

# **Union of Man with Ultimate Reality** **—A Comparison between Chinese Spirituality and** **Christian Mysticism**

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## **Abstract**

From a philosophical point of view, Chinese spirituality and Christian mysticism and raise a lot of interesting issues. This paper focuses on and discusses the following three aspects: the representability of the Chinese experience of spiritual transformation and the Christian mystic experience of spiritual ecstasy or transcendence; whether they are the pure experience of silence or whether this silence nevertheless leads to some kind of dialogue; and the status of the body in Chinese spirituality and Christian mystical experience, whether it is merely negative or that there is some positive role for human body to play in mystic/spiritual experience. My analysis attempts to make Chinese spirituality and Christian mysticism compatible with reason in a broad sense: they become reasonable human practices and experiences that are not in the least irrational. Both Chinese spirituality and Christian mysticism are deeply related to our ordinary human life. Both traditions work to promote the human spirit from within ordinary human life, and at the end they should return to the world of everyday life.

**Key Words:** Chinese Spirituality, Christian Mysticism, Transcendence, Transformation, Kenosis, Dialogue, Body.

# 人與終極真實的合一： 中國靈修與基督宗教密契論之比較

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## 摘要

從哲學的觀點，中國思想和基督宗教的神祕主義引起許多有趣的問題。這篇論文著眼於以下三個面向並討論之：中國的精神轉化經驗以及基督宗教的屬靈神魂超拔或超越的經驗的可表象性；它們究竟是言語道斷的純粹經驗，或者這個靜默可以促成某種對話；就人的身體而言，它在神祕或屬靈經驗裡的角色只是否定性的，或者有某個肯定性的角色。我的分析試圖證明中國宗教和基督宗教的神祕主義和廣義的理性是相容的：它們成為合理的人類習俗和經驗，一點也不會不理性。中國思想和基督宗教的神祕主義都和我們的日常生活息息相關。這兩個傳統都致力於從日常人類生活裡提升人的靈性，而到頭來它們也應該會回到日常生活的世界裡。

關鍵詞：中國思想、基督宗教的神祕主義、超越性、轉化、虛己、對話、身體。

# Union of Man with Ultimate Reality —A Comparison between Chinese Spirituality and Christian Mysticism

Vincent Shen

## I. Introduction

I define mysticism as a direct experience of the ultimate reality, even to the degree of enjoying union with it. In Christian tradition, God is the ultimate reality and therefore mysticism means a direct experience of God. For Chinese philosophy, the ultimate reality is conceived differently according to different traditions, such as *dao* for Daoism, emptiness or One Mind for Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, and *tian* (Heaven) for Confucianism. While all these traditions are concerned with an intimate relation with the ultimate reality, they involve different concepts of ultimate reality, and their definitions of mysticism are therefore also different.

Even if Christianity and Chinese philosophies/religions have different notions of mysticism in view of their concepts of ultimate reality, however, all of them have a common concern with spirituality. I define spirituality as the practices and inspiring ideas of self-cultivation and human perfection, which deal with the human desire for meaningfulness and its fulfillment through the spiritual enhancement of body/mind that nurtures, vitalizes and fulfills human life and promotes its relation with the ultimate reality. Or, in a much more succinct and eloquent way, as St. Teresa of Avila puts it, “way of perfection (Camino de Perfección).”<sup>1</sup> The basic concern of spirituality is therefore to lead a life of sanity, meaningfulness and perfection by means of self-cultivation and fulfillment of one’s being.

Different Christian and Chinese philosophical traditions have their own theories and practices of spirituality. For Christianity, which in the main takes relation with God as crucial to religious experience, the ultimate end of spirituality is union with God. This is to say that for Christianity, spirituality aims at a mystic union with God. While there is also a mystic dimension in China’s three teachings, namely Daoism, Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, and Confucianism, Chinese spirituality is more concerned with the nurturing of life (*yangsheng*

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa of Avila, *Way of Perfection*, in *The Complete Works of St. Theresa of Avila*, Vol. II, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946, pp.1-186.

養生), cultivation of mind/heart (*xiuxin* 修心) and achievement of virtues (*chengde* 成德). By this I mean that the mystic experience of these three teachings is usually integrated into their spirituality.

From a philosophical point of view, Christian mysticism and Chinese spirituality raise a lot of interesting problems. In this paper I shall focus on and discuss only three major issues: whether they are the pure experience of kenosis (emptiness) and/or silence, or whether this emptiness and/or silence nevertheless contains some kind of dialogue; the representability of the Christian mystic experience of spiritual ecstasy or transcendence and the Chinese experience of spiritual transformation; and the status of the body in Christian mystical experience and Chinese spirituality.

## II. Kenosis, Emptiness and Dialogue

Etymologically speaking, the words “mysticism” or “mystery” come from the Greek verb *musteion*, which means to close one’s eyes or mouth. It is therefore related to the experience of silence in the darkness. Thus, when in a mystic experience, one’s eyes and mouth are closed, and one is totally immersed in darkness and silence, one is alone with the ultimate reality and there will be no dialogue. It is a contemplative experience of emptiness or darkness of the soul without dialogue. However, the question is: whether in mystic experience there is only contemplation exclusive of all forms of dialogue? In both Christian and non-Christian religions, there is always a tendency to view the nature of mystic experience as beyond all forms of language, which may give us a misleading impression that it excludes dialogue.

There is a mystic tradition within Christianity that emphasizes nothingness and emptiness in the use of the term *kenosis*. This may be traced back to St. Paul’s theology of *kenosis* in the sense of “emptying of self” in his *Second Letter to the Philippians*:

*In your minds you must be the same as Jesus Christ:  
His state was divine,  
yet he did not cling  
to his equality with God,  
but emptied himself  
to assume the condition of a slave,  
and became as men are,  
he was humble yet,  
even to accepting death,*

*death on a cross.*<sup>2</sup>

I understand the meaning of this text on the level of Christian spirituality, since it is an advice to the Philippians that their minds should be Christ-like, in “becoming human, humble and even to accepting death on a cross.” Jesus Christ emptied himself and assumed the condition of a slave to be all of these things. Therefore, I will not enter into the Christological debate of this passage that may suggest different ways of reading. For me, in terms of Christian spirituality, *kenosis* here means the ‘self-emptying’ of one’s subjectivity, that is, one’s own will, and becoming entirely receptive to God and the divine will, imitating Christ’s humble incarnation.

