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Practice and the Comparative Study of Mysticism: *The Yoga Sūtra* and *The Cloud of Unknowing*

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IN his entry for the term "mysticism" in the updated edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Peter Moore writes that "the varieties of mystical practice tend to receive less scholarly attention than the varieties of experience or doctrine."[1] Bernard McGinn similarly claims that many studies of mysticism "so emphasize the moment of mystical contact . . . that they neglect the study of the fullness of the *via mystica*, particularly the ascetical and moral preparation for such contact."[2] Following from suggestions such as these, this article will do a comparative reading of two mystical texts: the *Yoga Sūtra*, a third-century Indian work attributed to Patañjali, and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous fourteenth-century English treatise. Specifically, it will consider two dimensions of the mystical practices taught in these texts. These are the taking of vows and the contemplative stilling of the mind.

To be sure, the *Yoga Sūtra* and *The Cloud of Unknowing* are oriented to goals that are conceptualized in very different ways. The *Yoga Sūtra* is founded upon "a dualistic system that presupposes an ultimate and absolute distinction between matter and consciousness."[3] Following from this, the goal of practice is described as a liberation of the practitioner's consciousness from false identification with the material world, so that "the spirit stands in its true identity as observer to the world."[4] *The Cloud of Unknowing* is directed to consciousness of a God described in traditional Christian theistic terms as the one "who made you and bought you, and who graciously has called you to his love."[5] Furthermore, as an apophatic text, the *Cloud* claims that this consciousness is of a God who "may well be loved, but not thought."[6] Despite the difference between these two texts, my concern is with similar processes in the mystical practices they teach.

By mystical practice, I mean, in the words of Moore, "anything pertaining to the training of body and mind, whether as elements of a mystic's general way of life or as part of the more immediate conditions of the mystical experience."[7] An emphasis on practice is consistent with the two texts being considered here, as can be seen in the characterizations offered by commentators on these texts. For example, Edwin Bryant describes the *Yoga Sūtra* as "primarily a manual for the practitioner rather than an exposition of Yoga philosophy."[8] Similarly, McGinn suggests that the *Cloud* is distinctive in "its combination of practical spiritual advice and profound apophaticism."[9]

Because my concern is with practice, I will make use of some concepts from performance theory to interpret these texts. This theory is useful because what these texts teach can indeed be understood as a performance; that is,

they give their readers something to do, a mystical practice to perform. In both the *Yoga Sūtra* and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the taking of vows constitutes a preliminary stage of mystical practice. Furthermore, both texts associate contemplative stilling of the mind with the attainment of their respective goals, be this realization of one's true nature or consciousness of God. It may not be immediately apparent that practices such as these can be seen as performance, given that they are largely internal rather than public phenomena. Yet, as Gavin Flood claims with regard to asceticism (and I would suggest this can be extended to mysticism), even practices "performed within the privacy of a cell or forest are nevertheless still public in the sense that they participate in and are given sanction by the wider community and tradition."[10] Both vow taking and contemplative stilling of the mind, the first and last steps of mystical practice in the *Yoga Sūtra* and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, can be analyzed in the terms of performance.

Vow Taking as the Start of Mystical Practice

In the *Yoga Sūtra*, practice is structured around a set of eight interrelated steps, which are referred to as the eight limbs of yoga. These are "moral principles, observances, posture, breath control, withdrawal of the senses, concentration, meditation, and pure contemplation."[11] The first of these—moral principles—consists of the five behavioral guidelines of "nonviolence, truthfulness, abjuration of stealing, celibacy, and absence of greed."[12] Patañjali refers to these as "the great vow of yoga."[13] It is especially important that this is the first of the eight limbs of yoga. This suggests the foundational role of the moral principles for the mystical practice as a whole.[14]

