Thirteenth Annual Graduate Theological Union Distinguished Faculty Lecture

Professor Daniel Matt

Center for Jewish Studies

"Varieties of Mystical Nothingness: Jewish, Christian and Buddhist."

On the same evening, we will honor GTU students who have received academic distinctions during the past year

The lecture will be followed by a reception and an exhibition of the bronze cast sculptures of *Ann Honig Nadel*

***Date*: November 16, 1988**

***Lecture and awards*: 7:00 - 9:00 pm,**
Chapel, Pacific School of Religion
1798 Scenic Avenue

***Reception and exhibition*: 8:30 - 10:00 pm,**
Flora Lamson Hewlett Library
Graduate Theological Union
2400 Ridge Road

VARIETIES OF MYSTICAL NOTHINGNESS:

JEWISH, CHRISTIAN AND BUDDHIST

Daniel C. Matt

How can God be defined? It cannot. To define ultimate reality would deny and desecrate its infinity. Theologians, philosophers and mystics have long wrestled with the problem of naming the ineffable. Though language relentlessly persists, God escapes its noisy clutches again and again.

The mystics celebrate divine ineffability, and they are quite comfortable with a God who refuses to be trapped by language. Yet even mystics need to refer to the nameless one, if only to communicate their awareness to others, to express a bit of what they have uncovered. One of their favorite methods is to call God "Nothing." Tonight I will focus on the Jewish mystical concept of ayin along with two parallels: Meister Eckhart's Nichts and the Buddhist sunyata. We should not assume that these terms express an identical meaning, since each mystic is uniquely shaped by his own training, outlook and language.

The word nothingness, of course, connotes negativity and nonbeing, but divine nothingness is a positive quality. God is greater than any thing one can imagine, like no thing. Since

God's being is incomprehensible and ineffable, the least offensive and most accurate description one can offer is, paradoxically, nothing.

The nothingness of God is a radical expression of negative theology. In the first century, Philo paved the way for negative theology by teaching that God is unknowable and indefinable. Plotinus, the mystical philosopher of the third century, maintains that the One surpasses our most basic categories. It is unnameable. "We say what it is not, but not what it is.... [It is] higher than what we call 'being.'"[1]

The negative theology of Plotinus had a great impact on Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought. In the fifth century the Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius writes that God is "the cause of being for all, but is itself nonbeing, for it is beyond all being."[2]

John Scotus Erigena, who lived in the ninth century, was deeply influenced by Dionysius and was apparently the first European to apply the term "nothing" to God. Writing in Latin, he calls God nihil, by which he means not that God is without being but rather beyond being. Because of "the ineffable, incomprehensible and inaccessible brilliance of the divine

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[1] Plotinus, Enneads 5:3:14.

[2] Pseudo-Dionysius, The Divine Names 1:1; cf. 4:3.

goodness.... it is not improperly called 'nothing'" (Periphyseon 634d). When John says that the world was created ex nihilo, "out of nothing," he means that everything emerged out of God's own essence, the divine no-thingness. In its essence, the divine is said not to be, but as it emanates, it becomes all that is. "Every visible creature can be called a theophany, that is, a divine appearance" (Periphyseon 681a). Medieval Christian mystics who speak of divine nothingness, such as Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, are indebted to John Scotus and to Dionysius.

The medieval Jewish mystics, the kabbalists, may also have been influenced by John Scotus, but their immediate teacher in the field of negative theology was Moses Maimonides. Building on Islamic formulations, Maimonides taught that God has nothing in common with any other being. God's existence is totally unlike anything we conceive: God "exists but not through existence" (Guide of the Perplexed 1:57). Maimonides developed an entire system of negative attributes. He encourages his reader to progress in discovering what God is not.

> The description of God ... by means of negations is the correct description.... You come nearer to the apprehension of God with every increase in the negations regarding God. (Guide of the Perplexed 1:58-59)

The Jewish mystics adopted Maimonides' theory of negative attributes, at least as it pertains to the infinite nature of God. Yet, and here the paradox is born, the very strategy of

negation provides a means of indicating the ineffable. Negative attributes carve away all that is false and culminate in a positive sense of nothingness. The mystics now claim to surpass the philosophers. Ayin, "nothingness," is revealed as the only name appropriate to the divine essence.

In the words of Joseph Gikatilla,

> The depth of primordial being ... is called Boundless. It is also called ayin because of its concealment from all creatures.... If one asks, "What is it?," the answer is, "Ayin," that is, no one can understand anything about it.[3]

The kabbalists taught that the infinite God manifests itself in ten stages known as the ten sefirot. The sefirot are aspects of God's personality; they reveal what can be conveyed of the divine nature. The kabbalists identified ayin with the first of these sefirot. Moses de León, the author of the Zohar, explains this identification and then draws an analogy between divine and human ineffability.

