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Edited by
Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes

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Guest Editor

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About the Editor

Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes

Dr. Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Philosophy at Palacky University in Olomouc, the Czech Republic. He is the guest editor for the Special Issue on Spanish Mysticism (2021) in the peer-reviewed international journal *Religions*. He is now finished with this Special Issue on Mysticism and Social Justice and is proceeding to start a new Special Issue on Mysticism and Nature. He is the editor of the Thomas Merton series *Merton and the Tao: Dialogues with John Wu and the Ancient Sages* (Fons Vitae, 2013) and the author of *Saint John of the Cross: His Prophetic Mysticism in the Historical Context of Sixteenth Century Spain* (Pacem in Terris Press, 2018). His publications include articles on Merton and the Spanish mystics, Merton on Dr. King, D. T. Suzuki, and Thich Nhat Hanh, Merton and Teilhard de Chardin, Merton and Heschel, Merton and Zhuangzi, among other seminal thinkers.

Preface

As the Guest Editor for the Special Issue on "Mysticism and Social Justice", my experience working with experts in this field has been excellent and very rewarding, especially in these current times, where we are dealing with ecological crises, wars, poverty, racism, sexism, and the rise in authoritarian regimes around the globe. I am very grateful to have served as the Guest Editor and to have contributed with an article on Thomas Merton and Abraham Joshua Heschel. It has been a great privilege to exchange ideas with scholars from all over the world. In total, twelve articles were published electronically in this Special Issue of *Religions*. The authors were scholars from Argentina (Raggio, Margulies), Israel (Meir), the United States (Robinson, Yong, Long, Kelly), Spain (Velez de Cea, Serrán-Pagán), Colombia (Santos Meza), and China (Liu, Na Liu). I am very proud of the quality of their research and their major contributions to this volume. Until not long ago, many scholars associated mysticism with escaping from the world (*fugi mundi*). Contemplatives, mystics and sages are generally portrayed as people who withdraw from society, escaping from their social responsibilities to better the world. But as we have seen in this Special Issue the great varieties of mystics have contributed with their wisdom and their witnessing to confront the most urgent issues of their times. In the pluralistic and global world in which we live today, we must try our best to address these ecological, economic, social, political, and religious problems. No mystic lives isolated in an island. Authentic mystics often get involved in the world of action they are part of. In this Special Issue, we have invited scholars from different academic fields and continents to submit an article addressing at least one mystic and one social justice issue, no matter which time, culture, or religious tradition they belong to. The overall focus of this Special Issue is to examine the great legacies of these mystics in action. The primary scope of these articles is to contextualize their mystical writings and life events in their own historical times. The aim of this volume is to expand on the existing literature currently available and to make clear why these mystics from different cultures and religious traditions were involved in the most urgent political, economic, social, and religious issues in their times. I believe this field of "Mysticism and Social Justice" will open up even more avenues and opportunities after people read these articles covering a Latin American Catholic mystic like Ernesto Cardenal from Nicaragua, American Jewish neo-Hasidic mystic Arthur Green, North American Catholic eco-feminist Rosemary Ruether, Spanish Catholic/Hindu philosopher of religion and mystic Raimon Panikkar, German Jewish prophetic mystic Martin Buber, Spanish Catholic Discalced Carmelite mystic St. John of the Cross, African American Protestant modern mystic and minister Howard Thurman, Polish American Jewish modern mystic and ethicist Abraham J. Heschel, French American Catholic Trappist monk, mystic, poet, and social critic Thomas Merton, Chinese Daoist mystics Laozi and Zhuangzi, Indian Hindu swami Vivekananda, and English Protestant mystic Richard Jefferies. This Special Issue has attracted scholars from different disciplines to study this major topic on mysticism and social justice. The overall focus of this issue is to examine their contemplative, mystical, spiritual, prophetic, social, political, artistic, and religious legacies in greater depth. Each one of these scholars has covered a variety of different topics from liberation theology in the context of Latin America to the Neo-Hasidic ecological care and to the deep concern for what happens in Israel and Palestine to ecofeminist theology to the cosmo-theandric holistic experience of non-duality to the dialogic Buberian philosophy of I-Thou to the Sanjuanist mystical theology of love addressing queer people to the civil rights movement issues to the interfaith dialog of Catholics-Jewish in the context of the Second Vatican Council to environmental justice issues addressed by ecofeminists to Hindu caste prejudice addressed by Advaita Vedantists to nature

mysticism to mysticism and nonviolent resistance. In this collection of articles, the reader will find a clear trend of interdisciplinary studies proving, once and for all, the innumerable interconnections and mutual influences exhibited by the great mystics in their own times. Moreover, I am thankful for this opportunity to have collaborated with scholars from different continents and with staff from Asia and Europe. I again want to express my deepest and sincere gratitude to each one of the authors who has contributed to this special volume. Their articles are invaluable in contextualizing the important roles played by each mystic in their cultural and religious milieu and in raising critical questions. In closing, it is my personal hope that this collection of scholarly articles will continue the trend of conversation that currently exists among scholars coming from different religious traditions, cultures, and countries in order for the public reader to better understand the deep and intimate link that exists between mysticism and social justice. This alone could serve as a model for more in-depth academic studies and for greater multicultural dialogs to be held among scholars across the different academic disciplines.

Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes
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Article

Ernesto Cardenal: A Latin American Liberation Mystic

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Abstract: This paper explores mysticism as seen in Ernesto Cardenal's *El Evangelio en Solentiname* (*The Gospel in Solentiname*), aiming at both defining Cardenal as a revolutionary and a traditional mystic, shaped by Thomas Merton's influence and by Latin American political circumstances. Mysticism is usually defined as individual contemplation of God, immediate and unmediated. Yet, in the context of Latin American 20th-century struggles for liberation, mysticism became contemplation of God while the individual is committed to the community. This perspective is studied in Cardenal's book, supported with his memoir *Las ínsulas extrañanas* (*The Strange Islands*), to show that Cardenal is a mystic, notwithstanding his political commitment, or precisely because of that. The theoretical background draws notions from liberation theology and liberation philosophy. Paradoxically, in spite of its revolutionary claims, Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname* can be seen in the line of traditional mysticism, in its challenge of power from the margins and its presentation of alternative modes of communicating with the divine.

Keywords: Ernesto Cardenal; mysticism; liberation

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1. Introduction

Latin American philosophy of liberation understands that the universal should be related to the particular and that philosophical thinking should be located. In Latin America, the peripheral *locus* of philosophy transforms it necessarily into liberation philosophy. The situated contributions of such a philosophy, anchored in a concrete reality, at the same time transcend it, because oppression can be found anywhere and liberation is necessary everywhere.

From the intersection of the theology and philosophy of liberation as defined by Enrique Dussel, this paper reads *El Evangelio en Solentiname* (*The Gospel in Solentiname*) ((1975) 1979) and Cardenal's praxis narrated in *Las ínsulas extrañas* (*The Strange Islands*)[1] (Cardenal 2002) as a manifestation of the Nicaraguan poet's mysticism. This paper aims at showing that Cardenal's commitment to the liberation of his country is a sign of his *mysticism*, in the context of both the theology and philosophy of liberation, in a continent and a historical period marked by social injustice. Just as liberation philosophy starts in the concrete Latin American (marginal) reality, as a situated system of thought, so its precedent liberation theology marks the pre-eminence of evangelical praxis (which by definition is situated) over dogma (which is universal). In this frame of ideas, the works and praxis of Nicaraguan poet, priest and activist Ernesto Cardenal (1925–2020) can be studied as the epitome of liberation ideas.

Ernesto Cardenal was born in a well-to-do family in Nicaragua. He had the chance to study at Columbia University in the United States, and after his religious conversion, he entered the Trappist monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky, where he was a novice under Thomas Merton (1915–1968) in the late 1950s. Due to a health problem, Cardenal left the abbey and attended seminary in Mexico and then in Colombia, to be ordained a priest in his native Nicaragua in 1965. The country was at the time under the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle (son of Anastasio Somoza García and brother of Luis Somoza Debayle, both of whom preceded Anastasio as dictators). Therefore, from 1937 until 1979, Nicaragua

was dominated by the Somozas, who controlled the country with tyranny and oppression. Repression, persecution, kidnapping and torture were the methods used by the Somozas to control a country stricken by poverty, unequal distribution of wealth and suppressed freedoms. Political repression, social tension and socio-economic crisis, together with terrorism against peasants and religious and political organizations and the suspension of constitutional guarantees in 1974, fueled the anti-somocista feeling and the support that the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN for its name in Spanish) would obtain in the late 1960s and 1970s, leading to the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution in 1979 (González Arana 2009).

Prompted by his mentor Thomas Merton and his own understanding and practice of the theology of liberation, Cardenal started his community at Solentiname in 1965, in which we may see the mystic experience in the Latin American context as understood by the theology of liberation.

Londoño (2021) points out that liberation theology highlights that mysticism is contextual (p. 144) and that God's mystery is manifested in actions (p. 145). Thus, faith is a contemplative act accompanied by social revindication in a world marked by structural oppression (p. 147). Contemplation cannot be separated from the praxis of political action. This paper presents such notions based on the contributions of Leonardo Boff, Enrique Dussel and Juan Carlos Scannone. Special attention is paid to Pablo Mello's consideration of the moments of liberation in mystic silence.

Boff (1991) stresses that the mystical experience is, of course, spiritual, yet it is historically located: "Any spiritual experience means meeting a new and defying face of God, which stems from the great challenges of historical reality [. . .] God appears [. . .] as a *meaningful event*, as a sign of *hope, of absolute future for man and his history. This situation fosters a proper and typical experience of God's mystery.*"[2] (p. 56, italics in the original). In the Latin American context, the historical situation that reveals God's face is the need for liberation of the poor, in whom God has manifested His own "*demands of solidarity, of identification, of justice and dignity.*" (p. 56, italics in the original). Due to the intrinsic connection between the mystical experience and its historicity, "*heaven is not an enemy of earth; it begins on earth already*. [. . .] This is not mere theology. It is the life and mysticism of many Christians." (p. 67, italics in the original). Such a connection with social and historical circumstance is unavoidable in the theology of liberation. García (1987) defines it as "that form of reflection that attempts to discern the religious significance of sociopolitical struggles in which the poor are engaged as they free themselves of their present state of political domination and economic exploitation" (p. 7).

In order to understand Cardenal's mysticism in the context of Latin American theology of liberation, we follow Dussel (1995), who considers that Solentiname can be seen as a sample of the sixth period in the history of theology in Latin America. Dussel affirms that "the contemplative movement generated by the liberation process emerges as a new type of 'spirituality'" (p. 141). He presents Cardenal as one of the representatives of this new spirituality: "Ernesto Cardenal, trappist with Thomas Merton, creator of a new way of monastic life in Solentiname, and especially in his revolutionary commitment both in his *Psalms* and in *The Sanctity of Revolution*, since 'sanctity' is not just Christian, but of those who die for love of their brethren." (Dussel 1995, pp. 141–42).

Dussel's analysis should be central to any approach to liberation theology, both because he was one of its main theorists, and because at present he continues to revisit his contributions to contemporary developments of liberation movements in the twenty-first century. While Dussel, himself an Argentine exiled in Mexico since the mid-1970s, explains the South American origin of liberation theology, he maintains that the political circumstances of Latin American countries during the 1960s and 1970s led to a type of theology produced by people working in teams, in reflection "centers" away from ecclesial centers (pp. 158–59). Of special interest to our paper is his appreciation of the Nicaraguan situation, when due to several circumstances, the theology of liberation expanded from the South Cone to the rest of Latin America, particularly to Central America, Mexico and

the Caribbean (p. 159). In this context, according to Dussel, "the Sandinist revolution is central to this period. All Central America begins a revolutionary process of Christian commitment and resistance against repression." (p. 159). Particularly in Nicaragua, "the revolutionary process calls for a theological clarification of faith. Sandinista ideology is not a mere repetition of what was already known." (p. 160). The Nicaraguan Church is indissolubly linked to the revolutionary process, thus producing a cultural revolution as well (pp. 161–62).

In addition, he follows a parallel study of the philosophy of liberation in his 1975 volume (2013). Dussel maintains that "liberation is the praxis which subverts the phenomenological order and drills it towards a metaphysical transcendence which is a total criticism of the established, fixed, normalized, crystallized, dead order." (Dussel 2013, p. 80). Liberation implies an ethics, says Dussel, in which listening to the other, to his just protest, may call into question the basis of the system. Thus, in order to listen, one has to become silent, and silence (listening) is a form of respect. Then the listener, by learning about the other, acquires a responsibility for him (social responsibility, because there is a need for a new system). Dussel goes on to explain that in order to establish a new system, the old one must pass away, as history shows. Therefore, "Every moment of passage is agonic; thus liberation is equally agonic of the old in order to achieve a fertile birth of the new, of what is just." (p. 83). Liberation also implies considering the real face of the other, instead of his mask as a peasant, worker, etc., and in this lifting off of masks, liberation involves not just listening, but also *seeing* the other: "It is a challenging seeing, which promotes mercy, justice, rebellion, revolution, liberation." (p. 85). Dussel's categories of liberation are *praxis*, or the mere creation of the new order (p. 86), and *ethos*, or solidarity and love for the oppressed in their own dignity (p. 87). This whole ethos stems from the solidarity of all involved in the liberation process, who call for "real justice, that it, subversive or subverting of the unjust established order." (p. 87). For Dussel, the process of liberation may even reach subversive illegality, because it works against the system in order to establish a new one (p. 88).

Since our analysis is based on written texts, we should consider another notion that Dussel develops in his *Filosofía de la liberación*: "A semiotics of liberation must describe the process of passing from an existing sign system to a new order born from destruction of and going beyond the old order." (p. 150).

In the liberation process, the analectic moment is fundamental. For Dussel, "Offering even one's own life in order to fulfill the requirements of protest, and launching out into praxis for the oppressed, is part of the analectic moment. Theory is not enough in analectics." (p. 186). Since praxis is central to liberation, it involves meeting and interacting with the other, and that praxis of liberation calls for a new way of expressing it, a new type of discourse. As Dussel puts it, in order to be radical, the discourse of liberation "must have a different starting point, must think of other themes, must get to different conclusions and with a different method." (p. 200). Such a discourse must think of what was unthought of before, that is, liberation of the oppressed.

Our approach to Cardenal's texts, then, is based on Dussel's definition: "Philosophy of liberation is a pedagogical operation, from a praxis that is established in the proximity teacher-disciple, thinker-people." (p. 205). Because the Nicaraguan poet understands and takes the risks of a philosophy of liberation and articulates theology with his people, the people of Solentiname, in a specific context that calls for a clarification of faith in praxis, and in a specific context, as theologians of liberation stress must be, he is a Latin American mystic both in his writings and in his actions.

Scannone (2009) makes it clear that even if the theology of liberation and philosophy of liberation have been connected by some critics, the philosophy of liberation is autonomous in its reflection (p. 61). He points out that like any other philosophical system, this one is based on reality. What distinguishes it from other systems of thought is that the philosophy of liberation considers the socio-historical reality of the victims of injustice in Latin America (p. 68), which explains why the *praxis* of liberation is central to it. While Scannone writes

about the philosophy of liberation, some of the notions he explores can be applied to our understanding of the theology of liberation in Cardenal's works. Scannone (2009) explains that "victims not only challenge and question philosophers and their activity, but they also teach the basic human wisdom which is frequently born out of injustice lived by each one and by others. In our context it is Latin American popular wisdom." (p. 69). We may argue that just as philosophy learns from the victims, the poor, so does the theology of liberation, as we prove later in our analysis of Cardenal's works.

Mella (2009) studies mysticism in Latin America and defines the mystic experience as follows: "Mystic experience [. . .] has traditionally been presented as an intense experience of God, of the sacred, or of the totality of worldly experience, which challenges the social order, shaking subjectivity, including the relation with one's own body, to arrive at the ineffable." (p. 366). Mella's paper situates the mystic experience in the Latin American context, thus becoming a useful instrument to analyze Ernesto Cardenal's texts and project. Mella's approach to mysticism in Latin American explores six counter-theses. First, by stating that there is not an essential form of the mystic phenomenon, he clarifies that words are not enough to transmit the experience, which calls for novel forms of poetic expression, of dissatisfaction with existing reality. This, in turn, may be considered dangerous by the establishment, as has happened throughout the history of mysticism (pp. 372–73). Mella then goes on to explain his second counter-thesis, related to mystical silence. Far from being politically irresponsible, silence in liberation mysticism implies taking on the reality of the oppressed (p. 380). Mella's analysis is based on González Buelta's poetry, which helps him identify six moments in liberation mystic silence:

1. "Loss of meaning of known discourse
2. Invitation to search new social meanings
3. Understanding that God still walks next to the people
4. Looking back on history to understand that God has always manifested Himself in liberation processes, while never ceasing to be transcendent
5. A new way of understanding one's own commitment to freedom as the fragile manifestation of what really matters, and
6. At the end of the journey (the mystic journey), a deep peace enables the mystic to accept he/she is a regular human being, whose achievements in the struggle for liberation are not a result of his/her own efforts, but a humble participation in divine life, which is given graciously everywhere, without asking for anything in return" (p. 382).

This leads to Mella's next counter-thesis, by which the Christian liberation mystic is able to see God's face in the oppressed and commits him/herself to struggling against situations of violence (p. 389).

Based on the theoretical framework presented above, we present the following hypothesis: Ernesto Cardenal presents the traits of Latin American liberation mysticism in his journal *The Strange Islands* and his book *The Gospel in Solentiname*. The analysis of his discourse of liberation, to use Dussel's expression, shows the intersection of the political stand of liberation theology and mysticism in Latin America, as a way to narrate political engagement (Londoño 2021, p. 139).

2. Community and Gospel in Solentiname: The Way of Liberation

2.1. A New Society in Solentiname

By the time Cardenal was ordained in August 1965, his project of setting up a monastic foundation in the Nicaraguan archipelago of Solentiname had been accepted by his superiors, as he states in *The Strange Islands*:

> I was ordained in Nicaragua by Monsignor Barni, bishop of Rio Chontales and Rio San Juan, which included Solentiname as well. Because he agreed to my foundation in Solentiname, as long as Rome would accept it (and Rome's approval was that the papal nuncio approved it). (Cardenal 2003, p. 68)

Prior to the establishment of the Solentiname community, Cardenal had been studying at the seminary in Colombia, where the changes the church was undergoing were strongly felt. During his time at the seminary, Cardenal formed part of the Halleluiahs, a group of seminarists who felt the mystical essence of their vocation. Cardenal points out that the group was resented by the more clericalist priests and students and the seminary, who were "viscerally anti-mystics" and who felt they "threatened their estatu quo" (Cardenal 2003, p. 33). Throughout history, mystics have been resented in like manner, and Cardenal was not an exception. In his seminarian days, as recounted in *The Strange Islands*, the various aspects that would combine and produce Cardenal's later mysticism in connection with the Nicaraguan liberation process were already at play. His support of liberation is wholistic, in that Cardenal does not see political or economic freedom separate from man's spiritual side. As he said in a 1974 interview with Ronald Christ, "I am not interested in an economic liberation of man without the liberation of the whole man" (Christ 1974). López-Baralt (2010) presents the mystic experience as informing all of Cardenal's activities:

> I understand that all the poet's [Cardenal's] activities, his entering the Trappist abbey, his studies for the priesthood in Colombia, his politization in Solentiname, his commitment to Sandinismo, his being Minister of Culture, his participation in collective alphabetization, his poetic tutoring of children with cancer, his sculpting, are all the exterior manifesttation of an ad intra spiritual process which has marked him for ever. (López-Baralt 2010, p. 11)

In this article, we concentrate on the first items in López-Baralt's enumeration, and in them we can detect the deep connection between liberation and mysticism, inextricably joined in his praxis and in his discourse. What makes Cardenal a mystic in the Latin American tradition is his deep commitment with his reality, after a journey both in a geographical and an ideological sense.

The discourse of liberation as shown in *The Strange Islands* presents at least four strands: Thomas Merton's influence, Cardenal's interest in Central American indigenous culture, the impact of revolutionary thought and praxis, and the experience of the mystical union.

2.1.1. Thomas Merton's Influence

Cardenal had met Merton at Gethsemani in 1957, when he entered the abbey as a novice. After his conversion to Catholicism, very much like that of Merton himself, Cardenal started his purification in rural Kentucky, unknowingly getting ready for the mystic way to be completed in the Latin American context. When Cardenal left Gethsemani in 1959, his friendship with Merton would continue in epistolar form and in a visit of Cardenal to the abbey after he was ordained. Merton's manifold influence has been pointed out by Santiago Daydí-Tolson (2003), who states, "This social responsibility of catholic intellectuals, and even of contemplatives, is a central aspect of Merton's influence on Cardenal" (Daydí-Tolson 2003, p. 23). Daydí-Tolson goes on to say, "Another aspect of Merton which would have a strong influence on Cardenal's religious thought and political action is his conviction of the need to establish a dialogue with left-wing politics as an alternative to social injustice" (Daydí-Tolson 2003, p. 23). Cardenal's interest in native American peoples is also connected to Merton's guide, as Daydí-Tolson explains: "Merton approves of and promotes Cardenal's interest in writing about the native cultures of th Americas, because they have a spiritual value superior to that of Western culture." (p. 23). Finally, according to Daydí-Tolson, "Solentiname, with its strong mark of an artistic community, free from the rules of a traditional monastery, fulfills Merton's idea of what an authentic monastic community should be." (Daydí-Tolson 2003, p. 25).

All these aspects that Daydí-Tolson presents reflect the characteristics of Latin American mysticism, though, paradoxically, or coincidentally, they are derived from Merton's influence as well. Cardenal himself recognizes that, "After, all he taught me to be like him, in whom spiritual life was not separate from any other human interest. What Merton taught me, which I could never have learned in classical mysticism, is that my life was the

only 'spiritual life' I could have, and not any other." (Cardenal 2003, p. 34). This paradox has been pointed out by Jordan (2015), who states that, "Though Cardenal's departure from strict pacifism appears to deny the spiritual and social ideals of his Trappist background, he justified support for the revolution through his social commitment as a contemplative Christian—a commitment he learned from Merton" (8). If careful attention is paid to the epistolar exchange between Merton and Cardenal from 1959 until 1965 (that is, from the moment Cardenal left the trappist monastery up to the time when he founded the community at Solentiname), the connection between poetry, politics, the inner life, mysticism and monasticism is evident. The letters, written in the 1960s, can be read together with Cardenal's memoir *The Strange Islands*, and the image one obtains is that of a deep relation that involves discussion about several "worldly" and literary issues, as well as on mysticism. In the memoir, Cardenal partially quotes the letter he received from Merton, written on the day of his ordination. In the volume edited by Daydí-Tolson, the full letter has been compiled, and it is possible to read Merton's blessings:

> May God bless your priesthood and all your priestly work, especially all the splendid inspirations you have received. May all of them come to fruition. It is true they will not without much difficulty, but it is a happy motive that the Church breathes a new spirit of understanding and originality [. . .] Your life has been blessed, your vocation certainly comes from God in the most evident ways. He may let you feel your own limitations, but the power of his Spirit will also be evident in your life. Do not be afraid; be like a child in His arms, and you will do much for your country. (Cardenal and Thomas 2003, pp. 157–58)

In the same letter, Merton makes reference to the six years that have passed since Cardenal left Gethsemani. If attention is paid to the letters exchanged over that period, it becomes evident that he knew about the plans for Solentiname from the very beginning: as early as 1962, Cardenal refers to the possibility of establishing a small community in a quiet place (Cardenal 2003, p. 88), but it is only on 28 January 1965 that Solentiname is mentioned for the first time:

> I have already chosen the place where I wil settle [. . .] at the end of the year. It is on an island in the Solentiname archipelago, in the lake of Nicaragua [. . .] The bishop has accepted my plan, and he will ordain me. The papal Nuncio has also approved it, and they are enthusiastic about my plans. (Cardenal 2003, p. 148)

In fact, Merton's influence over the foundation at Solentiname was to be so important that before settling down, in the autumn of 1965 Cardenal went on a sort of pilgrimage to Kentucky, to obtain instructions from his former master, in what could be part of the illumination moment in his mysticism. Merton was very clear about how to start at Solentiname: "The first rule is that there be no rules. And after this, then, all other rules are unnecessary." (Cardenal 2003, p. 80). The challenge of existing social order is at the basis of Merton's suggestions for Solentiname, and the way Cardenal organizes his literary discourse in *The Strange Islands* makes it clear that there were no rules, at least not any conventional rules, in his foundation; if there were original ones, they soon tended to be overlooked, as can be seen below.

Cardenal has said that Merton was like a father to him, and when thinking back on his death, he recalls, "Even if Merton was only 10 years my senior, to me he was like a father, and his death was the deepest sorrow I have felt." (Cardenal 2003, p. 235). Solentiname was a Latin American project and praxis, but it would not have existed had it not been by Merton's presence in Cardenal's life. After Merton's death, Cardenal met some of the Trappist's American friends: "at the Merton Center, we talked about how he was to go to Solentiname after the Asian journey. And Dan Berrigan asks me, 'Are you sure he's not there?'" (Cardenal 2003, p. 236).

2.1.2. Cardenal's Interest in Central American Indian Culture

From his days at the seminary to his project in Solentiname, Cardenal shows a deep interest in and involvement with Central American Indians. This cannot be separated from Merton's influence: "I have already said that it was a *gringo* who showed me the indians. When I was a novice in a holy United States, Thomas Merton revealed to me the wisdom, spirituality and mysticism of the indians of the Americas." (Cardenal 2003, p. 37). In a letter written very shortly after Cardenal left the novitiate, Merton tells him about the possibility of a monastic foundation, "one should be definitely rooted in the indian and Latin American cultural complex." (Merton and Cardenal 2003, p. 59). Cardenal studied native cultures at the Ethnographic Museum in Bogotá (Cardenal 2003, p. 37), and he admires aspects of that culture which are similar to the monasticism he wishes to live: "They have embraced poverty as a religious order. They say the life of the rich goes against wisdom. [. . .] Like trappists, they never say mine or yours." (Cardenal 2003, p. 37). After studying about them, while he was still at the seminary, Cardenal visited the cunas of Colombia, close to Panama, and on another occasion he went to see the ticunas of the Amazon, near Peru. On his way back from Gethsemani, after visiting Merton for instructions, he saw the native people of New Mexico, of whom he admires their simplicity and their prophetic knowledge. Of the former, Cardenal says, "One of them told me men were not happy because they were not satisfied with what they had, they always wanted newer cars [. . .] If everyone were satisfied with something, all would have enough." (Cardenal 2003, p. 86). He also quotes a prophecy of the Indians: "On that new earth to come, indians and white people would be brethren, and this is a prophecy yet to be fulfilled." (Cardenal 2003, pp. 87–88). Recalling those words decades after Solentiname, they can be taken as evidence of Cardenal's new understanding of community and of mysticism in relation to the Latin American heritage and context.

2.1.3. Latin American Revolutionary thought and Praxis

Even if his family and close friends were strong anti-somocistas, Cardenal seems a detached observer at first. In September 1959, shortly after leaving Gethsemani, he writes to Merton, "My brother Gonzalo is currently head of the clandestine movement in Nicaragua, doing very dangerous activities, like introducing weapons, communicating with foreign revolutionaries or making dynamite bombs [. . .] I have just learned this from my brother-in-law [. . .] Our prayers are much needed." (Merton and Cardenal 2003, p. 51). Of course right before learning this, he had been at the abbey, where this type of news could not reach him, thus the apparent detachment from the family involvement in "dangerous activities." Yet, once he learns about the revolutionary doings and leaders, his discourse changes, and he shows enthusiasm. Through the news of revolutionaries, Cardenal's interpretation of the Gospel becomes socially involved, and it is possible to see the seeds of what would later be reflected in *The Gospel in Solentiname*. While Cardenal was still at the seminary in Colombia, "Camilo Torres emerged in those days." (Cardenal 2003, p. 63). Ernesto, as well as many others at the seminary and across Colombia, were secretly reading Camilo to "become priests and not declare our camilismo before it was due time." (Cardenal 2003, p. 65). Even if Cardenal had befriended other Marxists or revolutionaries in Mexico or Colombia, "One novelty in Camilo is that he called for the union of marxists and Christians, to fight for the revolution." (Cardenal 2003, p. 65). Looking back, when he writes his memoir Cardenal uses the first-person plural to say, "He [Camilo] did not reach what we would later, that is, the union of Christians and marxists." (Cardenal 2003, p. 65). Camilo Torres' impact on Cardenal's thought and praxis as part of his illumination on the Latin American reality cannot be overlooked: he recounts details of Camilo's texts, participation in the guerrilla movement, and even the fact that he (Camilo) fell only five days after Cardenal and his friends arrived at Solentiname to start the foundation. "He [Camilo] was the first guerrilla priest in Latin America, and an example that many have followed. But he is not just an example to guerrilla priests: with or without guerrilla, his life and death have set an example for everyone, priests and all." (Cardenal 2003, p. 67). Many

years later, when Cardenal was already a public figure, he visited Cuba on an invitation of Casa de las Américas. The visit, described in *In Cuba* (1972), is recalled in *The Strange Islands* as well, and the discourse shows an enthusiasm for revolutionary thought and praxis similar to the one he felt in his youth, when he first heard of Camilo Torres.

2.1.4. The Experience of Mystical Union

As said earlier, while Cardenal was a novice under Merton, he learned that the spiritual life was the life he had, related to all his interests and aspirations. In *The Strange Islands*, he recalls that while at the seminary, he was part of the "Hallelujahs", a group of seminarists who not only shared political views, but also sympathized because of their spirituality, quite opposite to the strong clericalism of their superiors. In the chapter "Un seminario en los Andes" (A seminary in the Andes), he devotes four pages to describing the delights of mystical love in an exalted tone. The imagery he uses is that of traditional mysticism:

> Intimacy with the Inifinite, how can I explain that? It is a union within oneself, and without feeling it with the senses I feel it, his forehead on my forehad, his eyes on my eyes, his mouth on my mouth, so close to me that I no longer know who is who, who I am and who He is, where He begins and I end, because He and I are one, one you only, and one I only, a you that is me and an I that is you. [. . .] In my room in front of the Andes I could feel He invaded me and embraced all my being, body and soul, satisfying all the desires of my soul and of my body [. . .]. (Cardenal 2003, p. 30)

The joys of mystical union are such that language seems insufficient to convey them; the logic of ordinary language is surpassed by the beauty of absolute satisfaction brought on the soul by God, who fills the vacuum left by the absence of human love. Cardenal's mystic literature has been studied, among others, by García González (2011). García González describes the poet's efforts to convey the consequences of his mystic revelation or experience of 2 June 1956, narrated in *Vida perdida* (*Lost Life*) (Cardenal 1999), the first volume of his memoirs). García González concentrates on Cardenal's poetry (which we do not tackle in this article) and in what she calls his works "of mystic theme" (p. 49), that is, texts where the sociopolitical concerns are not apparent. Yet, as can be seen in his memoirs, both the rhythm and enthusiasm, the love imagery and the forcing of language to convey in as much as possible the ineffable, go beyond poetry, and the traits of mystic discourse permeate his prose as well.

In Cardenal's discourse, one may detect that love imagery, which is at first physical and sexual, and turns into a contemplative mood when he describes the overwhelming beauty of the natural world at Solentiname:

> These are all figures of love, I said. Observing what surrounds us was being in a dialogue with God. [. . .] And I say also that God speaks to us when we are hearing at night that continuous jua! jua! jua! from the lake, which reminds us who made the lake and these stony islands where we are, and the planet on which the lake is, and the whole universe. Which is, by the way, the very same one inside us. (Cardenal 2003, p. 109)

In this way, Cardenal is able to show that the mystical union is not only between the soul and God, but between human beings and creation.

Based, then, on the advice he sought from Merton and on what he had learned from the Trappist monk, rooting himself in his native Nicaragua, slowly stepping from an almost purely contemplative to an engaged stand, Cardenal starts his community at Solentiname as a site of liberation from established rules, orthodox biblical hermeneutics, worldly ties and, after all, from social injustice and political oppression as well. Through his contacts with revolutionary leaders, Cardenal changed not only from his detached observation of reality in 1959, but also from his pacifist views to an understanding of the need for engagement with the revolution. In this sense, he represents the type of liberation that Dussel defines as critical of the established order. Cardenal shows how he was gradually

brought into the Sandinista Front and recalls an interview with Eduardo Contreras, Zero Commandant: "The first time I saw him with my brother Fernando [who was a Jesuit priest], and he said, 'We are revolutionaries.' He explained to me that they did not aspire to just overthrow a tyrant, but to change the capitalist system. And then I was convinced." (Cardenal 2003, p. 224). The revolutionary itinerary has been described by Drozdowicz, who shows that Solentiname went from being a contemplative community to engaging with the oppressed society of which it formed a part: "Contemplation and working with the young made [Cardenal] more radical; consequently, a revolutionary conscience grows in Solentiname, and this is why several of its members would later take arms and revolt against Somocismo." (Drozdowicz 2018, p. 168).

In this context, even the flexible rules by which the community lived at Solentiname could be changed, as part of the liberation process. Cardenal as a Latin American mystic cannot be isolated from his community and the demands of solidarity from individuals and society. As Scannone suggests, the injustice suffered by victims puts traditional religiosity in interdiction and calls for new ways. Cardenal makes plenty of references to this; one case is that of Elbis, a young member of the community:

> Soon we incorporated Elbis (he wrote his name with a b thinking it was spelt that way). [. . .] I had thought candidates for the contemplative life would arrive at Solentiname from other parts, but they did not. I received the Solentiname peasants. [. . .] Elbis was humble, quiet, loving. Especially with young children. [. . .] His mother Natalia said he had been a martyr for the children, he told her how the children's suffering made him suffer; he wanted a Nicaragua where children could be happy; and that was mainly what brought him to the revolution in which he died. (Cardenal 2003, pp. 206, 210)

In the Latin American revolutionary context, martyrdom is not just an act of faith and witness, but life offered for the oppressed, as Cardenal shows by presenting Elbis' case. The connection between the mystic way and historicity as Boff and others understand it throws light into this reading of the martyrs and saints that Cardenal includes in his narrative. As a priest, and because of his religious formation, Cardenal and his community read the lives of the saints, but he makes it clear that Solentiname has its own heroes and martyrs (Cardenal 2003, p. 233).

The progressive radicalization of Cardenal's community is linked to its being rooted, as Merton had suggested, in Latin American reality. Once he had started his contact with the FSLN, Cardenal remembers his master's teachings: "I always remembered what Merton told me when we talked about the contemplative foundation we wished to make: that the contemplative should not be indifferent to the social and political problems of his people. Especially in Latin America, where there was so much social injustice and frequently dictatorships as well." (Cardenal 2003, pp. 203–04). Merton's teachings are at the root of the foundation, and Cardenal also explains that he had always felt inclined to worry about social and political issues. "The contact with the poverty of Solentiname peasants, and the ever-worsening national reality also contributed to the politicization and radicalization in myself and in the community. We were getting more left-wing." (Cardenal 2003, p. 204).

2.2. A Church and a Gospel of Liberation

2.2.1. A Peasant Community Reinterprets the Gospel

The human wisdom that Scannone sees in Latin American people is the essence of Cardenal's listening and learning. In the modern world, biblical hermeneutics has been traditionally owned by clerics. Yet, the Gospel as read and understood in Solentiname became not only a source of popular interpretation but also an opportunity for Cardenal's mystical silence. Silence allows for the soul to hear God's message. In Solentiname, not only God but also peasants speak, while Cardenal listens. The praxis of liberation in the community at Solentiname involves understanding the biblical text based on the surrounding context, to reach new conclusions through different methods, as Dussel suggests.

Sergio Ramírez (2015) explains:

> The idea of organizing a contemplative community in Soletiname did not prosper; what did, instead, was a peasant community, based on its commitment to a liberating gospel, not far from marxism. After the Eucharistic Congress in Medellin in 1968, and the breech opened by the Second Vatican Council, Latin American priests and lay people supported the idea of a church engaged with the poor, which in turn led to liberation theology. (Ramírez: caratula.net accessed on 10 March 2023)

The connection between mysticism and politics that scholars have marked as typical of the Latin American experience can be seen fully at play in Solentiname. Yet, Cardenal's method was not his own invention. He gives credit for it to Father De la Jara, a Spanish priest who was "parishioner in a poor barrio where they had this movement called God's Family, a sort of community of couples." (Cardenal 2003, p. 195). De la Jara visited Solentiname and helped create a similar movement. Cardenal implicitly refers to him as a master who "taught" him "not to give a sermon about the Gospel, but a dialogue about it instead, commenting it among all present." (Cardenal 2003, p. 196). In turn, Father De la Jara had learned this in Panama, in San Miguelito, a poor parish "famous for the comments of the Gospel they made there, and they had learned that from a poor parish in Chicago." (Cardenal 2003, p. 196). Making communal comments on the Gospel, then, is not something typical of Solentiname, but a practice that was already at work in the Catholic church in the Americas. Cardenal shows this continental line when he says, "From Chicago this passed on to San Miguelito, and from there to Father De la Jara's parish, which was also famous, and from there to Solentiname, where it produced the book of comments on the Gospel which I would publish later, under the name *The Gospel in Solentiname*." (Cardenal 2003, p. 196). The community of families and the shared reading of the Gospel existed within an unorthodox Mass liturgy.

Cardenal learned from De la Jara and other priests across the Americas to listen to his community as part of this liberation praxis: liberation from orthodox liturgy, from orthodox Church teaching, and freedom for people to express their ideas and interpretation of the Gospel, which would eventually lead to political liberation as well. Latin American mysticism at its best is communal theology rooted in people's reality. This can also be related to Thomas Merton's influence, who, as quoted above, taught Cardenal that contemplatives should not be indifferent to the social and political issues of their people, especially in Latin America (Cardenal 2003, p. 203).

In the "Introduction" to *The Gospel in Soletiname* Cardenal equates the comments he has recorded in this book with the way the Gospel was composed: "The *peasant's* comments are deeper than those of many theologians, but as simple as the Gospel. No wonder: the gospel or 'good news' (the good news for the poor) was written for them, and by people like them." (Cardenal 1979a, p. 9). The simplicity of style and the wisdom the comments manifest are part of the Spirit that speaks in them: "the true author is the Spirit who has inspired these comments (the Solentiname peasants know well that He makes them speak) and it is the same who inspired the gospels" (Cardenal 1979a, p. 9). The basic human wisdom or popular wisdom that Scannone (2009) (p. 69) defines is seen at play in the comments of Cardenal's community members. As editor of the comments, Cardenal does not overlook who says what, but instead pays close attention to each individual's identity, personality and background, and how all this shapes the comments the Spirit inspires unto them: "The Holy Spirit, which is God's spirit infused in the community, which Oscar would call the spirit of union in the community, and Alejandro the spirit of brotherly service, and Elbis the spirit of future society, and Felipe the spirit of the proletarians' struggle, and Julio the spirit of equality and common property, and Laureano the spirit of revolution, and Rebeca the spirit of love." (Cardenal 1979a, p. 10). The deep union between the Spirit and the people shows both in style and in Cardenal's presentation that his community has achieved communication with the divine and, in this way, mystic communion that leads to liberation.

2.2.2. The Journey towards Liberation

The idea of a journey towards liberation has shaped Judeo-Christian history and identity. Starting with Moses, who led the people of Israel across the desert towards the Promised Land, journeying has been intrinsically joined to the liberation process. God has a historical presence (García 1987, p. 12) among His people, and the mystic realizes that God still walks next to them in our own contemporary times (Mella 2009, p. 389). Whether there is geographical displacement or if the journey is just a metaphor, in both cases liberation implies walking towards it, advancing in life to reach that end.

It is interesting that Cardenal notices in the "Introduction" to *The Gospel in Solentiname* that the comments have not been edited in the chronological order in which they were made and recorded, but according to the chronology of Jesus' life instead. Thus, the revolutionary itinerary cannot be clearly detected in its evolution, but choice of the order of the Gospels (Cardenal 1979a, p. 9) instead shows how liberation was always present as a main concern in Cardenal's foundation.

As said above, Mella (2009) identifies six steps in the liberation process, departing from deep interior silence, as seen in the poetry of Buelta. In the case of Cardenal's text, considering that *The Gospel in Solentiname* is a polyphonic text (because the voices of all participants in the comments of the Gospel are included, transcribed from tape recordings), the steps of the individual mystic path should be extrapolated to a communal experience.

1. Loss of meaning of known discourse.

Dussel points out that in order for the new system to be born, the old one must pass away (Dussel 2013, p. 83). Read in terms of discourse, this implies that the old message, the old words, no longer possess meaning, and realizing this is the first step towards change. In Cardenal's community, the change takes place both at the level of religious practice and of social-political involvement. Commenting on the episode of Nicodemus' visit (Jn 3, 1–21), Olivia says, "And in spite of what Jesus said, we still have that religion of not eating meat on Friday, and no one cares if a poor is killed that day! That the candle is lit to pray the rosary, but if people are hungry, that is God's will! So that is why Christ told them that could not happen. It is better to fight against injustice than to be with that false religion [. . .] as many people still do. A lot of people who fast and have hard hearts." (Cardenal 1979b, p. 20).

It can be argued that throughout *The Gospel in Solentiname*, "known discourse", or the traditional interpretation of the Gospels, has lost meaning, thus also lost are the necessity of the comments and of this book by Cardenal. That loss of meaning calls for a new understanding of the biblical message.

2. Invitation to search new social meanings.

While traditional theology and hermeneutics may see a divide between earthly concerns and the religious, liberation theologians overcome the gaps between the various realms of human experience, and they "can meaningfully raise the question of the relationship that exists between the creation of a more just world and the kingdom of peace and justice" (García 1987, p. 17).

By having the type of Masses Cardenal describes in *The Strange Islands* as quoted above, in which dialogue leads to constructing new interpretations, he invites the people in his community to search social meanings in the biblical text. When discussing the Prologue to John's gospel, the priest and the peasants comment:

> Me: God became man, so now man is God. [. . .] The word now is the people. The people now do God's work.
>
> Felipe: Without the need for God to do it.
>
> Me: God has nothing to do here now. He began the work of creation, but now he has left that to ma, so that man keeps doing it.
>
> Oscar: As God has nothing to do here, it seems we have a huge responsibility in mending the world, so that those who are away from him and are not His

> children will be convinced by us and will be His children too, and we'll be united as brethren. That is our fight: to be all one.
>
> Laureano: We have to mend the world, establish justice on earth, make revolution. (Cardenal 1979a, p. 15)

Even if God "has nothing to do" here and now because He has passed on the responsibility to His people, the message is not totally secular or totally social. The new social meanings that are being created keep links with God because God himself became one of us, thus the need for a social meaning attached to the Gospel.

3. Understanding that God still walks next to the people.

All throughout *The Gospel in Solentiname* there are accounts of the ways in which people of the community feel their own experience is like that narrated in the Gospels. However, their words show not only a sort of imitation or of being like mirrors or duplications of stories that happened in the past, but instead there is an understanding that they are part of the people of God. Towards the end of the second volume, when they comment on the Resurrection, Cardenal tells his parishioners:

> Me: It is true that they [the official church] have put the resurrected Jesus in heaven, in another life, in the afterlife, so that the earth does not change and there is still injustice and poverty. But he resurrected to be on earth: 'He was dead and is on his way to Galilee before you.' And he is here in Solentiname too. And it's curious how for the first time he calls the disciples, 'brothers.' Before he had said, 'My Father and your Father.' Now, after resurrection, he calls them brothers.
>
> Esperanza: He is a *guerrillero*. He was killed for liberation. All who fight for liberation and die for it and resurrect are his brothers. (Cardenal 1979b, p. 295)

In this way, the struggles of the Nicaraguan Sandinista movement and the revolutionary plight in Solentiname are not only a reflection of Jesus' and the disciples' lives, but a true continuation in the same line, with Jesus walking side by side with them.

4. Looking back on history to understand that God has always manifested Himself in liberation processes, while never ceasing to be transcendent.

Just as this mystic people feel God is with them, there is a realization that He has been present at all moments, whenever and wherever there has been a liberation movement:

> William says, In the Bible, the Almighty God had always revealed Himself as the liberator of his people. He manifested Himself first with Moses, who f . . . the Pharaoh. And then, through the prophets, He fought all types of oppression. His son, this Jesus, the Yahve-liberates, will be like him. And he will be king.
>
> Oscar: The angel announces a new government with him. It is the kingdom of the poor. This kingdom is being set from the time Christ came to earth, but it is not fully established yet.
>
> Don Julio: I'd say it's just beginning. (Cardenal 1979a, p. 18)

God has manifested himself against all types of oppression, spiritual and social, political and religious, without ceasing to be God, speaking through the prophets and sending His own Son as part of the liberation scheme which has not finished yet.

5. A new way of understanding one's own commitment to freedom as the fragile manifestation of what really matters.

Cardenal and the community at Solentiname grow aware, by degrees, as is proved later, that they are part of a new church, a new society in which they will manifest Christ, just as the ancient prophets:

> Joining Christ is joining everyone. It is joining the community. Through a small community, we are united to a bigger community, like the small branches are united to bigger ones. And all branches together is Christ. (Cardenal 1979b, p. 248)

6. At the end of the journey (the mystic journey), a deep peace enables the mystic to accept he/she is a regular human being, whose achievements in the struggle for liberation are not a result of his/her own efforts, but " a humble participation in divine life, which is given graciously everywhere, without asking for anything in return". (Mella 2009, p. 382).

According to the way Mella poses this idea, the liberation process is not only part of a social struggle, but intrinsically connected with the spiritual liberation of all human beings. Cardenal is aware of the radicalization of his own message and of the interpretations of the Gospel the community make as time passes by. Yet, this does not mean they become secular; on the contrary, they never miss the connection with God:

> I say, Politics in the gospel is the communion of all men, who share all things, and to do this, a new birth is needed. We must leave behind the old man (the man of the old society), St. Paul says, and dress ourselves in the new man, without distinctions among Jewish or Greek, lords or slaves. [. . .] Che himself dressed like this new man a lot.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Oscar: I don't see why keep talking about heaven, wishing to go up to heaven now, I believe there's enough to see here on earth.
>
> Olivia: I think the things of earth are the same as the things of heaven.
>
> A girl: When people love each other there is a community of love, and that is heaven: where there is no division, no selfishness, no falseness, there is heaven, that is heaven, that is glory . . . (Cardenal 1979b, p. 22)

This comment about Nicodemus' visit (Jn 3, 13–21) summarizes the mystic journey and the inner and communal peace that can be achieved even in the midst of the struggle for liberation. The liberation journey, and the mystic journey, are communal experiences in which the delights of heaven can be sensed on earth as well.

2.2.3. A Social and Political Reading of Liberation

As Andiñach and Botta (2009) point out, new ways of reading and interpreting the Bible stemmed from the social injustices of Latin America, "as a demand from a reality that, when confronting the biblical text with an experience of oppression and subjugation of human rights, imposed a reading that would privilege sense and message" (p. 5). In Latin American liberation theology of the 1970s, "there was a firm purpose in both the general theological field and biblical theology in favor of getting involved with the social sciences in order first to understand reality and then to commit to the struggles to modify it so that oppression and injustices may be overcome" (Andiñach and Botta 2009, pp. 5, 6).

The progressive deepening of revolutionary concerns is underlined in *The Strange Islands*. In the chapter "Y hasta las sardinas parecen cantar" ("And even the sardines seem to sing")[3], Cardenal recalls the comments about the episode when Jesus calmed the tempest (Mk 4, 35–41), quoting quite literally from *The Gospel in Solentiname*. One of the peasants, Bosco, comments that repression is the danger they face, and Cosme answers that, "We are undergoing a rain of injustices. Inequalities are the waves going up and down", to which Olivia adds, "He travels with us in the community. The boat is the community." (Cardenal 2003, p. 246). Cardenal explains, "As can be seen in these comments, we were already in an unquiet climate. Those were the times when the revolution was approaching, as I said." (Cardenal 2003, p. 246). In *The Gospel in Solentiname*, the same conversation, recorded and transcribed, includes passages such as the following: "Felipe: Faith is what many youngester have nowadays, faith in change, in the revolution. It is faith in that the world may change with love, evil can become good, those brave waves can be calmed down." (Cardenal 1979a, p. 229).

On the other hand, in the episode of the Wise Men visiting the baby Jesus (Mth 2, 1–12), for example, Cardenal himself opens the dialogue saying, "As way of introduction, I say

that when Matthew says, 'in the time of King Herod', he is saying that Jesus was born under tyranny. There were three Herods, like saying three Somozas in Nicaragua." (Cardenal 1979a, p. 40). Even the fear that Nicaraguans feel when they think of overthrowing the dictator is equated to the attitude of the Wise Men who consult Herod before visiting the infant Jesus (Cardenal 1979a, p. 41). In the same chapter, Olivia reflects that when Mary, the mother, "was pregnant, she had sung that her son would dethrone the mighty and give riches to the poor, and leave nothing to the rich." (Cardenal 1979a, p. 43). The next episode from the Gospel included in the book is the killing of the innocent (Mth 2, 12–23), and the political violence in Nicaragua has evidently suffered an escalade, because the comment is more overtly political, revolutionary and denouncing than the previous chapter. Cardenal explains, "Little before Mass this Sunday, a patrol came inspecting our houses (the country is under martial law and individual guarantees have been suppressed). Some people seem to be scared[. . .]" (Cardenal 1979a, p. 44). Such political circumstances lead the commentators to speak of Jesus as a subversive, as Cardenal's brother Fernando (himself a Jesuit priest) who was visiting Solentiname at the time, says: "[Mary] realized she had given birth to a subversive messiah [. . .] And I think for a long time we have been misreading the gospel, interpreting it from a purely spiritual perspective, overlooking all its political and social circumstances." (Cardenal 1979a, p. 44).

Throughout *The Gospel in Solentiname*, the peasants reflect based on their own sociopolitical circumstance, and those who have had theological, philosophical or political training reconsider and reinterpret the teachings they received before being involved in the theology of liberation. In this sense, the novelty of the movement can be found in what Ismael García defines as "its political option for the poor, making them and their struggle a focus from which to engage in meaningful theological reflection" (García 1987, p. 8).

In the new approach that Latin American mysticism of liberation brings about, the message is still connected to the spiritual, but in its deep connection with the social and the political. In any case, neither of the aspects should be overlooked, because as Argüello states, "Solentiname was not simply a cultural or political project; the deep meaning of that experience is theological: through Cardenal's prophetic priesthood, God himself was present among the peasants in a remote corner of Nicaragua, and He penetrated the history of our martyred and oppressed people" (Argüello 1985, pp. 365–66). This presence of God among people is part of the dialectics of the theology of liberation, in which García explains "a hermeneutical circle between the sociopolitical and historical praxis of the community of faith and its interpretation of Scripture, the theological tradition, and in particular its interpretation of God's historical presence" (García 1987, p. 12). Ernesto Cardenal, his brother Fernando and other visiting priests and intellectuals make comments rooted in traditional theology; yet, once they are committed to the struggle for sociopolitical liberation in a context where God is seen in full presence among His people, the mere interpretation of Scripture changes, and the Bible is re-read anchored in the circumstances of the reading/interpreting moment, which challenge the traditional thought in which Cardenal and his fellow priests and scholars had been trained.

3. Conclusions

Following Londoño (2021), we may say that Cardenal's discourse shows how his mysticism (and that imprinted on his Solentiname community) shows a political stand, where liberation is not just, or not mainly, a spiritual notion but a way to become politically engaged. Social justice is at the center of Cardenal's community in Solentiname. Even if in the plans prior to settling on the archipelago he might have had in mind a purely contemplative foundation, reality soon led him to put into thought and practice the basis of liberation theology, for which the spiritual cannot be separated from the sociopolitical, economic, cultural and other realms of human experience.

The revolutionary commitment that Enrique Dussel sees in Cardenal is evident in the way he and especially the community at Solentiname comment on the gospels, feeling a very deep identification with every story and character from the Bible. Jesus' humble origin,

his upbringing in a family of artisans, his role as a leader, the sufferings of his crucifixion and his final resurrection/liberation are interpreted by the commentators in Cardenal's foundation in the light of their own liberation struggle. The mystical encounter with God is perceived not only in Cardenal himself, as an individual, but in his community. The Solentiname peasants and their visitors alike realize that God really walks next to them in the struggle and journey towards liberation. Read half a century after they were recorded, the comments of the Gospels in Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname* resonate in their commitment and identification with a concrete historical and sociopolitical circumstance, that of the preparatory stages of the Nicaraguan revolution, in a clear manifestation of God's presence in history as understood by the theology of liberation. In this sense, then, Cardenal and his community experience a communion among themselves and with God, so that the community is truly mystical.

Ernesto Cardenal is a mystic in the traditional sense, marginalized (geographically in Solentiname, away from the centers of power, and institutionally, because the official Church did not look favorably upon him or his foundation), though he holds spiritual authority in his community, and lives a deep communion with the divine in a spiritual and communal sense. At the same time, Cardenal is a mystic in the Latin American tradition of liberation, in which the social and political circumstances cannot be overlooked, because they lead him to political engagement. The deep communion with the divine which has characterized various mystic traditions across the world is, in Cardenal's Latin American liberationist trend, inseparable from community with the poor and the oppressed who fight for justice. As a mystic and a prophet, Cardenal also had a political and revolutionary mission: Solentiname became Cardenal's own a praxis of spirituality and liberation in the context of Latin American social movements of the last quarter of the 20th century. Deprived of its mystic sense, it would be incomplete: Cardenal (and his community) struggled for liberation from economic and political oppression, but the spiritual aspect of society and the need for union with God was never overlooked or secondary to their concerns.

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Notes

1 I used the original texts in Spanish for this article, and prepared my own translations. Yet, for the sake of fluent reading, whenever the titles are included in the text, they are mentioned in English, as *The Gospel in Solentiname* and *The Strange Islands*.

2 Authors' translation of all the citations from bibliography in Spanish.

3 The title is the line from one of the songs in *La misa campesina nicaragüense*, by Carlos Mejía Godoy and Oscar Gómez (1979).

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Article

Oneness and Mending the World in Arthur Green's Neo-Hasidism

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Abstract: This article describes and discusses Green's mystical neo-Hasidic thought, his reshaping of Judaism and his combination of scholarship and existential engagement. I showcase how his vision on the Oneness of all and on the unity in plurality leads him to an appreciation of evolution and to the promotion of love energy in all, to ecological care and to a deep concern for what happens in Israel and Palestine.

Keywords: Hasidism; Kabbalah; neo-Hasidism; oneness; environment; Israel; Palestine

1. Introduction

The Jewish philosophy scholar and neo-mystical thinker Arthur Green develops a sophisticated theology in which the consciousness of Oneness leads him to address issues of peace, equality, freedom, democracy and human rights. His neo-Hasidism goes hand in hand with social justice, with the defense of the rights of women, homosexuals, and queer people and with hearing the voices of the oppressed. Although Green defines himself as a thinker and teacher, and not as a social activist, his permanent search for wisdom has clear implications for the political and social sphere. In this essay, I spell out Green's mystical thought. I describe his vision on the Oneness of all and on the unity in plurality. I further showcase how this vision brings him to care for all, to the promotion of love energy, to the struggle for gender equality, and to an appreciation of evolution. I also discuss his care for the environment, and expound on his concern for what happens in Israel and Palestine.

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2. Neo-Hasidism

The fine details of Green's sophisticated Kabbalist-Hasidic thinking will probably escape the understanding of those who are not intimately familiar with the depth of Jewish life and thought that is intrinsically linked to the meanders of the Hebrew language. Yet, his mystical thought that centers on evolution and Oneness may be of interest for all those who want to know how mysticism and involvement in social and political action chime together.[1] For half a century, Green studied Kabbalist and Hasidic thought.[2] His own creative theology continues this tradition, but also differs substantially from it. Green develops and explains his constructive theology in several books (Green 1992, 2004b, 2010, 2015b, 2020). He is a neo-Hasid, not a classical Hasid, belonging to a particular Hasidic community. He is a nonconventional mystic soul who is interested in the renewal of a world affirming religiosity. He looks for a spirituality that gives meaning to human existence. Like Martin Buber, much present in his writings, Green wants to make Hasidism relevant for broader circles of Jews. He continues a Jewish mystic tradition in a loving, non-naïve and critical way. He follows the footsteps of other neo-Hasidic thinkers such as Zeitlin, Buber and Heschel. He loves the mystical tradition, but is aware of the stains in some of its narratives. He is selective in his reading of the mystical sources. He does not accept the distinction between Jewish souls and non-Jewish souls. He dislikes negative talk of "the goyim". He does not agree with gender hierarchy, and criticizes chauvinism. He does not take the mystical tradition at face value, but reimagines it in view of self-transformation

and transformation of the world. In his post-Kabbalist and post-Hasidic Jewish mysticism, he goes to the roots of Jewish mysticism in view of mending the world (*tiqqun olam*). In this way, he repackages and recreates Judaism, showing its relevance for the present-day world. His revival of Jewish mysticism corrects a dry, rationalistic Judaism that is remote from life itself, and that neglects emotional profundity and passionate engagement. Green's main mystical insight is the Oneness of all. His nondualism leads him to a merciful and lovely engagement in the world.

Green rereads and reimagines the Hasidic teaching and universalizes it. Jews and non-Jews may profit from this rereading. Hasidism started as a popular Jewish movement in the 18th century with Eliezer the Baal Shem Tov. The great spiritual leaders of this movement, which became known to the world through Martin Buber's writings (Buber 1963), developed the view that God is present everywhere, and that one serves Him in joy through whatever one does. Each Jew had his own way of serving God in concrete, daily life. Today, Hasidim in the United States and Israel are fully committed to orthodox life. Much like Buber, Green reimagines Hasidism and develops a religious humanism in which he finds God in the human (Ben Pazi 2023, pp. 39–64). He wants to inspire Jews and non-Jews outside the traditional Hasidic community by providing them with Hasidic values of wholeness, simplicity, love and joy. He lends a universal outlook to the particular Jewish mystic language.

Kabbalah, as the complex of mystical texts and practices and Hasidism that popularized Kabbalah, provide Green with a language that depicts an inward journey leading to acts. So, for instance, the "temple" becomes the word that stands for inner life, and "Moses" is the liberator in each one of us. Green also switches from the vertical dimension to the internal dimension, leading to care for others. His spirituality is meant to be relevant for the world, as the title of his book *Judaism for the World* expresses (Green 2020). In a world that exists in the One, the task is to discover the divine sparks in all and to uplift them to their divine source.

3. Scholar and Activist

Green is an accomplished scholar in Kabbalah and Hasidism, but he became foremost interested in a creative reinterpretation of this tradition. His personal search became research, and his research became personal search. A rabbi and educator, he brings his personal quest and questions to the texts. His personal religious experience colors the ancient mystic symbolism. He studies Jewish mystical writings not in a neutral, detached way, but is involved in what is written, hearing the living voice through the words. A seeker of spiritual life, he is in a permanent spiritual quest. He even confesses that Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Zalman Schachter Shalomi and mostly Hillel Zeitlin saved Judaism for him. He strives to live and formulate a neo-Hasidic Judaism for himself, for spiritually serious Jews and for contemporary seekers (Green 2015b, pp. 269–70).

Green's creative reinterpretation of Jewish mysticism engages him socially and politically. He stood up for the release of Soviet Jews during the period of the Soviet Union. He raised his voice for gender equality. In 1969 his *Havurat Shalom* group, a community of religious Jews founded in 1968, started counting women for a *minyan* (a quorum of 10 Jewish adults required for public prayer) and invited them to equal ritual participation (Green 2015a, p. 231). Green hears the voices of women and men together. He valorizes the female elements in the Divine: "We welcome the devotion to the one God through the channels of *shekhinah* and *binah*, God as life-giving, nourishing, and protecting Mother" (Green 2015b, p. 273). He admits that "[t]he old Hasidism, born of a deeply misogynist Kabbalah, saw that imbalance, but was still part of it" (Green 2015b, p. 286). Green's neo-Hasidism corrects a patriarchal situation by welcoming female energies (Green 2015b, p. 287). With a God as female and male, he raises his voice against the exclusion and for the acceptance of women in rabbinical schools.

Green deems that scholarship is not enough (Green 2020, pp. 244–53). Study and engagement, for instance for the release of Jews from the Soviet Union, belong together. He

has a decennia long involvement in the training of rabbis. He loves personal study, and complains that in the academy the tree of knowledge is cut off from the tree of life. He contests the bifurcation between wisdom and knowledge at the universities. He is in search of wisdom, which—in his view—is unfortunately not the first priority of the academy. He is interested in transformation by responding to a voice that comes out from texts that become alive (Green 2015a, pp. 222–23, 226–27). As a theologian, he gives attention to the religious experience and its transformative power. His study of Jewish mysticism leads him to activity in society. Spirituality for him is inwardness (*pnimiyut*). Yet, this movement to his innermost self is discovered as ultimately "transpersonal". Inwardness starts in the self but links the self to other selves (Green 2015b, pp. 296–97).

4. Longing for the Source

In the tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, Green finds inspiration for his own journey and search for healing. One of these tales beautifully describes how human beings cry and long for Oneness, for God, for an undivided heart. We are far from the Garden of Eden, but we yearn and long for healing of the broken heart. Here comes the story:

> There is a mountain, and on that mountain there stands a rock. A spring gushes forth from that rock.
>
> Now everything in the world has a heart, and the world as a whole has a heart. The heart of the world is a complete form, with face, hands and feet. Even the toenail of that heart of the world is more heart-like than any other heart.
>
> The mountain and the spring stand at one end of the world, and the heart is at the other. The heart stands facing the spring, longing and yearning to draw near to it. It is filled with wild yearning, and constantly cries out in its desire to approach the spring. The spring, too, longs for the heart.
>
> The heart suffers from two weaknesses: the sun pursues it terribly, burning it because it wants to approach the spring. The second weakness is that of the longing and outcry itself, the great desire to reach the spring. The heart ever stands facing the spring, crying out in longing to draw near.
>
> When the heart needs to rest a bit or catch its breath, a great bird comes over it and spreads forth its wings to shield the heart from the sun. Even at its times of rest, the heart looks toward the spring in longing.
>
> Now if the heart is filled with so great a desire to draw near to the spring, why does it not simply do so? Because as soon as it starts to move toward the mountain, the mountaintop where the spring stands would disappear from view and the life of the heart flows from seeing the spring; if it were to allow the spring to vanish from its sight, it would die . . .
>
> If that heart were to die, God forbid, the entire world would be destroyed. The heart is the life of all things; how could the world exist without a heart? For this reason, the heart can never approach the spring, but ever stands opposite it and looks at it in longing.

A deeply religious soul, nurtured by the Jewish esoteric tradition, Green comments that we all yearn to see God's face and to enjoy His presence. We all want to drink from the divine well, but the gates of the Garden of Eden are closed. However, from the moment we become conscious that we are far from the life-giving Spring, we become aware of the fact that we *are* close to it (Green 2020, pp. 284–86). The human alienation is overcome in the healing power of those who spread love and show mercy.

In Rabbi Nahman's story, Green appreciates the longing of "the heart of the world" for the "Source". We long to be healed and to be whole again. This healing is done in mending a fractured world (*tiqqun olam*). Yet, he himself develops an alternative way of speaking about God. In his radical theology, nature, God and the evolution of humankind are intimately linked. Green's search for wisdom leads him to a deep inner reality which

manifests itself as the unity of all. In his personal interpretation of Hasidism, he calls for the unity of all within the Oneness. In his unitive vision, the other human being is no other, since I am part of the whole (Green 2015a, p. 232). This vision lies at the root of his humanist care for all. Good care for others expresses the love for God. Others are "our fellow limbs on the single Adamic body or Tree of life" (Green 2015b, p. 273). Green finds in the daily prayer *Shema' Yisrael* "Listen Israel, the ineffable Name is our God, the ineffable Name is One" (*Shema' Yisrael YHWH 'elohenu, YHWH 'èhad*; Deut. 6:4), a reminder of the unity, which commands the creation of unity: "Thou shalt love" *(ve-'ahavta*; Deut. 6:5) (Green 2020, p. 110). In love and care, we testify to the One beyond naming: "In caring for the other, we reassert the One" (Green 2015b, p. 285).

Green calls himself "a mystical and panentheistic theologian" (Green 2015a, p. 237). He quotes the Zoharic expression "no place is devoid of God" (*let 'atar panui mineh*; Tiqqune Zohar 57). The one underlies everything; transcendence is present within immanence (Green 1995, p. 15; 2015a, pp. 234–36). He is fascinated by God's glory manifest in everything, and goes from monotheism to monism.[3] In his theology, the nondualistic Oneness is "the unity of all being in God". In moral behavior, "you bear witness to the One who dwells in all" (Green 1995, p. 15). God is "world-filling" and "world-transcending" (Green 1995, p. 15). A religious person is the one who perceives the holiness of life and who testifies thereby that being or YHWH underlies and unifies all that is (Green 2015a, p. 119).

In Green's nondualistic Jewish spirituality, God dwells in us and inspires "Moses" in us to rebel against every Pharoah, and to strive for the liberation of all (Green 2015a, p. 309). God is not a deus ex machina, but the One manifest everywhere and discovered in the sparks in the human beings. God (JHWH) and Being (HWYH) are One, two sides of the same reality (Green 2015b, p. 309–11). In his recreated Hasidism, the physical and the spiritual go together. The world is within the divine Presence (the *Shekhina*), but God is also beyond. "He is the place of the world, but the world Is not His place") *hu meqomo shel 'olam ve-'ein 'olamo meqomo*; Midrash Bereshit Rabba 68:9). Jewish life is dedicated to the unification of male and female within God (*le-shem yichud qudsha berikh hu u-shekhinte*) (Green 2015b, p. 277).

Close to Rabbi Nahman, but different from the Hasidic master who personalizes the Divine, Green imagines God as loving energy. God is a mysterious transcendent entity in every human being (Green 2015a, pp. 233–34). Transcendence "dwells within immanence" (Green 2010, p. 18). Its full presence is ungraspable and ineffable. There is only One, undifferentiated whole. Through contraction of divine presence (*tsimtsum*), we see ourselves as separated, but ultimately there is only One and we are all one. The great Hasidic masters joyously served God and knew that there are several ways to be in service of the One (Green 2015b, pp. 271–72). Green has his own way, in accordance with the utterance of Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol, who said: "When I die and go the world to come, they will not ask me, Zusya, why were you not Moses? They will ask me: Zusya, why were you not Zusya?" (Sacks 2005, p. 252).

Green proposes to think about God not in terms of higher and lower, but in terms of inward and outward. Instead of a God as a Supreme Being, on the top of a (Sinaitic) mountain, we may discover the deepest reality as a well that flows freely. God is not the "whole other" of Rudolph Otto (Green 1995, p. 12). Inheriting the sense of wonder of his teacher Heschel, Green repeatedly says with the Bible: "The whole world is filled with His glory" (*melo' kol ha-'arets kevodo*; Isaiah 6:3), and with the Zohar: "There is no place devoid of Him". God is unutterable, approached as "filling all worlds and surrounding all worlds" (*memaleh kol 'almin u'sovev kol 'almin*. Zohar 3:224a), manifest in the world. In Ezechiel's vision, in which the prophet sees God as "an image like that of a human" (Ez. 1:26), Green finds support for his daring interpretation that puts the Divine and the human together (Green 2020, p. 80). Nevertheless, saving transcendence, he emphasizes that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Green 2004b, p. 18). Humans are not the organs of God, but his garments (Magid 2013, p. 101).

Shaul Magid has described Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Arthur Green as radical theologians, who moved beyond monotheism, undermining in this way Assmann's Mosaic distinction (Magid 2013, pp. 79–88). He explains that in Schachter-Shalomi's pantheistic vision, the divine–human relationship has overcome its vertical metaphor, since '*efes biltekha* (there is nothing beside You) means that there is really nothing else that exists (Magid 2013, pp. 75, 78–88). After Schachter-Shalomi, who broke free of the monotheistic paradigm, others developed a nondualistic Judaism. The most known representative of this new trend, after Schachter-Shalomi, is Arthur Green (Magid 2013, p. 97). Green developed his own personal theology, but is part of a group of Jewish intellectuals who represent a new trend in Judaism that is nondual (Magid 2013, p, 288, n. 122).

Green's radical Judaism, and especially his views on the Divine, have been criticized from an Orthodox viewpoint. Rabbi Daniel Landes, director of the Jerusalem Pardes Institute, challenged Green's original thoughts in his review of *Radical Judaism*. Green responded to Landes's rather unpleasant article.[4] Thereafter, Landes's critical review and Green's response led to a public conversation on the Internet. The controversy shows the divergences between Landes's traditional Orthodox standpoint and what Green calls his "monist theology". Unlike Orthodoxy, Green has a nonliteral understanding of creation and revelation. For him, there is no outside, personal and commanding God. The world derives from God. He develops a Jewish, nonreductionist version of pantheism, retaining transcendence that does "speak" through our "inner voice". To my mind, this view of a Jewish seeker of Unity (*dorshe yihudèkha*) has an honorable place in the plethora of views on God in the pluralist Jewish tradition. Green, as an open-minded religious humanist, reconfigures religious imagination that fits our postmodern period.

Alan Brill too discusses Green's radical theology. Instead of a sky-God and God as King, Green suggests a pantheistic oneness of being, an energy for evolution. Brill himself sees advantages in continuing the image of a hierarchical God, and asks if Green's *Radical Judaism* is "a vision for the 21st century future of Judaism or was it just the spiritual autobiography of a baby-boomer?".[5] I think that Green's theology, with a view of God as an energy that lends meaning to life, remains highly inspirational for all those who are in search for a different language than the traditional one in view of giving meaning to their religious life. Leaving aside parental and royal imaginary of the Divine, he writes about his experience of the Divine within all.

In response to Green's review of his *Hasidism Incarnate*, Magid discusses the differences between Schachter-Shalomi's organistic pantheism and Green's panentheistic monism (Magid 2016). For the first one, God is a divine body as a living organism, and the community is part of that body; multiplicity is part of God. For the latter, the One is a transcendent, undifferentiated being and differentiation is not essential revelation, but stems from the "inner call" of the self. Magid notes that Green prefers Moses Cordovero's access to divine energy (*shèfa*), whereas Schachter-Shalomi follows Isaac Luria with his theory of divine contraction (*tsimtsum*) and rupture of the Godhead (*shevira*) through the divine sparks. Magid deems that the Hasidic masters adopted the Lurian model, which created the possibility of an incarnational model, to which Green objects.

The many reactions to Green's work illustrate how Green's theology aroused great interest among Jews who want to deepen their spiritual life. With his mystical theology, Green takes seriously Rabbi Ishmael's saying that the Torah speaks in human language and offers his unique, original interpretation of the ancient Jewish wisdom.

5. Divine Image, Equality and Democracy

In Green's theology, the Divine is not personal, nor does it command or elect. The panentheistic One unfolds and becomes; it is present in the evolutionary process, in everything. The human beings respond to a universal, inner divine call (Magid 2013, pp. 97–101).

As a consequence of his monist worldview, Green develops a religious humanism. Mysticism and humanism complement each other (Green 2015a, p. 110). He deems that God *has* an image and it is the human being. Being created in the divine image means that

there is something divine in the human. The human being creates the image of God in herself (Green 2015a, p. 231). Since every person is in the divine image, Green stands up for the uniqueness and equality of all.

If all human beings are created in God's image, one has to come up for equal rights for all, for rights of women and of minorities. Green's resistance and social activity stem from his belief in each person as in God's image. Values of democracy and equality are part of his worldview, since all are in the divine image. With his belief in evolution and of the uniqueness and dignity of each human being, he welcomes those who were once rejected (Green 2015b, pp. 288–89).

Green's commitment to ancient Judaism within the bounds of today's ethics is part of his neo-Hasidic credo:

> "Yes, there are ethical limits to our traditionalism. We are not ashamed to say that we have learned much that is positive from living in an open society that strives toward democracy and equality. These values should become part of our Judaism. Ultimately they are rooted in the most essential Jewish teaching that each person is a unique *tsèlèm 'elohim*, divine image. Traditions that inhibit the growth and self-acceptance inherent in that teaching must be subject to careful examination and the possibility of being set aside. New ways of thinking that enhance our ability to discover the divine image in more ways, or in people we once rejected, need to be taken seriously as part of the Torah". (Green 2015b, p. 288)

6. Judaism as Counter-Culture, Healing Power, and Open, Spiritual Reality

Green reshapes Judaism as a religion that promotes quest and a vision of life. The Jewish mystic literature, with its symbolic language and imagination, helps him in the reconstruction of Judaism (Green 1995, pp. 12–13). He believes that "postmodern Jews' recovery of the kabbalistic-hasidic tradition is a decisive event in our ongoing spiritual history, one that should have a great impact upon the future of Jewish theology" (Green 1994, p. 5).

Green's Judaism is not a Judaism of fear, nor a mere set of rules. Rather, it bears a message of love, compassion and healing. It is self-transforming because of the primordial question "where are you" ('*ayeka* Gen. 3:9), to which one responds in mending the world. Work or service ('*avoda*) consists in self-transformation and looking for the divine sparks in everybody and everything. Green's Judaism is foremost a counter-culture, to stand up against the mighty, like Jeremiah, Yeshayahu Leibowitz and the writers Amos Oz and David Grossman (Green 2020, pp. 237, 287).

Moreover, Green considers the Jewish mystical tradition as conveying a great healing message and a wisdom that he wants to share in order to help broken spirits to become whole again through human caring and relationship:

> "It surely is [. . .] no coincidence that I was drawn to the figure of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, whom I depicted as the great wounded healer of the Jewish tradition, in a book I called *Tormented Master*, back in 1979. The accounts of Rabbi Nahman, uniquely among hasidic sources, depict a childhood of great psychic pain, marked by loneliness, doubt and a constantly gnawing sense of inadequacy. His disciples claimed that he had overcome all of these, becoming the greatest of hasidic masters, one to whom countless thousands, both in his lifetime and even more today, turn for blessing and healing. As his biographer, I understood that he had not truly 'overcome' any of this pain, but that he had learned to turn it around and use it as a tool of empathy, allowing him to soothe the pain of so many others, 'to pull them out of hell by the *peyos* [forelocks]', as he once said". (Green 2020, p. 289)

Green himself knew a long period of caregiving for his ill wife. As opposed to mystical healers, he writes about healing without pretending to cure. Prayer "heals the one who prays, restoring a wholeness or a balance that can be lost when we are beset by concern or

worry" (Green 2020, p. 283). Given the One who lies in our heart and in the heart of the one for whom we pray, Green believes that the love energy, expressed in prayer, reaches the other. He interprets the *'amidah* phrase *refa'enu ha-shem ve-nerafe* to mean "'Soften us up, O Lord, so that we may be able to receive healing'. Open our hearts so that we can receive the gift of those who seek to heal. Help us to break down our own resistance to Your healing love! This was a message I needed to hear then and still could use to listen more fully today" (Green 2020, p. 283).

