in death lies the potential to become nothingness, a void.

Much could be written about Jüngel's thoughts on nothingness, but what is important here is the relationship between nothingness and humanity in the latter's quest for God. Death is the constant threat of nothingness. Death shows us that we are not in control of either our beginning or our end. But because of God's words we can have hope. We know through scripture that God is both the beginning and the end. God created us out of nothingness, and this is the first example of how God involves Godself in nothingness. But the fact that we die reveals that nothingness persists in creation. We do not fully know the role of nothingness in our ultimate end, but the story of Jesus's death and resurrection teaches us about our end and is the beginning of the end.

God's death and resurrection in Jesus reveal both God's struggle with nothingness and, in particular, it teaches us something new about God's creation out of nothingness. For Jüngel, Jesus's passion and death, interpreted again in light of the resurrection, shows us that, (1) God involves Godself in nothingness, (2) this involvement takes the form of a struggle, (3) God puts nothingness in its place, and (4) that place is within being because God has taken it on himself. In other words, by identifying with Jesus, who died, God "located nothingness within the divine life" and thus within being in general. [48]

Through God's act, nothingness becomes something transformative and positive in this life, "the critical edge" of "concrete affirmation." It "receives the new function of

[47] Ibid., 217.
[48] Ibid., 218-19.

raising the possibilities of being to a new level of power."[49] In his passion and death, Jesus connected love and death, such that life is able to go beyond itself. This ability for life to go beyond life is essential to God and it is revealed as essential to God on the cross. In particular, the cross reveals that God goes beyond Godself in that God suffers "endlessly," for others. Through entering the nothingness of death, God defined Godself as existing for others. This dialectic of being and nonbeing for others is love for Jüngel. While God is and was always love, "God defined himself as love on the cross of Jesus."[50]

The cross reveals that love and God are essentially self-transcendent: "The being of love unites love and death in that in the event of love life goes beyond itself. Therefore it may be asserted that, in that God is, he is already beyond himself."[51] God's going or being beyond Godself is the reason for Jüngel's assertion that God's essence is to address us, to reveal Godself to us. In other words, God is God's Word.

God's loving "going beyond" in self-communication is also the cause of creation:

> God is self-communication in the most original form. In this fashion, God is related to nothingness. In order not to have himself only for himself, God creates for himself, in the act of original self-communication, a living counterpart out of nothingness to whom he can communicate himself as love and has in fact already communicated himself in the act of creation in an irrevocable fashion.[52]

In examining Jesus's birth, death, and resurrection, as well as creation, Jüngel argues that we can know God

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[49] Ibid., 219.
[50] Ibid., 220.
[51] Ibid., 222.
[52] Ibid., 222-23.

and speak of God, because God has come into creation and brought it into Godself. This "coming" is expressed analogically in an "analogy of event." Jüngel says that his concept of analogy goes against that expressed by Erich Przywara in his article, "Metaphysik, Religion, Analogie," regarding the "rhythm of 'greater dissimilarity in so great a likeness' between God and the creature."[53] This position on analogy is shared by Kant in his formulation of God as an unknown "x" that relates to three knowns, such as "a," "b," and "c." The resultant formula would be x:a = b:c.

However, Jüngel believes that this maintains too great a separation between God and creation, opting to write the formula as x→a=b:c. He explains, "One must understand analogy as an event which allows the One (x) to come to the Other (a) with the help of the relationship of a further Other (b) to even one more Other (c). The issue is an analogy of advent, which expresses God's arrival among men as a definitive event."[54] This analogy of advent demonstrates Christianity's central belief that the Word became flesh. It shows how God enters into creation and how through love, he "suffers" all parts of it, including death. The key point for Jüngel, is that this formula should lead us to reject the "negative" understanding of mystery, which holds that God is more dissimilar than similar to creation, more ineffable than expressible to human beings.

The analogy of advent is how God reveals Godself to us as organizing principle in the incarnation, Jesus's words and deeds, his passion, death, and resurrection. These events of God's arrival bring to us an ontological as well as a linguistic transformation. God "introduces himself in that he arrives… But this is possible only when this arrival itself takes place as an arrival-in-language…

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[53] Ibid., 283. Cf., the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.
[54] Ibid., 285.

