

Is There Something - Or Nothing?

Towards a Feministic Approach

by

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To become what you are: with these words by Thomas Merton, it is possible to sum up his predominant thoughts. I wish it were equally easy to sum up, in a few straight words, what religiosity and mysticism are all about. Another wish of mine would be to find a simple way to describe what sex-related differences are about, that is, if they are about anything. Perhaps they are about nothing.

My aim with this paper is to present a few findings I have been digging up along the way. They began with Simone Weil (1909-1943), who led me to my dealings with the intricate subject of mysticism. In my project on mysticism I focused on Thomas Merton, among others, and Zen Buddhism. Merton and Zen provided me with a fresh understanding of how to use phenomenology in my analysis of a contemplative awareness.

Today I am standing at a crossroad, between the old and the new. The old is represented by the academic philosophy of the fifties and sixties, while the new is represented by a feministic perspective, which is breaking away from a long history of male dominance obliging female academics to conform according to male definitions. So here I am, on the brink of plunging myself into a feministic approach to mysticism.

Concepts of Simone Weil.

Let me start from the beginning and say a few words about Simone Weil.¹ What was it about her that captured my attention?

At the start it was her concept of "attention" in her well-known book, *Attente de Dieu*. Through attention, according to Weil, we are able to grasp truth and beauty. When we are attentive, we imitate a divine way of being. We decreate ourselves as God decreates himself in the act of creation. "To decreate" is a conceptual innovation of Weil and fundamental in her under-

standing of how grace and gravity are related. Gravity is the law of the world, which is governed by mechanism and cold force. The movement of gravity is downwards. Grace is the law of the creator and its movement is upwards. Grace and the divine are opposed to gravity. Gravity belongs to the naturalistic domain while grace is of a non-naturalistic essence. As the two are of opposed qualities they can never intermingle.

Since God has nothing to do with the naturalistic order of this world, he cannot be all-powerful and almighty, according to Weil. God *may be* almighty but he has chosen not to execute his power. This is important to Weil as power for her is synonymous with force and tyranny. Power is an expression of gravity.

If God is love, it would be a contradiction in terms to conceive of him as almighty, since being almighty, to Weil, is being a tyrant, who capriciously, and when it is in his pleasure to do so, intervenes in the affairs of the world. Therefore, argues Weil, the Jewish and Christian concept of God as almighty is wrong. Love has nothing whatsoever in common with power. These are in short a few important lines in the thoughts of Weil. How did she reach these conceptions of the world and God? Through her mystical experiences, I would say.

Even late in life Weil still perceived herself as an agnostic and she ignored her heritage as a Jew. Towards the end of her life, after profound attention to prayer, she experienced how Christ took hold of her. After that she had this experience repeatedly. Her experiences made her reformulate her concepts in the way we now have them. Another consequence was her intensified urge to share the afflictions of mankind during the Second World War. In sum, her mystical experiences became imperative for an acting out of her reformulated views on God and reality.

Weil's concepts of grace and gravity, and of the powerless God, were her way of solving the problem of evil. Her mystical experiences brought harmony to the contradiction spelled out in the problem of theodicy. But this harmony was not to last. Thanks to her experiences of Christ, she could not abandon her experience of the love of God, just as she could no longer uphold the harmony between God and evil. Even though she had succeeded in explaining evil as a natural cause of gravity, she could not ignore the innocent suffering during the war. This proved to be an unbearable tension. She died, believing firmly that in the moment of death truth would be revealed to her.

After my work on Simone Weil I was intrigued by the mystical phenomenon. But what to do with this broad, vague and evaporating concept? At first I had a bold approach. My ambition was to look into the mystical traditions of the world-religions, to see what they had in common and in what they differed. But this soon proved to be an all too huge task. Finally I ended up focusing on mysticism in our Western Christian tradition and in Zen Buddhism. I picked out four mystics: Saint John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton, and dominant thoughts within Zen Buddhism.²

One of my theses concerning mysticism is that it is not an esoteric activity or for an exclusive minority only, as has so often been claimed. It is not elitistic and the concern of a happy few. A true mystic is known through his or her concern for others and solidarity with those who suffer. Thomas Merton, for example, claims his unity with everything living. Simone Weil is driven to extremes by her wish to share in the affliction of those who suffer.

The knowledge gained through mystical experience is not of an esoteric quality either. The possibility of mystical experience is open to everyone. But there are conditions, either to apply a certain technique or to cultivate what might be called a pure heart or a contemplative attitude. Those who are mystics lead a contemplative life which can be carried out in the midst of life. The heart of the contemplative life is a certain outlook on life, a reversal of values, and a serious ambition to live according to what one's experiences and attitude demand.