In traditional Judaism, the divine commandments occupy a central place. For Green too, outer deeds are important, but they are means, not ends. They are "vessels to contain the divine light that floods the soul". *Mitsva* (commandment) is linked to the Aramaic *tsavta* (togetherness): God and the human are together. One is called to serve the Holy One (*'ana 'avda de qudsha-berikh hu'*) by respecting the holiness of all life. Love of God is witnessed in the love of all creatures (Green 2015b, pp. 272, 281–83). Green loves the Jewish tradition, but does not think in strictly legal categories. In Boston, he created a transdenominational, pluralist rabbinical school. His entire work consists in translating the tradition into a viable Jewish spirituality for today. He envisages a revival of *Halakha* (literary: a way to walk; the normative path) that is noncoercive and inclusive, embracing a plurality of approaches. Such a *Halakha* is a path "that we are not yet ready to define" (Green 1992, p. 72; 2020). He does not think primarily in today's Halakhic categories, and deems that the praxis depends upon the individual. Judaism is, for him, not a legal system that one must observe. *Mitsvot* and *Halakha* are not interchangeable terms. The 613 *mitsvot*, corresponding to the 248 limbs and 365 veins in the human being, are knowable before Sinai, whereas *Halakha* is already institutionalization, which was necessary given the weakness of the human being. *Mitsvot* are spiritual needs of the individual and not a command of an external God. Already as a third-year student at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Green conceives religion as based on Unity, in which there is no distinction between within and without.

Whereas the Orthodox position usually approaches *Halakha* as the Law, Green regrets this equation. For him, *Halakha* is a way to walk through the world, a path and a discipline that one *may* choose. He emphasizes that all Jews are heirs of the Jewish tradition, not only the Orthodox.[6]

Green has a welcoming attitude towards people who are close to Judaism or who come to Judaism and want to creatively live out of the Jewish tradition (Green 2015a, pp. 246–47). At the same time, he widens the meaning of Israel, as does Emmanuel Levinas (Meir 2008, p. 108). Israel stands for humanity (Green 2020, p. 323). In a radical way, by reimagining Judaism and translating the particular Jewish language in a universal language, he calls for a new religious awareness. He sees evolution in the people of Israel, for instance, from an eye for an eye to compensation, and from a tribal God to a universal one. He universalizes Israel, which becomes every community of righteous people that testify to the One in engagement for others (Green 2015a, pp. 111, 131). Israel, for Green, is a spiritual reality, started by Jews, but not restricted to them (Magid 2013, p. 105).

7. Ecological Crisis

One of the highlights in Green's radical poetic-theological thinking lies in rereading the evolutionary theory in light of the Kabbalah. He wonders at the evolutionary process that brought us to where we are now and that guides us to an unseen and unexpected future. This process is meaningful. It contains a struggle for survival, but it also has cooperative elements. In the process of interaction and interrelatedness of all, we are "called" (by an inner voice) to care for the survival and maintenance of our biosphere and of the cosmos (Green 2015a, pp. 126–27). Mystical thought and ecological activism go hand in hand for Green.[7]

Against the Platonic dualism between spirit and matter, his spirituality embraces nature. As a student of Abraham Joshua Heschel, he is attentive to wonder: the divine presence fills the world, but the pursuit of success and comfort blinds us.[8] To my mind, his nondualism is close to the Advaita Vedanta monism and to Thich Nhat Hanh's interbeing

(Rambachan 2015; Meir 2021a, pp. 89–95). On the backdrop of an all-pervading Oneness, Green calls for a change in our attitude to the environment. We will have to take full responsibility for our natural home instead of destroying it in overconsumption and greed. Green looks for a community of all and celebrates evolution, in which the Oneness manifests itself. Ecological sustainability and vegetarianism will have to complement or perhaps replace the laws of kashrut (Green 2015a, p. 41). In his theology of creation, he is conscious of the destruction of the biosphere and of our obligation to preserve it (Green 1995, p. 17).

Green's book *The Heart of the Matter* contains a chapter entitled "A Kabbalah for the Environmental Age" (Green 2015b, pp. 313–24). He writes on the holiness of the natural world. He approaches God and the universe as deep structure and surface. The multiple comes from the One. In Green's Kabbalist terminology: The ten *sefirot* (numbers) flow from the One. Mending the world (*tiqqun 'olam*) is the ascendence, the uplifting of the lower worlds towards the One, towards Unity (Green 2015b, pp. 314–15). The letters Yud-He-Waw-He form the verb "to be". It is the holy, ineffable verb-name ("I shall be whatever I shall be" of Ex. 3:14; '*èheyè 'asher 'èheyè*) or being itself, HaWaYaH. From the silent *alef* comes all language (*bet* of *bereshit*) (Green 2015b, p. 316). Therefore, all that exists is less a Darwinian struggle for life than a journey towards oneness. In Green's vision, the first chapter of the Bible (*bereshit*) is not about cosmology, but about multitude stemming from oneness and about protecting what is, in the consciousness of the primacy of the one to the many. The one underlies the many (Green 2015b, p. 318).

Green's thought on ecology follows from his vision on Unity, on the One in the multicolored coat of being. Behind any dualism (*bet* = two) is the One (*alef*). Behind diversity, there is oneness, to which all returns. The One is behind evolution as life energy and life forms. It is the *telos* of existence in which humans represent a developed stage, as in "God's image". Harmony with the nonhuman world makes us stewards of nature. We discover the unity of all (*yichud*). Humans are a microcosmos as a replica of the One. Recognizing Oneness in humans, plants, animals and minerals, Green perceives the one light in the multiplicity. This is a consciousness of "miracles" that are daily with us, as we say in the daily prayer of *shmone 'èsre*. Green's reformulation of the new path (*Halakha*) responds to the new challenges. He refers to sensitivity for the suffering of other forms of life. In *torat hayyim* (teaching of life) he opposes wasting living resources and appreciates forests, water and air. Limiting our power and opening our eyes to the marvel of existence brings about a renewed sense of wonder. The earth is threatened by human action. Consciousness of the unity of all leads to a change of our economic system and puts limits to consumption.

In the volume *Judaism for the World* we also find a chapter on religion and environmental responsibility (Green 2020, pp. 214–22). Here, Green defines the environmental crisis as the most serious challenge of our age (Green 2020, p. 215). He deems that we are too much concerned with internal problems, and that we do not see the deadly threat of the environmental crisis. He addresses Jews and Christians, but in fact all religious people, to take global action for the protection of our biosphere and against the abuse of the planet. Jews and Christians share a language of creation and, therefore, they share a common concern for the future of the planet.

Green refers to the Jewish consciousness of our belonging to nature. Shabbat calls for the respect of nature. Before reciting *Shema'* each morning, we pray that God "renews every day the work of creation". We will have to take care of it. Green notes that the creation is brought about by God's word. He argues that since words are the beginning of symbolism, the divine word that creates the world says "that all existence is potentially *meaningful*, translatable into categories of speech" (Green 2020, p. 217). In Israel's credo, *Shema' Yisrael* ("Listen strugglers") we are invited to listen (Green 2020, p. 218).

Turning to Christians, he mentions Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudatio Si* of 2015, with its concern for the environment and the poor. The encyclical criticizes consumerism and calls for a common home and economic justice. The wealthy society has responsibility for the Southern Hemisphere, with its climatic disasters and poverty. Green criticizes

politicians who contrast business interests with earth-friendly behavior. The environment is not a priority for them. Green asks, how will the business of the wealthy thrive on a scorched planet?

To the concern of *Laudatio Si*, Green adds his concern for freedom and liberation. We have to be freed from Egypt (*mitsrayim*), from constriction and narrowness (*me-tsar*). We hear the Sinaitic voice "I am YHWH your God who brings you out from Egypt, the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2), out of economic and political oppression, free from addiction and divisiveness, from inability to control our passions, from our drive for success toward the wide-open spaces. We share values of democracy, gender egalitarianism, care for our natural home and for the freedom and liberation of all.

8. Love of and Critique of Israel

Green's consciousness of Oneness also has implications for his view on Israel and Palestine.[9] He situates himself on the left side of Zionism, but he lives mostly in the United States. He writes about "our beloved State of Israel" (Green 2015b, p. 287). Israel, he notes, is a haven for Jews. His criticism of Israel is one that has its source in his love for Israel. This love leads him to active involvement in struggle against injustice. After 1967, Jews are the stronger ones who do not give equal rights to Palestinians. The Palestinians, from their side, are not ready to offer peace to the Jews. Green supports the two-state solution, and reminds us that we were called "merciful sons of merciful fathers" (*rahamanim bené rahamanim*) (Green 2015a, pp. 251–52). He does not lend a messianic significance to the state of Israel, as is usually done by religious Jews in Israel, and he criticizes the lack of proper relation to the Arab population in Israel and in the occupied territories.

He deems that the best security for Israel is to abandon the West bank and to help create a viable Palestinian state. He refers to the prophets who taught us to care for social justice and to promote peace. He speaks truth to power. One cannot leave the peace process to the Israeli leaders. One has to create an atmosphere from the bottom, in view of promoting peace between Israel and Palestine. The compassion of the Jews does not have to stop at the borders of Gaza. We have to care for those living in Gaza and Westbank. Like Judith Butler, Green problematizes the word "security" (Green 2020, p. 135; Butler 2020).

Israel is great as a place of refuge for Green, but it is also a challenge. It has not been a great success as a welcoming society. Green takes justice and the proper treatment of the stranger very seriously. He talks about a kind of colonialism in the West bank. A struggle for the soul of Judaism is going on (Green 2015a, pp. 249–50).

Judaism for the World contains his letter with the title "Dear brothers and sisters. A letter to Israelis" (Green 2020, pp. 254–72). Green writes the letter as "one who loves Israel and is gravely concerned about its future" (Green 2020, p. 254). He believes in the legitimacy of the state of Israel "as a nation of all its citizens". He regrets that the dominant perspective in Israel is that first of all, one has to take care of security since you cannot trust people. This does not leave room for Jewish values and questions of ultimate meaning. Green deems that the memory of our own oppression forbids the oppression of others. After 1967, there are the territories and settlements. We must remember that all are in God's image (*be-tsèlèm 'elohim*).

Will there be a Palestinian State, or an annexation that leads to one state with all the problems of inequality? Green deems that nothing less than the image of the Jewish people is at stake. Self-critically, looking at his own country, he recalls the major American sins: they took the land of others and imported African slaves. "This is the lesson to be learned from the history of America" (Green 2020, p. 271). He mentions the shortsighted Israeli governments, the poverty in Gaza and the degradation of Arabs in the West bank. There is "moral blindness" and a lack of opening "our hearts to the wounds and needs of the other, with whom we are destined to live side by side" (Green 2020, p. 271).

At the end of the letter, he returns to the question initially asked: why should Israelis listen to him, an American Jew? He answers that he has "love for Israel" (*'ahavat Yisrael*): "We love you, despite all that has come between us [. . .] The ones who really love you are

these troubling and sometimes annoying cousins from across the sea. We are still *family*. Listen to us" (Green 2020, p. 272).

Green's care for all human beings stems from his deep religious feelings. He refers to the Talmudic question: why are the human beings created as stemming from only one human? The answer is: so that nobody can say that his father is greater than the father of others. In the same universal vein, Rabbi Shimon ben Azzai thought that the basic principle of Judaism is that God created every person in His image (Bereshit Rabba 24, in reference to Gen. 5:1–2) (Green 2015a, p. 251). The divine is in every human being. Even beyond the human being, the divine presence is in everything. The marrow of Green's spiritualism is profoundly humanistic. He is a religious Jew, but a secular, nonmessianic Zionist. From his teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel, he learned that the exclusivist affirmation that "my God is not your God" is idolatry (Heschel 1967, p. 86; Green 2010, pp. 102–3). In the land, Muslims and Jews are called to serve God in cooperation with each other: they share the land.

9. Conclusions: Celebrating Diversity and Loving Oneness

Green celebrates diversity in the unity of all. As a result of his promotion of a diversity of lifestyles, he perceives truth beyond all religions. This insight contributes to a dialogical theology (Meir 2015). He opposes exclusivism and superiority. He lives his Judaism profoundly, in great openness to the plural manifestation of religious experiences. He develops a transdifferent view in his pluralist theology. He mentions Franz Rosenzweig, who developed a Jewish theology of Christianity (Meir 2018), and writes that we have to do this for other religions (Green 1995, p. 21).[10] Like his mentor Heschel, he becomes active with religious others (Green 2015b, p. 289). Against exclusivism, he quotes from the Sayings of the Fathers "Who is wise? One who learns from every person" (Avot 4:1).

More generally, Green believes in the underlying unity of all, not a struggle and survival of the fittest. There is a common source for all that exists. The One wants the many (Green 1995, pp. 19–20). "We worship the One manifest in all the many traditions of humanity" (Green 1995, p. 22).

Ariel Evan Mayse rightly characterizes Green as "a religious seeker" and "a religious humanist", whose theology is "a mystical and monistic panentheism" (Green 2015a, pp. 1,15, 26). Green is indeed a seeker, who pursues God's presence, in answer to the call "Seek His face, always" (Ps. 105:4). He also takes his personal search for spirituality seriously. God for him is not outside, a Supreme Being, who governs history. Green believes in the Oneness of all, and this leads him to active involvement in the world, which he greatly loves. In his creative reinterpretation of Hasidism, he invites people to follow the footsteps of Abraham as the "classical Jewish seeker", and to continue the journey which is still unfinished. Open to the values of our world, he formulates and lives a nonconventional "seeker friendly Judaism" that impacts the world and is impacted by the world (Green 2015b, pp. 270, 286). The particularity of such a Judaism lies in its universality. In a time that we witness religious fundamentalism and the politization of religion, Green's heterodox radical theology is an invitation to discover again loving religious energy that enlightens our world.

Through his nontheistic approach of God as the "inner force of existence itself", Green testifies to that force in his loving care for all human beings and in his engagement for our environment (Green 2015a, p. 120). With his radical idea that there is no being other than God, he values that each person is truly God's image, and that nature with its earth, air and water is holy. Since transcendence dwells in immanence, since the One underlies the many, he fully appreciates the evolutionary process which made possible the life that we live. The evolving life energy, the *dynamis*, is for Green the self-manifestation of the One Being. It is not a violent struggle, but a meaningful process. Much as Brahman in Hinduism, the One garbs itself in multiplicity. This harmonic vision of all that is, born in wonder, does not resemble Darwin's struggle for life. It allows for our participation in an endless meaningful process. Care for our natural home and interconnectedness with other human

beings contribute to the positive development of that process, that is, the development of Being itself (Green 2015a, pp. 121–25). As in process theology, Divinity is in a state of becoming (Magid 2013, p. 99). The Divine is a process without end. We are responsible for the self-articulation and self-fulfillment of the One (Green 2015a, p. 128). In the process of the free, unfolding and unnamable One, we are paradoxically "commanded" to be free and to free others. In Green's spirituality, human beings are not determined by fate and condemned to live a meaningless life. In treating others in justice and love, and in saving and maintaining our environment, we testify to the One and its miraculous evolution.

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Notes

1 He expresses his active spiritualism in several works: (Green 1992, 2004b, 2010, 2020).

2 (Green 1979, 1989, 1997, 2004a, 2015b). Green is also the editor of *Jewish Spirituality* (Green 1986, 1987). He was ordained a rabbi at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He taught at the University of Pennsylvania and at Brandeis University. He was president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and created a non-denominational rabbinical School at Hebrew College in Newton, Massachusetts. Apart from his scholarly work, he is much involved in Jewish education. For instance, (Green 1999) is dedicated to his sister Paula. In fact, this lexicon of Jewish words is for all the women who could not receive a Jewish education as their brothers.

3 Ariel Evan Mayse qualifies Green's theology as a "monistic panentheism" (Green 2015a, p. 15). Cautious theologians interested in boundaries could object that this is a problematic expression; they could ask for a clear decision if Green is a monist/pantheist, or rather a panentheist. In my view, the question whether Green is a more classical panentheist or a radical monist who believes in a developing and self-articulating God is not quite relevant here. As I will show, Green's texts go in both directions and testify to a unitive and nondualistic vision that implies a profound humanism. In an interview with Alan Brill, Green defines his theology as a "mystical and monistic panentheism" (See Brill's blog "The Book of Doctrines and Opinions. Notes on Jewish theology and spirituality" of 18 February 2021).

4 Landes's article appeared under the title "Hidden Master" in the *Jewish Review of Books* of fall 2010.

5 Alan Brill's discussion of Green's radical theology appears in his blog "The Book of Doctrines and Opinions. Notes on Jewish theology and spirituality" of May 1, 8 and 22, 2010. The quotation is from Brill's blog of May 22.

6 So in his interview with Alan Brill in "The Book of Doctrines and Opinions. Notes on Jewish theology and spirituality" of 18 February 2021.

7 For environmentalism in Jewish studies: (Tirosh-Samuelson 2011, 2012).

8 For Heschel, nature refers to God. His theology is essential for the construction of a full-fledged eco-theology, in which nature is not merely an object of manipulation. Following Heschel's sensitivity to the religious dimension in nature, Schachter-Shalomi, Green and Arthur Waskow developed a Jewish eco-theology (Meir 2020, pp. 60–3).

9 For a discussion of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: (Sokatch 2021).

10 For a detailed and critical discussion of Rosenzweig's treatment of religions in the *Star of Redemption* in the perspective of an interreligious theology: (Meir 2021b).

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Article

Encountering the Divine, Resisting Patriarchy: Rosemary Radford Ruether's Prophetic Catholicism

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Abstract: While Rosemary Radford Ruether is widely, and rightly, acknowledged as a prophetic Catholic scholar–activist, her interest in and experience of mysticism is rarely emphasized. However, Ruether had an impactful mystical experience as a young woman, and the themes of this experience echo throughout her body of work. This paper paints a portrait of Ruether as both a profoundly prophetic scholar–activist and a spiritually attuned seeker of the very divinity that she encountered in her twenties. In the process, this paper first offers a democratized and demystified vision of mysticism by drawing on the work of Bernard McGinn, Dorothee Söelle, and Jess Byron Hollenback. Next, it offers a biographical sketch of Ruether, contextualizing her early mystical experience within the broader pattern of her spiritual and intellectual path. It interprets Ruether's mystical experience, through which she encountered the divine as a feminine presence suffusing creation, as a meaningful source of inspiration for her decades-long commitment to an anti-patriarchal, ecofeminist theology.

Keywords: Rosemary Radford Ruether; mysticism; feminist theology; ecofeminist theology; Catholic; prophetic

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1. Introduction

Rosemary Radford Ruether is widely acknowledged as a deeply generative and powerfully prophetic Catholic theologian. In a *New York Times* article published shortly after her death on 21 May 2022, Clay Risen refers to Ruether as "a pioneering theologian who brought feminist, antiracist and environmental perspectives to bear on the traditional teachings of the Roman Catholic Church" (Risen 2022). Through her voluminous scholarship, Ruether has articulated a critical analysis of the "systems of domination" that shape our unjust and unsustainable status quo, lending laser-sharp attention to the ways in which aspects of her own Christian tradition have been appropriated to solidify, sanction, and even sacralize this status quo.[1] Ruether has simultaneously highlighted the prophetic potential embedded in the Christian tradition, and the capacity for Christianity to serve as a liberating, life-giving, and transformative force.[2] For Ruether, the "prophetic-liberating tradition", by which people of faith critique, renew, and reimagine the existing religious and social order, is "central" to the biblical tradition (Ruether 1993b, pp. 23–24).[3] In alignment with this tradition, Ruether's work consistently emerged from and contributed to scholarly movements promoting theological renewal, as well as activist movements enfleshing social justice and ecological flourishing. True to her feminist[4] commitments, Ruether's written work was inextricable from an expansive relational web, consisting of persons and communities seeking to transform the world (Ruether 1993b, p. vii).[5] With this in mind, Gary Dorrien refers to Ruether as the "epitome of a scholar-activist" (Dorrien 2006, p. 187). For Dorrien, every book that Ruether produced "had a community behind it", because she "forged friendships with activists in various fields and wrote books out of her activist commitments" (Dorrien 2006, p. 187).

While Ruether's legacy as a prophetic scholar–activist has been solidly acknowledged, her interest in and experience of mysticism is rarely emphasized. However, she devoted portions of her corpus to exploring historical mystics and mysticism (Ruether 2002), and she

had her own transformative mystical experience as a young woman (Ruether 2013, p. 18). The key themes of this experience reverberate throughout her body of work. This paper paints a portrait of Ruether as both a prophetic scholar–activist and a spiritually attuned seeker of the very divinity that she powerfully encountered through a mystical experience as a young woman. First, this paper offers a demystified and democratized vision of mysticism and its transformative impacts in conversation with Bernard McGinn, Dorothee Söelle, and Jess Byron Hollenback. Next, it offers a biographical sketch of Ruether, situating her early mystical experience within the larger fabric of her spiritual and intellectual journey. It then traces the link between Ruether's mystical experience, in which she encountered the divine as a feminine presence permeating creation, and her decades-long commitment to an anti-patriarchal, ecofeminist theology. It argues that Ruether's early mystical experience can and should be viewed as a significant spark of inspiration in the vibrant fire of her life's work as a justice-oriented scholar–activist.

2. Demystifying and Democratizing Mysticism and Mystical Experiences

Bernard McGinn notes that the term "mysticism" is a relatively recent one. It first appeared in the seventeenth century, and it did not blossom into popular use until the nineteenth century (McGinn 2006, p. xiv). The adjective "mystical", a Greek word which translates to "hidden", has been widely employed by Christians since the late second century, at least (McGinn 2006, p. xiv). McGinn specifically defines Christian mysticism as the particular arena of Christian life "that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effect of what the mystics themselves have described as a direct and transformative presence of God" (McGinn 2006, p. xiv). He highlights the transformational impact of mystical experiences, observing that the mystic's "encounter with God transforms their minds and their lives" (McGinn 2006, p. xvii). For McGinn, Christian mysticism entails the opening to, the experience of, and the impact of a fundamentally transformative encounter with God. This encounter significantly changes the life of the mystic, inspiring them to encourage others to "open themselves to a similar process of transformation" (McGinn 2006, p. xvii).

Dorothee Söelle similarly emphasizes the deeply transformative impact of mystical experiences, while also explicitly attempting to "democratize mysticism", to locate mystical experiences within a relational web, and to highlight the link between mystical experiences and active resistance to the status quo (Söelle 2001, p. 14). Söelle proposes that mystical experiences are accessible to all human beings, rather than merely being periodically gifted to the privileged few. She simultaneously expands the scope of mystical experience beyond the domain of the private interiority of the individual self, emphasizing the necessary enmeshment of personal mystical experiences within a broader sociopolitical fabric. In this regard, she aims to completely "erase the distinction between a mystical *internal* and a political *external*" (Söelle 2001, p. 3). Furthermore, Söelle senses a pattern of resistance exhibited by a wide range of mystics. Whether mystics engage in a prayerful withdrawal from mainstream existence or a spiritually charged confrontation with the status quo, they ultimately offer a "No! to the world as it exists now" (Söelle 2001, p. 3). The "normal world", which mystics stand in resistance to, is an order that is "founded on power, possession, and violence", and which therefore exists in striking dissonance with the tone of their own experiences of the divine (Söelle 2001, p. 198). For Söelle, genuine mystical intimacy with the divine must converge with an active, ethical commitment to the flourishing of others. For us to flourish together, the systems that structure our world must be dramatically transformed.

Synthesizing insights from McGinn and Söelle, we can identify mystical experiences as transformative in nature, democratically available to all, inextricable from a broader sociopolitical context, and capable of animating active resistance to the existing arrangement of our world. With these ideas in mind, it remains helpful and necessary to more thoroughly consider the elements that make a highly charged and transformative experience a specifically mystical experience. In an effort to do so, we will turn to the work of Jess Byron

Hollenback, who helpfully maps out the specific contours of mystical experiences across numerous religious traditions, highlighting seven key qualities that commonly surface in these experiences. He notes that, while some mystical experiences involve all seven of these features, others do not. Furthermore, Hollenback emphasizes that the specific expressions that these seven key features take vary significantly depending on the particular mystic, as well as their cultural context.

Most essentially, mystical experiences entail a kind of dilation of consciousness, which grants intimate access to invaluable religious insights. The first mark of such experiences is that they involve a "radical, trans-sensory metamorphosis of the subject's mode of consciousness" during their waking state (Hollenback 1996, p. 40). While the mystic retains waking awareness, they perceive "by means of some faculty other than the five physical senses" (Hollenback 1996, p. 43). Indeed, for Hollenback, the majority of mystical experiences appear to be "akin to hallucinatory phenomena" (Hollenback 1996, p. 43). Second, mystical experiences provide one with direct access to realities deemed the "ultimately real" by their own religious and cultural traditions (Hollenback 1996, p. 40). For instance, in a Christian context, a mystic might suddenly plunge into an experiential encounter with Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Godhead, or the presence of Sophia shining through creation.

Mystical experiences tend to be illuminating (often literally), shedding light on profoundly significant spiritual truths that stimulate highly charged affective responses. The third facet of mystical experiences that Hollenback highlights is that they provide knowledge about realities that are of the "utmost importance for human salvation" (Hollenback 1996, p. 40). They disclose significant and saving truths. In this respect, mystical experiences commonly elicit a "response" that involves "all of one's being" (Hollenback 1996, p. 40). Naturally, an experience that activates such a response is brimming with a surplus of emotion. This, for Hollenback, is the fourth key characteristic of mystical experiences. They are "heavily laden with affect" (Hollenback 1996, p. 41). Fifth, mystical experiences tend to bring about an "illumination that is both literal and metaphorical" (Hollenback 1996, p. 41). What once was hidden is suddenly revealed, as if some mysterious source of light had suddenly flooded a previously darkened room, illuminating its contents.

While mystical experiences are "fundamentally amorphous" and "historically conditioned", they generally emerge from what Hollenback terms the "recollective act" (Hollenback 1996, p. 41). The content of specific mystical experiences is amorphous in that this content does not conform, universally, to a predetermined pattern. Mystical experiences are, in fact, inextricable from and informed by the specific historical and religious contexts in which the mystic is situated. Hollenback observes that the specific details of various mystical experiences across religious traditions differ significantly, such that Inuit shamans have markedly different mystical experiences than Christian mystics (Hollenback 1996, p. 75). Finally, despite the vast variety of shapes that mystical experiences take, they usually unfold through the act of recollection. Recollection, for Hollenback, refers to the concentered and single-pointed focusing of the fullness of one's being (Hollenback 1996, p. 94). Mysticism emerges, in this regard, from concentrated attentiveness, which allows for a deepening immersion in an experiential realm that might otherwise be clouded over by distracted forms of thinking, acting, or feeling.

Rosemary Radford Ruether had one such mystical experience in her twenties. As we will see, the content of her experience resonates with aspects of mysticism highlighted by McGinn, Söelle, and Hollenback. Ruether's mystical experience, like all mystical experiences, is inextricable from her larger life. In her description of her experience, she is sensitive to the influence of her upbringing on the tone and textures of her vision. Furthermore, the impact of this mystical experience can be sensed in Ruether's life and writing as it continued to unfold through and beyond her twenties. The impact can be sensed in her deeply prophetic resistance to the status quo, which emerges throughout her scholarship and activism. For Söelle, this is the hallmark of an authentic mystical experience: it enkindles a "No! to the world as it exists now" (Söelle 2001, p. 3).

3. Journeying into Justice: The Life and Legacy of Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether understood her scholarly path to resemble the pattern of a spiral. "I sometimes describe my intellectual journey as spiraling," she writes, "rather than changing from one perspective and topic of concern to another" (Ruether 2006, p. 280). In her dozens of books and hundreds of articles, Ruether addressed a wide variety of topics, from ecclesiology to ecology, from feminist theology to Latin American liberation theology, from Black theology to Buddhist–Christian dialogue (Ruether 2006, p. 280). For Ruether, this is absolutely not a scattered galaxy of issues. Instead, these particular issues are "deeply interconnected", and "most of them have been present in my thinking since the early 1970's" (Ruether 2006, p. 280).

Ruether's spiraling scholarship is inextricable from the concrete contours of personal experience, and she has long been convinced of the central significance of experience to theological production. In a letter sent to Thomas Merton in February of 1967, Ruether writes, "I distrust all academic theology", asserting that "only theology bred in the crucible of experience is any good" (Ruether 1995, p. 25).[6] In *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Ruether identifies experience as the "base of all theological reflection", whether or not this is consciously acknowledged (Ruether 1993b, p. 12). Mary E. Hunt describes Ruether's theological production as being both "intellectually rigorous and grounded in daily experiences" (Hunt 2014). As Hunt has it, Ruether's theology is "as much about the ozone layer as about her garden" (Hunt 2014). Ruether's theology is inseparable from her life story, and from the particular assemblage of experiences that shaped her, including her mystical experience.

Born in 1936, in St. Paul, Minnesota, and raised in Washington D.C. and La Jolla, California, Ruether was brought up in an atmosphere of religious diversity, in which she sensed that "a multiplicity of perspectives living together has always seemed normal" (Ruether 1992, p. 10). Ruether's mother, Rebecca, was Catholic, and her father, Robert, was Episcopalian; her extended family included her Jewish uncle, David, as well as Unitarians, Quakers, and Russian Orthodox Christians (Ruether 1992, p. 10). As a young woman, she embraced the perspective that "Going to Mass was the usual way I could encounter God, but an Episcopal or Russian Orthodox liturgy, a synagogue service or a Quaker meeting, were places where the same God could also be found" (Ruether 2013, p. 37). Ruether would, throughout her life, "remain a Catholic as an ecumenical and interfaith Christian" (Ruether 2013, p. 65).

The women in Ruether's life had particularly powerful impacts on her spiritual and intellectual journey. Ruether was formed "in a series of matricentric enclaves led by intelligent, articulate, and self-confident women", both within and beyond her own home (Ruether 2013, p. 1). Ruether's mother had an especially significant impact, leading her to declare that "in the nurturing of my faith and spiritual life I can think of only one important person: Rebecca Cresap Ord Radford, my mother" (Ruether 1993a, p. 164). Ruether's mother modeled a way of being rooted in the Catholic tradition and equally open to ongoing intellectual inquiry and spiritual seeking. She embodied a "lucid balance of serious spirituality and intellectual freedom" (Ruether 1993a, p. 164). Ruether attended Catholic mass with her mother while also occasionally attending Quaker meetings with one of her mother's friends, who brought her to marches in solidarity with the United Farm Workers, as well as pacifist rallies (Ruether 2006, p. 281). These experiences enabled Ruether to realize "that one can connect with several religious traditions at the same time without choosing between them" as well as that one "should relate religion to peace and social justice" (Ruether 2006, p. 281). In addition, Ruether was significantly empowered by the atmosphere of her Catholic grade school and high school, which she remembers as an "all-female world of nuns and girls" (Ruether 2013, p. 4). As a student, the nuns of the Sisters of Providence encouraged her intellectual pursuits, and later in her career, Ruether delivered a speech at the order's motherhouse in Indiana, which had been transformed into an "ecojustice center" (Ruether 2013, p. 5).

After high school, Ruether went on to study at Scripps College, in Claremont, CA (Ruether 2013, p. 7). She married her husband, Herman, during her senior year, and gave birth to her first of three children soon after graduating (Ruether 2013, p. 2). By 1965, Ruether had received her M.A. in Roman History and her Ph.D. in Classics and Patristics from Claremont Graduate School (Ruether 2013, p. 9). That summer, Ruether entered into an embodied involvement in the Civil Rights movement, traveling to the headquarters of the Delta Ministry in Beulah, Mississippi, where she volunteered with Head Start (Ruether 2008, pp. 21–22). Her experience in Mississippi was "dangerous and frightening" (Ruether 2008, p. 22). She recalls one night during which hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan drove through campus, shooting through the windows of the buildings (Ruether 2008, p. 22). Reflecting on her experience, Ruether writes, "That summer, social justice permanently entered my thinking and life" (Ruether 2008, p. 22). It was, for Ruether, a "crucial turning point in my social consciousness" (Ruether 2006, p. 282).

When the summer ended, Ruether and her family moved to Washington D.C., where she taught at Howard, a historically Black university, through 1976 (Ruether 2013, p. 15). Her experiences in the summer of 1965, as well as her experiences at Howard, molded her "praxis/thought in its formative stage in the context of the African American struggle" (Ruether 2012, p. 186). While teaching at Howard, Ruether became deeply involved in a social justice-oriented Episcopalian parish in Washington, DC.[7] Ruether's children "grew up on" protest marches, which frequently "flowed out of the church we had joined" (Ruether 2013, p. 16). Through her scholarship and teaching at Howard, and through her involvement at St. Stephen and the Incarnation, Ruether became immersed in the theory and praxis of radical Christianity. As Mary Joanne Henold puts it, "in the sixties, Ruether became deeply involved in the civil rights and peace movements as well as the Catholic left" and that "while pursuing her academic career as a theologian, and raising her children in a racially integrated Washington neighborhood, she could frequently be found at demonstrations, on picket lines, and occasionally in jail" (Henold 2008, pp. 39–40).

In the late 1960's, Ruether's feminist consciousness was activated, and she began to connect feminist insights with theological reflection (Ruether 2013, p. 17). During this time, she was questioning the existence of God "in the sense of a male person outside and ruling over the universe" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). Amidst this questioning, Ruether "had a vivid experience, something like a dream or visual hallucination", in which she found herself in the "great hall of a huge fortress". (Ruether 2013, p. 18). The long hallway led to a staircase, which she climbed. Finally, after numerous levels of stars, she arrived at the top level and stood before a door. She was struck by the sense that, behind this door, was God's throne room. With a feeling of "excitement" and "nervousness", Ruether opened the door (Ruether 2013, p. 18). She beheld a throne room, but the throne itself was empty. She recognized, in that instant, that there simply was no solitary God inhabiting a throne at the apex of a pyramid of power. As the absence of this deity impressed itself upon her, the presence of a strikingly different divinity emerged. She experienced this God as a "great nurturing and empowering energy that existed in and through all things, sustaining and renewing them" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). Despite the fact that this divine presence was not merely "anthropomorphic", she found this presence to be "more maternal than paternal" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). From this moment forward, the "Great Mother" became Ruether's "operative understanding of the divine" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). Tracing the link between this vivid experience and her own upbringing, Ruether writes, "The matrix of mothers who had nurtured and empowered me as I grew up" served as the "experiential base for this vision of the Great Mother" (Ruether 2013, p. 18).

In accordance with McGinn's understanding of Christian mysticism, Ruether's revelation of the "Great Mother" served as a deeply transformative encounter with God. In alignment with Söelle's vision, the specific content of this experience is inextricable from Ruether's broader relational web, including the inspirational and empowering women in her life. Furthermore, the impact of the experience can be sensed in Ruether's ongoing resistance to patriarchal religion and culture through her scholarship and activism. The

experience unfolded during a waking state, though the content of the experience was, as Hollenback notes of many mystical experiences, "akin to hallucinatory phenomena" (Hollenback 1996, p. 43). In Ruether's words, her experience was "something like a dream or visual hallucination" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). Ruether's experience involved an illumination of the "ultimately real", to use Hollenback's language, and this particular illumination simultaneously subverted the patriarchal mirage proffered by the mainstream (Hollenback 1996, p. 40). Based on Ruether's description, the experience was charged with affect, and it offered life-giving, liberating, and ultimately salvific insights, as it amounted to the melting of a patriarchal idol and the encounter with a "nurturing and empowering" divine presence (Ruether 2013, p. 18). In Ruether's description, she gave herself over whole-heartedly to the experience, entering into its frame and steeping herself in its power.

The seeds planted by this experience can be sensed in Ruether's blossoming scholarship, which she devoted to prophetically resisting systems of injustice, including the system of patriarchy, while constructively articulating feminist and ecofeminist alternatives. Ruether wrote "Male Chauvinist Theology and the Anger of Women", her first talk on feminist theology, in 1968, and she delivered it in numerous seminaries and churches before publishing it in 1971 (Ruether 2008, p. 30). Her concern for ecology developed soon after. Early on in her career, she "sought to connect ecology and feminism, both in recognition of the way the domination of the earth is metaphorically interconnected with the domination of women in patriarchal ideology, and also to reveal how women's use and abuse in society interfaces with the abuse of nature" (Ruether 2013, p. 27). Ruether continued to clarify and enflesh these ecofeminist commitments in scholarship and activism when, after teaching for over a decade at Howard, she was appointed to the Georgia Harkness Chair in Applied Theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (Ruether 2013, p. 24). Ruether officially retired from Garrett in 2002 (Ruether 2017, p. vii). She then taught for a number of years at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, before spiraling back to Claremont School of Theology and Claremont Graduate University, where she had done her own doctoral work (Ruether 2017, p. vii).

Ruether died on 21 May 2022. Her death, like all deaths, is not an end. Instead, it is akin to a supernova. Ruether had scattered the insights generated within her core far and wide, and these insights—like elements generated within a star—serve as the building blocks for novel expressions of theology and activism that continue to be developed in the present. In "The Chispa Carrier: Rosemary Radford Ruether", Renny Golden observes that the "rising of women/is what she wrote for, the fire she lit again and again" and that "We are her legacy/a choir of wild women intoning a Magnificat" (Golden 2011).

4. Ruether's Anti-Patriarchal, Ecofeminist Theology

Ruether articulated and employed a theological method that is firmly grounded in the soil of human experience. For Ruether, scripture and tradition, which are often understood to be the "objective sources of theology", are "themselves codified collective human experience" (Ruether 1993b, p. 12). Scripture and tradition crystalize past experiences, transmitting them into the present. From Ruether's perspective, "every great religious idea begins in the revelatory experience" (Ruether 1993b, p. 13). A "revelatory experience", in Ruether's description, is effectively a mystical experience. It amounts to a profound "breakthrough" that transcends "ordinary fragmented consciousness", offering "interpretive symbols illuminating the means of the *whole* of life" (Ruether 1993b, p. 13). One can sense, in this description, echoes of Ruether's own mystical experience, which led her to recognize the unreality of a patriarchal deity elevated above creation and to experience, instead, a divine force permeating every element of reality. Following the experience, the symbol of the "Great Mother" became Ruether's "operative understanding of the divine" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). If all theology emerges from experience, and if religious ideas can be traced to revelatory experiences, it is only natural to suggest the Ruether's own mystical experience contributed a meaningful charge to her own constructive work in feminist and ecofeminist theology.

Ruether's sense of the centrality of experience can be traced, at least partially, to an insight from the classist Robert Palmer, with whom she studied as an undergraduate at Scripps. Robert Palmer's "favorite formula" regarding the origins of religious traditions, which he learned from Walter Otto, was "First the god, then the dance, and finally the story" (Ruether 1982, p. 26). Convinced of the validity of this formula, Ruether believed that "religion begins in theophany" (Ruether 2013, p. 91). While religious insights emerge from an encounter with divinity, the vital energy released by these insights can become warped and corrupted by institutions over time. "The encounter" with the divine, "must be spelled out, danced out, worked out in culture in order to realize its full implications, but then these cultural structures take over and choke off access to the reality that they are supposed to mediate" (Ruether 1966, p. 52). While Ruether's own theophany placed her into intimate contact with a feminine expression of the divine, it simultaneously marked a decisive decentering of the patriarchal image of God, which has ossified over the course of centuries. Ruether acted, throughout her career, to deconstruct this patriarchal deity, and to articulate an alternative theological vision.

Ruether argued that patriarchy is, without question, the cultural milieu undergirding and encompassing both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament (Ruether 1993b, p. 22). Patriarchy has, therefore, "been incorporated into religious ideology on many levels" (Ruether 1993b, p. 22). In this respect, aspects of the Bible reflect the patriarchal culture in which it was composed, and these aspects can be—and have been—appropriated in order to bolster sexist interpersonal relationships and social systems, including in ecclesial arrangements. For Ruether, the myriad manifestations of patriarchal ideology within the Bible are not to be "cleaned up or explained away", but rather recognized, critically grappled with, and ultimately "denounced" (Ruether 1993b, p. 23). In Ruether's understanding, the Bible simultaneously contains generative resources that can be employed in order to deconstruct and dismantle patriarchy, while inspiring the development of more just and sustainable patterns of being in its ruins. The Bible contains not only fodder for the "religious sanctification of patriarchy" but also "resources for the critique of patriarchy" (Ruether 1993b, p. 22). Ruether retrieved and recentered these resources in fleshing out her feminist and ecofeminist theology.

As early as 1972, in "Motherearth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic and Ecological Perspective" Ruether began to articulate what scholars would now identify as an ecofeminist theology, two years before the term "ecofeminist" was even coined.[8] This groundbreaking essay attends to the interlacing subjugation of women and the natural world, while holistically envisioning constructive alternatives to this two-fold domination. For Ruether, patriarchal cultures emanate from and reify a "one-sided expression of the ego claiming its transcendental autonomy by negating the finite matrix of existence"(Ruether 1972, p. 122). Patriarchal systems sanction and sacralize this negation, associating women and other oppressed groups with the material realm which is to be transcended and controlled. An "exclusively male God", who transcends and acts upon this material realm from afar, amounts to the "theological self-image and guilty conscience of this self-infinitizing spirit" (Ruether 1972, p. 122). This whole system, for Ruether, must be recognized, resisted, and radically transformed. This will require a "total abolition of the social pattern of domination and subjugation", and the development of an alternative ethos, alternative practices, and alternative structural conditions (Ruether 1972, p. 124). Such total transformation must emerge through concrete, grassroots efforts, which will feed into broader shifts that will ultimately radiate out as a "global struggle to overthrow and transform the character of power structures" (Ruether 1972, p. 125). In the process, human beings and human communities must exchange their intentions and weapons of domination and violence for a willingness to skillfully "cultivate the garden", by sensitively linking the "powers of rational consciousness" with "the harmonies of nature in partnership" (Ruether 1972, p. 125).

Throughout her career, Ruether offered similarly sharp critiques of patriarchal systems and the ideologies which undergird and sanction them, including the rendering of God

as a solitary male deity hovering above creation. In the process, she constructed and promoted ecofeminist alternatives. Her constructive theological vision aligns closely with the content of the mystical experience that she had in her twenties. For instance, Ruether wrote in *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*, that God "is not a 'being' removed from creation, ruling it from outside in the manner of a patriarchal ruler" (Ruether 2012, p. 187). This image of God is, after all, the very image that melted in the course of her mystical experience. Instead, "God is the source of being that underlies creation and grounds its nature and future potential for continual transformative renewal in biophilic mutuality" (Ruether 2012, p. 187). In *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Ruether referred to this divinity as "God/ess", the sacred being who does not sanction the "existing hierarchical social order", but who instead "liberates us from it", calling us into a "new community of equals" (Ruether 1993b, p. 69).[9]

5. Conclusions

Rosemary Radford Ruether is rightly recognized as a prophetic scholar–activist, who devoted her energies to confronting and transforming ideologies, relationships, and systems marked by domination, including the system of patriarchy. She should also be recognized as a spiritually attuned seeker of the divine, whose prophetic work is inextricable from her spiraling constellation of experiences, including her mystical encounter with the divine as a young woman. Much of Ruether's theology flowed in close continuity with this mystical experience, during which the radical absence of an enthroned patriarch ruling over creation opened a space for her to encounter an intimately present and liberating divinity. Throughout her career, Ruether expanded upon this essential dynamic. She deconstructed the idol of patriarchy while actively constructing an alternative theological, social, and ecological vision aimed at animating a more just and sustainable world. Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk* ends with the following prayerful affirmation: "The Shalom of the Holy; the disclosure of the gracious *Shekinah;* Divine Wisdom; the empowering Matrix; She, in whom we live and move and have our being—She comes; She is here" (Ruether 1993b, p. 266). Ruether encountered this divine presence through her transformative mystical experience, and her ongoing faith in this divinity can be sensed in her efforts to envision and enflesh an alternative, ecofeminist, future.

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Notes

1 See (Ruether 1992). Ruether observes that "we inherit not only a legacy of systems of domination, but also cultures that teach us to see such relations as the 'natural order' and as the will of God" (p. 3).

2 See (Ruether 1993b). Ruether argues that "Prophetic faith denounces religious ideologies and systems that function to justify and sanctify the dominant, unjust social order" (p. 24).

3 For a critical assessment of Ruether's turn to the prophetic tradition, see the work of feminist theologian and biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. See, for instance, (Fiorenza 1994). Fiorenza proposes that Ruether constructs a "rather idealized picture of the biblical and prophetic traditions" without adequately accounting for their own "oppressive androcentric elements" (p. 17).

4 See (Hill Fletcher 2013). Hill Fletcher articulates a feminist theological anthropology, arguing that "We are fundamentally relational, we exercise creativity under constraint as embedded and embodied beings within this relational nexus, and we have the capacity to think ourselves forward or to know ourselves into interbeing in community with others" (p. 209).

5 In order to appreciate the rootedness of Ruether's scholarship in concrete communities, one might review the "Acknowledgments" of *Sexism and God-Talk.* Ruether notes that she composed portions of the text while living at Grailville, in Loveland, Ohio (vii). Ruether thanks the community for their hospitality, and she thanks the "community of women" living there, "who read and responded to" her manuscript (vii). For an analysis of the feminist commitments of the Grail, see (Kalven 1989). The Grail is an international movement that is grounded in the Christian tradition, led by women, animated by feminist convictions, and committed to justice (p. 120).

[6] Rosemary Radford Ruether to Thomas Merton, Mid-February 1967, in (Ruether 1995, p. 25). For additional reflections on Ruether's theology, all of which specifically attend to Merton and Ruether's exchange, please see the following additional works by this author. See (Robinson 2020). Also see (Robinson 2021, pp. 120–28). Also see (Robinson 2023).

[7] See (Ruether 1967). Ruether describes St. Stephen and the Incarnation as an ecumenical Episcopal church, with a significant number of Roman Catholic parishoners, and with ministers coming from a number of denominations, including the Presbyterian Church and the Baptist Church (p. 153).

[8] See (Ruether 2007, p. 77). The concept of ecofeminism was initially developed by Françoise d'Eaubonne, who founded the "Ecologie-Féminisme" group in 1972, and who used the term "ecofeminism" in her 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la mort* ("Feminism or Death") (p. 77).

[9] Ruether emphasizes that the symbol "God/ess" is intended to bring together feminine and masculine forms of God-talk, while preserving a monotheistic vision (p. 46). Though this symbol, like all symbols, is ultimately provisional and "inadequate", it aims to gesture toward an "unnameable understanding of the divine that would transcend patriarchal limitations and signal redemptive experience for women as well as men" (p. 46).

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Article

Panikkar on Mysticism as a Middle Way between Contemplation and Action

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Abstract: Panikkar's philosophy of mysticism is best understood as an attempt to overcome monistic and dualistic ways of thinking about the divine, human beings and the universe. Mysticism, for Panikkar, is irreducible to either monistic experiences of oneness without a second or to dualistic experiences where the divine is seen as wholly other. Rather, mysticism relates to holistic experiences of Reality and Life where the divine, the universe and human consciousness are seen as distinct yet constitutively interrelated. Mysticism has often been based on dualistic views of this life and the next, worldly existence and heavenly existence, the material and the spiritual, body and soul, and action and contemplation. These dualisms have led many to view mysticism as negating life and as an escape from this world and human activities. Panikkar's philosophy of mysticism, however, attempts to overcome these dualisms and restores the equilibrium between the diverse yet united aspects of Reality and the human condition. This article is divided into two parts. The first part introduces Panikkar's conception of mysticism as an anthropological dimension and as involving holistic experiences of Reality and Life. The second part examines Panikkar's notion of pure consciousness and his understanding of mystical experiences as being the result of various mediating factors.

Keywords: mysticism; mystical experience; pure consciousness; pure presence; socially engaged spirituality; Panikkar; constructivism; non-constructivism; perennialism; essentialism; contextualism; contemplation and action; nondualism

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1. Introduction

Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010) was a Catholic priest and pioneer of comparative theology, cross-cultural philosophy and interfaith dialogue. He devoted his life to advancing the cause of interreligious dialogue, understood not as conversations between experts or representatives of religious communities but rather as what he called "intrareligious dialogue", an internal dialogue and spiritual practice for everyone that results from a profound encounter with the religious other (Panikkar 1999).

Panikkar's life can be considered a symbol of openness to religious diversity without falling into shallow eclecticism and without underplaying significant differences between beliefs and mystical experiences. Panikkar was the son of a Spanish Catholic mother and an Indian Hindu father. He earned a doctorate in Philosophy at the University of Madrid and became a Roman Catholic priest in 1946. He also earned a doctorate in Chemistry at the University of Madrid in 1958 and a doctorate in Theology at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome in 1961. Panikkar left Europe for India in 1954 to search for his Hindu identity after distancing himself from Opus Dei, an organization that he joined after the Spanish civil war in the 1940s. Except for a few travels to Italy and other countries, between 1954 and 1967, Panikkar lived a life of absolute simplicity in Varanasi, in two small rooms above the Shiva temple at Hanumanghat, near the Ganges River (Panikkar 2018). In 1966, he was invited to teach at Harvard University as a visiting professor. From 1971 to 1987, he resided in India and the USA, teaching comparative philosophy of religion during the

spring semester at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and spending the rest of the year in Varanasi. As a Catholic priest, he remained affiliated to the diocese of Varanasi until the end of his life. He returned to Spain in 1987 and decided to reside in the small town of Tavertet, north of Barcelona, close to the Pyrenees, until the end of his life at the age of 91. Part of his ashes were buried in Tavertet, according to the Catholic tradition, and the remainder of his ashes were scattered over the Ganges River, according to Hindu tradition (Bielawski 2018).

Panikkar claimed to be Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and secular at the same time, fully and without contradiction. In an interview that appeared in *The Christian Century*, he was asked how such a belonging to multiple religious could be possible. He answered the following about his Catholic–Hindu identity, although it can be extrapolated to his Buddhist and secular identity: "I was brought up in the Catholic religion by my Spanish mother, but I never stopped trying to be united with the tolerant and generous religion of my father and of my Hindu ancestors. This does not make me a cultural or religious 'half-caste', however. Christ was not half man and half God, but fully man and fully God. In the same way, I consider myself 100 percent Hindu and Indian, and 100 percent Catholic and Spanish. How is that possible? By living religion as an experience rather than as an ideology." (*The Christian Century*, 16–23 August 2000, pp. 834–36).

Panikkar's intrareligious dialogue with Hindu, Buddhist and secular traditions from within his Catholic tradition was arguably in harmony with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, which he experienced firsthand as a young Catholic theologian. Panikkar's pluralism, however, goes beyond the inclusivist position of Vatican II, but it is certainly consistent with the document *Nostra Aetate* when it encourages Catholics to "recognize, preserve, and promote the good things, spiritual and moral" found among Hindus and Buddhists. Panikkar published more than thirty books, many of them reflecting his theological and philosophical dialogues with religious diversity and the secular world.

It is not a coincidence that Panikkar's complete works begin with two volumes devoted to mysticism and spiritualty. Panikkar himself acknowledges that mysticism is the most important theme of his life, the inspiration for all his writings and the hermeneutical key to understanding his thought (Panikkar 2014a, p. XIII). Panikkar's insights on mysticism are not based on pure speculation but rather on his own experience of Reality and Life. Mysticism involves mystical experiences but, for Panikkar, these experiences are part of a comprehensive way of life in which knowledge, love and action are intertwined. In this sense, it can be said that, for Panikkar, mysticism is a middle way between contemplation and action.

Panikkar's approach to mysticism is inseparable from the spiritual life, which is contemplative and active at the same time and without contradiction. Mysticism and spirituality may be distinguished but not separated. He understands both terms as overlapping to a great extent, but he is not fully satisfied with any of them due to the negative connotations they have acquired in modern times. The profound connection between mysticism and spirituality permits a distinction but never a separation between contemplation and action or between the contemplative life and the active life.

For Panikkar, human life relates to mysticism because "mysticism is not a specialists' field but an anthropological dimension, something that belongs to human beings as such. Every person is a mystic—even if only potentiality so" (Panikkar 2014a, p. XIV). Thus, mysticism as a middle way between contemplation and action is for everybody because it has to do with "*the* human characteristic par excellence" (Panikkar 2014a, p. XIV).

Panikkar's work in general and, more specifically, his writings on mysticism are best understood as an attempt to overcome monistic and dualistic ways of thinking about the divine, the human condition and the universe. Instead of seeing the divine and the world or the divine and human beings or the world and human beings, in monistic terms, as one and the same reality or, in dualistic terms, as two separate entities, Panikkar conceives them as constitutively interrelated.

Panikkar calls his relational vision of Reality "cosmotheandric", from the Greek *kosmos* (Universe, World), *theos* (God, Divine) and *andros* (Human, Man). This cosmotheandric vision entails not only that everything in the universe is intrinsically interrelated to everything else but also that every being exhibits a threefold relationship with three aspects of Reality: matter or the spaciotemporal aspect (world), mind or the intelligible aspect (human) and spirit or the open-ended, non-finite, transcendent aspect (divine).

Panikkar's philosophy of mysticism presupposes this cosmotheandric vision of Reality. Mysticism is irreducible to either monistic experiences of oneness without a second or to dualistic experiences where the divine is seen as wholly other. Rather, mysticism relates to holistic experiences of Reality and Life, that is, experiences of the divine, but understood as constitutively interrelated to the universe and humankind.

The cosmotheandric vision of mystical experiences does more justice to the lives and teachings of the great mystics. There are instances of mystics in many traditions who devoted their lives to improving their religious institutions, participated in missionary activities, opposed various forms of social injustice and promoted peace and reconciliation in their communities. The contemplative activism of so many mystics across traditions contradicts the stereotype about mysticism as being other-worldly and socially passive. For Panikkar, the mystical way of life is concerned not only with the cultivation of inner peace but also with the quest for social justice and ecological wellbeing.

The cosmotheandric vision of mysticism provides a robust foundation for a this-worldly, socially engaged spirituality. Mysticism is a middle way between contemplation and action, that is, it presupposes a comprehensive way of life that involves contemplation and action to advance social harmony, justice and freedom which, for Panikkar, are the three components of peace (Panikkar 1995, p. 64). Peace, for Panikkar, is irreducible to inner peace or contemplative peace. Similarly, peace for him is irreducible to external peace or political peace. Peace demands both social justice and inner peace. Social justice cannot be reduced to an external reality, just as peace cannot be confined to other-worldly mental states of calm and concentration. Contemplative practices to attain inner peace and the pursuit of social justice and political peace are two distinct yet inseparable elements of mysticism as the middle way between contemplation and action.

The relationship between mysticism and social transformation has received little attention from theologians, philosophers and scholars of religious studies (Ruffing 2001). This paucity of scholarly studies on mysticism and social action derives from modern constructions of religion. The modern privatization of religion and its emphasis on spiritual experiences have contributed to the perception of mysticism as having to do primarily with extraordinary, paranormal, supernatural and even pathological states of consciousness. Similarly, modern constructions of mysticism view it as a specialization within the spiritual life accessible primarily to an elite group of contemplatives, monastics, illuminati, priests or fulltime spiritual seekers.

Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision of mysticism and mystical experiences remains virtually unknown among philosophers, theologians and religious scholars. There are at least two main reasons for this neglect. First, the depth and the complexity of Panikkar's thought can be challenging and even overwhelming at times because he writes not as an analytical philosopher but rather as what Young-chan Ro calls an "intellectual mystic" (Ro 2018, p. 116). Second, Panikkar's thought is influenced by several traditions, namely Roman Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist and secular traditions. Panikkar's openness to religious diversity has allowed him to expand in creative ways his alma mater and arguably "primary" tradition, i.e., Catholic Christianity. Panikkar does not fit into the mold of a petrified conception of tradition and a narrow view of orthodoxy, what he calls "microdoxy", but this should not serve as an excuse to ignore his work. Panikkar's thought remains truly Catholic not only for his faithfulness to the Catholic tradition understood in a broad sense but also because it has been enriched by other traditions, which is nothing new for anyone familiar with the history of Christian theology. And yet, Panikkar's insights on mysticism transcend restrictive sectarian labels and monocultural approaches to the philosophy of religion.

This article would like to contribute to a greater appreciation of Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision of mysticism and mystical experiences. Panikkar summarizes his ideas about mysticism in nine sūtras, literally "threads", aphorisms that invite us to ponder in a contemplative sense a variety of possible meanings. In this sense, "the sūtra does not 'mean' anything, but simply suggests" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 127). A sūtra is neither a thesis nor a synthesis of complex ideas but rather an insight that presupposes a simple way of thinking different from deduction, induction and analytical calculus.

Panikkar's sūtras on mysticism can be divided into two groups: those that relate to ontological questions and his vision of Reality (the first four) and those that focus on epistemological matters and his notion of pure consciousness (the next four). The last sūtra, the ninth, can be considered a summary of Panikkar's view of mystical experiences as a direct relation with the totality of the human condition. This article is divided into three parts that correspond to this division of sūtras. Although Panikkar's sūtras on mysticism are not intended to be guidelines for social action, I conclude each sūtra's description with a discussion of its implications for social and earthly involvement.

2. Mysticism as an Integral Experience of Reality

(1) The first sūtra states that "mysticism is the integral experience of Reality" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 128). By "integral experience", Panikkar means a holistic, complete and direct contact or "touch" with Reality. By "Reality", he means the three dimensions that constitute all beings: the spaciotemporal or cosmic dimension, the non-finite, spiritual or divine dimension and the intelligible or accessible-to-human-consciousness dimension. Panikkar prefers the term "Life" rather than "Reality" because "Life" connotes better the idea of an experience. However, in this first sūtra, he uses "Reality" rather than "Life".

Mysticism is not just an experience of our life or our reality but rather an experience of Life and Reality within us. Panikkar's first sūtra is intended to question interpretations of mysticism as experiences of a divine reality somewhat beyond this secular and temporal world. This a-cosmic or other-worldly view of mysticism is, for Panikkar, problematic because it does not do justice to many mystical traditions that speak about human beings at the crossroads between heaven and earth or the cosmic and divine dimension of Reality. Reducing mysticism to experiences of a supreme entity apart from the universe and utterly beyond human beings also fails to consider what many mystics state about the proximity of the divine or the presence of a divine dimension in all beings. For instance, if the divine is omnipresent, then it does not seem possible to define mysticism as having nothing to do with this world and the material, spaciotemporal dimension of reality. Likewise, if the divine is "*intimior intimo meo*" (nearer to me than I am to myself) as St. Augustine says, or "closer to us than the jugular vein" as the Qur'an suggests, it seems difficult to portray mysticism in terms of experiences of God understood as wholly other than the universe and human beings.

This first sūtra expands common understandings of mysticism in Abrahamic religions as "experience of God" or as "experiential knowledge of the Divine". This view, for Panikkar, is reductionistic unless one means by God in a broad sense as encompassing the whole of Reality. Mysticism is not about experiencing a supreme God beyond the universe or as wholly other than human beings. Rather, mysticism is about experiencing the whole of Reality in each being.

Panikkar understands the concept of the divine in a broad, inclusive and relational sense as constitutively interrelated to the cosmic and the human dimensions of Reality. That is why Panikkar objects to conceptions of mysticism that assume a supreme being on top of a pyramidal vision of the universe. There are religions and worldviews that do not conceive the divine as the vertex of a pyramid, and Panikkar does not want to exclude these traditions from mysticism. By expanding the scope of mysticism from experiences of God alone to integral experiences of Reality, Panikkar is also challenging hierarchical views of mystical experiences. For Panikkar, theistic mystical experiences are not considered superior to non-theistic experiences of nature or a cosmic consciousness.

Panikkar differs from other philosophers of mysticism who rank mystical experiences. For instance, Walter Stace considered introvertive mystical experiences as superior to extrovertive mystical experiences (Stace 1960). Likewise, R.C. Zaehner viewed theistic mystical experiences as more authentic than "panenhenic" (all-in-one) extrovertive experiences of nature and monistic introvertive experiences of a nonpersonal absolute (Zaehner 1957).

Mysticism tells us that there is a gate to complete Reality, that it is possible to experience Reality and Life as an integral whole, that we can perceive the fullness of Reality and Life in concrete things and in specific human activities. Thus, Panikkar introduces an intercultural perspective and an innovative approach to mystical experiences "which, by forcing mysticism to descend from the Olympus of the Gods to the land of Man, makes it impossible any longer to be considered a specialization accessible only to the few, becoming a constitutive element of the human being" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 129).

When Panikkar suggests that mysticism is an integral, holistic, complete experience of Reality and Life, he does not mean that mystics know all things in the universe in a quantitative sense. Rather, his point is that mystics experience all dimensions of Reality and Life in concrete things: "Have not some mystics said that they see God in all things and all things in God—leaving the question of what they meant by this 'God' unanswered?" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 131). Mystics experience Reality and Life in their entirety; they see the whole in every being, the entire universe in a single flower, even if they do not know all that there is to know about that flower.

Having a holistic, complete or integral experience of Reality and Life does not amount to having a 360-degree vision of all things in the universe. Mystics do not need to know literally all things or all the parts of a single thing to know the fullness of Reality and Life. Panikkar is talking about the fullness of Reality and Life in a qualitative sense. Panikkar explains this holistic experience as an experience of the *totum in parte*, the whole in something concrete, in a particular being or part of Reality. This integral experience of Reality and Life in concrete things is both transcendent and immanent. For Panikkar, transcendence and immanence are intertwined: one cannot have an experience of transcendence without having at the same time an experience of immanence. An experience of transcendence presupposes an experience of immanence and vice versa. This integral experience of transcendence and immanence may take place both internally and externally, vertically and horizontally, within us and across the universe.

The main implication of the first sūtra for social and earthly involvement is that mysticism relates to all aspects of Reality and Life including society and the world. Another implication is that mysticism is for all human beings and not just for a select few. Yet another implication is that mysticism should not be seen as an other-worldly pursuit of spiritual experiences by self-centered individuals in search of God or the divine.

(2) The second sūtra states that mystical "experience is the conscious touch of reality" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 135). Mystical experiences involve an immediate, direct contact or "touch" with the three dimensions of Reality and Life. In this "touch", there is no separation between the toucher and the touched, the experiencer and the experienced. This, however, does not mean that the toucher and the touched are so united that they become identical. Rather, there is a mutual going-through or *com-penetration* between the subject and the object, between the person who experiences and the reality experienced. This "touch" is an experience of the intrinsic relationship between the poles of Reality and Life, an experience of the perichoresis and radical relativity of all beings in the universe. This relationship is constitutive, non-substantialist and a-dualistic, that is, it is a union or communion irreducible to either monolithic oneness (monism) or fragmented plurality (dualism).

Consciousness is what allows us to become aware of this "touch" with the constitutive relationships that unite the poles of Reality and Life. Human consciousness is another pole of Reality and Life, a pole in between the material or cosmic pole and the spiritual or divine pole. Each pole of Reality and Life is a mediation between the other two poles. Panikkar clarifies that by mediation he does not mean being an intermediary. A mediation,

in Panikkar's sense, presupposes a relational, non-substantialist ontology, that is, beings are constituted by mediations, i.e., by intrinsic relationships.

Human consciousness mediates between the divine and the cosmic poles, just as the divine pole mediates between the human and the cosmic poles and the cosmic pole mediates between the human and the divine poles. This basically means that Reality and Life are relational in the sense of being constituted by relationships. In other words, there are not discrete substances that, once constituted as real entities, relate extrinsically to other substances or already existing entities. Rather, we have non-substantial poles that are constituted as realities by their intrinsic relationships. If the poles or dimensions of Reality and Life were not constitutively relational or mediations, then mystical experience would not involve an immediate, direct "touch" of Reality and Life.

In mystical experiences, consciousness becomes aware of the spiritual or divine dimension but in a constitutive relationship with the material and the human dimensions. Human consciousness mediates between the divine and the cosmic dimensions, but this mediation does not render mystical experiences indirect because the three poles of Reality and Life are constitutively relational, i.e., they are mediations rather than intermediaries.

Mystical experiences are deeply personal because they affect the entire person and because they allow mystics to realize the constitutive relationships that unite the whole of Reality and Life. That is, mystical experiences are also personal because persons are knots in a net of relationships. In this sense, mystical experiences cannot be private or just individual experiences. Reality and Life are personal in the sense of being constitutively relational. We cannot divide Reality and Life by cutting off the relationships that constitute any of their dimensions. That is why mystical experiences are personal and have an impact in the entire universe. We are also members and co-authors of Reality. What we experience has cosmological repercussions: "If the mystical experience touches reality, it is natural that it should be sensitive to the touch; it is reality itself that manifests having been touched" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 140).

Mystical experiences "touch" on Reality at a single point. This "touch" opens us to the whole of Reality and Life, but it also allows us to discover our contingent and tangential nature, i.e., our limitations and finitude. We discover our contingency when we realize the meeting point between the finite and infinite aspects of Reality and Life. This realization of our contingency is humbling and that is why mystical experiences are often related to the virtue of humility before something much greater than ourselves.

Human consciousness mediates mystical experiences, but Reality and Life are irreducible to consciousness, even less to rational consciousness. There are other aspects of Reality and Life besides consciousness and the intelligible aspect of things. Mystical experiences enable consciousness to realize with a direct, immediate "touch" those aspects of Reality and Life that transcend the testimony of the senses and the intuition of the intellect. This realization is the vision the third eye, the spiritual eye, or the eye of faith which, for Panikkar, is an experience: "the unmediated vision of a reality that can be proven neither rationally or empirically but that is just as immediate as the experience of the senses or of the intellect" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 141).

Consciousness may be coextensive with Reality, but this does not mean that Reality and consciousness are identical. Panikkar criticizes Parmenides for conflating Being and Thinking, that is, Reality and Consciousness. For Panikkar, mystical experiences preclude any identification between consciousness and Reality, Thinking and Being, Reason and the Real. Mystics realize that Reality is irreducible to consciousness as well as that consciousness is irreducible to its rational aspect. Panikkar expresses this insight by saying that the logos does not exhausts the whole of Reality; there is also spirit and matter.

In other words, Reality and Life are irreducible to consciousness and the human condition, and neither consciousness nor the human condition are irreducible to the logos, reason or the intelligible aspect of Reality and Life. The human condition is to be suspended between heaven and earth, to be a mediator, not an intermediary, between the divine and the cosmic poles of Reality. Realizing this human role as a mediator with an immediate,

direct, conscious "touch" on Infinity at a contingent and tangential point of cosmotheandric Reality and Life is characteristic of mysticism.

The main implication of the second sūtra for social and earthly involvement is that all our actions matter and have an impact, even if it seems insignificant at first sight. What we think, say and do "touches" the heart of Reality, transforming the relationships that constitute it and creating new possibilities. We are co-authors of Reality and Life, and that is why we need to become aware of our global responsibility and the cosmological repercussions of our actions.

(3) The third sūtra states that "Reality is neither subjective not objective: it is our mythos" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 142). Having established that Reality is irreducible to consciousness and consciousness to the intelligible aspect of beings (logos), Panikkar proceeds to explain the ultimate foundation of the logos, which he calls "mythos." The term "mythos" primarily refers to our horizon of understanding and the assumptions that we take for granted. We need the encounter with people from other religions and cultures to become aware of our own cultural and religious "mythos". Here, however, "mythos" has a deeper ontological connotation and refers to the aspect of Reality that eludes the logos and serves as its foundation. Mythos denotes our fundamental presupposition, "the substrate on which we rest to say anything" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 146).

For Panikkar, mythos has to do with silence and the spiritual or divine dimension of Reality, whereas logos relates to words and the human dimension. Every word is a word within a mythos, which is its horizon and ultimate foundation. When we ask with the logos about Reality, we presuppose Reality in the shaping of the question, and that presupposition is the mythos. The mythos gives meaning and allows for the questions of the logos.

For Panikkar, the concepts of "mythos" and "logos" are complementary and inseparable from each other: "there is no logos without mythos and no mythos without logos" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 143). Mythos and logos need to be in harmony in an a-dualistic consciousness without reducing them to monolithic unity (monism) or to fragmented plurality (dualism). This insight about "mythos" and "logos" can be extrapolated to the divine and the human dimensions, to the spirit and reason. They are constitutively interrelated; they are distinct yet inseparable; they are neither one nor two.

Saying that Reality is our mythos means that Reality cannot be fully objectified by the logos or the rational aspect of consciousness. This, however, does not entail that Reality is irrational and purely subjective. The divine dimension is an open-ended, non-finite, truly free aspect of Reality that eludes the "logos", that is, concepts and language cannot put Reality into a rational box once and for all. Reason and language may grasp the intelligible aspect of Reality but not all its aspects. Suggesting that Reality is a mythos that transcends the logos is compatible with attempts to rationally understand and describe Reality: the logos "does not give up and urges on to say something on the mythos itself" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 146).

Panikkar's philosophy of mysticism is not free from paradoxical language when he speaks about silence and attempts to discuss the ineffable "mythos". In this regard, Panikkar respectfully disagrees with Wittgenstein:

> "With all due respect to Wittgenstein, I would venture to say the exact opposite of his much-quoted phrase, although not the opposite of what the Austrian philosopher meant in the context. I think, then, that what cannot be talked about is what is actually worth expressing in words. The rest can be reduced to 'linguistic analysis,' and true philosophy knows that the wisdom of love is what really counts. All else is rational deduction. Mysticism is Silence, and the mystic is one who makes it speak". (Panikkar 2014a, p. 21)

To attain the consciousness in which mythos and logos can coexist a-dualistically in harmony, we need participatory knowledge. Participatory knowledge is neither purely subjective nor totally objective. Participatory knowledge is relational in the sense of being inseparable from the subject. This participatory knowledge becomes conscious of the

constitutive relationship between all aspects of Reality. Panikkar calls this participative knowledge "participative consciousness". Another term for this participative consciousness is love.

A participatory knowledge is a knowledge filled with love. Participative consciousness is characteristic of mysticism; it is a consciousness with loving knowledge or knowledge-filled love. For Panikkar, one of the functions of mysticism is precisely to restore the connection between knowledge and love. What this loving knowledge experiences is the *totum in parte*, the whole of Reality in concrete things. This participative consciousness of the whole is not an analytical and rational vision of all things and all their parts, even less a knowledge of something abstract. Rather, mystical consciousness knows concrete things as expressions of the whole. In Panikkar's words, "By affirming that reality becomes manifest to us in the form of a mythos, we are saying that the mystical experience sees the concrete that incarnates the universal as a real epiphany of the Whole" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 146).

The main implication of the third sūtra for social and earthly involvement is that we should act with more intellectual humility without assuming that reason, scientific knowledge or our way of thinking is the absolute or the exclusive source of knowledge. There is also participatory knowledge, which is the type of knowledge that allows us to access the mythos of other cultures and religions, a knowledge that requires love. If Reality cannot be fully objectified, and if Reality is something more than just subjective thoughts and emotions of different groups of people, then we should dialogue with each other with humble openness, without assuming that we were in possession of absolute truth or as if others had nothing relevant to contribute to the expansion or refinement of our horizon of understanding.

(4) The fourth sūtra further clarifies what Panikkar means by "mythos" in the context of mysticism: "The mythos is the ultimate horizon of presence, the first step of consciousness" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 146). Panikkar compares the mythos to a picture frame in which the logos places everything we are conscious of. The mythos is also compared to the obscurity that allows the light of the logos to shine and illuminate things. In this sense, the mythos functions as the ultimate foundation for the logos. The logos may demythologize a particular story, worldview, belief or assumption but this does not entail the disappearance of the mythos. Rather, the demythologization of something implies the arising of a new mythologization that the logos accepts without realizing it. There is never a way of thinking without a horizon of understanding, a logos without its corresponding mythos.

Consciousness is the place where something becomes present to us. There is a presence to our consciousness of what is intelligible (logos), but there is also a presence that is not directly intelligible (mythos): "We are conscious that something is present in our spirit and that it does not require interpretation; it is not intelligible to us" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 150). This is the presence of the mythos. We accept the mythos as a given, without discussion. The presence of the mythos does not demand intelligibility; it simply requires that we become aware of its presence. This is an awareness of a presence as presence.

The mythos does not interpret; it believes in what presents it. The mythos is the horizon against which such presence becomes conscious for us. The mythos is the ultimate horizon of a presence that cannot be reduced to mere intelligibility. The field of consciousness is broader than the field of rational consciousness.

Strictly speaking, we cannot understand the mythos; we can only accept it and lean on it in a pre-reflective way, that is, taking it for granted, presupposing it. We accept the mythos with a movement of the spirit that goes deeper than pure rationality. This movement of the spirit involves an element of trust that allows us to be conscious of a presence irreducible to rational knowledge yet not opposed to reason. Mysticism, for Panikkar, relates to the irruption of this presence in our field of consciousness. This presence of the mythos is not irrational, "but its boundaries lie beyond strict rationality" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 151).

The main implication of the fourth sūtra for social and earthly involvement is that we need to acknowledge the mythos underlying our logos so that we do not impose them upon others as if they were absolute truth. Social justice issues require dialogue and collaborative

efforts between persons often with distinct assumptions, concerns and ways of thinking. We may not find their beliefs and practices intelligible, but we can still cooperate with them to forge a shared mythos through dialogical dialogue.

3. The Role of Pure Consciousness in Panikkar's Mysticism

Whereas the first four sūtras discuss Panikkar's interpretation of mysticism as a holistic experience of Reality and Life or an immediate and direct "touch" with the three dimensions of Reality and Life through a participative consciousness irreducible to the presence of the logos and rational consciousness, the next four sūtras focus primarily on the notion of pure consciousness and the epistemology of mystical experiences. This section examines the next four sūtras.

(5) The fifth sūtra affirms that "Consciousness is consciousness of things, of itself, of abstractions or pure consciousness" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 152). For Panikkar, the question of whether there is a pure consciousness is fundamental in giving an account of mysticism. There are three main classes of consciousness: (1) knowledge of things and their relations, (2) knowledge of ourselves and (3) knowledge of our own knowledge. For Panikkar, however, mysticism demonstrates the existence of another type of consciousness. Unlike Husserl and Brentano, Panikkar does not think that all consciousness is intentional, that is, consciousness *of* some object. There is also a pure consciousness or consciousness that is a pure presence, a pure experience devoid of specific content. If we press on the idea of consciousness as necessarily being consciousness of some object, Panikkar responds that pure consciousness is a consciousness of nothing, not even of itself. This "nothing", however, is not an object like others, and that is why some mystical traditions prefer to speak about an objectless consciousness. Mysticism relates to this type of pure consciousness that is realized as pure presence: "For many, mysticism consists exactly of this pure experience" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 153). Panikkar, however, does not claim that all mystical experiences are experiences of a pure consciousness or pure presence devoid of specific content. What Panikkar contends is that mystical experiences somehow presuppose a pure consciousness or pure presence.

