

# INDISTINCT UNION

## *An Integral Introduction to Nonduality in Christianity*

Christopher Dierkes

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**ABSTRACT** This article explores the work of Bernadette Roberts, a little-known contemporary Catholic Christian mystic. I analyze her work as a basis for a renewed and complete Christian map of mystical consciousness for the contemporary era. Through her experience, Roberts lays the foundation for a native Christian nonduality. Nonduality (or in Christian terms, *indistinct union*) is not described in traditional Christian mystical maps. This article argues for the inclusion and legitimacy of nonduality in Christian spiritual life. The article then focuses on the path of individual states. A fully integral analysis of Christian spirituality would include all elements of the Integral model (i.e., quadrants, levels, lines, states, and types); this article is intended to be an introductory contribution to a much larger project.

**KEY WORDS:** Christianity; indistinct union; mysticism; nonduality; state-stages

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The classic map of Christian mysticism comes from Dionysius (1987, p. 195), writing somewhere between the fifth and sixth centuries C.E. Dionysius argues that the Christian mystical path consists of three stages: purification, illumination, and union. *Purification* (sometimes called purgation) is the beginning of spiritual life: it is the taking on of discipline, usually moral in nature, helping purify the self and preparing it for the spiritual transformation to come. *Illumination* is the next phase. Generally it is here where the budding contemplative may begin to experience a deeper kind of knowing and subtlety to experience. This phase of the journey is the home of classic descriptions of spiritual visions or auditions, although the primary effect at this stage is contact with one's deepest self (traditionally called the soul). Finally, there is the stage of *union*, which is the culmination of one's identity shifting to the Real Self, the soul as it experiences its maker (God) at deeper levels of mutual knowing, until the soul is finally and irrevocably united with God.

While the imagery of light dominates the illumination phase, the union phase deploys language of darkness and unknowing. In the experience of being united with God, the soul loses its ability to know anything else and falls into a state the Christian tradition calls *The Cloud of Unknowing*. As Dionysius himself said, the light from the illuminative phase becomes so bright it "knocks out" the mystic (Dionysius, 1987). It is, he said, a dazzling or luminous darkness.

### The AQAL Model

One of the key components of The AQAL framework is the concept of states.<sup>1</sup> States of consciousness are what an individual experiences in his first-person phenomenological experience. States are the lived inner content of daily experience. This immediate felt sense distinguishes states from other core elements of the

**Correspondence:** Christopher Dierkes, 2206 West 18th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V6L 1A6, Canada. *E-mail:* dierkes.chris@gmail.com.

AQAL framework like levels (structures) and types. “Notice that whereas I can experience states, I don’t experience structures per se.... States, on the other hand, are directly available to awareness, under various circumstances. I experience states, not structures” (Wilber, 2006, pp. 72-73).

According to Ken Wilber, states are temporary experiences that come and go. There are many kinds of states (e.g., emotional states, daydreaming, non-ordinary states such as intoxication, meditative states). Wilber (2000) writes, “States themselves rarely show development, and their occurrence is often random; yet they seem to be some of the most profound experiences human beings ever encounter” (p. 2). This tendency to come and go may include extraordinary spiritual states. When one undertakes the spiritual life, however, there may be movement toward a more permanent developmental capacity for states. When this developmental pattern takes place, Wilber (2006) calls these *state-stages*—states that develop in a stage-like manner (pp. 74-75). According to Wilber (2006), “Even though the major natural states of being and consciousness are said to be available to all humans, at all stages [of development], this doesn’t mean that they can’t be trained and exercised” (p. 75).