> [The first sefirah] is ... the totality of all existence, and all have wearied in their search for it.... It brings all into being.... Anything sealed and concealed is called ayin, meaning that no one knows anything about it. Similarly, no one knows anything about the human soul; she stands in the status of nothingness.... By means of this soul, the human being obtains ... the glory of ayin.[4]

The inner nature of both God and the human being is impenetrable. If the human soul could be defined, it would

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[3] Joseph Gikatilla, Sha'arei Orah, pp. 44a-b.

[4] Moses de León, Sheqel ha-Qodesh, pp. 23-24.

lose its divine likeness. By our nature, we participate in ayin. The kabbalists do not elaborate on this intriguing notion, preferring to emphasize the theosophical dimension of nothingness; in Hasidism, as we shall see, the discussion of ayin focuses precisely on mystical psychology.

For the kabbalist, one of the deepest mysteries is the transition from ayin to yesh, from "nothing" to "something." Following in the footsteps of John Scotus and others, they reinterpreted creation ex nihilo to mean emanation from the hidden essence of God. "Something" does emerge from "nothing," but the nothing is brimming with overwhelming divine reality. The something is not a physical object but the rather the first ray of divine wisdom, which comes into being out of ayin. It is the primordial point that initiates the unfolding of God. The opening words of Genesis, "In the beginning," allude to this first point, the sefirah of divine wisdom.

The transition from ayin to yesh is the decisive act of creation. As time proceeds, nothingness serves as the medium of each transformation, of every birth and death. Ayin represents the entirety of potential forms that can inhere in matter, each one issuing forth as a pool spreading out from a spring. As matter adopts new forms, it passes through ayin; thus the world is constantly renewed. In every change, in each

gap of existence, the abyss of nothingness is crossed and becomes visible for a fleeting moment.

The mystic yearns for this depth of being, this formless source of all form. Through contemplation one is able to retrace the individual words of prayer to their source in ayin. Azriel of Gerona writes that a true prayer is one in which "we have directed the words to the nothingness of the word."[5]

Can one know the reality beyond forms? Only by unknowing or, as one kabbalist puts it, "forgetting." As the mystic ascends the ladder of the sefirot, she uncovers layers of being within herself and throughout the cosmos. But there is a higher level, a deeper realm, beyond this step-by-step approach. At the ultimate stage of contemplation, discursive thought, with all its distinctions and connections, dissolves. The highest sefirah is also called "the annihilation of thought." Here the mystic cannot grasp for knowledge; rather, he imbibes from the source to which he is now joined. In the words of Isaac the Blind, "The inner, subtle essences can be contemplated only by sucking,... not by knowing."[6]

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[5] Azriel of Gerona, Sod ha-Tefillah, ed. Scholem, "Seridim Hadashim," p. 215.

[6] Isaac the Blind, Commentary on Sefer Yezirah, p. 1.

Ayin cannot be known. If one searches too eagerly, one may be overtaken by it, sucked in by the vortex of nothingness. The soul will be severed from the body and return to her root.

There are both positive and negative aspects of the return. Another kabbalist describes cleaving to God as "pouring a jug of water into a flowing spring, so that all becomes one." Yet he warns that one should not sink in the ocean of ayin. "The endeavor should be to contemplate but to escape drowning.... Your soul shall indeed see the divine light and cleave to it while dwelling in her [body, the] palace."[7]

The mystic is vulnerable. Moreover, she is responsible for the divine emanation. She must ensure that the sefirot themselves do not collapse back into nothingness. Through righteous action the human being stimulates and maintains the flow of emanation; wrongdoing can have disastrous effect. "One who sins returns the attributes to ayin, to the primordial world,... and they no longer emanate goodness down to the lower world."[8]

In eighteenth-century Eastern Europe, the popular mystical movement known as Hasidism arose. Now the kabbalistic material

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[7] Isaac of Akko, Ozar Hayyim, MS Moscow-Günzberg 775, fols. 111a, 161b.

[8] David ben Abraham ha-Lavan, Masoret ha-Berit, ed. Scholem, Qovez 'al Yad 1 (1936): 39.

is recast and psychologized; the experiential aspect of ayin becomes prominent. The emphasis is no longer on the inner life of God, but on how to perceive the world mystically and how to transform the ego. The Hasidic master Dov Baer, known as the Maggid, the preacher, encourages his followers to change aniy ("I") into ayin, to dissolve the separate ego in nothingness.[9] As we shall see, this is not a destructive but rather a dialectical and creative process. Only by attaining the awareness of ayin, can one imitate and express the boundless nature of God.

> One must think of oneself as ayin and forget oneself totally.... If one thinks of oneself as something,... God cannot be clothed in such a person, for God is infinite. No vessel can contain God, unless one thinks of oneself as ayin.[10]

We must shed the illusion that we are separate from God. There is, of course, a danger that the breakthrough to ayin will generate megalomania. Perhaps for just this reason, the Maggid emphasizes the link between ayin and humility. To defend an independent sense of self is a sign of false pride.