Panikkar acknowledges that speaking about this pure consciousness is paradoxical because we are conscious of it only after it has passed, that is, we "know" about this pure presence when it is already absent. Experiences of pure consciousness are ineffable and can only be spoken about in the past. Panikkar relates this insight to the biblical image of knowing God from behind.

Mystics remember their experience of pure consciousness and then begin to speak about it. This means that accounts of pure consciousness are always based on a recollection, a memory that is interpreted and expressed linguistically through the logos. But a logical or linguistical explanation of pure consciousness is no longer the experience of a pure presence. There is no contradiction because human consciousness is more than rational consciousness and human beings are more than logos. It is the spirit that allows us to become conscious of the ineffable. We cannot fully describe and understand the ineffable through the logos, but we can still be aware of it and say something about it (Panikkar 2014a, p. 157).

This ineffable pure presence devoid of specific content is pure experience or pure consciousness. It is an "ecstatic" experience in the sense that it does not turn back on itself. This pure presence is not an unconscious rapture beyond all types of knowledge and awareness. Mystical experiences involve three distinct yet interrelated types of knowledge, i.e., sensory, intellectual and spiritual. There is also spiritual knowledge and a component of consciousness that transcends rational and sensory consciousness. This spiritual component of consciousness is at least latently present in all types of knowledge. In this sense, for Panikkar, "something in all knowledge is mystical" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 155).

The recognition of pure consciousness, however, is not the mystical experience itself but its translation into the rational consciousness. The mystic recalls having had an empty consciousness by way of an experience that cannot be explained by the experience of the

rational consciousness. This leads mystics to emphasize the idea of ineffability when they attempt to describe their recollection of a pure consciousness.

For Panikkar, however, the experience of pure consciousness or pure presence is not something that exists exclusively in the past. Pure consciousness is somewhat present in all acts of consciousness: "The challenge of mystical experience is to state that there is a component of consciousness that transcends reason and that is present, albeit too often latently, in every act of consciousness" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 157).

Panikkar's notion of "pure consciousness" has nothing to do with an absolute reality underlying introvertive mystical experiences. Likewise, Panikkar's "pure consciousness" is not a transcendent "noumena" or "thing in itself" beyond the diversity of mystical experiences. Panikkar explicitly dismisses the concept of "noumena" and what he calls "crypto-Kantianism" for not doing justice to the claims of religions and mystical traditions. For Panikkar, mystical traditions do experience Reality in a direct and immediate way, although always at a particular point and through various factors that both mediate and modify that Reality. However, there are also aspects of Reality and mystical experiences that are not mediated and constructed by our language, concepts and doctrines.

In other words, Panikkar's notion of "pure consciousness" does not entail essentialism or perennialism. Panikkar explicitly affirms that mystical experiences are "unique each time, and foreign to repetition" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 15). This, however, does not mean that Panikkar is a particularist or an extreme contextualist. He accepts the existence of human, linguistic and cultural invariants as well as what he calls "homeomorphic" or functional equivalents, which permit communication and comparisons across different traditions.

For Panikkar, mystical experiences are also different because they presuppose ultimately incommensurable doctrinal systems. Panikkar's pluralism, which is not a theology or philosophy of religions but rather a dialogical and humble attitude toward religious diversity, begins precisely when we realize that religions and worldviews cannot be reconciled. In this sense, for Panikkar, a pluralist system that somewhat reconciles all religious traditions is a contradiction in terms.

Panikkar is closer to constructivism and contextualism than essentialism and perennialism. As Beverly J. Lanzetta explains, Pannikar's perspective "differs from that of perennialists in one significant respect: he views the multiple manifestations of religious expressions as *constitutive* of Reality and hence *internal* to the interreligious task, and *not* as relative stages along the way to an overarching Tradition or Oneness" (Lanzetta 1996, p. 92).

Not being a perennialist, however, does not mean that Panikkar must be then a constructivist. Considering Panikkar a constructivist would be misleading because he speaks about a "pure consciousness" or a "pure experience" inherent in each of the factors that mediate mystical experiences. In fact, Panikkar would object to the main epistemological assumption of constructivism as illustrated by one of their main representatives, Steven T. Katz: "There are NO pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences" (Katz 1978, p. 26). Yet accepting a "pure consciousness" or "pure experience" does not mean that Panikkar would endorse "neoperennialism" either (Forman 1990; Rose 2016).

As Richard H. Jones has shown, rejecting essentialism and perennialism does not entail that one must agree with constructivism or that one must fail to pay careful attention to the context of mystical authors. Similarly, accepting non-constructivist claims like a "pure consciousness" does make someone an essentialist about mystical experiences (Jones 2020, p. 3). Panikkar's philosophy of mysticism deserves to be understood in its own terms without being forced to fit into dichotomies that do not apply to his cosmothenadric view of mystical experiences.

Panikkar proposes his cosmotheandric vision not as a closed system or a universal metanarrative but rather as an "open horizon" and a "hypothesis" that "allows and even calls for differing interpretations" (Panikkar 1993, p. 15). A cosmotheandric view of mysticism, therefore, should not be conflated with a universal metatheory of all mystical experiences or a universal framework that assumes a mystical common denominator or one

and the same experience across mystical traditions. Panikkar rejects both essentialism and perennialism. That is, he does not claim that there is one mystical experience common to all traditions (essentialism) or a universal set of esoteric doctrines underlying the teachings of all mystical traditions (perennialism).

The fifth sūtra can be related to what Panikkar calls "cultural disarmament", which refers to the need to overcome the violent uses of reason. For Panikkar, the ultimate root of the violent uses of reason is what he calls the "*principle of Parmenides*", which is the main dogma of Western culture. The principle of Parmenides assumes that Reality and thinking consciousness are identical. For Panikkar, however, Reality is irreducible to thinking consciousness. It is precisely because there are aspects of Reality that transcend the scope of thinking consciousness that there is room for diverse and even conflicting doctrinal standpoints. It is precisely because the scope of thinking consciousness is limited that no culture, religion, ideology or philosophical system can claim exhaustive knowledge, wisdom or truth. By challenging absolutism, Panikkar is not advocating relativism. Rather, Panikkar's expanded notion of consciousness presupposes the radical relativity and the contingent nature of cultures, religions and traditions. Panikkar's notion of cultural disarmament is best understood as a middle way to peace that avoids the two extremes of cultural absolutism and cultural relativism.

(6) The sixth sūtra further clarifies the nature of the pure presence or pure consciousness found at the beginning or at the source of mystical experiences: "Pure consciousness is the experience of a love-filled presence" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 157). The experience of pure consciousness and its recollection by rational consciousness do not lead mystics to passivity and isolation from the rest of the world and society. The pure presence or pure consciousness experienced by mystics is filled with love. It is this love-filled presence that does not allow pure consciousness to collapse on itself or to revert to itself. Love is a centrifugal force that directs consciousness towards the whole of Reality.

Panikkar begins this sixth sūtra by reiterating that mystical experiences are not complete if they do not encompass the whole of Reality and Life. Mystical knowledge too would be incomplete without incorporating love and without encouraging mystics to act. Mystical experiences "touch" Reality and Life through both knowledge and love. This loving knowledge or loving wisdom characteristic of mysticism is inseparable from action: "There is no mysticism without knowledge, just as there is no mysticism without love, which in turn does not exist without action" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 161). In other words, for Panikkar, mysticism involves both loving contemplation and loving action; both are distinct yet inseparable aspects of mystical experiences and the life of mystics.

In *An Introduction to the Study of Mysticism*, Richard H. Jones contends that "mysticism is more encompassing than simply having mystical experiences" and that "mysticism involves comprehensive ways of life" (Jones 2021, p. 5). This understanding of mysticism is also best understood as a way of life irreducible to peak experiences and altered states of consciousness. Mysticism is a comprehensive way of life with cognitive, affective and active aspects.

Panikkar compares the knowledge, love and action characteristic of mysticism to the Hindu paths of *jñāna*, *bhakti* and *karman*. Just as these three paths constitute a single spiritual journey, knowledge, love and action constitute an encompassing way of life irreducible to mystical experiences. Panikkar also compares the relationship between knowledge, love and action to Martha and Mary, which are symbols for a Christian way of life that integrates action (good works) and contemplation (prayer, devotion). We can infer from these comparisons that, for Panikkar, mysticism is a comprehensive way of life that integrates knowledge, love and action or contemplation and action.

The profound connection between knowledge, love and action in mysticism is rooted in a dual dynamism found in all human beings. These dynamisms are not two separate tendencies but rather two directions of the same motion. The dynamism of love is a centrifugal force that projects outward towards Beauty, which attracts us radiating from

without. The dynamism of knowledge is a centripetal force that pushes inward towards truth, which draws us from within.

For Panikkar, it is necessary to harmonize these two dynamisms. Mystical wisdom is precisely that harmony between the attraction of Beauty and the aspiration toward truth. At the center of this dual dynamism is Goodness. This centrality of Goodness underscores the importance of moral action in the mystical way of life. The dual dynamism of knowledge toward truth and of love towards Beauty are deeply connected to Goodness, and the pursuit of Goodness demands moral action.

Thus, mysticism as a way of life involves not only a harmonious integration of knowledge, love and action but also a harmonious integration of anthropological dynamisms towards truth, Beauty and Goodness. Panikkar calls "perfect consciousness" the "consciousness of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness without possible separation" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 163). The experience of a love-filled presence or pure consciousness manifests in the perfect consciousness of mystics. To facilitate the manifestation of this perfect consciousness in their lives, mystics must experience first the love-filled presence of pure consciousness. To experience this pure loving presence, consciousness must be devoid of all other content (images, concepts, mental fabrications) and emptied of every desire (longings, selfish tendencies, attachments).

Mystical experiences have a loving and an intellectual dimension. The loving dimension saves us from solipsism and excessive introversion, whereas the intellectual dimension saves us from credulity, sentimentalism and excessive extroversion. In Panikkar's words: "The mystical experience holds the balance between introversion and extroversion. The mystic is neither an activist nor an 'intimist'. Martha and Mary, in Christian terms, are the two parts of the 'necessary One'. Or, as St. Teresa of Avila says, with feminine elegance, in her *Moradas*, 'Martha and Mary must remain united to play host to the Lord'" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 164).

When Panikkar speaks about pure consciousness as an experience of a love-filled presence, he is not necessarily referring to a theistic conception of the divine, even less reducing mysticism to introvertive experiences of a loving God. Panikkar admits that non-theistic mystics are also "touched" by that love-filled presence; they "may be able to 'feel' with even more intensity 'this' presence, but they do not project it onto another being" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 165).

Panikkar suggests that the experience of this love-filled presence entails a discovery of the person, the discovery of the "you". This experience of the person or the "you" presupposes a relational view of Reality and Life. The person is a knot in a net of relationships, and the discovery of the "you" entails an experience of the relationships that constitute us. This experience expands our sense of identity and dissolves the individualistic ego. The relational experience of the person and the "you" is cosmotheandric. This means that the discovery of the person or the "you" does not refer to just an encounter with a divine reality nor just with our human neighbors nor simply with the cosmos.

Panikkar clarifies that the "you" is neither "another" nor the "I". The "you" is a-dualistically related to myself, that is, it is neither the same as me nor different from me. The experience of the whole of Reality as a personal "you" entails a new sense of identity beyond the individualistic ego, an expanded "Self" that encompasses the three dimensions of Reality. Thus, for Panikkar, the experience of a love-filled presence is inseparable from the cosmotheandric vision of Reality and Life.

It is unclear whether Panikkar would consider experiences of a love-filled presence and the cosmotheandric experience two different types of mystical experience or rather two aspects of the "same" mystical experience. If we adopt the first interpretation, then Panikkar's two experiences would correlate with the distinction between introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences. However, the second interpretation seems to do more justice to Panikkar's thought. That is, rather than speaking about two different types of mystical experience, I prefer to understand the experience of pure consciousness and the cosmotheandric experience in a-dualistic terms as two distinct yet inseparable aspects of

mysticism or the mystical way of life. Panikkar's relational and a-dualistic vision of Reality does not seem to allow for a sharp distinction between two separate experiences. Even if we accepted that Panikkar is referring to two different types of mystical experience, it would be necessary to emphasize their constitutive relationship and inseparability.

The main implication of the sixth sūtra for social and earthly involvement is that they should be accompanied by the simultaneous cultivation of knowledge, love and action, that is, by the development of both Martha and Mary understood as symbols for an a-dualistic middle way between action and contemplation.

(7) The seventh sūtra states that "What we call experience is the result of multiple factors" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 167). To summarize the six factors that mediate mystical experiences (E), Panikkar proposes the following formula: E = e. l. m. i. r. a., where "e" stands for pure consciousness, which is ineffable and accessible only through the mediations of language (l), memory (m), interpretation (i), reception (r) and actualization (a). In a previous work, Panikkar simplifies the formula and speaks about four factors: E = e.m.i.r. (Panikkar 2014b, p. 15; 2001, p. 45). Here, we discuss the expanded version of the formula, which is the one that appears on his latest monograph on mysticism (Panikkar 2005, p. 131; 2014a, p. 167).

Panikkar explains that these six factors are experienced as mediations, not as intermediaries. This means that the factors are intrinsically or constitutively interrelated, i.e., mystical experiences would not exist without these factors, which can be distinguished but not separated. This also means that, for Panikkar, each mystical experience is unique and, strictly speaking, incomparable. There is not a neutral vantage point outside mystical traditions that allows us to compare them. We always speak and interpret things from our limited and contingent window into Reality.

The concepts of "e" and "E" should be clearly distinguished to avoid possible misunderstandings of Panikkar's philosophy of mysticism. Strictly speaking, "e" is ineffable, although mystics talk about it all the time. Panikkar's claim is that "e" is an immediate, ineffable experience at the source or at the beginning of specific accounts of mystical experiences (E). For Panikkar, "e" is not the same thing as the Kantian concept of "noumena" nor something we know through rational induction or deduction. Rather, "e" is an experience of pure consciousness. This pure consciousness is remembered and subsequently expressed, interpreted, received and actualized by mystics, giving rise to different accounts of mystical experiences (Es).

Panikkar compares "e" to light, which is invisible but allows us to see things. This comparison would suggest that "e" exists not only in the past but also in the present. Without "e", there would not be "E" or a particular account of mystical experience. Pure consciousness is not conscious even of itself; it is pure silence, pure nothingness, pure emptiness, devoid of content, ineffable and immediate. Whatever we try to say about "e" is already something mediated by language, culture and religion. Panikkar calls e' this mediation of "e". The intentionality of e' is "e", but e' is not the ineffable and unmediated "e". We can only know "e" through its mediations. Language is the primary mediation.

Panikkar explains that "e" is a pure presence inherent in each of the factors that is discovered as the dimension of the infinite (divine) present in every being (Panikkar 2014a, p. 170). We cannot give "e" any content without infecting it with our mediations, which have no reason to be universal.

Speaking about a pure consciousness or pure presence inherent in each of the factors that constitute mystical experiences should not be mistaken with presupposing a common denominator or the same Reality experienced by all mystical traditions. For Panikkar, mystical experiences are truly different. We cannot affirm that mystical experiences are the same in all cases or that they differ across cultures and religions because the constitutive factors of "e" do not render the experience impure but, rather, real. We cannot isolate this "e" in and of itself; we cannot purge it from its constitutive factors. Whenever we state that mystical experiences are the same or different across religions and cultures, we are

not speaking about "e" but about "e'", which is always seen from the perspective of a particular E.

Panikkar advocates neither essentialism nor perennialism. Each mystical experience "is one experience, not in the sense that it is the same one, but in the sense that it is unique in every case, and uniqueness is not comparable" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 172). The path by which we arrive at "e" already modifies it. Given that "e" is inseparable from the other factors that give rise to accounts of mystical experiences, "E" is unique in each case. In this sense, for Panikkar, "there is no sense in discussing whether mystical experience is the same or different within the various mysticisms" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 172).

Panikkar goes as far as to reject what he calls "crypto-Kantianism," which conceives "e" as a noumenon beyond the diverse mystical traditions, a transcendent Real or thing in itself that is never known in a direct and immediate way. For Panikkar, such "crypto-Kantianism" does not do justice to the insights of mystical traditions. Mystics experience Reality holistically, and this involves a direct, immediate touch on Reality. The concept of noumena is rejected by Panikkar because it entails that Reality is never touched or known in a direct and immediate way by mystics. However, Panikkar accepts that we can never refer to "e" without mediations. This means that when we discuss "e" it is already interpreted and understood according to certain categories of mystical traditions.

For Panikkar, "e" is not a common denominator either: "Our Es are different and do not have a common denominator because e has not and cannot have any qualification" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 174). The "content" of pure consciousness is not something, yet it is not nothing in the literal sense of being the opposite of being, i.e., non-being. The nothingness or the emptiness or the lack of content of "e" should be properly understood: it is neither "is" nor "is not", neither being nor non-being.

When Panikkar speaks about "e" in terms of nothingness or emptiness without any qualification, he is not endorsing a Buddhist view of mystical experiences. Panikkar distinguishes between experiences of vacuity (*śūnyatā*) or the nothingness of things and experiences of being. For Panikkar, these experiences are different; both are primordial and irreducible to each other. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to claim that Panikkar subordinates experiences of being to experiences of emptiness: "The experience of Being is not subordinate to the experience of the nothingness of things. They are two parallel paths that meet in infinity (in the mystical experience) because previously they had their beginnings in the abyss (bottomless, infinite) of (human) contingency" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 174).

Mystical experiences are unique not only because "e" can only be discussed through various mediating factors but also because the mystical languages and the doctrines that they presuppose are incommensurable. Language is inseparable from the mystical experience (E): "Language actually configures our experience itself" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 177). Language is not the same thing as our experience, but language conceals and reveals what we experience. In this sense, mystical language is "a continuous process of self-disqualification: *neti*, *neti* (that is not it, that is not it)" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 178).

For Panikkar, mystical language is apophatic even when it appears to be cataphatic. The language that expresses mystical experiences is the symbol. Symbols require participatory knowledge to be understood, i.e., experienced. In this sense, symbolic knowledge is different from rational knowledge. Understanding the concepts used by mystics is not the same thing as participating in the symbols of a mystical language.

Another factor that mediates mystical experiences is memory (m). Memory allows us to relive the experience, to become conscious of it. This act of remembering entails a reflection. By remembering and reflecting on the mystical experience, memory modifies it. Memory also relativizes our mystical experience by introducing the factor of time. Once we remember and reflect upon a mystical experience, we cannot help but to interpret it. Interpretation (i) is another factor that mediates mystical experiences. Interpretations also modify mystical experiences.

Panikkar differentiates between the interpretation we make once something appears in our consciousness and a second interpretation that he calls reception (r). The reception of a mystical experience refers to the cultural framework in which interpretations take place. Cultural contexts and their conceptual frameworks also modify mystical experiences.

Once a mystical experience is interpreted through the lenses of specific individuals (i) and the cultural framework of those individuals (r), there is yet another mediating factor that Panikkar calls actualization (a). This actualization of mystical experiences refers to "the existential factor of every experience: its active translation, its expression in life, its power to transform, its manifestation in practice" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 183).

Another term for this existential actualization or expression of mystical experiences in the life of mystics is "action". Mystical experiences change our lives, our existence and our actions. For Panikkar, this existential impact and transformation enabled by mystical experiences comprise the test of their authenticity. Unless mystical experiences transform our actions and our lives, we cannot speak about genuine mystical experiences.

By considering the existential expression of mystical experiences one of their mediating factors, Panikkar is highlighting the inseparability between mysticism and action or between action and contemplation. Panikkar is not simply acknowledging that mystical experiences have existential repercussions in the lives of individuals. Panikkar is claiming that mysticism and mystical experiences necessarily involve an active component: "if human experience is not manifested in action (life, activity, change. . .) that is to say, if a [actualization] is zero, then there is no experience (E)" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 185).

Panikkar explains that the existential or active side of mystical experiences relates to love. The love-filled presence experienced by mystics is expressed in all aspects of their lives. Panikkar explains this active side of mystical experiences in Christian terms by suggesting that mysticism involves repentance (*metanoia*) and good deeds. Panikkar quotes St. James: "Faith, if good deeds do not go with it, is quite dead." Panikkar relates mysticism to faith understood as inseparable from loving wisdom and loving action. Neither faith nor mysticism have to do with passivity and denying the world or society.

This view of mysticism entails that it cannot be reduced to isolated mystical experiences apart from the lives of mystics. Mysticism entails a comprehensive way of life and that is why the active side of mystical experiences should not be separated from it. Instead of viewing mysticism as a comprehensive way of life in which knowledge, love and action are intertwined, modern constructions of mysticism tend to view it as socially passive, other-worldly and as having to do primarily with peak experiences and altered states of consciousness.

Panikkar's understanding of mystical experiences is incompatible with such a view of mysticism. Mystical experiences cannot be a-cosmic and asocial not only because they are cosmothendric and presuppose a way of life in which knowledge, love and action are intertwined but also because they have an existential or active component.

The main implication of the seventh sūtra for social and earthly involvement is that we need to consider the multiple factors that mediate any social justice issue. Without critically analyzing the multiple factors that cause and condition a social justice issue, we probably fail to address it properly, thus generating subsequent problems that complicate matters further. No two social justice issues are alike and that is why it is necessary to pay close attention to the particulars and the existential component of each situation.

(8) The eighth sūtra explains that mystical experiences involve a holistic type of knowledge that is irreducible to the knowledge of a special faculty, eye or sense: "we are aware of a threefold experience: sensory, intelligible, and spiritual" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 186). Mystical experiences are holistic not only because they experience the whole of Reality and Life but also because they require cooperation of the senses, the mind and the spirit.

Panikkar compares this threefold experience to three doors or windows that open us to both the inner and the outer world. Human beings encounter the three dimensions of Reality and Life inside and outside themselves. This means that human beings are an

image of Reality, just as Reality is an image of human beings: "each of us is a microcosm that mirrors and impacts the macrocosm of reality as a whole" (Panikkar 2014a, p. V).

Panikkar also compares the three senses to the stages of the spiritual path: the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive. The purgative path corresponds to the body and calls for the submission of the senses; the illuminative path correlates with the soul and demands the illumination of the mind; and the unitive path is associated with the spirit, which seeks an a-dualistic union or communion with the fullness of Reality and Life. For Panikkar, mysticism has lost its anthropological foundation due to modern mind–body dualism. This dualistic way of thinking about human beings has led to the reduction of mysticism to peak experiences along the illuminative path. However, mysticism cannot be reduced to mere "illuminated" knowledge because mysticism presupposes a holistic approach to the spiritual life in which *jñāna* (wisdom), *bhakti* (love) and *karman* (action) are simultaneously cultivated.

Mystical experiences cannot be reduced to suprarational insights attained only through the third eye or eye of the spirit. Panikkar makes it clear that the mystical contact or "touch" with Reality "is not mediated by any special faculty of ours" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 139). The three eyes or senses are inseparable and necessary to have a holistic vision of Reality: "The three senses are inseparable, in that if separated they give us a distorted vision of reality" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 188). The three eyes are distinct and irreducible to each other: "sensory knowledge is neither mental (intellectual) nor spiritual, and the latter two are also distinct" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 187). A complete vision of Reality would be incomplete without the spiritual eye, just as it would be incomplete without the eye of the senses and the mental eye.

Panikkar explains that the key to understanding the relationship between the three eyes and the three dimensions of Reality and Life is the Trinitarian experience. This means that the three eyes as well as the three dimensions of Reality and Life are "related to one another, as in the Trinitarian perichoresis" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 191). Just as the three persons of the Trinity are distinct yet constitutively interrelated, the three eyes and the three dimensions of Reality and Life are distinct yet constitutively interrelated; they are neither one and the same reality (monism) nor separate realities (dualism). Similarly, just as it is not possible to claim that one person of the Trinity is superior or subordinate to others, it is not possible to claim that one eye or dimension of Reality and Life is superior or subordinate to others. In Panikkar's words: "In reality there is nothing that prevails. The senses do not dominate Man, as materialists claim; nor does the mind dominate sensuality, as Plato would have it; nor indeed does the eye of faith dominate the eye of the intellect, as a certain medieval Christian school would wish. A natural harmony exists among these three faculties, organs, or dimensions of reality" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 189).

By comparing the three eyes and the three dimensions of Reality and Life to the Trinity, Panikkar is not suggesting that mystical experiences relate to different aspects of the Christian Trinity. Panikkar is simply extrapolating to the three eyes and Reality, the relational, non-substantialist and a-dualistic way of thinking that the Trinity illustrates, but without assuming that a such way of thinking is exclusive to the Christian Trinity. In fact, Panikkar also uses concepts from other traditions to express a similar insight, more specifically, the Hindu notion of "*advaita*" understood as neither one (monism) nor two (dualism) and the Buddhist notion of "*paticcasamuppāda*" or interdependent co-origination, which Panikkar prefers to translate as "radical relativity".

Panikkar's epistemological claim is that mystical experiences integrate the vision of the third eye with the vision of the other two eyes without privileging or subordinating any of the eyes. The knowledge provided by the third eye does not replace the knowledge derived from the other two eyes but rather enhances them, thus generating a threefold experience that correlates with the three dimensions of Reality and Life.

This integral knowledge or holistic experience of Reality and Life explains why so many mystics were at the same time men and women of action. Mystics do not separate action from contemplation nor knowledge from love and action because they experience

the fullness of Reality and Life. Reducing mystical experiences to the knowledge of a "supernatural" third eye and merely experiences of the divine has led to questionable views of mysticism as separated from this world and ordinary human activities.

According to Panikkar, mystical experiences are corporeal, mental and spiritual at the same time, and they encompass all aspects of Reality in an a-dualistic (*advaita*) union or communion. Neither the three eyes nor the cosmic, divine and human dimensions of Reality and Life can be split into parts because they are constitutively interrelated and, in that sense, they are analogous to the *perichorēsis* that constitutes the three persons of the Trinity.

The main implication of the eighth sūtra for social and earthly involvement is that we need to remain open to different types of knowledge without absolutizing any of them. This epistemological openness does not mean that any type of knowledge is equally valid or relative. Acknowledging the polysemic and pluralistic nature of many social justice issues does not entail relativism and the impossibility of cross-cultural and interfaith understanding. Quite the contrary, the polysemic and pluralistic nature of many social justice issues demands a cross-cultural and interfaith approach, that is, genuine openness to dialogue, mutual enrichment and the possible contribution of diverse perspectives from multiple cultures, philosophies and religions.

4. Conclusion: Mysticism as a Way of Life of Action and Contemplation

(9) Panikkar's last sūtra connects mysticism to all human problems and the whole of human existence: "The Mystical experience is in direct relation to the totality of the human condition" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 198).

The path of mysticism for Panikkar could be summarized in the advice of the Sybil "know yourself!" and the Vedic question "Who am I?". The knowledge that the advice refers to is not to a mere epistemic or intellectual act but rather an existential identification or transformation into with what is known. The "Self" that one is encouraged to know is not one's own ego or individual self but rather a Self that embraces all aspects of reality. To illustrate this point, Panikkar cites Meister Eckhart: "He who knowns himself knows all things" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 198). In the prologue to the first volume of his complete works, Panikkar relates this knowledge to one *Upaniṣad*: "that existential knowledge through which one knows everything" (Panikkar 2014a, p. XXII). Similarly, Panikkar clarifies that the "I" of the Vedic question is not my ego and that the "I" comes from the same origin as the "Who", which is not a "What" but a real "Who".

These two phrases not only summarize but also express the main elements of mystical experience: a self-knowledge that embraces the macrocosm and that is made up of wisdom (*gnōsis*) and love. This is an experience of all aspects of Life, that is, it is a sensory, intellectual and spiritual experience. This is the human experience in its fullness, an experience open to everybody.

Mystical experiences open us to all human beings and all aspects of Reality and Life. Mysticism comprehends the communion of the divine, human and cosmic dimensions of Reality and Life in an a-dual relationship. The holistic knowledge of Life and Reality does not entail a monistic knowledge of one and the same reality across all single realities in the universe. Similarly, the mystical experience does not provide a dualistic knowledge of separate and independent entities. Rather, the mystical experience involves an a-dualistic loving knowledge of all dimensions of Reality, a comprehensive vision through the three eyes that "includes the Other (as alter) as much as my Self, as much humanity and earth as the divine. It is cosmotheandric experience; the rest is reductionism. Mystical experience is the complete (human) experience" (Panikkar 2014a, pp. XXII, 200).

This cosmotheandric view of mystical experiences entails that mysticism is incompatible with solipsistic individualism and the privatization of religion or spirituality. Action and contemplation cannot be divided, In Panikkar's words: "Action and contemplation are not mutually exclusive. Not only do they complete each other, but they also mutually entail

each other, since there is no true action without contemplation, and no true contemplation without action" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 203).

Mystical experiences are both cognitive and loving and, therefore, active, although they also have a passive, contemplative element. For Panikkar, the mysticism of our times cannot be indifferent to suffering and human injustice. Mystical experiences express a dual dynamism: centripetal and centrifugal at the same time. In other words, mystical experience tends simultaneously towards the interior and the exterior, towards oneself and others. In fact, Panikkar contends that the criterion of authenticity for mystical experiences is precisely that they make persons more sensitive to human problems and human suffering.

To illustrate the relational and comprehensive nature of mysticism, Panikkar clarifies that one cannot love God without loving at the same time one's neighbor nor one can love one's neighbor without loving God. Mystical experiences know all things in ourselves and ourselves in all things, realizing a profound union between microcosm and macrocosm, interiority and exteriority. Panikkar compares this communion to the experiences of the Mystical Body and the realization of Buddha-nature in all beings. The sensitivity that mystical experiences awaken in us "is as much open to the external world as to the internal, as much to cultivating politics as spirituality, and as much concerned with others as with oneself" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 200).

The human sensitivity that authentic mysticism enhances is also concerned with this world and our time on earth. This secular world has a sacred, divine dimension that Panikkar calls "sacred secularity". Time also has a dimension of eternity that Panikkar calls "*tempiternity*", the experience of eternity in each temporal moment. Earth is our companion and matter is a constitutive dimension of Reality; realizing this sacred aspect of the world is the wisdom that Panikkar calls "*ecosophy*".

Mystics are ready to get their hands dirty if necessary but without sacrificing their peace and equanimity. Mystics do not separate their earthly existence from the divine and eternal dimensions of Reality. Mystics do not split Life into the temporal and the eternal, the sacred and the profane, this world and the other or the divine and the world not because they negate such distinctions but rather because they experience the totality of the human condition.

Panikkar acknowledges that certain interpretations of mysticism have neglected the cosmic dimension, that is, this world, matter and the human body. For Panikkar, however, "a-cosmic" mysticism does not follow necessarily from concepts such as *apatheia*, *ataraxia*, *asakta*, detachment, indifference and tranquility. Properly understood, these concepts are not a negation of earthliness and ordinary life. Rather, "they are a hymn to freedom, freeing us from our slavish dependence on factors that are unrelated to our lives" (Panikkar 2014a, p. 203). In this sense, mysticism does not negate life, society or this world but rather our lack of freedom.

Mysticism has *often* been based on dualistic views of this life and the next, worldly existence and heavenly existence, the material and the spiritual, body and soul and action and contemplation. These dualisms have led many to view mysticism as negating life and as an escape from this world and human activities. Panikkar's cosmotheandric philosophy of mysticism, however, overcomes these extreme dualisms and restores the "middle way" or equilibrium between the diverse yet united aspects of Reality and the human condition.

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Article

Martin Buber and Social Justice

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Abstract: Martin Buber's seminal work is his "*I and Thou*". In *I and Thou*, Buber establishes a philosophical foundation for the creation of a dialogical society. Buber's concept of I–Thou dialogue provides a framework for understanding the inherent connection between interpersonal encounters and social justice. As Buber elucidates, genuine dialogue is not confined to the encounter between two persons, but it manifests in the manner of a society organized on premises of social justice, freedom and compassion. In this regard, it is important to note that if we trace Buber's personal and philosophical biography we will not find many instances of him engaging in what could be called social justice activism. Buber did found and join civic organizations that dealt with issues of peace and justice, and lent his support to many such political endeavors (see the organizations called Brith Shalom (Covenant of Peace) founded in 1925 in mandatory Palestine, and Ihud (Unity) founded in 1942, six years before Israel's statehood). Nonetheless, a number of world prominent social justice advocates and activists found inspiration and guidance in Buber's philosophy, and it is perhaps hereby, where Buber's impact on social justice is most distinctly pronounced. What Buber aimed to achieve in his writings and political endeavors was to present a philosophy of relationships on which to found a society established on practices of social justice.

Keywords: Buber; dialogue; Zen Buddhism; liberation theology; religious socialism; social justice; libertarian socialism; mysticism; peace; engaged Buddhism; pure land Buddhism

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1. Introduction

Martin Buber did not explicitly engage with the topic of social justice per se. Buber spoke of *I–Thou* as the mode of human relationships better able to actualize the whole-being humanity of each person, and as such, it constitutes the basis for a socially just and compassionate society. Buber spoke of two distinct modes of interconnection with one another and with the world: *I–Thou* relationships and *I–It* interactions. In a simplified way, we can say that *I–Thou* refers to any relationship in which the other is recognized as a *subject*, while in an I–It interaction, the other is approached as an *object*. Dialogue implies presence, and presence implies a willingness to disengage the other from its socially constructed attributes, therefore, strictly speaking I–It is not a relationship, it is an interaction.

Buber described his social philosophy with terms such as "Religious Socialism" and sometimes "Libertarian Socialism". Buber's primary development of his religious Libertarian Socialist ideas appears in his book "*Paths in Utopia*" (Buber 1996). At the outset, it is also essential to clarify that while Martin Buber speaks of religion, he should not be regarded as a "*mystic*" in the traditional sense of the term. As Paul Mendes Flohr aptly explains, Buber's thinking evolved and shifted from mysticism to a philosophy of dialogue (Mendes-Flohr 1989, p. 7). For the purpose of understanding Buber's philosophy, mysticism can be defined as the pursuit of a direct, inner and personal experience of the divine or ultimate reality[1]. Dialogue, in contrast, seeks the presence of God *in* and *through* the relationship with the other. Buber's distinction between an I and a You is not a *dualistic* dichotomy, for the *between* of *I and Thou* is the *non-dual* realm of relationship. Buber said "When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them." In other words, God emerges from within the relationship. For

Buber, the presence of God with us is always the presence of God between us, therefore, dialogue, in contrast to mysticism, does not seek to transcend the human realm of the here and now, but through the saying of Thou to all beings, dialogue recognizes the world and all its inhabitants as the realm of the sacred. Buber wrote "God wants man to fulfill his commands as a human being and with the quality peculiar to human beings. A person cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human. To become human, is what this individual person has been created for." We can ask, how can we become that which is already inherent in us? The answer is not in the realm of ontology. Similar to the concept of the inborn Buddha nature, it is necessary to awaken to our own humanity, and that requires the existential task of recognizing the others as Thou rather than It. Buber wrote "Our relationships live in the space between us which is sacred." In Buber's dialogical philosophy, the between of *I and Thou* is the sacred soil for the house of God, and in that house justice and compassion are its only inhabitants. The recognition that we already stand on God's sacred land calls on us to transform the social structures of society to allow for the actualization of the kingdom of God (Mendes-Flohr 2008). In Buber's terms, the kingdom of God is not a mystical land in heaven above, but a human society structured in response to the prophetic teachings of social justice, freedom and compassion. Buber's social justice postulates lead him to advocate for a society built on what he referred to as "Religious Socialism".[2] But it is of the essence to understand that Buber's "religion" was non-institutional and non-canonical (Moore 2016, p. 45), and by positing Religious Socialism, Buber emphasized the fundamental dialogical principle that amalgamates as one and the same one's spiritual commitments with the task of actualizing in society policies of social and economic justice. For Buber, spirituality and social justice are, in effect, one and the same practice. In other words, from a dialogical perspective, we are not pursuing two separate practices, one being spirituality and the other social justice: in terms of Buber, integrating spirituality with social justice simply means that neither practice precedes nor follows the other, but both are conjoined into a single existential unit. If for Levinas, ethics are first philosophy, we can say that for Buber dialogue is first ethics and only then are ethics first philosophy.

Any being, human or otherwise, can be approached as either subject or object. In the case of human beings, there cannot be social justice during the interactions of I–It, for I–It is inherently unjust as it does not regard the other as a full and equal person, but primarily as an object of use (Margulies 2016, p. 77)[3]. For Buber, the enactment of I–Thou relationships in the day-to-day life of individuals and communities requires the creation of a social and economic system within which dialogue can both manifest and flourish. In this sense, Buber's political thought belongs within the political and economic ideologies generally identified as embodiments of social justice.

In his *Paths in Utopia*, Buber offered a structural analysis that recognized that social injustice, oppression and inequity are deeply rooted in systemic and structural deficiencies[4]. Buber refuted economic systems that perpetuate I–It interactions, fostering inequality and injustice, and called for a critical examination of the underlying social, political, and economic structures that contribute to creation and perpetuation of injustice and oppression. Buber believed that addressing inequity and other forms of injustice required a commitment to systemic changes and the creation of new communities founded on dialogical practices. For Buber, social injustice is not only defined by material conditions, as the need for human community is an existential challenge that transcends strict economic considerations. He believed that addressing social injustice required a profound transformation of society and the reorientation of values away from I–It and toward the implementation of I–Thou. That is, a society built on community, compassion, and solidarity. Buber advocated for a holistic approach to injustice that encompasses both material betterment and social flourishing, aiming to create conditions where every individual will be able to realize their full human nature. From a dialogical perspective, the systemic impediments to justice cannot be addressed only through compassionate charity toward the poor, for what is required is the

removal and transformation of those conditions that cause social injustice to emerge in the first place.

2. Mysticism and Dialogue

In order to comprehend Buber's approach to social philosophy in general and social justice in particular, it is essential to clarify Buber's distinction between mysticism and dialogue. The entire foundation of Buber's philosophy stands on his rejection of mystical practices as essentially non-dialogical religious experiences. Buber wrote "What has to be given up is not the I, as most mystics suppose: this I is indispensable for any relationship, including the highest, which always presupposes an *I and Thou*." Buber's dialogical philosophy represents his categorical distancing from previous mystical proclivities as reflected in his earlier books "*Daniel*" and "*Ecstatic Confessions*." For Buber, dialogical deeds can be recognized not by recourse to mystical experiences, transcendental divine entities or exalted emotional contents, but only in the deeds themselves[5]. The similarities we find between Buber and many exponents of mystical traditions help to point at the essential distinction between mysticism and dialogue. There are general similarities between Buber's philosophy of dialogue and the philosophies of mystics, theologians and thinkers, but for the most part, those are similarities without an equivalence. In Buber's philosophy, the relationship of I–Thou is not a mystical encounter between two persons or with God, nor it is a relationship that requires the participants to rise to a spiritual and emotional level akin to an "ubermensch"[6]. In this regard, the work of Paul Mendes Flohr extensively explains Buber's transformation from an adherent to mystical concepts and practices to a person devoted to the concepts and practices of dialogue. Buber speaks of I–Thou dialogue as the primordial moment of inception of all genuine spiritual revelations (Margulies 2022, p. 143). Mystical experiences have the potential to be transformative, shaking individuals out of complacency and sometimes igniting a desire for personal and societal change, but in themselves, these experiences are not dialogical in nature or practice. Mystics often emphasize the need for inner transformation as a precursor to external transformation, but the idea of a prior and posterior state of mind is inherently not dialogical, as genuine inner transformation occurs in the between of *I and Thou*. By cultivating qualities such as love, compassion and equanimity, individuals may be inspired to address social injustices and work toward a more just world, but from a dialogical perspective, there is no need for a precursive inner transformation, as the inner transformation will occur as we pursue the "outer" transformation. Both realms, the inner and the outer are not two separate dimensions of being, but rather one and the same[7].

Buber's dialogical perspective rejected the basic mystical assumption of "subsuming" the self into an all-encompassing unity within the divine. In the between of *I and Thou* there is no mystical dissolution of the self into the other or into the divine. Buber's "Between of *I and Thou*" is not a mystical space of union or absorption of the self into the other, but it is precisely the space where we encounter the other, human or otherwise, in the fulness of its being. For Buber, God is not an abstract or distant deity, but a presence that emerges in the between of an I–Thou encounter. In the in-between encounter a person moves beyond both his ego-bound self, and his desire for a self-abolishing merger, and enters into a mode of genuine dialogue and presence. The between is the space of mutual encounter of a whole being I with a whole being Thou. It is in this relational space of authentic encounter that the pursuit of social justice is inherent to the deeds themselves. For Buber, God is not an object of knowledge or intellectual speculation, nor is God solely an inner experience, God is a deed we do, and that which we do is justice, love and compassion[8]. As discussed here, the recognition of God as the "between" has unavoidable implications for ethical action and social justice. If God emerges in the relational space of the I–Thou, then ethical conduct is the only essential manifestation of this encounter. Relating to others as Thou, with love, responsibility, dignity, and compassion becomes the act of recognizing the divine presence emerging in the between. The Hindu concept of "namaste," is often interpreted as saying "the divine in me recognizes the divine in you," but the dialogical approach takes

this sentiment a step further by saying that the I and the Thou recognize the divinity not *in* each other separately, but *between* them. In this sense, the I–Thou relationship is inherently a practice of ethical behavior and social justice. The recognition of the sacred "between" compels individuals to address social injustices and work towards creating a more humane and egalitarian society. I–Thou dialogue is not a holy sacrament, it is a concrete, practical and quotidian deed we do, and it was this aspect of existential praxis that drew Buber to devote much of his intellectual oeuvre to describing and interpreting the early Hasidic way of life. And these "here and now" aspects of spiritual life can be likened to what in Zen is called an "ordinary mind," that is, *a deed-oriented spirituality* emptied from the accruals of extraneous theological and conceptual hindrances[9]. Buber wrote "There is something that can be found in one place. It is a great treasure which may be called the fulfillment of existence. The place where this treasure can be found is the place where one stands." Nothing in dialogical relationships is transcendental or mystical, it is simply a mindful renewal of genuine human community.

3. The Systemic Hindrances to *I and Thou* Relationships

From the perspective of Buber's philosophy, the principal hindrances to a dialogical life are the social constructs that prevent us from putting into practice the genuine deeds of I–Thou dialogue. I–Thou dialogue requires the building of a social structure within which the hindrances to its actualization could be minimized, and as discussed here, Buber identified this structure as "Religious Socialism." It is in this sense that Buber's philosophy intersects with political ideas and programs. In other words, it is an error to regard Buber's dialogue as encompassing solely a relationship between two participants, as that could be construed as a "monologue of two"[10]. Dialogue, in its concrete and practical implications, is an overall social project. Therefore, in order to be able to practice I–Thou relationships we must create a society within which dialogue can be made manifest. As Buber insisted, I–Thou is a relationship each person does in accordance to his abilities and circumstances[11], emphasizing, as he did, that dialogue is not a dogmatic approach as there are no formulas or codes to proscribe the forms and contents of a dialogical relationship. Codifying relationships amounts to the adoption of an I–It approach to the practice of dialogue, the same as the codifying of our relationships with God in the form of institutional religion[12]. For this reason, we can say that since it is not possible to articulate in strict terms what I–Thou entails, in a sort of apophatic manner, we can try to describe what *it is not*. Every time we reduce the scope and reach of I–It, we are creating the space and the time of I–Thou[13]. In a similar vein, Paul Tillich wrote "Buber's existential 'I-Thou' philosophy. . . should be a powerful help in reversing the victory of the 'It' over the 'Thou' and the 'I' in present civilization . . . The 'I-Thou' philosophy. . .challenging both orthodox and liberal theology, points a way beyond their alternatives" (Tillich 1948, p. 23). Buber viewed the creation of intentional communal societies and their integration into larger federative structures standing beside and apart from the state as resulting in a concrete reduction in the realm of the political in favor of the expansion of the realm of the social (Buber 1996). This emptying of the realm of *Itness* can be likened to what in Zen is known as the creation of "The pure land of the Buddha in the human realm"[14].

When we extend the principles of the *I–Thou* relationship from the realm of the personal to the realm of the social we find that the practices of dialogue inherently manifest in the form of a just and equitable society. It could not be otherwise, for while the I–It interaction is a utilitarian and objectifying interaction between people and with nature as a whole, the I–Thou relationship recognizes the essential humanity of each person and emphasizes the inherent dignity and value of human beings as such. The I–Thou relationship emphasizes the recognition of each person's inherent value and irreplaceable uniqueness. This confirmation of otherness is crucial for social justice, as it demands that we acknowledge the humanity of all individuals, regardless of their race, social utility, gender, caste, socioeconomic status, or any other socially constructed characteristics. The I–Thou relationship, being a deed we do, involves a deep sense of empathy and

solidarity with oppressed individuals and communities. Dialogue calls for an irrevocable commitment to respect the experiences and struggles of others, standing alongside them in their pursuit of social justice, and actively working to dismantle the underlying systemic causes of oppression and discrimination. The dialogical praxis of social justice calls for the recognition of everyone's equal rights and the implementation of those rights through the overturn of pre-existing hierarchies and systems of privilege. Dialogue confronts and addresses the structural injustices that perpetuate inequality and discrimination, striving for a more just and inclusive society. *I and Thou* requires concrete efforts to address and rectify systemic inequalities and oppression from the immediate realm of the personal to the overall realm of the social. The I–Thou relationship entails the *responsibility* to engage in ethical action toward the other, demanding that we actively work for the creation of a more just and equitable society[15]. The principles of love, empathy, and compassion inherent in the I–Thou relationship are precisely the manifestation of the values and goals of social justice[16]. By embracing the praxis of I–Thou and the delimiting of our I–It interactions with one another we contribute to the realization of social justice, equality, and human flourishing for all.

4. The Between

The concept of the between of *I and Thou* is Buber's most fundamental dialogical principle. In Buber's philosophy, the concept of God *as* and *in* the between of the I–Thou relationship is the foundation for the dialogical understanding of social justice. Without the concept of the between, *I and Thou* remains a relationship that does not necessarily expand from the realm of the interpersonal to the realm of the social (Buber 2002). Buber affirms that there is no I outside of a relationship, and that the I of the I–Thou is not the same as the I of the I–It[17]. In other words, borrowing from Zen language, there is *no-self per se*, there is only the *emergence* of a *true-self* in the between of *I and Thou*. Since only through a Thou one becomes an I, hence the irrevocable need to pursue and promulgate deeds of social justice. Conversely, there is an illusory-self, that is the ego, that emerges from the interactions of I–It. The implications of this distinction for Buber's social philosophy is that the only way for the implementation of a socially just society is to facilitate the emergence of our innate true-selves through the practices of dialogical relationships (Margulies 2022, p. 18). The between is not a mystical absorbance of the I and the Thou into a unity that transcends and encompasses both, but a "narrow ridge"[18] on which each participant firmly stands in the fullness of his own being. There is a distinction between ontological unity and existential otherness. From the perspective of Buber's philosophy of dialogue, we manifest the ontological wholeness of Being through the existential dialogue between *I and Thou*. Buber wrote "God is found near to the sphere that lies between beings, to the kingdom that is hidden in our midst, there between us." Buber can be understood as arguing that from an *existential* perspective God is not only the third person in the between of I–Thou, but God, in all dialogical regards, is the between of *I and Thou*. This being the case, there can be no room in that between for any social policy not based on social justice. The between is akin to the environmental realm of the spiritual, and as such it requires protection and nurturing. The spiritual environment is protected through the transformation of the social realm from a capitalistic–consumerist society and into a dialogical realm of I–Thou relationships.

Buber's in-between dialogical approach is the point of confluence when the personal, the social and the "spiritual" become one and the same. We find this non-dualistic approach in many sources within the Jewish religious traditions. One salient example is the founder of the Mussar movement, Rabbi Israel Salanter, who said: "My Spiritual needs are more important than my material needs, but the material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs[19]. Whether, in A. J. Heschel's words, God is searching for us, or alternatively, we are searching for Her, from Buber's perspective, it is the *responsibility* for the other that opens what Zen calls the "gate-less gate" to the true presence of God in our lives. In other words, in the between of *I and Thou*, inner transformation is one and the same with outer transformation.

We find this dialogical approach in many different spiritual traditions. Francis de Sales said "You learn to speak by speaking, to study by studying, to run by running, to work by working; in just the same way, you learn to love by loving. All those who think to learn in any other way deceive themselves." Richard Rohr understood the I–Thou and the process of dialogue in clear Buberian terms. Rohr wrote: "The in-between of things. Reality is radically relational, and all the power is in the relationships themselves! it sounds a lot like what we call holy spirit . . . we do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking" (Rohr 2015). In other words, from a Buberian perspective, we can not "prepare" for dialogue for we must let dialogue prepare us. While mystics who report to have directly encountered the divine may feel a responsibility to act as agents of change in the world, from a dialogical perspective, the agency is itself the encounter with God.

5. The I–It and Its Systemic Manifestations

In contrast to the essence of the I–Thou relationship, the I–It interaction is characterized by the relegation of individuals to their ultimate utilitarian value, and it is in the rejection of this type of social interaction that the I–Thou system of relationships becomes the embodiment of social justice. From a Buberian perspective, the most intractable hindrances to human liberation are of two kinds: the spiritual-systems we have invented to help us attain it, and the social systems that fragment our lives into times of genuine encounters and times delineated by the strictures of I–It social interactions[20]. Social justice and liberation cannot be partial, otherwise, what shall we call those times when we are not just or not liberated? There is no being partially just or partially free, there is only being partially unjust and fully in bondage. We should understand that Buber did not argue that social justice could only be achieved through the cultivation of authentic relationships, but to be precise, authentic I–Thou dialogue is itself the system of social justice we seek. In other words, there can be no social justice without I–Thou dialogue, and I–Thou dialogue remains empty of redemptory meaning if not extended from the personal to society as a whole.

Buber's basic premises of dialogical spirituality mirror similar understandings within Zen Buddhism, namely, that genuine spirituality manifests not in mystical raptures, but in the deeds we do, in the between of *I and Thou*. That is to say, the life of the spirit, or the life of poetry, or even the life of the God, must be enacted in the ways we live our lives with each other and with the world, for spirit, poetry and God are the between of I–Thou (Margulies 2022, p. 97). Many practitioners and adherents of Zen have arrived at a similar understanding and organized themselves in various movements to advance issues in social justice and peace known as "Engaged Buddhism" (Thich 2017). From Buber's dialogical perspective, we do not manifest spirituality by performing religious rituals, we manifest the spirit by embracing the neighbor, and we embrace the neighbor by entering into relationships of genuine communal structures founded on social justice. This type of spirituality is found in various degrees in all religious traditions. St. Francis of Assisi well said: "We teach the gospel, and if necessary we use words too." That is to say, we manifest the presence of God by the ways of our relationship with the whole of existence. Indeed, if the realms of the spiritual, the poetical and the Godly are realms of relationship, we must understand that our human calling is to engage in the transformation of society. In Buber's terms, we must transform society from a system based on I–It interactions to a community founded on I–Thou relationships.

6. Buber and Religious-Libertarian Socialism

Buber's philosophy centers around the concept of dialogue, which he undertook to be the manifestation of genuine humanity, and believed that communitarian socialism possesses transformative potential in fostering understanding, empathy and authentic relationships. Buber distinguished between the realm of the political and the realm of the social, and by privileging the social over the political, Buber demanded the reduction in the scope of the state in the lives of individuals and communities (Buber 1996). The State,

for Buber, whether in its capitalistic or soviet-style manifestations, was an impediment to the creation of genuine socialist communities, or as he himself put it: the alternative of his period was to choose between Moscow and Jerusalem (Buber 1996). As with the term "mystic," it is important to note that Martin Buber should not be wholly associated with the conventional understanding of anarchism, a political ideology advocating for the abolition of hierarchical systems of power, in particular, those embodied in the institution of the state. Buber's philosophy of dialogue shares commonalities with Anarchist principles, but only inasmuch as those reflect principles of communitarian socialism. Buber's ideas resonate with key Anarchist concepts such as voluntary cooperation, decentralization and federation of cooperative communities, individual autonomy and social justice. Buber's emphasis on horizontal relationships aligns with Anarchist principles of voluntary cooperation and the rejection of hierarchical authority. Anarchism advocates for the decentralization of power structures, recognizing that centralized authority often leads to oppression and inequality. Similarly, Buber's philosophy emphasizes the reorganization of society as a federation of autonomous cooperative communities of production, distribution and mutual aid, and in this regard Buber saw in the incipient Kibbutz movement one example of the system he envisioned[21]. These cooperative communities are to be formed on the basis of social autonomy and the rejection of coercive power. The basic Anarchist argument against oppressive structures, including the state, capitalism and other hierarchical systems that perpetuate social injustice through inequality, echoes Buber's proposals for the reconstruction of society along communitarian lines.

At the same time, Buber had an abiding interest in the importance of the philosophies of Taoism and Buddhism (Margulies 2022; Herman 1966). Similarly to Buber's understanding of the function of I–Thou in the realm of the social, in "the Orient," the importance of the actualization of awakening as deeds of engagement with the world is built into the fundamental dharmic goal of enlightenment[22]. In this context, there is an abiding similarity between Buber's ideas concerning the implementation of the socially just communities in the present time with the Ch'an Engaged Buddhist doctrine of the Pure Land on Earth (Master Sheng Yen 2007). For Buber, as for Ch'an's teachings concerning the Pure Land, the communal ideal is not a description of a mystical heaven, nor, in a more mundane sense, is it a project that needs to be postponed until after the overall social revolution has ensued. Buber's social philosophy called for cooperative communities to be established aside and beside the existing non-dialogical social and economic system, and through their larger federative agreements start to replace the functions of the state thereby rendering it vacuous. In other words, Buber did not call for revolutionary action against the existing unjust systems of governance, but for their replacement through active projects of community building and their mutual affiliation into larger federations. The larger the federative entity the more powerful it will be to avoid and eventually replace the state.[23] Similarly, Ch'an Master Sheng Yen's "Buddhist Humanism" and its core teachings of Pure Land on earth are an explicit argument in favor of a Buddhism that is engaged in the "redemption" of the world in the "here and now."[24]. For Sheng Yen, Amitabha's Pure Land should not be understood as referring only to a transcendent realm of the spirit, something akin to a paradise or even para-nirvana, nor is it only a cultivated mind's enlightened approach to the comings and goings of daily existence. Similar to Buber's ideas on the possibility of creating communities within the current non-communal system, Sheng Yen explains that Pure Land is a concrete and practical goal attainable in our current lives through actions of social responsibility and mutual solidarity (Margulies 2022). Moreover, the Buddha's eightfold path to human liberation includes the principles of right livelihood and right actions (Bhikkhu Bodhi 1984). These principles are not ancillary teachings but integral parts of the path itself. It is in this sense that Buber saw the early Kibbutz movement and their federation into larger federative units as exemplary attempts at socialist communitarianism. As Maurice Friedman writes "The most promising experiment in the Village Commune, according to Buber, has been that of the Jewish communes in Palestine. These have been based on the needs of a given local situation rather than on abstract ideas and theories. At

the same time they have not been limited to the purely topical but have combined it with ideal motives inspired by socialistic and Biblical teachings on social justice (Friedman 1998, p. 120)".

In "*Paths in Utopia*", Buber studied Anarchist thinkers, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin and Gustav Landauer, but he chose not to engage with the writings of Bakunin. Buber's political "teacher" was Gustav Landauer. Landauer argued for a Libertarian Socialism sharply contrasted to the more "direct action" Bakunin version, and most importantly, Landauer opposed the widespread Leninist version of state Socialism. Following Landauer, Buber was deeply critical of those embedded structures of oppression and social injustices that hindered the possibility of genuine I–Thou human relationships. Buber quotes Landauer's statement "The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently." For Buber, capitalism and the state structures that sustain it, is the embodiment of the I–It system founded on the assignment of socially constructed monetary values to every human body and mind. As such, capitalism is a system that denies the essence of I–Thou relationships. Buber recognized in capitalism the detrimental effects of power imbalances, exploitation and dehumanization on individuals and communities.

7. Hebrew Humanism and Liberation Theology

Buber's Hebrew humanism calls for compassionate responses to human suffering by addressing the systemic causes of injustice. Buber's Hebrew humanism explored the paths by which religious and spiritual principles can inform and contribute to social and political transformation. Buber spoke from within his own Jewish cultural ancestry. As he once stated "I stand at my door and from there I speak to the world" (Buber 1990).

Buber did not explicitly define his philosophy within the framework of liberation theology, which is a tendency prevalent within the Catholic Church and some strands of European Protestantism, but he advocated a similar social vision concerning the need to organize society on principles of Religious Socialism. Buber's social critique focuses on the I–It objectification of the other, where individuals and communities are reduced to means rather than ends. His call for authentic relational encounters challenges oppressive power dynamics by seeking to dismantle those systems that dehumanize and exploit. In this context, Buber's ideas have had a visible impact on Catholic and Protestant liberation theology thinkers. Buber's Religious Socialism and the doctrines of liberation theology share their emphasis on the belief that dialogue, faith, social justice and the pursuit of liberation for the oppressed are the essence of a genuine relationship with God[25]. The "founder" of liberation theology, Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez's call for "a sacrament of the neighbor" (Gutierrez 1988; Boff 1987) is a Buberian call for a deep dialogical transformation of society. Buber's influence on Protestant theologians has been significant and consequential. Many Protestant theologians who engaged with social justice issues have found Buber's philosophy to be of consequence to their understanding of the social repercussions of the distinction between *I and Thou* and I and It. Similarly, teachings of "Dharmic Socialism" and "Engaged Buddhism" mirror the contents and aims of Buber's Religious Socialism (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu 1997).

Buber's views were described as "Hebrew Humanism" (Bieman 2002). Buber spoke of a "Believing Humanism." Buber's views concerning dialogical philosophy and social justice are firmly rooted within biblical exegesis as well as within some of the Judaic homiletical traditions. Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, known as Maimonides, taught: "Anticipate charity by preventing poverty. Assist the reduced fellow man either by a considerable gift, or a sum of money or by teaching him a trade, or by putting him in the way of business, so that he may earn an honest livelihood and not be forced to the dreadful alternative of holding out his hand for charity. This is the highest step and summit of charity's golden ladder". Here, there is no questioning of the specific circumstances that lead the fellow man to become "reduced", and there is no demand to teach the person to earn his own livelihood rather than to give him a cash stipend. These views define the concrete application of the practices

of "radical love". Radical love implies the imperative to establish a society in which the need to provide charity to the disadvantaged members of our communities will no longer be necessary. In other words, the call is to radically change those social conditions that make charity necessary in the first place, and that is the true manifestation of radical love in the realm of the social.

In the biblical book of Deuteronomy (15:8) it is written: "You shall surely open your hand to the poor, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need/lack, according as he needs/lacks". The Talmud explains the phrase: "According to that which is lacking for the poor person, you are commanded to give him . . . if it is appropriate to give him bread, they give him bread; if dough, they give him dough, if to feed him, they feed him. if he is not married and wants to take a wife, they enable him to marry; they rent a house for him, and provide a bed and furnishings . . ." While the Torah does not specifically itemize the reasons for the fiery demise of Sodom and Gomorrah, the prophet Ezekiel found it necessary to explain the motives behind God's decision to destroy the cities: "Behold this was the sin of Sodom. She and her daughters had pride, excess bread, and peaceful serenity, but she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy."

One of Buber's magisterial contributions to Jewish religiosity was his studies and explorations of the Hasidic movement, particularly its literary and folkloric expressions. In Hasidism, the highest rung of piety is to be a "Tzadik", a practitioner of "tzedek". The term *tzedek* denotes various different things, but in its Hebrew linguistic root it means social justice, and as such, it is mandatory by virtue of God's own commandments. Deuteronomy (16:20) says "Justice, justice (tzedek, tzedek) you shall pursue". Here, the word justice is repeated twice as a rare biblical literary tool for emphasis[26]. There are seventy-seven instances in the entire Torah where words are doubled up or repeated for emphasis. The prophet Amos inveighed bitterly against the exploitation of the poor and the weakest members of the community.

In general, the Hebrew Bible contains the very specific and radical social teachings of twenty-one prophets. The prophets admonished the people to implement in the here and now the social and personal laws of the kingdom of God on earth. In a similar vein as Sheng Yen's teachings on the Pure Land, the prophets' kingdom of God is not in heaven, it is in this earth, and within this kingdom there is only room for social justice for the poor and liberty for the oppressed, peace between nations, and generally, an ecologically conscious society. Within the context of Buber's Hebrew humanism he emphasized the importance of the equitable distribution of resources, the elimination of structural inequalities and the empowerment of marginalized voices, such as was the case with the Palestinian population of pre-state Israel. Buber tirelessly worked for the creation of a bi-national Jewish–Arab republic rather than a Jewish state (Mendes-Flohr 2005). In this regard, Buber's approach to the Jewish–Arab conflict was rooted on two foundations: the first was his overall anti-statist Libertarian tendencies. The second foundation was deeply rooted in biblical teachings regarding the equality of rights between citizens of the land and its migrants[27]. For Buber, the Palestinian Arabs were not foreign migrants to the land but fully rightful residents of the "land of two peoples". Nonetheless, after the legal establishment of the State of Israel, Buber called on the newly formed Israeli government to relate to its Arab minority with policies and practices of social justice in the manner taught in the Torah. He demanded full civil rights and equality between Jews and Arabs.

In terms reminiscent of Buber's I–Thou, Pope Francis speaks of creating a "culture of encounter" (Pope Francis 2016). As Paul Mendes-Flohr remarked, "Pope Francis uses Buber's terminology about encounter and dialogue, but without explicitly mentioning Buber." While not doctrinally an adherent of liberation theology, Pope Francis speaks of the Gospels of Jesus as teaching of caring and redemption for the poor and exploited. Francis said: "You pray for the poor, then you feed the poor: that's how prayer works." Compare this with Buber's own words: "When people come to you for help, do not turn them off with pious words, saying, 'Have faith and take your troubles to God.' Act instead as though there was no God, as though there was only one person in the world who could help—only

yourself." In other words, it is incumbent upon us to take actual responsibility for the fate of those in need, for we are the fulfillers or deniers of prayer. One important figure within the liberation theology movement is Paulo Freire (2007). Freire was influenced by Buber's dialogical philosophy and its implications for social justice. Freire wrote: "Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation. The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality. If the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed." In terms of both, dialogue as education and the need to change the structure of society in order to allow for dialogue to become a reality, Freire is echoing fundamental Buberian ideas.

A glaring example of Buber's reach within liberation theology was the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" written by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. In this letter, King states: "Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court because it is morally right, and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong." On 14 February 1965, Martin Buber added his name to a letter addressed to president Lyndon B. Johnson thanking him for the release from prison of Martin Luther King, and asking that the other 300 civil rights prisoners be promptly released as well[28]. Catholic social projects such as Dorothy Day's workers cooperatives are exemplary experiments in Religious Socialism, inspired, to a great extent by Martin Buber's philosophy[29]. The Catholic Workers movement is especially significant in that it was organized by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin as a federation of autonomous communities much in the way Buber envisioned society as a whole in his *Paths in Utopia*. Day studied and reflected on Buber's philosophy as part of her own teachings on social justice, religion, cooperativism and Christian Anarchism. Thomas Merton, shortly before his untimely death, asked himself to judge his own life in light of Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. Merton wrote that in light of what he perceived to be "the hollowness and falsity of my life. . .my business is to verify Buber's (spirituality) with my own" (Merton 1999). In liberation theology, there is an effort to reconcile religious beliefs and values with Socialist principles, such as economic equality, social justice and collective ownership of resources. For Buber, non-political socialism and non-institutional religion are integral parts of the renewal of society along dialogical principles. Buber wrote: "Religion without socialism is disembodied spirit and, therefore, not genuine spirit; socialism without religion is body emptied of spirit and, hence, also not genuine body. But—socialism without religion does not hear the divine address; it does not aim at a response. Still it happens that it responds; religion without socialism hears the call but does not respond" (Buber 1996). Neither can be alive.

In summary, Religious Socialism, as advocated by Martin Buber, seeks to reconcile religious practices with the pursuit of social justice through the transformation of societal structures. Buber's Religious Socialism argues that spirituality and social responsibility are intertwined and that the ideals of compassion, justice and solidarity are integral to a faithful life. As Buber's philosophy emphasized the significance of dialogue and genuine

encounters in the pursuit of social justice, he believed that transformative social change could only occur through a renewal of spiritual creativity and communitarian association. Buber's Religious Socialism addresses economic inequality, exploitation of workers and human rights. He criticized capitalism for perpetuating social divisions and its commodification of human beings. Buber advocated for social and economic systems that foment and sustain I–Thou relationships, those that prioritize the well-being of all individuals and promote the equitable distribution of resources. He envisioned a society where economic relationships are grounded in solidarity, cooperation and shared responsibility.

8. Conclusions

Buber has had a significant impact on the discourses of social justice and peace throughout the world. Buber insisted on the fact that spirituality and social justice coalesce as one and the same practice, as there can be no genuine spiritual life outside of the I–Thou relationship. The interconnectedness of all that exists is what Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh called the practices of "inter-being", which in Buberian terms is the between of *I and Thou*. Hanh, the Buddhist, did not speak of no-being or intra-being, but of a being grounded in the relationship with one another and all beings. In Buber's words, "At the beginning it was the relationship, and all real life is encounter" (Buber 1971). By integrating as one and the same spiritual insights with a commitment to social justice, individuals and communities can work toward the creation of a more just, compassionate and equitable world. Buber's advocacy of *religiosity* instead of religion serves as a wellspring of inspiration and guidance for the pursuit of personal transformation through I–Thou relationships, and for those relationships to serve as collective efforts to address systemic injustices. In conclusion, we can say that Buber's philosophy of dialogue is best understood by positing that dialogue precedes existence and then existence precedes essence. Buber's philosophy can be summarized by the realization that we should not seek God above or below, not in the spirit or the flesh, for God is not an entity anywhere. God is the between of *I and Thou*, and that between is the actualization of a society built on freedom, radical love and social justice (Margulies 2022).

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Notes

1 Mysticism is also understood as achieving a unity of the self with the self of the divinity. The aim is the obliteration of the self and its subsuming within the "self" of the godhood. Buber maintained a fluid exchange on this topic with Gershom Scholem. Scholem's studies on Jewish mysticism, even as he defined it as a "revival of the mythic," which seems to coincide with Buber's interest in Hasidism in terms of legend or folklore, diverted from Buber's approach to Dialogue as the foundation of religious experience. See (Scholem 1971).

2 See (Friedman 2002). The mature expression of Buber's concern with realizing the divine through true community is the religious socialism which he developed in the period immediately after the First World War. This development was decisively influenced by the socialism of Buber's friend Gustav Landauer, the social anarchism of Michael Kropotkin, and the distinction between 'community' and 'association' in Ferdinand Tönnies's work, Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (1887). Community ('Gemeinschaft') Buber defines as an organic unity which has grown out of common possessions, work, morals, or belief. Association ('Gesellschaft') he defines as a mechanical association of isolated self-seeking individuals. It is an ordered division of society into self-seeking individuals held together by force, compromise, convention, and public opinion.

3 See Note 28 Martin Luther King 's letter from a Birmingham jail.

4 In Paths in Utopia Buber wrote "Seen from another angle this difference may be clarified still further. When we examine the capitalist society which has given birth to socialism, as a society, we see that it is a society inherently poor in structure and growing visibly poorer every day. By the structure of a society is to be understood its social content or community-content: a

society can be called structurally rich to the extent that it is built up of genuine societies, that is, local communes and trade communes and their step by step association" (Buber 1996).

5 In 1906, Buber published Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nahman. One of the fundamental points of Buber's understanding of Hasidism was precisely the insistence on the role of community and the quotidian life of the hasid as both the means toward and the expression of the relationship with God (Buber 1906).

6 Buber wrote "What good is the ecstasy of a religious experience if it caused me to miss a chance to save a desperate fellow human at my door?".

7 In his *Hasidism and Modern Man*, Buber (1958) wrote "To begin with oneself but not to end with oneself. To start from oneself but not to aim at oneself".

8 Buber wrote: "The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable: through the embracing of one of its beings".

9 See the Zen dialogue between Master Nansen and Joshu, Joshu asked "What is the Way?" "Ordinary mind is the Way," Nansen replied. "Shall I try to seek after it?" Joshu asked. "If you try for it, you will become separated from it," responded Nansen. "How can I know the Way unless I try for it?" persisted Joshu. Nansen said, "The Way is not a matter of knowing or not knowing.

10 It is of interest to note that Jacob Levy Moreno, the founder of the school of psychodrama, offered a critique of Buber's Dialogical philosophy as a "monologue of two." In a similar vein, Viktor Frankl, the founder of Logotherapy argued that Buber's dialogue does not transcend itself outside of the dyadic relationship. Both these observation underscore a lack of understanding of Buber's dialogical philosophy as essentially a community oriented practice.

11 Buber wrote "In spite of all similarities, every living situation has, like a newborn child, a new face, that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction that cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you".

12 Buber wrote "I do not accept any absolute formulas for living. No preconceived code can see ahead to everything that can happen in a man's life. As we live, we grow and our beliefs change. They must change. So I think we should live with this constant discovery. We should be open to this adventure in heightened awareness of living. We should stake our whole existence on our willingness to explore and experience".

13 Buber wrote: "It is indeed true that there can be no life without injustice. The fact that there is no living creature that can live and thrive without destroying another existing organism has a symbolic significance as regards our human life. But the human aspect of life begins the moment we say to ourselves: We will not do more injustice to others than we are forced to do to exist".

14 See Master Sheng Yen A Pure Land on Earth, Dharma Drum Monastery [2007] "The concept of a pure land on Earth is no illusion or fantasy, like a castle in the air. Rather, it is a reality that each and every one of us can experience in real life. The intention of building a pure land on Earth is not to move the pure lands of the Buddhas in other parts of the universe to Earth, nor does it set out to manifest on Earth of today the scenery of pure lands as described in the Amitabha Sutra, the Medicine Buddha Sutra, the Akshobhya Buddha's Land Sutra, and the Sutra of Maitreya's Descending to Our World. Instead, it applies the concepts of the Buddhadharma to purify people's minds, and applies the exemplary lifestyle of Buddhists to purify our societies. By means of purifying our thoughts, life, and minds and by putting in step-by-step, persistent endeavor, we work to achieve the purification of the social and natural environment. The Buddha Land Chapter in the Vimalakirti Sutra states, "By relying on the Buddha's wisdom, one can see that the land of this Buddha is pure. Once we look at the world with the Buddha's wisdom, we will perceive that the pure land is everywhere".

15 Buber wrote "Love is responsibility of an I for a Thou: in this consists what cannot consist in any feeling – the equality of all lovers. . .".

16 As Cornell West said" Justice is how love looks like in public".

17 In his *I and Thou*, Buber (1971) wrote "Through the Thou a person becomes I" and The I of the basic word I-Thou is different from that of the basic word I-It.

18 Buber's use of the term "narrow ridge" was inspired by the dictum of rabbi Nahman of Bratslav who said "all of life is a very narrow bridge: but the most important thing is never to be afraid".

19 When Buber speaks of God as the "Third Person" in a genuine I-Thou relationship it should not be understood as "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). Buber's third person is not an outside addition to the relationship, it is the relationship itself, for there is no third person outside of the relationship.

20 Buber wrote "Nothing so tends to mask the face of God as religion; it can be a substitute for God himself".

21 In *Paths in Utopia* Buber (1996) wrote "One element in these reasons has been repeatedly pointed out: that the Jewish Village Commune in Palestine owes its existence not to a doctrine but to a situation, to the needs, the stress, the demands of the situation. In establishing the "Kvutza" or Village Commune the primary thing was not ideology but work. This is certainly correct, but with one limitation. True, the point was to solve certain problems of work and construction which the Palestinian reality forced on the settlers, by collaborating; what a loose conglomeration of individuals could not, in the nature of things, hope to overcome, or even try to overcome, things being what they were, the collective could try to do and actually succeeded in doing. But what is called the "ideology" I personally prefer the old but untarnished word "Ideal" was not just something to be added afterwards, that would justify the accomplished facts. In the spirit of the members of the first Palestinian Communes ideal motives joined hands with the dictates of the hour; and in the motives there was a curious mixture of memories of the Russian Artel, impressions

left over from reading the so-called "utopian" Socialists, and the half unconscious after-effects of the Bible's teachings about social justice. The important thing is that this ideal motive remained loose and pliable in almost every respect.

22 In 1910, in his translation to German of Chuang Tzu's parables, Buber states: "Amid our theories of races and cultures, our time has lost sight of the old knowledge that the Orient forms a natural unity, expressed in its values and workings. That despite their differences the peoples of the East possess a common reality that sunders them in unconditional clarity from the destiny and genius of the West." Also, in 1976, Maurice Friedman wrote that "Martin Buber's encounter with Asia is an important one. Until his death he remained actively concerned with comparative mysticism. Although Asian studies was not his great central field of scholarship, he was for years professor of Comparative History of Religion at the University of Frankfurt and did, in fact, deal in scholarly manner with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. His concern with mysticism in Taoism, Hinduism and Zen, and with Eastern thought, became a study in dialogue. It was an integral part of his path".

23 In *Paths in Utopia* Buber (1996) states "Proudhon by no means fails to recognize that "the real problem to be solved for federalism is not political, but economic". "In order to make the confederation indestructible," he says, "economic right must be declared the foundation of federative right and of all political order".

24 Sheng Yen stated "In modern times Master Taixu advocated Humanistic Buddhism and promoted the Maitreya Pure Land. Venerable Master Dongchu, my late teacher, carried on this thought to found Humanity Magazine, and upheld the cause of Humanistic Buddhism. The advocacy of Venerable Master Yinshun (1906–2005) that "the Buddha was in the human world" is based on the saying of the Ekottara-Agama Sutra that "all Buddhas come from the human world." I have followed in the steps of the sages of the past to advocate the pure land on Earth. In addition to expressing in various ways the viability of building a pure land on Earth, I have also given lectures on the topic to articulate the necessity of building a pure land on Earth.

25 It is of note to state that Buber's liberation theology should also be understood as Buber liberating God from theology. Margulies (2022).

26 See Buber's two tomes of Tales of the Hasidim, his Legend of the Baal Shem and The Tales of Rabbi Nahman.

27 "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10:19.) "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19:34) "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow.' Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!" (Deuteronomy 27:19).