There are two 'I's according to my mystics, one illusory and one authentic. So long as you have no mystical enlightenment, you understand the illusory 'I' to be the real 'I'. Once the distinction between what is real and what is illusory is understood, it has implications for understanding reality and knowledge. When the mystic is able to distinguish between the illusory and authentic 'I', he or she is beyond the veil of ignorance. Whatever used to appear as true is now seen as untrue, and what used to be regarded as nonsense or sheer fantasy is now apprehended as true.

To get to know oneself is the road to know the divine or reality. Self-knowledge is the instrument for getting in touch with authentic reality. This was the message of Saint Augustine as well as, for example, of Saint John of the Cross, Thomas Merton and the masters of Zen Buddhism.

During contemplation there is an offer to get to know one's self. The self is repeatedly described as blank, as a nothingness. There "is" nothing. The nothingness is the "nature" of everything. This is a central core in Zen. Most Christians are not satisfied with this picture as they claim there is a substance both immanent and transcendent. But this, I reckon, is a way of interpreting "nothing" as "anything" with no more valid reason than the Zen Buddhist who interprets "anything" as "no-thing".

Thomas Merton and the Question of Nothingness.

Thomas Merton is fascinating as a person, a monk and a theologian. He became a Roman Catholic in 1938 and a Trappist in 1941.³ At that time he was a convinced Catholic, firm in his belief in the unique character of the Catholic faith. But as he was fundamentally not a dogmatic person, and as his career as a writer challenged him, he through the years gained an open mind and a growing interest in non-Christian religiosity, and in the harsh problems of American society.

The Zen Buddhist tradition attracted Merton, and a couple of days before he died he had, as he called it himself, an aesthetic experience, which he interpreted in Zen terminology.

What Merton found in Zen must have been something corresponding with his own views on contemplation and his conceptualizations of God.

If we are to look for a central theme in Merton's writing, it is natural to stress his concept of contemplation. The way he experienced contemplation was *his*, and not necessarily according to the Roman Catholic doctrine. As Merton, as time passed, became more open to different religious traditions, he found in Zen outlooks similar to his own. This of course proved to be a doctrinal as well as an emotional problem. He could not abandon his Catholic faith, but on the other hand he could not deny his experience. The tension proved to be a dilemma. The dilemma had its roots in how to describe God. Merton started to use a non-theistic concept, "the hidden ground of love".

It is possible to find numerous passages in his writings where he discusses the Western and Eastern concepts of God and reality. In some passages he argues that there is a real difference, in others he argues that the differences are superficial and a question of terminology.

Merton was a voracious reader with an extensive knowledge in most subjects. He was sensitive and empathetic for how other people were, and the kinship between different standpoints came to him without constraint. One sign of this was his ability to connect phenomenology with Zen, which at that time, in the sixties, was not yet obvious. In a few passages Merton remarks upon the kinship between the phenomenological epoché and the Zen use of koan in order to have a direct experience of reality.

In my work on Merton I have followed in his footsteps by focusing on contemplation as Merton describes it and how it is described by a couple of Zen masters. I have done this in order to see in what sense a contemplative awareness differs, or does not differ, from how Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the founder of phenomenology, defines consciousness as intentional. The mark of human consciousness is intentionality, which implies being aware of, and "explains" how reality is represented by our consciousness. My thesis is that contemplative consciousness is non-intentional, that the mystic is aware of nothing except his or her own consciousness. In other words, non-intentionality could be described as being in a state of total absorption. This kind of awareness is primordial and presupposes all other states of mind, according to Merton and Zen.

Although Merton and Zen describe the primordial consciousness differently from Husserl, there are interesting connections between a mystical or contemplative consciousness and phenomenology. Contemplation aims at something similar to the phenomenological method, the epoché. They both aim at a non-judgemental apprehension of reality, and both stress the presupposition of the 'I', and the priority of experience to language. These views are expressed in the concept of the pure experience. What is "pure" is free from qualities and beyond language. What is beyond language is apprehended as authentic reality, the source of meaning and truth.

One important difference, though, between Husserl and Zen, and later Merton, is their different options on what pure experience "contains". According to Husserl, pure experience and pure consciousness are of a substantial character. At least that is how I have understood Husserl. Reality is meaning, it is *something*. Zen, and later Merton, argue that pure experience is nothing, it is about reality, which is *nothing*, as reality lacks substance. Reality is a nothingness. To get to know reality is to get to know the non-substantial "nature" of the human 'I'. What is non-substantial is real, according to Zen and later Merton, while Husserl would say that which is substantial is real. So while

Husserl claims reality to be about something, Zen and Merton claim it to be about nothing.

A Tentative Feministic Approach.

Why is a feminist approach of value for mysticism, or for anything, for that matter?⁴ First, we must be aware that there are many different feminist standpoints. Here I will refer to feminism as a concept.

Feminism argues that its perspective is of a fundamental nature. Another cornerstone is that whatever is said and done depends on *who* defines what should be said and done. This principle is extremely important as so far the definer has been a male.