> The essence of the worship of God ... is to attain the state of humility, namely,... to understand that all one's physical and mental powers and one's essential being are dependent on the divine elements within. One is simply a channel for the divine attributes. One attains such humility through the awe of God's vastness, through realizing that there is no place empty of God. Then one comes to the

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[9] See Scholem, The Messianic Idea in Judaism (New York: Schocken, 1971), p. 214. On the kabbalistic roots of this play on words, see Gikatilla, Sha'arei Orah, p. 103a.

[10] Dov Baer, Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov, p. 186.

> state of ayin, which is the state of humility.... One has no independent self and is contained, as it were, in the Creator.... This is the meaning of the verse [Exodus 3:6]: "Moses hid his face, for he was in awe...." Through his experience of awe, Moses attained the hiding of his face, that is, he perceived no independent self. Everything was part of divinity![11]

Hasidic prayer provides an opportunity for the experience of nothingness. The words of the liturgy are reinterpreted and endowed with mystical content. For example, when reciting the first line of the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," the hasid "should intend that there is nothing in the world but God.... You should consider yourself to be absolute nothingness. Your essence is only the soul within, part of God above. Thus only God is! This is the meaning of the word 'one.'"[12]

The immersion in nothingness does not induce a blank stare; on the contrary, it engenders new mental life, through a rhythm of annihilation and thinking. "One [should] turn away from the [prior] object [of thought] totally to the place called 'nothingness,' and then a new topic comes to mind. Thus transformation comes about only by passing through nothingness." In the words of one of the Maggid's disciples,

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[11] Issachar Ber of Zlotshov, Mevasser Zedek (Berditchev, 1817), p. 9a-b. Cf. John of the Cross, The Ascent of Mount Carmel 2:7: "When one is brought to nothing [nada], the highest degree of humility, the spiritual union between one's soul and God will be effected."

[12] Liqqutei Yeqarim (Lemberg, 1865), p. 12b.

"When one attains the level of ... gazing at ayin, one's intellect is annihilated.... Afterwards, when one returns to the intellect, it is filled with emanation."[13] The creative pool of nothingness is described as the "preconscious" (gadmut ha-sekhel), that which precedes, surpasses and inspires both language and thought.

The mystic is expected to trace each thought, word and material object back to its source in ayin. The world no longer appears as essentially distinct from God. "This is the foundation of the entire Torah: that yesh [the apparent "somethingness" of the world] be annihilated into ayin.... The purpose of the creation of the worlds from ayin to yesh was that they be transformed from yesh to ayin." This transformation is realized through contemplative action. "In everything they do, even physical acts such as eating, the righteous raise the holy sparks, from food or any other object. They thus transform yesh into ayin."[14]

This mystical perspective is not nihilistic. Matter is not destroyed or negated but rather enlivened and revitalized. The awareness that divine energy underlies material existence increases the flow from the source (ayin) to its manifestation (yesh).

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13 Dov Baer, Maggid Devarav le-Ya'agov, p. 224; Levi Yitzhak, Qedushat Levi (Jerusalem, 1972), p. 71d.

14 Shneur Zalman of Lyady, Torah Or, Noah, p. 11a; Va-Yeze, p. 22b; Dov Baer, Maggid Devarav le-Ya'agov, p. 24.

> When one gazes at an object, one brings blessing to it. For through contemplation, one knows that it is really absolutely nothing without divinity permeating it. By means of this awareness, one draws greater vitality to that object from the divine source of life, since one binds that thing to absolute ayin, the origin of all.... On the other hand, if one looks at that object as a separate thing, by one's look, that thing is cut off from its divine root and vitality.[15]

World, mind and self dissolve momentarily in ayin and then reemerge. Every object, every thought is revealed as an epiphany of ayin. Yet ayin is not the goal in itself; it is the moment of transformation from being through nonbeing to new being. The Maggid conveys this thought with the image of a seed that disintegrates before sprouting, an image familiar to us from the New Testament and the Koran. Annihilation is a natural process engendering fresh life.

Ayin is the root of all things, and "when one brings anything to its root, one can transform it.... First [each thing] must arrive at the level of ayin; only then can it become something else."[16] Nothingness embraces all potentiality. Every birth and rebirth must navigate the depths of ayin. As long as the human ego refuses to acknowledge its source, to participate in the divine, it is mistaking its part for the all. When this apparently separate self is ayinized, the effect is not total extinction but the emergence of a new

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[15] Dov Baer, Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov, pp. 124-25.

[16] Dov Baer, Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov, pp. 49, 134.

form, a more perfectly human image of the divine. "Only when one's existence is nullified ... is one called 'human.'"[17]

We have traced the concept of ayin from its roots in Neoplatonic mysticism through Kabbalah and into Hasidism. It is now time to examine two parallels: the Nichts of Meister Eckhart and sunyata in Mahayana Buddhism. Eckhart was perhaps the most daring Christian mystic. Given his Neoplatonic context, it is no wonder that we find striking parallels between his teaching and that of the Jewish mystics. Mahayana confronts us with the elusive emptiness of the East, a distinct variety of nothingness.