This importance is further underscored by Patañjali's insistence that the great vow is "universal" and "unrestricted by conditions of birth, place, time, or circumstance."[15] This suggests that the great vow cannot be compromised or altered based upon the particularities of one's social position.[16] The implied contrast between one's location in secular society and what is required for yogic practice suggests an important aspect of this limb of yoga, namely that adverting to the moral principles represents a turning away from the ordinary circumstances of life. Furthermore, the particular renunciations in the moral principles serve to detach the practitioner from association with the physical world. As such, they are consistent with the purpose of yoga. As Bryant explains, in yogic practice "one must curb activities that pander to the grosser urges of the body—violence, stealing, deceit, sexual exploitation, and coveting are generally performed with a view to improving one's bodily or material situation and must be resisted by one striving for transcendent goals."[17]

Of course, the practice of such vow taking can be interpreted not only as withdrawal from the world, but also as movement toward more authentic and meaningful engagement with the world. Such an interpretation is offered by Ian Whicher, who claims that yoga practice reorients the way a person perceives the world, so that "one gains proper access to the world and is therefore established in the right relationship to the world. Far from being denied or renounced, the world, for the yogin, has become transformed, properly engaged."[18] Significantly, this perspective suggests that withdrawal from or engagement with the world is not a simple binary opposition. According to Whicher, yoga practice "takes consciousness out

of (*ecstasis*) its identification with the rigid structure of the monadic ego, thereby reversing the inveterate tendency of this ego to inflate itself at the expense of its responsibility in relation to others."[19] Thus, by detaching from the way one ordinarily perceives oneself and the world, one can relate more compassionately with that world. The particulars of the great vow serve to embody this new relationship between practitioner and world.

The foundational role of vow taking can also be seen in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It must be acknowledged that consideration of this text is necessarily more speculative, as the *Cloud* does not include explicit discussion of taking vows. Furthermore, since the *Cloud* was written by an anonymous author, it is difficult to know the precise context in which the text was used. That being said, some things may be hypothesized. In the first chapter of the text, the *Cloud* author states that he is writing to a person living in the "singular" life, which is characterized by a "solitary form and manner of living."[20] Scholars of the *Cloud* use textual clues such as this, along with historical considerations, to suggest that the *Cloud* is most likely monastic, and more specifically, a text from the Carthusian order.[21] While this cannot be known with certainty, it seems evident that the text assumes a withdrawal from the world consistent with a monastic and even an eremitic form of life. Working from this assumption, some conclusion about the vows that would form the context of the practice of this text can be addressed by considering the vows taken in Christian monasticism.

Initiation into the Carthusian order, following the more general tradition of Christian monasticism set out in the *Rule of St. Benedict*, involves the taking of three vows:

stability, which means remaining within one's monastic community; obedience to the head of the monastery; and conversion of manners, which refers to the transformation of a worldly lifestyle to that of a monk.[22] To address the significance of these vows, I will briefly draw on the work of Thomas Merton, as this represents a traditional understanding of their role in Christian monastic life.

Merton's basic perspective is that "all religious are by their very state obliged to a certain amount of *separation from the world*."[23] Of course, this separation, which is embodied in the vows taken by the monk, is understood to serve the purpose of developing a relationship with God: "The ascent to perfect charity is proportionate to detachment from all that is not God."[24] As with the first limb of yoga, the mystical practice associated with Christian monasticism begins with vows that enact a withdrawal from identification with the world. This perspective on vows is two-fold. There is the obvious opposition between the life of the world and the life of the religious. Yet, this is in the interest of the goal of the vows, union with God. Detachment from the world corresponds to a union with God who is beyond the world. As Merton says, "The fulfillment of our vow unites us more perfectly with His will and His liberty and thereby takes us further beyond the sphere of the limited and the contingent. It takes us into the sanctuary of His infinite love."[25]

It might be noted that the vows taken in the *Yoga Sūtra* and those that constitute the background of *The Cloud of Unknowing* are considerably different from each other.[26] Nevertheless, the vows in these two traditions do something similar, even if they vary in their particular content. Both sets of vows enact a process of detachment from the world and

ordinary circumstances of life. Through this detachment, the practitioner is brought into a condition of new consciousness. In the *Yoga Sūtra*, this involves realization of one's true nature relative to the material world. In the Christian monastic context of the *Cloud*, this involves awareness of God as ultimate reality. The particular perspective of performance theory can be useful in addressing this. As Catherine Bell explains, performance theory focuses "on what ritual actually *does*, rather than on what it is supposed to mean."[27] While the specific content of the vows in these two texts may be different, there is similarity in what taking these vows does as a part of mystical practice.

