

Transcendence in a culture of immanent mysticism: a perspective from Western Europe

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Approaching transcendence

Many people in Western Europe are fascinated by the work of the Persian poet and mystic Jalâl al-Din Rumi (1207-1273). Therefore I want to start my first section with some lines of his poem “A thief in the night”. “Suddenly/yet somehow unexpected/he arrived/the guest/the heart trembling/‘Who’s there?’/and soul responding/‘The Moon’/came into the house/and we lunatics/ran into the street/stared up/looking/for the moon.”²

According to ancient tradition ‘the unattainable’ that is hailed with words like ‘God’, ‘the holy’ and ‘the Moon’ is inaccessible to reason – yet it addresses questions to our minds. It is inaccessible to celebratory ritual – yet it continually compels people to ritualise life. It is inaccessible to our ethics – yet it orients our actions that are looking for good and evil. With the aid of references to forms of logic, ritual and ethics it may be possible to say what the unattainability of the unattainable consists in.

The unattainable requires that theology starts with a ‘trans/location’ (*dé/placement*),³ a trans/location of theology to a world in which ‘the magic of night’ prevails, in which ‘the unattainable’ is artistically depicted in mystical, impassioned forms.

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² Helminski, K. (2005), *The Rumi collection. An Anthology of Mevlâna Jalâluddin Rumi*, Shambala, Boston&London, 224.

³ Originally this French term, which naturally refers to the classical concept of *locus theologicus*, indicated the notion that foundational theological questions about the premise, orientation, tasks and expectations of religious reflection have changed drastically, because the functions of religion in society are changing. (Cf. Bellet, M 1972, *Le déplacement de la religion. Recherche sur la région réelle de la foi chrétienne* Paris:Desclée de Brouwer; Küng, H. & Tracey, D. (Hrsg) 1986, *Das neue Paradigma von Theologie. Strukturen und Dimensionen*, Zürich: Benzinger Verlag (etc.) /Gütersloh: Mohn.) Here I use the term in the sense of ‘mapping religion’: “The production of religious meaning and value in terms of how the creators and practicers of several traditions, including artists, theorists, and activists, have employed religious symbols, myths, rituals, and disciplines as strategies to empower self and others in the name of higher values or causes.” Cf. Cooley, P.M (1994), *Religious imagination and the body. A feminist analysis* Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 109.

‘The magic of night’ refers to an article of Roland Penrose about the Catalan artist Joan Miró (1893-1983). He used to attach titles to his works, as many artists do. Miró’s titles took the form of texts, which often tended to be of a mystical, passionate nature. Thus a painting from 1938 is inscribed, “*Une étoile carresse le sein d’une négresse*”. In his article “The magic of night”⁴ Roland Penrose wrote that Miró had a love for the unattainable, an inclination to mystical marriage with the stars. This is expressed in his preoccupation with the darkness of night in his paintings. In Miró’s work this is an artistic portrayal of spiritual freedom, with all the ambiguity and contrasts that entails. Miró’s night, says Penrose, is a metaphor for our daylight reality. Miró’s world is one in which one perceives the spectacles of twinkling stars in the darkness of night. It is a world in which birds and shooting stars encircle a woman in the dark of night; in which dewdrops fall from a bird’s wing. In this world a ladder of escape reaches into the depths of night and a woman with tangled hair welcomes the rising moon. We witness the passage of the divine bird and a dog barking at the moon.

Why start my reflection about transcendence against the background of Miró’s graphic world? This is because there is a twofold basis to Miró’s portrayal of reality. He portrays the infinity of realities, but more especially he portrays an infinity fraught with contrasts. The concept of transcendence is characterised by this twofold perception of our reality.