Because of both the profundity and pervasiveness of states, the contemplative and mystical traditions of the world have often created very detailed and sophisticated cartographies of states. The AQAL framework argues—using the language of Vedanta Hinduism and Vajrayana Buddhism—that there are four great states of consciousness. These four higher states are: waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and nondual (Wilber, 2000, p. 2). The nondual is not so much a separate state as it is the *is-ness*, or essence, of the other three states. Corresponding then to the three states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep are three body energies: gross, subtle, and causal. Sometimes for brevity, the mystical states are referred to as gross, subtle, and causal, although technically it should be remembered they are state-bodies: waking-gross, dreaming-subtle, and deep sleep-causal (Wilber, 2000, p.2). In integral terms, state-bodies are the interior individual (Upper-Left quadrant) and exterior individual (Upper-Right quadrant) dimensions of any moment of experience.

## AQAL and Dionysius

I argue that by comparing the maps of both Wilber and Dionysius we see a strong correspondence between the first three state-stages in both systems. In other words, purification, illumination, and union correspond nearly perfectly with waking-gross, dreaming-subtle, and deep sleep-causal. The words *correspond* and *nearly* in the previous sentence are doing some very important conceptual and linguistic heavy lifting. Correspondence does not equal identification. The Christian path of purification, illumination, and union is not identical to the Buddhist-Hindu paths of gross, subtle, and causal. They are, however, very similar (Brown et al., 1986). For the purpose of making helpful comparisons and for ease of understanding I will use terms like *gross* and *purification* interchangeably, but it should be remembered technically they are not identical but rather correspond very closely.

Purification is disciplining of the waking body-mind, after which one undertakes more serious life of prayer and meditation, illuminating the subtle capacities. Finally, one enters into the Cloud of Unknowing, resting in God as ground of being, an experience beyond awareness of time and space, as in deep, dreamless sleep. There is one element missing in Dionysius’ description that is contained in the Vedanta-Vajrayana description (i.e., the fourth, or nondual, state). Here the teachings of Bernadette Roberts (b. 1931) come into our discussion. Roberts describes through her own experience going beyond the third state-stage of Christian union to a new reality, one she did not know about prior to her transformation. She did not know about the nondual because she had learned and been trained in the contemplative traditional three state-stage path of Dionysius.

Her description of a state beyond union fills in the missing fourth state, nonduality, for Christianity.

## **Bernadette Roberts and Integral Spirituality**

Roberts' style is quite direct, at points almost shockingly so. She has a unique gift and vantage point on the subject (remembering of course that the experience to be described is beyond and inclusive of all vantage points). Roberts was raised in the traditional threefold Dionysian Christian mystical path, specifically as it had been handed down by the Roman Catholic Church from 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish Carmelites mystics Saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Roberts therefore knew nothing of nonduality prior to her transformation.<sup>2</sup> Her work, as a result, is remarkably vivid and free of prejudice.

In her Introduction to *The Experience of No-Self* (1993), Roberts writes:

Within the traditional framework, the Christian notion of loss-of-self is generally regarded as the transformation or loss of the ego (lower self) as it attains the higher or true self in its union with God. In this union, however, self retains its individual uniqueness and never loses its ontological sense of personal selfhood... From here on, the deepest sense of being and life is equally the sense of God's being and life. There is no longer any sense of "my" life but rather "our" life—God and self. In this abiding state God, the "still-point" at the center of being, is ever accessible to the contemplative gaze—a point from which the life of self arises and into which it sometimes disappears. But this latter experience of loss-of-self is only transient, it does not constitute a permanent state, nor did it occur to me that it could even do so in this life. (p. 9)

Descriptions of higher state-stages aside, this paragraph is a wonderful synopsis of the traditional threefold Christian mystical path. Although Roberts stresses the reality of a stage beyond causal union, she is no way denigrates the traditional Christian contemplative goal of the individual soul in union with God. In fact, Roberts goes so far as to say that her view is that God desires all adults to live the majority of their adult life in the stage of union (early-mid causal)! In other words, Roberts recognizes that not everyone will be called to what she calls *no-self*. In her view, nonetheless, every baptized Christian can be brought to the stage of contemplative union in this present life.