This concept of “emptying oneself” had much influence on the mysticism of St. Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius Ponticus, and was further developed by Pseudo-Dionysius, who thought that through *via negativa*, the human mind could transcend all kinds of mental representations and arrive at a state of spiritual silence (*hesychia*), in which the soul could experience a kind of spiritual darkness, in order to enter into communion with God. After Pseudo-Dionysius, Duns Scotus Erigena (810-877AD) even tended to think of God as Nothing, and that if God is Nothing, He is Everything. According to him, God is the Holy Nothing who decides to pass from nothing to being, and thereby everything that exists is the manifestation of his divinity. This line of mysticism was further developed by Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) and John Tauler (1300-1361), both emphasized the abandonment of things and the retreat to the inner core of one’s soul to attain a state of spiritual nakedness. John Tauler even went so far as to say that God is void, which means that if we do not arrive at a state of spiritual nakedness, God is void for our experience and understanding.

The *kenosis*, as “emptying of self,” is also emphasized by St. Teresa of Avila in the sense of abnegation of one’s will for God’s will, so that one can retreat to the “centre of our soul” or spirit.<sup>3</sup> She said, “Perhaps when St. Paul says: ‘He who is joined to God becomes one spirit with Him,’ he is referring to this sovereign Marriage, which presupposes the entrance of His Majesty into the soul by union. And he also says: *Nihil vivere Christus est, mori lucrum* (For to me, to live is Christ; and to die is gain.)...Undoubtedly, if we empty ourselves of all that belongs to the creature, depriving ourselves thus for the love of God, He must fill us with Himself.”<sup>4</sup> And, again, Teresa in her poems says,

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<sup>2</sup> St. Paul, *Second Letter to the Philippians*, in *Jerusalem Bible*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1966), pp. 339-340

<sup>3</sup> Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, in *Complete Works of St. Theresa of Avila*, Vol.II, p.338

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp.335-336.

Since this new death-in-life I've known,  
Estrang'd from self my life has been,  
For now I live a life unseen;  
The Lord has claim'd me as His own.  
My heart I gave Him for His throne,  
Whereon He wrote indelibly:  
*I die because I do not die.*<sup>5</sup>

Thus, this idea of *kenosis* as self-denial for Christ must have gone through St Teresa of Avila to St. John of the Cross (1542-1591). As Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen has well said, "Teresa has strongly insisted upon the need for complete self-abnegation in order that the soul may obtain contemplation, and further (and in this she forestalls St. John of the Cross) that contemplatives must suffer much."<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, *Kenosis* is fundamental to St. John of the Cross' mysticism, which well articulates the mystical experience of "darkness of the soul." In his *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*, he refers to a song of the soul's happiness "in having passed through the dark night of faith, in nakedness and purgation, to union with its Beloved."<sup>7</sup> In the second stanza of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* he writes,

*In darkness, and secure,  
By the secret ladder, disguised,  
--Ah, the sheer grace!--  
In dankness and concealment,  
My house being now all still.*<sup>8</sup>

According to the explanation of St. John of the Cross himself, this second stanza "tells in song of the sheer grace that was the soul's in divesting the spirit of all its imperfections and appetites for spiritual possessions."<sup>9</sup> Thus, it concerns the 'spiritual darkness.' However, even when there is such a spiritual state of nothingness, emptiness and darkness, nevertheless, the soul according to Christianity always keeps in touch and in dialogue with a personal God. In Christianity, God is personal. If we may say there is also a certain aspect of impersonality of God, it is in the sense of God's unfathomableness, and, more properly speaking, in the

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<sup>5</sup> Teresa of Avila, *Poems*, in *Complete Works of St. Theresa of Avila*, Vol. III. p.277.

<sup>6</sup> Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, *St. Teresa of Jesus*, Cork: The Mercier Press, 1949, p.35.

<sup>7</sup> St John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kicran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D. C. Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), p.68

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.68

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.107.

sense of God's immanence in the lawfulness of the natural world and in His irreducible justice.

In comparison, we can see that there is, in Daoism as well as Buddhism, a spiritual state of nothingness or emptiness, which is the most profound experience the sage can achieve, so much so that it even goes beyond the experience of dialoguing with a personal God. Both Daoism and Buddhism perceive nothingness as the deepest experience. They do not identify the ultimate reality with Being and are also reluctant to recognize a personal God. It seems that for Daoism and Buddhism, the personalization of God is a sign of inferiority, when compared with the rich experience of nothingness or emptiness.<sup>10</sup>

For Buddhism, the experience of emptiness is the essence of enlightenment and liberation. What does "emptiness" mean here? Generally speaking, the concept of "emptiness" means three things in Buddhism. On the ontological level, emptiness means interdependent causation or dependent co-arising and therefore without self-nature: *yuanqi xinkong* (緣起性空); on the spiritual level, emptiness means spiritual freedom in terms of non-attachment, even no attachment to emptiness itself. This is the meaning most cherished by Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. Finally, on the linguistic level, emptiness means that all languages are human constructs and there is no fixed correspondence between a linguistic term and the reality. Even when conceived as the ultimate reality in terms of Buddha's Body, the Dharmakaya or the True Body of Buddha is unspeakable, unfathomable, and unthinkable. Since it is unspeakable, there is nothing to say, and therefore no dialogue. In the state of emptiness, there is no personal God to dialogue with. For Buddhism, the concept of a personal God is inferior to the concept of emptiness as the ultimate reality which consists rather in interdependent causation and emptying emptiness. This explains why there is no dialogue in Buddhist mystic experience. In its development, Chinese Mahayana Buddhism has put emphasis on enlightenment as the self-realization of one's immanent Buddha nature. In such cases there is no need for postulating a personal God with whom one may dialogue.