‘The magic of night’ is evoked in a context marked more than ever before by an infinity in which innumerable human beings are living in horror camps and cease becoming.⁵ I borrow the expression from the Jewish writer Abel Herzberg (1893-1989). It signifies that all our hopes of ‘growth’ and ‘development’ are sucked into a vortex in which nothing remains of anything that ever lived or existed. At the same time the ‘magic of night’ in Miró’s graphic world is graceful and erotic, like a star caressing the breast of a black woman. It is the infinity of a ladder, depicted in his work, disappearing into the depths of night.

Yet the ladder disappearing into the infinite depths of night differs from the one we read about in the book of Genesis, Jacob’s ladder (Gn. 28:12). That ladder reached down from heaven and rested on the earth. God’s angels were ascending and descending on it. It connects earth with heaven where the One dwells, the world of a Godhead characterised by justice and mercy. Miró’s ladder rises from our world and disappears into ‘nothingness’. Heaven is (as yet?) empty. And everywhere stars are sparkling – not a ‘*splendor veritatis*’ (sparkle of truth) (Thomas Aquinas) but a sparkling void.

⁴ In: San Lazzaro, G. di (1976) *Homage to Joan Miró*, London: Ebeling, 40-41 (orig. Paris 1972).

⁵ Cf. Hoogen, T. van den (1989), Over de strijd om het bestaan. Aanzetten tot een verbondstheologie, in: *Sleutelen aan het verbond*, Boxtel/Brugge: KBS/Tabor, 99-124, esp. 113.

What is clarified by Miró's portrayal of reality about transcendence and its role in religion?

By *religion* I mean a theoretical and practical system of exchanging meanings in a concrete (sub)culture that has to do with the original and ultimate *survival* of humankind and the world, the dynamics of the historical (*geschichtliche*) state and existence of people *in* the world, and the *desired optimal life* of humankind and the world. By means of such systems of meaning people express their conceptions and expectations of *touching God and being touched by God* in concrete forms of religion. I regard such conceptions and expectations of the touch of God as aspects of spirituality and mysticism in a concrete religion. Religion is about survival, about history and about being touched by God, by human beings. Religion is about being and expresses, discovers and fights about the human being in this threefold dimension. Therefore, and in that threefold sense, religion is about transcendence.

An example of a religious text which deals with transcendence is Exodus 3:1-14. The transcendent reality happens when Moses is called by name from the burning bush, and when on that holy ground the Holy One reveals his name.⁶ The text is about survival, as the name promises exodus and redemption. It is about history as the name promises future. And it is about being touched as the name sounds.

I would like to remember at the end of this section the words of Rumi. "Suddenly/yet somehow unexpected/he arrived/the guest/the heart trembling/'Who's there?'/and soul responding/'The Moon'/came into the house/and we lunatics/ran into the street/stared up/looking/for the moon". Why shouldn't we remember Moses as a lunatic, crying 'who's there?', staring up to the burning bush, captured by this weird and wonderful sound 'I am who I will be'.

Immanent mysticism

The term 'immanent mysticism' may easily be misconstrued, hence I need to explain it. First I want to stress what it does *not* mean. I do *not* see immanent mysticism as a 'glorification' of our immediate reality, an interpretation of our world that is totally confined to our everyday life. Neither does it mean resigning ourselves to that reality. Miró's ladder offers an escape from disgust with the world around us and portrays escape from the dominance of violence. Immanent mysticism likewise fosters the desire to escape from lies, a desire kept alive by the enticement of truth and radiant humaneness; there is

⁶ Cf. Hoogen, T. van den (1994). Duister licht. Het verlangen naar God en de mystiek van Nietzsche (Dark light. The yearning for God and Nietzsche's mysticism), in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, 34, 385-407.

a desire to make the field dance (following one of Miró's titles), to transcend everyday reality and transform it into a world where 'normal' contrasts between dark and light, heavy and light, here and there are broken down and the world is mobilised in a 'magical' – hence ecstatic and enticing – way.