This assertion is compatible with the entire 1,500-year stream of Christian mystical tradition, both East and West, following Dionysius. This tradition, as noted by Father Thomas Keating, was in many ways lost in the Western world after the Reformation and Counter-Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Fathers of the Church up through the Middle Ages continually emphasized that contemplative union was the goal of the spiritual life for every Christian. Second, Roberts believed that prior to her transformation, experiences of a total loss of self were only temporary. This temporary loss of self is the experience of The Cloud of Unknowing. John of the Cross (1991) similarly acknowledges temporary moments of loss of self in his path, but never seems to have discovered that higher state as a possibly permanent or quasi-permanent state of being.

Roberts spent 10 years as a nun in a cloistered order, spending hours each day in prayer and meditation. Roberts (1992) describes how the work of John of the Cross was a major influence on her. From an integral perspective, what practice of prayer an individual undertakes influences what experiences that individual will have. According to Wilber (2000), life is "enacted"—there is an experience or exemplar, an actual thing

that one does that helps reveal an experience (p. 267). Roberts took on the classic forms of Christian unitive through her practice of silent, surrendering prayer to the presence and action of God advocated by John of the Cross.

In an integral understanding, every moment consists of interior and exterior, individual and collective experience (Wilber, 2006, pp. 20-21). As such, spirituality, like all endeavors in life, is, in part, an intersubjective affair. Wilber (2006) argues that bringing in the intersubjective dimension of life to the spiritual process brings traditional contemplative spirituality in line with postmodern currents that emphasize cultural conditioning and the intrinsically linguistic nature of existence (pp. 46-49). This postmodern turn within spirituality allows us to connect Dionysius through John of the Cross to Bernadette Roberts. Though each of these three come from radically different historical time periods, this cultural formation of mystical prayer, this intersubjective tradition that was passed down, interpreted, and practiced, puts Roberts in a thread connecting her to Dionysius. Nevertheless, Roberts would begin to experience something in her spiritual life that she had no framework to understand, as it was not covered by the traditions of Dionysius and John of the Cross in which she was raised and trained.

Wilber's (2006) work describes three strands to all good knowledge: injunction, experience, and communal confirmation and rejection. Integral scholar-practitioner Mark Edwards (2000) adds a fourth moment, interpretation, located in the cycle after experience and before communal confirmation. In interpretation, the enacted experience is interpreted, understood, and fit within a framework (the Lower-Left quadrant). That interpretive framework is what is communally rejected/confirmed, and when confirmed brought into a form of social action and social authority structure (Lower-Right quadrant) that validates this set of practice-experience-interpretation. Again, the concept of a learning cycle helps incorporate an intersubjective, post-metaphysical, postmodern element to spiritual practice and understanding.

Taking those four moments in the cycle of learning into account, we can contextualize Bernadette Roberts' path. Roberts' path consisted of two major (and qualitatively different) sections: 1) her path in the traditional three state-stage Christian contemplation, and 2) her more radical fourth or nondual stage of awareness. Both of these periods of Roberts' spiritual life can be charted on the four strands of learning from Edwards (action, experience, interpretation, and communal confirmation/rejection).

Roberts undertook the practice of prayer advocated by John of the Cross, which consisted of surrendering silently and interiorly to the presence and action of God, allowing God to change her and bring her into union with God's self. The experience of that contemplative journey is one that she describes in her book *Path to No-Self* (1992). Her interpretation of that experience followed in near exact detail that of John of the Cross, as she herself admits. In terms of her communal confirmation or rejection, her novice mistress—representing the authority of her tradition during her time as a nun—was worried that Roberts was becoming a heretic (Roberts, 1992, p. 57) after Roberts described her experience of prayer. Roberts, however, came to trust the writings of the John of the Cross providing her a sense of validation and confirmation within the Christian tradition.