The vow taking in the *Yoga Sūtra* and *The Cloud of Unknowing* can be interpreted with a concept from performance theory referred to as framing. As its name suggests, framing concerns the boundaries that are drawn around a performance, so that its special and distinctive nature, relative to ordinary life, may be emphasized. It is, to use a theatrical metaphor, a setting of the stage, so that a performance may take place. Mircea Eliade's concept of sacred space illustrates this framing. Eliade notes that one aspect of spaces understood as sacred is that they have boundaries that serve to differentiate them from the profane spaces that surround them. Such boundaries are key to their function. Thus, Eliade writes that a sacred space "is always a clearly marked space which makes it possible . . . to communicate with the sacred."[28] Eliade further suggests that the concept of sacred space is applicable not only to physical locales; it can also refer to the metaphorical space at the center of one's being, which is entered through the performance of a religious practice.[29]

This framing can also function as a psychological process. Gregory Bateson explains that a frame is simultaneously exclusive and inclusive, in that it distinguishes what is outside the frame from what is inside. Furthermore, it sets up premises in the practitioner's mind, so that what is inside the frame is perceived differently than what is outside it.[30] I would suggest that the vow taking in the *Yoga Sūtra* and *The Cloud of Unknowing* functions as just such a framing device. It sets up a performative space within which mystical consciousness can occur. It does this by excluding attachment to the physical world and including a concern for what transcends this. Writing about the great vow of yoga, Eliade suggests that, by observing this vow, "one creates new centers of experience."[31] Similarly, referring to the vow of obedience, but applicable to all the monastic vows, Merton claims, "We obtain, through the merit of obedience, *specific graces necessary to us as religious*, graces to do things in a monastic way, to see them from a monastic viewpoint, to attain to the kind of spiritual life and inner perfection which is characteristic of a true monk."[32] What can be noted in both these statements is the way taking vows functions as a psychological frame for the practitioner. Understood in this way, these vows are a preliminary, but also crucial, aspect of mystical practice.

Stilling the Mind as the End of Mystical Practice

Having discussed vow taking as the beginning of the paths set out in the *Yoga Sūtra* and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the end point of these mystical practices can now be considered. Both texts associate mystical consciousness with a stilling of the mind, a transcendence of ordinary thought, and both texts give instruction in a practice to bring this about.

The *Yoga Sūtra* makes clear from its opening lines that the stilling of thought is the purpose of its practice: "This is the teaching of yoga. Yoga is the cessation of the turnings of thought."[33] The final three limbs of yoga—concentration, meditation, and pure contemplation—are most specifically associated with this. Of the first of these, Patañjali states that "concentration is binding thought in one place."[34] According to Vyāsa's commentary on the *Yoga Sūtra*, the one place of concentration can include such things as "the circle of the navel, the lotus in the heart, the light in the brain, the tip of the nose, the tip of the tongue, or any external object as a place upon which the mind can be fixed."[35] In addition, in more theistically oriented Indian traditions, the object of concentration can be the image of one's chosen deity.[36] Whatever is concentrated upon, the essential element is fixing the mind on that object. The next limb, meditation, is a furthering of this concentration. It is, in the words of the *Yoga Sūtra*, the "focusing on a single conceptual flow."[37] This is when the mind's attention to the object of meditation becomes so focused that it is undistracted by any other sense perception or thought.[38] The final limb of yoga, pure contemplation, is the culmination of this experience. Patañjali describes it as "meditation that illumines the object alone, as if the subject were devoid of intrinsic form."[39] The key characteristic of this final stage is that all sense of subject-object distinction is transcended. According to Bryant, "the mind is no longer aware of itself as meditating on something external to itself; all distinctions—between the *yogi* as the subjective meditator, the act of meditation, and the object of meditation—have disappeared."[40] At this point the turnings of thought have ceased; the goal of yogic practice is reached.