Briefly put: the gospel is to be understood as the event of correspondence."[55]

By "correspondence," Jüngel means that the apostles' words about God's actions in Christ, written in the New Testament, say something true about the events they discuss. Their truth comes from the power of the Christ event, and the power of the event "is shared with the speech which speaks about it… In its character as the present, the human word lives from the definitiveness of the divine word. The name of Jesus Christ as the Crucified One is responsible for this definitiveness."[56] Thus, because of Christ's coming to us, living among us and dying for us, we are not only brought to knowledge of God, but our speech about God has a definitive, divine power to it.

And because of the Christ event/advent, not only *can* we speak of God, we *must*. For Jüngel, God is not a mystery to be encountered only in silence, as Wittgenstein or strict Neoplatonism would maintain. Rather, the mystery of God wishes to be proclaimed, writes Jüngel, as supported by I Corinthians, 9:16, "For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"

Again, countering the charges of a "negative" understanding of mystery, Jüngel asserts that we are more similar than dissimilar to God: "The Christian faith confesses that God's becoming man, the incarnation of the word of God in Jesus Christ, is the unique, unsurpassable instance of a still greater similarity

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[55] Ibid., 286.

[56] Ibid., 287. Jüngel cites I Cor. 1:18 many times: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

between God and man taking place within a great dissimilarity."[57]

This "greater similarity" and "great dissimilarity" is possible because of God's coming to be with us and lifting up of our existence into God. The "greater similarity" and "great dissimilarity" are also true of our language about God. In particular, Jüngel lifts up our claim that God is love:

> The uniqueness, definitiveness, and the 'once and for all' nature of the humanity of God are expressed most stringently in the confession 'God is love. To tell about God's being can and may mean nothing else than to tell about God's love. The statement 'God is love' must accompany all talk about God, even about the anger and judgment of God(!), if such talk is to correspond to God.[58]

While our similarity to God and thus our ability to know and to speak truly about God are made possible by God's coming as Christ Jesus, Jüngel does not neglect the importance of the Holy Spirit. In particular, Christians may only know and confess that God is love if and "to the extent that people are defined in their entire existence by this event – in that they receive the spirit of love who is the spirit of this very God."[59]

Agreeing with Ludwig Feuerbach's criticism of the popular interpretation of "God is love" in *The Essence of Christianity*, Jüngel writes that theologians have often reduced God's love, the Spirit, from a subject to a predicate, devaluing "God is love" to "God has love." We turn love from a subject to a predicate. If we are to understand "God is love" correctly, we must consider salvation history, the history of God's being with us,

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[57] Ibid., 288. Emphasis added.
[58] Ibid., 314.
[59] Ibid., 315.

which, Jüngel says, is trinitarian. Learning from Martin Buber, Jüngel says that love is in its fullest form when "a loving I is loved back by the beloved Thou." Jüngel's description of love and beloved is similar to his description of God and human being and knowing. Love is "the event of a still greater selflessness within such great self-relatedness," in which life and death are united for the sake of life. And in creation, being and nonbeing were joined for being. In love, "the loving ego experiences both an extreme distancing of himself from himself and an entirely new kind of nearness to himself."[60]

The distancing and death are caused by the I's desire to have the Thou. A loving I loves its Thou more than itself and surrenders itself to the Thou. And so, since self-possession is an "old expression of being," an I in love enters nothingness, death. But the death is united with life for the sake of life. The self-distancing produces a new self-nearness. After surrender, "the beloved Thou gives me myself in that it has me, so that I have myself again, but in a completely new way."[61] In other words, through selflessness which is a kind of death, love brings a person into full relation with one's own nothingness and thus with one's full self. A person in love can say, "without Thee I am nothing."[62] The I-Thou relation is a union of the two persons and a union of being and non-being. Thus, our love reflects God's entering nothingness to create, a process that brings the nothingness into his own being. It also reflects Christ's life and death for the sake of life.