28 The text of the letter: Jerusalem, 14 February 1965. Dear Mr. President, We are taking the liberty to express our deep satisfaction that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is now again a free man and can continue his righteous fight for the equality of his people, a fight to which you Mr. President, have given your full assistance. We are not equally sure that all of the other emprisoned [sic] 300 liberty fighters have meanwhile been released. If this suspicion should prove correct, we submit that urgent steps should be taken to return all of them as soon as possible to their families. Believe us, Mr. President, Respectfully yoursProfessors at the Hebrew University Jerusalem.

29 The last lines of Dorothy Day's autobiography explain this thought further: "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love, and that love comes with community." This third chapter of Day's "rhetoric of defiance and devotion" develops within this context of Day's Community: its participants, costs, conflicts, motives and its more than abundant controversies. While Dorothy Day, in the capitol of the United States was praying for a community which would allow her access to mutuality of purpose, on the other side of the Atlantic, Martin Buber, was planning his dream of a homeland populated by those who might recognize the personal experience of the "I-Thou" encounter which then might be translated into the public experience of communal living. While not suggesting Buber as a constant Day mentor, Day, herself, later described Martin Buber as "admirable for his community experiments in Israel" and she often identified him as "the only modern writer who held out a hope for a modern voluntary community as a place where men and women could live in love and the happiness which God intended for them" (Day, Selected writings). See Fitzwilliams (2009).

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Article

Queering John of the Cross: Sanjuanist Contributions to the Fight against Phobias towards Queer People

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Abstract: This article aims to approach Sanjuanist mysticism from a queer perspective. It is not a monolithic apology to queer people, nor a treatise on mystical interpretation, but an effort to recognize and validate the spiritual experience of LGBTIQ+ people. It takes some mystical passages from St. John of the Cross that help to read the experience of queer life in a mystical key. With this, the potential of mysticism to combat those phobic, segregating, and unjust ideologies that mistreat so many people because of their sexual orientation and gender identity dissidence is manifested. Although it is problematic, talking about this is an act of epistemic, sociocultural, and religious justice.

Keywords: mysticism; queer theologies; LGBTIQ+; social justice; John of the Cross; queering mysticism; contemplation; queer spirituality; queer theory; inclusion

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1. Introduction

> "The rupture or transgression of the theological path requires us somehow to assume God's own determination to be led astray". Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 44)

The purpose of this *special issue* is "powerful" because it seeks to point with explicit allusions towards the relationship between mystical experience and social justice. The writer of this reflection considers this motivational goal "powerful" because it addresses the question that presents itself, time and again, as urgent for theology, spirituality, and mysticism: what is their concrete contribution to the problems that incessantly wound, break, and tear our societies apart? On this issue, mysticism has much to say, for its eternal freshness always compels us to reflect on the way in which God communicates himself in history, on the way in which divinity manifests itself in the midst of human struggles and, becoming one among the people, traces paths towards reconciliation, justice, and healing, that is, towards the horizon of a life in abundance.

In the following pages, some reflections will be presented that seek to relate the experience of St. John of the Cross to the experience of LGBTIQ+ communities today. For some people, this may be problematic and cause conflict. However, for many others, including the writer of this article, this association is not novel, nor far-fetched, for it is about the spiritual bond that they have built and that they have cultivated within themselves. Sanjuanist mysticism is presented as a path of self-knowledge, of identity purification, of sexual healing and, above all, of the recovery of dialogue with the divinity. For a few lines, I will speak in the first person, as St. John of the Cross himself and some contextual and queer theologians have taught me.

Since adolescence, I identified myself as a Catholic Christian person, but also as a homosexual; I lived through many crises of faith that, for the most part, were related to the conflict of one who does not fit the sex–gender norms that society establishes as "correct" or "ordered" in "God's plan". I found it painful to constantly hear expletives from "very" religious people towards the LGBTIQ+ community, and I felt that my destiny was heartbreak, abandonment, and hell. However, those ideas changed when I began my religious formation in the community of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross.

My approach to Carmelite spirituality was a "safe harbor" in which I was able to calm the turbulences that had been troubling me since adolescence, because I discovered the possibility of cultivating my "intimate world" or, in the words of St. Teresa, my "inner castle" [Castillo interior] (St. Teresa of Jesus 1946, 2000). What I remember most about this time of my first approach to Carmelite spirituality is that I felt deeply in love with the divinity that the Carmelite mystics had discovered; I was passionate about spending hours and hours of my days and nights reading their experiences and imagining myself in them. I fell in love with that powerful divinity who held little Therese of Lisieux in the palm of his hand and protected her unconditionally, who guided her along a little path of spiritual childhood, where the divine mysteries were hidden from the powerful and offered freely to the smallest and most fragile; I also remember that invitation I felt to give myself without reserve to God, that "ocean" in which, like thirsty deer, we can drink of his infinite water. I was captivated by the loving God who seduced and enamored Teresa of Jesus, who shook her from her comforts and urged her to reform Carmel—that God who, in the words of Teresa, invites her to have a loving search within: "Alma, buscarte has en Mí y a Mí buscarme has en Tí" [soul, seek you in me, and me, seek me in you] (St. Teresa of Jesus 2000, pp. 1192–94; Vega 1972, pp. 88–97).

Nevertheless, the experience of St. John of the Cross (1990, 2003) was one of those that most seduced me: the passionate departure of the one who loves in the twilight of a dark night, with anxieties in love inflamed, in search of his loved one, because the strongest conquest in darkness was made; the flame of living love that tenderly wounds the soul in the deepest center, the flame of love that makes the one who loves exclaim sobbingly "break the fabric of this sweet encounter! (. . .) O soft hand! O delicate touch that tastes of eternal life and repays every debt!" [rompe la tela de este dulce encuentro! (. . .) /¡Oh, mano blanda! ¡Oh, toque delicado /que a vida eterna sabe /y toda deuda paga!]. The recognition of the overflowing experience of the divinity that exceeds understanding: "I did not know where I was, but when I saw myself there, without knowing where I was, I understood great things; I will not say what I felt, I remained not knowing, transcending all science" [Yo no supe dónde entraba, /porque, cuando allí me vi, /sin saber dónde me estaba, /grandes cosas entendí; /no diré lo que sentí, /que me quedé no sabiendo, /toda ciencia trascendiendo]; a loving experience of God that produces such a sensation that the only thing that can be said is "woe to him who has made absence of my love and does not want to enjoy my presence, and the chest by his love is very hurt!" [¡Ay, desdichado /de aquel que de mi amor ha hecho ausencia /y no quiere gozar la mi presencia, /el pecho por su amor muy lastimado!].[1] I used to read the poet John of the Cross and he filled me with a love so deep that it made me feel madly in love. Above all, I discovered in his poetry a homoerotic language that made me think of a pure, healthy, tender, God-filled queer love.

This was not something that only I felt, lived, and thought. Many friars with whom I conversed and lived with alluded to it. Moreover, at that time I perceived how there was a generalized homoerotic background in the Carmelite conventualities, which used to operate as a way of *resisting* in the current heteronormative environments. If society does not accept the existence of homosexual people and recognize the richness of their experiences, religious communities will continue to be an option to resist, in a certain sense, heteronormativity, because there one can overcome the expectations of patriarchal society, opting for a "betrothal" with Jesus Christ and also for queer romances with other friars that take place in clandestinely in the convents (Thompson 1985; Kelly 2019; Díaz 2022; Santos Meza 2024). In the rhetorical consideration of St. John's *dark night*, Thompson's (1985) statement is critical: "The author is a man who is writing from the point of view of a woman" (p. 200). However, I wonder if it is only a "point of view"? Here, I would suggest that—at the very least—it must be suspected that John of the Cross is consciously or unconsciously using particular homoaffective and erotic language, which opens the horizon to interpretations beyond the cis-heterosexual. It was not something that only I felt, lived, and thought. Many friars with whom I conversed and lived alluded to it. Moreover, at that time, I perceived how there was a generalized homoerotic background in the Carmelite

conventualities, which used to operate as a way of resisting the current heteronormative environments. Suppose society does not accept the existence of homosexual people and recognize the richness of their experiences. In that case, religious communities will continue to be an option to resist, in a certain sense, heteronormativity because there one can overcome the expectations of a cis-heteropatriarchal society, opting for a "betrothal" with Jesus Christ and also for queer romances with other friars that take place in clandestinely in the convents (Thompson 1985). In the rhetorical consideration of St. John's *dark night*, Thompson's (1985) statement is critical: "The author is a man who is writing from the point of view of a woman" (p. 200). However, I wonder if it is only a "point of view"? Here, I would suggest that—at the very least—it must be suspected that John of the Cross is consciously or unconsciously using particular homoaffective and erotic language, which opens the horizon to interpretations beyond the cis-heterosexual.

When I left the convent where I lived, I had an intuition: The God who had seduced me and who had made me fall in love with him would continue to do so outside the convent and, perhaps, I would be able to feel and love him better. Over the years, this intuition has become a non-negotiable certainty. But, in order *to confess*, by faith, that God loves me, seduces me, and accompanies me without condemning my sexual orientation and gender identity, I had to live and walk through my own *dark night*. Indeed, that "safe harbor" of the Teresian Carmel was not only a place where I could begin to discover some aspects of my being, but, as a good "harbor", it also propelled me to set out on new journeys that helped me to advance in my self-knowledge and in my own spiritual life.

I must recognize that this is not something that only I lived, as many other ex-frail members agree with me in this aspect, and also today there are writings that tell us about real testimonies of believers and non-believers, in the dark night, who are going through difficult moments of illness, meaninglessness, depression, loneliness, marginalization, and oppression. However, although the dark night is not a new issue, it is of concern that different spiritual companions continue to note that today there are people who are going through this difficult process, and yet they do not know very well how to accompany them. The night is a stage of the spiritual process that takes us, among many things, into the *affective dimension* of the person, in human sexuality and in the so-called "sentimental education". St. John of the Cross invites his readers to personal healing, which involves integrating and educating desire in all dimensions: power, having, and knowing. The night is a time for healing and liberation, and it is also for queer people.

Thus, the exercise of the *queerization* of Sanjuanist thought proposed here is an exercise of epistemic justice (Fricker 2007), but, above all, of *spiritual justice*, since it is an effort to point out how queer people, who have been deprived of even spirituality and mysticism, also cultivate our "inner castle". As Cassidy Hall (2024, p. 64) states, "when we queer mysticism, we see that the pursuit of justice, love, liberation —and even joy and rest— stand within reach". Reading and feeling the experience of St. John of the Cross from a queer perspective is a powerful response to the *colonial geographies of sainthood* (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 141), which systematically silence the voice of sex–gender diversities that speak of their spiritual experiences. Queer people have the right to be heard in relation to religion and mysticism, because we also have a relationship with our Creator. If, as Malraux once said, "the twenty-first century will be mystical or it will not be",[2] the phenomenon of queer people's return to religion and mysticism reinforces this conviction. We have a voice to pronounce in the face of justice, peace, benevolence, welcoming the stranger, forgiveness, coexistence with opposites, and union and love between humans and God (Boff 2000, p. 19).

Suppose we are to live "mystically" in our world. In that case, we need models, references, and witnesses who have lived an authentic experience of God and who speak to us in a way that is meaningful for today (Baracco 2014, p. 437). It should be noted that LGBTIQ+ people have had a challenging time with this because it seems that there are no figures of holiness who have courageously acknowledged dissident sexuality. Perhaps this is because—as Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, pp. 140–41) points out—the *queering* of sainthood has all but disappeared as people have not been able to witness holy men and

holy women eating with their hands in their underwear or the underwear of the opposite sex, let alone seen them praying while taking off their underwear. The signs of holiness—the decency and legal sexual order of totalitarian theology—have become equivalent to the real lives of saints, eliminating gestures of rebellion and the contradiction of the *colonial geographies of sainthood*. However, there are still roads to be walked. This is the main proposal of Hanna Reichel's (2023) disruptive book, *After Method. Queer grace, conceptual design, and the possibility of theology*. Its author, recognizing that theological malpractice has killed, proposes a shake-up in the architectural foundations of theological methodologies, to discover the many structural fissures and their constructive flaws, but also the new possibilities of doing theology and, furthermore, of approaching mystical texts.

While I was shaping some aspects of this research, I came across Cassidy Hall's work on *Queering Contemplation* (2024), a book that is due out in mid-May of this year, but which I was generously able to read before its publication, thanks to the kindness of its author. In her work, Hall (2024) lucidly points out the relationship between mysticism and social justice:

> The mysticism can be found in falling in love with a tree or in the eroticism in oceanic oneness with one's partner. But it is crucial to also recall that mysticism occurs in social-justice activism, and in being awake—and responsive to the injustices in one's community and the world. (p. 63)

Like her, mysticism has much to contribute to social justice in the world and always has. I have already pointed out in other research that more attention should be paid to queer resistance to religious institutionality from a perspective that has received very little attention: the experience of mystics (Santos Meza 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). Mystics are "seeking the ineffable in the ordinary, the mystical in the mundane, the transcendent in the midst of pragmatic justice-seeking acts" (Hall 2024, p. 62; Holmes 2017). As in many social contexts, where the dominant, cis-heteropatriarchal interpretation takes precedence, queer people step out of the usual mode of approaching spirituality and mysticism, since "that" mode is merely a habit of thought from which we can disabuse ourselves. We pervert mysticism, removing it from the theo(ideo)logical closet (Córdova Quero 2015, 2016).

Therefore, this exploration of St. John's thought does not seek to assert itself within the confines of established interpretations; instead, it strives to highlight alternative perspectives that already exist and that many consider meaningful, therapeutic, and liberating (Kelly 2019; Santos Meza 2021; Díaz 2022; Hall 2024). It is worth noting that queer individuals are well aware that such interpretations are often considered "uncomfortable" and labeled as "perverted" by proponents of the conventional exegesis of mystical texts. This recognition is crucial because the proposal of these "alternative reflections" by scholars, such as we ourselves, stems from our inability to find resonance within the rigid and dominant interpretations that have historically been employed to perpetuate oppression towards LGBTIQ+ people under the guise of divine authority.

2. Walking *Queerly* into the Depths of Mystery

> "Outside the established religious system there is a source of mystical powers available only to people at the margins". Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 160)

Nothing has been as "strange" and "suspicious" to traditional hegemonic theologies as the mystical experience. Countless contemporary theologians—including Paul Mommaers (1979), Leonardo Boff (2003), José María Mardonés (2005), Evelyn Underhill (2006), Juan Martín Velasco (2006, 2007), Michel de Certeau (2007), and Raimon Pannikar (2008), among others—have agreed that the perception of mystics as "strange" and "dangerous" people has been a recurrent phenomenon throughout history. They all agree that this label has been applied to mystics mainly because their spiritual and religious experiences did not conform to the rigid and conventional model that prevailed in the religious practices of the time.

Within the framework of traditional beliefs, mystics often challenged established norms by describing direct and intimate experiences with the divine, experiences that went beyond conventional dogmatic structures and rituals. By not conforming to religious conventions, these individuals were perceived as threats to existing religious orthodoxy. The reaction to these divergent views was often swift and forceful. Those who shared their mystical experiences were frequently discredited and labeled as madmen, heretics, or blasphemers. They were accused of having deviations in their reason and faith since their testimonies challenged the conventional understanding of the relationship between humanity and the divine.

This tendency to marginalize the mystics was due, in part, to resistance to the notion that connection with the transcendental could be achieved directly and individually without the need for mediators or ecclesiastical structures. Mystical interpretations challenged established religious authority and raised uncomfortable questions about the very nature of faith and spirituality. Today, many scholars recognize the importance of mystical experiences and seek to understand them in a broader context, recognizing that the diversity of spiritual expressions enriches the overall understanding of religion (Kelly 2019; Santos Meza 2021; Díaz 2022; Santos Meza 2024). However, the history of the marginalization of mystics serves as a reminder of how religious institutions have often resisted interpretations that challenge established norms, perpetuating the perception of mystics as "outsiders" and "dangerous" figures.

A reading of mystical texts from various historical periods—and a review of the interpretations that have been privileged over these texts—reveals a dominant bias in canonical reflections. In other words, the cis-heteropatriarchal narrative has appropriated the interpretation of mystical texts to distort the testimonial meaning of the mystics, even to the point of theological distortion of divine experiences. This audacity reflects the firm determination of the religious hegemony to impose its normative vision on mystical experiences, even when these are expressions of the absolute freedom to feel and connect with the divine. The resistance of mysticism in the face of these normative interpretations highlights its unique capacity to challenge and transcend the limitations imposed by traditional religious structures, thus opening the door to a more authentic and emancipatory spirituality.

The testimonies of mystical experiences begin to be obscured and relegated to the theo(ideo)logical closet (Córdova Quero 2015, 2016), especially those textual passages in which the language is indecent. That has happened, for example, with the testimonies of the medieval Beguines—Marguerite Porrette, Hadewych of Antwerp, Mary of Oignies, and Julian of Norwich, among others—and of the saints of the Spanish Golden Age—Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross (Santos Meza 2021). As female voices emerged from the shadows of anonymity –after having been banished and exiled—a *disruptive masculinity* was also emerging that challenged and weakened the dominant and fragile patriarchal virility of the time.

St. John of the Cross (1990, 2003, 2011) was one of the first mystics who dared to share his spiritual experience using homoerotic and sexually transgressive language. His work reveals a deep and sincere masculine longing: the desire to be kissed by God with divine lips, to be delicately touched, seduced, and carried between divine arms into the sacred nuptial space where the eternal union is consummated (Loughlin 2007, pp. 1–7; Diskant 2012, pp. 67–115; Hinkle 2001, pp. 427–40). John of the Cross, like other spiritual witnesses, protagonizes acts of resistance by challenging and dismantling the self-indulgent supremacy of gender–sexual patriarchal ideology (Smith 1994, p. 147). This boldness not only involved a personal revelation of her inclinations and desires but also served as a direct challenge to the rigidity of the patriarchal conception that upheld heteronormativity as the absolute norm. Their spiritual experiences, imbued with homoeroticism, metaphorical and performative, challenged the prevailing narrative that limited spirituality and divine intimacy to heterosexual conventions. Such an act of defiance ultimately weakened the artificial construction of masculinity. It opened a space for exploring and accepting diverse expressions of spirituality and desire in the mystical context.

The Argentine theologian M. Althaus-Reid acutely identified the cis-hetero-patriarchalization of mystical narratives and, citing Georges Bataille, noted that mysticism seems to show a weakness in its ability to express itself fully in crucial moments of militancy, while, from the perspective of eroticism, it reveals itself as a more robust and uninhibited force (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 47). However, it is not that mystics are lacking in critical moments; rather, it is the hegemonic reading transmitted from their experiences that hinders and attenuates the revolutionary message of mysticism, attempting to present it as something "decent". Clearly, the limitations and fears of traditional "decent" theology, as we have observed, cannot deal with the vision of uncontrolled corporealities, canon-defying orgasmic experiences, and the multiple orgies formed by these unrestrained bodies. Instead of addressing the *divinely indecent* dimensions of mysticism, traditional theology has chosen to minimize and silence them—rendering "*soft-sex*" what is "*hard-sex*"—hiding them in the dark theo(ideo)logical closet that disguises human experience in the tight garb of decency (Córdova Quero 2011, 2015).

That attitude reflects a resistance rooted in religious orthodoxy toward the exploration of spirituality that transcends normative boundaries, especially concerning sexuality and eroticism. A limited and biased version of mysticism is perpetuated by relegating mystical experiences to the periphery and restricting their expression in acceptable terms, which seeks to maintain the conventional image of decency in spirituality. The censorship, however, not only distorts the authentic message of mysticism but also perpetuates the invisibility of mystical experiences that defy established norms and embrace the fullness of human experience, including the erotic and sexual dimensions. However, mystical experience has always evidenced that "there are bodies whose fluids overflow the metaphorical discourse of theology, even if they have lost materiality and sensuality. Theology can see blood in wine, but not blood in blood" (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 47). In this way, theological discourse often prefers to elevate itself to the status of transubstantiation [*transubstantiatio*] rather than open its eyes and reach out to the sex-dissident population. Again, making Bataille's words his own, Althaus-Reid (2003) dares to assert that,

> God himself with all his attributes; yet this God is a whore exactly like all other whores. But what mysticism cannot put into words [it fails at the moment of the utterance], eroticism says. . .. (p. 94)

In this context, I think of the first time I read the erotic poem *Dark Night* by St. John of the Cross (2003, pp. 391–92):

En una noche oscura	In a dark night,
con ansias en amores inflamada,	With anxious love inflamed,
¡oh, dichosa ventura!,	O, happy lot!
salí sin ser notada	Forth unobserved I went,
estando ya mi casa sosegada.	My house being now at rest
A oscuras y segura,	In darkness and in safety,
por la secreta escala disfrazada,	By the secret ladder, disguised,
¡oh, dichosa ventura!,	O, happy lot!
a oscuras y en celada,	In darkness and concealment,
estando ya mi casa sosegada.	My house being now at rest.
En la noche dichosa,	In that happy night,
en secreto, que nadie me veía	In secret, seen of none,
ni yo miraba cosa,	Seeing naught myself,
sin otra luz y guía	Without other light or guide
sino la que en el corazón ardía.	Save that which in my heart was burning.

Aquesta me guiaba	That light guided me
más cierto que la luz de mediodía,	More surely than the noonday sun
adonde me esperaba	To the place where He was waiting for me,
quien yo bien me sabía,	Whom I knew well,
en parte donde nadie parecía.	And where none appeared.
¡Oh, noche que guiaste!	O, guiding night;
¡Oh, noche amable más que la alborada!	O, night more lovely than the dawn;
¡Oh, noche que juntaste	O, night that hast united
Amado con amada,	The lover with His beloved,
amada en el Amado transformada!	And changed her into her love.
En mi pecho florido,	On my flowery bosom
que entero para él solo se guardaba,	Kept whole for Him alone,
allí quedó dormido,	There He reposed and slept;
y yo le regalaba,	And I cherished Him, and the waving
y el ventalle de cedros aire daba.	Of the cedars fanned Him.
El aire del almena	As His hair floated in the breeze
cuando yo sus cabellos esparcía,	That from the turret blew,
con su mano serena	He struck me on the neck
en mi cuello hería	With His gentle hand,
y todos mis sentidos suspendía.	And all sensation left me.
Quedeme y olvideme.	I continued in oblivion lost,
El rostro recliné sobre el Amado.	My head was resting on my love;
Cesó todo y déjeme	Lost to all things and myself,
dejando mi cuidado	And, amid the lilies forgotten,
entre las azucenas olvidado.	Threw all my cares away.

How can I not think of those days when I would sneak out late at night to meet my beloved(s)? John of the Cross is using the erotic language of the love encounter, of the emerging passion in the sexual encounter, of orgasm and penetration, of moaning and post-orgasmic rest on the breast of the beloved. However, in traditional theological interpretations, we find only bodily mutilations, which disembody John of the Cross, taking his mystical confessions to the language of the ecstasy of the soul, of intellectuality and imagination, without considering the mystic's sexed body, much less his homoerotic language. Should we not at least think about why John of the Cross had such a rich catalogue of erotic metaphors and descriptions of the sexual act?

Many times, I have heard homosexual or bisexual friars "*in the closet*" versed in mystical theology and spirituality but limited and reluctant to address their sexual practices honestly, claiming that homoaffective language should not be used in the mystical context. In fact, for some people, the simplest way to explain St. John's experience is to affirm that, most likely, before entering the Carmel, or even while inside, he had affairs with some of the women around him. According to this perspective, the mystical encounter of St. John is encapsulated in cis-heterosexuality, reduced to an experience between the "feminine" soul and the "masculine" God. Such a monolithic perspective—proper of patriarchal stubbornness—attempts to sexualize, cis-hetero-sexualize, and strip figures, like John of the Cross—poet and lover—of their richness, plunging him into the *dark night* of cis-heterosexual radicalization and repressing the communicative potentiality of his love songs. Poor John of the Cross, poet and lover, cis-heterosexualized to the extreme by patriarchal stubbornness! What a *dark night* in which the longing for love is extinguished!

Therefore, some questions arise to glimpse the complexity of the situation: Why can we not suspect, at least, that these were encounters and love affairs with other men? Would

this be a reason for minimizing the mysticism of St. John of the Cross or some detriment to the validity of his spiritual experience? Furthermore, Can we not think that St. John was in love with another man—the man Jesus Christ—and that is why he presented himself as the "lover" who—in the "beloved"—was transformed? Can we not consider it *queer* that a man insists on systematically enunciating himself in states of sexual passivity and submission? In the end, Can we not at least be suspicious of his mystical and erotic language to avoid encapsulating it in norms that minimize and narrow its horizon?

3. *Queering* John of The Cross

> "Can theology or God exist without a prescriptive sexual centre around which we should gather as a community to celebrate our struggles for justice and peace in our lives?". Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 90)

Queering theology is an exercise in justice but, above all, in love. Whoever does queer theology inserts himself in a place [*locus*] and tries to get out of it by unsettling the given framework and, in the process, unsettling himself and others to see the world differently or to see other ways of understanding the world. Undoubtedly, it becomes necessary to unhinge the framework that labels theology, because this framework is tailored to the measure of a prevailing and traditional "*logos*" [λόγος], which makes some things visible, makes others invisible and places, always places, each "thing" [*ding*] in its specific place, conditioning it [*bedingen*]. From a queer perspective, the need to unsettle the theological framework is intensified by recognizing the oppression inherent in traditional structures. Queer theologies challenge the binary norms and categories imposed by prevailing, traditional *logos*, which—by selectively making certain aspects visible—invisibilizes and marginalizes others. This "logos"—by placing each "thing" in its specific place—exerts a conditioning that reinforces hegemonic norms (Santos Meza 2024). Therefore, as Althaus-Reid stated, we need not accept a *claim to neutrality* as indecent theologians. Still, instead, we need to maintain a *responsible position* in the divine cartography of desire and pleasure (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 7).

In this sense, theologian Gerard Loughlin (2007) affirmed that,

> (. . .) to find St. John of the Cross teaching the due ordering of sexual to spiritual desire, and not the least for gay men, is not to find John a gay saint, even if there are aspects of his life and character that tempt this identification. (p. 147)

Although it might be thought that such a characterization is anachronistic, "we should attend to the queerness of his writings, to John's written desire for the embrace of his divine lover" (Loughlin 2007). Another response to the concern that some con-temporary forms of reading and criticism of ancient and medieval texts are anachronistic has been put forward by Karma Lochrie (1997). She asserts that queer interpretation assumes the *risk of anachronism* in speaking of sexuality and does so precisely to challenge and disrupt cis-heteropatriarchal historicist and literary assumptions and practices (Lochrie 1997; Córdova Quero 2004; Santos Meza 2022). Therefore, if we assume the *risk of anachronism*, it is because it is undelayable to talk about sexual diversity, evidencing and problematizing it from historical sources that destabilize the cis-heterosexual paradigms that prevail in medievalist and patristic scholarship, but also in the fields of research on the mystical phenomenon. It is also necessary to "[. . .] contest medieval representational practices across sexual, gender and class lines [. . .]" (Lochrie 1997, p. 180). Additionally, it is irreplaceable to advocate readings of medieval texts that challenge traditional and rigid assumptions about medieval culture and practices of translation and interpretation of those texts.

In this case, the interest in thinking of a *Sanjuanist queering* arises as a response to the social, institutional, and religious injustice that excludes LGBTIQ+ people from mystical discourses, invalidating the experiences of God that such people live in the intimacy of stories. Undoubtedly,

> We need to walk in these different paths at a time when Sexual theologies have left behind the male/female naturalized discussions within Christianity in order

> to focus on the particular construction of masculinity and femininity of which the discourse on God not only has something to say but, as we shall argue, on which it might depend. (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 33)

As in everything, the writer of this text has already been preceded by other stories and vigorous research. The publication of the masterful book *Queer God de Amor* (Díaz 2022) by Latinx theologian Miguel H. Díaz has already presented an exercise in *Sanjuanist queering*. According to the author, John's mystical theology is disruptive and constructive. The apophatic elements of his theology take distance and oppose the idolatrous interpretations of the divine life and the exclusive mediations of that life in human experiences. The constructive or cataphatic elements are particularly evident in *Living Flame of Love* and its commentary. In this double process of altering and constructing, and in its deployment of sexual metaphors, Diaz perceives the opportunity to offer a queer reading of Johannine theology. *To queer John*, then, is to engage in critical conversations that unveil forgotten or suppressed theological elements in his thought and to open up new ones that challenge heteronormative theologies of God (Díaz 2022, p. 95). In this way, Díaz follows the idea of Hugo Córdova Quero (2004), who points out the urgent need to queerize the past to open the horizon of religious discourses:

> To queer the past is a performative disruption in order to open up spaces for other discourses from the past to arise and to be heard in the conversation nowadays, as well as dealing with the performances of di6erent discourses in the academy. To queer the past is not to transplant gays, lesbians, bisexuals or transsexuals into the past, but to disrupt monolithic discourses that oppress historical periods. It also refers to the fact that we need to be conscious that our own lenses should be disrupted and that the result of that process of disruption is not to reiterate hegemonic heteropatriarchal discourses. (Córdova Quero 2004, p. 28)

In reading John of the Cross, one finds permission to follow a queer line of interpretation, for going back to his words in the prologue of the *Spiritual Canticle*, one notes the following:

> (. . .) because the sayings of love are better left in their breadth so that each one of them may take advantage of them according to his own way and flow of spirit, than to abbreviate them to a sense that does not suit every palate. And so, although in some way they are declared, there is no reason to be tied to the declaration; because mystical wisdom (which is for love, of which the present songs treat) does not need to be distinctly understood to have the effect of love and affection in the soul, because it is like faith, in which we love God without understanding Him.

In this confession of St. John, the affirmations related to preserving the "breadth" of love instead of "shortening" it to the taste of a few palates are striking; in addition, he points out that there is no reason to be "tied" to certain statements, because mystical wisdom, John knows well, exceeds our comprehension. These words suggest a robust *hermeneutical criterion* that considers lived experience over mere theorizing, that gives specific importance to the one who lives the experience of God and receives the effects of his love, then to the one who seeks to understand what happened to someone else, even sometimes without faith. In *Spiritual Canticle*, Prologue, 2 (St. John of the Cross 1961), we can note a similar argument in *The Living Flame of Love* when he writes: "and knowing the reader understands that everything I say is as far from the reality as is a painting from the living object represented, I shall declare what I know" (*Living Flame*, Prologue, 1). Finally, note the following argument that Celia Kourie makes: "John's entire mystical schemata must be seen holistically; the various stages may well overlap, and the path is unique to each individual: 'God leads each one along different path so that hardly one spirit will be found like another in even half its procedure'" (Kourie 2016, p. 10).

Relying on such prologue words, I propose a *queer* mystical theology of John that is useful for considering the mystical experience without abandoning the specific erotic–

sexual connotations concerning LGBTIQ+ communities. By this, it is not meant to reject the myriad efforts to understand Sanjuanist mysticism from multiple angles but to point to an additional perspective. Framing John through the lens of queer theology requires an attempt to hold queer *in extenso*:

> In addition to the definition of "queer" as "odd", and as a collective grouping for non-normative identifications of gender/sexuality, there is a third, critical usage of the word which emerges from its use as an academic term. In this context "queer" means to "disturb" or "disrupt". It is this definition that was later applied to theory, and theology, as a critical lens. It calls for the uncovering and dismantling of power structures. (Greenough 2020, p. 4)

As Miguel H. Díaz (2022) rightly points out,

> Unlike some queer voices in Spanish literature, few biblical scholars and theologians have attended to the sexual dimensions of John's writings, and rarely do they venture beyond the heteronormative sexual subject. To some extent, John's own commentaries reflect this heteronormativity, but as we have seen, his poems also push and disrupt ways of conceiving the human relationship to God through his performance, for example, as Christ's mystical male lover. (p. 101)

Crossing the wall of the heteronormative is a fruitful exercise in all stages that seek to engage in sincere and honest conversations about the urgency of social justice, and even more so when the theme is mysticism, since it is the path of divine experience, of mystery, and of fullness. Nevertheless, if queer people cannot at least think, imagine, and confess their experiences with God without being attacked and discredited, then not only would it be unfair to them to take away part of their status as *imago Dei* and their right to confess their spiritual experiences, but this would be even more unfair to God, for it would superbly call into question that Divinity is indeed omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. These reflective and queer lines seek to testify that it is true that human beings, LGBTIQ+ or not, can personally experience God, and the experiences of the mystics help human beings to experience that they have always been and continue to be in contact with "the divine" (Rahner 1990, pp. 10–12).

4. How Delicately (and *Queerly*) You Make Me Fall in Love with You

> "In the economy of the text, processes of symbolic value and representations of the world (and the divine) come forward bringing new light (and darkness) to our understanding of Sexual theological reflections". Marcel Hénaff (1999, p. 12)

A reading, with queer eyes and heart, of St. John of the Cross (2003) invites us to say the following: How meek and loving you are remembered in my bosom where secretly alone you dwell, and in your tasty aspiration of good and glory full how delicately and *queerly* you make me fall in love! The theologians Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid have already said that "different ways of amatory knowing express themselves in different ways of befriending, imagining God and compassion and creating different structures of relationships" (Isherwood and Althaus-Reid 2004, p. 5). Queer amatory knowing will, thus, be responsible for driving this Sanjuanist interpretation, since many people—including the writer of this reflection—recognize that the spirituality they experience is innately queer and find forms of queerness in the disruptions of the mystical testimonies of countless spiritual witnesses. Undoubtedly, healing and reconciliation, self-knowledge and love, justice, and freedom of queer lives are claimed here.

For this, Karl Rahner's (1997) affirmation that "the mysticism of every day, the search for God in all things" (p. 53) is crucial and needs to be assumed because we cannot speak in our case of pontifical and canonized experiences because queer people reside in the peripheries and the social, but also ecclesial, diasporas. In the same way, it usually happens with those who confess their mystical experiences. Suffice it to recall how the nascent reform of the Discalced Carmel generated unrest among the friars of the old observance, also called "calzados", who directed persecution towards the leaders of that enterprise:

Teresa of Jesus, Jerónimo Gracián, and John of the Cross, to put an end to it (Cantero 2010, p. 39).

However, the presence of the Saint, which was of great spiritual benefit for the nuns, was unbearable for the "calzados". In 1575, they held a chapter in Piacenza, Italy, in which they dictated a series of dispositions that declared war on the reform. In 1576, the prior of Carmen de Avila, Friar Alonso Valdemoro, proposed to free himself from the two discalced friars, taking them prisoner and taking them to Medina del Campo, from where they soon left by order of the nuncio Ornameto, protector of the reform. With the death of the nuncio (1577), the "calzados" managed another nuncio favorable to their intentions, with which, under the command of Tostado, vicar general of the Order, and the prior of Toledo, Maldonado, they seized both friars on the night of 2 December 1577, and, chained, they were dragged outside the walls to take them to the convent of Carmen de Avila. John was finally transferred to Toledo to appear before Father Tostado. Once in Toledo, taken blindfolded to the convent of El Carmen, Juan de la Cruz was locked in the cell destined for the conventual prison (Cristiani 1983; Pacho 1998; Rodríguez 1991). When news of Friar Germán's escape from the San Pablo de la Moraleja convent became known, greater vigilance was imposed upon the Saint. He was transferred to a more guarded place under worse living conditions. About the new place, the testimonies affirm: "They put him in a hole in a wall, little more or less than a grave, but much higher, without light" (Pacho 1998, p. 103). Bruno Moriconi (2020) states:

> The door was closed with a strong padlock that could only be opened from the outside, and, for a bed, there was a bench and some old blankets. Because of the cold, Friar Juan went to bed dressed without being allowed to change (. . .) He and the lice were one and the same. (p. 119)

The routine during this time consisted of eating bread with water and sometimes sardines. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, he underwent a rigorous fast. However, on Fridays in the community refectory, he was punished with discipline. One by one, the friars gave him strong blows: "During this time, they took him down to the refectory, while the friars were there, three or four times so that he would receive discipline there, which was given to him with some rigor, without him ever speaking a word." This testimony was collected by de la Madre de Dios and Steggink (1992, p. 415). And Steggink affirms: "after the repression, Friar John received the discipline: half naked, kneeling, head bowed; it lasted the recitation of a *Miserere*" (Steggink 1991, p. 299).

Treated by some as hypocritical and indecent, as well as proud and rebellious, Friar John responded with patience. In May 1578, the change of the jailer for a friendlier one led the Saint to ask him for paper and ink, and in his narrow cell and with little light, he com-posed 31 stanzas of the *Spiritual Canticle* [Cántico Espiritual], the poem of the *Fonte* and some of his *Romances* (Sedgwick 2008; Boucai 2022, pp. 587–611; Beliso-De Jesus 2023, pp. 1–26; Ratcliff and Haltom 2021, pp. 249–69; Coburn et al. 2019, pp. 165–94; Seely 2013). Toledo's prison and escape have become obligatory points of reference to understand the Saint, mainly because of their resonances in his works, specifically in *Noche Oscura* [dark night]. Undoubtedly, as Bernard Sesé affirms, this experience of prison, solitude, and abandonment "that John of the Cross suffered in the convent of Toledo was deeply inscribed in his spiritual doctrine. Who could have described in this way the night of abandonment, pain, and death without having gone through it?" (Sesé 2018, p. 75).

In the efforts to systematically study the phenomenology of the "closet", that is, of the experience of gender identity and sexual orientation of LGBTIQ+ people who must hide because circumstances prevent them from being entirely free and authentic to themselves, one could find aspects similar to the experience of the deprivation of freedom to which John of the Cross was subjected concerning the suffering of captivity and the passionate transition to freedom from the darkness of night to the rising of dawn.

If it is true that symbolic totalization entails the freezing of the experience of the phenomenon and the totalitarian crystallization of culture, and any pretension of totality leads to the actual "end of history", which, as Paul Tillich (1951, p. 134) says, is accompanied

by a *demonization of culture*, then undertaking this exercise of *Sanjuanist queering* is also an effort to break with the rigid interpretations of the work of John of the Cross, of his symbolism and his mystical eroticism. From the night, it is possible to deconstruct the luminescence of many totalitarian and dominant certainties to install the security of the provisional, always in rethinking, taking steps with love, but not establishing this path as the only way. It must be recognized that to appropriate the step taken is to give meaning to the step, but not to set paths forever, because the path is made each time a transit is begun. According to Jacques Derrida (1989, 1991), it is not the encounter that matters but the potentiality of the incessant *disencounter*.

The writer of this reflection profoundly believes in the existence of the eternal encounter and the never-ending *disencounter*, for this is the mystical–poetic inhabitation of the world. The traditional heterosexual interpretation of the mystics obscures dissident and plural understandings of the spiritual experience of figures, such as St. John of the Cross. His mysticism, imbued with homoaffective and homoerotic symbolism, harbors a powerful resistance to the regimes of masculinization and virility, aspects of phallocentric "dominance" and patriarchalism, which dominate in all times. Recovering these traces of resistance and emancipation in St. John's work is an opportunity to point out a necessary aspect of "social justice", namely the equality of all human beings to love fully, unreservedly, and in freedom.

A "fresh look" is then offered to look sensibly at the fractures and wounds that theology itself has inflicted on today's societies, more specifically on LGBTIQ+ people. This reflection is pertinent for someone who believes that the healing of these social wounds must begin where theology exists—the minds and hearts of people, the prayer, and the lives of theologians (Copeland 2021). Testimonial traces of the *dark night* of queer people's love will be presented in the light of the poem *Noche oscura*, because "its contribution and novelty will be in interpreting that Night as an experience of personal encounter, from a perspective of falling in love" (Pikaza 2004, p. 34).

5. Prison, Night, and Darkness: The Struggle at the Threshold of the Closet

> "Without doing that, God may also be condemned to never come out of the confessionary closet". Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 52)

Iain Mathew (2001)—offering keys to a contemporary reading of St. John of the Cross—says,

> John's genius as a poet consists, in part, in his ability to play with an image without stifling its vitality. [. . .] When we ask him: 'tell us your story of faith,' this is what he tells us: *In a dark night, /With anxious love inflamed, /O, happy lot! /Forth unobserved I went, /My house being now at rest*". (p. 95)

The metaphors of night and darkness appear in the story of St. John with an impressive force since they allude to his experience in prison but also to the process of an inner prison, to that prison of the senses, prejudices, and ideas that imprison the human being and prevent him from flying free towards the encounter with the Divinity. As such, there is a particular relationship between prison, night, and darkness, and this correlation is also perceived in the experience of LGBTIQ+ people who remain "inside the closet" or try to come out of it.

It is astonishingly paradoxical (and mystical?) that, even as they hinder queer people's journey to the powerful center of their spirit, there are always, always possibilities to "find God in dark alleys" (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 33). Because of this, "our search is for theological interchanges of intimacy, sexual identities and politics in the dark alleys behind our churches; the search for God in dark alleys. However, how far can we go? And since when has God been a host of law and legality, instead of justice?" (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 34).

This quote by theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003) encapsulates a provocative exploration at the intersection of theology, sexuality, and politics. Althaus-Reid advocates

for theological dialogues that delve into the intimate realms of human experience and sexual identities, challenging traditional religious taboos and norms. By metaphorically venturing into "the dark alleys behind our churches" (p. 34), she urges theologians to engage with marginalized spaces where conventional religious doctrines might not reach, suggesting that the divine presence can be found in the most unexpected and overlooked corners of society. Moreover, Althaus-Reid's inquiry raises fundamental questions about the nature of divine justice and its relationship to human laws. She critiques the conception of God as merely a dispenser of legal edicts, highlighting the distinction between legality and justice. By interrogating the role of God as a mere enforcer of laws, she prompts a deeper reflection on whether divine justice transcends human-made legal systems, thus challenging theologians and believers alike to reconsider their understanding of the divine and its implications for social and moral order. This motivates the reflection on the prison, the night, and the darkness, which are pointed out in the struggle at the threshold of the closet.

5.1. Prison: Physical and Interior Place, Complex Reality

> "We are sexual and class warriors who need to beware of the danger of ending up in confined, narrow spaces of reflection (our little jails) when reading the Scriptures or God". Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 88)

In the poem, jail represents the feeling of being trapped or limited, away from light and freedom. In the context of LGBTIQ+ people who struggle with the "closet", jail could symbolize the oppression of having to hide their true identity for fear of rejection, discrimination, or violence from a society that does not accept their sexual orientation or gender identity. In his short play, entitled *Miserere para un medio fraile* [*Miserere for a half friar*], playwright Carlos Muñiz recreates the stay in Toledo of St. John of the Cross and makes the convent doorman exclaim: "They are coming, brothers. Come. Come. Come all of you. Look how they bring him. Handcuffed. Like a thief. Like a highwayman. Like a heretic. Like a blasphemer. Like a Jew. As a criminal" (Muñiz 1975, p. 88; Sastre 2011, p. 60).

Such a description resembles the description that is usually made of a queer person, as "dangerous", "indecent", "deviant", "sodomite", "demonic", and "blasphemous", given that everything "different" and "strange" has been historically displaced to the peripheries in which many human beings suffer the systematic silencing of their voices and a sort of existential cornering on the threshold of the unnamable (Santos Meza 2021, p. 85; 2023, pp. 134–38). In this sense, the experience of prison and the transformation of John of the Cross into an indecent and blasphemer would similarly enter the queer since, as Judith Butler (1993) points out, the term queer operated as an excluding linguistic practice whose purpose was *to shame* the naming subject or, instead, to engender a stigmatized subject through that humiliating interpellation. The word *queer* acquires its strength precisely from the repeated invocation that ended up linking it with accusation, pathologization, and insult. As with many Carmelites who were reluctant towards the Teresian–San Juan reform, John of the Cross deserved death and jail for his insurrection and rebellion; so too are many LGBTIQ+ people today continuously criminalized by the dominant socio-religious hegemony for confessing their queer love, carrying on their shoulders the yokes of illness, sin, and crime, a triad that Hugo Córdova Quero (2024) has called the "perverse trinity".

Returning to the story of John of the Cross, some biographers affirm that he stood firm, but before an illegitimate tribunal, which also relied on a false accusation, a peaceful man was found guilty. He knew beforehand that the punishment consisted of imprisonment (Ruiz 1990; Steggink 1991; de Jesús 1991; Martínez 2006). To all this must be added the psychological pressure to which the dissident Carmelite was subjected, being bombarded with hurtful and threatening phrases about the failure of the reform and about what would await him if he did not cease. All this was said near the cell door where he was imprisoned with the intention that the words become *poisoned darts* (Sastre 2011, pp. 61–62).

However, they failed to shatter his morale, conviction, passionate love, or rebelliousness. Year after year, many LGBTIQ+ people take to the streets to march and commemorate their love, their life, and their resistance, even though in many countries today, affirming their queer existence is still a death sentence and a cause for imprisonment, both in and out of the closet: inside the closet, many people die from depression and anxiety, from sexually transmitted diseases without timely treatment, and from ignorance, loneliness, and a lack of social guarantees; outside the closet, the injustice and phobia of political and religious systems hinder access to rights of all kinds for people of sex–gender dissidence, and there is also constant neglect, insults, and abuse that does not cease. Amid this terrible panorama, a large majority of LGBTIQ+ people refuse to give up on love, which produces countless *dark nights* at the threshold of the closet.

5.2. The Night: Possibilities of Escape and Love Amid the Dark

> "The transparency of light which carries with it the clarity of imperial logics and the white axis of its racial supremacy, gives a global identity to demons". Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 135)

Note that *night* in the Sanjuanist poem can be seen as a time of darkness and bewilderment but also of introspection and spiritual search; similarly, for LGBTIQ+ people who live in the secrecy of the night due to lack of social acceptance, the night can represent a time of hiding and isolation, but also the only space where they can find community and solidarity among those who share their same life experiences. It is striking that John of the Cross characterizes his night, in addition to being "dark", as "blissful", "guiding", and "kinder than the dawn", and that it was a space "that joined beloved with beloved". Thus, it seems that with these characterizations, the poet recognizes that it is about the *transit* from a frightful *dark night* to one that was never dark again, the itinerary of the night of meaning, in which the human being does not know much about himself, nor about God, nor love, to the blissful night in which knowledge of himself, the loving presence of God and the fire of a corresponding and overflowing love concur.

As can be seen in the explanation of the poem, there is a linguistic movement of meaning that expands in two directions when speaking of "night": on the one hand, of that night in which there is loneliness, discouragement, suffering, incomprehension, mistreatment, imprisonment, punishment, violence, and lack of company, and, on the other hand, of a night in which there is sound solitude, company, balm, requited love, healing, rest, repose, calm, serenity, clarity, and care.

John of the Cross devotes many pages to interpreting what, according to him, is the process of purification of souls and their ascent to God; here, we do not want to repeat what John already says, but to point out how this same path is analogous to the one that queer people usually relate when they move from the darkness of the closet to the self-affirmation of their life experiences, because when they suffer the suffering of the normative closet, which prevents them from externalizing their sexual orientation, their gender identity, their feelings and, ultimately, prevents them from being able to express their sexual orientation, their gender identity, their feelings and, ultimately, their sexuality and feeling, which prevents sincerity when talking about one's own life; infinite problems, pressures and ties arise, from which only those who begin a process of self-knowledge and self-affirmation, with courage, can advance towards the "blissful night" in which loved ones and lovers meet to give themselves unconditionally.

Moreover, at night, queer people manage to break through the lock of the closet that prevents them from being fully themselves during the day, to go out in clandestine freedom to look for their love, to live their sexuality, and to dream of the possibility of love.

5.3. Darkness: Groping between Social Uncertainty and Human Reality

> "Did Shadow know that Shadow was dead? Without any doubt. Shadow and herself were associated for many years … Sometimes the clients called

> Shadow, Shadow; but Shadow replied to both names, as if Shadow was, effectively, Shadow, the one who was dead". Alejandra Pizarnik (1985, p. 58)

Darkness is associated with the absence of light and clarity, but it can also be seen as a place of mystery and possibility (Baruzi 1999, pp. 279–85); for LGBTIQ+ people who live in hiding and anonymity due to socio-religious intolerance, darkness can represent the fear and uncertainty of being discovered, but it can also be a refuge where they can express themselves authentically, albeit in private. The poet Luis Rosales said that people who do not know pain are like unblessed churches (Rosales 1996, p. 319). Here, I want to reformulate this sentence in the following way: people who have not had to live in solitude, darkness, and secrecy because of being true to themselves—or trying to be so—cannot fully measure what John of the Cross lived through.

Whoever wishes to understand St. John's darkness must consider, at least, that it is not the same to expose oneself to the darkness that comes when the lights go out in the comfort of one's home, amid the people one loves and with one's family, as it is to expose oneself to the darkness of the street, with the loneliness and danger that such exposure entails; that it is not the same to inhabit the darkness that one wants—for example, to make movies look better, to sleep better, to make some environment more romantic—as the darkness that is painfully imposed by economic or other needs (lack of public services, exposure to the street late at night, lack of housing, romantic clandestinity due to persecution). This is what is not usually made explicit when it is believed that all people understand the same thing by "darkness" or when one tries to understand that *dark night* of which John of the Cross speaks, since although it is an "interior" process, the primary way in which we human beings understand is through what we have lived and experienced, and even more so if it is the so-called "interior castle".

When LGBTIQ+ people talk about "darkness", they think of some different things than cis-heterosexual people do because—especially if one lives "in the closet"—darkness has become a quasi-companion of life: watching TV shows you like but that have queer content is carried out in the dark of night, wearing lipstick or some makeup you want to try is carried out in the dark of night, seeing the person you like is carried out in the gloom of night so that no one suspects your "inclination", going out on the street dressed in a certain way is carried out in the shadows of night, among other things. That does not happen because LGBTIQ+ people "love" the night and its dangers, but because the society in which they live relegates them to such nightlife. And perhaps, when a queer person honestly read the John romances, they think of their own experiences because if God is everywhere, He was also there in the journeys of queer people in search of love and companionship.

6. Tear the Fabric of This Sweet Encounter!

> "The theologian expects this encounter of communities from past and present to create a new understanding by the act of resignifying the past in a sharing of memories of belief in itself". Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 14)

I want to allude to a queer witness, Luis Caballero Holguín (1943–1995), a Colombian artist who gave life to erotic art (Caballero 2023). In some interviews, this artist recognized that he had to be "different", not because he had "decided" or "chosen" it, but because he had to be. And he also affirmed that when it was his turn to be different, it was his turn to be an artist, his turn to be a painter, his turn to be a queer, his turn to be the way he was, and that he had no regrets. Even today, in the museums of Colombia, it seems that nothing is more powerful than those torsos painted by Caballero. The Colombian artist's work incorporates a long artistic and religious tradition and speaks of enduring themes, such as sex, violence, eroticism, and pain. Simultaneously, it is a dynamic, contemporary, and ephemeral art (Davis 2024).[3] Caballero not only worked the nude incited by hedonism and homoerotic passion or motivated by recurrent reflection on the Christ of passion but based on the most brutal graphic references of contemporary violence. The trident—suffering, sacredness, and eroticism—will mark the artist's work. When looking at his paintings, the

men he drew seem to be in mystical or sexual ecstasy, in the middle of a torture session, or in a trance of divine adoration, but who knows for sure?

Caballero was obsessed with the human figure that he stole from sacred art, with the drama of the martyr, and with the imminence of a divine call that one never knows if it will materialize because a fascinating and overflowing ambiguity marks it. His interest was to capture what is most human in humans, that which makes us vulnerable: the exposed corporeality, the naked flesh, the open wound, the *nuda vita*. The impact that sacredness left on him has to do with the anatomy of men, with the suffering of Christ, his contortions on the Cross and his descent, with the martyrdom of St. Lawrence and the folds of his skin, and with the feminized corporeality of St. Sebastian. It is appropriate to speak of this author because one of his most famous works is precisely the Dark Night of St. John of the Cross (1977), a graphic work composed of ten lithographic engravings on Velin d'Arches paper (Figure 1).[4]

Figure 1. The author of this paper took these photographs from the lithographic work of Luis Caballero.

The contemplation of this work is frequented by LGBTIQ+ people, who see in it "something" of their own experience, their blissful night, their passionate love, and their divine ecstasy. There are certain similarities with the work of Richard Stott, a Methodist minister and art therapist in England, who created three paintings inspired by "The Dark Night of the Soul". The triptych by Stott is called "*Intimacy with Christ*" (Cherry 2013). Portrayed in the work are countless anonymous, beatific, wounded, whole, heavenly, chopped, surrendered, violent, defenseless, sexual, murdered, ecstatic, subdued, and dependent men that the Colombian queer artist knew or imagined and then painted. However, who were they? Perhaps Roman legionaries in Carthage, victorious Maccabees, Christians martyred by Diocletian, Trojans returning from war, Constantine's soldiers; perhaps in all his paintings, the same ones always appeared, sometimes alive, sometimes dead. Possibly, they matured with him, always accompanying him in the creation of his universe, until they abandoned him to his fate, leaving him alone in his studio in Paris, that city of love that was his temporary refuge (Erazo 2020).

In Caballero's work, prison, night, and darkness come together, and these three realities dance to the rhythm of San Juan's mysticism, which touches the heart of the queer artist and moves his brushstrokes to testify to something of the spiritual experience of queer people. Nevertheless, when contemplating the Sanjuanist work painted by Caballero, reflecting on the author's vital outcome is most important. The queer man who portrayed his queer experience through the dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross around 1977 would, eighteen years later, die in Bogotá, Colombia. He died of complications arising from the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which has claimed countless LGBTIQ+ lives from the 1970s to the present day. Dying at the age of fifty-two, Caballero remembers the

generations of queer people whose lives and work were cut short by an epidemic of silence and stigma, the actual *dark night* of society, the terrible night of systematic abandonment by the state, churches, and health institutions.

To contemplate his work today is to feel the yearning in inflamed loves of so many LGBTIQ+ people that continue to be extinguished. It is to feel the suffering that comes from the impossibility of loving freely in an era in which queer love continues to be condemned. It is to recognize the vulnerability of those who decide to love and give themselves unconditionally, even if there is prison, night, and darkness in between. In his paintings, he who has spun this reflection hears a cry for justice, which incessantly cries out for the blissful night, in pair with the rising of the dawn, for the fallen music and the sonorous solitude, for the dinner that recreates and falls in love with LGBTIQ+ people.

This simple and provocative *Sanjuanist queering* is nothing other than a sobbing groan that comes from the bowels of LGBTIQ+ people to confess that our human experience, our experience of God, and our experience of queer love is accurate and true. We have as a witness the light and guide that in our heart burns, as it burned in the heart of John of the Cross. However, for most people, when addressing the intersection of gender and sexual diversity and the religious sphere, we tend to visualize two opposing extremes, as if we were observing two opposing trenches in a supposed war that has already claimed numerous victims. I present an effort to reconcile these two supposed antagonistic poles, recognizing that they are not essential. Indeed, there are histories, wounds, and socio-religious conditions that have tragically fractured the bonds. Notwithstanding, if it is believed that,

> The [Sanjuanist] commentaries turn out to be, in this way, a kind of hermeneutic code, without pretensions of exclusivism, given the wide margin of width that the saint confers to the explanation of the multiple significant values enclosed in his symbols. (Mancho Duque 2008, p. 2)

then these two realities can still be reconciled. Sanjuanist mysticism is one of the many ways to achieve it. Undoubtedly, mysticism has much to contribute to gender diversity, and the LGBTIQ+ communities have a lot of wisdom and love to resignify and revitalize the mystical experience. I believe that mysticism and contemplation are in many human places and realities beyond those usually considered mainstream. As Hall (2024) puts it:

> Contemplation can show up as the pause when I gaze at the maple tree billowing in the breeze, my arrival at the state house to protest the latest anti-trans bills and rhetoric, the walk in the woods when I find my body metabolizing memories, the note written to the beloved in silence, the strange bug I see with my nephew on a walk by the ocean, the morning's silent coffee with my companion, the weeping prayer I experience when I sense my interconnectedness to all living beings. Contemplation is the centering of myself in order to know and remember who I am and what I am to speak—or show up to. Contemplative life is a continual deep engagement with the roots and truth of life that bind me to all the lives around me. Rather, contemplation is, at its heart, a reflective activity that is always seeking the spiritual balance between individual piety and communal justice seeking. (pp. 3–4)

When we strive, with honesty and transparency, to acknowledge God's loving and disruptive passage through our queer experiences, we feel the need to continue transgressing the narratives of the mystics, past and present. We use inadequate and indecent language to speak of ecstasy and immoderation, of divine dissidence and popular spirituality, of queer diasporas and sanctity out of the closet. We find peace and love in the mystical verses of St. John of the Cross because we have felt God's love pouring over us through them. Is not reading the mystics with queer eyes a service of social healing, an opportunity to heal the wounds that have tragically exiled the LGBTIQ+ community from religious spaces? Precisely, authors, such as John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesus, are notable because,

> They make God accessible to us and teach us that we ourselves are desirable. They teach us than by opening ourselves and making ourselves accessible to the transforming love of God in ongoing and deepening ways, we are drawn into the love that gives life. Endowed with the capacity to love, each of us, no matter what our station, can be empowered in that love to enkindle love in others and rejoice in the fruits of new life. (Ahlgren 2016, p. 153)

Let us not forget that John of the Cross thought that his poetry could and should act on its own; it even seemed to him that symbolic language was more appropriate than theologically inspired prose to convey the full scope and human richness of the spirit of love, which is in itself so fruitful. Therefore, I invite every queer person who reads this reflection to pause prayerfully in the poems of St. John and to find other ways, better ways, and paths of reconciliation, to undertake spiritual itineraries of return to the "inner castle" that every human being has within. As Reichel says "Such a theological realism takes its cues from that which it recognizes as even more real than the reality of sin: the revelatory, excessive, messy, kenotic, indecent, and honest reality of God and real people (. . .) Grace is not clean, straight or immaculate" (Reichel 2023, pp. 111–12).

7. Conclusions

Throughout these pages, an effort has been made to adhere to Marcella Althaus-Reid's assertion that "The rupture or transgression of the theological path requires us somehow to assume God's own determination to be led astray" (Althaus-Reid 2003). The interpretative *rupture* of Sanjuanist thought presented here has been mobilized by the queer perspective, not merely as a theoretical framework but as a genuine way of inhabiting the world—a way of existence embraced by countless individuals. Thus, our approach did not entail merely "postulating" a reading of the mystical texts. Instead, we aimed to highlight how queer individuals discover in the mysticism of Saint John of the Cross a remarkable opportunity to encounter the divinity that resides within us.

While contemporary societies find themselves amidst the "night" of social injustice and the "terrible night" of systematic violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals, the flame of [queer] love persists in our hearts, serving as a beacon of resistance. In traversing this reflective journey, guided by the rhythm of St. John's night, various provocative aspects have been unveiled, some arising from personal experiences, as illuminated by Sanjuanist mysticism, others emerging as queer communities embark on paths of emancipation, struggle, and resistance, and still others manifesting as aesthetics that offer disruptive itineraries. It is all about ruptures.

To "walk queerly into the depths of mystery" entails acknowledging that mystery always transcends our human comprehension. It may not be about "knowing everything", but rather about feeling deeply and loving passionately, and recognizing that love, in its profoundest essence, invariably invites transgression, risk-taking, and a leap into the unknown. This loving interpretation of mystical texts embodies precisely that: a radical queer leap into the ocean of divine love. Such leaps and risks occur daily in Latin America and many other parts of the world, where being "queer" still carries the threat of death and condemnation.

This *Sanjuanist queering* arises from the author's profound conviction: in every act of giving and every instance of loving, whether agapic or erotic, there is also the presence of God. Acknowledging the omnipresence of divinity elicits the exclamation: "How delicately (and queerly) you make me fall in love with you!" Affirming this is, once again, a leap—a daunting one, particularly in the dark night as conceived by Sanjuanist tradition.

This leap prompted us to offer insights into the experience of imprisonment, night, and darkness from the perspective of the struggle at the threshold of the closet. Regardless of whether one embraces or rejects these insights, the crucial point is to demonstrate that queer individuals approach the mystical texts of St. John from a different vantage point—one to which society has consigned us, yet also from the vantage point shaped by each personal narrative. Amidst these narratives, numerous closets and prisons emerge, constraining

life and ensnaring affections—a factual reality. Yet, amidst the myriad stories and infinite divergences, there exists a potent similarity: the shared desire to liberate ourselves from oppression, and to rupture the fabric hindering our tender and loving encounter with love. This is resurrection, salvation, and eschatology.

This reflection implies as much. Thus, beyond merely commenting on the work of St. John of the Cross, our intention was to delineate the horizon proposed by Spanish Carmelite mysticism. To take the mysticism of John of the Cross seriously is to embrace the challenge of social justice, the liberation of all individuals, and the upholding of dignity and human rights.

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Notes

1 The translations proposed here are the author's own, taking as a starting point the Spanish text of St. John of the Cross (2003). In this exercise, several existing versions of St. John's work have been thoroughly reviewed.

2 Carlos Floria, of the Argentine magazine *Criterio*, affirms that the French writer confessed this in an interview granted in 1963. However, Juan Martín Velasco affirms that, in 1975, Malraux specified that "I have been made to say that the 21st century will be religious. I have never said such a thing. . . What I am saying is something more uncertain. I do not exclude the possibility of a spiritual event on a planetary scale" (Martín Velasco 2008, p. 14).

3 Davis' recent article is wonderful in its descriptiveness of Caballero's work. It is an invitation to visit the tribute "*Luis Caballero: A Deliberate Defiance*" that is showing at Cecilia Brunson Projects.

4 The *Opera Omnia* by Luis Caballero has been preserved in the museums of the Central Bank of Colombia (BRC). More information is available here: https://www.banrepcultural.org/luis-caballero/linea-de-tiempo.html#!prettyPhoto (accessed on 1 January 2024).

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Article

Good News for the Oppressed? Exploring the Spiritual, Political, and Intercultural Dimensions of Howard Thurman's Philosophy

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Abstract: This paper centers on the godfather of the civil rights movement, Howard Thurman, and his most influential work, "*Jesus and the Disinherited*", as a pre-eminent text into early 20th century intercultural philosophy. Building upon Kipton Jensen's analysis in "*Howard Thurman: Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Search for Common Ground*", this presentation will reframe Howard Thurman's unique philosophy as one that integrates spirituality, interculturality, and critical social analysis. It is well known that Thurman's treatise on the oppressed was carried in the pocket of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. throughout the civil rights movement for the ways it empowered nonviolent resistance for those marginalized by the dominant culture of the United States, which was (and still is) built on racism, military violence, and class-based oppression. This paper advocates that Thurman came to his philosophical conclusions through deep engagement with various cultural and philosophical traditions, most notably the Hindu spiritual–political paradigm of *Mahatma* Gandhi, and sought to harmonize these insights for African Americans in the USA. By investigating the intercultural foundations of "*Jesus and the Disinherited*", this paper will encourage scholars to explore how interculturality enriched Thurman's philosophy and how this fostered a more expansive vision of community in pluralistic societies. This article traces the roots of the development of "*Jesus and the Disinherited*", looking back to presentations Thurman gave as early as 1922, concluding with the publication of his book in 1949. And via this study, we will see the progression of Thurman's ideas and the impacts interculturality had on his philosophy and vision for social justice.

Keywords: mysticism; social justice; spirituality; inter-racial; intercultural; inter-religious

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1. Introduction

Howard Thurman (1899–1981) was seen as a "godfather of the civil rights movement", truly a multi-dimensional genius who lived beyond any one label or definition (Brown 2023)—Scholar–Intellectual, Teacher–Educator, Pastor–Preacher, and Spiritual–Mystic. What makes all these aspects of his life even more interesting is that he was an African American man living amidst the terror of racial oppression within the United States in the early twentieth century and bore witness to a vision of racial justice and mutual liberation alongside diverse others. Thurman was well aware of the violations and challenges that marginalized communities faced historically and in the present and sought to engage them by transforming life using one's deepest interiority (Yong 2023). To use Thurman's own words, his life could be described as one lived with his "back against the wall" and attempting to bear witness to a "technique of survival for the oppressed" in the lineage of Jesus of Nazareth (Thurman 1949, pp. xxvii). While Thurman is widely known to be a leading precursor to Black liberation theology or the Black social gospel, the civil rights movement, and inter-religiosity, why is it that Thurman is often relegated to pre-status (Prince 2023)? Why is his work looked to as a prologue for someone or something else, and why is he not taken more seriously as a philosopher at large beyond any one cultural tradition? Perhaps it is because he wrote with a timeless spirit aimed toward a "distant progeny" (Jensen 2019, p. 142). And while I agree that his aims were beyond his

own lifetime, I also contend it was because of his radically integrative and intercultural persuasion that many in his time did not (and perhaps many today still do not) understand. Therefore, the thrust of my purpose with this article is to detail the interculturality embedded within Thurman's approach to mysticism, social justice, and philosophy at large. Furthering this intuition, I offer at least three reasons for his neglect as an intercultural philosopher: (1) Thurman was well trained in the study and practice of religion, philosophy, and education across diverse communities, creatively weaving together the three, refusing to allow anyone to predominate; (2) Thurman embodied and called forth a spirituality that was radically nonviolent, what he understood as the love ethic and religion of Jesus; and (3) he chose to insist upon a spiritual and social vision of integration requiring a great deal from each person to overcome and transform fear, hypocrisy, and hatred within the core of being. Ultimately, it appears it was due to his interculturality that many did not fully grasp the far-reaching implications of his philosophy. To this day, many have chosen to focus attention and critical analysis upon the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, or other well-known public figures of social change movements, all the while Thurman has only in the last few years begun to be centered across theological, philosophical, and educational domains of inquiry (Ellison 2021). A more sustained study of his life and thought can cultivate greater creativity, passion, and a sense of belonging, which are all important in the pluralistic societies of today.

2. Thurman in Context

In order to understand and appreciate Thurman's life, philosophy, and spiritual vision, one must first understand the context in which he lived. Thurman's life was primarily characterized by an incessant hunger and spiritual longing for deeper spiritual integration, attempting to be faithful to his initial and ongoing experiences with the divine from a young age. In *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Thurman 1961), Howard Thurman wrote that "mysticism is defined as the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own spirit." Although there is also evidence that Thurman grew increasingly weary of using the term mysticism to describe his work due to a "medley of confusion" around it in the later years of his life, it is clear that direct spiritual encounter is key to his entire thought (Thurman 1973, p. 5). And he came to his own understanding of the sacred via a series of mystical experiences as a child. Thurman wrote of his first religious experience at oceanside in his autobiography, *With Head and Heart* (Thurman 1981, pp. 7–8), reflecting "The ocean and the night together surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behavior of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances. Death would be a minor thing, I felt, in the sweep of that natural embrace… Again, the boundaries of self did not hold me. Unafraid, I was held by the storms' embrace. The experience of these storms gave me a certain overriding immunity against much of the pain with which I would have to deal in the years ahead when the ocean was only a memory. The sense held: I felt rooted in life, in nature, in existence."

He reflected upon another nature-based religious experience, as an eleven-year-old boy when Halley's Comet passed across the sky and terrified him. "One night I was awakened by my mother, who asked if I would like to see the comet. I got up, dressed quickly, and went out with her to the back yard. There I saw in the heavens the awesome tail of the comet and stood transfixed. With deep anxiety I asked, without taking my eyes off it, 'What will happen to us when that thing falls out of the sky?' There was a long silence during which I felt the gentle pressure of her fingers on my shoulders; then I looked into her face and saw what I had seen on another occasion, when without knocking I had rushed into her room and found her in prayer. At last she said, 'Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us.' In that moment something was touched and kindled in me, a quiet reassurance that has never quite deserted me. As I look back on it, what I sensed then was the fact that what stirred in me was one with what created and controlled the comet. It was this inarticulate awareness that silenced my fear and stilled

my panic" (Schaper and Thurman 2009, p. 32). Thurman was not only graced with ecstatic experiences of connectedness in nature but also understood that cosmic forces were also present as strength available within himself to confront the oppressive powers at work in society (Robinson 2021).

Due to these powerful nature-based experiences he endured, Thurman longed to walk a path in harmony with the sacred with other human beings and the cosmos at large. And he spent the entirety of his life seeking to integrate his profound sense of the sacred available to all people, beginning with the plight of marginalized experiences and communities. As a result, Thurman's life led him to pursue others who could understand his convictions about inner life and the liberation of the oppressed. First, he studied mysticism with the well-known Quaker theologian and philosopher Rufus Jones, who emphasized the "inner light" of each person and sought to affirm the relationship between Christianity and modern science (Holt 2022). Thurman later translated Jones' insight to the "sound of the genuine" within each person and the call to listen more deeply within to effect positive social change (Thurman 1980). Thurman's journey and questions then led him on an inter-religious and intercultural pilgrimage of friendship from 1935 to 1936, where he held multiple informal, private, and public meetings (many of which were even devoted to sharing the ideas of famous African American philosopher Booker T. Washington) as well as convened with various leaders and intellectuals across South Asia, such as Rabindranath Tagore and Kshitimohan Sen, as well as Mahatma Gandhi. While the meeting with Tagore was disappointing for Thurman, the meeting with Sen was a prime example of the intercultural mysticism to which Thurman gave his life, describing it as "a watershed experience" as he described in his autobiography that "we had become part of each other even as we remained essentially individual" (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. lxxvv). After this encounter, Thurman met with Gandhi, the Hindu spiritual teacher, philosopher, and activist who spoke on the message of ahimsa and satyagraha, a theory and practice of nonviolent resistance based on the philosophical ethic of no-harm. His second wife, Sue Bailey Thurman (an activist, educator, and intellectual in her own right who seriously impacted Thurman's thought (Brown 2023), played a prominent role in this delegation and was highly involved in leading the proceedings. While Thurman was in India, he was asked a very troubling question, namely why does he consider himself a Christian, a religion that has been weaponized against African American people for so long (Dixie and Eisenstadt 2011)? Thurman's response was one he had been giving since as early as 1932 (especially to other African Americans who believed Thurman's acceptance of Christianity was only perpetuating the racial oppression against their communities (Harvey 2020)) and that he understood Jesus' historical and lived religious experience to be deeply attuned to that of minoritized communities as Jesus himself was culturally, socio-economically, and politically subservient under the Roman imperial occupation. Via Thurman's study of Jesus, he also saw how echoes of the Roman imperial system impacts extended to the present-day United States context (Thurman and Fluker 2009). And it was thanks to Thurman's visit with Gandhi and their freedom movement against British colonial rule that Thurman was able to refine and deepen his philosophy, which aimed to support collective liberation in the United States. Thurman left his meeting with Gandhi internalizing his message as one of the closest living examples who embodied Jesus' teachings of love and led to the publication of his most famous book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Thurman 1949), where he detailed how the spiritual vitality of a person could transform the "three hounds of hell: fear, hypocrisy, and hatred" creating personal action and social renewal.

Although it is well documented that Thurman's philosophy of the disinherited guided the civil rights movements and their leaders, it was also true that his ideas were not always well received by the vast majority of white Christians or African Americans at the popular level, likely because it demanded a great deal of reflection and intercultural engagement. One of Thurman's first congregational interns, Rev. Alfred Cleage Jr., became increasingly disturbed by Thurman's insistence on racial integration because he did not believe that

whites could, in fact, be trustworthy allies in the struggle for African American freedom and chose to leave Thurman's leadership eventually leading him to become a prominent Black nationalist movement leader in the 1960s (Zubovich 2019; Thurman and Fluker 2015). But even amidst his detractors, Thurman persisted in his commitment to radical nonviolence, which required a spiritual and philosophical vision built upon relationality with all of life rather than separateness. Thurman's conviction was that direct spiritual or mystical experience was the sustenance required to live life abundantly and was the resource one could draw upon to overcome the calamities of life, whether it be psychospiritual in nature such as anxiety or anger stemming from societal violence and oppression (Crozier 2013). Thurman knew from direct experience that if the oppressed person could arrive at the awareness of inherent belovedness, it would be the needed antidote for low self-esteem, which is common for marginalized communities to internalize after years of oppression (Thurman and Fluker 2009) and what would provide creative avenues to extend care to all beings, creating new paths toward flourishing for all. When Thurman reflected on the nature of love it was a "robust vitality that quickens the roots of personality, creating an unfolding of the self that redefines, reshapes, and makes all things new" (Thurman 1963, p. 123). Thurman's relational understanding of love was definitively influenced by the likes of Josiah Royce in his adoption of the vision for Beloved Community. Subsequently, for Thurman, the most important task of a leader in that time was to lead "a way to unite people of great ideological and religious diversity through experiences which were more compelling than the concepts that separated and divided" (Jensen 2019, p. 131). For Thurman, virtue in a pluralistic society could only occur via a relationship with one another rather than assuming if individuals pursue their own individual agendas, it will benefit the whole. Therefore, Thurman's philosophy was a major critique of the modern liberal agenda of society, which depends upon the self-determined and self-sufficient individual. Thurman called for people to come together and learn how to live more deeply in communion with the sacred and one another. Of course, this is easier said than done, and there are many debates about how effective this actually is (including the recognition that in a truly diverse community, conflict and disagreement is natural and should be expected (Panikkar 2004; Jensen 2019)), but regardless of where one lands on the debate, it remains evident that Thurman's philosophy prioritized the experiences of those who were living on the margins of society and called for new intercultural communities to exist that understood suffering acutely and responded with integrative visions for the human person.