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the end point of mystical practice can likewise be seen in terms of a stilling of the practitioner's mind. This is oriented toward an experience in which God is the only object present in one's consciousness. The *Cloud* addresses this with one of its central images, the cloud of unknowing, which is described as "a loving stirring and a blind beholding unto the naked being of God himself only."[41] Such a consciousness of God is only possible if the practitioner detaches himself from awareness of everything other than God. Thoughts of anything else must be surpassed in what the author calls the cloud of forgetting. This includes thoughts about the created world,[42] and even thoughts about devotional topics such as one's sinfulness, the passion of Jesus, and the qualities of God.[43] In short, for the *Cloud* author, consciousness of God is only possible when consciousness of everything other than God's very self is forgotten. In McGinn's apt summary, this text describes a "dual exercise of forgetting created things and intending God in the cloud of unknowing."[44]

The *Cloud* author teaches a form of contemplative prayer in which the practitioner's intent for God is encapsulated in a single, short word. This word is the only thing said or thought in this prayer. He instructs his reader:

> And if it pleases you have this intent wrapped and enfolded in one word, so that you should have a better hold thereupon, take but a little word of one syllable; for so it is better than of two, for ever the shorter it is, the better it accords with the work of the spirit. And such a word is this word GOD or

this word LOVE. Choose which you will, or another as it pleases you: whichever that you like best of one syllable. And fasten this word to your heart, so that it never goes away for anything that befalls you.[45]

This single, short word serves a dual function in contemplative prayer. It both directs the practitioner's will toward encounter with God in the cloud of unknowing; at the same time, it does this by functioning as a way to transcend all other thoughts, putting them beneath the cloud of forgetting. As the *Cloud* author explains, "With this word you shall beat on this cloud and this darkness above you. With this word you shall smite down all manner of thought under the cloud of forgetting; in so much that if any thought presses upon you to ask you what you would have, answer him with no more words but with this one word."[46]

Further explaining how this word functions, the *Cloud* author states that it "is prayed with a full spirit, in the height, and in the depth, and in the length, and in the breadth of his spirit who prays it."[47] The author then relates this description of the word used in prayer to the God to whom the prayer is directed: "The everlastingness of God is his length; his love is his breadth; his might is his height; and his wisdom is his depth. No wonder that a soul, that is thus nearly conformed by grace to the image and likeness of God, his maker, be soon heard of God."[48] The word thus sets up a correspondence between the entire being of the practitioner and the entire being of God. While it may not be immediately apparent, this description of contemplative prayer bears similarity to what is described in the *Yoga Sūtra*. There, the final stage of meditative practice involves a loss of distinction between the meditator and the object of meditation. While the *Cloud* might not go so far as to claim erasure of distinction between self and God, it does suggest that the form of practice embodies a union of the practitioner with the object of his practice.

As with the taking of vows, a concept from performance theory can help interpret these contemplative practices aimed at stilling the mind. Richard Schechner explains that human performances are composed of what he calls restored behavior, by which he means "physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are not-for-the-first-time; that are prepared or rehearsed."[49] Schechner explains that restored behavior "is marked, framed, and separate"; it "can be worked on, stored and recalled, played with, made into something else, transmitted, and transformed."[50] Furthermore, such behaviors "are freed from their original functions" in the way they are employed.[51] This concept of restored behavior corresponds quite well with the mystical practices being considered here. In the *Yoga Sūtra*, an object of meditation is made the focus of consciousness. This object is cut loose from any ordinary meaning it might have and used with the purpose of stilling the mind. In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a single, short word is used to direct intention toward God and transcend the thoughts ordinarily present in the mind. Again, the associations of meaning this word might ordinarily have are not nearly so important as is its function in contemplative prayer.

There is a final aspect of restored behavior that is important to consider here. Schechner says it is ultimately the context of a performance that gives a restored behavior the particular significance it has.[52] In discussing the taking of vows, I suggested that this could be interpreted with the concept of framing. Bell

explains that framing can refer to "the way in which some activities or messages set up an interpretive framework within which to understand other subsequent or simultaneous acts or messages."[53] With this, I would suggest that we are brought full circle, back to the consideration of what happens at the outset of these mystical practices, and how this is related to the attainment of their respective goals. Vow taking constructs a frame around the performative space. It serves to detach one from association with the physical world and profane consciousness. It likewise focuses awareness on what transcends this world, thereby moving one toward sacred consciousness. In doing so, this vow taking sets up a context within which the restored behavior of contemplative stilling of the mind can take place and have meaning.