However, we should take note of the historical fact that, since the beginning of Buddhism in India there has been a tendency to worship Buddha as God. We can trace this tendency back to the origin of the Second Council, where it caused a great schism between the Mahasamghikas (Section of the Great Mass) and Sthaviras (Section of the Elders) by reason of their different interpretations of the status of Buddhahood. For the Sthaviras, the human body of Buddha, just like every other human body, needs food, sleep, clothing and medical

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<sup>10</sup> Please notice the historical fact that, in religious Daoism, there is God in Heaven (*tian di*), similar to the Christian God, although in polytheistic context; and in Indian Buddhism there is also a tendency of divinization of Buddha in the Mahasamghikas.

care when ill, whereas Buddha's Dharmakaya is perfect. But the Mahasamghikas asserted that Buddha is Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient and living endlessly and eternally. They also held that Buddha himself is in the Tusita Heaven, and never teaches in the world. He who teaches is merely a Nirmannakaya, a form of Buddha's bodily appearance.<sup>11</sup>

I would say that the belief in an Omnipresent, Omniscient, and Omnipotent Buddha responds to a need among Buddhist believers to dialogue. From the point of view of psychology of religion, there is always a need of dialogue with a transcendent divinity. This applies not only to Indian Buddhism, but also to Chinese Buddhism. When a believer enters into a Buddhist temple to pay homage to a Buddha statue, this may be seen as an act of enlightening one's own Buddha nature in the light of Buddha rather than an act of worshipping Buddha, yet deep in the heart of every Buddhist believer, there is still a need, albeit hidden and implicit, for a dialogue with Buddha.

Now let me discuss the experience of *wu* (non-being) in Daoism. In fact, the experience of non-being in Daoism is much more profound and original than that of being. For Laozi, *dao* is even more ancient than a God, who is the Lord of the realm of beings, resulted from the realization of some possibilities from non-being. Ontologically speaking, *dao* first manifests itself into non-being, which is the realm of possibilities and then, from among all possibilities, some are realized as beings. Anthropologically speaking, non-being represents spiritual freedom and liberation from all attachment, whereas being represents the experience of realization and saturation. In other words, being is there to manifest the traces and limits of realization, whereas non-being manifests the marvelous possibilities. For Laozi, the dialectics between non-being and being leads to the marvelous gate of *dao*, transcending all forms of realization.

According to Daoism, *dao* transcends all forms of discourse; as Laozi says, "Dao Itself can be told of, but the *dao* that is told of is not the constant *dao*." In a similar spirit, Zhuangzi says, "Dao exists beyond the limit of things, therefore it could not be supported by words and silence."<sup>12</sup> Since *dao* surpasses all forms of discourse and language, and since *dao* is also impersonal, though self-manifesting itself, and is not a personal God, there is no possibility of dialogue with it in language or otherwise.

However, in Daoist philosophy, there are still some dialogical implications. Since a human being can be in union with *dao*, while the human being him/herself is not *dao*, there

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<sup>11</sup>Yin Shun, *A History of Indian Buddhist Thought*, (Taipei: Cheng-wen Press: 1988), pp. 61-63

<sup>12</sup> Zhuangzi Jishi, p. 396. English translation mine.



must in the moment of mystic union be a form of interactive union. Zhuangzi speaks of the spiritual state of “wondering with the Infinite,” “dwelling alone calmly and soberly with the divine,” and even says “playing with the creator up there and making friends with those surpassing life and death, beginning and ending down here.”<sup>13</sup> Could we say that, in all these ways of wondering, dwelling, playing with, and making friends, there is no room for dialogue?

In comparison, Buddhist emptiness and Daoist non-being are similar to Heidegger’s *Ab-grund*,<sup>14</sup> the always departing from all foundations. In Heidegger’s view, Christian metaphysics is constituted of what he called “onto-theo-logy”.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand it affirms being as the ontological foundation of all things, and on the other it affirms God as the theological foundation of being. However, Buddhist emptiness and Daoist non-being are much closer to a dynamic anti-foundationalism. What Buddhists call non-attachment to emptiness, or the emptying of emptiness, is without any foundation and keeps on departing from all foundations, in order to liberate the human spirit from all attachments and render it as free as possible.

However, even if emptiness and non-being are most profound in their potentialities, this still does not mean that there is no God as the perfect Fulfillment of Being. Even if human freedom is so radical that not a single human discourse, not even any philosophical, scientific or theological doctrine, could serve as foundation to the realm of beings, this still does not mean that the realm of beings is foundationless. There must be a certain foundation of beings, although The Foundation Itself is unfathomable and all our efforts to propose any founding discourse are in vain, and all resulted discourses should always be deconstructed, so as to keep the human spirit free.

Still, I think it is more human to think of a personal God who knows and loves us and to whom we can pray and therefore converse with. Although there is also a profound meaning in saying that God is impersonal, however, any inflexible and stubborn attachment to this thesis may lead to an insensible religion, in which there is no personal interaction and no dialogue. An impersonalist interpretation of God and *dao* has the danger of giving rise to a inflexible mindset, something similar to what Jesus describes:

*What description can I find for this generation? It is like Children shouting to each other as they sit in the market place: "We played the pipes for you, and you wouldn't*

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<sup>13</sup> Zhuangzi Jishi, pp.10, 472, 475. English translations mine.

<sup>14</sup> M.Heidegger, *Wozu Dichter*, in *Holzweg*, (Frankfurt: V. Klostermann, 1938), p. 248.

<sup>15</sup> M.Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, (Pfullingen: Gunther Neske, 1957), pp. 60-63.

*dance; we sang dirges, and you wouldn't be mourners.”*<sup>16</sup>

For us as human beings, to say that God is personal is to say that God does know and love us, and that we may pray and interact with Him in our hearts. However, this does not mean that He knows, loves and listens to our prayers in our *human, too human* way. It is in this sense that we may say that God is not personal but hyper-personal, which does not mean God does not know and love, but that he knows and loves in a hyper-excellent way. Especially in the Christian tradition of mysticism, God is Mystery of all mysteries. In the mystical experience of God, there is emptiness of the soul, or as St. John of the Cross says, darkness of the soul, where contemplative prayer leads to a mysterious, passive phase of experience in which one loses the Self in an overwhelming rhythm of union that is not to be characterized as impersonal at all. In any case, God transcends the distinction between “personal” and “impersonal.” God is personal as well as hyper-personal. In this contrast, the human relationship with God could become ever more profound.