There is another possible misconstruction deriving from the (recent) history of systematic theology, in which forceful arguments were adduced *against* the theological use of the term 'immanence'. The Dutch Reformed theologian Hendrik Berkhof writes: "God does not only stand *above* the world, he also *dwells in* it. He does so both in his so-called 'general revelation' [...] and in his omnipresence [...]." That is why immanence is seen as distinct from transcendence. "But this static concept [immanence – TvdH] is even more philosophically loaded than 'transcendence'. An accent on it often leads in the direction of pantheism. 'Condensation' is a better term, also for God's sustaining and provident activity among us [...]." ⁷ Hence the 'loading' that the concept of immanence entails for theology consists in its static character and the concomitant 'pantheism'.

Berkhof's problem with the alleged static character of the concept of immanence has to do with his notion that theology should bow to the dictates of Scripture. In his view the biblical substance of the concept of revelation is informed by the notion of a covenant between the One (God) and everything that constitutes our reality. This connection between the One and our reality includes all living beings, particularly humans. The connection should be interpreted as dynamic and relational. Up to this point I fully agree with Berkhof. But according to him the philosophical concept of immanence is but a pale reflection of the relationality that the Other maintains faithfully and eternally.

Berkhof belongs to the tradition of dialectical theology, propounded pre-eminently by Karl Barth, who likes to refer to God's divinity as loving in freedom (*der Liebende in der Freiheit*). He agrees with Barth that God's divinity is the event of a loving freedom in which we participate through his revelation. ⁸ This scripturally based reorientation of the doctrine of God enabled Barth to break free from the philosophical slant of 19th century theology, which focused firmly on German idealism; it proceeded from the religious subject and cherished a metaphysical ideal of knowledge. The Barthian breakthrough is still discernible in Berkhof's objection to the theological use of the concept of immanence in the doctrine of God. But the breakthrough did not lead to fresh reflection on revelation and the being of God, nor to a new debate between theology and philosophy, nor to a reappraisal of talk based on faith and talk based on (human) experience. To

⁷ Berkhof, H. (1985) *Christelijk geloof*, Nijkerk: Callenbach (5th revised edition), 113 (my italics – TvdH). (Our translation.)

⁸ See CD II-I,c.VI, §28.

Berkhof the philosophical concept of immanence refers only marginally, if at all, to loving and being loved, getting involved and being involved, bearing and being borne, in the manner conveyed by the scriptural message about God. That is why he follows Barth's breakthrough and proposes replacing the philosophical concept of immanence in theology with the concept of condensation.

So, the term 'immanent mysticism' may easily be misconstrued. I have to explain what I *do* mean by it. I do so with reference to the concept of natural contemplation (*natuerlijk scouwen*) of the Brabantine mystic *Jan van Ruusbroec* (1293-1381).⁹ I associate immanent mysticism with what Ruusbroec calls natural contemplation.

To Ruusbroec it denotes a mode of perception, in principle available to everybody and within the range of ordinary perceptual capabilities. In this respect natural contemplation can be compared with artistic contemplation. First I cite an example from Miró's oeuvre to show what is meant by artistic contemplation, whereupon I use that as a basis to explain the relevance of the concept of natural contemplation to my concept of immanent mysticism.

In 1928 Miró used the same genre painting by *Jan Steen* no fewer than three times to come to grips with his own – one could call it surrealist – portrayal of reality.¹⁰ The painting, executed by Steen in the third quarter of the 17th century, is entitled "The cat's dancing lesson" (*Dansles van de kat*) and is typical of this artist's work. Every observer can recognise the enacted situation it depicts and everyone can see what the graphic language of Steen, who was a pub keeper himself, is telling us about the world of his day. It shows some children standing round a table. One of them, an adolescent boy, is making a cat dance on the table. On the wall hangs a lute, the instrument that is played on by fingers (!). A girl – the most striking figure in the painting, her vividly coloured apparel standing out against a dark brown background – sits on the table with one buttock, playing (blowing!) a pipe. Another child tries to get the cat to smoke (!) a pipe. On the floor next to the table is a barking (aroused!) dog. Through a window high up in the wall an old man watches the scene with a grin.