3. Thurman's Transformation: From Good News for the Underprivileged to a Fellowship for All Peoples

While tracing the chronological and biographical events of Thurman's life at large is of vital significance and has been undertaken in breathtaking fashion via *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*, edited by Walter Earl Fluker volumes 1–5 (2009–2019), *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman* (Eisenstadt 2021) by Peter Eisenstadt, and *Howard Thurman and the disinherited: A Religious Biography* by Paul Harvey (2020), none detail the transformations of Thurman as an intercultural philosopher who spent his life sincerely wrestling and changing his thinking on questions of his own personal experience and identity, religious orientation of origin, and socio-political struggles of his time. While the summative conclusions of his philosophy can be found in the book *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Thurman 1949), I contend his true insights cannot be appreciated without recounting various intercultural moments and shifts within his thought from the years of 1922–1949. As a graduating university student from Morehouse College in 1922, Thurman delivered a speech entitled "Our Challenge", where he clearly demonstrates his sensitivity to the "struggle for existence" which defines the experience of African Americans in the United States, and he acknowledges the limitations of the myth of racial progress and takes his place as an orator and intellectual within the African American philosophical tradition delivering the annual emancipation proclamation address which was a well-established ritual in the late 19th century (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 22). In this speech, the

influences of African American philosopher Mordecai Wyatt Johnson were apparent as he was one of Thurman's most significant mentors, encouraging him to take his place in "being one among the few well trained thinkers and leaders who will have the destiny of our people in their keeping" (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 5). In this speech, it is also evident of other philosophical influences (outside African Americans) upon him such as John Dewey's whom he studied at Columbia University the preceding summer and which he acknowledged gifted him with a "basic methodological approach to problem solving in all fields of investigation, from simple decision-making to the understanding and treatment of disease and the most confused patterns of human behavior" (Jensen 2019, p. 109). Later on, as Thurman was finishing his graduate training at Rochester Theological Seminary, he wrote a paper entitled "Can it Truly be Said that the Existence of a Supreme Spirit Is a Scientific Hypothesis?" where he developed his philosophical connections to the Neo-Kantian tradition à la his Canadian advisor George Cross and humanist thinker E.A. Burtt from Columbia University, asserting that religious experience and values precede rationalism, which developed the basis for his emphasis on the importance of religious experience in attaining knowledge (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 54). In 1927, Thurman wrote an article entitled "Higher Education and Religion", where he challenges African American colleges and universities to educate students beyond escapist or otherworldly religious visions (which he saw as anti-illectual), all while "staying clear of Marxism in any systematic way" and its critique of religion (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. lxxv). In this article, the influences of John Hope, another mixed-race, African American thinker, emerge as he cautioned of the other extreme, which seeks salvation in economic power primarily and advocates instead for an education that cultivates spiritual maturity and authentic community with an eye toward hope and courage (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 118). Thurman "credited Hope with the foresight to create an environment whereby young black men could experience themselves as human beings with dignity. . ." (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. xlviii). One year later, Thurman speaks on this subject again and re-titles the speech "The Task of Negro Ministry", where he doubles down on his insistence that true power from within is greater than a "demand for things", critiquing "materialism, apocalypticism, and institutionalism" while advocating for integration between religion and science; it is also in this speech where Thurman draws upon an array of cultural philosophy weaving together African spirituals, the thought of South African poet and feminist, Olive Schreiner, as well as the Zulu Africana tradition ending his words with an appeal from a Zulu proverb (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 144). In 1930, his first wife, Kate Thurman, died from tuberculosis, and he reflected upon this experience as one of the most difficult of his life, teaching him about the transformational power of enduring suffering where he wrote, "the test of life is to be found in the amount of pain one can absorb without spoiling joy" (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 174) and this grueling experience certainly deepened his sensibilities to the transformation, which could be attained through trial and tribulation. Two years later, in 1932, Thurman spoke on the topic of "the Kind of Religion a Negro Needs in Times Like These", where he first emphasized Jesus as a teacher hailing from minoritized communities offering inner strength and a way of survival wedding Christian religion with critical African American philosophical analysis which was birthed through the tutelage of African American philosopher, Benjamin E. Mays, and taught him "the ability to engage in critical analysis of the underlying presuppositions of society" (Thurman 1949; Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. xlvii). In this speech, he validated the importance of oppressed communities learning from the spiritual teachings of Jesus Christ and, more importantly, experiencing him within so that it would enable a deeper sense of meaning, fullness, and joy in life. Later, in 1935, he retitled his speech "Good News for the Underprivileged" where he boldly distinguished between the historical teachings of Paul as a social conservative in juxtaposition to Jesus of Nazareth, who was a revolutionary and taught a countercultural way that subverts ways of living that are dominating to others (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 263). Thurman understood African American communities as having a unique opportunity to overcome the twofold challenges of contemporary

Christianity in the US; on one hand, an "inferiority" that does not challenge the status quo and a "cockiness" on the other hand that dismisses religious experience as containing essential qualities for thriving in life (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. lxv). In the early stages, Thurman focused on Christianity exclusively but continued to develop his ideas during his trip to India in the 1930s, where he discovered the power of nonviolent thinking and practice, translating his sensibilities into a poetic vision entitled "The Great Incarnate Words" in *The Motive* (Thurman 1944) from which I will share a portion:

- *"And thy neighbor?*
- *Any man whose need of thee lays claim: Friend and foe alike.*
- *Thou must not make division.*
- *Thy mind, heart, soul and strength must ever search*
- *To find the way by which the road To all men's need of thee must go.*
- *This is the Highway of the Lord.*

In reflecting upon his poem, one stark observation can be made, and that is his move away from American Christianity exclusively or even a focus on the conditions of the oppressed within the United States (while both remain central) to a more universal call urging all sincere lovers of wisdom (whether from science, humanist, or various other cultural traditions) to find a path that accepts and transforms hatred and fear of the other within the core of being. Looking at Thurman's progression, one can see how Thurman exemplifies a philosopher par excellence, a lover of wisdom who taught his ideas most profoundly by modeling a journey of transformation within himself. Thurman began as an apologist for American Christianity and later recognized the path of wisdom could not be profoundly realized through only one's religion or culture of origin but through intercultural relationships and encounters and, most importantly, through living one's life in a conscious way. While Thurman's work at large is still Christian-centric, it opens the possibilities for renewing and re-imagining contemporary religiousness outside of monocultural paradigms by prioritizing spiritual experience and social transformation in diverse settings. For Thurman, virtue and genuine societal engagement can only be birthed from the pursuit and direct experience of existential love—wherever and with whomever (human or more than human life included) it may be found.

From his own growing awareness of the value of spirituality, diversity, and socially transformative living, Thurman was invited to co-found the nation's first inter-racial and intercultural church in San Francisco with a white philosopher from San Francisco State College, Alfred Fisk. Its name was the Church for the Fellowship of All People's, and their aim was not to build up a great institution but to provide spiritual education and support for seekers toward encountering a personal and vital experience of God, which translates to authentic fellowship with one another. Their goal, as Thurman put it, to "grow in understanding of all men as sons of God, and a vital experience of God as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth and other great religious spirits whose fellowship with God was the foundation of their fellowship with men" (Thurman 1981, p. 143). In this short quote, it is evident that Thurman wanted the church to grow out of a distinctly Protestant Christian heritage but transcend it due to its unwavering commitment to racial and cultural integration. Thurman lamented how Christian Protestantism at the time was stuck in paradigms of segregation and hierarchy and could not find a path toward authentic friendship (Thurman and Fluker 2015). Thurman, in the spirit of W.E.B. Dubois, was committed to communal education as a way toward embodying the justice and healing that was long overdue in US society at large, and he recognized this can only occur via diverse people genuinely caring for one another.

For Thurman, as a philosophical personalist and prophetic pragmatist, as Jensen (2019) suggest, the transformation of a society starts and ends within the innermost of each person and to resist an individualized or sanitized approach to the pain and sufferings of the oppressed in society. Both Fisk and Thurman believed that the power of religion is most profound when it is serious about those vulnerable to violence or harm and calls all truth-seeking people in society to become engaged. When this happens, a beloved community would form that would undergo the long and deep transformational work

of confronting fear, hatred, anger, and deception (understanding them yet refusing to remain captive to them) within themselves and in the world. They understood their community of practice to be essential to any chance at a viable future for democracy in the US, and their community embraced insights from a variety of diverse religious traditions and their leadership structure was shared across racial and cultural divides. Thurman's philosophical approach to integration is one that builds upon the Black philosophical tradition, the mystical encounters of each person, relationality to learn from the experiences of one other, and creative social engagement calling for all to live from a fullness that is a direct contradiction to the status quo of society.

4. Thurman as a Philosopher of Intercultural Transformation

As I argued previously, Thurman's life and thought have been overlooked due to the interdisciplinary and spiritually focused approach he advocated, which was often frowned upon by the academic elite who preferred rationalism or for Black intellectuals who desired a more separatist vision of Black liberation. The former was a lifelong struggle for Thurman as he sought to identify why he did not believe the Christian message was one of "betrayal" into the hands of [whites] those who wanted to dominate (Harvey 2020). Yet, as we reviewed Thurman's transformational personal journey, we find the connections he makes between mysticism, theology, philosophy, education, and social change, all stem from his own intercultural experiences. In my view, Thurman is a philosopher of intercultural transformation because he was deeply dedicated to integration on all accounts while respecting differences and individuation. Consequently, it is the core of interculturality that provides the biggest foundation for his vision of social change. For it is by engaging life holistically (via mysticism and spirituality, communities of belonging, and collaborative social action) that Thurman proclaim can make the largest and most lasting difference. In final conclusion, I suggest how viewing Thurman as a philosopher of intercultural transformation invites possibilities for renewing each domain and embodying social justice in pluralistic societies.

First and foremost, he understood mysticism and spirituality as that which could allow fear to fall to the wayside. In Thurman's work, mystical experiences can offer people a sense of deep affection and regard, and it is from this that genuine relations with the rest of life can be deepened. While the dominance of society continues in patterns of violence, intimidation, and individualistic hierarchies, a focus on intercultural mysticism counters by emphasizing the unique cultural expressions of belovedness and how they deepen each other. One example of this is the nonviolence he learned from South Asia and how that helped Thurman clarify the kind of social action needed in the US context. For Thurman, mysticism also produces an overcoming of the fear of failure or rejection from those in power (both are struggles shared by others across cultural contexts, and so, the mystical awareness and assurance he advocates for are best realized via intercultural exchange, which in turn creates perseverance and a willingness to continue on toward the pursuit of spiritual growth and destiny regardless of obstacle, setback, or struggle.

Now, for some critics, an appreciation for mysticism may seem to be simply wishful thinking or idealistic as it does not deal with the harsh realities or facts of life (for example, the unthinkable violence committed by people to one another, the ecological degradation and destruction that is human-caused, or the trauma and abuse perpetrated by those who are supposed to nurture, protect, and guide)—at worst, it could seemingly justify perpetuation of the worst and violent forms of imperial religiosity. In response to this, Thurman spoke fiercely about the difference between mysticism as "listening to the sound of the genuine" versus institutional forms of religion that re-entrenched segregation and the status quo (which for him was based on the supreme self-reliant individual). Thurman saw this essentialized (and race-based) identity as incompatible with the religion of Jesus or other spiritual teachers who embodied love and justice for oppressed persons. In addition, Thurman saw the religion of Jesus as something that brought spiritual restoration and agency to people so they could enhance their capacities to transform the violence of society

within themselves and all their relations—it did not, however, promise a pain- or suffering-free life. For Thurman, any message about a consciousness of love or justice or solidarity or belonging starts a spirituality that is authentic and available to those whose backs are against the wall and can only be concretized through intercultural partnerships such as the one he had co-founded, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, with Alfred Fisk.

Secondly, in the educational domain, Thurman practiced a method that was deeply pragmatic, relational, and dialogical across cultural experiences. Thurman did not believe learning could take place purely in the realm of idea exchange in homogenous settings but required encounters with people from all walks of life. He called his trip to India a pilgrimage of friendship because he believed that learning happens best in living relationships with others. Thurman's pedagogical gits were on display during his various appointments as the Dean of Rankin Chapel and full-time faculty member at Morehouse College, Howard University (teaching up to 10 classes per year on subjects ranging from philosophy, religion, theology, biblical studies, and history) (Thurman and Fluker 2009, p. 167) and also as the first African American Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. Thurman's intercultural pedagogy often landed him in trouble as he sought to de-center monoculturality wherever he could.

Finally, when it comes to engaged social action, Thurman taught about the importance of radical nonviolence or the love ethic of Jesus as a collaborative effort conducted by all parties in society. He validated the feelings of resentment and even hatred, which would have been normal to feel as a member of the oppressed group, but called for it all to be transformed into a sincerity and simplicity of heart that seeks the best for all by speaking the truth about their identity as a beloved of God. Thurman wrote, "it is necessary therefore, for the privileged and under-privileged to work in the common environment for the purpose of providing normal experiences of fellowship...the first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value. This cannot be discovered in a hypothetical, it has to be in a real situation, natural, free." (Thurman 1949, p. 88) In other words, Thurman's approach was to invite all members of a society to an authentic and living intercultural community that was rooted in spiritual experience as the key to overcoming societal barriers, which were often re-enacted and perpetuated through both inner and structural processes.

Ultimately, weaving these three together demonstrates the brilliance of Thurman's philosophy, although it was gravely misunderstood in his own time. We see Thurman's philosophy as one that harmonized diverse cultural insights, the paradox of contemplation and action, critically engaged suffering, and inspired social justice, as well as danced between individuation and an ethic of solidarity. Thurman's work was well ahead of its time, and its recovery is vital as the world turns to more widespread encounters with differences of all kinds. Hence, I deem Thurman a philosopher of intercultural transformation who would not have arrived at any of these conclusions (or been as inspiring to the civil rights) were it not for his own mysticism and spirituality, intercultural friendships, and his lived experience an African American male who brought together wisdom from African American, South Asian, South African, and Euroamerican traditions, providing resources for communities to believe another way beyond violence was possible.

5. Conclusions

Uplifting the spiritual, intercultural, and social dimensions of Howard Thurman's philosophy demonstrates the rich diversity of African American philosophy and beckons a clarion call to living in the paradox of contemplation and action from the perspectives of those who are most vulnerable in society. Thurman did not believe transformation can come from ideas alone or one religious tradition exclusively but must be discovered in an authentic relationship with oneself, one's community, and in light of the larger social realities of one's time. Therefore, Thurman's life and work call for philosophy today to be an interdisciplinary, experiential, and relational task lived out via intercultural encounters where the experiences and stories of the most vulnerable are front and center. It asks for

philosophers to be deeply grounded in the most difficult experiences in life and what it means to live together in a pluralistic age where conflicts, injustice, and violence are prevalent. Thurman's philosophy of transformation invites the possibility that education centers around direct experiences of and with sacred, diverse cultural traditions, and radical social engagement. May we be inspired by Thurman's philosophical approach, which insists upon the authentic and inner freedom of each participant and presupposes humility, self-awareness, and a desire for ongoing transformation where no one perspective can fully take center stage but can only be realized in beloved community together. While the call is weighty and requires inner fortitude, a dependence on encounters with the sacred, and a persevering spirit, it also promises possibilities for overcoming the seeming impasses within self, others, and the world via unlikely relationships of love.

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Article

Passion for Peace and Justice in the Prophetic Mysticism of Merton and Heschel

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Abstract: Thomas Merton's interfaith dialogue with the Jewish rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel sets a resonating example of how these two religious figures from the twentieth century can learn from each other and respect their theological differences while still finding common ground in their social critiques, as fully revealed in their more mature prophetic writings from the 1960s. The purpose of this article is to show how both Merton and Heschel found, in their sacred humanism, a final integration between their mystical quest for God and their passion as modern prophets to denounce the social injustices of their time. Merton and Heschel have become exemplar cases of creative interfaith dialogue and witnesses for justice. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate how their interfaith friendship brought them closer together when facing the Second Vatican Council's efforts to write a major document like *Nostra Aetate*, or "in Our Time".

Keywords: Thomas Merton; Abraham Joshua Heschel; prophetic mysticism; interfaith dialogue; the Second Vatican Council; *Nostra Aetate*

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1. Introduction

This article examines the passion for peace and justice in the prophetic mysticism of Thomas Merton and Abraham Joshua Heschel, and explores the way modern mystics are fully engaged with the social and religious issues of their time. Both Merton and Heschel defined a prophetic mystic as one who bears witness to truth, justice, and love. An authentic mystic is one who has an immediate encounter with the divine, and is called to participate in the political and religious struggles of their time.

The purpose of this article is to show how both Merton and Heschel are viewed today as two of the great representatives on interfaith friendship in the ongoing modern history of interreligious dialogues. Merton was a Trappist monk and writer while Heschel was a Jewish rabbi specialized in the areas of philosophy of religion, mysticism, and ethics. The two of them are recognized today as living exemplars on how to integrate in life and thoughts their passion for peace and justice, by following their prophetic mysticism in deeds and words.

This article begins by introducing the lives of Merton and Heschel and then how Merton and Heschel came into contact through their common friends working for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Next, I will compare and contrast the passion for peace and justice in Merton and Heschel. I will conclude with a few meditations on the relevance of Merton's and Heschel's prophetic legacies for us today.

2. Merton and Heschel on Interfaith Friendship

2.1. Merton's Life

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France on 31 January 1915. As he wrote in his autobiography, he was born "in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain [. . .]" (Merton 1948, p. 3). The story of Merton's conversion is fascinating. His Trappist brothers called him by his religious name Father

M. Louis, making direct reference to his French origins. Merton the peacemaker learned from experience the tragedy of losing his own brother. In 1943, Merton received the tragic news that his brother John Paul was killed in action while he was flying in a military mission. Merton wrote a poem to his brother entitled, "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943". In this poem, Merton prayed for the soul of his brother whose body is "lost and dead" in a "landscape of disaster" (Merton 1977, p. 36). Merton chose the path of the monastic tradition by entering the Trappist Order in 1941, although in the 1930s he had already adopted the Gandhian position and worked in Harlem with the foundress of Friendship House, Catherine de Hueck. Merton thought that by becoming a Trappist monk, he would be able to withdraw completely from the world so that he would be exempted from any sense of personal or collective responsibility for the evils caused by his own society. However, the later Merton will admit that he created this illusion. Merton no longer wanted to be a guilty bystander so he broke his vow of silence by denouncing the social atrocities and injustices that were committed in the name of Christianity and democracy. Merton became a controversial figure even within the Trappist Order and the Catholic tradition since he was, like Heschel, outspoken against the Vietnam War and against racism. Merton became a member of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation.

In 1958, Merton reported having a unitive inner experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Street (today renamed as Muhammed Ali Boulevard), the business and commercial district in Louisville, Kentucky. This epiphany, narrated in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, marks Merton's transition from a life solely dedicated to prayer and contemplation to a life more engaged with the world. After this, Merton began addressing social issues more directly, and started to publicly denounce the Cold War in his letters and writings. Merton saw the divine reflected in all things and developed a sense of cosmic interconnectedness. In 1968, Merton was given permission to travel to Asia. Merton was interested in Zen Buddhism but went to Asia as a pilgrim not as a missionary to learn firsthand from his personal encounters with members of other faith traditions. In one of his trips in Asia, Merton narrates having experienced a spiritual aesthetic illumination facing the giant statues of the Buddha. He said: "All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear [. . .]. Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion" (Merton 1973, p. 235). After having met His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama and other religious dignitaries in India, Merton went to Thailand to attend a Benedictine conference. On 10 December 1968, Merton died after giving his talk on Christianity and Marxism. The official story is that he died accidentally after receiving an electric shock from a faulty fan. Ironically, Merton died in Asia after denouncing the American war in Vietnam, and his body was brought back to the United States with the dead bodies of American soldiers who served in Vietnam. To sum it up, as Anthony Padovano has found in his research:

> During Merton's lifetime, he published 60 books and 600 articles and became recognized as a spiritual guide, a contemporary critic, a poet, a mystic, and an activist for social reform. He broke stereotypical molds and eluded the traditional definition of a monk and a contemplative. He became active in civil rights, nuclear disarmament, and protest against the Vietnam war. During this time he became a hermit and continued to lead others by his writings from the hermitage. Merton's appeal to Twentieth Century men and women appears to lie in the paradoxes in his life and writings. [. . .] Merton was always on a journey. (Padovano 1984, pp. 11–12)

2.2. Heschel's Life

Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Warsaw, Poland on 11 January 1907. Both parents came from a lineage of Hasidic rabbis and spiritual masters. He was trained both in Orthodox rabbinical seminaries and in secular universities, receiving his doctoral degree from the University of Berlin. Heschel wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Jewish prophets. His thesis would later be published in two volumes. Merton read them and was very grateful to Heschel for his excellent reflections on how the prophets were inspired by

God's revelations. The prophets are seen as reminders of God's words in their historical time and they served as witnesses of their faith into action. In 1938, Heschel moved to Frankfurt to be in charge of Buber's center as his successor but the Nazis came, arrested him, and deported him to Poland. He spent less than a year in Warsaw teaching Jewish philosophy and theology. Heschel was able to escape in time and went to London. Many of his relatives were killed by the Nazis, including his mother and two other sisters. Heschel got a visa to teach at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. This Jewish College was affiliated with Reform Judaism. His experience of teaching there for five years was one of loneliness but his English skills and his scholarship developed quite rapidly. Then, in 1946, Heschel moved to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City which was affiliated with Conservative Judaism. He spent the rest of his career teaching in the JTS as a professor of Jewish Mysticism and Ethics until his untimely death in 1972.

Like Merton, Heschel was the author of numerous books and articles. Unlike Merton, Heschel married Sylvia Straus. His love for music, aesthetics, and spirituality came from her. Sylvia was a concert pianist. His daughter Susannah is one of the leading Jewish feminist scholars in the world. While Merton's papers are mainly archived at Bellarmine University's Merton Center, Heschel's papers are located in Duke University's Rubenstein Library. Heschel's research interests cover a great variety of topics, from medieval philosophy in Maimonides and other Jewish thinkers to his studies of Kabbalah to the life and writings of his Hasidic spiritual masters. Clearly, Heschel, like Merton, was more interested in spirituality and mystical theology than critical studies or scholasticism, even though they mastered both in their research. Heschel felt isolated from some of his colleagues because they thought of him more as a mystic and less as a scholar when in reality, he was both. Heschel's main focus on the Jewish prophets brought him national and international recognition as an authority in Jewish studies. Like Merton, Heschel wrote poetic justice in his later writings, urging leaders and lay people to take a real stance against racism, poverty, and unnecessary wars such as Vietnam. Heschel's prophetic voice joined Dr. King and others in Selma. Heschel spoke like a true modern prophet. Heschel gained numerous enemies, even among his Jewish contemporaries, because he was highly critical of certain legalistic and exclusivist claims made by certain groups of rabbis and theologians. He questioned their understanding of the Jewish tradition, following the Torah, the Talmud, and the great philosophical teachings of Maimonides and others. But ultimately, Heschel gained the recognition that he deserved as one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. As Rabbi Michael Shire said in his introduction to Heschel,

> . . .[Heschel] did much to bridge the growing divide between Jewish piety and Western academic thought by highlighting the importance of the prophetic critique of social injustice, as well as the prophet's religious experience as God's messengers. . . Believing that God and humanity meet in the human deed, he became closely involved in the issues of his time-Vietnam, civil rights, racism, poverty, Soviet Jewry and Israel. (Shire 2001, p. 121)

Heschel's moral and spiritual support for Soviet Jews got him in trouble with the FBI, who were behind the scrutiny of him, Merton, and King for their prophetic and social denunciations of U.S. foreign policies during the Cold War era.

3. Merton and Heschel on Interfaith Friendship

In Heschel, Merton found a spiritual friendship seeking holiness in a world of action. Their exchange of letters started in 1960 and ended in 1966. Merton's letters to Heschel are published in *The Hidden Ground of Love*. Merton got a copy of Heschel's book on *the Prophets* and told Heschel how grateful he was to read perhaps his very best book. In addition, Merton wrote:

> I think the one that really appeals to me the most of all is God in Search of Man. I do not mean that I think it contains all your best and deepest thought, but it is what most appeals to me, at least now, because it has most to say about prayer.

> This is what I can agree with you on, in the deepest possible way. It is something beyond the intellect and beyond reflection. I am happy that someone is there, like yourself, to emphasize the mystery and the Holiness of God. (Merton 1985, pp. 430–31)

The Trappist contemplative was moving towards a realm of action, where listening to the prophets as messengers and as witnesses of God's word meant a great deal in the context of the many challenges facing the U.S. and other countries around the globe in the 1960s. Merton found in Heschel a great Jewish prophetic voice resonating through modern times with great strength and courage. Merton saw Heschel as a modern prophet and poet, as a spiritual friend and guide, as a great Jewish scholar, and as a kindred spirit seeking to sanctify time through holiness in action. Merton met Heschel on 13 July 1964 at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Edward Kaplan has concluded after this extraordinary meeting that:

> Their encounter, under the pall of the Ecumenical Council, confirmed Merton's deep sympathy for, and even identification with, Judaism and the Jewish people. [. . .] Central to their conversation was the declaration on the Jews at the Ecumenical Council soon to convene its third session. [. . .] Heschel ate dinner in the guest house with Merton and Father Flavian. The monks' unfamiliarity with Jewish dietary laws created quite a stir when the rabbi refused the steak (because it was not kosher), provided as a special supplement to the monks' normally vegetarian diet. As Merton noted: "Heschel did well on cheese, lettuce, etc. He enjoyed the wine and smoked a couple of long cigars". (Kaplan 2007, pp. 256–57)

After Heschel visited Merton to share with the Trappist monk his serious concerns about the latest draft on Catholic–Jewish relations issued by the Catholic representatives working in a committee run by Cardinal Augustine Bea, Merton expressed in a letter dated 13 July 1964 his warm and providential encounter with Heschel (Merton 1985, p. 432). Merton offered Heschel his monastic hospitality and invited him to come back whenever he wanted. Their friendship solidified and made their spiritual bond stronger. A day later, Merton wrote a letter dated 14 July 1964 to the Cardinal to express his sincere concerns after talking to Heschel, hoping to have some impact in the last negotiations of the final document, *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Times"-*Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*). This document addressed the relationships between Catholics and non-Catholics. In particular, a big chapter was dedicated to the Jews in the context of the *Shoah*, and post-Holocaust. Heschel was becoming more frustrated with the changes in successive drafts, where Catholics still used the language of expecting the Jews to convert to the Catholic Church and blaming the Jews for killing Jesus as God (deicide). Merton did not accept this old Christian anti-Semitic charge. Merton denounced this bad theology of blaming the Jews for being "Christ-killer" (Merton 1966, p. 171). In addition, Merton told Cardinal Bea the opportunity for *metanoia* (or in Hebrew *teshuva*, translated as repentance or return as an answer to G-d), where the Catholic Church has to ask for forgiveness from the Jewish people for their long history of past sins and anti-Jewish hatred. In this context, Merton showed his empathetic understanding and solidarity with representatives of the Jewish tradition that he greatly appreciated and valued, especially through his own correspondence with Heschel, Schachter, and Fromm. As John Moses has indicated in his acclaimed book in Europe and the U.S.,

> It was through his extensive correspondence with Abraham Heschel, a Jewish rabbi and teacher, with Zalman Schachter, a Hasidic scholar, and with Eric Fromm, a writer and a psychoanalyst, that Merton deepened his appreciation of Judaism and of his earlier insights into the Jewish mystical tradition. Merton had great reverence for the Jewish scriptures, and especially for the psalms and the prophets. [. . .] and Merton was indebted to the writings of Abraham Heschel, the Jewish scholar with whom he corresponded on various matters over many years. He was familiar with Heschel's work, and his book *The Prophets* was welcomed by Merton

> as something that he might use in his conferences with the novices. (Moses 2014, pp. 142, 183)

Merton was willing to share his suffering with his Jewish friend Heschel. After receiving from him a mimeographed statement to the Second Vatican Council, where Heschel said that the latest draft issued by the Council contained serious omissions and additions that will do harm to the Catholic–Jewish dialogue, Merton got more involved and gave Heschel his full support as a Catholic monk and spiritual friend. According to William Shannon,

> [. . .] the things Merton had to say about Judaism were, in part at least, an expression of his concern for the anguish of his Jewish friends, especially Rabbi Heschel. I would point out that this is no rare thing in Merton's life: his being moved to personal involvement in an issue because it affected people who were dear to him and important in his life. (Shannon 2003, p. 224)

Merton was sharing his anguish with Heschel and expressing his frustration at his own Catholic brothers and sisters. Merton was very much troubled by the long history of hatred and anti-Semitism found within the Catholic Church and saw this Ecumenical Council as an opportunity to change the course of history and be on the right side with God. Merton's empathetic understanding towards Heschel and the Jews is well known. Merton was very sad when he read Heschel's statement: "I am ready to go to Auschwitz any time, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death" (Shannon 2003, p. 224). According to Michael Cook, there were different reasons why the draft suffered two years of delays: "Then ensued two years of delays by Arab propagandists wary of the Vatican recognizing Israel and by conservative prelates desiring retention of the 'deicide charge' and of the Jews' need to convert" (Cook 2016, p. 18). As a response, Merton wrote to Heschel a letter dated 9 September 1964, in which he acknowledged his own frustrations with his Catholic brothers working on this draft. Merton's reply said the following: "It is simply incredible. I don't know what to say about it. This much I will say: my latest ambitions to be a true Jew under my Catholic skin will surely be realized if I continue to go through experiences like this, being spiritually slapped in the face by these blind and complacent people of whom I am nevertheless a 'collaborator'" (Merton 1985, p. 434). Actually, Heschel found Merton's words very comforting at a time of great upheaval and difficulties awaiting the last draft. Heschel concluded that he was still hopeful that something can be done to repair this damage. Finally, in 1965, the final document came and did not please everyone. There were still problems with the language but with the passage of time, the relationship between Jews and Catholics had improved dramatically. Today, Heschel is seen as one of the major players in improving this ongoing interfaith dialogue between Jews, Catholics, and non-Catholics. Heschel adopted a more pluralistic view by the end of his life and saw that no religion can claim to possess the Truth. According to Edward Kaplan,

> Neither Merton nor Heschel quickly jumped on the bandwagon of pluralism, pro-actively affirming the preciousness of all religions. But they did so when called upon, and with utmost respect and conviction: Heschel in his inaugural address at Union Theological Seminary, Merton in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), and especially in Merton's final writings on Asian spirituality. Both men recognized the sanctity of other religions, preparing future cooperation and mutual support against the demons of nihilism, dehumanization, and doubt, our inescapable heritage as fallible human beings. (Kaplan 2004, p. 146)

Their interfaith meeting and their religious pluralism remind us that mystics are ordinary human beings who can change their worldviews, and who can join hands together to repair the world (*tikkun olam*). As William Apel has observed in his book on interfaith letters between Merton and Heschel,

> [. . .] the spiritual friendship of Merton and Heschel continued to deepen as their witness to the holiness of God and the dignity of humanity grew in ever-

> expanding circles of ecumenical involvement and work for social justice and peace. But perhaps the ultimate sign of their interfaith kinship was an invitation from Heschel to Merton to write the introduction for a Time-Life edition of the Bible. No greater compliment could have been paid Merton by his interfaith friend. (Apel 2006, p. 80)

Merton, like Heschel, brought fresh air to a Church in need of an *aggiornamento*. Their mystical language served as a bridge between the traditionalist views of the Catholic Church and the modern views they both embraced from arts to humanities to sciences. For Heschel, the goal of interfaith dialogue was to experience mutual respect and trust and to gain mutual appreciation of each other's faith traditions. In his essay "The Ecumenical Movement", he wrote: "Respect for each other's commitment, respect for each other's faith, is more than a political and social imperative. It is born of the insight that God is greater than religion, that faith is deeper than dogma, that theology has its roots in depth theology" (Heschel 1972, p. 181). For the Jewish rabbi, there was no longer a need to look for debates of who is doctrinally right or wrong. Leaders from different religious traditions must look for common ground without overlooking their religious differences. As his daughter Susanna Heschel has quoted in "Reading Abraham Joshua Heschel Today":

> "What is the purpose of interreligious dialogue?" He answers his own question: It is neither to flatter nor to refute one another, but to help one another, to share insight and learning, to cooperate in academic ventures on the highest scholarly level and, what is even more important, to search in the wilderness for wellsprings of devotion, for treasures of stillness, for the power of love and care for man. (Heschel 2021, p. xxxiii)

Heschel was a pioneer in breaking with the past Jewish establishment in their aversion to having dialogues with Christians. Some Orthodox Jews did not want to even try to dialogue with Christians because of their long history of hatred, persecution, and religious conversions. But Heschel did not give up his high hopes in bridging the gap that existed in those days between these two Abrahamic covenantal faith traditions. Perhaps Heschel's historical milieu after leaving Europe made him feel more at home in developing and cultivating interfaith friendships with Christians and people of other faiths. His numerous encounters with Christians proved to him that the common search for holiness in words and deeds is not the monopoly of any religious tradition. No prophet is fully embraced and loved in his own homeland, but now the two of them are highly admired and respected around the globe.

4. Passion for Peace and Justice in Merton and Heschel

True prophetic mystics are contemplatives in action who confront the real social injustices of the world. They are not passive citizens but agents of resistance, following God's Will. Their goal is to work for peace and justice in order to build the Beloved community. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, prophets not only are entrusted with God's Word but they also announce the deepest troubles of society by denouncing those who commit injustices against the suffering people, even at the expense of dying as martyrs themselves. As Christine Bochen has confessed in the afterword to Merton-Ruether's journals,

> Driven by his passion for truth, Merton felt compelled to voice his opposition to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the injustice of racism, and the immorality of the war in Vietnam. He was equally outspoken in his criticism of those in the Roman Catholic Church who kept their silence in the face of social evils that threatened to destroy humankind. [. . .] As monk and writer, Merton assumed a critical, one might say, prophetic role challenging social, ecclesial, and monastic institutions alike. (Merton and Ruether 1995, p. 102)

Those who knew Merton best understood the paradoxical Merton holding together his passion for peace and justice and his interior and mystical life. Merton's good friend John

H. Griffin knew the hardships Merton had to suffer and endure because he was a monk who followed his conscience, and in doing so he paid a big price which may have cost even his life. According to Griffin, "many saw hope in his voice and viewed him as a prophetic spokesman. But many others who might admire his 'spiritual' writings came to consider him a radical, a subversive, and the greatest of social sinners, 'a troublemaker', because of his more controversial writings" (Griffin 1978, p. 81). Merton was loved and hated by even his own Catholic brothers and sisters. Some were highly critical of his politics and his openness to other religious traditions, especially his Zen Buddhist appreciations. They thought he was planning to leave the Church when he left for Asia as a pilgrim, and there were rumors he became a Buddhist. One of his friends from Columbia University, Ed Rice, has reported to his readers: "The two main themes in Merton's later life were peace —in various forms: social and racial justice, freedom, love, liberty—and the interior life, and neither excluded the other" (Rice 1972, p. 12). Merton's new direction in the 1960s proves his two great loves by embracing Martha and Mary together. As Rice further commented on his beloved friend from Columbia: "He returned over and over again, once he had found his new direction in the 1960s, to these basic themes: war and peace, violence and nonviolence, and Buddhism. He began to run into opposition from the Trappist censors on a scale never before encountered" (Rice 1972, p. 111). Merton's epiphany in Louisville became a turning point in his life. The late Merton turned from being a monk writing solely about the interior life to becoming a critical theorist and a modern prophetic voice addressing the most urgent issues of his times, from war to poverty to racism and ecological degradation. As Paul Pearson corroborates, "Merton's growing sense of compassion led him to start writing voraciously on issues of war and peace, nuclear disarmament, civil rights, environmental concerns, and a whole myriad of other issues" (Pearson 2020, p. 23). Merton's ecclesiastical superiors in the Trappist Order banned his writings on peace and war. They told him he was a monk and his major role was to be focused only on matters of the interior life. However, Merton had a great network of friends who were publishers in different religious magazines and journals, and they were able to help him publish some of his essays on social and political issues. As Michael Higgins emphatically stressed in his book on Merton and William Blake,

> Within a short time Merton became one of the most outspoken and respected critics of the scourge of racism, the nuclear arms race, and the wild proliferation of unfettered capitalist and imperialist ambitions. He set his face against authoritarianism in any form-in the state as well as in the church [. . .They] were all eager to censor the political Merton, and indeed to silence him directly when he wrote on peace matters. (Higgins 1998, p. 46)

In 1965, Merton was allowed to become a hermit living in a cabin a mile away from the Trappist Abbey. The Trappist monk did not escape from his prophetic and social responsibilities towards God and the world. As a matter of fact, he became more in tune with the world's sufferings from his solitude inside a cabin in the hills of Kentucky. As Mario Aguilar has noted,

> The hermit then is for Merton a witness, a silent witness to a profound truth: the presence of God. Contemplation for a hermit does not become an esoteric exercise or realization but an awareness of the presence of God, in sympathy with others, that becomes a profound act of love, filled with the love of God. (Aguilar 2011, p. 72)

Merton's critics argued against his silent contemplative chosen vocation. Robert Inchausti concluded in his remarks that

> Merton's critics might argue that in taking the long view, he took too long a view—and in defending the silent life, he sometimes slighted the outspoken, fallible, compromised, democratic self-in-progress burdened by historical particulars—. And there is an element of truth to this. (Inchausti 1998, p. 152)

Merton not only got in deep trouble with his Catholic ecclesiastical authorities but even with some white liberals such as Martin Marty and Rosemary Ruether, who criticized him for remaining a monk in Gethsemani and for not joining forces with the activists who were protesting and getting arrested outside the monastic walls in Kentucky. As Jon Sweeney astutely reported in his Merton biography,

> But there were some who criticized him for attempting to speak prophetically and polemically from behind the walls of a monastery. The prominent church historian and public theologian Martin Marty was one such critic [. . .] The other critic was Rosemary Ruether] who [. . .] initiated a contentious correspondence with Merton along similar lines: criticizing him for talking and writing about action instead of acting. (Sweeney 2021, pp. 80–81)

Yet, in 1965, two years before Dr. King denounced the war in Vietnam, Merton the prophetic mystic and monk denounced the war in Vietnam, calling it an atrocity. Merton the contemplative activist was in his later years becoming more radical in his writings. As Leonardo Boff reminds us, "all true liberation arises out of a deep encounter with God, which impels us toward committed action" (Boff 1993, p. 59). Merton thought that the root of war and unnecessary violence is fear of others. The antidote for this fear is to cultivate a spiritual practice of love in action, which is based on mutual trust. Again, Merton's personal conviction has its origins in his own contemplative vision of love's transformative power, which led him to keep his high hopes in humanity intact. Merton believed that it is only through compassionate love that we can treat the other as one of us, because God is love. Furthermore, Merton took sides with those who suffer. He spoke truth to power. Merton himself wrote:

> I am on the side of the people who are being burned, cut to pieces, tortured, held as hostages, gassed, ruined, destroyed. They are the victims of both sides. To take sides with massive power is to take sides against the innocent. The side I take is then the side of the people who are sick of war and want peace in order to rebuild their country. (Merton 1968, pp. 109–10)

Merton, having a compassionate heart, showed solidarity to all victims of violence. In his cosmic understanding that all life is interrelated and interconnected, Merton knew that we are all children of God. And this is the theological reason why loving your enemy as well as your neighbor is the Christian thing to do. As Merton himself said:

> The theology of love must seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice in the world, and not merely to compromise with them. . . In any case, it is a theology of *resistance*. . . which is at the same time *Christian* resistance and which therefore emphasizes reason and humane communication rather than force, but which also admits the possibility of force in a limit-situation when everything else fails. (Merton 1968, p. 9)

The prophetic voice of Merton does not turn a blind eye to the social injustices in the world. Merton wrote:

> A theology of love cannot afford to be sentimental. [. . .] A Theology of love cannot be allowed merely to serve the interests of the rich and powerful, justifying their wars, their violence and their bombs, while exhorting the poor and underprivileged to practice patience, meekness, longsuffering and to solve their problems, if at all, non-violently. (Merton 1968, p. 108)

Merton knew that he as a monk must speak out against social injustices and not remain silent. He sided with the African American community and endorsed the enlightened response by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who in the midst of personal and collective suffering had the courage to resist evil actions and racist behaviors. In addition, Merton built a network of people within and outside his monastic community in the hills of Kentucky. He corresponded with people from all over the world, including poets, artists,

intellectuals, spiritual and political activists, etc. In 1963, Heschel and King first met at the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago. The person who was instrumental in introducing Heschel to King and to the civil rights movement was Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum (1925–1992). He was the director of interreligious affairs, serving for thirty years at the American Jewish Committee and later as the director of international affairs. Tanenbaum was a former student of Heschel but he was the one who really pushed Heschel to activism and to become involved in the Jewish–Catholic dialogues at the Second Vatican Council. As Harold Kasimow has confessed, "Heschel also developed a deep friendship with Thomas Merton, the most influential American Catholic monk of the twentieth century. Merton wrote that Heschel "is the most significant and spiritual writer in this country at the moment. I like his depth and his realism. He knows God"" (Kasimov 2015, p. 75). Merton also knew about Heschel's activities through the Fellowship of Reconciliation and through common friends such as the Berrigans, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Jim Forest. According to Daniel Berrigan, a common friend to both Merton and Heschel:

> In this matter of an unashamed publicly expressed faith, Heschel was as usual with the fashion. One knew where stood, as for example, one knew where Martin Luther King stood. Their faith was consistent, lucid, intense, political. They and their like announced God in God's world, God suffering and rejoicing amid people, the people acknowledging God's sovereignty in their passion for justice and peace, in their prayer and worship. Faith and life in the world was all one, it was to be proclaimed, as the prophets had done, from the housetops, in season and out. (Berrigan 1991, p. 70)

Merton "intended to host Dr. King, Vincent Harding, and Thich Nhat Hanh for a week-long retreat in mid-April, 1968, but Dr. King was assassinated" (Oyer 2014, p. 234). But the meeting never came to fruition. Merton was deeply wounded when he heard that Dr. King was killed. He saw King as a modern American prophet who spoke Truth to power, like the old prophets did. Merton felt that King knew he would be killed soon but in spite of all, the African American prophet put his whole life into what he deeply believed. It was a true statement of prophetic courage and sacrifice. Merton learned an important lesson from King's martyrdom. He told religious sisters during a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani the following:

> He [Dr. King] obviously knew his death was imminent. Yes, he had clearly accepted it. He may have felt that it was one last thing he could do that was not equivocal. This is a kind of pattern of what's required for the prophetic vocation. Not that we have to go out and get shot, but that we have to have a clear grasp of the situation and be unequivocal about it. It may mean that sooner or later we will be faced with choices which require a break with the establishment. (Merton 1997, p. 73)

Before planning this meeting with King, Merton was successful in organizing a retreat meeting with fourteen people who spent three days in November 1964 at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Among the participants, Merton invited the following witnesses who were pacifists: Abraham J. Muste, John Oliver Nelson, Dan and Phil Berrigan, Jim Forest, Tom Cornell, John Grady, Wilbur H "Ping" Ferry, John Howard Yoder, Anthony Walsh, Robert Cunnane, Charles Ring, and Elbert Jean. Merton took the middle way and recommended any activist to build a true fellowship, a beloved community rooted in the principle of serving God and humanity, and not just a political movement. Merton made it very clear in his interpretive talks given on Eberhard Arnold and the ideal of living in community. His personal opinion is well stated when he said:

> I personally think that we should be in between; we shouldn't be on the conservative side and we shouldn't be on the radical side-we should be Christians. We should understand the principles that are involved and realize that we can't get involved in anything where there is not true Christian fellowship. [. . .] Most activists do not go in for naked violence yet, but they will. (Arnold 1995, p. 55)

Merton would have preferred to have women invited to this meeting but in those days, the monastery was not welcoming women to stay in the guest house. Therefore, it was more a logistical problem than blaming Merton for excluding women in this historical meeting. I am sure Merton would have invited Dorothy Day, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, and other prophetic figures of his day. It is well-known how influential these women were in Merton's life and writings, especially through their exchange of letters. All of Merton's network of witnesses has expressed the great joy of sharing and communicating with a spiritual friend when God allows it to happen, and they kept giving support to each other spiritually and emotionally when things got tough.

Merton and Heschel as spiritual writers chose the vehicle of words as the most potent spiritual weapon against the social injustices they witnessed in their times. Merton, within the monastic Trappist context, spoke like a true modern prophet by denouncing the social injustices of his day. Heschel prayed with his legs in Selma while Merton supported Heschel and other clouds of witnesses from his cabin in the woods of Kentucky. This does not mean that Heschel was just a prophet and Merton a mystic. In fact, they both were modern prophets and mystics. As Bruce Epperly has said about Heschel's prophetic mysticism,

> While there are many models of mysticism and spirituality, Heschel's unique contribution is his focus on prophetic spirituality. The prophet is one who experiences her- or himself as being encountered by God and given insights into God's vision for history, and who is sensitive to injustice and pain caused by the decisions of the powerful. The living God feels the pain of the world, and those who follow God are especially empathetic toward those who experience injustice, illness, discrimination, or neglect. [...] There is no ultimate distinction between spiritual and political, individual and communal, in prophetic faith. [. . .] Accordingly, Heschel's spirituality compelled him to march in Selma and to oppose publicly the Vietnam War. (Epperly 2020, pp. 85–86)

For Heschel,

> The preoccupation with justice, the passion with which the prophets condemn injustice, is rooted in their sympathy with divine pathos. The chief characteristic of prophetic thought is the primacy of God's involvement in history. History is the domain with which the prophets' minds are occupied. They are moved by a responsibility for society, by a sensitivity to what the moment demands. (Heschel 2021, p. 48)

Merton was banned from publishing on war and peace. Unfortunately, before the Second Vatican Council, the Church was reluctant to embrace modern reforms. As a result, Merton suffered the consequences of being a pioneer in his effort to promote renewal within the Church. The ecclesiastical authorities tried to silence him, but he found ways to publish his material and spread his ideas which won the day. In our time, interfaith dialogue has become an integral part of the official teachings of the Catholic Church after 1965. Just recently, Pope Francis spoke in Japan of the use of nuclear weapons as evil, which is especially relevant as he visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Merton would have not faced censorship under Pope Francis on his writings on war and peace. Merton offered practical solutions to the problem of the war in Vietnam by indicating that the American government must act non-violently, de-escalate and stop the bombing raids, stop destroying crops, and engage in peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese.

Both Merton and Heschel knew that we are all created in the image and likeness of God (*imago dei*). This is why their mystical vision of the Divine led them to act with compassion and with a righteous sense of justice. For Heschel, "[t]o bring about the restitution of the universe was the goal of all efforts" (Heschel 1995b, p. 72). Our human task is to cleanse and repair the world by performing good deeds. For Heschel, the notion of *tikkun olam* or repairing the world is essential to understanding the uniqueness of the Jewish mystical perspective on compassion and the restoration of unity. In so doing, we get closer to God by way of redemption. The task of the prophet is to bring the eternal consciousness of God

into our present time and into our human situation. This means human actions are required to choose out of their own personal freedom to do God's Will, hoping that the good deeds done by His co-partners in this ongoing cosmic drama of creation will minimize evil and will alleviate the unnecessary suffering of so many creatures. As Heschel himself stressed in his philosophy of Judaism: "The world is in need of redemption, but the redemption must not be expected to happen as an act of sheer grace. Man's task is to make the world worthy of redemption. His faith and his works are preparations for *ultimate redemption*" (Heschel 1994, p. 380). Clearly, this statement will not be welcomed in some Christian circles because it contradicts its own interpretation of God's omnipotence and the whole doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

Both Merton and Heschel knew first-hand that fear of the other is the root cause of all wars, conflicts, and violent responses in history. Merton wrote in his essay "The Root of War is Fear" that "[if] you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed-but hate these things in yourself, not in another" (p. 19). According to Heschel, "[t]here is a longing for peace in the hearts of man. But peace is not the same as the absence of war. Peace among men depends upon a relationship of reverence for each other" (Heschel 1972, pp. 181–82). As the Jewish rabbi has observed, "[w]e have failed to offer sacrifices on the altar of peace; thus we offered sacrifices on the altar of war" (Heschel 1987, p. 148). Furthermore, he said: "Either we make an altar for God or it is invaded by demons. There can be no neutrality. Either we are ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil" (Heschel 1987, p. 151). To remain neutral in situations of evil is to become a guilty bystander, as Merton reiterated in his writings on peace and war. For Heschel, "[w]e should have insisted in the spirit of the prophetic vision that more knowledge should also mean more reverence, that more civilization should also mean less violence" (Heschel 1965, p. 100). In sum, Heschel believed that "[i]n the eyes of the prophet, justice is more than an idea or a norm: justice is charged with the omnipotence of God. What ought to be, shall be!" (Heschel 1965, p. 100). As I can attest following their numerous publications, both Merton and Heschel have left us with a rich legacy of spiritual writings on peace and justice.

5. The Prophetic Legacies of Merton and Heschel

The prophetic legacies of Merton and Heschel are beacons of hope for humanity because they never gave up as witnesses for truth, peace, justice, and love. As Heschel often reported: "God's dream is not to be alone, to have mankind as a partner in the drama of continuous creation. By whatever we do, by every act we carry out, we either advance or obstruct the drama of redemption; we either reduce or enhance the power of evil" (Heschel 1965, p. 119). Or as Heschel wrote in a different book: "The task is never to forget that by each sacred deed we commit, by each word we hallow, by each thought we chant, we render our modest part in reducing distress and advancing redemption" (Heschel 1973, p. 299). For Heschel, God is always waiting for us to redeem the world. God needs the help of humans to perform good deeds. Without our human help, God cannot fulfill His ultimate eschatological promise of salvation. This is the real messianic task of cosmic restoration, of rebirth, of renewal, of *tikkun olam* or healing the world. Merton shared in this Jewish messianic view of salvation for all, since he knew that the world is still a work in progress and also an unfinished business that requires our partnership with God in building the Earth.

Merton and Heschel integrated, in their lives and thoughts, the mystical life and the prophetic life in different ways. By responding to their inner calling, they were able to partake in the divine life in building the kingdom of God here on earth. Merton's and Heschel's prophetic messages of compassion and love are still relevant to us in an age of polarization and ongoing wars and conflicts. For Heschel, "[t]he deepest wisdom man can attain is to know that his destiny is to aid, to serve. [. . .] For the pious man it is a privilege to die" (Heschel 1995a, p. 296). This selfless service motif found in Heschel as well as in Merton proves their shared vision of a new creation where we are all called to become

co-partakers in building the Beloved community in the here and now, regardless of whether we believe in the same God or not.

This article has demonstrated that although Thomas Merton was different from Abraham Joshua Heschel in many ways, the Trappist monk was very fond and sympathetic to the prophetic mysticism held by Heschel. As mystics, both Merton and Heschel converge as co-partakers in building the earth and finding God in all things. In turn, the mystics must respond to this great gift of God's grace with humility in their hearts by taking upon their shoulders the great burden and shared sense of responsibility to build the heavenly kingdom on earth. As Merton has reiterated in his messages of hope, "It is precisely because I believe, with Abraham Heschel and a cloud of witnesses before him, that 'man is not alone,' that I find hope even in this most desperate situation" (Merton 1968, p. 117). Consequently, Merton and Heschel found hope in joining hands with people of goodwill and of other faith traditions. Christians have often thought that heaven, their true home, was physically located in a far celestial realm and thereby this universe is not our true home. This theology is rarely found in Judaism because their emphasis is not on being found in the afterlife but on doing good deeds here on earth. However, Merton and Heschel took the awesome responsibility of building the earth seriously. Their spiritual legacy still resonates with many people around the globe, and their inspiration serves us well in building a more lasting, peaceful, and just world in which to live. The fact that a Catholic monk and a Jewish rabbi were able to meet in person and form a strong spiritual bond beyond any disputes of religious dogmas or doctrines proves that hope is always present in our ongoing healing and repairing of the world. I am positive both Merton and Heschel, if they were alive today, would join hands and efforts to heal the divisions and polarizations that we find in the U.S. and abroad, from Russia to the Middle East. Without any doubt, spiritual dialogue among people of different faiths is a firm step towards peace and reconciliation.

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Laozi's Ecofeminist Ethos: Bridging Ancient Wisdom with Contemporary Gender and Environmental Justice

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Abstract: This paper delves into the convergence of Laozi's Daoist mysticism with the principles of ecofeminism, highlighting the potential for ancient wisdom to inform contemporary issues of gender and environmental justice. Through an examination of the *Dao De Jing*, we uncover insights into a holistic approach to social justice that integrates ecological sustainability and gender equality. Laozi's teachings, characterized by the principles of *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*, offer a foundational framework for understanding the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of living in harmony with the natural world. By analyzing relevant passages and concepts from the *Dao De Jing*, this paper demonstrates how Daoist philosophy aligns with and enriches ecofeminist values, advocating for a society that honors the balance between humanity and nature and recognizes the integral role of women in achieving environmental and social harmony. This paper presents case studies that illustrate the practical application of Daoist principles in ecological feminist practices, shedding light on the successes and challenges of integrating ancient philosophical insights into modern activism. The fusion of Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism provides a compelling vision for addressing the intertwined challenges of gender inequality and environmental degradation, suggesting pathways toward a more just, sustainable, and harmonious world. In doing so, it calls for a reimagined approach to social justice that is deeply informed by an understanding of ecological sustainability and gender equality as mutually reinforcing goals.

Keywords: Laozi; Daoist mysticism; ecofeminism; gender justice; environmental justice; *Dao De Jing*; harmony; sustainability

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the intersections of ancient wisdom and contemporary social justice movements have garnered increasing attention among scholars and activists alike. This convergence is particularly poignant in the dialogue between Laozi's Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism, where ancient philosophical principles offer fresh insights into modern struggles against environmental degradation and gender injustice. The *Dao De Jing*, attributed to Laozi, serves as a cornerstone text for Daoism—a tradition steeped in the values of *Dao* (*dao* 道), *Wu-wei* (*wuwei* 無為), and *Ziran* (*ziran* 自然). These principles, while ancient, resonate deeply with the aims and aspirations of ecofeminism, a movement that seeks to address the intertwined oppressions of gender and environmental injustice (Warren 1997).

Ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, emerges from the critical insight that the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women are interconnected phenomena, both stemming from a patriarchal worldview that values domination over care, competition over cooperation, and extraction over sustainability (Shiva and Mies 2014). This perspective highlights the ways in which environmental degradation and gender inequality are not isolated issues but are deeply entangled within the fabric of societal norms and structures. Therefore, ecofeminism advocates for a holistic approach to social justice—one that simultaneously addresses the need for environmental preservation and the advancement of gender equality.

Laozi has been called "the earliest feminist thinker in human history" (Zhang and Zhang 2010). His Daoism, with its rich philosophical heritage, offers profound insights into the natural world and human existence; "It advocates the deconstruction of power through a feminist philosophy that seeks freedom in intimacy with nature" (Liu 2022). Central to Daoist thought is the concept of *Wu-wei*, or non-action, which advocates for a way of living that is in harmony with the natural rhythms and patterns of the *Dao*—the underlying principle that governs all existence (Feng 1947). Daoism has historically provided a unique philosophical stance characterized by principles such as *Wu-wei*. Daoism responded to the rigid moral structures of Confucianism, highlighting a path that emphasizes naturalness and spontaneity over structured moral imperatives (Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes 2013). This approach encourages a life of simplicity, spontaneity, and alignment with *Ziran*, or the self-arising nature of things. Through these teachings, Daoism promotes a worldview that respects the interconnectedness of all life and the value of maintaining balance within the cosmos. In such a world, nature is the highest value, "wherein love and compassion and caring for one another are generated" (Liu 2005).

The thesis of this paper posits that Laozi's Daoist mysticism, as encapsulated in the *Dao De Jing*[1], provides a foundational framework for addressing contemporary ecological and gender-based injustices. Rawls said, "Justice is the first virtue of social systems" (Rawls 1971). Thomas Michael believes that Laozi constructed his view of justice around four concepts: Heaven and Earth (tiandi 天地), the constant *Dao* (changdao 常道), the *Dao* of humans (renzhidao 人之道), and the *Dao* of Heaven (tiandao 天道 or tianzhidao 天之道) (Michael 2023). Among these concepts, The *Dao* of humans is against nature and unjust, while Heaven and Earth, the constant *Dao*, and the *Dao* of Heaven follow nature and justice[2]. Thus, from Laozi's perspective, we can also say "Nature is the primary standard of justice." By exploring the synergies between Daoist philosophy and ecofeminist values, this paper aims to uncover a holistic approach to social justice—one that is deeply informed by an understanding of ecological sustainability and gender equality as mutually reinforcing goals.

This paper first comprehensively outlines the core teachings of Laozi's Daoism, with a special focus on the concepts of *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*. This exploration will highlight how Daoist philosophy offers insights into living in harmony with the natural laws and principles, emphasizing the importance of balance, moderation, and respect for the intrinsic value of all forms of life. Next, this article delves into ecofeminism, tracing its theoretical roots and outlining its key principles and objectives. This section elucidates how ecofeminism challenges the dualistic thinking that separates nature from culture and men from women, instead advocating a perspective of understanding the world that recognizes the profound interconnection between the health of the Earth and the wellbeing of all of its inhabitants. The heart of this paper then examines the intersection of Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism, drawing parallels between the two perspectives in their critique of dominant paradigms and their vision for a more equitable and sustainable world. This analysis will demonstrate how the principles of Daoism can complement and deepen ecofeminist approaches to social justice, providing a rich philosophical foundation for re-envisioning the relationships between humans, other living beings, and the Earth. Furthermore, this paper will explore practical implications of this integrated approach, considering how insights from Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism can inform contemporary activism, policymaking, and everyday life practices aimed at achieving a more just and sustainable world. Through this discussion, this paper aims to illustrate the transformative potential of bringing together ancient wisdom and modern social justice movements in the quest for a better future. Lastly, this paper reiterates the thesis that Laozi's Daoist mysticism offers valuable resources for ecofeminist efforts to combat ecological and gender injustices.

By embracing the holistic worldview proposed by Daoism and integrating it with ecofeminist values, this paper argues for a comprehensive approach to social justice that is capable of addressing the complex and interconnected challenges facing contemporary societies. Through this synthesis, we can aspire to create a world that honors the intercon-

nectedness of all life, fostering a more harmonious, equitable, and sustainable existence for generations to come.

2. Laozi's Daoist Mysticism: Concepts and Context

Laozi's Daoist mysticism, as encapsulated within the venerable text of the *Dao De Jing*, presents a profound and nuanced philosophy that has intrigued scholars, practitioners, and seekers of wisdom for centuries. At the heart of this mystical tradition are the concepts of *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*, which together form the bedrock of Daoist thought and spiritual practice. Laozi believed that all humans and all things originate from nature and, ultimately, return to it. He envisioned harmony among all things as a state of completeness, self-sufficiency, and simplicity. He stated "The *Dao* is great, the heaven is great, the earth is great, and king is also great. There are four greats in the world, and king is one of them" (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 25). In Laozi's view, king should embody the laws of nature and ought to be the best among humans (Li 2008), which is why Laozi stated, "the king is also great," and humans are a part of nature, coexisting and thriving with all other beings without distinction of status or value; at the same time, humans are the spirits of all beings and should therefore bear the responsibility of "assisting the natural ways of all things" (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 64) (Zhang 2008). In the process of "assisting the natural ways of all things", humans must heed Laozi's teachings "not to engage in reckless action" (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 64), but to comply with and aid nature, allowing all things to develop and grow naturally according to their own nature.

2.1. Exploration of Key Daoist Concepts: Dao, Wu-wei, and Ziran

The *Dao*: The Way Beyond Words

The *Dao*, often translated as "The Way", stands as a profound principle in Daoism that transcends simple definition or categorization; it is one of the most important terms in Chinese thought and philosophy (Guo 2010). This summary distills the core translations from the *Dao De Jing* to emphasize their contributions to understanding Daoism's essence and their relevance to broader philosophical discourses.

Key translations of *Dao* in the *Dao De Jing*:

Chapter 1: "The *Dao* that can be told is not the eternal *Dao*." This opening sets the tone for the *Dao*'s ineffable nature.

Chapter 25: Describes the *Dao* as pre-existing the universe, embodying tranquility and permanence, thereby highlighting its role as the ultimate origin.

Chapter 32: Compares the *Dao* to a river or sea, illustrating its vast and guiding presence in the world.

The *Dao*'s portrayal across various chapters, such as Chapters 8, 18, 21, and 73, shows its application from governing principles to metaphysical descriptions, suggesting a versatile influence on both the practical and spiritual levels. Chapters such as 42 and 48 reveal the *Dao*'s foundational impact on creation and wisdom, implying a continuous cycle of learning and unlearning.

Laozi's frequent use of feminine terms like "mother", "female", and "maternity" to describe the *Dao* highlights its nurturing and generative qualities, aligning with ecofeminist perspectives that emphasize care and interdependence. Feng's interpretation of the *Dao* as akin to female genitalia and Xiao Bing and Ye Shuxian's views on female worship underscore the *Dao*'s role in fostering a culture of reproduction and respect for the feminine (Feng 1962; Xiao and Ye 1993). The *Dao De Jing*'s emphasis on *Wu-wei* and *Ziran* across various chapters (e.g., Chapters 40 and 57) advocates for a way of life that harmonizes action with spontaneity and ethical conduct, without forced efforts. The *Dao* is both the source and the driving force behind everything that exists, yet it remains beyond the grasp of language and conceptual thought (Wu and Wu 2009). It is not merely a path to be followed but the underlying reality of all that is. In Daoist mysticism, the *Dao* represents the ultimate reality, an unchanging and indescribable force that permeates the cosmos. It is both immanent, manifesting in every aspect of the natural world, and transcendent, existing beyond

the physical realm. This dual nature of the *Dao* challenges the dualistic thinking prevalent in many other philosophical and religious traditions, proposing instead a vision of unity and interconnectedness, in which the "female theory helps us to rebuild the harmonious relationship between man and man and between man and nature" (Gu 2017).

Wu-wei: The Art of Non-Action

Wu-wei, often translated as "non-action" or "inaction", is a foundational concept in Daoism that emphasizes acting in harmony with the natural flow of the *Dao*. This summary presents a concise exploration of *Wu-wei*'s appearances in the *Dao De Jing* and its philosophical implications, structured to enhance readability and highlight its relevance to the thesis.

Key translations of *Wu-wei* in the *Dao De Jing*:

Chapter 2: Illustrates how sages lead by example, performing actions that are effortless and unspoken yet effective, embodying the principle of *Wu-wei*.

Chapter 3: Suggests that by adopting *Wu-wei*, societal and personal order is naturally achieved.

Chapter 10: Questions the possibility of governing with detachment and without intervention, reinforcing the *Wu-wei* approach to leadership.

Chapter 38: Distinguishes between higher and lower virtues, with the superior virtue acting through *Wu-wei*, devoid of overt effort or motive.

Chapter 43: Demonstrates how the softest approaches can overcome the hardest challenges through *Wu-wei*, signifying the power of gentleness and flexibility.

Chapter 48: Discusses the diminishing of active learning in favor of intuitive understanding, a core aspect of *Wu-wei*.

Chapter 57: Shows that natural transformation in people arises from the leader's practice of *Wu-wei*, leading to self-governance and harmony.

Chapter 64: Encourages supporting the natural progression of events without force, highlighting *Wu-wei*'s role in fostering natural success.

Wu-wei is not about doing nothing but, rather, about doing what is naturally aligned with the *Dao*; it is an action guided by a deep understanding of and integration with the natural world, as opposed to forced or artificial efforts. This principle contrasts with Western notions of active intervention, offering a perspective that values spontaneity and intrinsic order over control and manipulation. *Wu-wei*'s advocacy for effortless action resonates with modern ecological and social movements that emphasize sustainability and reducing human impact. The concept promotes living in harmony with nature, aligning closely with principles of sustainability and ethical interaction within ecosystems (Xiong 1996). By embracing *Wu-wei*, individuals and societies can achieve their goals with minimal resistance and maximum efficiency. This practice encourages a return to simplicity and authenticity, fostering a deeper connection with the natural rhythms of life and the universe. *Wu-wei* thus provides a valuable framework for addressing contemporary challenges, from personal wellbeing to global sustainability, illustrating how ancient wisdom can inform modern practices.

Ziran: The Principle of Naturalness

Ziran, a pivotal concept in Daoism, is often translated as "naturalness" or "spontaneity" and is crucial for understanding Daoist philosophy's emphasis on the intrinsic, self-arising nature of things. It is from this concept of *Ziran* that Laozi established his theory of Daoism (Wei 2018). This summary distills the core translations and contexts from the *Dao De Jing* to elucidate *Ziran*'s role and relevance in broader philosophical discourse. *Ziran* is associated with a range of meanings, including "naturalness", "nature", "self-doing", "self-going", "being free", "spontaneous", and "spontaneity" (Guo 2010; Liu 2016), underscoring its diverse implications in Daoist thought.

Key translations of *Ziran* in the *Dao De Jing*:

Chapter 17: Describes achievements happening so naturally that people feel that they occurred spontaneously.

Chapter 23: Advocates for minimal speech and following the natural way, emphasizing simplicity and authenticity.

Chapter 25: Illustrates the cascading order of adherence from humans to the Earth, and from Earth to the Heavens, culminating in all following the *Dao*, which itself adheres to the natural way.

Chapter 51: Reflects on the reverence for the *Dao* and virtue as inherently constant without being commanded.

Chapter 64: Portrays the sage who supports the natural progression of things without imposing actions, aligning with the spontaneous nature of *Ziran*.

Ziran relates to living in harmony with the *Dao*, suggesting that all phenomena evolve naturally in accordance with the *Dao*, without external force or manipulation; it embodies a state of uncontrived simplicity and authenticity, where actions arise from an innate understanding of what is appropriate in each moment. *Ziran* contrasts with Western notions of control and manipulation, advocating for a philosophy of freedom and natural progression; it challenges the dualistic approach of human versus nature, proposing a unified vision where actions are integrated with the natural order. The concept encourages a return to natural states, promoting actions driven not by desire or fear but by a deep alignment with what is inherently right, reflecting a trust in the natural wisdom of the universe. The concept of *Ziran* encourages a return to the natural state, where actions are taken not out of desire for gain or fear of loss, but from an innate understanding of what is inherently right and appropriate in each moment (Xing and Sims 2012). By embodying *Ziran*, individuals engage in life with a respect for the natural order, trusting life's processes, embracing change, and living in harmony with the cosmos. This approach not only fosters personal peace but also enhances collective wellbeing by reinforcing interconnectedness and mutual respect among all beings.

Interconnectedness of Dao, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*

The *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran* form a trinity within Daoist philosophy, each concept intricately woven into the fabric of the others. The *Dao* embodies the underlying principle of the universe—the invisible source and order that governs all things—and is "the mechanism by which the ultimate meaning occurs" (Zhang 2022); it represents the natural flow and rhythm of existence, a vast and ever-changing dance of energy. *Wu-wei* is not about passivity but, rather, about acting in accordance with the *Dao*; it is about aligning oneself with the natural flow, responding with fluidity and adaptability rather than forceful intervention (Liu 1996). *Ziran* represents the effortless manifestation of the *Dao* in the world; it is the state of being where actions flow naturally, mirroring the inherent order of the universe.

Imagine the *Dao* as a vast ocean, with its currents and tides representing the natural order of existence. *Wu-wei* becomes the art of navigating these currents—not fighting against them, but using sails and rudder to move with grace and efficiency. The destination is not a rigid endpoint but, rather, a harmonious journey within the flow. *Ziran*, then, is the effortless movement of the sailboat itself—a perfect expression of the ocean's power channeled through the vessel's design. The boat does not need to force its way through the water; it simply moves in accordance with the natural forces at play.

This interconnectedness between the *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran* fosters a profound sense of harmony with the natural world. By understanding the *Dao*, we gain a deeper appreciation for the inherent order and beauty of the universe. By practicing *Wu-wei*, we learn to act in ways that complement this order, minimizing disruption and maximizing flow, and by cultivating *Ziran*, we strive to embody this naturalness in our own actions, becoming expressions of the *Dao* ourselves. The relationship among the *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran* is dynamic, where each principle reinforces and deepens the significance of the others. Through the understanding of the *Dao*, one finds the motivation for *Wu-wei*, the practice of which naturally results in *Ziran*. This cyclical relationship reflects the very cycles and rhythms of the natural world that the *Dao* itself encapsulates. In living through *Wu-wei*, one aligns with the *Dao*, leading to actions and existence that are marked by *Ziran*. This

alignment not only fosters personal peace and fulfillment but also harmonizes individual actions with the larger order of the universe, promoting a balance that benefits not just the individual but the community and the natural world at large.

Laozi's mysticism, through the lens of these interrelated concepts, challenges us to reevaluate our approach to life and our interactions with the environment; it calls for a profound alignment with the *Dao*, achieved through the practice of *Wu-wei*, resulting in a life of *Ziran*. This philosophical approach views human existence not as separate from the natural order but as an integral part of it, where each individual's understanding and application of these principles can lead to a harmonious existence that echoes the fundamental truths of the universe. By embracing the *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*, we not only cultivate a deeper connection with the world around us but also contribute to the sustaining and flourishing of the natural order.

2.2. Historical Context of Laozi's Teachings

The historical backdrop against which Laozi's teachings emerged was a period of immense social and political upheaval. The Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BCE) in China witnessed the decline of the Zhou Dynasty's centralized authority, leading to a power struggle among various warring states. This era of constant conflict and instability fueled a philosophical renaissance, as thinkers grappled with the question of how to restore order and harmony to a fractured society.

Challenging the Status Quo: A Reaction to Patriarchal Excess

Within this context, some scholars posit that Laozi's *Dao De Jing* emerged as a critique of the dominant social and political structures. The patriarchal system of the time, characterized by hierarchical power dynamics and with an emphasis on aggressive expansion, was seen as a contributing factor to the prevailing chaos. Laozi, according to this interpretation, sought to champion qualities traditionally associated with the feminine, such as compassion, *Wu-wei*, and gentleness, as antidotes to the societal ills of the time (Zhang 2014). However, it is important to acknowledge that evidence for a deliberate feminist undercurrent in the *Dao De Jing* is open to debate.

A Call for Harmony and Order Through Alignment with the *Dao*

The prevailing philosophical paradigm of the time was largely shaped by Confucianism, which emphasized social order achieved through strict hierarchies, moral codes, and adherence to rituals. In contrast, Laozi's teachings offered a vision of achieving peace and stability through aligning oneself with the *Dao*, the natural order of the universe. This philosophy, advocating for a return to a simpler, more natural way of life, stood in stark contrast to the rigid control and moralism advocated by other schools of thought (Liu 1996).

Beyond the Immediate: A Philosophical Legacy

Laozi's ideas, with their emphasis on inner harmony and balance over external control, were revolutionary for their time. They challenged the dominant Confucian perspective and resonated with those seeking alternative ways of understanding the world and navigating the complexities of life during a period of societal unrest (Shen and Qian 2012). The Daoist concepts of *Ziran* and *Wu-wei* offered a distinct approach to living and governing, emphasizing harmony with nature rather than active intervention and manipulation. This philosophy suggested that true peace and order could be attained through a deep understanding of the natural world's inherent rhythms and patterns (Shi 2000).

Daoism's Enduring Influence: A Legacy that Spans Millennia

Laozi's teachings transcended their immediate historical context to leave an indelible mark on Chinese culture for centuries to come. Daoist principles—particularly the emphasis on living in harmony with nature—have profoundly influenced Chinese aesthetics, ecological practices, and philosophical discourse. The *Dao De Jing* continues to be a source of inspiration and contemplation for scholars, artists, and political leaders who seek guidance from its enduring wisdom.

A Global Conversation: Daoism's Reach Beyond China

The Daoist mystical tradition has garnered international interest and respect, fostering cross-cultural philosophical and spiritual dialogues. The widespread translation of the *Dao De Jing* into numerous languages and its study across diverse cultures highlight the universality of its message. Laozi's emphasis on simplicity, peace, and harmony resonates with contemporary human quests for meaning and balance in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. In reassessing the broader cultural and historical impacts of Laozi's teachings, it becomes evident that Daoism offered revolutionary insights that transcended the immediate sociopolitical context of the Spring and Autumn period. The philosophical legacy of Laozi not only influenced subsequent dynastic eras but also resonated with later feminist and ecological movements, advocating for harmony, balance, and a holistic connection with the natural world.

Conclusion: A Tapestry Woven from History and Philosophy

Understanding the historical context of Laozi's teachings enriches our appreciation of Daoist mysticism. The turmoil of the Spring and Autumn period provided fertile ground for the emergence of Laozi's revolutionary ideas, which offered a compelling alternative to the established Confucian order. Unlike the Confucianist, the Daoist seeks to follow the *Dao* in harmony with and through nature. The mystical teaching of *Wu-wei*, or the ideal of creative quietude, forms the basis for a new Daoist way of life based on the contemplative practices of simplicity, spontaneity, and naturalness (Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes 2013). These core Daoist principles transcended the immediate concerns of their time to establish a timeless philosophy that continues to inspire individuals and communities seeking harmony and balance in their lives. By delving into the origins and impacts of Laozi's teachings, we gain a deeper appreciation for Daoism's enduring value. This offers a powerful lens through which to examine the complexities of human existence, reminding us of the ancient quest for understanding and balance, and inviting us to explore a path of simplicity and naturalness that remains relevant even in the modern world.

3. Ecofeminism: Principles and Practices

Ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, is "a meeting between feminism and ecology", (Puleo 2017), representing a dynamic intersection within feminist and environmental movements that articulates a critical perspective on the relationship between the oppression of nature and the subjugation of women. This ideology emerges from the understanding that the environmental crisis and gender inequality are not separate issues but are intricately linked through the same systems of domination and exploitation. By examining the historical development and foundational ideas of ecofeminism, one can appreciate its significance in advocating for both environmental sustainability and gender equity.

3.1. Definition and History of Ecofeminism

The term "ecofeminism" itself was first coined in 1974 by the French feminist d'Eaubonne in her book "*Le Féminisme ou la Mort*" (Feminism or Death), where she called for women to lead a movement against the ecological destruction wrought by patriarchal societies. D'Eaubonne argued that the liberation of women and the salvation of the environment were deeply interconnected goals that could only be achieved through a radical restructuring of society (d'Eaubonne [1974] 2022). Ecofeminism is defined by its proponents as a movement that combines ecological concerns with feminist perspectives, highlighting the connection between the exploitation of natural resources and the oppression of women (Shiva and Mies 2014). This movement suggests that the same patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate gender inequality also drive environmental degradation, positioning both women and nature as subordinate to male authority and control. The roots of ecofeminism can be traced back to the early environmental and feminist movements of the 1970s, which began to identify and challenge the interconnected systems of oppression affecting both women and the planet.

Historical Development

The development of ecofeminism as a philosophical and activist stance has been influenced by various feminist and environmental milestones. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, ecofeminism gained momentum as activists and scholars began to more explicitly link the feminist critique of patriarchy with critical analyses of environmental degradation. Key events, such as the publication of Rachel Carson's "*Silent Spring*" in 1962, which exposed the dangers of pesticide use, and the emergence of the women's liberation movement, provided a backdrop for the ecological feminist movement to flourish (Rachel 1962). Ecological feminists pointed out that women—particularly those in marginalized communities—often bear the brunt of environmental degradation due to their closer ties to the natural world through roles in agriculture, family care, and as the primary gatherers of water and fuel in many traditional societies. This insight led to a broadening of the ecological feminist critique to include issues of racial and class injustice, making it a multifaceted movement that seeks to address a range of interconnected oppressions.

Core Themes and Ideas

Ecofeminism is based on the belief that the ideology behind modern society's exploitation of the environment is rooted in the same patriarchal structures that oppress women, with the current global crisis being a product of patriarchal culture (Salleh 1988). Warren noted that both the domination of nature by humans and the domination of women by men operate under a patriarchal culture-centered system, forming an oppressive conceptual framework characterized by three major features: (1) hierarchical thinking, which posits that higher ranks equate to higher value, while lower ranks equate to lower value; (2) binary opposition, which divides the world and everything in it into mutually exclusive and opposing aspects, X and Y, where one is valued over the other; and (3) logic of domination, holding that if X is of higher value than Y, then X's domination over Y is justified (Warren 1990). Based on this understanding, ecofeminism advocates for a world where ecological balance and gender equality are seen as inseparable goals, emphasizing the need for an environmental ethics that includes respect for women's rights and contributions. This perspective challenges the dualisms of man/nature and male/female, arguing instead for a holistic understanding of the interdependence between humans and the natural world (Val 1993). This movement also critiques the dominant scientific and economic paradigms that prioritize profit and growth over sustainability and equity, calling for alternative models of development that are inclusive and respectful of both human and non-human life. Through this lens, ecofeminism offers both a critique of existing systems and a vision for a more just and sustainable future.

