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## Review of The Darkness of God

Sheila E. McGinn

*John Carroll University*, [smcginn@jcu.edu](mailto:smcginn@jcu.edu)

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*The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism.* By DENYS TURNER. Pp. x + 278. Cambridge University Press, 1995. ISBN 0 521 45317 8. £35/\$54-95-

Denys Turner provides a lucid monograph on the philosophical history of several key metaphors typically associated with mystical theology, i.e., interiority and ascent, light and darkness, and oneness with God. These metaphors have in common that they are 'metaphors of negativity', conveying not a certain kind of experience but rather a critique of the attempt to cultivate such religious experiences. In this way they served quite different purposes for the ancient and medieval theologians who used them than they do in contemporary 'experientialism'.

The ultimate purpose of Turner's book is 'the retrieval of the mediaeval tradition of apophatic, or "negative" mysticism' (p. 5). To do this, Turner sets himself the task of a systematic discussion of such influential spiritual writers as Augustine of Hippo (the *Confessions* and *De Trinitate*), Bonaventure (the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*), Meister Eckhart, Denys the Areopagite, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Denys the Carthusian, and St. John of the Cross. In each case, Turner shows that three metaphors recur: 'exteriority', 'interiority', and 'ascent'. And, in each of these authors, this imagery is used in a dialectical or 'self-subverting' way. The most common example of this is the image of the divine light whose excess 'causes darkness and unknowing to the soul ... a "dazzling darkness", a "cloud of unknowing" (p. 252).

The apophatic process here described is radically different from the popular contemporary view of mysticism, which Turner names 'experientialism'—a product of nineteenth-century scholarship more than of medieval spirituality. Experientialism, in its extreme form, is 'the displacement of a sense of the negativity of all religious experience with the pursuit of some goal of achieving *negative experiences*. [It is, in short, the "positivism" of Christian spirituality' (p. 259; orig. emphasis). Where the apophatic recognizes an experiential vacuum, the experientialist fills it with psychologistic *experiences of the negative*. Hence, the experientialist uses the same terms as the apophatic, but in a radically different way, subverting the intent of the apophatic and replacing the original negativity with those very experientialist (or 'imaginative') tendencies which the apophatic sought to oppose (p. 260).

It is the 'constructive interplay of negation and affirmation, embracing ontology, dialectics and metaphor' which Turner sees as 'the defining characteristic of the mediaeval apophatic mystical tradition' (p. 271). The medieval 'mystical' tradition represents a method of doing theology which is inseparable from Christian praxis. It is 'the moment of negativity immanent within the ordinary practice, theoretical and moral, of the Christian life...' (p. 272). Hence, God is found not in some *experience of nothingness*, but rather 'in the negation of experience and in the negation of the negation so that everything is denied and nothing is abandoned, so that all things lead to a God who is beyond what they lead to, by means of ways which are the active practice of the denial of ways' (p. 272).

Truly, a great chasm lies between what Turner outlines as the medieval approach and the contemporary cultivation of 'mystical experience'. Through his solid analytical work in this volume, Turner demonstrates that this is one clear case where use of the same terminology of negativity is no guarantee that the same idea undergirds that terminology. Turner raises an important challenge to the contemporary discussion of 'medieval mysticism', and provides clear signposts for reorienting that discussion. Along the way, he recontextualizes 'medieval mysticism' in the totality of the Christian way of life, relinking *theoria* and praxis. This holistic approach holds promise for rejuvenating contemporary theology as well.

Sheila Elizabeth McGinn