What is *new* with feminism? It is its stress on the importance of our sex. If not for anything else, feminism is nowadays known for its distinction between sex and gender. Everything, it is argued, we do, say and think is permeated with sex and gender. Sex is what we are biologically, while gender is what we are socially. We live and act as male and female according to our acquired gender. This implies there is no necessary connection between sex and gender. A person could be born a female but act out a male gender. That is what women actually have been accused of when they are said to behave as a male. But what other options are there for a woman to gain attention?

There is a quotation from one of the early Church Fathers about a woman who is like a man: "this female man of God." A question from a feminist approach would be: why cannot a woman be a woman? Why cannot a woman be a female female of God? Why is it through our Western history that women, if at all they have been given attention, have to be "malish", that is, to acquire what is supposed to be a male gender?

There is an important observation to be made at this point. When I talk about "female" and "male", I am not referring to a biological determinism, which is scorned by many feminists today. Biological determinism implies that gender is not acquired but something which we are somehow born with. Males *are* aggressive species, females *are* passive and obedient creatures. If this was the case, things would truly be bad for the feminist cause.

Contrary to determinism or essentialism is a *relativistic* standpoint. Whatever we "are", at least socially, can be changed, at least to some degree.

The most important thing is to become aware of how our gender is constructed as something subjective and not given once and for all.

The essentialistic standpoint could be said to be about something, about having a definite nature. This is close to phenomenology, while the relativistic standpoint, which could be said to be about nothing, is close to Zen and Merton. Zen and Merton would argue that what we are is what we become, while Husserl would say that we are what we are.

If, finally, we turn our gaze to the question of mysticism, *one* feminist approach could be formulated as a question concerning gender. The task could be to analyze to what degree mystics have deconstructed their "secularized" gender and acquired an altered gender definition, either before their mystical "conversion" or as a consequence of it. Examples of other intriguing questions could be: to what degree do mystics, females and males, use a sexist language and to what degree do they use verbs instead of substantives? Do mystics express a relational concept of God or the more traditional, patriarchal? Do they use a concept of power and how is power understood?

If we take a quick glance at Merton, we see how, inspired by Zen, he started to use a non-theistic language. This non-theism could also be interpreted as non-sexism, as Merton no longer uses "He" or "Father" about "God", but prefers the expression "the hidden ground of love". But Merton's language is not only non-sexistic, he also prefers verbs to substantives, thereby indicating a more active and dynamic concept of "God" and reality. This is close to how many feminists have stressed their notion of reality as "being"; Mary Daly is perhaps the best-known example. Using language in its active modality is a pointer that reality is not given once and for all, but something we construct. Reality is what we perceive to be important.

Does Merton deconstruct his gender? I am not able to answer such a broad question here as it needs further investigation, but it is possible to find hints in that direction. He leaves behind a male concept of God, and as his theistic conceptualization wears out, it is replaced with a more subjective understanding. I would not label Merton as gender-blind as he seems to have a tentative awareness of the importance of feminist theology.

In what sense does Simone Weil deconstruct her gender? There is no obvious answer here either. She strikes me at first as having no awareness of her sex apart from being intellectually inferior to her elder brother. But I would like to argue that Weil criticized concepts inherent in a patriarchal theology and society. Her criticism concerned, as we saw before, the almighty God. She was

much troubled by the concept of power but also, and perhaps even more, by the executing of power. Weil criticized what she called the brute force, meaning that when in war men killed others, they killed their own souls.

Finally, Weil's concept of decreation is illuminating. To decreate could, in feminist terminology, be interpreted as a deconstruction of a negative gender. What is opposed to love, according to Weil, is what is not decreed. When we are decreed, we have found our true nature. Weil's thinking is close to biological determinism, except that Weil believes in a given nature *beyond* the sex and gender divisions.

To sum up: Weil has a belief about something. There is a given but sexless human nature. She is keenly aware of a naturalistic, but destructive power structure. Merton shows signs of an increasing awareness of what we today call gender. He hints at a gender awareness, that we are from the beginning of nothing. He is critical of theistic concepts and moving towards a non-sexistic language.

Notes and References

- 1 My dissertation dealt with Simone Weil: Catherina Stenqvist: *Simone Weil - om livets tragik och dess skönhet*. Stockholm: Proprius, 1984.
- 2 The title of my book on mysticism is: Catherina Stenqvist: *Förundran och förändring. Mystikens teori och livssyn*. Delsbo: Åsak, 1994.
- 3 The title of my book on Merton is: Catherina Stenqvist: *NU - är verklig: Thomas Merton och kontemplativa erfarenheter*, Studiekamratens förlag, 1996.
- 4 My new project deals with questions concerning feminism, Christian faith and mysticism. One of my aims is to investigate if and what kinds of connections there are between these three areas. For example, to analyze how gender is experienced, the extent of sexist language and embedded power structures.