Steen's picture contains a string of detailed meanings and references that told viewers in his society and culture that the picture is only ostensibly innocent and mischievous. In actual fact to the people of those days the cat, the dog, the pipe and the girl symbolised a thinly disguised erotic scene. That

⁹ For the translation of Ruusbroec's texts and concepts into English we use the glossary in Jan van Ruusbroec, *Opera Omnia* 10 (1991) (= Corpus Christianorum *Continuatio Mediaevalis* CX), De Baere, G. (ed. in chief), Tiel/Turnhou: Lannoo/Brepols. The spelling of Ruusbroec's name is also taken from this edition.

¹⁰ Cf. Weelen, G. (1989), *Miró*, New York: Abrams (orig. Nouvelles Editions Françaises, 1984), 82ff.

also explains the leering old man. It is as if Jan Steen is saying with unashamed satisfaction: see what happens when vice sneakily takes over in decent society.



Miró takes this genre painting as a basis for a series of works entitled “Dutch interior”. His reinterpretation of Steen’s picture ‘explodes’, as Weelen puts it, that amusing scene, in which people highlight, so to speak, the limits of the ‘Dutch’ order of reality by dallying jocularly and frivolously on its periphery. In Miró’s magic, recognisable fragments of Steen’s picture become flat planes, each in its own way engaged in a magic dance in vividly contrasting colours, a whirl of forms that retain not even a memory of Jan Steen’s human and animal protagonists. It seems, Weelen writes, as if Miró has unleashed a bunch of balloons, and – one might add – the entire room has been sucked in by them and now floats in endless space. Some forms are as if were pinned in place with long needles and end up a putrefied shape, which, in a later version of Miró’s “Dutch interior”, resembles a woman in labour, as Weelen points out.

Steen’s picture explicitly refers to the real world. It is packed with details that should be seen as comments on people’s (reprehensible) moral behaviour. In Miró’s picture, by contrast, this reference to the world outside the painting disappears; it has exploded. Miró paints an image, not what it represents. The image is heteronomous in relation to the viewer. It refers to itself.¹¹

In modern art the artwork contrasts with reality and is autonomous in relation to it: its position is determined by the formal aspects of the work, as Adorno puts it in his *Ästhetische Theorie*. The artwork does not portray reality but exists in its own right.¹² Hence there is no point of reference outside the work that permits a distinction between normal and extraordinary. The example of Miró’s “Dutch interior” shows that the self-reference is crucial for our understanding of what happens in an artwork. Its immanence lies in its autonomy (its heteronomy from the outside world), and in that immanence it encounters both maker and viewer as ‘a moment of being’, which in its own right questions empirical reality.

That’s the way I want to understand the concept of immanence. Immanence refers to the experience of a moment of being which in its own right questions reality.

I reinterpret Ruusbroec’s term ‘natural contemplation’ critically in this hermeneutic horizon, in which texts on natural contemplation are about normal, everyday experience.¹³ Natural contemplation is an ordinary form of perception for common people (*ghemeyne menschen*), as Ruusbroec would

¹¹ In modern aesthetics that also means that the reference of an image can only be reinterpreted creatively in a constantly resumed reception. In principle all participants in a given culture have access to each other’s interpretations of images and may join in the ‘discourse’ about these. Cf. Townsend, B. (1997), *An introduction to aesthetics*, Oxford: Blackwell.

¹² Cf. Adorno Th.W. (1970), *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp.

¹³ I should like to emphasise that at once, before turning to the – to him – intriguing distinction between natural contemplation and turning inward gracelessly (*sonder gracie inkeeren*).

put it. I read these texts in terms of their immanent autonomy: texts that encounter me as ‘moments of being’, making them question empirical reality in their own right.