In summary, the definition and historical development of ecofeminism reveal a movement deeply committed to addressing the intertwined destinies of women and the natural environment. By challenging the patriarchal underpinnings of environmental degradation and advocating for gender equity, ecofeminism represents a unique and vital perspective within both feminist and environmental discourses. Its evolution from a merging of feminist and environmental activism into a distinct philosophical stance highlights the importance of understanding and combating the interconnected systems of oppression that impact both the planet and its people.

3.2. Core Principles and How They Relate to Environmental and Gender Justice

Ecofeminism, with its integration of feminist and ecological concerns, is grounded in several core principles that illuminate its approach to achieving both environmental and gender justice. These principles not only critique the existing patriarchal and capitalist systems that lead to the degradation of the environment and the oppression of women (Giacomini 2020, p. 101), they also propose alternative ways of understanding and interacting with the world that foster sustainability, equity, and mutual respect among all forms of life.

Interconnectedness of Oppression

A foundational principle of ecofeminism is the belief in the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression, whether based on gender, race, class, or species. Ecological feminists argue that the mechanisms that marginalize women are intrinsically linked to those that

lead to environmental destruction. This perspective challenges the hierarchical dualisms—such as man/woman, culture/nature, or human/animal—that underpin patriarchal societies, suggesting instead that oppression is a multifaceted phenomenon that must be addressed in its entirety. By recognizing the interconnected nature of these systems of domination, ecofeminism seeks to dismantle them, advocating for a more equitable and just world (Radford Ruether 2003).

Ethics of Care

Central to ecological feminist thought is the ethics of care, which emphasizes empathy, compassion, and nurturing as essential components of an ethical relationship with both people and the environment (Cross 2018). This contrasts sharply with the more traditional environmental ethics, which often prioritizes rights-based and utilitarian approaches. The ethics of care advocates for personal responsibility and interconnectedness, urging individuals and societies to consider the impacts of their actions on others and the environment. This principle extends the notion of care beyond human relationships to include the more-than-human world, advocating for a form of environmental stewardship that is informed by care and mutual respect.

Holistic Worldview

Ecofeminism promotes a holistic understanding of the world that acknowledges the complex interdependencies between the natural environment and human societies; it critiques the reductionist and compartmentalized approaches of modern science and economics, which often ignore the intricate relationships that sustain life on Earth. Instead, ecofeminism embraces a worldview that recognizes the value of diversity, the importance of ecological balance, and the need for sustainable living practices that honor the Earth and all of its inhabitants. This holistic perspective is crucial for addressing the environmental and social challenges of our time in an integrated and comprehensive manner (Mellor 2007).

Sustainability and Regeneration

A commitment to sustainability and regeneration underpins the ecological feminist approach to environmental and gender justice. This principle involves rethinking our economic and social systems in ways that prioritize the long-term health of the planet over immediate profit and consumption. Ecological feminists advocate for renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and circular economies that mimic natural cycles of regeneration and minimize waste. By promoting practices that restore and rejuvenate the environment, ecofeminism contributes to the creation of a more sustainable and resilient world for future generations (Meinzen-Dick et al. 2014).

Solidarity and Alliance-Building

Finally, ecofeminism emphasizes the importance of solidarity and alliance-building among diverse movements fighting against oppression (Giacomini 2020). Recognizing that environmental and gender justice are part of a broader struggle for liberation, ecological feminists seek to forge alliances with indigenous rights activists, labor movements, anti-racist organizations, and other groups working towards a more equitable and just society. Through these collaborations, ecofeminism strengthens its capacity to challenge the dominant paradigms and practices that harm both people and the planet, highlighting the power of collective action in driving social change.

In summary, ecofeminism draws upon the theory of deep ecology, "conceptualizing human relations with nature as a form of domination" (Giacomini 2020, p. 101). The core principles of this theory—the interconnectedness of oppression, the ethics of care, a holistic worldview, sustainability and regeneration, and solidarity and alliance-building—offer a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the intertwined issues of environmental degradation and gender inequality. By grounding its approach in these principles, ecofeminism provides valuable insights into how we might reimagine our relationships with the natural world and with one another, fostering a more just, sustainable, and compassionate society.

4. Intersection of Daoism and Ecofeminism

Daoism can provide a powerful philosophical framework for ecofeminism, as it inherently values the natural world and its principles of harmony and balance. Unlike Confucianism, which has more patriarchal overtones, Daoism offers a perspective that is potentially more aligned with ecofeminist ideals, emphasizing equality and interconnectedness among lifeforms (Amy 2022). In the *Dao De Jing*, the terms representing femininity, such as "mother (mu 母)", "female (ci 雌)", and "maternity (pin 牝)", appear much more frequently and predominantly than those representing masculinity, such as "father (fu 父)", "male (xiong 雄)", and "paternity (mu 牡)". For instance, the character for "mother" occurs seven times, whereas "father" appears only once; "female" is mentioned twice, while "male" appears just once; "maternity (pin 牝)" is noted five times, in contrast to "paternity (mu 牡)", which appears twice. Moreover, in the *Dao De Jing*, these terms denoting femininity are always presented in a positive light. Clearly, Laozi showed a preference for the feminine, leading some scholars to regard him as an advocate of female supremacy (Zhu et al. 2022). The intersection of Daoism and ecofeminism presents a fascinating convergence of Eastern philosophy and Western feminist thought, each offering unique insights into the relationship between humanity and the natural world. This comparative analysis aims to explore the philosophical synergies and distinctions between Daoism and ecofeminism, highlighting how these two frameworks can inform and enhance one another in the pursuit of environmental sustainability and gender equity.

4.1. Comparative Analysis of Daoism and Ecofeminism

Philosophical Foundations

Daoism, an ancient Chinese philosophy, centers around the concepts of *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*, advocating for a life in harmony with the natural order. This philosophy can offer a "critical diagnosis and treatment of modernity and the contemporary ecological crisis situation" (Nelson 2020, p. 6); it emphasizes the importance of following the spontaneous flow of the universe, suggesting that true wisdom lies in recognizing and aligning with the rhythms of nature. Chapter 57 of the *Dao De Jing* says, "When I practice *Wu-wei*, the people naturally transform; When I love tranquility, the people naturally become upright; When I am free from affairs, the people naturally become wealthy; When I am free from desires, the people naturally become simple." This indicates that Laozi believed that true righteousness does not require forced intervention but naturally arises within the interactions and balance of Heaven, Earth, the universe, and humanity. This perspective challenges contemporary notions of justice, advocating for a method more in line with the rhythms and cycles of natural life. This encourages a deep respect for the natural world, seeing it not as a resource to be exploited but as a living, integral part of existence. Ecofeminism, on the other hand, emerges from a critique of the patriarchal structures that have led to both the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment; it posits that the ideologies driving the exploitation of nature are rooted in the same patriarchal systems that marginalize women. Ecofeminism advocates for an interconnected approach to social justice, emphasizing the importance of addressing environmental and gender issues as fundamentally linked challenges.

Synergies between Daoism and Ecofeminism

In Daoism, female is "not the power that is opposite to the male" (Liu 2022) but the symbol of nature, the source of all things, and even the representative of the best good. One of the key synergies between Daoism and ecofeminism lies in their shared emphasis on interconnectedness and holistic understanding, and they also share "a similar view of the ethic of life that nature is One" (Li 2023). Both frameworks challenge the dualistic thinking that separates humans from nature and men from women, proposing instead a vision of unity and mutual dependence. Daoism's concept of *Ziran* aligns with ecofeminism's critique of the artificial division between culture and nature, suggesting a return to a more integrated, authentic way of living. The ethics of care central to ecological feminist thought also finds resonance in Daoist philosophy. From an ecological feminist perspective, Dao-

ism encompasses feminist values (Li 2023). Daoism's appreciation for the intrinsic worth of all living beings and the emphasis on living in harmony with the *Dao* reflect a form of care and respect for the environment that is deeply aligned with ecological feminist principles. This shared ethics of care fosters a compassionate engagement with the world, advocating for actions that nurture rather than harm.

In reevaluating Daoist texts, especially the gender discourse in the *Dao De Jing*, we find that the *Dao*, as the fundamental principle of the universe, generates all things, including both males and females. Daoism does not emphasize gender differences but, rather, stresses the fundamental equality of all beings. The *Dao* produces everything in Heaven and Earth without distinction between Yin and Yang or male and female, reflecting its essential stance on gender equality. The concepts of "Unity of Heaven and Man" and "Harmony between Yin and Yang" in the *Dao De Jing* further suggest that when society reaches a state of natural harmony, gender distinctions will blur, and people will no longer be differentiated based on gender but will instead reflect the unity of humanity with nature. In Daoist texts, particularly in interpretations from various dynasties, the concept of the *Dao* is often linked with nature and generative forces—attributes that are culturally associated with femininity. The portrayal of female traits in the *Dao De Jing* is not limited to biological roles, such as reproduction and nurturing, but also includes traits like gentleness and compliance, closely related to the notion of "valuing softness" (Zhu et al. 2022). From a Daoist perspective, softness is a form of strength; it informs a way of living in accordance with natural laws, emphasizes the political philosophy of governing through non-action, and achieves social harmony through gentle forces. This view not only highlights the high regard for women in the *Dao De Jing* but also reflects the complexity and depth of gender notions in ancient texts.

Additionally, the maternal qualities of the *Dao* can be further understood through the annotations of He Shanggong, Wang Bi, Lu Xisheng, and Su Zhe on the phrase "the mother of all things" in the *Dao De Jing*. He (2015) remarked "The mother of all things refers to heaven and earth, which contain qi to give birth to all things, grow, mature, like a mother nurturing her child", illustrating the *Dao* as a nurturing mother to all beings. Wang's (2015) interpretation highlights "Once they have form and name, then they are nurtured and grown, sheltered and cherished, thus acting as their mother", emphasizing the maternal role of the *Dao* in the maturation process of all things. Lu (2015), from a more philosophical angle, explained "The so-called mother is the Dao; the child is the One. Lovingly nurturing its child involves feeding its spirit with desires; valuing nurturing its mother involves returning to the *Dao* through tranquility", indicating the *Dao* as not only the source of birth but also a haven and spiritual refuge. Su (2015) commented "Once it has a name, it spreads and becomes all things, and the things it nurtures are too numerous to count", illustrating the Dao's formless vastness and power through the birthing of all things. These explanations deepen our understanding of the *Dao* as a generative force and philosophical foundation, reinforcing Daoist texts' advocacy for gender equality and natural harmony.

Distinctions between Daoism and Ecofeminism

In the *Dao De Jing*, in addition to the aforementioned characters related to feminism, such as "mother (*mu* 母)", "female (*ci* 雌)", and "maternity (*pin* 牝)", there are also words like "valley (*gu* 谷)", "stream (*xi* 谿)", and "abyss (*yuan* 淵)", among which representative sentences include the following:

Chapter 1: The nameless (無名) is the beginning of Heaven and Earth; the named (有名) is the mother of all things.[3]

第一章：無名天地之始，有名萬物之母。

Chapter 4: The *Dao* is used but never filled, ever-inexhaustible; it is like the abyss (*yuan* 淵), seemingly the progenitor of all things.

第四章：道沖而用之，或不盈。淵兮，似萬物之宗。

Chapter 6: The valley (*gu* 谷) spirit never dies; it is called the mysterious maternity (*pin* 牝). The gate of the mysterious female is the root of Heaven and Earth; it is continuous and seems to exist forever, and it can be used without being exhausted.

第六章：谷神不死是謂玄牝。玄牝之門是謂天地根。綿綿若存，用之不勤。

Chapter 10: When the world is in turmoil, can one be like the female (ci 雌) ?

第十章：天門開闔，能為雌乎？

Chapter 20: I alone am different from others, and I cherish the mother (mu 母) who raised me.

第二十章：我獨異於人，而貴食母。

Chapter 28: Know the male (*xiong* 雄), yet keep to the female (*ci* 雌), and be the valley (*xi* 谿) of the world. Being the valley (*xi* 谿) of the world, constant virtue will not depart, enabling a return to the state of the infant.

第二十八章：知其雄，守其雌，為天下谿。為天下谿，常德不離，復歸於嬰兒。

Chapter 52: The world has a beginning, which can be regarded as the mother (mu 母) of the world. Once you find her, you can know her children; once you know her children, return to uphold the mother, and you will be safe all your life.

第五十二章：天下有始，以為天下母。既得其母，以知其子；既知其子，復守其母，沒身不殆。

Chapter 61: A great country is like the lower part of a river—the confluence of the world, the maternity (*pin* 牝) of the world. The maternity (*pin* 牝) always overcomes the paternity (mu 牡) with tranquility, using tranquility as her lower position.

第六十一章：大國者下流，天下之交，天下之牝。牝常以靜勝牡，以靜為下。

From the aforementioned words of Laozi, it can be seen that a key resonance between Daoism and ecofeminism lies in their mutual emphasis on interconnection and holistic understanding. Despite these synergies, there are also distinctions in the origins, emphases, and applications of Daoism and ecofeminism. Daoism's roots in ancient Chinese cosmology and its emphasis on mystical understanding and individual enlightenment offer a contrast to ecofeminism's more activist-oriented, critical approach to social structures and gender relations. Where Daoism seeks harmony through alignment with the *Dao* and the practice of *Wu-wei*, ecofeminism calls for active resistance against patriarchal and capitalist systems that perpetuate inequality and environmental destruction. Moreover, ecofeminism explicitly addresses the role of gender in the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women—a focus that is not inherently present in traditional Daoist texts. While Daoism advocates for a universal harmony and balance, ecofeminism emphasizes the need for social and political change to achieve gender equity and environmental justice.

In summary, the integrative potential of Daoism and ecofeminism lies in their ability to offer complementary perspectives on the relationship between humanity and the natural world. By blending Daoism's philosophical insights with ecofeminism's critique of patriarchal structures, an enriched framework emerges that advocates for environmental sustainability, gender equity, and a more profound respect for the interconnectedness of all life. This synthesis invites a reimagining of our place in the world, encouraging practices and ways of being that are sustainable, equitable, and aligned with the fundamental principles of both harmony and justice.

4.2. Discussion on Harmony, Natural Order, and Gender Equity

The intertwining of Daoism and ecofeminism offers a rich tapestry for exploring concepts such as harmony, natural order, and gender equity. These foundational elements serve not only as points of convergence but also as platforms for a deeper understanding of how these philosophies can inform and transform contemporary approaches to environmental and social issues.

Harmony and Natural Order

Harmony and natural order are central tenets of Daoism, which posits that living in accordance with the *Dao*, or "The Way", leads to a balanced and harmonious existence (Lee et al. 2009). This principle extends beyond the individual, suggesting that societies and

ecosystems thrive when they align with the natural rhythms and patterns of the universe (Cao and Xu 2012). Ecofeminism resonates with this notion of harmony but extends it to include the social realm, particularly in relation to gender relations. Ecological feminists argue that the patriarchal domination of women and nature disrupts the natural order, leading to environmental degradation and gender inequality. By advocating for a restoration of balance between humans and the natural world, ecofeminism seeks to reestablish a harmonious relationship that respects both ecological integrity and gender equity. The synergy between Daoism and ecofeminism lies in their mutual recognition of the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of maintaining balance within these relationships. Both philosophies challenge the exploitative and hierarchical structures that lead to disharmony, suggesting that true harmony is achieved through a respectful and reciprocal engagement with the natural world and with one another.

Natural Order and Gender Equity

The ecological feminist theologian Ivone (2003) pointed out that Christianity considers humans to be supernatural beings created by God and, thus, humans can dominate nature; furthermore, Christianity also sees women as immoral subjects compared to men, which is a typical dualism. In contrast to Christian culture, Daoism believes that the universe and everything in it were created by the *Dao* and are integral to the *Dao*. The concept of natural order in Daoism encompasses a holistic view of the universe, where every element has its place and purpose. This implies not a static or unchanging order but, rather, a dynamic equilibrium that adapts and evolves over time. Lai, after analyzing the *Dao De Jing*, pointed out that (1) feminine qualities and masculine vigor are not in opposition to one another but, rather, interdependent; and (2) feminine qualities and masculine vigor are not static and unchanging but, rather, dynamic and variable (Lai 2000). Daoism's embrace of change and impermanence offers a valuable perspective for addressing gender equity, suggesting that societal norms and roles are not fixed but can be transformed to reflect more equitable relationships. Ecofeminism brings to the forefront the idea that gender equity is an essential component of restoring natural order; it posits that the patriarchal disruption of natural processes is mirrored in the social oppression of women, and that addressing one requires addressing the other. In this way, ecofeminism and Daoism converge on the principle that gender equity and environmental sustainability are inseparable goals, each reinforcing the other. The discussion of harmony, natural order, and gender equity within the context of Daoism and ecofeminism opens up new avenues for envisioning a more just and sustainable world. As ZhuangZi (2010) said, "From the perspective of the *Dao*, all things are equal without distinction of high or low". This suggests that the principles of balance, reciprocity, and respect that underlie these philosophies can guide us toward solutions that honor the interconnectedness of all beings and promote the wellbeing of both the planet and its inhabitants.

In summary, the intersection of Daoism and ecofeminism illuminates the profound relationships between environmental sustainability, social justice, and gender equity. By drawing on the strengths of both philosophies, we can develop a more holistic approach to addressing the pressing challenges of our time. This integrated perspective emphasizes the necessity of harmony, the value of natural order, and the importance of gender equity as interconnected facets of a sustainable and equitable future.

5. Case Studies: Daoist Mysticism in Environmental and Gender Justice

We should more deeply integrate Daoist ecofeminism into current ecological debates and feminist movements, suggesting that these ancient teachings could offer valuable insights into creating more sustainable and equitable societies (Amy 2022). In the exploration of how Daoist mysticism intersects with ecofeminism, there are specific instances where Daoist principles have been applied to ecological feminist practices, offering insightful perspectives on environmental and gender justice. These case studies illuminate the practical application of Daoist philosophy in addressing contemporary issues, demonstrating the profound impact of integrating ancient wisdom with modern activism.

5.1. Analysis of Specific Instances Where Daoist Principles Have Been Applied to Ecological Feminist Practices

Case Study 1: Daoist Feminist Leadership in International Peace Activism

In the early–mid-20th century, the pioneering efforts of Jeannette Rankin in the United States highlighted a unique integration of Daoist principles and feminist values aimed at promoting international peace. As the first elected congresswoman in the U.S. and the only representative to oppose U.S. involvement in both World Wars, Rankin's leadership style and ethical stance were deeply influenced by the Daoist ideals of harmony and *Wu-wei*, as well as by a profound commitment to feminist pacifism (Joshi 2023).

Rankin's approach to leadership was characterized by a strong emphasis on empathy, peace, and the feminine virtues of compassion and modesty, reflecting core Daoist values. Her pacifist actions demonstrated a practical application of *Wu-wei*, where she effectively took non-aggressive stands that were both impactful and aligned with ecological feminist principles. By advocating for peace and opposing war, Rankin challenged patriarchal norms and contributed to a broader discourse on gender equity and ethical governance. Her leadership not only preserved ecological and human resources but also promoted a global feminist solidarity that was sensitive to the cultural nuances of both Eastern and Western perspectives. Her unique stance during critical moments in U.S. history illustrated how Daoist thought could be effectively applied to modern feminist movements, creating a foundation for enduring peace and cooperative international relations. Rankin's legacy continues to inspire feminist peace leaders across the world, emphasizing the relevance of integrating Daoist philosophy with feminist approaches to achieve sustainable global harmony and justice.

This case study underscores the potential of Daoist feminist leadership to foster significant changes in international politics, promoting peace and gender equity through a commitment to non-violence and a deep respect for the interconnectedness of all beings—principles that are increasingly relevant in today's globalized world.

Case Study 2: The Alex Wilson Community Garden and Sustainable Urban Planning

The Alex Wilson Community Garden (AWCG) in Toronto exemplifies the integration of Daoist and ecological feminist principles into sustainable urban development. Named after Alex Wilson, a landscape designer and community activist, the garden was established to honor his legacy of fostering harmonious relationships between people and the landscape. This case study illustrates how the garden's creation reflects Wilson's philosophy, which aligns with Daoist principles of living in harmony with nature and the ecological feminist focus on empowerment and community-centric development (Irvine et al. 1999).

The AWCG was inaugurated in June 1998 and encompasses 40 garden plots along with a naturalized area maintained by the community; its design and function serve as a practical application of sustainable land use, reflecting the garden's commitment to ecological restoration and community involvement. This initiative not only promotes biodiversity through the use of native plant species but also enhances local food security and fosters social cohesion by involving diverse community members in the garden's cultivation and upkeep. The planning process of the AWCG was notably participatory, involving Wilson's colleagues, local residents, and city planning officials, using innovative planning tools that are uncommon in urban settings, such as conservation easements. This inclusive approach ensured that the garden was a collective endeavor, which is central to both Daoist and ecological feminist ideologies. The garden's role in connecting the urban environment with natural processes showcases a living model of Daoist balance and ecological sustainability. Furthermore, the AWCG addresses key aspects of ecological feminism by empowering local residents, particularly through providing gardening opportunities to a nearby low-income housing complex and a drop-in center. In doing so, the garden contributes to addressing gender equity and enhancing the community's capacity for self-reliance—key components of ecological feminist theory.

In sum, the Alex Wilson Community Garden serves as a vibrant example of how urban green spaces can effectively integrate ecological principles with community empowerment, resonating deeply with both Daoist and ecological feminist values. This case study highlights the potential for urban community gardens to act as catalysts for sustainable development, fostering environmental stewardship and social equity in densely populated urban areas.

Case Study 3: The Chipko Movement in India

The Chipko movement, a non-violent protest movement that emerged in the Himalayas in the 1970s, exemplifies how ecological feminist and Daoist principles can converge in environmental activism. While not explicitly based on Daoism, the movement's focus on protecting trees by embracing them (Chipko means "to hug" in Hindi) resonates with the Daoist emphasis on respecting the natural world (Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 2019).

The Chipko movement relied on peaceful tactics, such as villagers embracing trees to prevent their felling. This aligns with the Daoist concept of Wu-wei by achieving environmental protection through passive resistance rather than aggressive confronta-tion. The movement's success in pressuring the Indian government to implement forest conservation policies demonstrates the effectiveness of non-violent action. Women in rural communities throughout the Himalayas played a leading role in the Chipko movement. Their actions challenged traditional patriarchal norms and highlighted the vital role that women play in protecting natural resources, aligning with ecological feminist values. The Chipko movement empowered local communities, giving them a voice in the management of their forests. This aligns with the Daoist ideal of living in harmony with nature by ensuring that human actions are guided by respect for the natural world's inherent value. The movement's success led to a shift towards more sustainable forestry practices in India.

The Chipko movement's integration of ecological feminist and Daoist principles demonstrates the power of non-violent action and community empowerment in achieving environmental protection; it highlights the importance of respecting nature and ensuring that women's voices are heard in environmental decision-making.

In summary, these case studies demonstrate the applicability and relevance of Daoist principles in ecological feminist practices. Whether through sustainable agriculture, grassroots environmental movements, or ecological feminist art, the integration of Daoism with ecofeminism offers innovative approaches to addressing environmental and gender justice. These examples highlight the potential for ancient wisdom to inform contemporary activism, providing valuable insights into how harmony, balance, and equity can be achieved in practice.

5.2. Examination of Successes and Challenges

The integration of Daoist principles into ecological feminist practices has both yielded notable successes and encountered significant challenges. These experiences offer valuable lessons on the potential and limits of applying ancient philosophical concepts to contemporary issues of environmental and gender justice.

Successes

One of the most evident successes of blending Daoist mysticism with ecological feminist practices is the promotion of sustainable living. Daoism's emphasis on living in harmony with nature and practicing *Wu-wei* has found resonance in ecological feminist efforts to reduce humans' impact on the environment. This has led to innovative approaches to agriculture, resource management, and community living that prioritize ecological balance and sustainability. Such practices not only help mitigate environmental degradation but also foster a sense of community and shared responsibility, which are crucial for long-term sustainability. Another significant achievement is the empowerment of marginalized groups—especially women—in environmental activism. By drawing on Daoist concepts of balance and harmony, ecological feminist movements have highlighted the importance of inclusive participation and the value of diverse perspectives in addressing environmen-

tal issues. This has facilitated the emergence of women-led initiatives that aim to restore natural landscapes, protect biodiversity, and advocate for environmental justice. These initiatives often challenge traditional power dynamics and offer alternative models of leadership and decision-making that are more collaborative and egalitarian.

Challenges

However, integrating Daoist principles into ecological feminist practices has not been without its challenges. One of the primary difficulties lies in bridging the gap between ancient philosophical concepts and the practical realities of modern environmental and gender issues (Xu 2003). While Daoism offers a profound understanding of the interdependence of all lifeforms and the importance of following natural rhythms, translating these ideas into concrete actions that effectively address systemic injustices can be complex. Additionally, the global nature of environmental degradation and gender inequality presents another layer of complexity. Daoist principles, with their roots in ancient Chinese culture and philosophy, may not always directly translate to diverse cultural contexts and contemporary global challenges. This has necessitated a creative adaptation of Daoist ideas to make them relevant and applicable to different settings and issues, which can sometimes dilute their essence or lead to misinterpretations. Moreover, the patriarchal structures that are deeply embedded in many societies pose a significant barrier to the full realization of ecological feminist goals informed by Daoist principles. Overcoming entrenched gender norms and practices that contribute to both environmental exploitation and gender inequality requires not only philosophical shifts but also systemic changes, which can be slow and met with resistance.

In summary, to overcome these challenges and build on the successes, it is crucial for practitioners of ecofeminism who are influenced by Daoist principles to engage in continuous dialogue and reflection. This involves critically examining how Daoist ideas can be most effectively translated into practices that promote environmental sustainability and gender equity in various cultural and social contexts; it also means fostering alliances with other movements and disciplines to enrich the ecological feminist approach with a diverse range of insights and strategies. Furthermore, there is a need for ongoing education and awareness-raising about the interconnectedness of environmental and gender justice issues. By highlighting the relevance of Daoist principles to these contemporary challenges, advocates can inspire broader engagement and action towards a more harmonious and equitable world.

6. The *Dao De Jing*'s Perspective on Gender and Environmental Justice

The *Dao De Jing*, attributed to the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi, is a foundational text of Daoist philosophy that offers profound insights into the nature of existence, governance, and the art of living. While the text does not explicitly address modern concepts of gender and environmental justice, its teachings on harmony, balance, and the intrinsic value of all beings provide a rich framework for interpreting these issues. Laozi "put forward political propositions on the basis of deep understanding of the changes between the ancient and modern times contain demands for the principles of social justice such as equality and freedom" (Lv 2005). This section analyzes relevant passages from the *Dao De Jing* and reveals how Daoist principles contribute to the modern discussion of gender and environmental justice.

6.1. Analysis of Relevant Passages from the Dao De Jing

Harmony with Nature

The *Dao De Jing* frequently emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with the natural world. For instance, in Chapter 25, Laozi wrote, "People follow the laws of the Earth, the Earth follows the laws of the Heaven, the Heaven follows the laws of *Dao*, and *Dao* follows the laws of Nature." This passage highlights the interconnectedness of all things and the necessity of aligning human actions with the broader rhythms of the Earth and the cosmos. From a perspective of environmental justice, Laozi hopes that society,

by "removing selfishness and self-centeredness, takes the attitude and method of noncontention and inaction to accomplish everything, and learns the humility, softness, and inclusiveness of water to promote harmony" (Jeng et al. 2022). This teaching underscores the need for sustainable practices that respect the Earth's limits and ensure the wellbeing of all of its inhabitants.

The Value of Softness and Flexibility

Laozi advocates for the virtues of softness and flexibility, often associating these qualities with water, which is capable of overcoming the hardest substances through persistence and gentleness. Chapter 78 states "Nothing in the world is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can surpass it in overcoming the hard and strong." This passage can be interpreted as a critique of aggressive, exploitative approaches to the natural world and an endorsement of more gentle, sustainable methods. Additionally, the association of softness and flexibility with strength challenges traditional gender norms that equate masculinity with hardness and dominance, promoting a more inclusive understanding of strength and power.

The Concept of *Wu-wei*

Wu-wei, or non-action, is a central concept in the *Dao De Jing*, advocating for actions that are in harmony with the natural order and free from forced effort. Ames and Hall believe that this concept " …provide[s] a way of entertaining, of deferring to, and of investing oneself in an objectless world. Thus, in their governing of the people the sages are concerned with embodying and promoting the sort of acting, knowing, and desiring that does not depend on objects"(Ames and Hall 2003). Chapter 48 elaborates on this, stating "The study of knowledge increasing day by day; The study of *Dao* losing day by day". This teaches the value of simplicity and letting go of unnecessary desires and actions, which can be applied to both environmental sustainability and the deconstruction of gender roles. By embracing *Wu-wei*, societies can move towards practices that are not only environmentally sustainable but also free from the rigid constraints of prescribed gender roles, allowing individuals to live more authentically.

Interconnectedness of All Beings

The *Dao De Jing* also speaks to the interconnectedness of all beings, suggesting a vision of the world where every entity is valued and respected. Chapter 13 advises, "Favor and disgrace make one fearful; The greatest misfortune is the self." This can be interpreted as a call to transcend ego and recognize the inherent worth of all beings, regardless of their gender or species. Such a perspective is vital for fostering a culture of respect and equality that supports both gender equity and environmental justice (Joshi 2022).

In summary, while the *Dao De Jing* does not directly address gender and environmental justice, its teachings on harmony with nature, the value of softness and flexibility, the concept of *Wu-wei*, and the interconnectedness of all beings provide valuable insights for these contemporary issues. By interpreting Laozi's teachings through the lens of gender and environmental justice, we can uncover new ways of thinking about and addressing the challenges facing our world today.

6.2. Interpretation of Laozi's Teachings in the Context of Contemporary Issues

In interpreting Laozi's teachings within the context of contemporary issues, it becomes apparent that Daoism offers profound insights into the challenges of gender and environmental justice that we face today. Through a closer examination, Laozi's philosophies provide a valuable lens through which we can reevaluate our approach to these critical issues, advocating for a more harmonious and balanced way of living that resonates with ecological feminist principles.

Environmental Justice and Daoism

Laozi's emphasis on living in accordance with the *Dao*, or the natural way, holds significant implications for contemporary environmental justice. In Chapter 30 of the *Dao De Jing*, Laozi said "Where the army goes, the thorns are full. After the great war, it will certainly become a barren year." In a world grappling with climate change, pollution, and

biodiversity loss, the Daoist principle of harmony with nature challenges the prevailing exploitation of the Earth's resources. The concept of *Wu-wei* advocates for minimal interference and a gentle approach to our environment, suggesting that sustainability can be achieved by aligning human activities with the natural rhythms and cycles of the Earth. This perspective encourages a shift from aggressive resource extraction to sustainable practices that respect the limits of the natural world.

Gender Equity through Daoist Philosophy

While the *Dao De Jing* does not explicitly address gender issues, its teachings on balance, softness, and the strength of yielding offer a compelling framework for gender equity. In challenging the valorization of hard over soft and action over non-action, Daoism inherently questions the binary oppositions that underpin gender inequality. The Daoist appreciation for the *Yin* (feminine, dark, receptive, 陰) alongside the *Yang* (masculine, bright, active, 陽) emphasizes the importance of both forces in achieving balance and harmony. Laozi said, "All things carry *Yin* (陰) and embrace *Yang* (陽), they achieve harmony by combining these forces." Regarding Yin and Yang, Wei (2018) advocates that they should be reinterpreted within the context of ecofeminism, suggesting that this can promote a non-dualistic understanding of environmental and feminist issues. This reinterpretation aims to transcend traditional dichotomies and foster a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment. Lv (1982) had long pointed out that, in the *Dao De Jing*, "the entire book favors women's rights over men's rights, vastly different from those later who valued men over women". Compared with Confucian thought, this perspective aligns with ecological feminist views that critique patriarchal structures for their role in both environmental degradation and the marginalization of women (Li 2011).

Daoism in Addressing Modern Challenges

Applying Daoist teachings to the context of contemporary issues requires a reimagining of how societies operate. In terms of environmental justice, this means adopting practices that are sustainable, promote biodiversity, and reduce harm to the planet. Daoist nature "refers to a free state that is manifested in all the myriad things, including humans. Daoist freedom therefore belongs not only to humans but also to the myriad things" (Liu 2022). For gender equity, this entails recognizing and valuing the contributions of all genders, dismantling patriarchal systems that restrict individual freedom, and fostering a culture that celebrates diversity and inclusivity.

Challenges in Integrating Daoist Philosophy

Integrating Daoist philosophy into contemporary activism and policymaking presents challenges, particularly in translating abstract concepts into concrete actions (Ma and Tsui 2015). Moreover, the global nature of today's environmental and gender issues requires adapting Daoist principles in ways that are culturally sensitive and applicable across diverse contexts. Despite these challenges, the potential for Daoism to inspire meaningful change in how we approach gender and environmental justice remains significant.

In summary, Laozi's teachings, as articulated in the *Dao De Jing*, offer valuable insights for addressing the interconnected issues of environmental degradation and gender inequality. By advocating for harmony with nature, balance between the feminine and masculine, and the interconnectedness of all beings, Daoism provides a philosophical foundation for ecofeminism and a pathway towards a more just and sustainable world. In embracing these principles, we can find guidance for navigating the complexities of contemporary issues and inspiration for creating a more equitable and harmonious society.

7. Future Directions: Integrating Daoism into Ecological Feminist Practices

Laozi was the first thinker to consciously recognize the fundamental flaws of a patriarchal society and attempt to remedy human society with female wisdom and qualities. It is precisely because he "emphasized and developed the virtues of femininity that he formed a philosophy with a distinct personality that is predominantly *Yin*" (Mou 1991). Therefore, the potential for integrating Daoist mysticism, represented by Laozi, into ecofeminist strategies is both profound and promising. As contemporary society grapples with the

dual crises of environmental degradation and gender inequality, the integration of Daoist principles offers a unique perspective that can enrich ecological feminist practices. This fusion not only brings a deep philosophical grounding to the movement but also provides practical approaches for fostering sustainability and gender equity.

7.1. Potential for Daoist Mysticism to Inform and Enhance Ecological Feminist Strategies

Philosophical Synergies

At the heart of both Daoism and ecofeminism is a profound respect for the natural world and a critical stance against the exploitative mechanisms that harm the environment and marginalize certain groups—especially women. Daoist mysticism, with its emphasis on harmony, balance, and the interconnectedness of all beings, aligns closely with ecological feminist values. On the one hand, it advocates for "knowing contentment and avoiding humiliation, knowing where to stop and avoiding danger," (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 46) reminding us that "humanity should curb excessive desires and appropriately limit the consumption rate of natural resources to achieve sustainable development" (Hu 2010); on the other hand, it promotes a lifestyle in harmony with the natural rhythm, advocating for sustainable actions that align with the ecological processes that sustain life. The concept of *Wu-wei* is particularly relevant to ecological feminist strategies; it suggests a form of activism that is effective yet non-coercive, promoting change through alignment with natural and social forces rather than through domination or aggressive confrontation (Mason 2021). This approach encourages a reevaluation of how ecological feminists' goals are pursued, emphasizing the power of gentle persistence and the strength found in vulnerability and cooperation.

Enhancing ecological feminist Practices

Integrating Daoist mysticism into ecological feminist practices can enhance the movement in several ways. First, it can provide a broader philosophical foundation that deepens the movement's understanding of the connections between human society and the natural world. By adopting a Daoist perspective, ecological feminists can develop strategies that are not only environmentally sound but also deeply rooted in an appreciation for the complexity and beauty of natural systems. Second, Daoism's focus on simplicity and contentment with less can inspire ecological feminist practices that challenge consumerist culture and its contributions to environmental destruction. This perspective advocates for a minimalist lifestyle that reduces waste, conserves resources, and promotes a more sustainable relationship with the planet. Third, Daoism's teachings on the dynamism of Yin and Yang can inform ecological feminist approaches to gender equity. By recognizing the value and necessity of both feminine and masculine qualities in achieving harmony, ecological feminists can advocate for a more inclusive society that values diversity and rejects rigid gender binaries.

In summary, the potential for Daoist mysticism to inform and enhance ecological feminist strategies is vast. By embracing the philosophical synergies between Daoism and ecofeminism, there is an opportunity to develop a more holistic, effective, and compassionate approach to addressing the intertwined challenges of environmental degradation and gender inequality. As Ames and Hall stated, "Compassion funds the concrete network of affective relationships that constitutes one in a particular nexus. Feeling each other is how we really know each other. All effective transactions are affective transactions, and require recourse to these invested relations." (Ames and Hall 2003). As the movement looks to the future, integrating Daoist principles into ecological feminist practices can provide valuable insights and methods for creating a more just and sustainable world.

7.2. Suggestions for Future Research and Activism

The integration of Daoism into ecological feminist practices opens new avenues for future research and activism. By drawing from both philosophical traditions, there is an opportunity to create more holistic and effective strategies for addressing the intertwined

issues of gender inequality and environmental degradation. Below are several suggestions for future research and activism in this innovative field.

Interdisciplinary Research

Future research should focus on interdisciplinary studies that explore the confluence of Daoist philosophy and ecofeminism. Scholars of environmental science, gender studies, philosophy, and religious studies could collaborate to examine how Daoist concepts of harmony, balance, and interconnectedness can inform and enhance ecological feminist practices. Such research could involve case studies of communities or movements that have successfully integrated these principles into their environmental and gender justice efforts, providing valuable insights into best practices and strategies.

Cultivating Ecological Awareness

Activism informed by Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism should prioritize cultivating ecological awareness and a deep appreciation for the natural world. Workshops, educational programs, and public awareness campaigns could be developed to teach the principles of both traditions, emphasizing the importance of living in harmony with nature and respecting the intrinsic value of all beings. These programs could focus on practical ways in which individuals and communities can reduce their environmental footprint and promote gender equity.

Policy Advocacy

Researchers and activists can work together to advocate for policies that reflect Daoist and ecological feminist values. This could involve promoting legislation that protects natural habitats, supports sustainable agriculture and energy production, and addresses gender disparities in access to resources and decision-making. Policy advocacy efforts should aim to influence both local and global policies, ensuring that environmental and gender justice are considered to be integral components of sustainable development.

Community-Based Initiatives

Future activism could also focus on developing community-based initiatives that integrate Daoist and ecological feminist principles. These initiatives could range from community gardens and reforestation projects that embody the Daoist respect for nature (Jiang 2019) to programs that empower women and promote gender equity within environmental movements. By grounding these initiatives in local cultures and communities, activists can ensure that they are relevant, sustainable, and capable of making a meaningful impact.

Building Alliances

Finally, building alliances with other movements and organizations that share similar goals is crucial for the success of integrating Daoist mysticism into ecological feminist practices. By collaborating with indigenous rights activists, climate justice movements, and other gender equality initiatives, ecological feminists can create a powerful coalition capable of advocating for profound systemic change. These alliances can also facilitate the exchange of ideas, strategies, and resources, strengthening the movement and expanding its reach.

In summary, although Daoism is not a "direct theory of gender equality, it can challenge and amend the fundamental theoretical foundation of a patriarchal society from an ontological height" (Liu 2003). Thus, it is evident that the integration of Daoism into ecological feminist practices is ripe with potential. Through interdisciplinary research, cultivating ecological awareness, policy advocacy, community-based initiatives, and building alliances, activists and scholars can explore new ways to address the pressing challenges of our time. By embracing the wisdom of Daoist mysticism and the insights of ecofeminism, there is an opportunity to create a more just, sustainable, and harmonious world.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper presents a journey through the intersecting landscapes of Laozi's Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism, revealing a rich tapestry of philosophical insights and practical implications for contemporary social justice movements. This exploration highlights the profound synergy between Daoist principles of harmony, *Wu-wei*,

and *Ziran* and the core values of ecofeminism, which champions the interconnectedness of gender and environmental justice. This synthesis of ancient wisdom and modern activism presents a compelling vision for addressing the dual crises of gender inequality and environmental degradation that plague our world today.

The analysis within this paper underscores the transformative potential that lies in integrating Daoist mysticism into ecological feminist practices. By drawing on Laozi's teachings, we can deepen our understanding of the complex relationships between humanity and the natural world, fostering approaches to social justice that are grounded in respect, balance, and interconnectedness. As Liu (2022) said, "Laozi established Daoism as a feminist philosophy, which would require gender equity as the center of his focus." This integration not only enriches the philosophical foundations of ecofeminism but also offers practical pathways for creating more sustainable and equitable communities. However, the journey towards fully realizing the potential of this integration is not without its challenges. As explored in this paper, bridging the gap between ancient philosophical concepts and the realities of modern social justice efforts requires creative interpretation, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to ongoing dialogue and collaboration. However, the rewards of this endeavor are clear: a more holistic and effective approach to combating the interlinked issues of environmental destruction and gender oppression.

Future research and activism in this field should continue to explore the fertile ground at the intersection of Daoism and ecofeminism. Interdisciplinary studies, community-based initiatives, policy advocacy, and the cultivation of ecological awareness and gender equity are crucial areas for development. By building alliances across movements and embracing the diversity of perspectives and strategies, the combined forces of Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism can offer powerful solutions to some of the most pressing challenges of our time. As we move forward, the wisdom of Laozi's Daoist mysticism, paired with the insights of ecofeminism, invites us to reimagine our relationships with the Earth and with one another. This paper advocates for a comprehensive approach to social justice—one that recognizes the inherent value of all beings and seeks to restore harmony and balance within the natural world and human societies. In doing so, we can aspire to create a future that honors the interconnectedness of life, fostering a more harmonious, equitable, and sustainable existence for generations to come.

The journey towards integrating Daoist mysticism with ecological feminist practices is an ongoing process of discovery, reflection, and action; it is a path that challenges us to think deeply, act compassionately, and live in a way that reflects our profound connections to the natural world and to one another. By embracing this path, we can work towards a world that truly embodies the principles of harmony, equity, and sustainability that are at the heart of both Daoist and ecological feminist philosophies. Finally, I would like to conclude this article with a passage from Laozi: "I have three treasures, which I hold and cherish: The first is compassion, the second is frugality, and the third is not daring to be ahead of the world." (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 67). Laozi greatly praises the virtues of compassion, frugality, and humility represented by female culture. In the modern world, although the status of women is far higher than in the past era of imperial autocracy, overall, they still exist within a patriarchal society. I believe that, regardless of gender, if each of us could embody the compassion, frugality, and humility advocated by Laozi, this world would become even more beautiful and harmonious.

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Notes

[1] All translations are my own and rely on the work of Waley (2013). All translations from recent scholarly works in Chinese herein are also my own.

[2] *Dao De Jing* Chapter 77: The *Dao* of Heaven (tiandao 天道 or tianzhidao 天之道) is to take from those who have too much and give to those who have too little. The *Dao* of humans (renzhidao 人之道) is the opposite: it takes from those who have too little and gives to those who have too much.

[3] Another common understanding is that "The Nothing (無) is named the beginning of Heaven and Earth, while the being (有) is named the mother of all things."

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Article

On Swami Vivekananda and Caste Prejudice: Ethical Implications of the Experience of Non-Duality

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Abstract: The well-known modern Hindu reformer and pioneer of Vedānta in the West, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), based his ethical vision on mysticism: specifically, on the direct experience of non-duality and the ultimate unity and organic interconnectedness of all beings. This paper will explore the implications of this experientially based ethos for caste prejudice. Caste remains a hot-button issue in India to the present day and was no less so in the time of Swami Vivekananda. This system of social organization is rightly criticized by social justice advocates for the inequities it enshrines and enforces in Indian society. Because it has historically been justified by reference to Hindu textual sources—specifically such *Dharma Śāstras* as the *Manusmṛti*—prejudice based on caste, or *casteism*, has frequently been depicted, especially by critics of Hinduism, as essential or inherent to Hindu traditions. The implication of this identification of caste with Hinduism, and caste with social injustice, is that Hinduism is an intrinsically wicked and unjust religion. Such simplistic equations fail to consider the extent to which caste prejudice has been condemned by authoritative Hindu teachers, not least, by Swami Vivekananda himself. It is thus important to rearticulate Swami Vivekananda's rejection of caste prejudice—and indeed, of all prejudice—based on Advaita Vedānta both to make the case against such prejudice in today's world and to address criticisms of Hinduism as inherently or essentially casteist. Finally, it will be noted that Vivekananda's criticisms of caste anticipate those of a contemporary anti-casteist voice from the Advaita tradition: that of Hindu theologian Anantanand Rambachan, who has also argued against prejudices of various kinds, including caste prejudice, based on Advaita Vedānta.

Keywords: Advaita Vedānta; caste; casteism; Hinduism; Vedānta; Vivekananda; Swami

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1. Swami Vivekananda: His Importance and Position within Hindu Traditions

Except for Mohandas K. Gandhi, few, if any figures of the modern Hindu tradition are better known than Swami Vivekananda. Born Narendranath Datta in Kolkata on 12 January 1863, Vivekananda—as he would come to be known after taking this as his monastic name on 31 May 1893 (Banhatti 1995, p. 24)—is best known for addressing the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and for establishing the first Vedanta Society in New York in 1894 and the Ramakrishna Mission at Belur Math, India, in 1897.

These achievements are best understood as coming at the end of a century of cultural ferment, a period of intensive self-reflection and reform on the part of Bengali Hindus widely known today as the Bengal Renaissance. Arguably, the emergence of Swami Vivekananda onto the world stage at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions could be seen as a culmination of this century of reform.

During Vivekananda's lifetime, Kolkata was the administrative center of British rule in India. The region of Bengal, of which Kolkata was and remains the largest urban center, was the first part of India to experience British culture. Western thought was inculcated in the minds of middle-class Bengalis through English education and Christian missionary activity.

Bengalis were not passive recipients of European thought. Bengal had long been home to vibrant intellectual traditions: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Islamic. Bengali intellectuals

responded to the West with a movement of Hindu reform which sought to incorporate the best of both India and the West into a Dharmic model of civilization. This process was initiated by Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), who is widely known as "the father of modern India" (Richards 1985, p. 1). He responded to the criticisms of Hinduism by Westernizing rationalists and Christian missionaries not by renouncing Hinduism, but by affirming what he took to be the original ideals of Hinduism, found in the Vedānta of the Upaniṣads. He rejected elements of the tradition that its critics attacked, such as casteism, as later corruptions of an originally monotheistic, and ultimately monistic, doctrine of the inherent divinity and dignity of all beings. This is essentially the pattern followed by Swami Vivekananda's critique of casteism as well. This pattern was no doubt derived from his experiences with the organization established by Roy: the Brahmo Samāj.

For Roy, reforming Hinduism was a matter of both principle and practicality. In a letter dated 18 January 1828, Roy writes to a friend:

> I agree with you that in point of vices the Hindus are not worse than the generality of Christians in Europe and America; but I regret to say that the present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interest. The distinction of castes, introducing innumerable divisions and sub-divisions among them, has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling, and the multitude of religious rites and ceremonies and the laws of purification have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprise. . .It is, I think, necessary that some changes should take place in their religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort. (Richards 1985, pp. 8–9)

Roy's legacy of reform has endured largely due to the activities of the organization—the *Brahmo Samāj* or 'Community of Brahman'—that he established in 1828. Its first president, after Roy, was Devendranath Tagore (1817–1905). Tagore is known, among other things, for being the father of the famed Nobel laureate, playwright, poet, songwriter, essayist, and all-around Bengali cultural hero, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). The long-lived elder Tagore presided over the Brahmo Samāj for most of the nineteenth century. His long tenure in this role placed him in a position to exert a major influence on the current of Hindu thought that Roy had initiated.

More so than Roy, Tagore was a man of deeply mystical inclinations, and the direct experience of divinity is a major theme of his writings. His moving, frank, and painfully honest reflections on his mystical experiences are well represented by the following quote:

> Then I went out and sat underneath an ashvattha tree and according to the teaching of the saints began meditating on the Spirit of God dwelling in my soul. My mind was flooded with emotion, my eyes were filled with tears. All at once I saw the shining vision of Brahma in the lotus core of my heart. A thrill passed through my whole body, I felt a joy beyond all measure. But the next moment I could see Him no more. On losing sight of that beatific vision which destroys all sorrow, I suddenly rose from the ground. A great sadness came over my spirit. Then I tried to see Him again by force of contemplation, and found Him not. I became as one stricken with disease, and would not be comforted. Meanwhile I suddenly heard a voice in the air, 'In this life thou shalt see Me no more. Those whose hearts have not been purified, who have not attained the highest Yoga, cannot see Me. It was only to stimulate thy love that I once appeared before thee'. (Richards 1985, p. 27)

Another leader of the Brahmo Samaj, Keshub Chunder Sen (1838–1884), emphasized what he perceived to be commonalities shared between Hinduism and Christianity. He envisioned what he enthusiastically dubbed the 'New Dispensation', or *Nava Vidhān*—a new religious order—which he described in the following terms:

> It is the harmony of all scriptures and prophets and dispensations. It is not an isolated creed, but the science which binds and explains and harmonizes all religions. It gives history a meaning, to the action of Providence a consistency, to

> quarrelling churches a common bond, and to successive dispensations a continuity. It shows marvelous synthesis how the different rainbow colours are one in the light of heaven. The New Dispensation is the sweet music of diverse instruments. It is the precious necklace in which are strung together the rubies and pearls of all ages and climes. It is the celestial court where around enthroned Divinity shine the lights of all heavenly saints and prophets. It is the wonderful solvent, which fuses all dispensations into a new chemical compound. It is the mighty absorbent, which absorbs all that is true and good and beautiful in the objective world. Before the flag of the New Dispensation bow ye nations, and proclaim the Brotherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man. (Richards 1985, pp. 43–44)

These words of Sen would not be out of place in the *Complete Works* of Swami Vivekananda. In his youth, Vivekananda found himself deeply drawn to the Brahmo Samāj and its teaching of a primordial monotheism as the wellspring of both Hinduism and Christianity. He was especially drawn to the teachings and charismatic personality of Sen, whose home he began to frequent in 1880, attending regular gatherings there where Sen would give talks and devotional songs would be sung.

During this same period, Sen met and came under the influence of a most unconventional Bengali mystic known as Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886). Ramakrishna's and Vivekananda's paths would first cross at a gathering in Sen's house.

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that Sri Ramakrishna is one of the most remarkable figures of not only Indian, but of world religious history. Barely literate, Ramakrishna had no specialized training in the study and elucidation of Hindu sacred texts. Born to a poor Brahmin family in the Bengali village of Kamarpukur, when he was nineteen years old, he and his elder brother were hired as priests at a temple of the Goddess Kali in Dakshineshwar, on the outskirts of Kolkata. Before this time, Ramakrishna was known locally for periodically going into ecstatic mystical states, in which he would lose consciousness of the outer world and become immersed in divine bliss. Both during and after his lifetime, many skeptics expressed the view that he might have been suffering from a neurological disorder.

Ramakrishna came out of these experiences, though, believing he had become absorbed in God-consciousness, and with a deep knowledge of many topics discussed in the Hindu scriptures, even though he had not studied these texts formally. The belief of the community of devotees which developed around him was that his knowledge came from direct experiences of the realities the scriptures described. Some even believed him to be an *avatār*: a divine incarnation (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 19).

Ramakrishna, according to accounts of his life, performed *sādhana*, or spiritual practice, following a variety of traditions. His aim was to realize God in as many ways as possible. He thus followed various Hindu traditions—Śākta, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and Advaitic—as well as Christianity and Islam, until he entered a state of *samadhi* through their respective practices (Miller et al. 2019, pp. 41–60). According to the beliefs of the community that developed on the basis of his life and teachings, he achieved God-realization in all of them, thus establishing an experiential basis for religious pluralism, the belief that many religious paths can lead to the ultimate salvific goal (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 60).

Young Vivekananda, an adherent of the Brahmo Samaj, was also a skeptic. He had absorbed the thinking of many modern European philosophers in the course of his English education. He was encouraged by one of his teachers, a Scottish theologian named William Hastie (1842–1903), to seek out Ramakrishna, whom Hastie had heard was a 'man of God'. Having met Ramakrishna in passing at the home of Keshub Chunder Sen, Vivekananda dutifully visited him at Dakshineshwar. Initially thinking Ramakrishna to be insane, Datta nevertheless found himself mysteriously drawn to this holy man, who seemed more a product of ancient India than the modern world in which he was immersed. Many young men of Kolkata who found themselves torn between the traditional Hinduism of their upbringing and the modernity of their English education, felt similarly drawn to Ramakrishna. After his death from throat cancer in 1886, these men took monastic vows,

forming a new group of Hindu monks known as the Ramakrishna Order. Their leader was Vivekananda.

From 1886 to 1893, Vivekananda traveled the length and breadth of India as a wandering *sādhu* or *sannyāsi*: a renouncer. In 1893, he undertook his first voyage to the United States, speaking at the Chicago World Parliament of Religions and then undertaking a successful lecture tour across the United States, which included his establishment of the first Vedanta Society in New York in 1894.

A major theme of Vivekananda's lectures and writings during this period was the pluralism taught by his guru, Ramakrishna, and reflected upon the teachings he had previously absorbed from Keshub Chunder Sen as well. His understanding of the final aim of all religions was deeply tied to the idea of mysticism: to the direct experience and manifestation of divinity as the ultimate reality of one's existence. In his own words,

> The ultimate goal of all mankind, the aim and end of all religions, is but one—re-union with God, or, what amounts to the same, with the divinity which is every man's true nature. But while the aim is one, the method of attaining may vary with the different temperaments of men.
>
> Both the goal and the methods employed for reaching it are called Yoga, a word derived from the same Sanskrit root as the English "yoke", meaning "to join", to join us to our reality, God. There are various such Yogas, or methods of union—but the chief ones are—Karma-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Rāja-Yoga, and Jñāna-Yoga. (Vivekananda 1979, Vol. 5, p. 292)

The yogas described by Vivekananda refer to four types of spiritual practice, each of which draws upon the strengths of particular personality types. The yogas are not mutually exclusive but are in fact seen by Vivekananda as mutually reinforcing. He differentiates them as follows:

(1) Karma-Yoga—The manner in which a man realizes his own divinity through works and duty;
(2) Bhakti-Yoga—The realization of the divinity through devotion to, and love of, a Personal God;
(3) Rāja-Yoga—The realization of the divinity through the control of [the] mind;
(4) Jñāna-Yoga—The realization of a man's own divinity through knowledge (Vivekananda 1979, vol. 5, p. 292).

Swami Vivekananda did not focus exclusively, however, on his pluralistic mysticism. He covered many topics in his numerous lectures, including the institution of caste, and he often expressed his opinions on this topic in very frank and explicit terms. We shall see that his views on caste—and in particular, caste prejudice—are informed by his pluralistic mysticism, which is itself rooted in his understanding of non-duality.

2. Defining Our Terms: Mysticism and Non-Duality

In the course of introducing Swami Vivekananda and the broad contours of his thought thus far, I have already employed the terms *mysticism*, *non-duality*, *caste*, and *casteism*. At this point in the discussion, it would be good to pause and reflect on the meanings of each of these terms, especially as they function in Swami Vivekananda's philosophy.

As already suggested by my usage in the preceding section, *mysticism* refers to practices and an overall approach to spiritual life that involves the cultivation of a direct experience of what one sees as a divine reality or divine realities. When Swami Vivekananda defines the goal of religion as "re-union with God, or, what amounts to the same, with the divinity which is every man's true nature", in just a few words, he equates what many religious traditions—including multiple Hindu traditions—have regarded as quite distinct realities: namely, the personal God of theistic religions (such as the Abrahamic traditions and multiple devotional Hindu traditions, such as the Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta traditions) and the idea of an indwelling divinity within oneself, like the *ātman*, or Self, of Advaita Vedānta; the *jīva*, or life force of the Jain tradition; one's Buddha nature; the Dao within; and

so on. For Vivekananda—as for Sri Ramakrishna before him—these are not two distinct realities or types of reality but rather two modes of experiencing one ultimate reality that is infinite and therefore characterizable in infinitely many true ways. This is the basis of pluralistic mysticism. It is pluralistic because it allows for many forms or manifestations of divinity to be the object of one's spiritual striving. It is mysticism because its aim is the direct experience of one or more of these forms.

According to Vivekananda scholar Swami Medhananda, Vivekananda's conception of mysticism was thoroughly pluralistic:

> . . . Contrary to what some scholars have claimed, Vivekananda did not subscribe to the 'common core' or 'perennialist' thesis that all mystical experiences are phenomenologically identical. Indeed, he frequently distinguishes three fundamental types of mystical experience: the realization of one's own individual soul, the theistic experience of a personal God, and the non-theistic realization of the impersonal nondual Brahman/Ātman. (Medhananda 2022, p. 174)

Another important component of Swami Vivekananda's thought, particularly with regard to his understanding of ethics and his application of this understanding to the question of caste, is non-duality. As we have seen, Swami Medhananda refers to the "impersonal non-dual Brahman/Ātman" which Vivekananda affirms. This, of course, is a central teaching of Advaita Vedānta, with which Vivekananda's philosophy has often been identified. As both Advaita Vedānta scholar Anantanand Rambachan and Swami Medhananda point out, however, Vivekananda's philosophy is not simply identical to what is sometimes called the 'classical' Advaita Vedānta of the historical founder of this school of thought, Śaṅkara. Rather, Vivekananda's affirmation of pluralism—which affirms non-duality as *one of* the possible valid modes of mystical experience—is distinct from Śaṅkara's Vedānta, inasmuch as Śaṅkara, at least as he is often interpreted, does not view the varied mystical states realized through the four yogas as equivalent. Śaṅkara, rather, views jñāna yoga, the path of knowledge, as the way to the final realization—namely, the realization of the impersonal non-dual Brahman/Ātman—with the other yogas serving as purificatory or preparatory practices leading up to the yoga of knowledge (Rambachan 1994). For Rambachan, it seems, this is a defect in Vivekananda's thought, inasmuch as it is a discrepancy between Vivekananda's thought and Śaṅkara's. For Medhananda, though, it is a virtue, opening Vivekananda's philosophy up to being a wider cosmopolitanism and pluralism with regard to the means by which one attains, conceptualizes, and finally experiences ultimate reality.

However, while Swami Vivekananda does view non-duality as one of many modes through which ultimate reality might be experienced, he also believes that non-duality is the ultimate truth of our existence. I would argue that this is why Vivekananda sometimes sounds more like an Advaitic inclusivist than a genuine pluralist, seeming to subsume other forms of mystical experience to the Advaitic one. Medhananda argues that there was a real shift in Vivekananda's thought from a more traditional Advaitic inclusivism, which places the experience of non-duality at the top 'rung', as it were, on the ladder of realization, to a more thoroughgoing pluralism based on the four yogas. I do not take issue with Medhananda's claims here. I would suggest, though, that, not in terms of a hierarchy of mystical experience (which he finally rejects), but in terms of his basic philosophical *worldview*—his ontology—his pluralism is still functioning within an Advaitic understanding of the ultimate nature of existence. It is this non-dual ontology that forms the basis for Vivekananda's views on ethics and, so ultimately, his views on casteism as a morally reprehensible attitude that must be superseded.

3. Further Defining Our Terms: Caste and Casteism

Caste, as is now relatively widely known, is an anglicization of a Portuguese word—*casta*—which means *color*. It is, therefore, a quite literal—and therefore deceptive—translation of the Sanskrit *varṇa*, which can also mean *color* but also refers to the fourfold grouping of society found in such texts as the *Ṛg Veda* into Brahmins (who are conceptual-

ized as intellectual and religious figures), Kṣatriyas (warriors and secular leaders), Vaiśyas (commoners, people engaged in economically productive trades), and Śūdras (servants).[1] The rendition of *varṇa* as *color* is deceptive, inasmuch as it fed into nineteenth-century theories about ancient light-skinned Aryans invading India and imposing a race-based social order upon the indigenous peoples. Indeed, there is some evidence that varṇa was at one point based on personal preference or aptitude and only later became based on birth: what one might call one's ethnicity.[2]

In any case, *varṇa* has been, to some extent, a theoretical construct for much of India's history. The effective social units have been not the varṇas, but the *jātis*. *Jāti*, meaning *birth*, refers to a specific birth-based community that one joins by being born into it. It is the *jātis* to which people in India are typically referring when they speak of castes. At various times and locations in the subcontinent throughout history, *jātis* have been identified with or assigned to particular varṇas; but the precise varṇa with which a *jāti* is identified (and thus its position in the social hierarchy) varies by region. Such variation traces back to ancient times, as suggested by variances in the assignments of *jātis* in different *Dharma Śāstras*, the texts in which the varṇas and *jātis* and their various duties have been delineated. The *jātis*, as conceptualized in the contemporary Indian legal system, are defined largely based on the practices of British census takers, whose assignment of *jātis* to *varṇas* was not always accurate[3] and sometimes had unfortunate effects for those persons who found themselves assigned to what was regarded as a low status.

The system of *varṇas* and *jātis*—what has come to be known as 'the caste system'—is controversial for a variety of reasons. The one that concerns us the most here is the fact of *casteism* or prejudice against persons based on the *jāti* that they are held to inhabit.

To be sure, this system has lent itself to a wide array of abuses by those who regard themselves as being 'higher' in its postulated hierarchy than others. The leading social justice issue in India today is certainly the treatment of *Dalits,* the oppressed, as those who are regarded as being at the very bottom of this system have come to refer to themselves. Notably, the constitution of India, which was written by B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), a distinguished attorney and a revered *Dalit* activist, forbids prejudice on the basis of caste. There is also an elaborate system of 'reservations' in place in India that are intended to secure jobs for *Dalits* and other underprivileged groups and to right historical wrongs against these communities. Not unlike racism in the United States, however, it is not the case that enlightened changes in the legal system have led to the eradication of casteism in the hearts of many members of society, or of casteist practices, particularly in rural areas.

Despite the existence of *jātis*—of castes—amongst practitioners of all religions in contemporary India, the caste system is overwhelmingly identified by scholars and commentators with Hinduism, even to the point of its being seen as essential or inherent to the Hindu tradition.

This, however, disregards the fact that prominent Hindu leaders, including Swami Vivekananda, have condemned this system and the injustices associated with it. It is to Vivekananda's objections to caste on the basis of his ethic of non-duality that we now turn.

4. Swami Vivekananda's Ethics of Non-Duality

For Swami Vivekananda, the fundamental ontological truth that all beings are Brahman—that we are all ultimately non-dual and inseparable—is the foundation of all ethics:

> ... [E]ach individual soul is a part and parcel of that Universal Soul, which is infinite. Therefore in injuring his neighbour, the individual actually injures himself. This is the basic metaphysical truth underlying all ethical codes. (Vivekananda 1979, Volume One, p. 394)

Elaborating upon this teaching, a Vedanta teacher in the tradition of Swami Vivekananda, Pravrajika Vrajaprana, states that in order to be truly happy, you should "Love your

neighbor as yourself because your neighbor *is* yourself" (Vrajaprana 1999, p. 14). As she further explains,

> Love, sympathy, and empathy are the affirmation of this truth; they are a reflexive response because they mirror the reality of the universe. When we feel love and sympathy we are verifying–albeit unconsciously–the oneness that already exists. When we feel hatred, anger, and jealousy we separate ourselves from others and deny our real nature which is infinite and free from limitations. (Vrajaprana 1999, p. 39)

In short, for Vivekananda, non-duality is the foundation for the Golden Rule: that we should treat others as we would wish for ourselves to be treated (if we were in similar circumstances). Therefore, any form of oppression or social injustice is to be rejected as contrary to the nature of reality itself.

Contemporary Hindu theologian Anantanand Rambachan, mentioned previously, similarly affirms an ethic of empathy based on the metaphysics of non-duality (Rambachan 2006, pp. 11, 14, 49). Moreover, he specifically connects this ethic with the issue of casteism:

> . . . [T]here is a theological vision at the heart of Advaita that invalidates the assumptions of inequality, impurity, and indignity that are the foundations of caste belief and practice. From the perspective of Advaita, it is clear that the highest value is attributed to *brahman*. In creation, *brahman* enters into every created form, and it is the presence of *brahman* that gives value and significance to the human being. The dignity and worth of the human being is the consequence of the fact that she embodies the infinite. *Brahman* includes everyone; caste excludes. (Rambachan 2015, p. 177)

5. Swami Vivekananda and Caste Prejudice

With this understanding of the non-dual ethos of Swami Vivekananda's worldview, we can see that his pronouncements on caste prejudice are of a piece with the idea of the inherent divinity, and thus the inherent dignity, of all living beings and certainly of all human beings.

Swami Vivekananda fiercely ridiculed what he called "Don't-touchism"—or untouchability, the most exclusionary of caste-based practices—deriding it as "kitchen religion" for its emphasis on rules regarding dining between the members of different castes:

> The present religion of the Hindus is neither the path of Knowledge or Reason–it is "Don't-touchism."–"Don't touch me." "Don't touch me."–that exhausts its description. "Don't-touchism" is a form of mental disease. Beware! All expansion is life, all contraction is death. All love is expansion, all selfishness is contraction. Love is therefore the only law of life. See that you do not lose your lives in this dire irreligion of "Don't-touchism." Must the teaching (*Atma-vat sarvabhuteshu*)–"Looking upon all beings as your own self"–be confined to books alone? How will they grant salvation who cannot feed a hungry mouth with a crumb of bread? How will those, who become impure at the mere breath of others, purify others? (Vivekananda 1979, Volume Six, pp. 319–20)

Vivekananda viewed caste as not a religious institution at all, but a purely social one, and he was critical of previous reformers who conflated it with Hinduism as a whole. He was also quite blunt in his view that it was an institution whose time had passed:

> Beginning from Buddha down to Ram Mohan Roy, everyone made the mistake of holding caste to be a religious institution and tried to pull down religion and caste together, and failed. But in spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallised social institution, which after doing its service is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench, and it can only be removed by giving back to the people their lost social individuality. (Vivekananda 1979, Volume Five, pp. 22–23)

Finally, Vivekananda viewed the most vital service that could be rendered to the poor of India, of all communities, as education:

> The only service to be done for our lower classes is to give them education, *to develop their lost individuality*. That is the great task between our people and princes. Up to now nothing has been done in that direction. Priest-power and foreign conquest have trodden them down for centuries, and at last the poor of India have forgotten that they are human beings. They are to be given ideas; their eyes are to be opened to what is going on in the world around them; and then they will work out their own salvation. Every nation, every man and every woman must work out their own salvation. Give them ideas—that is the only help they require, and then the rest must follow as the effect. (Vivekananda 1979, Volume Four, pp. 361–64[4])

This is the mandate that has driven the educational efforts of the Ramakrishna Mission since its establishment by Swami Vivekananda in 1897.

6. Critical Reflections on Swami Vivekananda's Views of Caste

To be sure, much as Swami Vivekananda repeatedly stated his opposition to prejudice based on caste—what, in contemporary discourse, is often referred to as *casteism*—his view on caste as such, as a way of organizing society, is much more ambiguous and open to critique.

Like other Hindu reformers of his era, Vivekananda drew a distinction between caste-based prejudice and what he regarded as the original ideal of the system of *varṇa* and *jāti*. Given the fact that caste was frequently held up in the Christian missionary discourse of his time as an example of the perfidy of Hinduism, he often took pains, particularly when he addressed audiences in the West, to point to what he regarded as the advantages of this system, particularly when compared with the social hierarchies of the Western world. Comparing status based on caste with status based on wealth, for example, he said:

> You say we are heathens, we are uneducated, uncultivated, but we laugh in our sleeves at your want of refinement in telling us such things. With us, quality and birth make caste, not money. No amount of money can do anything for you in India. In caste the poorest is as good as the richest, and that is one of the most beautiful things about it.
>
> Money has made warfare in the world, and caused Christians to trample on each other's necks. Jealousy, hatred and avariciousness are born of money-getters. Here it is all work, hustle and bustle. Caste saves a man from all this. It makes it possible for a man to live with less money, and it brings work to all. The man of caste has time to think of his soul, and that is what we want in the society of India. . . Caste has kept us alive as a nation, and while it has many defects, it has many more advantages (Vivekananda 1979, Volume Two, p. 489)

The strongest critique of this perspective on caste—not specifically directed at Swami Vivekananda, but at the general tendency among Hindu reformers to seek to rescue and differentiate a supposed original ideal of caste from the caste prejudice of the modern era—is that of B.R. Ambedkar, who argues that caste as such, due to its intrinsically hierarchical nature is violent and beyond remediation (Ambedkar 2018).

7. Conclusions

Based on his pluralistic mysticism, ultimately rooted in an ontology of non-duality, Vivekananda was deeply committed to the proposition that all living beings are manifestations of Brahman and are thus bearers of inherent dignity. We ultimately cannot differentiate the other from ourselves. This insight, for Vivekananda, is the source of all ethics.

Like Rambachan in the present day, he sees this as basic to Hinduism. Thus, despite centuries of being validated by Hindu texts, caste is to be seen, for Vivekananda, as, at best,

an outdated social institution that has ceased to serve—if it ever did serve them—those whom it should be serving: the poor and marginalized members of society. He characterizes prejudice based on caste as "a form of mental disease" and the system itself as "filling the atmosphere of India with its stench".

Although the potential of this vision has yet to be realized in practice, inasmuch as caste prejudice still exists, and although Vivekananda himself expressed ambivalence about caste as such—whether it is an intrinsic evil, as claimed by Ambedkar, or whether it has some virtues which can justify its continuance in some form—one can see in the social thought of Swami Vivekananda an example of mysticism with at least the potential, based on its inner logic, to translate into a vision of universal social justice.

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Notes

1 See, for example, the *Puruṣa Sūkta* or 'Hymn of the Cosmic Person' (*Ṛg Veda* 10:90) (Doniger O'Flaherty 1981, pp. 29–32).

2 See, for example, *Ṛg Veda* 9:112:3, in which the speaker proclaims that he is a singer by profession, his father is a physician, and his mother grinds corn: all distinct professions within the same family and so not based on birth. There is also the story of Satyakāma Jabāla, from *Chandogya Upaniṣad*, who is accepted as a Brahmin on the basis of his honest character, although he is of uncertain parentage (Panikkar 1995, p. 257; Olivelle 1996, p. 130).

3 'Accurate', meaning 'based on the customs of particular regions of India at the time'.

4 Emphasis in the original.

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Article

Soul-Life: Richard Jefferies' Mystical Vision of Nature

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Abstract: This paper examines Richard Jefferies' contribution to the study of nature mysticism. I argue that the study of nature mysticism can be utilized as a valuable source of insight to cultivate a more ecocentric response to the ecological crisis. Historically, the study of mysticism in the West has been shaped by a monotheistic bias that tends to marginalize the teachings of nature mystics. I seek to redress this lacuna in the field by calling attention to the understudied teachings of the English mystic and author, Richard Jefferies. I claim that Jefferies' spiritual autobiography, *The Story of My Heart* ([1883] 2014) presents a compelling vision of nature mysticism that challenges the reader to reflect critically on conventional understandings of God, body, and time/being. Most significantly, I argue that Jefferies' concept of "soul-life" can be interpreted as an ontological category characterized by an intellectual and moral sensitivity towards the wonders of nature. Jefferies believed that the cultivation of soul-life is transformative and key to unlocking the full potential of our relationship to the earth and each other.

Keywords: Richard Jefferies; nature mysticism; ecology; soul-life; wonder; anthropocentric; ontology; social justice; neoliberalism

1. Introduction

"I want to know the soul of the flowers" (Jefferies 1895, p. 30). These are the words of a man transformed by the wonders of nature. They are also the words of a dying man. They are taken from one of Richard Jefferies' final essays, "Nature and Books", which he dictated to his beloved wife Jessie as he lay bed-ridden, slowly wasting away from tuberculosis. At the age of 38, he would die defeated, unknown, and penniless. A bitter end for a man who strived so earnestly to celebrate the flesh, body, and vital energies of the natural world. With perhaps the exception of a handful of scholars and a modest but dedicated reader base, the writings of Jefferies remain largely unknown outside of England. This is a shame, given that his mystical vision of nature is an invaluable source of ecological insight. We need such ecological insight now more than ever. The ecological crisis is the greatest existential threat that humanity has ever faced. The anthropocentric path of consumption that currently dominates the ideological order of the world is leading us towards planetary catastrophe. The only way we are going to stave off this disaster is to fundamentally change our actions, which will require a confrontation with a profound ontological question: how do we perceive ourselves as *being in the world*? Is nature here for me, or am I here for nature?

It is easy for the cynic to scoff at Jefferies and dismiss his desire to "know the soul of the flowers" as sentimental rubbish. Such a romantic vision is a bit too odd and a little too naïve to contribute anything of value to a serious discussion about the ecological crisis. The concrete political and economic measures required to mount a serious response to the ecological crisis need to be grounded in a rational framework, one that is realistic and far removed from Jefferies' "magical thinking". The problem with this argument, however, is that this rational mindset has shaped social policy for decades now, yet every year continues to get hotter than the last.[1] Despite the best efforts of our finest scientists, teachers, and activists, we have continued to fail future generations by refusing to adequately address the

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ecological crisis. In fact, the crisis is accelerating.[2] Of course, I am certainly not suggesting that we should abandon the scientific approach or lessen our activism. Quite the contrary. What I am suggesting is that this conventional "rational" approach can be enhanced by including a more engaged dialogue with the findings of the humanities. The problem we are facing is complex, and we need a more integrated or holistic approach, one that can accommodate both reason and emotion, both body and soul. This is not a new idea. Consider, for example, the teachings of the Catholic priest and author Thomas Berry, who helped pioneer the field of religion and ecology. Berry was adamant that a comprehensive response to the ecological crisis requires a well-rounded appreciation for the findings of both science and spirituality (Berry 2009). Today, scholars like Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, Bron Taylor, Leslie Sponsel, and scores of others have dedicated their careers to highlighting the various ways religion and spirituality shape and are shaped by our relationship with nature. Environmental lawyer and co-founder of the National Resources Defense Council, Gus Speth, cuts to the core of the matter: "Our environmental discourse has thus far been dominated by lawyers, scientists, and economists. Now, we need to hear a lot more from the poets, preachers, philosophers, and psychologists" (Speth 2017, p. 9). Why do we need to hear more from the humanities? Speth explains: "I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystems collapse, and climate change. I thought that with thirty years of good science, we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy. . . and to deal with those, we need a spiritual and cultural transformation, and we, (Lawyers) and scientists, don't know how to do that".[3] In other words, our response or lack thereof to the ecological crisis is an ethical issue, and moral questions are largely the domain of the humanities. Science and technology can only take us so far. Perhaps to go further, we need to immerse ourselves more deeply into the realm of wonder, imagination, and affect and boldly seek out the hidden reasons of the heart. From this perspective, perhaps it is a little less preposterous to suggest that our capacity to save the world ultimately hinges on our desire to "know the soul of the flowers".