When we come to Roberts' experience of nonduality, things are somewhat different. She did have a practice (an injunction) that will be explored below, explained in her book *The Experience of No Self* (Roberts, 1993). The book is a remarkable text in terms of her clear descriptions of her experience. In both this text and her earlier book, *What is Self* (1989), Roberts focuses heavily on her interpretation of her enacted experience in Christian nonduality. Where Roberts had tremendous difficulty with her nondual experience was in the last

moment of the learning cycle: communal verification. Her work had no place within the accepted practice-based, experientially grounded, and interpretatively understood tradition of Christian spirituality. Below I describe her practice leading toward indistinct union (nonduality), her description of that experience, her interpretation of the meaning of this event, and try to put it within a frame of communal acceptance within the Christian tradition.

### ***A Note on Roberts' Language: Two Forms of Union***

Before diving into an exploration of Bernadette Roberts' writing and experience of nonduality, a linguistic and conceptual clarification is in order. Roberts uses the terms *union* and *oneness* to refer to the experience of both causal and nondual mysticism. Her writing clearly differentiates two forms of mysticism as of two completely different orders: one relative (causal union) and one absolute (nondual). The use of the term *union* to refer to both experiences, however, is quite confusing. In this regard, Roberts echoes the work of the great historian of Christian mysticism Bernard McGinn. McGinn's *The Presence of God*, a multi-volume history of Western Christian mysticism (the greatest single set of texts on the subject), distinguishes two kinds of Christian mysticism. McGinn calls these two forms of mysticism *union of spirits* and *indistinct union*. McGinn, like Roberts, includes the term *union* in both kinds of mysticism.

McGinn (1994) states:

The first of these [i.e., casual union], formed in the Latin patristic period and reaching a level of explicit thematization in the twelfth century, held that the soul could attain a loving union of wills with God, an *unitas spirtus* whose basic human analogue was to be found in the embrace of the lovers portrayed in the Song of Songs. (p.12)

This concept of mystical union of wills implies uniting two different and therefore distinct entities—namely the soul and God. Just as two lovers unite into one married couple though each remains a unique individual, so the soul and God unite into one forever-bonded pair—a union of spirits plural. The soul and God are radically different in this causal-unionive space, with love acting as the “glue” bonding them to one another.

This union of spirits (causal state-stage) form of mysticism, while the dominant form of Christian mysticism historically, is not the only one. McGinn (1994) states:

But in the thirteenth century, first among some of the women vernacular theologians, a second form of understanding mystical union began to emerge, a potentially more radical and possibly more questionable understanding which emphasized a goal of “union without difference,” or what in [Meister] Eckhartian terms we can describe as an *unitas indistinctionis*—the insistence that in the ground of reality there is absolute identity between God and the soul. (p. 12)

Note that this language is intrinsic to the Christian tradition. These medieval Christian realizers of nonduality (e.g., Meister Eckhart, Hadewijch of Brabant, Marguerite Porete) did not study Tibetan or Hindu mystical texts. The terminology of an indistinct ground from which both God and the soul arise is their own native language and experience.<sup>3</sup> This point is an important one to keep in mind lest my comparison between the Christian and Eastern mystical traditions be considered an improper boundary violation, superimposing a non-normative outsider (i.e., Eastern) interpretative grid onto the Christian mystical cartography. The ratio-



nale behind employing Vedanta-Vajrayana terminology in this article is to help Christians hear and understand their own tradition better by interacting with an outside (though sympathetic) perspective.

The concept of an indistinct (i.e., non-distinct) form of union is therefore formally paradoxical if not self-contradictory. Indistinct union is a metaphor, a linguistic signifier meant to establish a common world of shared experience mediated through language concerning nonduality. Indistinct union refers to the way in which during the experience one is still completely united to God while at the same time not recognizing oneself is a position separate from God. There is only God all around, within and without, in a kind of “indistinct” nature, without at the same time this oneness being an undifferentiated mush. Rather it is a dynamic vision and opening to the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, where God is “all in all.”