The following example may clarify my reinterpretation. Talking about being, Ruusbroec uses *verbs* (‘turn inward’ and ‘cling to’) to refer to an unfathomable ground. Paul Mommaers, a specialist in the literature of Ruusbroeck, points out that Ruusbroeck’s word ‘*wesen*’ should preferably not be rendered with the word ‘essence’ (Dutch: *wezen*). ‘Wesen’ is a verb, *wezen* is a substantive. ‘Being’ is a better interpretation than essence of the state Ruusbroec has in mind.¹⁴ He defines this unfathomable being as ground (*gront*).

The ground that Ruusbroec has in mind is passionate and intensely personal, a source which overabundantly permeates humans as thinking, active beings and which is experienced by people enjoying themselves. Accordingly Ruusbroec defines this source – in the title of his first book (c. 1330) – as a ‘realm of lovers’ (*Dat rijcke der ghelieven*). According to Ruusbroeck, this realm of lovers, so our daily experience of being, is characterised by ‘touching’ the ground (*gherinen*) and ‘be touched’ (*gherenen werden*) by it. There is a passionate relation between myself and my ground. And, according to Ruusbroeck, that’s what people call ‘God’.

The living union that we feel is active and always renews itself between us and God. In that we mutually kiss and touch, we feel otherness that does not let us be quiet in ourselves. For though we are above reason, we are not without reason. And therefore we feel that we touch and are touched; love and are loved, and are always renewing and turning back into ourselves, going and becoming as the lightning of heaven. ... And therefore His touching and our hidden inner striving are the last intermediary between us and God, where we become united with him in mutual meeting of Love.¹⁵

¹⁴ Mommaers, P. (1995) The problem of the *I*, in: *Bijdragen* 56, 257, note 3.

¹⁵ *De levende eeninghe die wi met gode ghevoelen, die es werkelec ende vernuwet altoes tusschen ons ende gode. In dien dat wi underlinghe kussen ende gherinen, soe ghevoelen wi anderheit die ons niet ghedueren en laetd in ons selven. Want al sien wi boven redene, wi en sijn niet sonder redene. Ende hier omne ghevoelen wi dat wi gherinen ende gherenen werden, minnen ende ghemindt werden ende altoes vernuwen ende wederkeeren in ons selven, gaen ende komen alse de blixene des hemels. ...Ende hier omne es sijn gherinen ende onse verborghene, inneghe crighen dat leste middel tusschen ons ende gode, daer wi met heme vereeneghen in underlinghen ontmoete van minnen.* In: Jan van Ruusbroec, *Een spiegel der eeuwighe salicheit* (A mirror of eternal blessedness), Baere, G. de (1991), *Opera Omnia*, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis, CVIII, Tiel/Turnhout, Lannoo/Brepols, 1895-1907, p. 380-381.

This concept of mysticism do I have in mind. So, my main question is: what is immanent mysticism about, theologically speaking? Is this experience of a moment of being which in its own right questions reality, to be interpreted as a passionate relation between myself and my ground. And why should actual systematic theology follow Ruusbroeck by repeating: that's what people call 'God'?

Perspectives from actual Western culture

The third section will give some examples what kind of a new theological idiom is coming up outside and inside the theological academia.

My first example is a poem from the late, Dutch poet Gerard Reve (1923-2006) who is very well known in the Netherlands. He was a gay man and has written a poem entitled *A new paschal hymn*.

Not having drunk a drop, I glorify God.
Today I've seen everything.
Walking downtown,
thinking about Ultimate Things,
I saw a boy, probably a German tourist,
and I followed him, thinking to myself:
I'll have your ass, either that or
you have a go at me;
the main thing is to get down to it –
until he walked into the *Bijenkorf* and I,
giddy with lechery, bumping into people,
lost his scent.
Even so, I wasn't too dispirited to keep from praising You.
For incomprehensibly great are all Your works. ...
Then I saw Bet van Beeren sitting at a little white table
out in front of her café, slitting a mackerel
with a knife and fork to eat it in the sun.
'Look at that,' I thought. 'How beautifully made Nature is.'
(Think of all those stars with their light years.)
It made me want to take in an evening mass,
but there wasn't any to be had.¹⁶