Conclusion

The scholar of mysticism Peter Moore writes that "arguably, the varieties of mystical technique offer a better point of entry to the comparative study of mysticism than abstract ontologies or phenomenologies."[54] What I have discussed in this article has been an attempt to illustrate this claim. The *Yoga Sūtra* and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, different as they may be in terms of doctrinal assumptions underlying their respective experiences, and as different as those experiences themselves may be, are similar in the mystical practices they teach. Furthermore, interpreting these practices as performances can explain how the taking of vows that marks their beginning sets the stage for contemplative stilling of the mind that is their end.

Notes

[1]Peter Moore, "Mysticism [Further Considerations]," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 6357.

[2]Bernard McGinn, foreword to *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, by Gershom Scholem (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), xv.

[3]Edwin F. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary; With Insights from the Traditional Commentators* (New York: North Point Press, 2009), xlv.

[4]*Yoga Sūtra*, 1.3. Barbara Stoler Miller, trans., *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom; The Yoga Sutra Attributed to Patanjali* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995). Citations of the *Yoga Sūtra* are from this edition of the text.

[5]*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 26/17-18. Phyllis Hodgson, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling*, Early English Text Society o.s. 218 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944). http://dx.doi.org/2027/mdp.39015008395322 Citations of the *Cloud* are from this edition of the text. Translations from the Middle English are my own.

[6]Ibid., 26/4.

[7]Moore, "Mysticism [Further Considerations]," 6357.

[8]Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, lviii.

[9]Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550)*, vol. 5 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 2012), 401.

[10]Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7.

[11]*Yoga Sūtra*, 2.29.

[12]Ibid., 2.30.

[13]Ibid., 2.31.

[14]Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 243.

[15]*Yoga Sūtra*, 2.31.

[16]Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 250.

[17]Ibid., lviii.

[18]Ian Whicher, "The Integration of Spirit (*Puruṣa*) and Matter (*Prakṛti*) in the *Yoga Sūtra*," in *Yoga: The Indian Tradition*, ed. Ian Whicher and David Carpenter (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 58.

[19]Ibid., 60.

[20]*Cloud*, 14/12-13.

[21]On the possibility of Carthusian authorship of the *Cloud*, see James Walsh, introduction to *The Cloud of Unknowing*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 2-9; John P.H. Clark, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*, Analecta Cartusiana (Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1995), 1:14-18.

[22]E. Margaret Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930), 32.

[23]Thomas Merton, *The Life of the Vows*, vol. 6 of *Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 218.

[24]Ibid., 116.

[25]Ibid., 185.

[26]Though poverty and chastity, which could be understood to correlate with the vows of absence of greed and celibacy in the *Yoga Sūtra*, are implied in Christian monastic vows. Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 92.

[27]Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 73.

[28]Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (1958; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 368.

[29]Ibid., 382.

[30]Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 187-188.

[31]Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 2nd ed., trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 50. http://dx.doi.org/2027/mdp.39076005280453

[32]Merton, *Life of the Vows*, 238.

[33]*Yoga Sūtra*, 1.1-1.2.

[34]Ibid., 3.1.

[35]Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 302.

[36]Ibid.

[37]*Yoga Sūtra*, 3.2.

[38]Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 303.

[39]*Yoga Sūtra*, 3.3.

[40]Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 307.

[41]*Cloud*, 32/7-8.

[42]Ibid., 24/1-4.

[43]Ibid., 27/15-28/2.

[44]McGinn, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 404.

[45]*Cloud*, 28/10-16.

[46]Ibid., 28/18-29/1.

[47]Ibid., 75/7-8.

[48]Ibid., 75/17-21.

[49]Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 29.

[50]Ibid., 35.

[51]Ibid., 65. Schechner is describing ritual activity more generally here, which he says is similar to restored behavior.

[52]Ibid., 30.

[53]Bell, *Ritual*, 74.

[54]Moore, "Mysticism [Further Considerations]," 6357-6358.