The linguistic terminology concerning this form of mysticism in Christianity is complex. Either we can choose terms from outside the Christian tradition (e.g., nonduality) that in some manner is untrue to the experience itself, or we use the native Christian terminology that has the potential confusion of the use of the word *union* (with qualification) to refer to two different forms of mysticism. The same basic difficulty applies to Roberts’ use of the word *oneness* as seen in the marriage example above. The Ultimate is neither one nor many, so no term is ever perfectly accurate in describing it. As such, what is necessary is for communities of practice who consensually agree on shared terminology to signify certain experiences or insights and then build lineages/traditions that can confirm or disconfirm these insights (Wilber, 2002). With that caveat in mind, I now turn to Roberts’ work.

## The Mystical Compendium of Bernadette Roberts

Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan (1982) summarizes development in a very succinct phrase: “Subject becomes object” (p. 95). In other words, at one stage, one is immersed in her worldview, in her cognitive frame. She is “subject,” in a sense, to her subjective frame. After transformation to a higher level, she can “see” her lower self, her previous notion of self as an object. This same principle of structure-stage development can be applied to state-stage development. Roberts (1993) writes:

Prior to this present journey [to nonduality], I had given little thought to the self, its perimeters and definitions. I took for granted the self was the totality of being, body, and soul, mind and feelings; a being centered in God, its power-axis and still-point. . . . Because this was the limit of my expectations, I was all the more surprised and bewildered when many years later I came upon a permanent state [i.e., a state-stage] in which there was no self, no higher self, or anything that could be called a self. (p. 10)

In other words, what Roberts describes, through the context of her own transformation beyond union, is the transcending and including of the self (i.e., she has made the self, once and for all, an object). She experienced the total objectification of her self. Roberts (1993) further states, “But with the clear certitude of the self’s disappearance, there automatically arose the question of what had fallen away—what was the self? What, exactly, had it been? Then too, there was the all-important question: what remained in its absence?” (p. 11). As she objectified her own self, even her “higher self” or “unitive self,” she came to describe its contours in profound depth, from a very detached position (Roberts, 1992).<sup>4</sup>

I will focus almost exclusively on her answer to the second question—who or what remains after the loss of

self. To provide the reader with a direct sense of her first-person experience, I will quote extensively from her writings throughout the rest of this article. I will use the term *body-mind* as basically equivalent to Roberts' self. The body-mind of "self" consists of the combination of the frontal psychological self and the soul or subtle self. In the terms Roberts uses earlier, the total self consists of both the "false" or egoic self and the "true/real" self of the soul. What Roberts describes in awakening to that which is beyond the self is traditionally called *the spirit* in Christianity.

### ***Loss of Self***

Roberts begins her account describing different forms of silence encountered on her mystical journey. She refers to a new form of silence: "On one occasion, however, this path [the contemplative path of the self] seemed to come to an end when I entered a silence from which I would never totally emerge" (Roberts, 1993, p. 19). Roberts notes that she had previously come very close to this point of no return, but had always felt a subtle contraction of fear that brought her back into her normal union mode of existence. One day, according to her account, the fear never arose and she traveled into the unknown, plunging her on a path from which she would never return the same.

Roberts describes herself alone in a seaside chapel, praying. As usual, the pervasive silence emerges, but this time she does not feel the subtle contraction and self-defense mechanism of fear. Roberts (1993) writes:

Once outside, I fully expected to return to my ordinary energies and thinking mind, but this day I had a difficult time because I was continually falling back into the great silence. For three exhausting days it was a battle to stay awake and ward off the silence that every second threatened to overpower me... Finally I was so exhausted I would have to run for the couch. The moment I lay down I immediately blacked out... In this blackout there were no dreams, no awareness of my surroundings, no thoughts, no experiences—absolutely nothing. (p. 21)