Christian mysticism is different from Daoism and Buddhism in that it recognizes not only the impersonal, passive experience of emptiness/non-being, but also the relation of personal love and dialogue between man and God, leading towards their union. If in the mystic experience of Pseudo-Dionysius, the human soul should go beyond all representations to the state of total silence, and until a spiritual concentration, there should be silent waiting, the question is: what is one waiting for at this particular moment? Is one not waiting for communion with God? However, even if a human being can be in union with God, he/she is not God, and thus the union is one without being one. Therefore, we can say that in the mystic experience of silent waiting, there is an interactive communion with God, that is, a dialogue with God.

What I am saying is that even in the mystic experience of silent emptiness/nothingness, there should still be a kind of dialogue, and then, at the moment of communion of love, there must be a dialogue in a fuller sense. The mystic experience of love is commonly affirmed in Christian mysticism, as illustrated by the mystic experiences of St. John, St. Paul, St. Augustine, Meister Eckhart, St. Bonaventura, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, etc., all of which feature the importance of communion of love. Here is another verse that reads,

Take, O Lord, my loving heart;  
See, I yield it to Thee whole,  
With my body, life and soul

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<sup>16</sup> *Matthew*, 11, 16-17, in *Jerusalem Bible, New Testament*, p.32

And my nature's every part.  
Sweetest Spouse, my Life, Thou art;  
I have given myself to Thee;  
*What wilt Thou have done with me?*<sup>17</sup>

As expressed in this pious prayer, a loving dialogue is the highest form of mystic experience. In everyday religious life, prayer, singing, petition etc., are also forms of dialogue. Then, in the experience of silence, emptiness and darkness of the soul, there is a waiting for dialogue. And at last, loving dialogue with God is the highest form of mystic communion.

However, mystic experience, if we are privileged to have it, is only a moment of our life. In this sense, it is rare in comparison with our everyday experience. It is always necessary for mystic masters to enter into everyday life and pray, sing, and dialogue. This is to say that mystic experience begins from human everyday experience of dialogue, and achieves its highest form in loving dialogue with the ultimate reality, and, at the end, it has to reenter into dialogue in the everyday life-world.

### **III. Transcendence, Transformation and Representability**

By “representation” I mean images, impressions, concepts, mental and linguistic constructs, theories, and so on, which represent or express our direct experience of reality. In our ordinary cognitive experience, representations such as image, concept and theory play an important role in our acquisition and assimilation of knowledge. Nevertheless, there are philosophers who argue that we have some kind of non-representational knowledge. These philosophers include Henry Bergson, who posited ‘intuition’ of *élan vital* and the *durée* of time; Heidegger, who propounded a concept of truth as manifestation instead of truth as correspondence; Gabriel Marcel, who propounded presence and participation instead of discursive and conceptual knowledge; and among contemporary Chinese philosophers, Mou Zongsan, who puts forward the notion of the human capacity for intellectual intuition (*zhide zhijue* 智的直覺)...etc.

However, even if non-representational knowledge or direct experience of manifestation of the ultimate reality does sometimes occur, I should say that this happens only rarely, and only in some very privileged moments of our life. In everyday life and scientific activities, we are in need of representations. Even if the experience of direct manifestation of Reality in Itself (including the ultimate reality), or its presence and our intuition of it, does happen, these experiences could nevertheless become intelligible and expressible through

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<sup>17</sup> Teresa of Avila, *Poems*, in *Complete Works of St. Theresa of Avila*, Vol. III. p.280.

representation, language or expressible through actions and deeds. That is, even if intuitive and mystic experience is non-representational by nature, it is still compatible with and not exclusive of representations or actions in its expression. In other words, the knowledge that we have in our everyday life and scientific activities is basically representational and discursive in nature and in expression. Even if we could have some forms of knowledge which are non-representational in nature, such as that which is acquired through intuition and the experience of manifestation and presence, these are at least expressible through ways compatible with representations.

Now, my question is: is mystic experience non-representational and non-discursive both in nature and in expression? Does mystic experience not only transcend all representation and discourse by its nature, but is it also unfathomable beyond all language and expression?

First of all, we should say that mystical experience is beyond all representations by its nature. This applies to both the Christian experience of transcendence and the Chinese experience of spiritual transformation. Let's speak first of the Christian experience of transcendence. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine describes having a mystic experience together with his mother St. Monica, when leaning out of a window looking into the garden. Their souls, all of a sudden, flew over all things, all heavens, before returning to a place deep in their soul. St. Augustine writes, "While we were thus talking of His Wisdom and panting for it, with all the effort of our heart we did for one instant attain to touch it," And after this, "then, almost with a sigh, returned to the sound of our tongue, in which a word has both beginning and ending." And then they said,

*If to any man the tumult of the flesh grew silent, silent the images of earth and sea and air; and if the heavens grew silent, and the very soul grew silent to herself and by not thinking of self mounted beyond self; if all dreams and imagined visions grew silent and every tongue and every sign and whatsoever is transient.....they all grew silent, and in their silence He alone spoke to us, not by them but by Himself.*<sup>18</sup>

What St. Augustine describes to us here is the fact that, in the mystical experience he shared with his mother, their souls transcended all bodies, earth, sea, air, heavens, dreams and images... all kinds of representations, and for one instant of spiritual concentration, they attained the wisdom of God, who is beyond all representations and languages. But, as soon as human language returned to them, "almost with a sign," they could say out loud that

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<sup>18</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R.S. Pine-Coffin, (London: Penguin Classics, 1961), pp.200-201.

everything was silent, and “He alone spoke to us.” In this description of St. Augustine, mystic experience is not exclusive of expression through language.