Meister Johannes Eckhart, who lived from approximately 1260-1327, was a Dominican. His teachers in Germany selected him to teach and represent the Dominican order at the University of Paris, a position held a few decades earlier by Thomas Aquinas. Eckhart went on to hold a number of administrative Dominican positions. He wrote scholarly tracts in Latin, spoke passionately in convents and monasteries, and became one of the most famous preachers of his time, urging his listeners to seek the divine spark within the soul. In 1329, following Eckhart's death, Pope John XXII condemned twenty-eight of his propositions as heretical or dangerous.

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[17] Dov Baer, Maggid Devarav le-Ya'agov, p. 39.

Eckhart speaks of nothingness in two different senses. At times he emphasizes the nothingness of creatures as opposed to the being of God. On other occasions he speaks of transcendent divine nothingness. Thus, depending on the context, Eckhart's nothingness has either a positive or negative connotation.

One of Eckhart's teachings on creaturely nothingness was condemned as suspect of heresy:

> All creatures are a pure nothing. I do not just say that they are insignificant or are only a little something: They are a pure nothing. Whatever has no being, is not. Creatures have no being because their being depends on God's presence. If God were to turn away from creatures for an instant, they would turn to nothing.[18]

For Eckhart the dependence on God is total; creatures possess all their being in the divine being. Since, in his words, "God alone, properly speaking, exists," Eckhart feels justified in insisting on "the nothingness of creatures in themselves in relation to God" (LW 1:132; 2:290).

The purely negative aspect of nothingness is unambiguous in passages such as these. A mystical dimension emerges in Eckhart's preaching on detachment (Abegescheidenheit). Nothingness now becomes the goal of the spiritual life. "What is the object of this pure detachment? My answer is that

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[18] Meister Eckhart, German sermon 4, in Josef Quint et al., eds., Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke, Deutschen Werke 1:60-74 (hereafter cited as DW and LW). See Bernard McGinn, ed., Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher, p. 250. The first two sentences became article 26 of the papal bull "In agro dominico," condemned as suspect of heresy.

neither this nor that is the object of pure detachment. It reposes in a naked nothingness." By abiding in nothingness, one opens up to the transcendent. "In this there is the greatest potentiality,... [and] receptivity.... If God is to make anything in you or with you, you must first have become nothing."[19]

The attainment of nothingness makes room for all that is.

> If you could annihilate yourself just for an instant or even less than an instant, all that is in itself would be yours. But as long as in some way your mind is on yourself or on any other object, you know no more of God than my mouth knows about color or my eye about taste: so little do you know and discern of what God is. (DW 2:66)

Eckhart enjoys playing with the two different senses of nothingness. In order to assimilate to God one must become nothing, but this is impossible if one is still encumbered by creaturely nothingness.

> Since it is God's nature not to be like any one, we must come to the point that we are nothing so that we may be transported into the identical being that he is himself. When I come to the point that I form myself into nothing and form nothing into myself,... then I can be transported into the naked being of God.... Consider what deficiency is. It comes from nothing. Therefore, whatever there is of nothing in

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[19] "On Detachment," in Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, eds., Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons etc., pp. 291-92 (hereafter cited as Essential Eckhart); German sermon 39, in Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher, p. 297. Cf. p. 287: "Whoever wants to be this or that wants to be something, but detachment wants to be nothing." In a different context Eckhart exploits the erotic connotations of nakedness: "The greater the nakedness, the greater the union" (The Book of the Parables of Genesis, in Essential Eckhart, p. 105).

> a person must be eradicated. As long as there is deficiency in you, you are not the Son of God.[20]

The theme of the birth of the Son of God in the human soul has a long history in Christian spirituality, but Eckhart's radical formulations incensed his opponents, for he stressed the identity of sonship between the good person and Christ. Five articles in the papal bull cite statements advancing this claim and condemn them as either heretical or suspect of heresy. Even more radical is Eckhart's notion of breaking through (durchbrechen) to the God beyond God.

> [The spark of the soul] wants to know where this divine being comes from. It wants to penetrate to the simple ground, the silent desert ... where there is neither Father, nor Son, nor Holy Spirit.[21]

There is a divine reality more transcendent than the Trinity, and it is here, in the hidden Gotheit, that the soul discovers its true ground.

> When [the soul] sees God as he is God or as he is form or as he is three, there is something inadequate present in it; but when all forms are detached from the soul and she gazes only upon the One alone, then the pure being of the soul finds that it bears hidden in itself the pure formless being of divine unity that is being beyond being.[22]

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[20] German sermon 76, in Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher, p. 329; cf. Reiner Schürmann, Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosoher, pp. 134, 167-68.