In the Vedanta system, deep dreamless sleep is a state of absolute nothingness—no separate objects or subjects, just a vast, indescribable emptiness. States and their corresponding bodies are ever-present. Everyone from the youngest child to the oldest adult wakes, dreams, and deep sleeps. Of course, most people do so unconsciously. During sleep, the great majority of persons go "unconscious"; they can no longer hold awareness of higher states. If, for example, a person can maintain awareness into the dream state, they experience lucid dreaming. In lucid dreaming, a person is dreaming, and yet is simultaneously aware of the fact that they are dreaming. This awareness brings intrinsic freedom. There is a sense of humor and recognition of the dream as a dream. For a temporary state to become a permanent stage, however, continuous awareness is required. Roberts appears to be here pushing from temporary experiences in the deep dreamless state towards more and more permanent identity in the emptiness of the unknown. At this point, the transition to more and more time spent in pure emptiness took its toll on her physical and emotional strength.

After nine days, Roberts (1993) felt her energy returning, but with the sense that something had permanently disappeared:

But as days went by and I was once more able to function as usual I noticed something was missing, but I couldn't put my finger on it... I turned my gaze inward and what I saw stopped me in my tracks. Instead of the usual unlocalized center

of myself, there was nothing there, it was empty; and at the moment of seeing this there was a flood of quiet joy and I knew, finally I knew what was missing—it was “myself.” (pp. 22-23)

### *The Witness (Turiya)*

After experiencing the loss of self, Roberts went away to the woods to explore this new emptiness. She writes:

Though the center of self was gone, I was sure the remaining emptiness, the silence and joy, was God Himself. Thus on one occasion, with full hedonistic deliberation, I settled myself down and turned my gaze inward. Almost immediately the empty space began to expand, and expanded so rapidly it seemed to explode; then, in the pit of my stomach I had the feeling of falling a hundred floors in a non-stop elevator, and in this fall every sense of life was drained from me. The moment of landing, I knew: *When there is no personal self, there is no personal God.*

I saw clearly how the two go together—and where they went, I have never found out... Around me there was only stillness; I waited and waited for some kind of reaction to set in or something to happen next, but nothing ever did. In me there was no sense of life, no movement and no feeling; finally I realized I no longer had a “within” at all. The moment of falling had been such a complete wipe-out that never again would I have any sense of possessing a life I could call my own—or any other type of life. My interior or spiritual life was finished. There was no more gazing within; from now on my eyes could only look outward. (Roberts, 1993, p. 25)

With the loss of inner looking, and the turnaround of focus to the outside, Roberts’ seeing became more and more acute. After time spent outdoors, nature revealed herself to Roberts (1993):

It was here that nature finally yielded its secret to me in a simple, still moment in which I saw how it all worked. God or life was not *in* anything, it was just the reverse: everything was in God.... You cannot separate anything from God, for as soon as you let go of the notion of separateness, everything falls back into the wholeness of God and life. (p. 29)

Roberts (1993) continued to experience increasing and increasing levels of clarity in her “outward” looking:

I was standing on the hillside looking down over the ocean when a seagull came into view, gliding, dipping, playing with the wind. I watched it as I had never watched anything before in my life. I almost seemed to be mesmerized; it was as I was watching myself flying, for there was not the usual division between us. Yet something more was there than just a lack of separateness, “something” truly beautiful and unknowable...there was no division, only something “there” that was flowing with and through every vista and particular object of vision. To see the Oneness of everything is like having special 3-D glasses put before your eyes; I thought to myself: for sure, this is what they mean when they say “God IS Everywhere.” (p. 32)



And:

After discovering God Everywhere—or His Oneness, as I called it—I was compensated a thousandfold for the bewildering loss of a personal God within. It seems I had first to move through the personal and then the impersonal before I realized God was closer than either and beyond them both. (Roberts, 1993, p. 33)