The Chinese concern with spiritual transformation can be illustrated by the story that Zhuangzi tells right at the beginning of his book the *Zhuangzi*, about the transformation of a fish into a bird, which then flies high up into the sky. Nevertheless, the fish and bird still rely on water and wind. However, an authentic human person could arrive, unconditionally, at a spiritual state on playing in union with the infinite. Zhuangzi writes,

*In the Northern Ocean there is a fish, called the kun, I do not know how many thousand li in size. This kun transforms into a bird, called the peng. Its back is I do not know how many thousands li in breath. When it is moved, it flies, and its wings obscuring the like clouds...*

*As to the one who is charioted upon the eternal fitness of Heaven and Earth, driving before him the changing elements as his team to roam through the realm of the Infinite, upon what, then, would such a one have need to depend?<sup>19</sup>*

By this parable using the metaphors of fish and bird, Zhuangzi is saying that life is a process of transformation, not only from small to large, but also from low (water) to high (air). Thus, the fish *kun*, a being free in the water, evolves into a bird *peng*, a being free in the air. The bird, being stirred to fly, launches itself at a proper time on a great wind to a height of ninety thousand *li*...etc. The metaphor denotes that by making an effort to rise up with force and spirit, human beings can achieve utmost realization. However, the fish’s freedom in water and the bird’s freedom in air are both dependent on conditions (water and wind) and therefore they enjoy merely conditioned freedom. For Zhuangzi, only when one is playing in union with the Infinite, and following its rhythm of manifestation in the realm of being and becoming, does one have an unconditioned freedom. Thus Zhuangzi sees human beings as born free, with the capacity to enter into a process of spiritual transformation under favorable conditions; by striving for and accumulating favorable conditions, human beings can break through the limit of all conditions and attain an unconditional freedom in the mystic communion with *dao*, the Infinite.

How is it Zhuangzi’s “playing with the infinite”? Zhuangzi doesn’t say much about it. For him, it is rather an ultimate presupposition that renders our freedom unconditional. By contrast, St. Teresa of Avila has talked much about the love of God who is the Infinite

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<sup>19</sup> Zhuangzi Jishi 莊子集釋 (Collected Commentaries of Zhuangzi), (Taipei: World Books, 1982), pp.1-2, 10; English translation by Lin Yutan, *Chuangtse*, (Taipei: World Books, 1957), pp. 8, 10.

Wisdom, for example, “O my God and my infinite Wisdom, without measure and without bounds, high above the understanding of both of angels and of men! O Love, who lovest me more than I can love myself or conceive of love! Why, Lord, have I the will to desire more than it is in thy will to give me?”<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is not only in the privileged moment of union, but also by submitting one’s will to Him and in Him. The union itself, as a privileged moment of our life, is just another form of unity with the Infinite Wisdom. The more urgent form of union with the Infinite is to give up, in a state of total passivity, our will and follow His Will all the time. She said, “Let us renounce our self-love and self-will, and our attachment to earthly things. Let us practice penance, mortification, obedience, and all the other good works that you know of...Let the silkworm die.”<sup>21</sup> And, again, “This is the union which I have desired all my life; it is for this that I continually beseech our Lord. It is this which is the most genuine and the safest.”<sup>22</sup>

As I see them, although mystic experiences like the above transcend all representations, they can still be expressed by language or deeds. This is illustrated by what St. Augustine says, “then, almost with a sigh, returned to the sound of our tongue, in which a word has both beginning and ending,” and what Zhuangzi talks about such experiences in terms of metaphor, or elsewhere what he terms as *budao zhi dao* 不道之道 (the unsayable saying). As to St. Teresa of Avila, they are expressible not only through what she describes as “death of the silkworm” and the coming out of a “little white butterfly,”<sup>23</sup> but most importantly in all deeds we do for the love of God as well as for the love of our neighbors.

Also, let us remind ourselves that there are religious meditations that use mental imagery, such as the Jewish method of meditating on the mental image of Seven Heavens; the Buddhist meditation on the images of Buddha and bodhisattvas; the Christian visualization of the Virgin Mary, the Sacred Heart, and so on. However, the final intention of such practices is to finally surpass all representations in order to reach the ultimate reality. Those metaphorical, or better symbolic, representations should be seen as a useful tool for coming to a mystic experience of the ultimate reality. Here, I define ‘symbolic representation’ as a kind of signifying or pointing through a set of present, sensible and thinkable signs on the first level, to a transcendent, invisible and unthinkable ultimate reality on the second level. However, there are still mystics who deny the instrumentalist status of symbolic representations for reaching the ultimate reality.

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<sup>20</sup> Teresa of Avila, *Exclamations of Soul to God*, in *The Complete Works of St. Theresa of Avila*, Vol. II, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946, p.418.

<sup>21</sup> Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, in *The Complete Works of St. Theresa of Avila*, Vol. II, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946, p.254.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p.260.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p.255.

Can the ultimate reality be reached by using representations? The debate on this question is illustrated by the iconoclastic controversy that arose in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD. In that controversy, those who believed in the use of icons, for example, John of Damascus and Theodore of Studios, defended their belief by the doctrine of incarnation. For them, since God manifested Himself through incarnation and became man, the whole of the material world and the human body are endowed with divine meaning. Jesus Christ himself is the most Holy Icon par excellence. The icon is not God; it represents God in a symbolic way. Icons in the form of paintings and sculptures that decorate the church serve an important purpose in religious rites. Other images of biblical stories, the lives of saints and religious feasts, serve well in religious pedagogy.