[21] DW 1:252; see McGinn, "The God beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart," The Journal of Religion 61 (1981): 12.

[22] DW 3:437-38; see McGinn, "The God beyond God," p. 3.

The name "God" is what we use to signify the relationship of the divine to the world, the aspect of the transcendent that can be known by our mind. Gotheit refers to the divine as it is in itself, prior to its being named or known, prior to any attributes or any duality of Creator and creation. The traditional concept of God is so inadequate that Eckhart is moved to invent a rather scandalous prayer:

> Before there were any creatures, God was not God, but he was what he was.... Now I say that God, so far as he is God, is not the perfect end of created beings.... So therefore we beg God to rid us of God so that we may grasp and rejoice in that everlasting truth in which the highest angel and the fly and the soul are equal.... I pray to God that he rid me of God, for my real being is above God.[23]

Eckhart reaches new heights or, from the perspective of his critics, new depths, in his extreme version of negative theology. In his vernacular sermons he speaks passionately, recklessly, about the God beyond God:

> God is nameless, because no one can say anything or understand anything about him.... So if I say: "God is good," that is not true. I am good, but God is not good. I can even say: "I am better than God".... And if I say, "God is wise," that is not true. I am wiser than he. If I say: "God is being," it is not true; he is a being transcending being and a transcending nothingess.... If you love God as he is God, as he is spirit, as he is person and as he is image - all this must go! "Then how should I love him?" You should love him as he is a non-God, a nonspirit, a nonperson, a nonimage, but as he is a pure, unmixed, bright "One," separated from all

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[23] German sermon 52, in Essential Eckhart, pp. 199-203; Schürmann, Meister Eckhart, pp. 214-220.

> duality. In that One we should eternally sink down, out of something into nothing.[24]

The parallels between Eckhart's formulations and those of Jewish mysticism are obvious. There is no evidence that Eckhart had any direct knowledge of Kabbalah, but he and the Jewish mystics share a common Neoplatonic heritage. As we have noted, some of the early kabbalists were probably indebted to John Scotus Erigena. Plotinus had a powerful impact on Kabbalah, as he did on all western medieval thought. Eckhart drew on Pseudo-Dionysius, and, like the kabbalists, he was influenced by Maimonides' negative theology.[25] In fact, Eckhart was more familiar with Maimonides, and more sympathetic to his views, than was any other Christian author.

Eckhart's teaching on nothingness combines features that appear separately in Kabbalah and Hasidism. We have seen, for example, that Kabbalah emphasizes the theosophical dimension of ayin. The experiential component is there, but to discover it one must scratch the surface, dig beneath the symbol. In Hasidism the experiential and psychological aspects are overt

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[24] German sermon 83, in Essential Eckhart, pp. 206-208.

[25] On Eckhart and Maimonides see Josef Koch, "Meister Eckhart und die jüdische Religionsphilosophie des Mittelalters," Jahres-Bericht des Schlesischen Gesellschaft 101 (1928): 134-48; H. Liebeshcütz, "Meister Eckhart und Moses Maimonides," Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 54 (1972): 64-96; Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher, pp. 17-25.

and primary. In Eckhart, nothingness is both an attribute of Gotheit and the goal of the spiritual life. The experiential dimension is prominent. Of course, Eckhart paid the price for his radical formulations and impassioned preaching. So did the Hasidim, who were excommunicated by various rabbinical authorities, whereas the kabbalists were more circumspect and reticent, less eager to proclaim and celebrate their discovery of the divine within.

Eckhart and the kabbalists would agree that Nothingness with a capital "N" pertains to the hidden nature of God, while the personal features of divinity, namely, the Trinity or the lower sefirot, represent a later stage. According to both Eckhart and the Kabbalah, the personal God we normally speak of is born out of nothing, a pregnant nothingness.

Eckhart and the Hasidic Maggid would agree that creatures are absolutely nothing without divinity permeating them. Creatures have no independent existence. Both mystics urge that we leave somethingness behind and venture into nothingness. This nothingness has a positive dimension, for only by becoming nothing, can one become a vessel of the divine. We have heard the Maggid say this. Eckhart's version demonstrates both his affinity with the Maggid and his distinctive style: One "who has annihilated himself ... has

taken possession of the lowest place, and God must pour the whole of himself into this person, or else he is not God."[26]

Eckhart has a penchant for radical formulations. The Kabbalah is daring, the Maggid is extreme, but only Eckhart could say, "God must do this or else he is not God." Only Eckhart could say that, since God is beyond all designations, he, Eckhart, is better than God. Only Eckhart could pray "that God rid me of God."