I suggest that the English author and mystic Richard Jefferies' (1848–1887) concept of "soul-life" presents an ecocentric vision of nature that can be utilized to enhance the way we address the ecological crisis. I argue that soul-life can be interpreted as an ontological category characterized by a mystical sensitivity towards the wonders of nature. Jefferies believed that such a mystical state of *being in nature* is transformative and key to unlocking the full potential of our relationship to the earth and each other. This mystical/ecocentric insight, I claim, produces an intellectual and moral power that can be harnessed to inspire a more wonderous worldview to counter the ideology of neoliberalism[4] that has normalized the greed, apathy, and overall disenchantment that currently define our relationship to nature.

My paper consists of three sections that unfold as follows: First, I provide a brief introduction to the study of nature mysticism, focusing on the ways in which it has been marginalized by mainstream religious discourses. In particular, I suggest that the normalization of the world religions paradigm (WRP) within the field of religious studies has played a hegemonic role in devaluing the teachings of nature mysticism in the West. In short, nature mysticism does not meet the standard of what constitutes an "authentic" form of mysticism because it does not conform to the beliefs of (Christian) monotheism. This WRP model of the mystical is problematic because it is not only intellectually dubious, but its scope is too myopic to address the mystical significance of the ecological crisis. In direct contestation of this standard model of the mystical, I claim we need to hear a lot more from nature mystics, especially radical ones like Richard Jefferies. Hence, in the second section of my paper, I explore Jefferies' mystical vision of nature as represented in his most influential work, *The Story of My Heart* (Jefferies 2014). The core concept shaping Jefferies understanding of nature mysticism in *The Story of My Heart* is what he calls "soul-life", which refers to a mystical state of *being in wonder* with nature. This state of mystical wonder not only enhances Jefferies relationship to nature, but his search for soul-life transforms the

way he thinks about God, body, and time/being. Practically speaking, the cultivation of soul-life is fundamentally about spending time in nature. Breathing in the air, basking in the sun, feet on the grass, enjoying the bare fact of being alive. Such a wonderful attitude might begin in nature, but it does not end there. It continues with Jefferies' call for social reform. In the third and final section, I discuss how Jefferies' critique of market capitalism, class, and greed resonates with the contemporary concerns of the environmental justice movement.[5] Taken as a whole, his ecological and social commentary presents us with an opportunity to reflect upon new ways of thinking about the relationship between social justice and ecological flourishing.

2. Nature Mysticism

Long before the familiar gods we know today emerged, our prehistoric ancestors turned to nature as the ultimate source of spiritual meaning. In a sense, we have always been nature mystics. Whether it be the ancient animal bones found in ritual burial sites or the symbolic animal paintings that adorn the caves of Altamira and Lascaux, our earliest spiritual expressions are entwined with nature. It is not for nothing that both Max Muller and E.B. Taylor, two of the founding figures of the field of religious studies, trace the origins of religion to humanity's desire to explain the workings of the natural world.[6] Stated simply, nature shapes our spiritual sensibilities. And the study of mysticism is no different.

Consider, for example, the origins of the term mysticism. It is widely believed to be derived from the Greek verb "muo", meaning "to close", or more specifically, to close the eyes and lips (Bouyer 1980, p. 43). This injunction to close the eyes and lips refers to the oaths of secrecy associated with the sacred rites of the mystery religions of ancient Greece, the most popular of which was the Eleusinian cult of Demeter. Although it is often understated within contemporary religious discourses, it is telling that the earliest known reference to mysticism in the West is tied to the worship of a quintessential mother-earth Goddess.

Mysticism is a social construct, and the meanings we attribute to it are a product of cultural conditioning. We are wise here to heed the words of Richard King:

> Virtually all contemporary studies of mysticism fail to appreciate the sense in which notions of 'the mystical' (including those that are adopted in the studies themselves) are cultural and linguistic constructions dependent upon a web of interlocking definitions, attitudes and discursive processes, which themselves are tied to particular forms of life and historically specific practices. Not only are contemporary notions of the 'mystical' subject to the cultural presuppositions of the day, they are also informed by and overlap with a long history of discursive processes, continuities and discontinuities and shifts in both meaning and denotation. Just as these various meanings and applications of 'the mystical' have changed over time, so too have the variety of attitudes towards them and evaluations of their importance differed according to circumstance. Defining the mystical then is never a 'purely academic' activity (in the sense in which one means 'of no real consequence'), nor can it ever be completely divorced from the historical remains of past definitions of the term. (King 1999, p. 9)

Hence, it is important to consider how established understandings of "mysticism" normalize specific ideological assumptions about power, authority, and issues of inclusion.

Today, the common usage of the term "mysticism" is primarily a product of the material, historical, and cultural conditions of Western modernity. The field of psychology has played a central role in defining this modern approach to the study of mysticism. Following the work of Michel de Certeau (1992), Jefferey J. Kripal claims that "whereas premodern mysticism was historically embedded deeply in traditional forms of liturgical, scriptural, and doctrinal contexts, modernity has witnessed an increasing deracination of the mystical from the traditional forms of authority and faith and an ever-increasing psychologization of its meanings" (Kripal 2001, p. 10). Perhaps one of the most influential figures to hasten this

move to psychologize the study of mysticism is the American philosopher William James who famously outlined four defining characteristics of mystical consciousness: transiency, passivity, ineffability, and noetic quality (James 1958, p. 319). Of the four characteristics that James outlines, the noetic quality or "illumination" is particularly important because he was convinced it was "the essential mark of 'mystical' states" (James 1958, p. 341). According to James, illumination refers to a "highly specialized type of perception" that produces a sense of "enlargement, union, and emancipation" (Barnard 1997, p. 217). Ultimately, James reached the conclusion that mystical states of consciousness are valuable because they produce a unique and extraordinarily powerful kind of knowledge (illumination) that is profoundly transformative. Perhaps most significantly, if James' psychological model is correct, all human beings are mystics *in potentia* by virtue of the fact that we all have access to the same deep layers of mystical consciousness—regardless of one's religious affiliation. In a real sense, then, James' model naturalizes the study of mysticism.

The more traditional "religious" approach to the study of mysticism tends to lean more into metaphysics. Margaret Smith, for example, defines mysticism as "an innate tendency of the human soul, which seeks to transcend reason and attain a direct experience of God" (Smith 1980, p. 20). Evelyn Underhill refers to it as "the way of union with Reality" (Underhill 1995, p. 3). The notion of "union" with some higher principle or state of consciousness is a common feature of many definitions of mysticism. For example, W. T. Stace claims that the core characteristic of mystical experience is "an undifferentiated unity" (Stace 1960, p. 23). R. C. Zaehner defines mysticism in terms of "the union of the human soul with god" (Zaehner 1957, p. 74). Bernard McGinn claims that unitive language can be limiting and instead emphasizes the importance of God's presence in defining the mystical (McGinn 2006, p. xv). The problem with many of the definitions outlined above, however, is that they tend to exhibit a certain "essentialist" quality that harbors an implicit theistic bias. Hence, I adopt Jefferey Kripal's more pluralistic definition of "the mystical" as "a hidden dimension of human consciousness in which the dichotomies of normal awareness are transcended in an intense experience of unity or communion with a hidden reality or presence" (Kripal 1998, p. 20).

So where does nature mysticism fit in? F. C. Happold provides a succinct definition: "Nature-mysticism is characterized by a sense of the immanence of the One or God or soul in Nature" (Happold 1985, p. 43). In the West, nature mysticism is often conflated with the idea of pantheism or, in some instances, panentheism. Interestingly, the idea of a nature mystic that we have today did not really gain traction within popular culture until around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Prior to this time, nature mysticism tended to be associated with paganism and what early scholars pejoratively regarded as the "primitive" religious beliefs of Indigenous people. It was with the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and a little later the writings of the Romantic poets, like Shelley, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, that the idea of a nature mystic proper became fully fleshed out as a religious facet of the Western imagination. Nature for the Romantic was the driving force of spiritual inspiration and served as a sacred site of contact with the Divine (Goodbody 2013). This Romantic ethos would eventually spread to America, most prominently in the teachings of Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and the other Transcendentalists (Albanese 2007, p. 171). Today, the spiritual roots of the modern environmental movement can be traced back to the mystical aspirations of the Romantics.

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive and insightful scholarly accounts on the modern study of nature mysticism is Paul Marshall's *Mystical Encounters with the Natural World: Experiences & Explanations* (Marshall 2005). Marshall refers to nature mysticism, or "extrovertive mysticism", as a "transformed apprehension of the natural world", defined most often by the following key characteristics:

- unity with the world or some of its contents
- incorporation of the world into the self
- intuitive comprehension of the world
- a love that encompasses all things

- expansive vision of the world
- extraordinary beauty of the world
- luminous transfiguration of the environment
- an altered temporality that includes all times and places (Marshall 2005, p. 28).

As we can see from Marshall's list, the "nature mystical experience" shares many of the same characteristics as a traditional "religious" mystical experience. The core difference of course is the source of mystical meaning: religion or nature?

This tension between religion and nature is tied to an even larger dichotomy between culture and nature. It is widely accepted that this culture/nature dichotomy plays a pivotal role in the way we structure reality. Since at least the rise of the enlightenment this dichotomy has been deployed to justify a logic of domination that places (Western/Christian) culture above nature (White 2017, pp. 78–79). This logic of domination that underlies the culture/nature dichotomy was also deployed to justify the privileged status of the patriarchy and the abhorrent practices of slavery and colonization. Today, it continues to undermine the aims of environmental justice. Take for example the work of Melanie L. Harris, who draws on the insights of ecowomanism to highlight the "parallel oppressions suffered by black women and the earth" (Harris 2016, p. 6). Or consider the work of Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. and Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred, who both identify the insidious ways settler-colonialism has normalized the relationship between white Christian supremacy and harmful ecological practices (Deloria 1973; Alfred 2005). As an apparatus of state power, religion has been implicated in this "civilizing" project every step of the way, and consequently, this logic of domination has influenced the way mysticism is addressed in the West. This is all to say that the marginalization of nature mysticism in both the historical and contemporary field of religious studies is not just an academic exercise. Rather, it is the product of an ingrained cultural bias that draws on established sites of Western power and authority to preserve and perpetuate a particular worldview of the mystical that looks an awful lot like (Christian) monotheism.[7]

In his classic work *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (1957), R. C. Zaehner outlines an influential typology of the mystical that is emblematic of this religious (Christian/monotheistic) bias that I argue traditionally shapes the study of mysticism in the West.[8] Zaehner identifies three types of mysticism. The first is nature mysticism, which "sees the human self as encompassing all Nature, the subjective 'I' is merged into the cosmic All" (Zaehner 1957, p. 59). From a phenomenological perspective, there are typically three characteristics that define a "natural mystical experience" for Zaehner: First, a keen sense that "without and within are one;" second, a personal realization of the absurdity of death; and third, the transcendence of space and time (Zaehner 1957, p. 41). Zaehner's second category is "soul mysticism", which he characterizes as an experience of mystical isolation when the soul is absorbed into an impersonal and undifferentiated One that transcends space and time (Zaehner 1957, p. 59). He associates "soul mysticism" with the mystical traditions of the East. The final type of mysticism Zaehner identifies is theism, which he refers to as "the mysticism of the love of God" (ibid). Theistic mysticism, according to Zaehner, is a more authentic form of mysticism in comparison to nature and soul mysticism because, first, theistic mysticism privileges the central role of God's grace; and second, theistic mysticism recognizes the social applicability of love and thus offers a more sophisticated moral framework. And here we come to the heart of Zaehner's bias—namely, that mysticism proper can only be framed morally in relation to a transcendent God of love, or, more specifically, to the transcendent God of the Christian tradition. Essentially, Zaehner believes that theistic mysticism, or more specifically, Christian mysticism, is superior to nature mysticism (and soul mysticism) because it recognizes the moral imperative inherent to any authentic mystical state of consciousness. How else, asks Zaehner, are we to determine if a mystic is a saint or a scoundrel if not by the moral measure of how well they exemplify God's love? The nature mystic may experience something extraordinary in terms of accessing states of consciousness that were previously barred. However, they lack God; they lack grace; and thus, their vision of the mystical is at best solipsistic and, at worst, morally dubious.

The popularity of Zaehner's typology brings the biases of the field of mystical studies to the fore. Specifically, Zaehner adopts a clear hierarchical model of evaluation where monotheistic mysticism sits at the top, signaling its sovereign power. Beneath it is Eastern mysticism, which is ostensibly more tolerable than nature mysticism because it at least possesses some relatable dimensions, including institutional structures, sacred texts and rituals, and an elite class of religious "experts". At the bottom of the hierarchy is nature mysticism, the least authentic, and thus least valuable form of mysticism. Why? Because it does not conform to the standard model of what constitutes the mystical as established by the social/political powers of Western monotheism. Nature mysticism is anti-institutional; there is no cheering-squad, and there are no advocates at the parent-teachers' meeting demanding it be part of the religious studies curriculum. And thus, the teachings of nature mystics are relegated to the margins of religious studies and, by extension, culture.

I argue that the dominance of the world religions paradigm (WRP) within Western religious discourses has normalized this process of marginalization. The concept of the WRP refers to the idea that beliefs and practices of the most "popular" religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, etc.) play a hegemonic role in dictating what it means to be religious.[9] In recent decades, the WRP has been critiqued on numerous fronts by a variety of scholars, including Tomoko Masuzawa, who writes, "Although regularly mentioned in scholarly tracts as well as in non-scholarly media, world religions is not a technical term. There has been little critical discussion of the concept or its history; nor is there an established definition agreed upon by religion specialists. . .It is therefore best to understand that the meaning of this term at present is largely determined by conventional practice rather than by any scholarly consensus or rigorous analytic considerations" (quoted in McCutcheon 2019, p. 118). In other words, the WRP serves a political purpose: to normalize disproportionate power relations between certain religious actors over others. This leads Catherine Bell to ask an important question: "what does a list of eight world religions say about the other religions not included? That they simply do not loom large enough in the world? That they are confined to national entities and thus do not hold the promise of generating a transnational community? Or, that they do not fit the model/prototype used and so may not even technically qualify as religions after all?" (Bell 2006, pp. 34–35). Stated simply, the WRP is hierarchical, elitist, and exclusionary.[10] When we apply these same critiques to the study of nature mysticism, we see a similar pattern emerge in which the teachings of Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim mystics get lauded, published, and taught, while the teachings of nature mysticism remain obscured, understudied, and eventually forgotten.

How has this bias played out for Richard Jefferies specifically? For the most part, Jefferies' teachings are often framed as a foil to demonstrate the folly of nature mysticism. Take for example the following commentary by Evelyn Underhill, widely recognized as an authority on the modern study of mysticism. She acknowledges that Jefferies is a mystic, but that the quality of his mysticism does not quite make the grade. He got close, she admits, but ultimately missed "the Life known to the great mystics" (quoted in Rossabi 2017, p. 643). In other words, Jefferies is a mediocre mystic, and his nature mysticism is just not "great". In his classic work, *Cosmic Consciousness*, Maurice M. Bucke, points out that Jefferies felt the "Cosmic Sense" but did not quite meet the threshold of an authentic mystical state of consciousness (Bucke 2015, p. 282). Zaehner goes further. He praises the uniqueness of Jefferies' nature mysticism, calling particular attention to his atheism, yet nonetheless claims that Jefferies was "an unwilling witness on Christianity's behalf" because he maintains a distinction between the animating energies of creation and creation itself (Zaehner 1957, p. 49). Further, Zaehner argues that Jefferies views on immortality align with the Christian doctrine of Original Sin (Zaehner 1957, p. 49). It would appear as though Jefferies was a Christian after all—even despite himself! Given Zaehner's influence on the field, it is worth noting that he was also keen to highlight another important observation about nature mystics that distinguishes them from theistic mystics: they are mentally unstable. Commenting on the mysticism of Rimbaud and Blake (and we can infer Jefferies

as well), Zaehner concludes, "…there is a definite connexion between nature mysticism and lunacy" (Zaehner 1957, p. 52).

Perhaps nature mysticism has been historically marginalized within the field of religious studies because it is anti-institutional, anti-dogmatic, non-hierarchical, spontaneous[11] and innately egalitarian. Such ideas run counter to the practical reality of any organized religion that purports to possess the exclusive truth of Ultimate Reality. Most significantly for the focus of this paper, it is vital to call attention to and critique this negative bias towards nature mysticism because the teachings of certain nature mystics might provide valuable insight and much-needed guidance on how to incentivize our culture to become less anthropocentric and more ecocentric. Stated simply, a deeper education in nature mysticism might just inspire us to care a bit more about the welfare of the planet. Or as Carl Von Essen puts it, "Mystical experience of nature can be of particular relevance to our troubled age, bringing deeper into our consciousness and emotions the logic that nature sustains humanity as humanity must, in turn, sustain nature (Von Essen 2010, p. 7).

3. The Story of My Heart

"I am a son of the soil", writes Jefferies (quoted in Keith 1965, p. 17). Indeed, he was born on 6 November 1848, in Coate, Swindon, England, to a farming family with deep roots in the area.[12] Life is tough on a poor dirt farm, and Jefferies never really took to the idea of hard labor. He did, however, enjoy his time loafing in the fields and meadows, thinking, dreaming, and wondering. He left school at 15 and eventually landed a job as a freelance journalist, documenting the concerns of the local farmers and the general goings-on of the rural countryside. He would marry a local farmer's daughter, Jesse Baden, in 1874 and they would have three children. Over the next few years, Jefferies would continue to hone his writing skills with essays on agriculture, wildlife, and gamekeeping. He even tried his hand at being a novelist, with mixed results. He would eventually attain a modest degree of professional success by publishing collections of his nature essays, but he always found it difficult to make ends meet. In the winter of 1881 at the age of 33, Jefferies fell severely ill. For the next six years, he would struggle to survive a painful battle with tuberculosis that would eventually leave him bedridden for the remainder of his short life. He died on 14 August 1887, leaving his family destitute. An entry from one of his last notebooks underscores the brutal reality that he was forced to endure near the end: "Three great giants are against me—disease, despair, and poverty" (quoted in Besant 1888, p. 361).

Jefferies is often described as shy and somewhat reserved, and this aloofness garnered him a reputation as an eccentric. In terms of appearance, he was fairly tall and thin, with brown hair, an auburn beard, a long nose, and big blue eyes (Salt 1894, p. 23). He did not really indulge in any vices, and by most accounts was a dutiful husband and dedicated father. He was a voracious reader and passionate about spending time in nature, jotting down his discoveries along the way. Although mostly self-educated, he did manage to cultivate a unique voice as both a journalist and an author. Critics, however, described him as a "mere cataloguer", "vague", and a "curiosity" (Morris 2007, p. 11). On the other end of the spectrum, one of his earliest biographers, Henry Salt, ranked him as a "great prose writer" (Salt 1894, p. 103), and the literary critic Q. D. Leavis described him as a "many-sided and comprehensive genius" (Morris 2007, p. 11). His plain, unassuming style has drawn comparisons to the work of Twain, Hardy, and Ruskin. The uniqueness of his writing, argues Brian Morris, comes from his capacity to combine "rationalism and mysticism, social realism with an ecological sensibility, and a vivid empirical naturalism with an extraordinary poetic imagination (Morris 2007, p. 25). D.H. Lawrence was fond of his writing, but perhaps the most striking praise bestowed upon Jefferies comes from the American author Henry Miller: "Here is the man who speaks my inmost thoughts. He is the iconoclast I feel myself to be yet never fully reveal. He makes the utmost demands. He rejects, he scraps, he annihilates. What a seeker! What a daring seeker!" (quoted by Keith 1965, p. 177). I think Miller hit the nail on the head. For all his faults as an author, Jefferies'

legacy stems from his willingness to be vulnerable, to seek out something authentic—but to what end?

I claim that the key to appreciating Jefferies' voice as an author is to position his writings in dialogue with his mysticism; that is, he was a mystic first and an author second. Only when he had an opportunity to indulge his mystical proclivities did his writing truly soar. One of Jefferies' greatest claims to fame as a novelist is his two children's books, *Wood Magic* (Jefferies 1924) and *Bevis* (Jefferies 1882). Both stories follow the adventures of a young boy, Bevis, who magically communicates with animals and other forces of nature. Here is an excerpt from the conclusion of *Wood Magic* in which the Wind conveys its secret knowledge to young Bevis:

> Bevis, my love, if you want to know all about the sun, and the stars, and everything, make haste and come to me, and I will tell you, dear. In the morning, dear, get up as quick as you can, and drink me as I come down from the hill. In the day go up on the hill, dear, and drink me again, and stay there if you can till the stars shine out, and drink still more of me. And by and by you will understand all about the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and the Earth which is so beautiful, Bevis. It is so beautiful, you can hardly believe how beautiful it is. (Jefferies 1924, p. 375)

Here we have Jefferies using the literary medium of a children's fable—where elements of fantasy and magic are commonly deployed—to experiment with and reflect upon his own sense of the mystical, which, much like Bevis, is rooted in the wonders of nature. This sense of mystical reverence for the wonders of nature pervades his most accomplished writing. Take for example his most highly acclaimed work, *The Pageant of Summer* (Jefferies 1906), which dramatizes a personal rapport with the beauty and grandeur of the natural world:

> I seem as if I could feel all the glowing life the sunshine gives and the south wind calls to being. The endless grass, the endless leaves, the immense strength of the oak expanding, the unalloyed joy of finch and blackbird; from all of them I receive a little. Each gives me something of the pure joy they gather for themselves. In the blackbird's melody one note is mine; in the dance of the leaf shadows the formed maze is for me, though the motion is theirs; the flowers with a thousand faces have collected the kisses of the morning. Feeling with them, I receive some, at least, of their fulness of life. . .. The exceeding beauty of the earth, in her splendour of life, yields a new thought with every petal. The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live, so that the longer we can stay among these things so much the more is snatched from inevitable Time. . .. These are the only hours that are not wasted—these hours that absorb the soul and fill it with beauty. This is real life, and all else is illusion. . . (Jefferies 1906, p. 279)

There is a vibrant energy running throughout the imagery that enlivens a normally prosaic experience of witnessing nature with an undercurrent of spiritual engagement. As such, Jefferies seeks to strike a balance between nature realism—oak expanding, blackbird's melody, etc.,—and an existential realization of what it means to *feel* nature and to be *absorbed* in its beauty. What is this subtextual meaning that he alludes to? That such moments of intimacy between the soul and nature are edifying, essential, and real. The mystical significance of this intimacy between the soul and nature is the focus of Jefferies' most personal and most popular work, *The Story of My Heart* (Jefferies 2014).

As the title suggests, *The Story of My Heart* is Jefferies spiritual autobiography. It details the evolution of his mysticism and how his mystical experience of nature shaped his views on the world, which are in many ways quite radical. Here is a nature mystic that disavows God, embraces the flesh, and detests asceticism of any sort. And yet, entwined within these radical views on almost every page of *The Story* is a highly sensitive pean to nature, a confession of human fragility, and an all-too familiar call for empathetic understanding of

a man's search for meaning amidst the chaos of change. Beyond its aesthetic value, there is a morbid gravitas surrounding *The Story,* which is perhaps to be expected when one considers that the words were penned by a desperate man so close to the brink of death.

As an autobiography of the soul, it is a true confession, and he rarely holds back. He explains, "I have been obliged to write these things by an irresistible impulse, which has worked in me since early youth. They have not been written for the sake of argument, still less for any thought of profit, rather indeed the reverse. They have been forced from me by earnestness of heart, and they express my most serious convictions" (Jefferies 2014, p. 214). Jefferies freely admits that he struggled to write *The Story*, pondering over it for nearly 17 years. This is no surprise to anyone familiar with the phenomenology of mystical experience in that such a profound experience transcends rational modes of understanding; that is, it takes time to muster the right words to explain the ineffable. But such is the purpose of *The Story*: to gesture towards the infinite.

In the opening sections of *The Story*, Jefferies details his first mystical experience:

> I was utterly alone with the sun and the earth. Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. I thought of the earth's firmness—I felt it bear me up: through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me. I thought of the wandering air—its pureness, which is its beauty; the air touched me and gave me something of itself. I spoke to the sea: though so far, in my mind I saw it, green at the rim of the earth and blue in deeper ocean; I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory. Then I addressed the sun, desiring the soul equivalent of his light and brilliance, his endurance and unwearied race. I turned to the blue heaven over, gazing into its depth, inhaling its exquisite colour and sweetness. The rich blue of the unattainable flower of the sky drew my soul towards it, and there it rested, for pure colour is rest of heart. By all these I prayed; I felt an emotion of the soul beyond all definition; prayer is a puny thing to it, and the word is a rude sign to feeling, but I know no other. (Jefferies 2014, p. 31)

This mystical encounter with the energies of the Earth transformed him. The world took on a different hue, and within this heightened state of mystical wonder, his soul opened up to a whole new way of *being in the world.* He was now ready to embark on a hitherto unknown path of intellectual and moral discovery. In a short time, it would lead him to radical insights about the question of God, the value of body, and the nature of time/being. Morally speaking, he became convinced that what really matters in this world is not the accumulation of material possessions or social status, but rather a deep realization of "soul-life".

I claim that Jefferies' concept of soul-life is key to understanding his mystical vision of nature. It is a nebulous concept that Jefferies never defines in detail, which was likely a purposeful tactic to inure his reader to the provocative stance he takes against traditional religion and the social conventions of the day. However, we can glean a workable meaning of soul-life from how he contextualized it throughout his work. Near the end of *The Story*, he provides a tentative definition of the soul as "that inner consciousness which aspires", but he maintains that this definition is deficient and instructs the reader to "leave my book as a whole to give its own meaning to its words" (Jefferies 2014, p. 216). Borrowing from Brooke Williams' analysis, I read Jefferies' notion of the soul as a "conduit between the earth and me, through which energy and nourishment flow" (quoted in Jefferies 2014, p. 223). By extension, I take soul-life to refer to those dimensions of interaction between soul and earth that empower the flow of (cosmic) energy. From this perspective, I argue that soul-life can be read as an ecological concept that draws on the (intellectual and moral) energies of the mystical to facilitate a deeper appreciation of and connection with nature.[13] In *The Story* Jefferies identifies three core ideas that were transformed by his search for soul-life: God, body and time/being.

Jefferies was not a religious man in any conventional sense of the word. In fact, his critics characterize him as an atheist. And they are not wrong. How might we square this supposed atheism with his mysticism? It becomes clear very quickly from even the most cursory reading of *The Story* that Jefferies had little regard for the traditional Christian God. In fact, he found the idea abhorrent: "How can I adequately express my contempt for the assertion that all things occur for the best, for a wise and beneficent end, and are ordered by a humane intelligence! It is the most utter falsehood and a crime against the human race" (Jefferies 2014, p. 167). According to Jefferies, the belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God is illusionary nonsense. Further, even if there is a God, we ought to despise it for being such a failure. Clearly, argues Jefferies, any sober minded individual can recognize that all things happen by chance. But there is no need to despair about living in a godless universe, according to Jefferies, because we have the capacity and will to shape reality as we see fit. Only once we liberate ourselves from the shackles of God will we be able to realize our ultimate potential. This type of Nietzschean logic is familiar territory to the modern reader; however, Jefferies keeps the reader on their toes by taking an unexpected turn and confessing his deep-seated desire for something more than God:

> I conclude that there is an existence, a something higher than soul—higher, better, and more perfect than deity. Earnestly I pray to find this something better than a god. There is something superior, higher, more good. For this I search, labour, think, and pray. If after all there be nothing, and my soul has to go out like a flame, yet even then I have thought this while it lives. With the whole force of my existence, with the whole force of my thought, mind, and soul, I pray to find this Highest Soul, this greater than deity, this better than god. Give me to live the deepest soul-life now and always with this Soul. For want of words I write soul, but I think that it is something beyond soul. (Jefferies 2014, p. 91)

What are we to make of Jefferies' seemingly paradoxical position of disavowing God and simultaneously praying for a state of spiritual connection with "this something better than a god"? It is a matter of context. Jefferies cannot abide by the belief in Christian monotheism, which for him is nothing more than a depository of human projections. This traditional concept of God is beholden to the vainest conceits of our culture and its all-too-human limitations and prejudices. Jefferies wants something else—something more. He wants to know that force "more subtle than electricity" that connects the cosmos to the human heart yet demands nothing in return, akin to the flower that blossoms because it must, to that wave that inevitably meets the shore—and the sun shines on regardless (Jefferies 2014, p. 89).

The body is another important idea that Jefferies seeks to interrogate in his search for soul-life. A familiar trope in the history of Western mysticism since at least Plato revolves around the need to liberate the soul from the body; that is, the soul can only reach a state of spiritual fulfillment by escaping the material bondage of the body. The body, in other words, is a tomb for the soul. Hence the widespread popularity of ascetic practices within the history of Western mysticism, which are designed to violently subdue the distracting impulses of the body in order to help purify the soul for its journey towards God (Oliver 2009, p. 33). Jefferies claims that such practices are "pure folly". He takes the whole morbid idea of asceticism to task:

> I believe all manner of asceticism to be the vilest blasphemy—blasphemy towards the whole of the human race. I believe in the flesh and the body, which is worthy of worship—to see a perfect human body unveiled causes a sense of worship: The ascetics are the only persons who are impure. Increase of physical beauty is attended by increase of soul beauty. The soul is the high even by gazing on beauty. Let me be fleshly perfect. (Jefferies 2014, p. 142)

Jefferies viewed the body as a source of spiritual inspiration: "the divine beauty of flesh is life itself to me" (Jefferies 2014, p. 108). Unlike traditional religious mystics, Jefferies felt no aversion towards matters of the flesh; rather, the flesh signals an intimate encounter

with the beauty of form itself, offering us the only truly embodied reality of something rather than nothing. In other words, *embodiment is reality*, and this fleshy reality ought to be embraced in all its sweaty, stinky, and decaying glory. Jefferies' embrace of embodiment thus speaks to the hybridity of soul-life, by which I mean that soul-life is about integrating the knowledge of body *and* soul, materiality *and* mind, matter *and* energy. By closing off one domain or another, one loses access to an entire field of meaning. However, by seeking to integrate both body and soul, soul-life provides an opportunity to construct a more well-rounded or holistic understanding of our relationship to the cosmos.

Our understanding of this relationship to the cosmos is tied to the question of how we view and value time/being. Jefferies was no scientist and maintained an ambivalent relationship to science. He admired Darwin and yet, in the same breath, denied the theory of evolution (Manning 2020, p. 2). He did not have a problem with the aims of science *per se*, but rather he questioned its tendency to police boundaries on how we understand the ultimate meaning of our existence. Or, as he puts it: "the mind is not to be pinned to dogmas of science any more than to dogmas of superstition" (Jefferies 2014, p. 181). Neither science nor religion can fully explain the profundity of soul-life—there is always a remainder, a more, that cannot be placed in the "killing-jar" of our cultural habits. This is particularly true, argues Jefferies, for how we apprehend time and being, which are interwoven into the deepest dimensions of soul-life.

Jefferies was fascinated with the idea of immortality, but like his approach to "God" and "body", he sought to expand on its conventional meaning. His logic on the matter runs as follows: Duration shapes our regular sense of reality. Time passes, seasons change, and so do I. But mystical states of consciousness appear to suspend this conventional sense of time, so that only the "now" exists. He goes on:

> Realising that spirit, recognizing my own inner consciousness, the psyche, so clearly, I cannot understand time. It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air. Nothing has to come; it is now. Now is eternity; now is the immortal life. Here this moment, by this tumulus, on earth, now; I exist in it. The years, the centuries, the cycles are absolutely nothing; it is only a moment since this tumulus was raised; in a thousand years it will still be only a moment. To the soul there is no past and no future; all is and will be ever, in now. For artificial purposes time is mutually agreed on, but is really no such thing. The shadow goes on upon the dial, the index moves round upon the clock, and what is the difference? None whatever. If the clock had never been set going, what would have been the difference? There may be time for the clock, the clock may make time for itself; there is none for me. (Jefferies 2014, p. 67)

Time is a construct. The only authentic reality, the only real state of being, is *now*. The past is gone, the future is unknown, and thus it is only *now* that matters. But it is difficult to live in the moment. We are pulled into the past by our regrets and "what if's" and endlessly busy ourselves into oblivion with hopes of the future. "Wake up" screams Jefferies; only *now* do you breath; only *now* is their light upon your face; and only *now* can you realize eternity. How? By living the soul-life, which entails aligning the soul with the spiritual rhythms of nature so that one can learn how to "walk in the midst of immortal things" (Jefferies 2014, p. 70). Basically, it boils down to perspective. Twenty-four hours is a literal lifetime for the typical mayfly, but a mere day for you and me. The notion of immortality for Jefferies is not only a state of mind but also a state of being: "The fact of my own existence as I write, as I exist at this second, is so marvelous, so miracle-like, strange, and supernatural to me, that I unhesitatingly conclude I am always on the margin of life illimitable, and that there are higher conditions than existence" (Jefferies 2014, p. 73). This "higher condition than existence" is what Jefferies means by immortality. It is a state of *being in wonder* with the nature of existence: "there is nothing that is not wonderful; as, for instance, the existence of things at all" (Jefferies 2014, p. 222). Soul-life is not about asking *why* there is something rather than nothing, but about basking in the fact that there

is something rather than nothing. It is about feeling the energies of the earth and cosmos within one's soul, to become part of the whole, and making contact with that "something more than existence" (Jefferies 2014, p. 73).

4. Ecological Legacy

Jefferies has been labeled a "pagan", "pantheist", "earth spirit", "the high priest of summer", and even hailed as "the founding father of environmentalism in Britain".[14] For his own part, he claims there "never was such a worshipper of earth' (quoted in Rossabi 2017, p. 80). According to Brian Morris, "as a poet naturalist and pioneer ecologist Jefferies certainly needs to be placed alongside Henry Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold, as one of the true precursors of the environmental movement (Morris 2007, p. 25). Given these accolades, it thus might come as no surprise that the great environmentalist herself, Rachel Carson, kept a copy of *The Story of My Heart* by her bedside (Rossabi 2023, p. 393). Jefferies, however, is not your typical naturalist. He was a journalist by trade, and this skill added a factual flavor to his style of writing, lending fine detail to his documentation of the flora and fauna of the English countryside. Nothing was off limits—large and small game, birds, fish, insects, and wildflowers—they were all affectionate subjects of his pen. He studied changing habitats, landscapes, farms, and working conditions and even critiqued harmful agricultural practices (Morris 2007, p. 476). Some have suggested that Jefferies oeuvre can perhaps be best interpreted as an endorsement of the "return to nature" movement that first emerged with the Romantics. I tend to agree. However, I want to call attention to an often-understudied dimension of his ecological vision—namely, how it intersects with his call for social reform.

More specifically, I suggest that Jefferies' understanding of social reform is tied to the mystical sensitivities he acquired by seeking out the soul-life. In his early career, he comes across as politically conservative but appears to have softened his views over time to adopt a much more liberal, even socialist position in his later writings. The details of this political transition are still debated[15], but the fact is that he viewed the pervasive ambition for wealth with utter contempt (Jefferies 2014, p. 143). All material fortune, he writes, "ends in a cipher" (Jefferies 2014, p. 145). The vast majority of us have been bamboozled into thinking that our value in this world comes from the attainment of material possessions and that if we do not work hard to acquire more stuff, we are wasting our lives. Jefferies contests such nonsense and declares:

> This falsehood is the interested superstition of an age infatuated with money, which having accumulated it cannot even expend it in pageantry. It is a falsehood propagated for the doubtful benefit of two or three out of ten thousand. It is the lie of a morality founded on money only, and utterly outside and having no association whatever with the human being itself. Many superstitions have been got rid of in these days; time it is that this, the last and worst, were eradicated. (Jefferies 2014, p. 189)

Jefferies is basically claiming that the reality of the market is a fraud designed to maintain the status quo of power, in which the greedy desires of a select few come at the expense of the needs of the many. Our obsession with money is inhumane and ought to be "eradicated". Perhaps even more pointedly, Jefferies claims that the upper-class bemoans idleness not because of any actual moral reason but, more practically, they are in fact threatened by the idea of the lower-class having the time to reflect on the harsh realities of social and economic inequality. In other words, if you are forced to work all day long in order to eat, then you will be too exhausted to get any funny ideas about changing the system (Jefferies 2014, p. 198). Taking to the defense of the poor and working class, Jefferies goes on to vilify the "well-to-do" as criminals because they not only benefit from such an immoral system of oppression, but they also take active measures to ensure its permanence. Jefferies calls out the absurdity of such a system: "Food and drink, roof and clothes, are the inalienable right of every child born into the light. If the world does not provide it

freely—not as a grudging gift but as a right, as a son of the house sits down to breakfast—then is the world mad" (Jefferies 2014, p. 190). And finally, here is perhaps Jefferies' most stinging critique of the capitalist order, which leaves little room for interpretation: "One man whipped with hunger toils half-naked in the pit, face to face with death; the other is crowned by his fellows sitting in state, with fine wines and the sound of jubilee. This is the Divine Right of Capital" (quoted in Morris 2007, p. 182).

From an ecological perspective, Jefferies' class critique aligns with the contemporary concerns of the environmental justice movement, which seeks to highlight the fact that those least responsible for causing the climate crisis are bearing the greatest brunt of the burden.[16] In other words, the worst culprits behind the ecological crisis are those who consume most of the planet's resources, which are the upper class. There are enough resources on the planet to maintain a sustainable existence; there is enough water in the well for us all to have a drink. Or, as Jefferies puts it, "This our earth this day produces sufficient for our existence. This our earth produces not only a sufficiency, but a superabundance, and pours a cornucopia of good things down upon us" (Jefferies 2014, p. 188). The problem is that this abundance is wasted by the super wealthy, who selfishly lord their power over the commons. This avarice is normalized by the reigning ideology of neoliberalism, which aims to commodify the earth's resources for the sake of human profit. The problem, however, runs much deeper than politics in that neoliberalism is but a symptom of a much more insidious anthropocentric ontology that privileges human interests over the wellbeing of the planet. According to Lynn White Jr.'s classic essay, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* (1967), this anthropocentric ontology is in fact a product of religious beliefs and values. White claims that "since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not" (White 1967, p. 1207). And this is why it is so important to study nature mystics like Jefferies, who attempt to counter this anthropocentric ontology by calling attention to the unsettling fact that nature is "absolutely indifferent to us" (Jefferies 2014, p. 85). Or, to put it another way, that is no less disturbing but equally revelatory: Culture requires nature. *But nature has no need for culture.*

5. Conclusions

We need more wonder in our lives. We need to learn how to wonder about "the soul of the flowers". This is the point of Jefferies' philosophy. We have become seduced by the soul-crushing routine of what he calls "house-life", which runs as follows: "Remain; be content; go round and round in one barren path, a little money, a little food and sleep, some ancient fables, old age and death" (Jefferies 2014, p. 127). The house-life (or screen life as it is today) breeds disenchantment. The antidote to this sad script is wonder.[17] And there is nothing more wonderous than the natural world, for "all things seem possible in the open air" (quoted in Salt 1894, p. 74). Perhaps even the transformation of one's very soul.

The planet is on the precipice of an ecological catastrophe that threatens to end all life as we know it.[18] And yet, half the population of the world's most powerful country unabashedly denies this reality.[19] It would appear as though the science is just not convincing enough. Regardless of which end of the political spectrum one identifies with, however, we are all equally moved by wonder. The study of wonder, I believe, might just play a critical role in combating our apathy towards the ecological crisis.[20] Wonder not only "excites our ontological imagination" but can compel us to both intellectually and morally "discern what is of intrinsic value or meaning (as opposed to what is of utilitarian value or meaning). And it consequently elicits efforts to find a harmonious relationship with, rather active mastery of, our wider surroundings" (Fuller 2006, p. 9). Stated simply, by activating our "environmental imagination",[21] wonder can help us cultivate a more ecocentric understanding of the world.[22] It is from this context that I suggest that *The Story of My Heart* ought to be read in terms of what I call a "wonder text", which refers to a specific form of mystical confession characterized by a reverence for nature and an evocative posture geared at eliciting a state of wonder in the reader.[23] Think of Henry

David Thoreau's classic, *Walden* (Thoreau 2000) or Annie Dillard's Pulitzer-Prize-winning work, *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek* (Dillard 2013). Like Jefferies' *Story*, these texts share a similar form and purpose: to confess how their mystical encounters with the wonders of nature transformed their lives and to draw on this sense of intimacy to seduce the reader into a state of spiritual/ecological receptiveness to the idea that they too might experience something similar by getting out into the wild.

What made Jefferies' writing so distinctive, according to Brian Morris, was that he was able "to invoke a sense of wonder with regard to the natural world" (Morris 2007, p. 410). Exactly. Wonder, I argue, is the bridge that links Jefferies' concept of soul-life to the contemporary understanding of ecology. Ultimately, soul-life can be understood as a mystical state of *being in wonder with nature*. It is this sense of mystical wonder that shapes the way Jefferies responds to the question of God, body, and time/being. There is always something more to God, to the body, to time/being that exceeds conventional modes of knowledge—thus underscoring wonder's capacity to act as both a state of inquiry and contemplation (Schinkel 2020, p. 481). Furthermore, the mystical wonder that defines soul-life also inspired Jefferies' interest in social reform.[24] Jefferies felt compelled by the moral beauty of soul-life to call out economic injustice and critique a social order of privilege that profits from the suffering of the less fortunate. These are valuable insights; however, any connection we make between Jefferies' teachings and the noble aims of the environmental justice movement is bound to remain marginalized until the field of religious studies and our larger culture make a greater effort to embrace a pluralistic understanding of the mystical. In the meantime, we can keep *The Story of My Heart* close at hand to reflect upon our moral duty to the earth and each other. Such a wonderful story is ultimately designed to inspire us to turn off the screen, leave the house, and "Go straight to the sun, the immense forces of the universe, to the Entity unknown; go higher than a god; deeper than prayer; and open a new day" (Jefferies 2014, p. 126).

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Notes

1 https://www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-analysis-confirms-2023-as-warmest-year-on-record/ (accessed on 11 June 2024).

2 https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/ (accessed on 11 June 2024).

3 https://earthcharter.org/podcasts/gus-speth/ (accessed on 14 June 2024)

4 For a comprehensive analysis of neoliberalism and its impact on the climate crisis see Noam Chomsky and Marv Waterstone, *Consequences of Capitalism: Manufacturing Discontent and Resistance* (Chomsky and Waterstone 2021).

5 https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/efam/environmental-justice/principles_of_environmental_justice/ (accessed on 12 June 2024).

6 For example, Muller claims that religion is rooted in humanity's attempt to rationalize natural phenomena and Tylor claims that investing the natural world with idea of a soul (animism) is the first form of religious expression. See Russel T. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion: An Introduction* (McCutcheon 2019).

7 According to Grace Jantzen, "what counts as mysticism will reflect (and also help to constitute) the institutions of power in which it occurs. Put starkly, the church (and nowadays the university) will exert its power to determine who counts as a mystic, excluding from that category any who are threatening to its authority" (Jantzen 1995, p. 323).

8 We might also consider how this bias plays out in the work of W. T. Stace's interpretation of nature mysticism (extrovertive mysticism). In *The Philosophy of Mysticism* (1960) he outlines an influential distinction first made by Rudolph Otto (1976) between introvertive and extrovertive types of mystics. According to Stace, "the essential difference between them is that the extrovertive experience looks outwards through the senses, while the introvertive looks inward into the mind" (Stace 1960, p. 61). Stace clearly privileges introvertive mystical experience over extrovertive mystical experience, as evident by his claim that "the extrovertive experience, although we recognize it as a distinct type, is actually on a lower level than the introvertive type, that is to say, it is an incomplete kind of experience which finds its completion and fulfillment in the introvertive type of experience" (Stace 1960, p. 132). In other words, nature mysticism is lacking. What, exactly? Perhaps God? And this lack of God makes it less valuable.

[9] For a pioneering analysis of this trend see Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" (Smith 1998) and Tomoko Mazusawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Mazusawa 2005). See also Susanne Owen, "The World Religions Paradigm: Time for a Change" (Owen 2011).

[10] An interesting parallel can be drawn here between the critiques of the WRP and the insights of ecofeminism. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, has long suggested that there is an "interconnection between the domination of women and the domination of nature (Ruether 2009, p. 362). This interconnection is often obfuscated by the social and political interests of patriarchal religions, which tend to be hierarchical, elitist, and exclusionary.

[11] The debate between spontaneous and acquired mystical states (see Stace 1960) has proved problematic for the radical constructivist position as popularized by the work of Steven Katz (Katz 1978). The constructivist position claims that mystical experience is a product of religious indoctrination. However, this position is difficult to maintain when considering the spontaneous character of nature mysticism. The experiences of nature mystics are often "situated *outside traditions of doctrine and practice*, occurring under a variety of non-religious circumstances" (Marshall 2005, p. 176). To put the matter differently, there is no room in the constructivist model for novelty. Furthermore, in contrast to the constructivist position, certain theorists claim that mystical experiences "result from a deconstruction of ordinary experience". For example, in *Mysticism Mind and Consciousness* (1999) Robert Foreman claims that "mystical experiences don't result from a process of building or constructing mystical experiences, but rather from an un-constructing of language and belief. It seems to result from something like a releasing of experience from language" (Forman 1999, p. 99).

[12] For the most contemporary and comprehensive biography on Jefferies see Andrew Rossabi's *A Peculiarly English Genius or, A Wiltshire Taoist: A Biography of Richard Jefferies,* Vol. 1 (Rossabi 2017), Vol. II (Rossabi 2020) and Vol. III (Rossabi 2023).

[13] I believe that a fascinating resonance can be drawn between the affective quality of Jefferies' concept of soul-life and Edward O. Wilson's theory of "Biophilia" (Wilson 1984).

[14] https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/oct/13/richard-jefferies-swindon-coate-water (accessed 22 June 2024).

[15] According to Besant, "He belonged to the people, and cursed either party" (Besant 1888, p. 59). Rossabi suggests a combination of his own experience with poverty and the moral sense gained from his mystical illumination proved formative to Jefferies' "sympathies" with the suffering of the poor (Rossabi 2020, p. 643). W. J. Keith claims that Jefferies' socialist leanings ought to be "interpreted not as an increasing radicalism, but as a broadening humanitarianism (Keith 1965, p. 38).

[16] https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-emit-much-planet-heating-pollution-two-thirds-humanity (accessed 22 June 2024).

[17] Anders Schinkel defines wonder as "a mode of consciousness in which we experience what we perceive or are contemplating as strange, beyond our powers of comprehension, yet worthy of our attention for its own sake" (Schinkel 2018, p. 34).

[18] The UN secretary general, António Guterres, recently warned that humanity faces "collective suicide" by continuing to ignore the issue of climate change. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/18/world/europe/un-chief-suicide-warning-climate-change.html#:~:text=Europe%20Extreme%20Heat-%20%20%20,U.N.%20chief%20warns%20that%20humanity%20faces%20%E2%80%99collective%20suicide%E2%80%99%20over%20climate,dangerously%20high%20temperatures%20on%20Monday (accessed 23 June 2024).

[19] https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/08/09/why-some-americans-do-not-see-urgency-on-climate-change/ (accessed 25 June 2024).

[20] Haydn Washington claims that "we will not solve the environmental crisis (and reach a sustainable future) without a change in worldview to ecocentrism and a rejuvenation of humanity's sense of wonder toward nature" (Washington 2018, p. 14). For deeper examination of the relationship between wonder and mysticism see Robert, C. Fuller, *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality* (Fuller 2006). Or more recently, Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The Transformative Power of Everyday Wonder* (Keltner 2023).

[21] "*Environmental imagination* is the term that the Harvard professor Lawrence Buell uses to describe a process that can 'energize' thought and action toward renewed engagement with nature" (Von Essen 2010, p. 212).

[22] It is significant to note here the fascinating connection transdisciplinary scholar of Nahua and Maya descent Yuria Celidwen and professor of psychology Dacher Keltner make between states of awe and the concept of "ecological belonging" (Celidwen and Keltner 2023).

[23] I am inspired here by Jefferey J. Kripal's concept of "mystical hermeneutics", which suggest that reading mystical texts can potentially elicit a personal encounter with the mystical (Kripal 2001).

[24] According to Robert Fuller it is the emotion of wonder that "most readily enables us to become capable of true empathy or compassion" (Fuller 2006, p. 95).

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Inner Peace as the Seed of Global Peace: Unveiling the Link Between Zhuangzi's Mysticism and Nonviolent Resistance

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Abstract: This paper delves into the connection between Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy and its potential application to nonviolent resistance movements. It argues that the cultivation of inner peace, as advocated by Zhuangzi, can serve as a powerful foundation for individuals to engage in peaceful social change. Zhuangzi, a prominent figure in ancient Chinese thought, emphasized the importance of achieving harmony with *Dao*, the natural order of the universe. His mystical teachings centered on concepts like the "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state), "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering) and "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), as well as "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting). This paper explores how these mystical concepts can be interpreted as a call for inner peace and tranquility. The paper then examines how inner peace, as envisioned by Zhuangzi, can empower individuals to participate in nonviolent resistance. It suggests that achieving inner peace allows individuals to transcend feelings of anger, resentment, and violence, fostering a sense of compassion and understanding towards their opponents. This inner peace, in turn, can fuel the courage and determination necessary to engage in peaceful protests and civil disobedience. By exploring the connection between Zhuangzi's mysticism and nonviolent resistance, this paper aims to shed light on an alternative approach to social change. It argues that inner peace, cultivated through mystical experience, can be a powerful tool for individuals seeking to create a more just and peaceful world.

Keywords: Zhuangzi; Daoism; mysticism; inner peace; nonviolent resistance; social change

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1. Introduction

The concept of nonviolent resistance, or civil resistance, involves the use of peaceful means to achieve social, political, or economic objectives (Gandhi 2012). This approach to activism seeks to address injustices and bring about change without resorting to violence. Nonviolent resistance encompasses a range of tactics, including protests, strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and other forms of non-cooperation. Historically, this method has been pivotal in numerous movements, demonstrating its significance in achieving social change. Notable examples include Mahatma Gandhi's leadership in the Indian independence movement, Martin Luther King Jr.'s role in the American Civil Rights Movement, and more recent movements like the Arab Spring and various environmental campaigns (Sharp 1973; Ackerman and DuVall 2000).

The effectiveness of nonviolent resistance lies in its moral high ground and the ability to mobilize mass participation. It appeals to a broad spectrum of society, including those who might be alienated by violent methods. Furthermore, nonviolent resistance tends to attract positive media coverage and international support, increasing pressure on oppressive regimes and unjust systems. By avoiding the escalation of violence, nonviolent resistance seeks to break the cycle of retaliation and build a foundation for lasting peace and justice (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

In contemporary times, there is a growing interest in exploring alternative approaches to social activism. This interest is partly fueled by the recognition that traditional methods

of protest and resistance may not always suffice in addressing complex and evolving political and social challenges. As activists and scholars seek innovative ways to confront issues such as systemic racism, environmental degradation, and authoritarianism, there is a renewed focus on ancient philosophies and their potential applications to modern social movements. Among these ancient philosophies, the mystical teachings of Zhuangzi, a prominent figure in ancient Chinese thought, offer a unique and profound perspective on achieving harmony and effecting change through nonviolent means (Ivanhoe 2002).

However, one might wonder why focus on Zhuangzi among the many ancient philosophical resources. When compared with Laozi, though both advocate inner peace (P. Liu 2024a), Zhuangzi presents a distinct edge for modern social activism. Laozi's teachings, while profound in their own right, often center around the overarching concept of *Dao* in a more abstract and macrocosmic sense. In contrast, Zhuangzi zooms in on the individual's spiritual journey and practical experiences. His emphasis on practices like "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting) offers tangible means for individuals to directly engage in the pursuit of inner transformation, providing a hands-on pathway to achieving the harmony with *Dao* within the context of social action. His ideas such as "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), which shatter the artificial boundaries between the self and others, and "Wu-wei 無為" (non-action) that promotes acting in line with the natural order rather than passive inaction, offer a more detailed and actionable framework for activists striving for social change through nonviolent means.

In contrast to Buddhism, which is renowned for stressing meditation and compassion, Zhuangzi's philosophy has its own unique flavor. Buddhism typically delves deep into the cycle of karma and the pursuit of enlightenment through detachment from worldly desires in a rather structured religious context. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, rooted in Daoist thought, anchors on aligning with the natural order of the universe—*Dao*—and accentuates spontaneity and the rejection of rigid social conventions in the secular realm. His teachings are about finding one's place in the natural flow of things, attaining a state of "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state) and "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering) that empowers individuals to face social challenges with a sense of freedom and clarity, making it highly applicable to nonviolent resistance movements looking to break free from existing norms.

What makes Zhuangzi special lies in his ability to blend profound philosophical insights with practical spiritual exercises, all while remaining firmly rooted in the secular world. His philosophy is not just an abstract theory but a guide that individuals can actively practice transforming themselves and, in turn, impact society. By emphasizing inner transformation and harmony with *Dao*, he equips individuals with the mindset and tools necessary to approach social challenges with a nonviolent, yet powerful stance.

Zhuangzi, also romanized as Chuang Tzu, was a Daoist philosopher who lived during the Warring States period in China (4th century BCE). His writings, compiled in the text known as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Zhuangzi 1968)[1], emphasize the importance of aligning oneself with *Dao* (the Way), which represents the natural order of the universe. Zhuangzi's philosophy is characterized by its emphasis on spontaneity, non-action (*Wu-wei* 無為), and the rejection of rigid social conventions. He advocated for a life of simplicity, humility, and harmony with nature, encouraging individuals to transcend the limitations of the self and societal constraints to achieve true freedom and enlightenment.

One of the core tenets of Zhuangzi's thought is the cultivation of inner peace and tranquility. He believed that by achieving harmony with *Dao*, individuals could attain a state of perfect naturalness and spontaneity, free from the constraints of artificial distinctions and societal pressures. This state of being is often described in terms of the "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state), "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering), and achieving this state requires the understanding of "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory). Additionally, Zhuangzi emphasized practices such as "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting

of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting) to achieve mental clarity and spiritual enlightenment (Graham 1989).

The objective of this paper is to explore the connection between Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy and its potential application to nonviolent resistance movements. By examining the principles of Zhuangzi's thought, we aim to uncover how his teachings can inform and enhance contemporary strategies for nonviolent activism. Specifically, this paper will investigate how concepts such as "*Wu-wei* 無為" (non-action), natural spontaneity, and the rejection of social conventions can be applied to the context of nonviolent resistance. We will also consider the ways in which Zhuangzi's emphasis on inner transformation and harmony with *Dao* can provide a philosophical foundation for sustaining long-term social change (Mair 1994).

This paper is structured as follows:

Dao and Harmony:

This section explores the foundational concept of *Dao* in Zhuangzi's philosophy, focusing on its role as the natural order of the universe and its significance in achieving inner peace and harmony. We will delve into the concepts of *Wu-wei* (non-action) and *Ziran* (naturalness), highlighting how aligning with *Dao* fosters a fulfilling life. The section also includes an examination of textual evidence from Zhuangzi's writings to support these ideas.

Cultivating Inner Peace: Key Mystical Concepts:

Here, we will analyze Zhuangzi's mystical concepts such as "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state), "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering), "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind), and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting). These concepts are crucial for understanding how Zhuangzi's philosophy facilitates the cultivation of inner peace and spiritual liberation.

From Serenity to Compassion: The Transformation of Self:

In this section, we explore how the inner peace achieved through Zhuangzi's mystical practices can lead to profound compassion, empathy, and nonviolent resistance. We will discuss the connection between inner tranquility and the capacity to transcend negative emotions, fostering dialogue and understanding in the face of conflict.

Inner Peace as Fuel for Courage and Determination:

This section examines how inner peace, grounded in *Dao*, empowers individuals with the courage and resilience needed for nonviolent resistance. By highlighting historical and contemporary examples, we will demonstrate how inner tranquility can lead to clear thinking, strategic planning, and sustained activism against oppression and injustice.

Reimagining Social Change: The Seed of Global Peace:

Here, we discuss the broader implications of integrating Zhuangzi's philosophy into global social change movements. We will consider the significance of inner peace in promoting nonviolent resistance and explore the challenges and limitations of applying Zhuangzi's mystical teachings to modern activism. This section also provides practical suggestions for integrating these teachings into activist strategies.

Conclusions:

Finally, we will summarize the key insights gained from the intersection of Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy and nonviolent resistance. We will reflect on the relevance of these ancient teachings in contemporary social movements, emphasizing their potential to inspire new approaches to achieving justice and peace in a complex world.

Through this exploration, we aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on innovative approaches to social activism, demonstrating how ancient philosophical traditions can offer fresh perspectives and practical solutions for contemporary challenges. By integrating the timeless wisdom of Zhuangzi with the principles of nonviolent resistance, we hope

to inspire new strategies for achieving meaningful and lasting social change (Fox 1997; Mair 1994).

2. Zhuangzi's Political Philosophy and Its Relevance to Social Justice

Zhuangzi's philosophy, with its emphasis on spontaneity, non-action (*Wu-wei*), and the rejection of rigid social norms, indeed poses unique challenges when attempting to reconcile it with the modern concept of social justice. As a Daoist thinker, Zhuangzi was predominantly preoccupied with attaining personal harmony with *Dao*, the fundamental order of the universe, rather than actively restructuring society through direct political participation or activism. His philosophical stance frequently underlines the futility of human endeavors to control or modify the world, instead advocating for a life of seclusion and inner self-cultivation. This leads to the crucial question: how can Zhuangzi's moral relativism and hermitic proclivities contribute to, or even coexist with, contemporary social justice movements that typically necessitate activism, nonviolent resistance, and the impetus for societal transformation?

To address this conundrum, this section will meticulously dissect Zhuangzi's political philosophy, with particular attention to his perspectives on moral relativism and social withdrawal. It will probe into whether these concepts clash with activism and social change or if they can be reinterpreted to synchronize with nonviolent resistance initiatives. Additionally, this segment will plunge into the latest academic interpretations of Zhuangzi's political ideology, contemplating whether his philosophy can serve as a bedrock for social justice or if it inherently challenges this very concept.

2.1. Zhuangzi's Moral Relativism and Its Impact on Justice

Zhuangzi's moral relativism emerges as a formidable obstacle in aligning his thoughts with social justice (X. Wang 1981). He firmly repudiates absolute moral classifications such as right and wrong, good and bad. In the "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), Zhuangzi articulates, "Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me." This statement epitomizes his rejection of dualistic thinking, accentuating that distinctions, especially moral ones, are human fabrications. According to Zhuangzi, such distinctions frequently precipitate needless conflict and agony. Instead, he advocates that individuals strive to transcend these artificial demarcations and attune themselves to *Dao*, the perpetually evolving and interconnected flux of the universe.

This relativistic stance presents a quandary for proponents of social justice, as it often hinges on precise definitions of right and wrong to redress social inequalities and injustices. Social justice movements customarily combat oppression and injustice, concepts that mandate moral categorization to identify perpetrators and victims. If, as Zhuangzi contends, all things are equivalent, how can one rationalize opposing injustice or championing the oppressed?

One potential resolution resides in the comprehension that Zhuangzi's moral relativism does not necessarily nullify the significance of compassion or concern for others. On the contrary, it nurtures a more supple and inclusive moral perspective. By acknowledging the relativity of moral classifications, activists can approach social justice matters with enhanced receptivity and modesty, cognizant of the multiplicity of viewpoints and experiences involved. Rather than doggedly pursuing rigid moral absolutes, Zhuangzi's philosophy could inspire social movements to prioritize concord and benevolence, centering on mutual understanding rather than apportioning blame (Cai 1974).

Furthermore, Zhuangzi's critique of fixed moral categories can be construed as a censure of oppressive social systems that enforce rigid hierarchies and binaries, such as those based on class, race, and gender. By contesting the presumption that one perspective is innately superior to another, Zhuangzi's ideology unlocks the space for interrogating the legitimacy of social structures that perpetuate inequality. In this regard, his moral rela-

tivism might furnish a framework for reimagining the conceptualization of justice, shifting the emphasis from retribution to reconciliation and equilibrium (B. Liu 2011).

2.2. Zhuangzi's Hermit Inclination and Activism

Zhuangzi is indelibly associated with the archetype of the hermit (Ames 2016), an individual who retreats from society to coexist in harmony with nature. In the "*Ren Jian Shi* 人間世" (The Human World), Zhuangzi voices skepticism regarding political involvement, contending that entanglement in worldly affairs often culminates in moral compromise and affliction. He champions a lifestyle of simplicity, detachment, and alignment with *Dao*, which frequently translates into a withdrawal from the intricacies and corruptions of social and political existence.

At first glance, Zhuangzi's hermitic tendencies might seem to contradict the activism and leadership requisites of social justice movements, which mandate active participation in challenging and transforming society. Activism, broadly defined, entails deliberate efforts to effect social or political change, often through collective action aimed at dismantling oppressive structures and promoting justice (Sun 2011). In contrast, Zhuangzi's advocacy for withdrawal appears to prioritize personal liberation over collective struggle.

However, a closer examination reveals that Zhuangzi's philosophy is not fundamentally at odds with activism but rather offers a complementary perspective. Zhuangzi's withdrawal from society does not necessarily signify apathy or disengagement; instead, it underscores the importance of inner transformation as the foundation for meaningful external action. His emphasis on simplicity and seclusion can be interpreted as a form of resistance against the corrupting influences of power, status, and ego. This aligns with the principles of nonviolent resistance, which aim to dismantle systemic injustice without perpetuating cycles of violence or domination (Sun 2011).

Furthermore, Zhuangzi's critique of political engagement can be viewed as a critique of ego-driven activism. Activism motivated by anger, resentment, or a desire for personal recognition often risks exacerbating conflict and perpetuating harm. In contrast, Zhuangzi's focus on inner serenity and detachment suggests that activism should stem from a place of humility, compassion, and alignment with the natural order, rather than from a desire to dominate or control. This approach not only fosters a more sustainable and ethical form of resistance but also encourages activists to prioritize collaboration and reconciliation over confrontation.

The solitary lifestyle and hermit existence advocated by Zhuangzi may seem, on the surface, incompatible with the ideals of social justice activism. However, these ideals are not inherently contradictory. Zhuangzi's hermit-like withdrawal can be interpreted as a strategic retreat, enabling individuals to cultivate clarity and resilience, which are essential for effective leadership in activism. By stepping away from the tumult of societal entanglements, one can avoid being consumed by the very systems they seek to change and instead act with a greater sense of purpose and equanimity.

While Zhuangzi himself might not be labeled an "activist" in the modern sense, his philosophy offers profound insights into activism. His teachings challenge activists to balance external efforts for justice with internal alignment to *Dao*, ensuring that their actions are not only effective but also ethical and harmonious. In this way, Zhuangzi's hermit inclination enriches the discourse on activism by advocating for a foundation of self-awareness, compassion, and nonviolence as essential elements in the pursuit of social justice.

2.3. Zhuangzi and Nonviolent Resistance

The concept of *Wu-wei* (non-action) lies at the heart of Daoist philosophy and potentially bridges Zhuangzi's thought with the practice of nonviolent resistance (Joshi 2023). *Wu-wei* does not denote passivity or inaction but rather a mode of action that is in harmony with *Dao*, devoid of forceful interference or coercion. In the context of nonviolent resistance, *Wu-wei* can be construed as a strategy for engaging with social issues without resorting to violence or aggression. Instead of imposing one's will upon others or the world,

Wu-wei advocates for a form of action that is pliable, responsive, and synchronized with the natural ebb and flow of events.

Nonviolent resistance, as exemplified by luminaries such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., bears resemblances to Zhuangzi's concept of *Wu-wei*. Both approaches accentuate the significance of inner fortitude, patience, and non-coercive action. In this light, Zhuangzi's philosophy can be regarded as endowing nonviolent movements with a spiritual and philosophical underpinning, where the objective is not to vanquish the adversary but to engender conditions conducive to change through compassion, understanding, and forbearance.

Furthermore, Zhuangzi's notion of *Wu-wei* can be extrapolated to the strategic dimensions of social movements. Nonviolent resistance invariably demands meticulous planning and coordination, as well as the capacity to adapt to fluctuating circumstances without losing sight of the ultimate goal. Zhuangzi's philosophy champions this adaptability, advocating for a mode of engagement that is not inflexible or dogmatic but fluid and attuned to the exigencies of the moment. In this manner, Zhuangzi's thought can inform both the ethical and practical aspects of nonviolent resistance, proffering a model of activism that is grounded in inner peace and in harmony with the natural order.

2.4. Zhuangzi's Political Thought and Social Transformation

One of the most prominent challenges in applying Zhuangzi's philosophy to social justice is discerning whether Zhuangzi himself advocates for any form of social or political transformation. Zhuangzi's writings preponderantly center on personal liberation rather than collective social change, and he recurrently expresses doubts about the viability of enhancing society through political means. In the chapter "*Da Zong Shi* 大宗師" (The Great and Venerable Teacher), for instance, Zhuangzi expounds on the futility of attempting to govern or control the world, intimating that genuine wisdom resides in detachment from worldly affairs (Xu 2022).

Nevertheless, while Zhuangzi may not overtly advocate for direct political action, his emphasis on inner transformation can be construed as laying the groundwork for more extensive social change. By cultivating inner tranquility, lucidity, and detachment from ego-centric desires, individuals can approach social issues with a novel vantage point, one that privileges harmony and equilibrium over conflict and domination. This inner transformation can serve as the bedrock for nonviolent resistance and social justice movements, as it spurs individuals to act from a place of compassion and comprehension rather than ire or trepidation.

Zhuangzi's philosophy also challenges the legitimacy of hierarchical social structures, which frequently constitute the wellspring of injustice and oppression. His critique of artificial distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, and useful and useless can be extended to a censure of social hierarchies that perpetuate inequality. In this sense, Zhuangzi's thought furnishes a philosophical rationale for querying the legitimacy of oppressive systems and advocating for a more just and equitable society. Although Zhuangzi may not explicitly call for social transformation, his philosophy instigates a reappraisal of the values and structures that underlie society, proffering a nuanced yet profound critique of injustice.

2.5. The Compatibility of Zhuangzi's Thought with Social Justice

Zhuangzi's philosophy presents both impediments and prospects in aligning with the tenets of social justice. His moral relativism and hermitic predilections might initially seem incongruous with the activism and direct engagement requisite in social justice movements. However, a more scrupulous examination divulges that Zhuangzi's thought can proffer invaluable insights for nonviolent resistance and social transformation. His accentuation of inner peace, compassion, and harmony with the natural order furnishes a substratum for activism that is not impelled by anger or a lust for domination but by a sincere dedication to justice and balance.

While Zhuangzi's political philosophy might not dovetail flawlessly with modern conceptions of social justice, it proffers a singular perspective that can enrich contemporary movements. By championing a focus on inner transformation, flexibility, and non-coercive action, Zhuangzi's thought endows a spiritual and ethical framework for grappling with social issues in a manner that is empathetic, adaptable, and ultimately in consonance with Dao. In this regard, Zhuangzi's philosophy might not only be consonant with social justice but could also offer a more profound and holistic avenue for its attainment.

3. *Dao* and Harmony

In Zhuangzi's philosophy, the concept of *Dao* represents the natural order of the universe, a fundamental principle that underlies all existence. *Dao* is the source and the ultimate reality that governs the cosmos, encompassing everything from the grandest celestial bodies to the tiniest grains of sand. To Zhuangzi, understanding and aligning oneself with *Dao* is crucial for achieving harmony, inner peace, and a fulfilling life. This section will explore the concept of *Dao*, the significance of harmony with *Dao*, and the role of *Ziran* in living according to *Dao*. We will also examine textual evidence from Zhuangzi's writings to support these points.

3.1. The Concept of Dao

The concept of Dao was initially put forward by Laozi, and it holds a central place in the philosophical thoughts of ancient Chinese thinkers, including Zhuangzi. In Zhuangzi's view, Dao is an abstract and indescribable force that transcends human understanding. It is the ultimate source of all things, from which everything arises and to which everything ultimately returns. Unlike deities or specific entities, Dao is an omnipresent dynamic process that permeates and connects all aspects of existence. Zhuangzi often emphasizes the ineffability of Dao, suggesting that any attempt to define or describe it is limited and incomplete.

In the chapter "*Da Zong Shi* 大宗師" (The Great and Venerable Teacher), Zhuangzi (1968) writes, "Dao has emotions and sincerity but does nothing and has no form. It can be transmitted but not received, obtained but not seen." This vividly reflects Zhuangzi's perception that Dao defies easy categorization and verbal encapsulation, highlighting the idea that Dao transcends the realm of language and conceptual thinking.

Zhuangzi's understanding of Dao is more experiential than theoretical; it concerns aligning with the natural flow of the universe rather than attempting to intellectually grasp its essence (Fung 1948). He conveys his ideas through allegories and stories. For instance, in "Xiao Yao You 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering), Zhuangzi tells the story of the Kunpeng 鯤鵬. The tale of the Kunpeng, with its ability to soar through the vast expanse, illustrates a perspective that transcends limited viewpoints and emphasizes the importance of freedom and liberation. It shows how one can, in a sense, move in harmony with the greater cosmic forces symbolized by Dao, achieving a state of being unrestricted by the mundane constraints. Through such narratives, Zhuangzi invites his readers to have a taste of the experiential unity with Dao, guiding them towards personal spiritual experience and inner liberation rather than prescribing external behavioral norms.

In essence, Zhuangzi's exploration of Dao is deeply rooted in the pursuit of an individual's spiritual journey, seeking to unlock the path to inner peace and harmony by attuning oneself to the ineffable, omnipresent Dao that governs all of existence, as manifested through his unique allegorical and narrative-driven approach.

3.2. Achieving Harmony with Dao

For Zhuangzi, achieving harmony with *Dao* is essential for attaining a peaceful and fulfilling life. This harmony involves aligning one's actions, thoughts, and emotions with the natural order, allowing *Dao* to guide one's existence effortlessly. Living in harmony with *Dao* means embracing spontaneity, flexibility, and adaptability, rather than rigidly adhering to social conventions or personal desires (Kirkland 2004).

One of Zhuangzi's key concepts in this regard is "*Wu-wei*", often translated as non-action or effortless action. *Wu-wei* does not imply inactivity or passivity but rather refers to a state of being where actions are performed in complete alignment with *Dao*, without force or struggle. In the chapter "*Yang Sheng Zhu* 養生主" (The Cultivation of Life), Zhuangzi illustrates this through the story of Cook Ding, who effortlessly carves an ox by following the natural structure of its body. Cook Ding explains, "I follow the natural lines, going by what is inherently so. Thus I never touch the great bones." This metaphor highlights the importance of following the natural course of events and acting in harmony with the intrinsic nature of things, thereby achieving efficiency and skill without exertion (Zhuangzi 1968).

Harmony with *Dao* also involves accepting the impermanence and interconnectedness of all things. Zhuangzi emphasizes the transient nature of life and the importance of adapting to change. In the chapter "*Da Zong Shi* 大宗師" (The Great and Venerable Teacher), he writes, "Life and death are fated—constant as the succession of day and night. There are some things that cannot be altered." By recognizing and embracing the natural cycles of growth and decay, creation and destruction, individuals can cultivate a sense of peace and resilience, freeing themselves from the anxiety and resistance that come from clinging to permanence (Graham 1989).

3.3. The Concept of Ziran

"*Ziran*", often translated as "naturalness" or "spontaneity", is a central concept in Daoist philosophy, fundamental to living in harmony with *Dao*. *Ziran* refers to the inherent, uncontrived state of being that arises when one is aligned with *Dao*. It represents the quality of being true to one's nature, allowing responses to the world to emerge with authenticity and ease. While Zhuangzi advocates for a return to this natural state, emphasizing that societal norms and artificial constructs often pull individuals away from their true selves (An 1997), Laozi's articulation of *Ziran* offers a more cosmic dimension. In *Dao De Jing* Chapter 25, Laozi states, "Man follows the Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows Dao, and Dao follows Ziran" (人瀠地，地瀠天，天瀠道，道瀠自然). This passage highlights that *Ziran* is not just about individual authenticity but is also the principle that underlies the natural order of the universe. While Laozi views *Ziran* as the essence of *Dao* and the foundation of all existence, Zhuangzi focuses on how individuals can return to this natural state in their daily lives, free from the constraints of social conventions.

In the "Inner Chapters", Zhuangzi elucidates the value of naturalness through various allegories and stories. In the chapter "*Ren Jian Shi* 人間世" (The Human World), a famous story is about the "useless tree". Due to its wood being unsuitable for construction, carpenters deem it worthless. However, it is precisely this uselessness that allows the tree to grow tall and flourish, free from the threat of being cut down. Through this story, Zhuangzi illustrates that true value lies in remaining true to one's nature, even if it means defying conventional standards of utility and worth (Moeller 2006).

Another example can be found in the chapter "*De Chong Fu* 德充符" (The Sign of Virtue Complete). In this chapter, Zhuangzi narrates the story of the "useless man". This character, who clearly does not meet societal expectations, manages to lead a long and content life. Zhuangzi provocatively asks, "How could a cripple be worthy of emulation?" When we dig deeper into this, these characters, despite being pushed to the margins of society, are able to achieve peace and longevity. The key lies in their ability to wholeheartedly embrace their natural state and find a harmonious connection with their authentic selves. Here, Ziporyn's (2009) interpretation of the "true selves" becomes crucial. According to Ziporyn, the concept of "true selves" implies a profound and unconditional acceptance of one's inherent nature. It means stripping away the layers of influence from external pressures and societal norms that often cloud our perception of who we truly are. In the context of Zhuangzi's story, these "useless" individuals are precisely those who have managed to break free from the shackles of what society deems as valuable or worthy. They have delved into their innermost being and recognized the essence that is untouched by

the outside world. By doing so, they have found a sense of peace and contentment that eludes many who are constantly chasing after external validations. This understanding of the "true selves" offered by Ziporyn provides us with a valuable lens through which we can further explore Zhuangzi's philosophy. It reveals that Zhuangzi is not simply presenting these seemingly odd stories but is actually advocating for self-acceptance and inner harmony. He is challenging readers to look beyond the conventional standards set by society and focus on aligning with their true selves. Instead of blindly conforming to external expectations, one should strive to discover and embrace that which is inherently within them. Through this in-depth exploration of Ziporyn's interpretation, we can not only better understand the story in "De Chong Fu" but also appreciate the originality and depth of Zhuangzi's thought as a whole.