What exactly are these 3-D glasses, this impersonal God? In Christianity, God is trinitarian (i.e., three persons in one nature). The three persons of the trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—are one essence, one divinity or one Godhead. By “the impersonal,” Roberts means Godhead. In the Vedanta-Vajrayana system, I mostly refer to the three great state-bodies (waking, dreaming, deep sleep—gross, subtle, causal) and then to the fourth, the nondual. Technically, however, this model points to the fourth, the Witness (*Turiya* in Sanskrit), and then the fifth, *Turiyatita* (nonduality). The Witness is that which “witnesses” the three states. It is, however, described as the final, very subtle, point of separation. In the Witness, duality remains between the Witness (emptiness, consciousness itself) and the witnessed (form). Wilber (2004) writes:

The Witness is not identified with the ego or with any other mental object, it just impartially witnesses all objects. But that’s just it: the Witness is still separate from all objects that it witnesses. In other words, there is still a very subtle form of the subject/object dualism. The Witness is a huge step forward, and it is a necessary and important step in meditation, but it is not ultimate. (p. 24)

Roberts (1993) depicts the “seeing” and real import of the Witness thus:

I soon noticed that when I visually focused in on a flower, an animal, another person, or any particular object, slowly the particularity would recede into a nebulous Oneness, so that the object’s distinctness was lost to my mind.... It is truly marvelous how this works, it is a unique type of experience, but I repeat, the marvel of it isn’t the loss of individuality of the object observed; rather, the marvel is *that* into which it blends and ultimately disappears. For now I called *that* Oneness—and of course, “God.” (pp. 36-37)

Roberts (1993), however, notes that this experience was not the final word: “It [the 3-D glasses, Witness] not only remained as a permanent irreversible fixture of perception, but it seemed to be the necessary vehicle by which I eventually came to the final ‘seeing’ [i.e., nonduality]” (p. 36).

Wilber (1981), quoting Sages of the East, describes the Witness as absolute subjectivity, as a seer who can never be seen (p. 54). Compare that with the following statement by Roberts (1993):

The mysterious aspect of this type of seeing was that while I could focus on the objects around me, I could never focus on myself. To do so would have been as impossible as looking into my eyes without a mirror. For this reason, *I felt like an outside observer looking upon a Oneness that included everything but myself*. It was as if I was not a part of this Oneness, not even a part of the universe; in fact, I couldn’t see where I had any existence at all. (emphasis added) (p. 38)

### *The Great Death*

The dissolving of the Witness is the final plunge from separation and relativity into the absolute unknown. Zen masters call this final transformation *the Great Death*. Roberts, after having realized and rested sufficiently in the Witness, described the final, horrific death reflex of the self. The oneness looked upon by the Witness suddenly became more and more “empty” until Roberts (1993) could no longer sense any life anywhere:

If the constant sight of emptiness was tedious and difficult to live with, it was as nothing compared to what I came upon one morning as I walked along the beach. Suddenly, I was aware that all life around me had come to a complete standstill. Everywhere I looked, instead of life, I saw a hideous nothingness invading and strangling the life out of every object and vista in sight. It was a world being choked to death by an insidious void whereby every remaining movement was but the final throes of death. (p. 46)

Roberts (1993) continued with her life, cognizant of impending doom: “What I had to deal with now, was this frozen self, the very idea of which could be personified as ‘icy fingers’ of an unknown terror and dread that had a way of appearing when my mind was unoccupied.” (p. 51). After attempting to avoid the “icy fingers,” Roberts (1993) finally faced them down:

Initially, my reaction was only the appearance of goose bumps with a shudder now and then, but later my head grew hot, so hot, in fact, it felt like it was on fire and visually, all I could see were stars. Then I felt my feet begin to freeze with the freezing sensation spreading upward to encompass all but my head. Finally I fell back against the hill in a convulsive condition with my heart beating wildly... I was not aware of the moment when the dreadful thing [the self] departed, for the next thing I was aware of was a profound stillness wherein there was no physical sensation at all. After a while, something must have turned my head because I found myself looking eye-level at a small, yellow wildflower no more than twelve inches away. I cannot describe the moment of seeing, words could never do it justice. Let us just say it smiled—like a smile of welcome from the whole universe. (p. 55)