This is a difference in style and temperament. Of course, there is another difference, too. The path to Nichts and the path to ayin are distinct. Even if Eckhart speaks of a dimension of God beyond the Trinity, Christology is vital to him; he yearns to participate in the sonship of God. His radical formulations of this sonship highlight and enrich his own faith. For the Maggid, it is Torah, Jewish prayer and mizvot that lead ultimately to ayin. The symbol system of the sefirot serves to transform ritual and law into mystical practice, but the everyday structures of Jewish life are thereby enhanced, not abandoned. As each mystic surfaces from the depths of nothingness, as each mystic comes up for air, he inhales his own tradition. The yearning for ayin or Nichts is inspired by the particular even as it aims for the universal.

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[26] German sermon 48, in Essential Eckhart, p. 197.

Still, Nichts and ayin are quite similar. The Buddhist term sunyata, usually translated as "emptiness," offers an intriguing parallel, but the Eastern and Western varieties of mystical nothingness should be carefully distinguished. If we can resist the temptation to equate them, we will gain a clearer understanding of each one.

Sunyata has been called "the pivotal concept of Buddhism."[27] Buddhist meditation aims at uncovering the true nature of reality, which is empty. This emptiness means that nothing exists in and of itself but only in relation to other "things," which are themselves interrelated and thus empty of independent existence. There is no such thing as self-substantiated reality.

The word sunyata derives from the root svi, "to swell." The adjective sunya means "relating to the swollen." Something that looks swollen from the outside may be empty or hollow inside.[28] According to Buddhism the human personality is swollen by its constituent elements but is devoid of a central self. This anatta, or "not-self," doctrine is the basis for the teaching of sunyata. Not only the self but all existence is sunya, "swollen" or "empty." This statement is not nihilistic, not a denial of reality, but a denial of how we

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[27] T.R.V. Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Madhyamika System, p. 58.

[28] Edward Conze, Buddhism: Its Essence and Development, p. 130.

perceive reality, a way to free reality of artificial conceptual restrictions. The practice of perceiving existence in an empty manner becomes a technique to alleviate suffering. The Buddhist learns not to become attached to any material object or any mental construct, to any mundane or ultimate thing.

The term sunya appears in early Buddhist writings, but it was Mahayana Buddhism that emphasized emptiness as the nature of all existing things. The Mahayanists claimed that their teaching of sunyata conveyed the deepest meaning of the doctrine of the Buddha. In effect, Mahayana sharpened an old tendency that had taught ephemerality. The new formulation could lead to fear, cynicism or nihilism, but emptiness implies the complete interrelatedness of all things. The notion of emptiness is tied to compassion for all living beings. The Bodhisattva, who has realized the empty nature of reality, could withdraw from the world and enter nirvana. His compassion, however, prevents him from immediately taking this step. Halting on the threshold of nirvana, he postpones his entry and devotes himself to the welfare of others. He learns to engage the conditioned world without being tainted by its evil and delusion.

Within Mahayana it was the Madhyamika school that offered the most radical formulation of sunyata. Nagarjuna, who lived in the late second century, is regarded as the founder of

Madhyamika. He links sunyata with the notion of "dependent origination." In earlier Buddhism this meant simply that all things depend on causes and conditions for their origin. Nagarguna insists that "what is produced by causes is not produced in itself and does not exist in itself." Through meditation one discovers the radical emptiness and relativity of all things. The self-existence of each phenomenon dissolves into the conditions of its happening. "Whenever existing things exist by nature of their interdependence, this is sunyata;... they lack self-existence." The content of things belongs to the interplay of innumerable factors, which are also interdependent and empty.[29]

Of course there is a danger that emptiness itself will emerge as the one permanent "thing" or the absolute concept. Nagarjuna and his followers are sensitive to this. They insist that "sunyata is the antidote for all theories. One who mistakes sunyata itself as a theory is incurable."[30] Although sunyata is the object of highest knowledge and accounts for the

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[29] Nagarjuna, Vigraha-vyavartani, v. 22; see Frederick J. Streng, Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning, p. 143; Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, pp. 240-41.

[30] See Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, pp. 163-64. Cf. the commentary cited by Richard H. Robinson, Early Madhyamika in India and China, p. 277: "The Great Saint declared emptiness in order to demolish the sixty-two views and all the passions such as ignorance and craving. If one again conceives views about emptiness, this one cannot be reformed. It is like someone who has an illness that can be cured if a medicine is taken. But if the medicine in turn causes illness, then this cannot be cured."

possibility of the conditioned world, it too does not exist ultimately as a separate entity. This is the realization of the "emptiness of emptiness," sunyata-sunyata.[31] Sunyata itself must not cherised, must not become an attachment. It is the very nature of things, not another thing. If it is set up as something, it is "the emptiness perversely clung to." Later Chinese Buddhists taught that the concept of emptiness is like a fish-trap, to be abandoned when the fish of insight is obtained.[32]

Sunyata does not nullify things or make them disappear; it shows that their true nature is devoid of essence. The real is not denied, only doctrines about the real. The intuition of emptiness reveals the infinite relatedness of all that is, the "suchness" of reality, which is beyond all categories of thought, all designations. By destroying the definitions of things and their illusory self-existence, sunyata makes everything possible, including change. It is precisely because things lack selfhood that they are dynamic and full of possibilities. "When sunyata works, then everything in

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[31] See Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, p. 243; cf. Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, pp. 352-53.