In Gerard Reve's down-to-earth language, so deceptively familiar yet so Dionysian, homosexual love (Van der Wal's *herenliefde*) becomes a special

¹⁶ From: Clercq, H.de Wal & J.van der, Vervooren, Fr. (1993), *'Onbereikbaar maakt bemind'*. *Drie voordrachten naar aanleiding van het werk van Gerard Reve* [our translation], Amsterdam: Akrasia, p. 40.

experience, a source experience (a *locus theologicus*, in theological jargon) enabling him to speak about God in a way that is totally different from well known theological jargon. With a staunchly neo-classical Catholic sentiment – in itself a construction beyond all historical reality – he spills forth language about salvation, sin and guilt that runs through the physical Eros of homosexual love and leads to the dead and risen Lord. Thus ‘eros’ becomes ‘serious’ in a way that is sure to fascinate anyone interested in theology.

The poem illustrates that eros on temptation by no means inevitably leads to moralism. It speaks to us in language that tells us that being giddy with lechery and contemplating ultimate things belong to the same semantic field, as do eating a mackerel in the sun and stars with their light years – and that such semantic fields provide as it were a new idiom for praising God’s glory (*kabood Yahweh*).

The challenge of such a new idiom can also be demonstrated as follows. In recent years liturgical renewal and theological revitalisation in Europe have helped to trigger fresh reflection on human beings living in a secularised culture. Often this was couched on the lines of the classical adage of Irenaeus of Lyon († ±202), originally coined in the framework of his struggle against dualism and Gnosticism: *gloria Dei vivens homo* (God’s glory is living human beings). Throughout the texts of Vatican II, the great 20th century ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, it is taken to be an authentic formulation of an originally Christian, theological humanism. What stops that same humanism from speaking again in a new idiom in praise of God’s glory? There is something almost biblical (cf. Acts 2) about Reve’s insistence that he is not drunk. He is stressing that this is an ecstasy of quite a different kind. When his glance fell on the boy he entered a new reality. Haven’t Christians from the beginning extolled their ecstatic experience of a new world in new paschal hymns?

If Reve’s text is read in the context of his oeuvre as a whole, one realises that the idiom necessary to articulate such an experience has to come from a particular cultural setting. The inner city of Amsterdam, the *Bijenkorf* (one of the big department stores in the Netherlands), a German tourist at Easter, Bet van Beeren (a women pub-keeper) eating her mackerel outside her café – these are all signs pointing that way. These signs come to us, the readers of the poem, in an idiom from an un-Dutch combination of Dionysian and neo-classical Catholic sentiments, whose un-Dutch character will necessarily come across to Dutch readers as a *new* experience.

The second example is a weird sculpture of the German artist Jochen Gerz (1940), residing in France. When he was appointed as lecturer at the Saarbrücken art school in 1990 and thus returned regularly to his own country, he conceived of an unusual project that he was to work out with his students. In collaboration with Jewish communities in Germany, they under-

took a study of Jewish cemeteries in that country at the time of the rise of the Third Reich. Eventually they rubricated 2 160 by chiselling the name of each cemetery into an individual paving stone. These cobbles were not ordinary stones: they were surreptitiously removed from the paved area outside the Saarbrücken *Schlossplatz* and carved in the studio, whereafter they were returned to their original location, sculpted upside down. Thus 1993 saw the birth of an invisible monument and artwork entitled "*2 160 stones: monument against racism*" on the site outside the castle where the Gestapo once had its headquarters and where one of the cells, its walls inscribed by its inmates, was subsequently turned into a museum. Today the regional parliament of Saarland occupies the building.