On the other side of the debate, the iconoclasts denied the use of images. They maintained that God could never be depicted by icons painted by any artist whosoever, and that the act of adoring icons would be against the commandment, “Thou should not adore the idols.” Today, the meaning of iconoclasm consists not only in the destruction of idolatrous icons, but also in the fact that a representation, though serviceable as a mimesis of reality, is not reality itself. More serious is the fact that the representation itself could become an object of fixation, in other words, one may fix on a particular simulacrum that imitates reality instead of experiencing the reality in itself.<sup>24</sup>

Although images serve an important purpose in religious rites and religious pedagogy, the act of going beyond representations to reach the ultimate reality itself is for the mystics the most essential core of mystic experience. This has been the case in the oriental mystic tradition since St. Gregory of Nissa (330-394 AD), according to whom God revealed Himself to Moses in three phases; first in the light of flaming thorns, second in the clouds, third in the darkness. This can be applied to the human soul that begins by searching for God in the concreteness of things, after which the intellect covers over human sensibility like the cloud, thereby preparing the soul for meditation on the hidden God, and at the very last, the soul, having abandoned everything secular, is surrounded by the divine darkness. St. Gregory called this experience of God in the darkness “theognosis.”

Under the influence of St. Gregory, Evagrius Ponticus (346-399) taught that, “When you are praying, do not shape within yourself any image of the deity and do not let your mind be

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<sup>24</sup> In the secular culture of representation today, films, advertising, images, computerized virtual reality etc., are stuffing the mind of younger generations, depriving them of their freedom. The culture of representation today should take the lesson of iconoclasm seriously, and critique of media today should realize this spirit of iconoclasm: to point a way of freedom out of the jungle of images.

shaped by the impress of any form.”<sup>25</sup> For Ponticus, all images, or all representations if you like, possess some materiality, which was unworthy of God immaterial in essence. The individual soul should aim to finally reach the state of union with God, who was the Transcendent Being appearing as pure light; while all images, all impressions, all concepts were material in essence or at least possessed some material traces. Only when the human soul transcended all representations could it be in union with the immaterial God in a spiritual way.

After Evagrius Ponticus, Pseudo-Dionysius also sustained that the soul experiences the divine reality in silence, and this occurs through three phases: first, suspend all sensible and rational representations; second, enter into the unfathomable darkness; finally, enjoy intimate union with God. Pseudo-Dionysius saw the surpassing of representation as a necessary phase for experiencing Divine Reality.

According to these mystic thinkers, it was necessary to surpass representation in order to have mystic union with God. However, to surpass representations does not mean to exclude representations. In fact, pictorial representations, such as icons, and aural representations such as sacred music, may serve as mediation between human everyday experience and mystic experience. In the case of music, when we listen to religious music such as Gregorian chant, or masses and requiem by Mozart, Brahms, Bruckner etc., we are inspired by a passionate longing for the divine sphere, even to the degree of experiencing the Divine Reality at a certain privileged moment. Our profound experience of religious music reveals an element of contrast in our experience of representations. On the one hand, music surpasses concept and language and makes us feel that we are approaching the Reality Itself; on the other hand, music is still an aural representation, which means that the depth of experience evoked by music is not incompatible with representation.

In the same manner, an icon is a pictorial representation that can become the focus of silent meditation and evoke in us a feeling of mystery. As Nicephoras (758-829 AD) claimed, icons are “expressive of the silence of God, exhibiting in themselves the ineffability of a mystery that transcends being. Without ceasing and without speech, they praise the goodness of God in that venerable and thrice-illuminated melody of theology.”<sup>26</sup> From the cases of music and icon, we can say that symbolic representation may serve as a dynamic mediation from our ordinary experience to mystic experience.

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<sup>25</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, *On Prayer*, p.67, quoted from Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, (London: Mandarin, 1993), p.255.

<sup>26</sup> Nicephoras, *Greater Apology for the Holy Images*, p.70, quoted from Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, pp. 257-258.



I should add here that the essence of Chinese philosophy, with its spiritual and mystic dimension, depends on this dynamic contrast between unfathomability and representability. Laozi made this clear at the beginning of the *Daodejing* when he said that, “*Dao* could be said, however the said *dao* is not the constant *dao*. Name could be named, however the namable name could not be the constant name.”<sup>27</sup> The same holds in Buddhism, where it is said that the experience of Emptiness (*sunyata*), or the One Mind, or the One Pure Mind, is unsayable, unthinkable. However, when Chinese Mahayana Buddhism says that ultimate reality has a transcendent character, still there is a tension created by the dynamic contrast of mystic experience and its possible representations.

It is most interesting to observe that Chinese landscape painting emphasizes the philosophical idea that “landscape manifests *dao*.” How does *dao* the ultimate reality manifest itself in paintings? Philosophically speaking, there seems to be two procedures: first, *dao* manifests itself into space, and then *qi* appears, giving birth to bodies, life, energy and change, so that finally there is landscape and scenery for human beings to appreciate. Second, Chinese landscape paintings are themselves pictorial representations creatively produced by artists who observe landscape and form sensible representations using their eyes and minds, which, through the transformation of human “spirit,” become manifestations of *dao*. It is through *dao* that both painters and viewers of landscape paintings are able to purify their mind in order to experience the representations of *dao* in the landscape as the manifestation of *dao*. In this sense, Chinese landscape paintings somehow serve as representations manifesting the ultimate reality.

Let me wrap up: mystic experience itself should be an experience that surpasses all kinds of representation, given that it is a moment of being in union with the ultimate reality. However, this experience does not exclude representation. On the contrary, either before or after the occurrence of a mystic experience, some representations, especially symbolic ones, could serve as mediation between ordinary experience and mystic experience. The destruction of images and the denial of representations is only a response to the necessity of surpassing representations in pictorial and icon form, but does not signify thereby that mystic experience excludes any representations. Indeed, it is clear that mystic experience is compatible with representations. The human soul may even come to attain the Mysterious Mystery through the dynamic mediation of symbolic representations. The surpassing of representation and the attainment of experience of Reality may be achieved through the use of symbolic

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<sup>27</sup> *Laozi Sizhong* 老子四種, (Four Versions of Laozi), (Taipei: Da An Bookstore, 1999), Chapter 1. p.1. English translation mine.

representations. Furthermore, the unfathomable richness of mystic experience may even be expressed by using symbolic representations, in a way similar to that of thought concretized in writings. This is the crucial metaphysical and epistemological conditions upon which it is possible for us to study mysticism or to say anything about mysticism.