[32] Robinson, Early Madhyamika in India and China, pp. 158, 208, 300-301. Cf. Chuang Tzu, chap. 26: "Fishing-stakes are employed to catch fish; but when the fish are caught, the people forget the stakes."

existence works; if sunyata does not work, then all existence does not work."[33]

Thus despite the claims of Nagarjuna's opponents, his teaching is not nihilistic. But one should not assume that Nagarjuna's sunyata is some positive substance, an undifferentiated essence that lies behind every particular manifestation. Here we find the subtle but crucial difference between Eastern and Western mystical nothingness. Eckhart, the Maggid and Nagarjuna all agree that the ego and creation have no independent existence. But what lies behind the façade? What is the ultimate nature of reality? Western mystics speak in terms of substance, even when their language is negative. Buddhists speak of relation.

Ayin, for example, is absolute, divine essence, devoid of every attribute but more "something" than all somethings, enlivening all that is. In the words of one kabbalist, "Ayin is the essence, the essence of all."[34] It is the undifferentiated ground of being, pure potentiality. It alone is self-existent. In the West, even among the mystics, the category of substance is definitive. For Nagarguna, reality cannot be conceived of as substance or essence. There is nothing which is in itself. Everything that is, is in relation

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[33] Nagarjuna, Mulamadhyamaka-Karikas 24:14.

[34] Joseph Gikatilla, Sha'arei Zedeq (ed. Efraim Gottlieb, in Mehqarim be-Sifrut ha-Qabbalah), p. 140.

to something else, coming to pass out of relation and dissolving into relation. This universal relation too is not any subsistent thing but rather a dynamic process. Sunyata is not some mysterious reality but the dissipation of the mystery, the realization that existence is without an ultimate ground. Nagarjuna hardly ever speaks of emptiness per se, but rather the emptiness of something. Sunyata is not an absolute essence beyond the phenomenal world; it eliminates the desire for such an essence.

It is true that later, in Chinese Buddhism, sunyata is endowed with a more substantial character. Here the Mahayana tradition was interpreted according to indigenous Taoism, which teaches that nonbeing is the source of being. In the words of the Tao Te Ching: "Heaven and Earth and the ten thousand things are produced from Being; Being is the product of Nonbeing."[35] Here the basic principle of the universe is unnameable, beyond existence, yet all-embracing. Seen in this light, sunyata was understood as the primordial nothingness from which the myriad entities arise. It was now said that all things emerge from emptiness and return to it.[36] This certainly brings sunyata into closer accord with Western mystical nothingness, but it is not what Nagarjuna intended.

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[35] Tao Te Ching, chapter 40.

[36] See Robinson, Early Madhyamika in India and China, pp. 113-14; 157; 312, n. 11; Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, p. 61.

Nichts and ayin stand for divine essence. For Nagarguna, sunyata can be no such thing because since there is no substance, there is also no divine essence. Buddhism is not atheistic, but it obviously does not share the Western notion of God. According to the Buddhist scriptures, one must not say that God exists nor that God does not exist. In its popular forms, the Buddha is deified, but Buddhism was not originally concerned with the idea of a personal God or the creator of the universe. The universe is without beginning or end. If ultimate reality is called "He" or "She" or "Thou," it is, from the Buddhist point of view, no longer ultimate. The path to enlightenment does not allow for attachment to forms, even sublime ones. We have heard similar warnings from Western mystics, but the stark command of the Zen master goes one step further: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him."[37]

In Buddhist meditation there is no sense of union with the divine One or any One, no reference to merging or melting into something greater. Mystical union presupposes God's being as an object to be united with, but here there is no divine substance or being. Loss of self comes about not through absorption into something but through an emptying of what seemed to be real.[38]

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[37] Rinzairoku; see Heinrich Dumoulin, Zen Enlightenment, p. 64.

[38] Streng, Emptiness, p. 165.

Sunyata is not an epithet of divine reality. It simply points to the true nature of things: their interdependence, coorigination and lack of selfhood. Sunyata awakens awareness of the relativity of all concepts, words and objects in order to undermine and overcome our grasping, to cure the human addiction to delusion. The goal is not to unite with the source of things but to become free of the attachments and the egoism that create our suffering.