What makes this artwork so extraordinary is partly the way it came about: young artists, many of whom had had no contact with Jews before, now went looking for them and invited them to collaborate on a monument against racism; their information was vital. In addition they operated illegally by purloining paving stones (theft), carving them (damage and vandalism) and then returning them. All the work was carried out at night, right under the noses of the police that guard the house of parliament round the clock. Thus gradually an invisible monument was created that is steeped in German history; that is unique because Jewish communities collaborated on it; that is as hidden as it is present; and that is unknown while constantly being walked upon. These are all hallmarks of the very part of German history which, in this remarkable way, is commemorated both surreptitiously and consciously.

The ambivalence of this work is similar to that of a fear of heights: attraction coupled with resistance, if not total avoidance. For the artists it was simply an exercise in social engagement that brought about an active confrontation with past and current realities. By specifying racism (and not just fascism) it also commemorates the extermination of gypsies, homosexuals and the disabled – who shared the same fate as the Jews under the Nazi regime – and draws attention to present-day racial discrimination. The project had a fresh impact once it became known: in the end parliament decided, by a small majority, to legalise the illegality of the artwork – the MPs found themselves in a thoroughly paradoxical situation – and the square became the site of an invisible monument.

The reminder is everywhere and nevertheless not sharply defined or explicated! Those walking across the square don't know when they are stepping on a stone bearing the inscription of a Jewish cemetery – but they are unavoidably stepping on such stones. It is as though the artwork can see them, targets them, watches them while they helplessly – indeed, pushed aside – have to let it happen to them. Inasmuch as the 'viewer' has not yet learnt or is still learning to deal with the past, walking there is a terrifying thought. Meanwhile the invisible artwork is teaching them to traverse this

territory, to live with that history. In that sense it is not an accusation; it is a summons to face up to themselves and their unsavoury past and to prevent them from ever relapsing into such dehumanising brutality. Through the artwork visitors are assailed in their more or less complacent identity.

In theology confrontation with such tests may be seen as an appeal for a post-metaphysical Christology. Here we turn to a fundamentally new orientation of theology once formulated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He engaged intensively in what he called '*Denken in zwei Räumen*' – thinking in two worlds.¹⁷ He regarded such an approach as part of a worldview commonly encountered in God concepts, but it also conveys a notion of the relation between God and the world that has come in for fierce criticism since Nietzsche's day. Bonhoeffer avers that it entails a dichotomy between a super-sensory world – the world of the deity that, strictly speaking, is to be regarded as the real world – and the sensory world, a purely illusory realm, a vale of tears in which one cannot really encounter God. Unlike many scholars who have worked with this dualistic conception, Bonhoeffer criticises it from a christological angle. According to him, the end of metaphysics did not come with Heidegger, nor with Nietzsche's philosophy in the late 19th century: the moment God became human it put paid to two separate worlds and only one reality remained – Christ. God was no longer outside the world and the world was not outside God. Bonhoeffer stressed that there are not two worlds but only one. The reality of God revealed in Christ is a reality within the reality of this world.¹⁸

When Bonhoeffer proclaims the end of the two-worlds approach in the name of Christology he is not describing something that has already happened, either in his day or, for that matter, in ours. It is a programmatic formula, a summons to actively put an end to dualism. For a Christian theologian the invocation of Christology may well be consistent, but it does not mean that Christology itself has been wholly stripped of dualism. If one takes Bonhoeffer's summons seriously – as I propose to do – one also has to strip Christology of dualism, all the more so because (according to Bonhoeffer at any rate) Christology offers the only premise for non-dualistic God-talk.

But theology has not only to leave this dichotomy. A next step has been elaborated by the French theologian Henri de Lubac (1896-1991). Already in 1945, he observed that theology can only enter into dialogue with the substantial part of the 'thinking elite' (sic!) by way of a '*dérive*', a detour, since 'people in the West are repudiating their Christian sources and turning away from God (*se détourne de Dieu*).¹⁹ To De Lubac, the truth of the

¹⁷ Cf. Sperna Weiland, J.(1970), *Het einde van de religie. Verder op het spoor van Bonhoeffer*, Baarn: Wereldvenster, 81-85.