#### IV. Purification and Embodiment

Many mystic masters affirm the necessity of surpassing human sensibility, even to the extent of asceticism, in such a way that the role of the human body seems to be minimized. In this context, we have to ask: is there any positive role for the human body in the mystic experience?

As I see it, if the spiritual exercise of any religious practice requires a radical negation of body, with all manners of asceticism, even masochism, it is a token of weakness of one's soul, not a showcase of strength of will, so as to be assured of its own strength by the negation of body, the gift from God as *Imago Dei*. This negation presupposes, on the ontological level, a body-mind dualism; on the moral level, the negation of human desire for a life of sanity; and on the theological level, the misunderstanding of the doctrine of incarnation.

However, even without the above presuppositions, we can still take the surpassing of body and ascetic practice merely as methodological necessity. On this point, St. John of the Cross seems to hold a more balanced view. In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*, he envisions a journey through of a darkness of the senses, prior to the darkness of the soul. His first *Stanza* reads as follows,

*One dark night,  
Fired with love's urgent longings,  
--Ah. the sheer grace!--  
I went out unseen,  
My house being know all stilled.*<sup>28</sup>

In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St. John of the Cross explains this stanza in the following way:

*In this stanza the soul desires to declare in a summary fashion that it departed on a*

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<sup>28</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kicran Kavanaugh O.C.D. And Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D., (Washington D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), p. 68

*dark night, attracted by God and enkindled with love for Him alone....All this deprivation is wrought in the purgation of the sense. That is why the poem proclaims that the soul departed when the house was stilled, for the appetites of the sensory part was stilled and asleep in the soul, and the soul was still in them. One is not freed from the suffering and anguish of the appetites until they are tempered and put to sleep.<sup>29</sup>*

St. John of the Cross does not hold a position of body-mind dualism, as we can see clearly in these words: “the appetite of the sensory part was stilled and asleep in the soul, and the soul was still in them.” Here the metaphor of ‘sleeping’ gives us an impression of body-soul harmony, although not without some tension between the two. The necessity for purgation of the senses and surpassing of the body constitute merely a methodological necessity, in order for the human soul to be freed from sufferings and from the anguish of unfulfilled appetite, not at all an ontological position. In this mystic experience, there is no discrimination of a detestable body from a pure soul.

On this point, Daoist spirituality is very similar. On the one hand, it emphasizes the bracketing together of all our kinesthetic and perceptual activities, intellectual reasoning and conceptualization, social norms and values; but, on the other hand, it is a spiritual practice beginning with the control of body posture and breathing, in order to diminish one’s desire and to prepare for an intuition of the essence of all things. In chapter 10 of the *Daodejing*, Laozi clearly describes the procedure leading towards the intuition of essence.

*Can you keep your ying(營) (spiritual soul) and po(魄)( bodily soul) united in embracing the One without letting them be separated?*

*Can you concentrate your qi(氣) (vital force) and reach the highest degree of suppleness like an infant?*

*Can you clean and purify your speculative mirror so it becomes spotless?*

*Can you love the people and govern the state without resorting to actions?*

*Can you play the role of the female in serving to the opening and closing of the Gate of Heaven?*

*When you understand and penetrate into the four great realms of beings, can you know them not intellectually?<sup>16</sup>*

This text describes Daoist spiritual practice step by step. Let me analyze these steps in the following way:

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.74

<sup>16</sup> Laozi Sizhong., Ch.10, p. 7. English translation mine.

1. First, one has to keep one's spiritual soul and bodily soul united in embracing the One. Here, *ying* (營) means linguistically the same as *hun* (魂) which is the spiritual soul, whereas *po* (魄) means bodily soul that, when tranquil, assures and preserves external human shape. In our daily movements, these two souls function separately, which is why according to Laozi, one has to keep them united in embracing the One, which is *dao*.

2. Second, one has to regulate one's breathing and concentrate on one's vital life-force. Through breathing most naturally, one purifies one's spirit of all disturbing mental representations and false consciousness, and, more positively, one returns to the original state of one's vital life-force and becomes as supple as an infant, which is a metaphor for the original state of human existence.

3. Third, one should cleanse and purify one's own consciousness, using a method similar to that of phenomenological reduction, so as to render the human spirit as clear and spotless as a mystic mirror. Through this mystic mirror one can have intuition into the nature of all things by letting them be themselves. Intuition of essence is therefore the ultimate outcome of this act of "cleansing and purifying." However, for Laozi, to have intuition of the essence of all things is not for the purpose of determining them in science. Instead, it is to see them returning to their origin and becoming thereby authentically themselves. Thus the concept is different from Husserl's *Wesensschau*.<sup>30</sup>

4. After having accomplished the three steps of self-cultivation above, one may proceed to the matters of loving the people and governing the state. The principle for these is given here as the principle of no-action, which means no particular actions disturbing people but nevertheless leaving nothing undone.

5. Then we reach the higher level of serving Heaven. Here Laozi proposes the principle of femininity, passivity and weakness. In Chapter 40 of the *Daodejing*, Laozi says, "Reversion is the action of *dao*. Weakness is the function of *dao*." This means that one should passively

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<sup>30</sup> For me, even if Laozi uses a method similar to Husserl's phenomenological reduction, and also obtains the result of *Wesensschau*, the *Wesensschau* of Laozi is still quite different from that of Husserl. The *Wesensschau* of Husserl consists of a fulfilling gaze on the *eidōs* of things by an impartial pure ego. On the other hand, Laozi has already transcended the self-limit of human subjectivity and therefore transcended the presupposition of a pure ego and gone beyond the limits of any philosophy of subjectivity. Also, it is not a fulfilling gaze on the essence of things. His *Wesensschau* is resulted from an attitude of letting things be the way they are. It lets things manifest themselves in their own ways. What Laozi proposes here is to let *dao* itself manifest itself in the way itself manifests itself. For Laozi, this is the real function of the "mystic mirror." The "mystic mirror" achieves its highest function only when it renders manifest Dao or the Being of things in themselves. Laozi's *Wesensschau* is therefore resulted from *Seinlassen*, letting Being be Itself, and not as in Husserl's case, according to which *Wesensschau* is resulted from a dominating regard of the essence of things by our subjectivity. This reminds us of what Laozi says: "To let the being of body manifest itself, that is the way we intuit the essence of body. To let the being of family manifest itself, that is the way we intuit the essence of family. To let the community manifest its own being, that is the way we intuit the essence of community. To let the being of country manifest itself, that is the way we intuit the essence of country. Let the being of all-under-heaven manifest themselves, that is the way we intuit the essence of all-under-heaven."