Scholars such as Steven Katz and Wayne Proudfoot have argued that religious experience does not transcend concepts, doctrines and beliefs, but rather depends on them. It is because of the unique context of each tradition that we find different meanings, formulations and experiences of nothingness. As we explore each particular context, we gain an appreciation for the varieties of nothingness. Vive la difference! However, the distinctions should not blind us to the common features. The Mahayana Buddhist parts company with Jewish and Christian mystics over the nature of God and substance, but all three revel in negative language. In the East it is natural to approach ultimate reality by means of negation. Already in the Hindu Upanishads we read that the highest principle can be expressed only as neti, neti, "not this, not this."[39] In Western thought, negative theology was a

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[39] Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 4:5:15.

bold innovation, since there was always a strong emphasis on the fullness of being. It comes as no surprise that in Jewish and Christian thought God is called "nothingness" only rarely, whereas sunyata is central to Buddhism.

Paradox, also, is shared by the varieties of nothingness. Through paradox, the mystic announces the discovery of a vast, uncharted realm where language and conceptual thought falter. One who dares to participate in this dimension must cultivate an appreciation of paradox and learn to unlearn the normal workings of consciousness. The Western mystic insists that by becoming nothing, one takes part in the all. Divine nothingness is the source of everything, the God beyond God. According to Buddhism, sunyata is not only empty itself but equivalent to form: "Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form."[40] The kabbalistic parallel is the realization that "ayin is yesh, and yesh is ayin."[41] The something is potentially in the nothing, and nothingness animates the something.

Through negative language and paradox, these three traditions are trying to tell us that we usually misunderstand and misrepresent reality. We do not know the true nature of things. Modern science advances a similar critique. The

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40 Nagarjuna, Mulamadhyamaka-Karikas 25:19; Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra; cf. Streng, Emptiness, pp. 69-81.

41 Azriel, Derekh ha-Emunah ve-Derekh ha-Kefirah, ed. Scholem, "Seridim Hadashim," p. 207.

interchangeability of mass and energy boggles the conventional mind. As one physicist has said, "We should not say that matter exists, but rather that matter tends to exist." The scientist James Trefil has recently written, "We don't know what makes up 90 per cent of the universe, but we do know it's not something we've ever seen before."[42] Nagarjuna, Eckhart and the Maggid all teach that we are blind to the dynamic nature of reality; we falsely believe that things are self-contained, static and independent. But ayin, Nichts and sunyata are not merely alternate theories or concepts; they are means of self-transformation. One who ventures in must be prepared to surrender images of self. Eckhart and the Maggid emphasize the immediate experience of nothingness. Zen Buddhism insists that one must "become emptiness."

How hard it is to become nothing! There is irony and paradox here, and also a bit of humor. The ego does not surrender so easily. Proudly, it tries to lay claim even to nothingness. Let me illustrate this, and close, with an old Jewish joke. The setting is a crowded synagogue on Yom Kippur. The rabbi, moved to spontaneous prayer, walks up to the ark. Facing the scrolls of the Torah, he pours out his heart to God. "Lord, I am not worthy! In my heart I know that I am nothing." The cantor listens to the rabbi's words and joins him at the ark. He declares: "Lord, even though I have led your children

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[42] James Trefil, The Dark Side of the Universe (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1988).

today in fervent prayer, in beautiful melody, I know that I am really nothing." Then a simple Jew, who has been praying with devotion all day, stands up in the middle of synagogue and cries out, "Lord, I just want to let you know that I am nothing." The cantor leans over to the rabbi and whispers, "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

GTU
Lecture 88/9
Dan Matt

research and teaching of our consortial faculty, and tonight is a very special occasion in this series, for our lecturer is Dan Matt, an oustanding faculty member in the Center for Jewish Studies of the GTU.

Dan received his BA., M.A, and PH. D. from Brandeis, with a specialization in Jewish mysticism. He had the opportunity in graduate school to study and work with Gershom Scholem, one of the leading figures in introducing the Kabbalistic tradition to the academic world. Dann taught at the University of Texas at Austin before coming to the TU in 1979.

Dan has published two books, The Book of Mirrors: Sefer Mar'ot ha-Zoveot in 1982, and Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment in 1984. He has published a number of articles, and given lectures both in this country and at international conferences. His work is well-known and highly respected in the field of Jewish mysticism.

Dan's contributions, however, reach far beyond his scholarly specialization. He has additional qualities and attributes which have made him a valuable member of our community.

Dan is a gifted teacher, and he has used these gifts in various courses and programs for the broader Jewish community in the Bay Area, in courses cross-listed with UCB, and in courses at the GTU designed primarily for M.Div. students. "Jesus as a Jew," a course designed by him and taught by him and other members of the Center is famous beyond the boundaries of Berkeley as a course which represents the richness and genius of the GTU approach to theological education. In the tradition of the GTU, Dan is both an articulate scholar of his tradition and a gifted ecumenist; he is open and committed to exploring across religious boundaries the vital issues facing our society today.

In his teaching and his work on student committees---in areas of spirituality and comparative studies as well as in Judaica per se---his work, his teaching, and his person are an embodiment of the GTU educational ideal. It is with great pleasure that I present to you Professor Dan Matt.

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