As creation and salvation are graced, so too is love. "If it is of God, then no one can love without first being loved by God."[63] The parallels among creation, salvation, and

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[60] Ibid., 315-18.
[61] Ibid., 321-22.
[62] Ibid., 323.
[63] Ibid., 327.

love, are not surprising, because the God who creates and saves is love and creates and saves through love. These parallels bring us back to the Trinity. It is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who create, save, and love. In love, "God is spirit, establishing the link between father and son in such a way that man is drawn into this relationship."[64]

Conclusion

With these brief presentations of the trinitarian theologies of Meister Eckhart and Eberhart Jüngel in mind, let us compare and contrast the two regarding the knowability and speakability of God. Both Ekhart and Jüngel see love, nothingness, and grace as leading to a kind of union of the trinitarian God and humanity. Both of them consider the union as the foundation for our knowledge of and discourse on God.

Each author, however, focuses on a different member of the Trinity, and this has consequences of his thought regarding knowledge and discourse. As mentioned near the beginning of this essay, Eckhart seems to rely on something divine within one's self. This indwelling divinity is traditionally referred to as the Holy Spirit, or, as Lonergan would say, God's immaterial, inner Word. As John 3:8 says, "The wind blows where it wills. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with those who are born of the Spirit." The consequence for Eckart's reliance on the Spirit is a beautiful but difficult to grasp, paradoxical theology, which sometimes borders on the heretical and encourages one toward silence. Given Eckart's example, we may conclude that focusing on the Spirit can bring us to intimate knowledge of God, but it may limit our efforts

[64] Ibid., 328.

to express and share this knowledge in speech, as evinced by Eckhart's emphasis on a union of God beyond names.

Jüngel's focus on the Son as an already-articulated, outer Word has its own advantages and disadvantages. By emphasizing the Word's incarnation and entry into language in the Gospels, we have a strong foundation for God being knowable and for this knowledge being capable of being expressed. The weakness seems to be the temptation toward an over-estimation of our understanding of God through our encounter with the incarnate Word. Can we rightly assert, as Jüngel does, that our similarity to God is greater than our dissimilarity? Can we really believe that our knowledge of God reaches more than halfway to infinity?

For Lonergan, we can grow in the knowledge of God and speak truly of God, but it seems he would not say that what we know about God is greater than what we do not know. In fact, like Karl Rahner, one of Lonergan's favorite terms for God is "mystery" or "transcendent mystery." He affirms, following Church doctrine, that "no system we can construct will encompass or plumb or master the mystery by which we are held. As the fourth Lateran council declared: 'between creator and creature no similarity can be noted without a greater dissimilarity being noted' (DS 806). As the first Vatican council added: 'The divine mysteries so exceed created intellect that, even when given in revelation and received by faith, they remain covered over by the very veil of faith itself…' (DS 3016)."[65]

So far in Christian quest for knowledge of God, Crowe believes we have underemphasized the Spirit, and that while we should remain Christ-centered, we should also center ourselves on the Holy Spirit, and thus (to the degree that they are distinct persons with distinct

[65] *Method in Theology*, 315. Lonergan cites the Fourth Lateran Council.

revelations) the church should have two centers, an ellipse with two foci.[66] Nevertheless, inasmuch as God is one, we have a single center.

Similarly, I believe there is much to learn from Eckhart and Jüngel about how God's trinitarian missions, the outer Word of the Son and the inner word of the Spirit, give us an intimacy with God that enables us to know and to speak of God, however imperfectly. With the benefit of both divine Words, we may better meet present and future challenges.

So I believe we have met the challenge posed by the Daoist quote at the beginning of this paper. A better quote, surprisingly not from a religious source, may well summarize Eckhart and Jüngel's shared position (as well as my own). The claim here is that an increase of knowledge of God brings us to an awareness of our limits, which may shock us into saying hyperbolically, "He who knows does not speak. He who speaks does not know." This final quote is a metaphor by the British physicist, John Wheeler: "As the island of our knowledge grows, so do the shores of our ignorance." The claim here is that we have true knowledge of God, but that the more we grow in the knowledge of God, the more it feels that we know nothing about God. I hope our islands will continue to grow and that while on the way, we may love the island, the shores, and the mysterious darkness beyond.

About the Author

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[66] Crowe, *Appropriating the Lonergan Idea*, 304.

is working on a book on conversion that will put Lonergan in dialogue with Malcolm X, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and others. He is half Filipino and enjoys visiting the Philippines as much as he can. Email address: mtmiller2@usfca.edu

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