Zhuangzi's concept of *Ziran* (自然) presents a bold challenge to the common perception that success and fulfillment are only attainable through ceaseless striving and cutthroat competition. He puts forward the idea that true harmony and contentment are rooted in embracing one's innate qualities and allowing life to unfold in its natural rhythm. As noted by Puett and Gross-Loh (2016), this perspective prompts a significant shift in our mindset. It encourages us to move away from an overemphasis on external validation and the pursuit of achievements measured by society's benchmarks. Instead, it directs our attention towards internal alignment and self-acceptance. To elaborate further, in Zhuangzi's philosophy, individuals are urged to seek fulfillment not by chasing after the trophies and accolades set by society but by delving deep into their inner selves, understanding their true nature, and accepting it without reservation. This internal locus of control that Zhuangzi advocates is of great significance. It means that personal growth and satisfaction are no longer dependent on external factors such as others' approvals or the attainment of certain worldly accomplishments. Rather, they are driven by one's self-awareness and the ability to embrace one's natural disposition. When we analyze this concept in the context of contemporary life, we can see how it stands in contrast to the often frenetic and externally focused pursuit of success that dominates our society.

3.4. Textual Evidence from Zhuangzi's Writings

Zhuangzi's writings are rich with metaphors and anecdotes that illustrate his philosophical ideas. In the "Inner Chapters", he frequently uses stories and dialogues to convey complex concepts in a relatable and thought-provoking manner. These texts provide valuable insights into the principles of Daoism and the practical implications of living in harmony with *Dao* (Kohn 1993).

For example, in the story of the "Butterfly Dream", Zhuangzi dreams of being a butterfly and, upon waking, questions whether he is a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being a man. This allegory explores the fluidity of identity and the interconnectedness of all life forms, reinforcing the Daoist view of reality as a dynamic and ever-changing process (Hansen 1992). Zhuangzi writes in "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (The Equalization of Things), "Once Zhuang This highlights the theme of transformation in Daoist thought. Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting about happily, doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up, and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly, there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things."

In the dialogues between Zhuangzi and Huishi, Zhuangzi questions the limits of conventional logic and human knowledge. He uses paradoxes and playful reasoning to show that true wisdom lies in accepting uncertainty and recognizing the limitations of rational thought. This dialogue is recorded in "*Qiu Shui* 秋水" (Autumn Floods), where Zhuangzi says, "You are not a fish; how do you know what fish enjoy?" Huishi replied, "You are not I; how do you know I do not know what fish enjoy?" This conversation emphasizes the Daoist appreciation for intuition, spontaneity, and the ineffability of *Dao* (Roth 1991).

Through these textual examples, it becomes clear that Zhuangzi's philosophy offers a profound and comprehensive approach to life. By prioritizing harmony with *Dao*, embracing naturalness, and cultivating inner peace, individuals can achieve a state of fulfillment and tranquility that transcends societal constraints and personal limitations.

3.5. Zhuangzi's Dao and Its Application to Social Justice

Zhuangzi's concept of *Dao*, with its emphasis on the natural order and the interconnectedness of all things, can be a powerful framework for addressing social justice. In a world where inequalities and injustices often arise from rigid structures and hierarchies, Zhuangzi's *Dao* challenges these constructs by advocating for a return to a more natural and equitable state of being. For example, in contemporary discussions about environmental justice, Zhuangzi's emphasis on living in harmony with nature rather than exploiting it for short-term gain provides a philosophical basis for advocating sustainable practices that benefit all beings. The concept of *Dao* encourages a holistic view, seeing humanity as part of a larger ecological system, which aligns with modern movements that seek to protect the environment and promote sustainability as a form of justice.

The practice of *Wu-wei*, or effortless action, also offers a unique perspective on social justice. Wu-wei suggests that actions should be in alignment with the natural flow of *Dao*, without force or coercion. In a social justice context, this could translate into advocating for policies and practices that do not impose undue harm or force upon individuals or communities but rather support their natural growth and development. For instance, restorative justice practices, which focus on healing and reconciliation rather than punishment, reflect the principles of *Wu-wei*. Such approaches aim to address the root causes of harm and restore balance in a way that aligns with the natural human inclination towards empathy and connection, rather than perpetuating cycles of violence and retribution.

Ziran further informs the social justice discourse by challenging the artificial constructs that often underpin societal inequalities. Zhuangzi's advocacy for authenticity and spontaneity can inspire movements that seek to dismantle oppressive systems and allow individuals to express their true selves without fear of discrimination or marginalization. A relevant example would be the fight for women's rights or the rights of minority groups, as these movements seek to create a society where individuals can live authentically according to their nature, free from societal constraints or expectations. These efforts embody the spirit of *Ziran* by striving for a more just and inclusive society where people are encouraged to live in harmony with their true selves and natural inclinations, rather than conforming to imposed social roles or limitations.

In summary, Zhuangzi's mysticism, when applied to social justice, encourages a more natural, harmonious approach to societal issues. His teachings urge us to reconsider the artificial boundaries and hierarchies that create injustice and to seek solutions that align with the natural order of *Dao*, promoting harmony, equity, and peace in both individual lives and society as a whole (Fox 1997).

4. Cultivating Inner Peace: Key Mystical Concepts

Zhuangzi, a central figure in Daoist philosophy, offers profound insights into achieving inner peace through his mystical concepts. These concepts, such as the "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state), "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering), "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind), and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting), provide a pathway to spiritual liberation and tranquility. This section will define and analyze these key concepts, explaining how they contribute to cultivating inner peace.

4.1. Defining the Mystical in Zhuangzi's Philosophy

In the exploration of Zhuangzi's profound philosophical realm as it pertains to cultivating inner peace through key mystical concepts, a clear understanding of what constitutes the "mystical" within his teachings is of paramount importance. The term "mystical"

in the context of Zhuangzi's philosophy is far from being a simple or easily encapsulated notion; rather, it unfolds as a complex and multi-layered dimension that permeates his entire body of thought (McConochie 2017).

Central to Zhuangzi's mysticism is his understanding and veneration of *Dao*, the overarching and ineffable principle that governs all of existence. As elucidated in the text, *Dao* is described in ways that defy ordinary language and rational apprehension. In "Da Zong Shi" (The Great and Venerable Teacher), for instance, it is noted that *Dao* has "emotions and sincerity but does nothing and has no form. It can be transmitted but not received, obtained but not seen". This passage vividly illustrates the elusive and mysterious nature of Dao, which serves as the bedrock of the mystical elements in Zhuangzi's philosophy. Aligning with *Dao* is not a matter of conventional intellectual study but a deeply experiential journey, often facilitated by the rich tapestry of allegories and parables that populate his works.

Take, for example, the iconic allegory of the Kunpeng in "Xiao Yao You" (Free and Easy Wandering). The transformation of the Kunpeng from a massive fish submerged in the abyssal depths of the sea to a celestial bird that traverses the boundless skies, spanning cosmic distances, is not a literal zoological account but a symbolic vehicle of profound significance. It beckons the reader to transcend the myopic confines of everyday perception, liberating themselves from the constraints of the ordinary world and opening their minds to the infinite possibilities that emerge when attuned to the greater cosmic forces embodied by *Dao*. Such narrative devices, which are ubiquitous in Zhuangzi's writings, offer a non-linear, intuitive pathway to wisdom, a characteristic trait of mystical traditions across cultures (Zhuangzi 1968).

Zhuangzi's mystical orientation is further manifested in his advocated spiritual practices, namely "*Xin Zhai* 心斋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting). These practices are not pedestrian techniques for relaxation or mental focus; instead, they are profound quests for spiritual elevation and self-transcendence. "*Xin Zhai*" calls for the purging of the mind of entrenched preconceptions and external distractions, leading to a state of inner vacuity and heightened receptivity where one can sense the faint whispers of *Dao*. It functions as a form of psychological and emotional catharsis, stripping away the layers of worldly concerns to expose the pristine essence of one's being. Meanwhile, "Zuo Wang" delves even deeper into a state of self-annihilation, where one relinquishes the sense of the physical self, intellectual constructs, and mundane preoccupations, ultimately achieving a union with the universe or *Dao*. This profound detachment and merger with the greater whole bear resemblance to mystical experiences documented in diverse spiritual lineages, albeit bearing the unique imprint of Zhuangzi's Daoist perspective (Shaoyan Chen 1983).

Moreover, the concept of "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state), the unspoiled natural state that Zhuangzi champions, is steeped in mysticism. "Pu" represents a return to an unadulterated, primordial state of being, untainted by the artifices and impositions of society. It is a state that can only be accessed through an inward pilgrimage that eschews the allure of external validations and social norms, plumbing the depths of one's true nature, which is, in essence, an expression of *Dao* within. In attaining the "Pu" state, one enters a realm of simplicity and authenticity, standing apart from the convoluted and artificial trappings of the social world, guided by an intuitive attunement to the natural flow of *Dao* rather than by calculated rational strategies.

To sum up, the "mystical" in Zhuangzi's philosophy is a rich mosaic composed of ineffable encounters with *Dao*, the employment of allegorical wisdom conveyance, profound spiritual practices of self-transformation, and the pursuit of states of being that resonate with the natural order and are detached from worldly illusions. This nuanced understanding of the mystical underpinnings will serve as the crucial scaffolding as we venture further into the exploration of the specific key concepts he proffers for the cultivation of inner peace, each of which is indelibly marked by this overarching mystical worldview.

4.2. Pu 樸 *(Perfect Natural State)*

Zhuangzi's concept of "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state) symbolizes a pure potential and simplicity, unaltered by external influences and human constructs. It represents the original, pristine essence of things and embodies the idea of returning to a natural state. "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state) is a metaphor for inner peace, indicating that true tranquility arises from embracing simplicity and discarding the complexities imposed by society.

Zhuangzi uses the metaphor of "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state) to illustrate the importance of maintaining one's nature and resisting the pressures of assimilation. In "*Qu Qie* 胠篋", he writes, "If the sage does not die, the great thief will not stop." This statement emphasizes the importance of maintaining oneself and avoiding the interference of external desires, leading to inner peace. In "*Ren Jian Shi* 人间世" (The Human World), Zhuangzi further elaborates on the concept of "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state): "Simplicity and plainness cannot be surpassed in beauty by anything in the world." This phrase indicates that true beauty comes from simplicity and an uncarved state, allowing one to transcend worldly comparisons and competition.

"*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state) also emphasizes the potential for inner growth and transformation within simplicity. By maintaining an uncarved state, one can remain open to the myriad possibilities life presents, allowing spontaneous and natural development. Zhuangzi mentions in "*Geng Sang Chu* 庚桑楚", "Everyone knows the usefulness of the useful, but no one knows the usefulness of the useless." This statement highlights that while people often see only the obvious uses, true value and potential often lie in those "useless" things yet to be discovered, which is the essence of "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state).

This concept encourages people to cultivate an open and adaptive mindset, promoting peace and contentment. Through the practice of "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state), individuals can return to a natural state, reducing dependence on external complexities, thereby achieving inner calm and fulfillment. "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state) is not just a philosophical idea but a way of life, advocating for a simple and natural approach to the world, seeking true self and inner tranquility.

In summary, Zhuangzi's concept of "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state) underscores the importance of maintaining a pure essence. Through simplicity and natural development, people can find inner peace and contentment. This idea holds profound significance in today's complex social environment, reminding us to return to our true selves and seek harmony and peace within (E. Chen 2014).

4.3. Xiao Yao You 逍遙遊 *(Free and Easy Wandering)*

"*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering) translates to "Free and Easy Wandering" and is a central theme in Zhuangzi's philosophy. It represents the ideal state of spiritual liberation and transcendence, where one is free from the constraints of societal norms and personal anxieties. In this state, individuals free themselves from societal norms and personal anxieties. They can live easily and naturally, fully aligned with *Dao*, enjoying true freedom and inner peace (F. Wang 2009).

In the essay "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering), Zhuangzi vividly illustrates this concept through the story of the great Peng bird. This enormous bird soars effortlessly in the sky, unbound by worldly concerns. He writes that the Peng "rises ninety thousand li, breaking through the clouds and bearing the blue sky, then heads south to the southern ocean." This story symbolizes the ultimate freedom achieved by transcending limitations and harmonizing with the natural order. The Peng's flight is not only a physical ascent but also a spiritual transcendence, signifying the release from all worldly constraints and the attainment of unbounded mental freedom.

"*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering) is closely linked to the idea of spiritual liberation. It encourages people to abandon rigid ways of thinking, adopt broader perspectives, and recognize the interconnectedness of all things. Zhuangzi believes that by adopting such a mindset, people can achieve a state of mental and spiritual freedom, enjoying a peaceful and fulfilling life. In "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wander-

ing), he writes, "The perfect person has no self, the spiritual person has no achievement, the sage has no name." This indicates that true freedom comes from transcending the self—not pursuing fame and accomplishments, but rather aligning with *Dao*.

"*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering) also emphasizes a lifestyle in harmony with nature. Zhuangzi advocates for people to follow the natural order, abandoning artificial interference and desires to achieve inner tranquility. In "*Zhi Bei You* 知北遊", he mentions, "Heaven and Earth have great beauty but do not speak about it, the four seasons have clear laws but do not discuss them, all things have their principles but do not explain them." This statement highlights the inherent harmony and order of nature, suggesting that humans should conform to this natural order rather than trying to alter it.

Through the concept of "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering), Zhuangzi paints a picture of an ideal life. In this vision, people free themselves from worldly constraints, return to their true nature, and achieve mental freedom and tranquility. This state is not merely a philosophical idea but a practical way of life, encouraging people to pursue simplicity, naturalness, and inner peace in their daily lives. In conclusion, "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering) is not only a central theme in Zhuangzi's philosophy but also a path to spiritual liberation and inner freedom. Through this concept, individuals can find true happiness and fulfillment.

4.4. Qi Wu Lun 齊物論 *(Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory)*

The concept of "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" or "Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory" in Zhuangzi's philosophy has a profound connection with social justice that demands in-depth exploration. Although it emphasizes the relativity of human judgments and the equality of all things, which seemingly contradicts the definite right and wrong judgments on which social justice often relies, it actually has potential congruence and inspiration at a deeper level.

"*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" is another crucial concept in Zhuangzi's philosophy. It accentuates the relativity of human judgments and the significance of regarding all things as innately equal (Shaoming Chen 2002). This viewpoint nurtures a sense of interconnection, enabling individuals to surmount egocentric inclinations and contributing to inner tranquility.

Zhuangzi held that the distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, are human fabrications that frequently give rise to conflict and misery. In "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), he states, "Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me." This assertion underlines the unity and equality of existence, signifying that genuine serenity stems from acknowledging this fundamental oneness. Moreover, he writes, "Dao has never had boundaries; speech has no constancy." This illustrates that *Dao* is limitless, and language is not static but varies with circumstances, further highlighting the recognition of relativity and diversity in "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory).

Subsequent to this statement of the unity of all things, it can be added that such an understanding of the oneness of all beings has implications for social justice. It prompts people to examine social structures and interpersonal relationships from a broader perspective. When realizing the equality and interconnection of all things, in the face of issues such as the wealth gap and class differences in society, one no longer simply confines to simplistic right or wrong judgments. Instead, one contemplates how to construct a social environment in which all individuals can fully develop and coexist harmoniously, avoiding neglecting the rights and interests of one side due to an excessive emphasis on the "rightness" of the other, thereby propelling society towards a more just and inclusive direction.

After elaborating on "Dao has never had boundaries; speech has no constancy," it can be supplemented that in the context of social justice, this reminds us that the understanding of the concept of justice should not be rigid and unchanging. With the development of society, the transformation of culture, and the progress of human cognition, the connotations

and extensions of justice are constantly evolving. For instance, certain social institutions and behavioral norms that were once taken for granted may now be regarded as unjust. Therefore, we need to view social justice with a dynamic perspective, just as Zhuangzi's perception of Dao and language, continuously adapting to changes to better achieve the goals of social justice.

Zhuangzi mentions in "Qi Wu Lun 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), "What is one is also the other, and what is the other is also the one. Is there indeed a distinction between them? Or is there no distinction?" This challenges the existence of absolute right and wrong, emphasizing the relativity of perspectives and judgments. After this, it can be further stated that this line of thinking spurs us to fully respect the viewpoints and demands of different groups in the practice of social justice. When dealing with social disputes and contradictions, we cannot readily make judgments based on a single standard of right and wrong. Instead, we should comprehensively consider various factors, including the diverse perspectives brought about by different cultural backgrounds, social classes, and historical experiences. Through such multifaceted considerations, more just solutions that conform to the interests of all members of society can be formulated, averting new injustices and conflicts caused by one-sided judgments.

By adopting the perspective of "Qi Wu Lun 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), individuals can transcend their limited viewpoints and embrace a more comprehensive understanding of the world. This alteration in mindset diminishes the propensity to judge and categorize, fostering acceptance and harmony.

This philosophical thinking encourages people to relinquish biases and narrow outlooks, embrace diversity and different modes of existence, and attain inner peace and composure. It advocates humility and openness, which lead to enhanced inner placidity. By understanding and practicing "Qi Wu Lun 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), individuals can mitigate inner conflicts and discover a means to coexist harmoniously with the surrounding world.

In modern society, this perspective is especially vital. We are frequently constrained by assorted values and social norms, resulting in anxiety and restlessness. "Qi Wu Lun 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory) reminds us that all things are inherently equal, and by transcending superficial disparities and attaining inner balance and harmony, we can achieve genuine inner peace and contentment.

In conclusion, "Qi Wu Lun 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory) is not only a central concept in Zhuangzi's philosophy but also a guiding principle for life. By forsaking attachments to right and wrong, good and bad, and accepting the inherent equality of all things, we can discover inner peace and achieve harmony with *Dao*. Additionally, it furnishes a rich reservoir of contemplative dimensions for social justice, guiding us to transcend conventional, parochial conceptions of right and wrong and approach social justice in a more inclusive, flexible, and comprehensive manner. It lays a solid ideological foundation for constructing a more just, equal, and harmonious society while pursuing individual inner peace and harmony.

4.5. Xin Zhai 心齋 (Fasting of the Mind) and Zuo Wang 坐忘 (Sitting and Forgetting)

"*Xin Zhai* 心齋" or "Fasting of the Mind" and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" or "Sitting and Forgetting" are practices that Zhuangzi advocates for achieving detachment from worldly desires and anxieties. These practices are essential for cultivating inner peace and spiritual clarity. Both practices aim to dissolve the barriers created by the ego and societal conditioning. By engaging in "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "Zuo Wang 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting), individuals can achieve a state of emptiness and openness, where inner peace naturally arises. These practices facilitate a return to the "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state), allowing one to live authentically and harmoniously with *Dao* (X. Liu 2006).

"*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) involves purifying the mind by letting go of preconceived notions and attachments. It is a process of psychological and emotional detoxification, preparing one for deeper spiritual insight. Zhuangzi describes this practice in "*Ren*

Jian Shi 人間世" (The Human World), where he says, "To focus one's mind and not listen to outside things is called *Xin Zhai* 心齋 (fasting of the mind)." This means concentrating the mind without being disturbed by external influences. By focusing inward, "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) helps people eliminate external disturbances and inner distractions, achieving a state of mental clarity. This state is similar to modern psychological meditation, which often emphasizes focusing on the present moment, clearing away distractions, and fostering an open, non-judgmental attitude (Rošker 2016).

"*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting) involves a deeper level of meditation, where one transcends the self and unites with *Dao*. It is the process of forgetting the self and merging with the universe. Zhuangzi writes about this in "Da Zong Shi 大宗師", stating, "To let the body fall away, dismiss intellect, detach from form, and leave knowledge behind, becoming one with the great Dao, this is called Zuo Wang 坐忘 (sitting and forgetting)." He further describes, "To forget the feet in the fitting of the shoes; to forget the waist in the fitting of the belt; to forget right and wrong, this is the fitting of the mind; to not change internally or follow externally, this is the fitting of affairs; to start from fitting and never cease fitting, this is the fitting of the fitting." Through this meditative practice, individuals can transcend the limitations of the body and knowledge, becoming one with the great Dao. This state is akin to modern meditation, where through deep relaxation and concentration, one can transcend the self and achieve unity with a greater existence (Liu and Chew 2019).

Modern meditation shares many similarities with "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting). Meditation emphasizes focusing on the present moment, accepting each experience without judgment, which is very similar to Xin Zhai's pursuit of a focused mind, undisturbed by external influences. Meditation, through deep relaxation and introspection, transcends the self and unites with a greater existence, echoing Zuo Wang's pursuit of becoming one with the great Dao.

However, it is indeed controversial to categorize Zhuangzi's mystical practices as "meditation" in the contemporary sense. Meditation, in today's context, can be defined in multiple ways, with different philosophical interpretations in various traditions such as those from psychological perspectives and spiritual lineages. When considering Zhuangzi's practices as a form of meditation, one must note that while there are similarities in terms of focus on the present and the pursuit of mental clarity, there are also significant differences. Zhuangzi's practices are deeply rooted in his philosophical worldview of Daoism, which emphasizes the unity with nature and the transcendence of the self in a way that may not be fully captured by the modern understanding of meditation. Moreover, the historical and cultural context of Zhuangzi's time is vastly different from today, which further complicates the comparison. Nevertheless, by examining these practices through the lens of modern meditation, we can gain a deeper understanding of both Zhuangzi's philosophy and the potential benefits of cultivating a more meditative attitude in our modern lives.

Through these practices, individuals can not only achieve inner peace and mental clarity but also cultivate a personality that loves peace and embraces inclusivity. As Zhuangzi aspired, through "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "Zuo Wang 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting), people can free themselves from egocentrism and social constraints, reaching a higher spiritual realm. Meditation training can enhance inner peace (Liu et al. 2015), allowing individuals to deepen their practice of "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "Zuo Wang 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting). In modern society, this inner peace and mental clarity are particularly important, helping us maintain balance in a complex world and fostering a peaceful and harmonious attitude towards life.

4.6. The Connection Between Zhuangzi's Mystical Thought and Social Justice

Zhuangzi's teachings, while primarily focused on personal spiritual liberation, offer profound insights into the cultivation of a just and equitable society.

The concept of "*Pu*" (樸), which represents the perfect natural state, can be seen as a critique of societal complexity and artificiality. In the realm of social justice, "*Pu*" encourages a return to simplicity and authenticity, urging societies to strip away the superficial

layers that create inequality and oppression. For example, in modern social justice movements, this concept could inspire a focus on the fundamental needs and rights of individuals, promoting policies that prioritize human dignity over economic or political gain. By embracing "*Pu*", communities might work towards creating systems that are less hierarchical and more attuned to the natural and essential needs of all people, fostering a more equitable society.

"*Xiao Yao You*" (逍遙遊), or Free and Easy Wandering, can be interpreted as a call for spiritual and intellectual liberation, which has direct relevance to social justice. This concept advocates for freedom from societal constraints and mental liberation from dogmatic thinking. In a social justice context, "*Xiao Yao You*" could encourage individuals and groups to challenge oppressive norms and ideologies that limit freedom and equality. For instance, movements advocating for the rights of marginalized communities often seek to break free from restrictive societal norms that have historically oppressed them. Zhuangzi's idea of wandering freely aligns with the pursuit of liberation from these constraints, advocating for a society where all individuals can explore their potential without fear of repression.

"*Qi Wu Lun*" (齊物論), or Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory, directly addresses the relativity of human judgments and the inherent equality of all things. This concept has significant implications for social justice, as it challenges the hierarchical structures and binaries that often perpetuate inequality. By adopting the perspective of "Qi Wu Lun", individuals can transcend prejudices and biases, leading to a more inclusive and equitable society. For example, this concept could be applied to combat discrimination based on race, gender, or socioeconomic status, promoting the idea that all individuals, regardless of their background, have equal worth and should be treated with respect and fairness.

Finally, the practices of "*Xin Zhai*" (心齋) and "*Zuo Wang*" (坐忘)—Fasting of the Mind and Sitting and Forgetting—offer a method for detaching from the ego and societal conditioning. These practices can inspire approaches to social justice that emphasize inner transformation as a foundation for external change. For instance, activists and leaders in social justice movements might engage in these practices to cultivate humility, empathy, and a deep sense of connection with others. By transcending personal and societal ego, they can lead efforts that are not driven by anger or revenge but by a genuine desire for justice and harmony.

In essence, Zhuangzi's mystical concepts, when interpreted through the lens of social justice, provide valuable insights into creating a society that values simplicity, freedom, equality, and inner transformation. These teachings encourage us to look beyond superficial structures and work towards a world that is just, compassionate, and in harmony with *Dao*.

5. From Serenity to Compassion: The Transformation of Self

Achieving inner peace through Zhuangzi's mystical practices is not merely an end but a transformative process that cultivates deep compassion, empathy, and understanding towards others. This section explores how inner peace enables individuals to transcend negative emotions such as anger, resentment, and violence, thereby forming a worldview rich in compassion and empathy. It also analyzes how a tranquil mind fosters the willingness to engage in dialogue with opponents and seek solutions, laying the foundation for nonviolent resistance. While it is true that Zhuangzi may not consider arguments and dialogues as universally useful for understanding Dao, a tranquil mind can still play a significant role in laying the foundation for nonviolent resistance in a different way. A tranquil mind allows one to approach opponents with an open and receptive attitude, not necessarily engaging in traditional argumentative dialogues but rather observing and understanding their perspectives with empathy. This non-judgmental stance can lead to a form of communication that goes beyond the limitations of language and arguments as Zhuangzi might critique. It can create an environment where solutions might emerge through silent understanding and intuitive connection. Historical and contemporary examples can still illustrate how

this non-traditional form of interaction inspired by a tranquil mind can lead to nonviolent action and positive change.

5.1. Inner Peace, Compassion, and Empathy

Zhuangzi's mystical practices, such as "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting), aim to guide individuals away from worldly distractions, achieving inner peace and clarity. In "De Chong Fu" (The Filling of Virtue), Zhuangzi illustrates the concept of "Xin Zhai" through the portrayal of individuals who, despite their physical imperfections, possess profound virtue, thus demonstrating the pursuit of inner fullness and the transcendence of external appearances. This inner peace not only provides individuals with a new perspective on the world but also fosters a deep sense of compassion and empathy (Zuo 2010; Y. Wang 2024).

When one aligns with Dao and experiences the profound interconnectedness of all things, a natural compassion for all beings arises. This compassion is not arbitrary but is deeply rooted in the understanding that all things in the universe are interconnected and ultimately one. Zhuangzi illustrates this idea in "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), where he states, "The universe is one finger, all things are one horse." This metaphor emphasizes the unity of all existence, suggesting that distinctions between self and other are ultimately illusory. Furthermore, Zhuangzi implies that by recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings, one can perceive that the suffering of others is intrinsically linked to one's own suffering, as the boundaries that separate individuals dissolve. This realization fosters a sense of empathy and compassion, encouraging a deeper, more holistic approach to addressing the pain and struggles experienced by others.

David Wong maintains the view that insights into the limits of rational justification of morality, together with insights into moral relativity, can provide a basis for tolerance and even compassion. Zhuangzi, Wong argues, provides such insights and thus helps us to develop a sense for equal worth and "to cultivate the part of us that spontaneously identifies with others" (Wong 1984). "Acceptance of ethical diversity is part of a larger acceptance of the richness and diversity of the world itself" (Wong 2003). Zhuangzi certainly recommends this kind of acceptance regarding the world, and he even recommends, as Wong argues, "an enlarged view of what is of value" (Wong 2003). This view, grounded in Zhuangzi's philosophy, provides a foundation for compassion and empathy toward others, as it emphasizes the interconnectedness and equality of all things.

"*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" further emphasizes the equality and interconnectedness of all things. It challenges the traditional boundaries between self and others, teaching us to view the world from a broader perspective. Zhuangzi writes, "There is no thing that is not 'that'; there is no thing that is not 'this'. From the perspective of 'that', you cannot see it; from the perspective of 'this', you can know it. Hence, it is said: 'That' arises from 'this', and 'this' depends on 'that'." By recognizing the equality of all things, individuals can gradually transcend ego-centric thinking and develop deep sympathy and understanding for others.

This shift in consciousness is crucial for promoting social unity and harmony. It encourages us to approach interactions with others with greater inclusiveness and compassion, understanding their circumstances and feelings, thereby building closer and more harmonious relationships. Zhuangzi mentions in "*Da Zong Shi* 大宗師", "Interacting without interacting, doing without doing." This depicts the ideal state of harmonious coexistence and mutual understanding (Ivanhoe 2002). On such a foundation, communities can truly form, and people can grow together through mutual understanding and support.

In summary, Zhuangzi's philosophy not only provides a path to inner peace but also teaches us how to treat all beings with compassion and empathy. Zhuangzi's wisdom is profound and vast, offering significant insights for enhancing our personal cultivation and promoting social harmony and progress. By studying and practicing Zhuangzi's philosophy, we can better understand ourselves, appreciate others, and find true happiness and fulfillment in harmonious coexistence with the world.

5.2. Transcending Negative Emotions

Inner peace enables individuals to transcend emotions such as anger, resentment, and violence. These negative emotions are often rooted in a sense of separation and self-centered desires. Through practicing Zhuangzi's mystical techniques, people learn to calm their minds and detach from these destructive emotions (Ren 2018). As Laozi said in the "*Dao De Jing*", "He who conquers others is strong; he who conquers himself is mighty" (Chapter 33). Mastery over oneself leads to inner harmony, diminishing the influence of negative emotions. Zhuangzi also mentions in "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), "The sage harmonizes with right and wrong and rests in the balance of nature; this is called walking two paths." This suggests that sages can transcend distinctions and return to a state of natural harmony.

A calm mind is unlikely to react impulsively to provocation or conflict. Instead, it can respond with patience and understanding. This ability to react calmly is crucial in nonviolent resistance, where the goal is to transform adversarial relationships into cooperative ones. As Zhuangzi states in "*Tian Dao*", "Emptiness, stillness, tranquility, tastelessness, quietude, silence, and non-action are the root of all things." When an individual's mind reaches a state of emptiness and stillness, free from anger or revenge, they can approach opponents with compassion and a genuine desire for resolution, achieving a higher level of harmony and coexistence (Hansen 1992).

5.3. Fostering Dialogue and Nonviolent Resistance

Cultivating dialogue and nonviolent resistance is deeply rooted in Zhuangzi's philosophy, especially in his emphasis on flexibility and adaptability. Through the concept of "*Wu-wei*" (non-action), Zhuangzi advocates a life attitude that transcends confrontation and leans toward harmony, encouraging people to approach conflicts with an open mind and a spirit of cooperation. This idea not only serves as guidance for personal cultivation but also offers wisdom for resolving social conflicts. As Zhuangzi states in "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), "All things are one; their division is their completion, and their completion is their destruction. All things, whether completed or destroyed, return to unity." This statement reveals the truth of the mutual transformation and unity of all things, suggesting that we should view differences with an inclusive heart and see opponents as opportunities for mutual understanding and growth, rather than mere threats (Kohn 1993).

Y. Huang (2010) delves into the ethics of difference in Zhuangzi's thought, pointing out that Zhuangzi not only accepts differences but also advocates finding common ground within them to achieve a higher level of harmony. This perspective provides a theoretical foundation for nonviolent resistance: facing conflict not with force but through dialogue and persuasion, highlighting common values within differences to foster understanding and consensus. Maintaining inner peace, as advocated by Zhuangzi's state of "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind), enables individuals to remain calm in conflicts, creating a centered presence that fosters an environment conducive to constructive dialogue. Such an environment can effectively ease tensions and open the way to exploring and resolving the root causes of conflict, leading to genuine transformation and harmonious coexistence. Under the illumination of Zhuangzi's wisdom, nonviolent resistance is not merely a strategy but a lifestyle that profoundly reflects human wisdom and moral height.

5.4. The Path from Inner Peace to Social Transformation

Inner peace, as conceived within Zhuangzi's philosophical framework, holds a significance that extends far beyond the individual's internal realm, emerging as a potent catalyst with the potential to instigate transformation both at the personal and societal levels. However, it is crucial to meticulously examine whether Zhuangzi himself demonstrated an inclination toward societal transformation and, if so, what textual evidence underpins such a stance, as well as whether he advocated for any form of resistance.

Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy is replete with concepts that suggest a nuanced connection to the idea of social transformation. Take, for instance, his concept of "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state). In the relevant texts, it is expounded that attaining this state implies a return to one's innate, unadulterated essence, transcending the cacophony of worldly disturbances that often lead to strife and dissonance in society. While not explicitly laying out a step-by-step plan for social change, the pursuit of "Pu" on an individual level can be seen as laying the groundwork for a more harmonious social fabric. When individuals strive to shed the artificial accretions of society and return to this natural state, it inherently reduces the sources of conflict that arise from ego-driven desires and social pretenses. This can be inferred as a tacit acknowledgment of the need for a transformed social environment where people are more in tune with their true selves and, consequently, with one another.

The chapter "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering) further enriches this perspective. It vividly describes the free flight of the mind, unshackled by external constraints. Although the narrative might seem more focused on the individual's spiritual liberation, it has implications for society at large. A society where individuals are able to free their minds in this way is one that is more likely to embrace diversity and alternative ways of thinking, which are essential elements for any meaningful social transformation. By breaking free from the rigid molds imposed by convention and orthodoxy, people can contribute to a more fluid and adaptable social order, one that is open to innovation and positive change.

Regarding the question of whether Zhuangzi advocated for resistance, the concept presented in "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory) offers valuable insights. In this text, Zhuangzi emphasizes that all things should be regarded as one, dissolving the artificial boundaries that humans erect between different entities. He states, "All things are like one horse 萬物一馬也". This idea of unity and the erasure of distinctions is, in a sense, a form of resistance against the status quo of a society that often thrives on hierarchies, divisions, and oppositions. It is a call to see beyond the surface differences and to approach others and situations with empathy and understanding, which can be construed as a nonviolent form of resistance against the divisive forces prevalent in society.

Wenning (2023) posits that Zhuangzi's concept of passive resistance hinges on relinquishing egocentric desires. The Daoist principle of "Wu-wei" is elucidated not as sheer inaction but as an active alignment with nature, a way of resolving conflicts through harmonious non-contention. This interpretation dovetails neatly with the essence of "*Qi Wu Lun*", as it underlines the futility of engaging in fruitless battles based on artificial differences and the wisdom of seeking resolution through a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all things.

It must be acknowledged, however, that while Zhuangzi's philosophy presents these compelling ideas related to inner peace and its potential implications for social transformation and resistance, it is primarily a philosophical exploration. There is no empirical evidence within the texts themselves that definitively shows a direct causal link between inner peace, as he describes it, and tangible social change. Nor does it mandate that a peaceful mind must invariably engage in social transformation or nonviolent resistance. Instead, it offers a thought-provoking alternative paradigm, suggesting that when individuals cultivate inner tranquility and align with the principles of nature and unity, they are better equipped to interact with the world in a way that could potentially lead to a more harmonious and just society. This is exemplified in Zhuangzi's "*Zhi Le* 至樂" (Supreme Happiness), where the profound dictum "The highest happiness is no happiness, the highest praise is no praise" encapsulates the idea of transcending the conventional notions of success and recognition, reaching a state where one can contribute to a more balanced coexistence between self and society. As such, the exploration of these ideas remains an open-ended and fertile ground for further scholarly investigation and practical experimentation, inviting us to delve deeper into the relationship between inner peace, social transformation, and resistance as envisioned by Zhuangzi.

5.5. The Application of Zhuangzi's Philosophy in Social Justice: Practice, Wisdom, and Transformation

Based on the exploration in this section, it is evident that Zhuangzi's mystical practice not only guides individuals towards inner peace but also profoundly influences their perception of social justice. The compassion and understanding cultivated through this practice prompt people to transform their approach to conflict resolution and interaction with adversaries. The Song Dynasty litterateur Su Shi serves as an example, who, deeply influenced by Zhuangzi's thought, demonstrated a detached attitude amidst the vicissitudes of his official career (P. Liu 2024b). Through his poetry and prose, Su Shi expressed profound insights into nature, life, and society, advocating for a tolerant and understanding approach to conflicts, using the power of literature to influence people's hearts and promote social harmony. His lifestyle and artistic creations have become models for later generations, demonstrating that Zhuangzi's philosophy can not only enlighten people's minds but also guide practice, addressing social contradictions with peace and wisdom, and pursuing a higher spiritual realm.

For instance, consider the issue of environmental conservation. In contemporary society, the degradation of natural resources and the subsequent impact on ecosystems pose significant challenges. Often, conflicts arise between environmental activists and industries that prioritize profit over sustainability. By cultivating inner peace through Zhuangzi's mystical practices, individuals can transcend the anger and resentment that often accompany such conflicts. Instead, they can adopt a more empathetic and cooperative approach, seeking to understand the motivations and concerns of both sides. This shift in consciousness allows for the exploration of common ground and the development of solutions that benefit both the environment and the economy.

Moreover, Zhuangzi's philosophy of "*Wu-wei*" (non-action) can inform nonviolent resistance strategies in social justice movements. By aligning with the natural order and avoiding confrontational tactics, activists can create an environment conducive to constructive dialogue. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding and empathy, encouraging opponents to engage in meaningful conversations aimed at resolving the root causes of conflict. For example, in the context of racial justice, adopting a nonviolent resistance strategy inspired by Zhuangzi's teachings can help dissolve artificial distinctions and foster a deeper connection among individuals of different backgrounds. Through empathy and understanding, society can move towards a more equitable and harmonious coexistence.

Furthermore, Zhuangzi's concept of "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory) offers valuable insights for addressing social inequalities. By recognizing the equality of all things and dissolving boundaries between self and others, individuals can develop a more inclusive and compassionate approach to social justice issues. This perspective encourages us to view differences as opportunities for mutual understanding and growth, rather than mere threats. In the realm of gender equality, for instance, adopting Zhuangzi's wisdom can help transcend traditional gender roles and foster a society where individuals are valued and respected based on their inherent worth, rather than societal constructs.

Additionally, Zhuangzi's emphasis on flexibility and adaptability in "*Wu-wei*" can inform strategies for navigating complex social justice issues. By avoiding rigid ideologies and embracing a spirit of cooperation, individuals can approach conflicts with an open mind, seeking creative solutions that benefit all parties involved. In the context of economic justice, this approach can help bridge the gap between different socioeconomic groups, fostering an environment where dialogue and mutual understanding can lead to more equitable economic policies.

5.6. How Is the Topic of Self-Transformation Related to the Promotion of Social Justice

Zhuangzi's mystical practices and philosophical teachings unfurl as a tapestry of profound wisdom, intricately interwoven with the fabric of social justice. The journey of self-

transformation, as advocated by Zhuangzi, serves as the keystone bridging personal enlightenment and the betterment of society at large.

Beginning with the pursuit of inner peace, practices like "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting) act as catalysts, steering individuals away from worldly distractions and into a realm of serene clarity. This inner peace is far from a passive state; it becomes the fertile ground from which compassion and empathy burgeon. By experiencing the profound interconnectedness of all things, as expounded in "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory) with its metaphor of "The universe is one finger, all things are one horse", individuals recognize the illusory nature of self-other distinctions. This realization compels them to view the suffering of others as intrinsically linked to their own, thus fueling a sense of empathy that transcends mere sympathy. David Wong's insights further underpin this, highlighting how Zhuangzi's philosophy furnishes a basis for tolerance and compassion, rooted in moral relativity and the acceptance of diversity, which in turn nurtures a mindset primed for social justice efforts.

The transcendence of negative emotions, such as anger, resentment, and violence, is a crucial milestone on the path of self-transformation. Through Zhuangzi's teachings, individuals learn to detach from these self-centered and destructive feelings, echoing Laozi's sentiment of self-mastery. A calm and centered mind, as exemplified in "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" and "*Tian Dao*天道", not only resists impulsive reactions but also approaches conflicts with patience and understanding, laying the groundwork for nonviolent resistance.

Fostering dialogue and nonviolent resistance is another facet of Zhuangzi's influence. His concept of "*Wu-wei*" (non-action) and the emphasis on flexibility and adaptability prompt individuals to engage with conflicts in a spirit of cooperation, seeking common ground within differences, as elucidated by Huang's exploration of the ethics of difference. Inner peace, maintained through practices like "Xin Zhai 心齋", creates an environment conducive to constructive dialogue, enabling the transformation of adversarial relationships into collaborative ones, which is vital for social justice pursuits.

The transformation of the self then extends to become a driving force for social transformation. Zhuangzi's ideas of "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state), "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering), and "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" coalesce to offer a worldview that dissolves boundaries, promotes free thinking unshackled by external constraints, and fosters deep connections with all beings. This new perspective equips individuals to participate in nonviolent resistance not with the aim of overpowering opponents but of achieving mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence, as seen in Wenning's interpretation of passive resistance.

In practical applications, from the example of Su Shi to contemporary social justice arenas like environmental conservation, racial justice, gender equality, and economic justice, Zhuangzi's philosophy proves its mettle. It empowers individuals to navigate conflicts with empathy, informed by "Wu-wei" to avoid confrontation and embrace cooperation, and guided by "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" to recognize equality and dissolve divisive boundaries. This results in more inclusive, equitable, and harmonious solutions.

To address the query of how the topic of self-transformation relates to the promotion of social justice, it is abundantly clear that self-transformation, as espoused by Zhuangzi, is the linchpin. The internal metamorphosis that occurs through the adoption of his mystical practices and absorption of his philosophical teachings radically alters an individual's mindset, emotional landscape, and world view. This transformed individual, armed with inner peace, compassion, and an understanding of the interconnectedness of all things, steps into the social sphere with a new approach. They are no longer driven by negative emotions or self-centered desires but by a desire to foster harmony, seek common ground, and address social injustices through nonviolent means. Their ability to empathize, communicate constructively, and work towards dissolving artificial barriers becomes the engine that propels social justice efforts forward, gradually reshaping society into a more equitable and harmonious entity. In essence, the self-transformation journey is not an

isolated personal odyssey but a powerful catalyst for the collective pursuit of a just and peaceful world.

6. Inner Peace as Fuel for Courage and Determination

Inner peace, deeply rooted in the concept of *Dao* (Dreher 2021), is a profound source of strength, providing individuals with the courage and determination needed to engage in nonviolent resistance. The tranquility that arises from aligning oneself with *Dao* enables people to face oppression and injustice with resilience and perseverance, fostering a state of mind conducive to clear thinking and strategic planning. By being in harmony with *Dao*, individuals can transcend fear and anger, approaching challenges with a sense of balance and clarity. This section explores how inner peace, grounded in the principles of *Dao*, empowers individuals to participate in nonviolent resistance, highlighting the absence of fear and anger, and examines movements that have successfully integrated mindfulness and Daoist principles into their strategies.

6.1. Empowerment Through Inner Peace

Inner peace, when cultivated to foster a profound sense of purpose and an unwavering commitment to justice, endows individuals with the requisite courage and tenacity to partake in nonviolent resistance. Upon attaining inner tranquility, people are better poised to surmount the emotional and psychological hurdles that surface when confronting formidable foes and entrenched systemic injustices. In this regard, it is essential to clarify the application and true essence of Zhuangzi's concept of "Wu-wei" within this context, addressing concerns about potential misinterpretations.

Zhuangzi's "*Wu-wei*" is often misconstrued, and it is crucial to distinguish its meaning in his philosophy from other understandings, such as those more akin to Laozi's. In Zhuangzi's framework, "*Wu-wei*" emphasizes an alignment with the natural order and flow of things, a state of being where actions occur spontaneously and harmoniously, without the imposition of excessive force or artificial striving. It is not about a calculated, goal-oriented pursuit of social transformation in the way that might be misinterpreted from a cursory glance. Instead, it is a way of existing and interacting with the world that allows for a natural unfolding of events while maintaining inner equilibrium. When applied to nonviolent resistance, it means engaging in actions that are attuned to the rhythms of the situation, not aggressively forcing change but rather facilitating it through a calm and centered presence. For instance, in the face of injustice, rather than mounting a forceful, direct assault that may disrupt the natural order further, adherents of "Wu-wei" would act in a way that respects the existing context and gently nudges it towards a more just state, much like water that carves through rock over time, not by brute force but by persistent, harmonious flow (Barrett 2011).

The strength that springs from inner peace fortifies activists, enabling them to endure and stay true to their fundamental values. In a state devoid of inner turmoil, individuals can sustain focus and resilience even under duress (X. Liu 2006). As Zhuangzi illustrates in the "*Ying Di Wang* 應帝王" chapter, "The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror. It neither sends off nor welcomes; it responds but does not retain. Therefore, he can conquer without harm." This passage illuminates the mental disposition of the ideal person: their psyche resembles a pristine mirror, refraining from actively chasing after or shunning things, merely reacting organically to all stimuli without clinging or overreacting. Owing to this, they can navigate complex situations and overcome obstacles without incurring harm, safeguarding their inner peace and adaptability.

In the sphere of nonviolent resistance, embodying this "mind of the perfect man" holds the key. Activists must maintain a composed and astute awareness, mirroring reality with precision, neither shirking from nor inflating challenges. They ought to approach difficulties with the spirit of "*Wu-wei*", not forcefully imposing solutions but influencing others by virtue of their inner serenity and constancy, spurring positive social change. This stance not only shields them from external adverse emotions but also empowers them to

retain a lucid mind and unshakable belief throughout the protracted and arduous struggle, gradually edging closer to the objective of social betterment.

Regarding strategic planning, while it is a factor often deemed vital in enhancing social justice in modern understandings, it is not a concept that Zhuangzi overtly endorses in the traditional sense. His philosophy is centered around an intuitive, natural response to the world, guided by the principles of "*Wu-wei*" and inner peace. Strategic planning, with its connotations of meticulous forethought and goal-directed maneuvers, seems at odds with the spontaneous, flowing nature of Zhuangzi's advocated way of being. However, it could be argued that within the natural order of events that "Wu-wei" adheres to, there is an inherent wisdom that unfolds, which, while not a formal strategic plan, still guides actions in a way that can lead to more harmonious social outcomes. In essence, the actions taken in line with "Wu-wei" may not be the result of a deliberate, step-by-step strategic blueprint but rather a natural progression that respects the ebb and flow of life and society, ultimately contributing to social justice in its own, unique way.

6.2. Absence of Fear and Anger

The state of being without fear and anger is not only a high level of personal cultivation but also a crucial foundation for social change and progress. When individuals can maintain inner peace and resilience in the face of oppression and injustice, they can analyze situations with a clearer and more rational mind, formulating more effective strategies. Fear and anger, as fundamental human emotional responses, often lead to poor judgment at critical moments, resulting in impulsive actions and subsequent psychological and physical exhaustion. Therefore, cultivating the ability to transcend these negative emotions is of immeasurable value for long-term social movements and personal growth and development.

Zhuangzi's philosophical thoughts profoundly reveal this principle. In "*Qiu Shui*秋水", he mentions, "Knowing that adversity has its destiny and success has its timing, those who face great difficulties without fear are the true courageous ones." This statement implies that sages understand that both adversity and prosperity are part of fate and are aware of the flux of opportunities. Therefore, they can remain unafraid in the face of great challenges, which is the essence of their courage. Furthermore, in "*Geng Sang Chu* 庚桑楚", he proposes the idea of "respect without joy, humiliation without anger", indicating that only when people transcend the constraints of personal desires and fears, and are no longer swayed by worldly fame and fortune, can they genuinely face all forms of injustice and challenges with a selfless heart. This transcendence is not only a pursuit of personal spiritual freedom but also a necessary condition for achieving social harmony and justice. Through inner cultivation and reaching a state of spiritual balance, individuals can, like the sages described by Zhuangzi, respond to all changes with constancy, using firm strength and unwavering will to influence and change those seemingly unshakeable injustices (Chan 1963).

6.3. Clear Thinking and Strategic Planning

Inner peace, within the framework of Zhuangzi's philosophy and in the context of social movements, holds a significance that extends far beyond the individual's psychological realm, acting as a linchpin for the potential success of collective endeavors. It is crucial, however, to realign our understanding with the true essence of Zhuangzi's teachings to address the concerns raised.

Zhuangzi indeed does not advocate for what we conventionally understand as "meticulous planning and coordination" in the sense of a rigid, goal-oriented, and highly structured approach. His concept of "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory) beckons us to a different way of perceiving and engaging with the world. The Perfect Man, as described in the Inner Chapters of Zhuangzi, is one who embodies a state of being that is in harmony with nature's flow, unfettered by the trappings of artificial de-

signs and forced maneuvers. Instead of devising strategies through a calculative lens, the emphasis is on attuning to the natural rhythms and interconnections of all things.

In the context of social movements, particularly nonviolent resistance, the clarity of thought that springs from inner peace, as advocated by Zhuangzi, does not translate into a typical strategic planning model. Inner peace, rather than being a tool to engineer premeditated outcomes, becomes a means to achieve a state of awareness that allows activists to sense the undercurrents of social dynamics. It enables them to intuitively understand the complex web of relationships and interdependencies within society, much like the Perfect Man who perceives the unity beneath the apparent chaos.

For instance, when faced with social injustices, activists with inner peace, inspired by Zhuangzi's teachings, would not draft a detailed step-by-step plan in isolation. Instead, they would enter a space of deep listening and observation, attuned to the voices of the community, the historical echoes of past struggles, and the latent potential for change within the existing social fabric. Their actions would then unfold organically, in response to the emerging needs and opportunities, rather than being driven by a fixed blueprint.

The quote from "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), "Those of great wisdom are serene; those of little wisdom are busy and worried. Those of great words are fervent; those of little words are verbose and tedious 大知閑閑，小知間間；大言炎炎，小言詹詹", serves as a guiding light here. It is not about amassing detailed plans but about achieving a state of serenity that allows one to cut through the noise and distractions, to see the overarching patterns and connections. In this way, the strategies that emerge are not the result of meticulous planning in the traditional sense but are more akin to a natural manifestation of the understanding of the holistic nature of society, aligning with Zhuangzi's vision of the Perfect Man's way of being and interacting with the world.

This approach, while seemingly at odds with the common perception of strategic planning, actually offers a more sustainable and harmonious path for nonviolent resistance. By surrendering the need for forced control and instead embracing the fluidity of social change, activists can better adapt to the ever-shifting external environment, foster stronger community bonds through genuine connection and understanding, and ultimately nudge society towards a more just and peaceful state, all while remaining true to the core tenets of Zhuangzi's philosophy.

6.4. Examples of Nonviolent Resistance Movements

Some nonviolent resistance movements have successfully integrated the principles of inner peace and mindfulness into their strategies, demonstrating the power of these practices in cultivating courage and determination. Zhuangzi's mystical practices, such as "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting), can cultivate inner tranquility and clarity, enabling individuals to transcend negative emotions like anger, resentment, and violence, fostering compassion and empathy. This inner peace provides a solid foundation for nonviolent resistance.

When we speak of inner peace as a "solid foundation" for social transformation, it embodies several key elements. Firstly, it provides the emotional resilience necessary to withstand the setbacks and adversities that inevitably accompany any attempt at social change. Secondly, it fosters a sense of community and mutual understanding among individuals, as those who have cultivated inner peace are more inclined to listen, empathize, and cooperate with others. Thirdly, it enables the clear thinking and strategic planning required to address complex social issues effectively. While it may not be an absolute necessary condition in the strictest sense, as social transformation can occur through a variety of means and catalysts, it is, however, a highly conducive and empowering factor. I firmly believe that inner peace is essential for social transformation because it addresses the root causes of social unrest and conflict—the human emotions, biases, and lack of understanding that often fuel division and inequality. By cultivating inner peace on an individual level and

spreading its principles throughout society, we can create a more just, harmonious, and sustainable social order.

The Burmese democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi is a prime example. As a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi played a pivotal role in the Burmese democracy movement. Her commitment to nonviolence and emphasis on inner peace were central to her leadership. Influenced by Buddhist principles, Suu Kyi advocated maintaining mindfulness and compassion under the oppression of the military government. Her calm and composed demeanor inspired many, strengthening the movement's resolve to pursue democracy through peaceful means (Berridge 2022).

Martin Luther King Jr. in the American civil rights movement is another significant example. King's leadership was deeply inspired by Christian theology and Gandhi's principles of nonviolence. His regular practice of prayer and reflection helped him maintain inner peace, which was crucial in his fight for racial equality. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech reflects the clarity and vision that a peaceful mind brings, advocating for justice and equality through nonviolence (King 1963).

Nelson Mandela, a leader in the South African anti-apartheid movement, developed patience, forgiveness, and inner peace during his long imprisonment. These qualities enabled him to lead the movement with a focus on reconciliation and nonviolence, ultimately contributing to the dismantling of the apartheid system. Mandela's inner transformation and commitment to peace demonstrate the power of inner peace in nonviolent resistance (Mandela 1995).

In the Indian independence movement, Gandhi's philosophy of "Satyagraha" (truth force) was deeply rooted in the practice of inner peace. Gandhi believed that personal and collective transformation was key to achieving political freedom. His daily practices of meditation and prayer helped him maintain inner tranquility and clarity of purpose. Gandhi's ability to inspire large-scale nonviolent resistance stemmed from his inner peace and determination (Nanda 1958).

A contemporary example is Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen master and peace activist. Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings on mindful and compassionate living have inspired countless people to seek nonviolent solutions to conflicts. His concept of "Engaged Buddhism" emphasizes integrating mindfulness practice with social action. Thich Nhat Hanh's personal practices of meditation and mindfulness cultivated a deep inner peace, which he applied to his efforts in promoting reconciliation and global peace (Hanh 1991).

6.5. The Role of Inner Peace in Shaping Nonviolent Strategies

Zhuangzi's mystical teachings on inner peace can significantly influence the development and implementation of nonviolent strategies in social justice movements. Inner peace, cultivated through practices such as "*Xin Zhai*" (Fasting of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang*" (Sitting and Forgetting), is not merely a state of calm but a powerful tool for social change. By fostering a clear mind and a balanced emotional state, inner peace equips activists with the resilience and clarity needed to navigate the complexities of nonviolent resistance.

One example of how Zhuangzi's philosophy can shape nonviolent strategies is seen in the approach to conflict resolution. Inner peace allows individuals to approach conflicts without being swayed by negative emotions like anger or fear. This emotional stability is crucial in formulating strategies that prioritize dialogue and understanding over confrontation. For instance, during the American Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr.'s commitment to nonviolence was deeply rooted in his ability to maintain inner peace. This tranquility enabled him to advocate for peaceful protests and negotiations, rather than violent uprisings, which ultimately contributed to the movement's success in challenging systemic racism.

Moreover, the concept of "*Wu-wei*" (non-action) in Zhuangzi's philosophy can guide the strategic decisions of nonviolent movements. "Wu-wei" does not imply passivity but rather a form of action that is in harmony with the natural flow of events. This principle can

be applied to nonviolent resistance by encouraging activists to adapt to circumstances and respond to challenges in a way that minimizes force and maximizes impact. A practical example is Gandhi's strategy of "Satyagraha" (truth force) during the Indian independence movement. Gandhi's approach, which emphasized patience, persistence, and nonviolent action, reflects the essence of "Wu-wei". By not directly confronting British authority with violence, but instead applying steady and morally grounded pressure, Gandhi was able to mobilize a massive and effective movement that ultimately led to India's independence.

Another aspect of Zhuangzi's influence on nonviolent strategies is the emphasis on unity and interconnectedness, as reflected in the concept of "*Qi Wu Lun*" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory). This perspective encourages activists to view their opponents not as enemies but as part of the same human experience, deserving of empathy and understanding. This mindset can transform the way social justice movements engage with their adversaries. For example, Nelson Mandela's approach to dismantling apartheid in South Africa was characterized by a deep sense of empathy and a desire for reconciliation, rather than revenge. Mandela's inner peace allowed him to see beyond the immediate conflict and envision a future where all South Africans, regardless of race, could coexist peacefully.

In conclusion, Zhuangzi's mystical teachings provide a valuable framework for shaping nonviolent strategies in social justice movements. By cultivating inner peace, activists can develop the emotional resilience, strategic clarity, and empathetic understanding needed to challenge injustice effectively. Through these principles, nonviolent resistance becomes not only a method of social change but also a reflection of the deeper spiritual values that Zhuangzi espouses.

7. Reimagining Social Change: The Seed of Global Peace

The pursuit of social change has often been marked by conflict and violence, but the philosophy of inner peace offers a compelling alternative. By fostering tranquility and compassion, inner peace can drive nonviolent resistance movements and contribute to a more peaceful and just global society. This section discusses the significance of inner peace as a method for social change, examines how Zhuangzi's mysticism can empower nonviolent movements, addresses the limitations and challenges of applying mystical philosophies to activism, and suggests ways to integrate Zhuangzi's teachings into the strategies of nonviolent resistance movements.

7.1. The Significance of Inner Peace in Social Change

The significance of inner peace in social transformation forms a sharp contrast to violence. Violence often triggers a vicious cycle of retaliation and escalation, breeding more violence and creating an environment filled with fear and hostility, which can easily undermine meaningful efforts for change. In contrast, inner peace cultivates a calm and rational mindset, enabling people to address problems with clarity and compassion. This approach not only helps to mitigate conflict but also lays a solid foundation for sustainable and enduring social change.

In the essay "*Shan Mu* 山木" (The Mountain Tree), Zhuangzi says, "Those who float along with *Dao* and virtue are different. They are not swayed by praise or blame, like a dragon soaring or a snake slithering, adapting to the changing times without clinging to any fixed form or action." This passage depicts a person of inner peace navigating the world, unaffected by worldly praise or criticism, freely adapting to changes in circumstances without being attached to any particular form or behavior. This mindset is especially important in social transformation.

The significance of inner peace lies in its ability to cultivate empathy and understanding. When people approach situations from a place of calm, they are better able to listen to and understand the perspectives of others, including those who hold opposing views. This compassionate approach can lead to more effective communication, reconciliation, and the development of solutions that address the root causes of conflict. By promoting a

culture of peace, inner peace can transform adversarial relationships into cooperative ones, paving the way for a more harmonious society.

7.2. Zhuangzi's Mysticism and Global Peace

Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy, which emphasizes harmony with *Dao*, offers valuable insights for promoting a more peaceful and just global society. Zhuangzi's teachings encourage people to transcend self-centered desires and social conventions, advocating for inner detachment and alignment with nature. This perspective not only aids in personal inner transformation and mental harmony but also provides a solid philosophical foundation for nonviolent resistance movements, imbuing them with profound power and meaning.

Zhuangzi's concepts of "conforming to nature" and "inner cultivation" are particularly relevant to nonviolent resistance. Conforming to nature implies advocating actions that are in harmony with the natural order, which encourages activists to adopt peaceful and non-coercive methods, thereby reducing the likelihood of violent conflict and aligning the movement with universal principles of justice and compassion. Zhuangzi said, "Follow the natural order without allowing selfish desires, and the world will be at peace" (*Zhuangzi: Ying Di Wang*). At the same time, his emphasis on spontaneity and adaptability can help movements maintain resilience and respond flexibly to changing circumstances, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and impact.

Zhuangzi's philosophy of the interdependence and diversity of all things also strongly supports the ideal of global peace. He advocated recognizing and respecting the differences and uniqueness among all things, while also emphasizing their interconnectedness and interdependence. Zhuangzi stated, "All things are equal; who can say what is short or long?" (*Zhuangzi: Qiu Shui*). This philosophical stance can help activists recognize the common humanity of all people, including their adversaries, thereby fostering a more united and inclusive social atmosphere. By reducing the tendency to dehumanize opponents, Zhuangzi's philosophy can promote more compassionate and inclusive social movements, laying a solid foundation for building a peaceful and just global society.

7.3. Limitations and Challenges

Although Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy offers valuable insights into the harmony of the universe and the essence of human existence, applying these profound concepts to practical resistance faces significant limitations and challenges. One notable issue is the risk of misunderstanding. For example, while Zhuangzi does not explicitly mention the term "Wu Wei Er Zhi" (無為而治), or "governing by non-action", this concept originates from Laozi's Dao De Jing. However, Zhuangzi indeed carries forward and expands upon Laozi's idea of *Wu-wei*, interpreting it as a way of engaging with the world that emphasizes harmony and natural flow rather than forced intervention (J. Huang 2001). In Zhuangzi's philosophy, *Wu-wei* should not be mistaken for passive inaction; instead, it represents a form of action that aligns with the natural order, advocating for an approach that avoids imposing rigid control and allows events to unfold organically.

Another challenge lies in Zhuangzi's emphasis on long-term transformation and inner growth, as reflected in his words, "My life has limits, but knowledge has no limits" (*Zhuangzi: Yang Sheng Zhu*). This often does not align with the urgent need for immediate results in social justice movements. In a social environment that demands rapid change, activists may become discouraged if they do not see immediate effects, leading to disappointment and even a shift toward more confrontational methods.

Moreover, integrating Zhuangzi's philosophy into real-world resistance requires a profound cultural shift, one that advocates for the cultivation of inner peace and mindfulness—values that starkly contrast with the fast-paced, results-driven nature of modern society. As Zhuangzi said, "If the accumulation of water is not deep, it will not have the strength to carry a large boat" (*Zhuangzi: Xiao Yao You*). True transformation requires deep inner accumulation, rather than superficial haste. However, when facing

pressing social issues, asking individuals and groups to undergo such a profound transformation is undoubtedly a formidable challenge. This not only calls for a reversal of traditional modes of thinking but also demands a deep integration of personal cultivation and social responsibility, urging us to find a new balance between action and contemplation.

7.4. Integrating Zhuangzi's Teachings into Nonviolent Resistance

Despite these challenges, there are practical ways to integrate Zhuangzi's teachings into nonviolent resistance training and strategies. Emphasizing mindfulness practices and cultivating compassion can help activists embody the principles of inner peace and resilience.

Mindfulness Training: Incorporating mindfulness practices such as "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting) into training programs can help activists develop inner peace and emotional regulation skills. These practices can be integrated into training plans, providing activists with tools to remain calm and clear-headed under pressure.

Cultivating Compassion: Training programs can include exercises to cultivate compassion, such as perspective-taking activities and discussions on shared humanity. By encouraging activists to understand and empathize with others' experiences, these practices can reduce hostility and promote collaborative solutions.

Philosophical Education: Providing education on Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy can help activists understand the deeper principles of nonviolent resistance. Through workshops and study groups, key concepts such as "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering) and "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory) can be explored, along with examples of practical application.

Case Studies: The leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh was deeply influenced by inner peace. Suu Kyi emphasized nonviolence and inner peace in Myanmar's democratic movement, inspired by Buddhist principles. King's prayers and reflections helped him maintain calm during the U.S. civil rights movement. Mandela fostered reconciliation through patience and forgiveness in the fight against apartheid in South Africa. Gandhi's philosophy of "Satyagraha" (truth-force) relied on inner tranquility, while Thich Nhat Hanh combined mindfulness with social action to promote global peace. These leaders all demonstrated the power of inner peace in nonviolent resistance.

7.5. Inner Peace as a Catalyst for Nonviolent Social Movements

Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy, with its emphasis on inner peace and harmony with Dao, provides a unique and powerful foundation for nonviolent social movements. By cultivating inner peace, activists can harness a deep well of strength and clarity, which is essential for the sustained and effective pursuit of social justice. This section explores how the integration of Zhuangzi's teachings can transform the approach to social change, emphasizing the practical application of inner peace in nonviolent resistance.

One of the most significant ways inner peace influences social movements is through the cultivation of resilience and emotional stability. Activists often face intense pressure, opposition, and even violence, which can lead to burnout, frustration, or a turn towards aggressive tactics. However, by grounding themselves in the principles of Zhuangzi's "*Wu-wei*" (non-action) and "*Xin Zhai*" (Fasting of the Mind), activists can maintain their composure and focus, responding to challenges with calmness and strategic insight. For example, the practice of "Wu-wei" encourages activists to engage in actions that are in harmony with the natural and social environment, avoiding unnecessary force and instead leveraging the power of patience and persistence. This approach can be seen in the strategies of Gandhi's Satyagraha movement, where nonviolent resistance was not only a tactic but a way of embodying the principles of inner peace and moral integrity.

Another crucial aspect of Zhuangzi's philosophy is the idea of seeing all things as interconnected and equal, as expressed in "*Qi Wu Lun*" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing

Theory). This perspective fosters a sense of compassion and empathy, which is vital for building inclusive and sustainable social movements. By recognizing the shared humanity of all individuals, including opponents, activists can create more constructive and less adversarial approaches to social change. This philosophy underpinned Nelson Mandela's approach to dismantling apartheid in South Africa, where his focus on reconciliation and understanding, rather than retribution, helped to heal a divided nation. Mandela's ability to transcend personal grievances and see the broader picture was a direct result of his inner peace and deep commitment to the principles of equality and justice.

Finally, Zhuangzi's teachings on adaptability and spontaneity provide a valuable framework for navigating the complexities of social movements. In a rapidly changing world, the ability to remain flexible and open to new strategies is crucial for the success of nonviolent resistance. The concept of "*Zuo Wang*" (Sitting and Forgetting) teaches activists to let go of rigid plans and preconceived notions, allowing them to adapt to the fluid dynamics of social struggles. This flexibility was evident in the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., who, despite facing numerous setbacks and challenges, maintained a clear vision and adapted his strategies to meet the evolving needs of the Civil Rights Movement.

Incorporating Zhuangzi's mystical practices into the core of social justice activism can lead to a more effective and humane approach to change. By focusing on inner peace, resilience, and adaptability, activists are better equipped to sustain their efforts and inspire broader participation in the movement. Through the lens of Zhuangzi's teachings, nonviolent resistance becomes more than just a strategy—it becomes a way of embodying the deepest values of compassion, justice, and harmony in the pursuit of a peaceful and just global society.

8. Conclusions

The teachings of Zhuangzi, a central figure in Daoist philosophy, offer a profound and unique perspective on the pursuit of inner peace and its potential to fuel nonviolent resistance movements. Through his emphasis on aligning with *Dao*, Zhuangzi presents a vision of life that transcends conventional societal norms, advocating for a harmonious existence that is deeply in tune with the natural order of the universe. This concluding section reflects on the key insights gained from exploring the intersection of Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy and nonviolent resistance, emphasizing the relevance of these ancient teachings in addressing contemporary social challenges.

Inner peace, as articulated by Zhuangzi, is not merely a passive state of being but an active and dynamic force that can profoundly influence both individual behavior and collective action. Throughout this paper, we have examined how inner peace serves as a foundation for nonviolent resistance, providing activists with the emotional and spiritual resources needed to engage in peaceful social change. Inner peace enables individuals to transcend fear, anger, and resentment—emotions that often fuel conflict and violence—and instead approach challenges with clarity, compassion, and resilience.

The case studies of leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh illustrate how inner peace can empower individuals to lead transformative social movements. These leaders, deeply influenced by their spiritual practices and commitment to nonviolence, demonstrated that inner peace is not only a source of personal strength but also a catalyst for broader social change. By cultivating inner tranquility, these figures were able to inspire mass movements that sought justice and equality through peaceful means, highlighting the enduring relevance of Zhuangzi's teachings in modern activism.

Zhuangzi's philosophy offers a rich framework for understanding the nature of inner peace and its role in promoting social harmony. Central to Zhuangzi's thought is the concept of *Dao*, the natural order of the universe, which governs all existence. According to Zhuangzi, aligning oneself with *Dao* is essential for achieving inner peace and living a life of spontaneity and authenticity. This alignment involves letting go of rigid attachments to

societal conventions, personal desires, and fixed identities, allowing one to flow naturally with the rhythms of life.

Zhuangzi's mystical concepts, such as the "*Pu* 樸" (perfect natural state), "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering), "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory), "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind), and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting), are central to this understanding of inner peace. These practices promote detachment from worldly desires and anxieties, paving the way for inner tranquility and spiritual liberation. By cultivating these practices, individuals can achieve a state of being that is free from the distractions of the external world, enabling them to engage in life with greater clarity and purpose.

"*Wu-wei*" (non-action), another core concept in Zhuangzi's philosophy, is often misunderstood as passivity. However, it actually refers to a state of effortless action that arises when one is in harmony with *Dao*. It is about acting in accordance with the natural order, without force or struggle, which is particularly relevant in the context of nonviolent resistance. Similarly, "*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊" (Free and Easy Wandering) represents the ideal of spiritual freedom and liberation, where one is unbound by external constraints and fully aligned with *Dao*. "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory) emphasizes the relativity of human judgments and the interconnectedness of all things, encouraging a perspective that transcends dualistic thinking and embraces a holistic view of the world.

While Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy provides valuable insights into the pursuit of inner peace and its application to nonviolent resistance, there are significant challenges and limitations to consider. One of the primary challenges is the risk of misinterpretation. Zhuangzi's teachings are deeply philosophical and abstract, which can lead to misunderstandings or oversimplifications. For instance, the concept of "*Wu-wei*" might be misconstrued as advocating for inaction or passivity, rather than as a call for harmonious and effective action that aligns with the natural flow of life.

Another challenge is the tension between Zhuangzi's emphasis on long-term inner transformation and the immediate demands of social justice movements. Activists often operate in environments where quick results are necessary to address pressing issues. Zhuangzi's focus on gradual inner growth and alignment with *Dao* may not always align with the urgency of social and political activism, potentially leading to frustration or disillusionment among those seeking rapid change.

Furthermore, integrating Zhuangzi's philosophy into modern activism requires a significant cultural shift. In a fast-paced, results-driven world, the values of inner peace, mindfulness, and non-attachment may seem counterintuitive or impractical. Encouraging individuals and movements to embrace these principles involves challenging deeply ingrained societal norms and fostering a commitment to personal and collective transformation. This process is inherently challenging, particularly in the face of immediate and tangible social issues.

Despite these challenges, there are practical ways to integrate Zhuangzi's teachings into nonviolent resistance strategies. Emphasizing mindfulness practices, such as "*Xin Zhai* 心齋" (Fasting of the Mind) and "*Zuo Wang* 坐忘" (Sitting and Forgetting), can help activists cultivate the inner peace necessary for effective and sustainable activism. These practices provide tools for emotional regulation, mental clarity, and spiritual resilience, all of which are crucial for maintaining a nonviolent stance in the face of adversity.

Moreover, fostering a culture of compassion and empathy through training programs can reduce hostility and promote collaborative solutions. Zhuangzi's philosophy encourages individuals to view the world from a broader perspective, recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings and the relativity of human judgments. By cultivating this mindset, activists can approach conflicts with a spirit of understanding and cooperation, rather than antagonism and division.

Incorporating philosophical education on Zhuangzi's teachings into activist training can also deepen participants' understanding of the underlying principles of nonviolent

resistance. Workshops, study groups, and discussions centered on key concepts like "*Wu-wei*" and "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory) can provide activists with a philosophical foundation for their actions, reinforcing the importance of inner peace and harmony in the pursuit of social change.

Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy offers a compelling vision for reimagining social change through the lens of inner peace. By cultivating tranquility, compassion, and a deep connection to *Dao*, individuals can engage in nonviolent resistance that is not only effective but also sustainable and transformative. This approach challenges the traditional narratives of activism that often emphasize confrontation and aggression, proposing instead a model of social change rooted in harmony and understanding.

The case studies explored in this paper demonstrate that inner peace is not merely a personal achievement but a powerful force for collective action. Leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh have shown that the principles of inner peace can inspire and sustain movements that seek to transform society through nonviolence. Their examples highlight the potential of Zhuangzi's teachings to guide contemporary activism and contribute to the creation of a more just and peaceful world.

When considering the pursuit of inner peace and nonviolent resistance, one might naturally wonder why Zhuangzi is emphasized over other philosophical and religious traditions such as Laozi and Buddhism. While both Laozi and Zhuangzi are important figures in Daoism and advocate for inner peace, Zhuangzi offers a unique perspective that is particularly relevant to our modern context. Laozi's focus on non-action and softness is profound, but Zhuangzi takes a more experiential approach to aligning with *Dao*. His use of allegories and stories makes his teachings more accessible and relatable, allowing individuals to better understand and apply the concepts in their daily lives. For example, through the tales of the Kunpeng and the useless tree, Zhuangzi vividly illustrates the importance of transcending limitations and remaining true to one's nature. This practical and imaginative way of presenting his philosophy sets him apart from Laozi.

As for Buddhism, although it also emphasizes meditation and compassion, Zhuangzi's approach is distinct. Buddhism often focuses on the pursuit of enlightenment through specific religious practices and a path of renunciation. In contrast, Zhuangzi's philosophy is centered on living in harmony with the natural order and the world around us. His concept of "*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論" (Equalizing Things and Equalizing Theory) challenges our fixed judgments and encourages a more fluid understanding of the world. Additionally, Zhuangzi's emphasis on spontaneity and non-action as a way of engaging with the world offers a different perspective from Buddhism's more structured path to spiritual growth.

What makes Zhuangzi special is his ability to inspire a profound transformation of self while also providing a practical framework for social change. His mystical concepts not only guide individuals towards inner peace but also empower them to participate in nonviolent resistance. By cultivating inner tranquility through practices like "Xin Zhai" and "Zuo Wang", individuals can develop the courage and determination needed to confront injustice. Moreover, Zhuangzi's teachings encourage a more inclusive and empathetic view of the world, promoting understanding and cooperation rather than conflict.

The significance of this proposal lies in its potential to offer an alternative approach to social activism. In a world often marked by violence and conflict, Zhuangzi's philosophy provides a way to achieve social change through nonviolent means. By emphasizing inner peace and harmony with *Dao*, individuals can contribute to a more just and peaceful global society. This approach challenges the traditional narratives of activism and offers a model that is not only effective but also sustainable and transformative. It shows that true change can come from within, and by cultivating a state of inner peace, we can inspire positive change in the world around us.

In conclusion, Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy provides a profound and insightful framework for understanding the role of inner peace in nonviolent resistance. By aligning with *Dao* and cultivating a state of tranquility and compassion, individuals can engage in

social change that is both effective and harmonious. While there are challenges in applying these ancient teachings to modern activism, the potential benefits are significant. By integrating Zhuangzi's concepts into nonviolent resistance strategies, activists can develop the inner strength and clarity needed to pursue justice and create a more peaceful global society. As we continue to navigate the complexities of contemporary social challenges, the wisdom of Zhuangzi offers timeless guidance for cultivating the inner peace necessary to effect meaningful and lasting change.

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Notes

[1] All translations are my own and rely on Burton (Zhuangzi 1968). All translations from recent scholarly works in Chinese herein are also my own.

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