¹⁸ Cf op. cit., 83. (our translation.)

¹⁹ Cf. Lubac, H. de, (1945) *Le drame de l'humanisme athée*, Paris :Spes (3. ed. rev. et corr.), 7.

Christian sources and the truth concerning God were not at issue, any more than they are to his sisters and brothers in theology half a century later. What is pertinent is his proposal about the strategy of theological research, its questioning strategy. De Lubac does not talk about a kind of 'pedagogy', a strategy that the revealed truth makes more understandable. His idea is to use a 'dérive' to discuss this truth itself, which in effect means inquiring into the input and structure of immanent mysticism and awareness of it as part of our ongoing human existence. He locates this awareness particularly in Nietzsche's work. This was the pivotal question in Lubac's analyses of theological reflection on the 'supernatural'. Compelled by the acute theological and doctrinal issues raised by his *Le surnaturel* (1946), he wrote an article (1949) and a book (1965),²⁰ in which he dwelt at length on the mystery of the supernatural. In his 1949 article, "Le mystère du surnaturel", he spells it out in detail. You can only approach the unique reality of the human individual by means of an analogy, he argues. That usually happens within a frame of reference that is derived from the reality of the cosmos. That is a common point of view in theology in his days. But De Lubac's comment on it is not usual at all. Within that framework there is a decisive difference between the relationship of God and the cosmos and the relationship of God and the human being, he argues. 'The spiritual creature [the human being, TvdH] has a direct relationship with God, who is original in this relationship. And that changes everything. This original relationship is the source of that crooked hip, that strange limp. This crooked hip is not a product of sin. It is much more radical: the lameness is that of a body that is spirit, of a creature who, strangely enough, touches God.'²¹ For Lubac, as we see from this unmistakable reference to the story of Jacob's fight with the angel (Gen. 32:23-33), the key is the mystery of human existence, the subject of the longing for God. This subject, *the* subject of religion, is a crippled subject because he has touched God Himself.

The touch of God lies is a 'vanishing point'. It happens when one looks for the person's concrete truth. From a religious point of view the person's concrete truth vanishes in a cultural practice – art, in this case – and is retrieved by it as well. The truth concerning the concrete person is defenceless against magic, for in all (sub)cultures there is a great, perfectly understandable need for security. But the person's concrete truth is also very powerful (not to be confused with almighty). For it repudiates every violent attempt to reduce it. In the religious dimension of a (sub)culture, as well as in the 'game' by which a concrete religion articulates itself, the concrete truth of the person is always as it were 'surrounded' by magic and violence. In every context that is its lot and sometimes, we must admit, its fascinating,

²⁰ Lubac, H. de (1965) *Le mystère du surnaturel*, Paris:Aubier.

²¹ In: *Le mystère du surnaturel*, a.a. 107.

mysterious light. All we see on this side is the crooked hip, a silent sign and a speaking memory. That is the way how theology has to approach transcendence within a culture of immanent mysticism.

By way of conclusion

My conclusion has rather to be formulated by way of a perspective. As this paper questions how theology in my actual society is challenged to reflect on the relation of a culture of immanent mysticism and how this touches the Christian traditions of approaching God, a conclusion is only possible by way of a perspective that opens new horizons. Christian theology in this specific context has to reflect on 'God' realizing itself that 'god-talk' refers to experiences of a moment of being which in its own right questions reality. By reinterpreting the mystical concept of Jan van Ruusbroeck 'natural contemplation' (*natuerlijk scouwen*) in a hermeneutical perspective that is enriched by aesthetic insight in the self-referential character of cultural idiom, this paper explains that a new understanding of 'God-talk' in the Christian tradition becomes possible. By this, theology today continues and renews an outlook of Christian theology that has been expressed by theologians like Bonhoeffer (a non-religious way of talking about God) and De Lubac (theological turn of a 'dérive') half a century ago.