follow the way of *dao* and act in total accordance with its demand, without any strong will of one's own, and without any desire of domination. Let *dao* be Itself. Here we encounter the most profound mystic experience of Daoism: to follow *dao* with the highest degree of passivity, to let the rhythm of *dao* pour into and fill up one's own mind, and to let one's mind be brought away by it. That is to say, to abandon one's tiny self in the rhythmic, spontaneous movement of the Great *dao*.

Zhuangzi speaks about something similar when he says that the Daoist life praxis begins from a spontaneous way of deep breathing, to the point of minimizing desire and its unconscious expressions through dreams, care or gluttony. Zhuangzi said,

*The true men of old slept without dreaming, and woke up without worries. .. For true men draw breathes from their heels; the vulgar only from their throats. Out of the crooked, words are retched like vomit. When man's attachments are deep, their divine endowments are shallow.*<sup>31</sup>

We can interpret this text by reference to Freudian psychoanalysis. For Freud, dreaming was a veiled expression of one's unconscious desires. For Zhuangzi, indulgence of one's desires would render shallow one's sensitivity to the workings of Heaven. However, by a profound and natural way of breathing, as deep as breathing with one's heels - this is a metaphorical way of saying the *daoist* method of *dazhoutian* (Great Heavenly Circle) breathing - one may minimize one's desire to the point of sleeping without dreaming, waking without daily care and eating without indulging.

As seen from the above, the surpassing of bodily and sensorial functions has only a methodological status, without any necessity to refer to an ontological dualism. If the surpassing of bodily sensations and movement could be used as a method, the return to an affirmation of bodily movement could also be seen as a method. This may also be seen in Christianity in the tradition of body spirituality that began with Evagrius Ponticus. In the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, Diodocius taught a sort of Christian Yoga, using the method of concentration through the control of breathing: as they inhaled, the hasychasts would pray, "Jesus Christ, Son of God." Then, when they exhaled, they would say the words, "Have mercy upon us."

This kind of Christian Yoga is also a spirituality that unifies body and mind, causing the mystics to feel a sense of integral human and divine union. In regard to this, Maximum the Confessor said, "The whole man should become God, deified by God-become-man,

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<sup>31</sup> *Zhuangzi Jishi*, p. 103. English translation by Lin Yutang, *Zhuangtzu*, p. 34

becoming whole man, soul and body, by nature and becoming whole God, soul and body, by grace.”<sup>32</sup> This is indeed a body-mind spirituality bringing out the divinity in the human. It signifies that there is a certain divine nature within human beings, by which they may become “as perfect as their Father in Heaven.” This was affirmed by Jesus when he said, “Is it not written in your Law: ‘I said, you are gods?’ So the Law uses the word ‘gods’ of those to whom the word of God was addressed, and scripture cannot be rejected.”<sup>33</sup> The divinity within human beings is therefore related ontologically to God. It may be seen as the inner light, the locus of enlightenment, of human existence; just as in the case of Buddhism, the Buddha nature of each human and sentient being is the source of his/her enlightenment. The final end of this spirituality is the sanctification or deification, not the negation, of the human body. Its paradigm is Jesus’ transfiguration on the Mount of Tabor.

Thus, we can say that the negation of body only serves as a method, and that the positive use of body movement can also serve as a method for obtaining mystic experience. This possibility brings to light the ontological meaning of body-mind unity.

## V. Conclusion

From the above philosophical reflections on comparing Christian mysticism and Chinese spirituality, we can clearly see that both traditions show a common concern with experience of the ultimate reality. They share the idea that mystic experience, in its emptiness and darkness, is not a totally silent experience without any possibility of dialogue. On the contrary, mystic experience begins with dialogue, climaxes in loving dialogue and should return finally to dialogue. Moreover, mystic experience can be achieved by surpassing all representations, but they do not exclude representations, which may make ultimate reality accessible to human understanding. For both traditions, symbolic representations not only prepare for the advent of mystic experience, but they also express this experience and thereby leave some traces behind that other people to come may follow. Also, mystic experience needs not deny the body and presupposes a dualistic body/mind opposition. The negation of the body has only the status of a method, just as the positive use of the body is a method when it performs meditation and rites.

My analysis attempts to make mysticism and spirituality compatible with reason in a

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<sup>32</sup> Maximum the Confessor, *Ambiguorum Liber*, in *Patrologia cursus completus, series graeca*, Vol. 91, (Paris: Migne, 1863), p. 1088.

<sup>33</sup> *John*, 10, 34-35 in *Jerusalem Bible, New Testament*, p.170, In *Psalms*, 82:6, it reads, “I once said, ‘You too are gods, son of the Most High, all of you.’” *Jerusalem Bible, Old Testament*, p.867. Here the term “gods” in the context of *Psalms* may have other connotations. Thus we should be more careful about its interpretation, and notice the fact that the term “gods” meant by *Psalms* 82:6 could be interpreted as other Canaanite pagan gods. Nevertheless, in *John*, 10, 34-35, Jesus’ words “You are all gods” meant human beings are also gods, because of the fact that they are children of God.

broad sense: they become reasonable human practices and experiences that are not in the least irrational. Therefore, both Christian mysticism and Chinese spirituality are deeply related to our ordinary human life. They fulfill reason rather than deny reason. Both traditions work to promote the human spirit from within ordinary human life, and at the end they should return to the world of everyday life. Under the inspiration of both traditions, that is, Christian and Chinese, mystic experience and spiritual practices should open up new horizons, create new forms of human self-understanding in the life world and take the deepening and sanctification of humanity as their final end.

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