This experience, however, did not bring back the sense of joy lost. Roberts (1993) writes, “Apart from the absence of the dreadful thing which I never saw again, I came up the hill without any sense of true existence” (p. 66). Her sense of loss was complete:

Though I searched everywhere in what should have been my being, I now felt there was nothing substantial there, nothing left that I had not experienced as either dissolving or suddenly disappearing, leaving nothing in its place. As for “that” which remained, I had no idea what it was, or even, if it was. (p. 66)

Roberts calls her entrance into this final phase before ultimate enlightenment *the Great Passageway*. Referring to the Great Passageway-Death, Roberts (1993) states, “This state cannot be compared to a Dark Night, it is more (and far worse) than the purification of the mind and will in its ignorance of the Unknown; rather, it is a radical state wherein the mind cannot dwell on anything known or unknown” (p. 66).

The term *Dark Night* refers to the work of St. John of the Cross. John of the Cross in his mystical map talked

of two dark nights: The Dark Night of Sense and the Dark Night of the Soul. The latter of those two terms is better known in spiritual circles, but is often misunderstood. The Dark Nights are, in integral terms, the transition points between various state-stages. Movement from one stage to another always requires a metaphorical death and resurrection. The Dark Nights are the death experiences, as one's self-identity "dies" from one state-stage and "rises" to another. The Dark Night of Sense represents the shift from gross to subtle and the Dark Night of the Soul from subtle to causal (Wilber, 2006, p. 99). At each transformational shift, one's identity has to be stripped of attachment to that state. That pain caused by that stripping and the loss of a sense of direction is the Dark Night. One cannot go back to the old comfortable identity but has not yet reached a new stable identity in the next higher state-stage. The reason Roberts' Great Passageway is not a Dark Night is that it is not a purification of the self, either of its gross (Dark Night of Sense) nor its subtle (Dark Night of Soul) tendencies. If it were anything, it would be called, following Wilber (2006, p. 99), *The Dark Night of the Self*. The self, however, is not being purified in this death but rather the tendency to identify with the self is being dropped entirely.

Whatever the exact nature of the transition, Roberts (1993) eventually reached her limit:

So this was the end of the line. I had finally come upon the great truth: that all was void; that self has merely filled in the void; and that all man's words were empty labels foraged by a mind that doesn't know a thing about its world and cannot tolerate a state of unknowing. (p. 77)

### ***The Revelation of the Nondual (Turiyatita)***

Roberts consigned herself to the inevitability of life in the nothingness, but she was in for yet another surprise. There was one more thing to be revealed:

I walked down and sat on the river's edge, watching the dead wood in its speedy descent to the sea. With neither reason nor provocation a smile emerged on my face, and in the split second of recognition I "saw"—finally I saw and knew I had seen. I knew: *the smile itself, that which smiled, and that at which it smiled, were One.* (Roberts, 1993, pp. 72-73)

The enlightened mind, so it is said, is always already the case (Wilber, 2006, p. 74). It is the natural state. Compare Roberts (1993): "If there was anything marvelous or spectacular about this seeing, it was the fact that everything was as usual and that nothing had changed, because it meant that I too was as usual and had arrived at the end of the passage, normal, whole, and sane" (p. 73).

In relative terms, The causal is God/spirit as the highest source. The nondual is spirit as the essence, the isness, or the formless condition of all form. In Roberts' words, "The smile is neither the unknown subject or object, yet it is identical with it. It is the aspect of the Unknown which is obviously manifest" (p. 73). With the total loss of self, the relative sense of judgment falls away as well. Roberts notes, "It was as if the moment of its vanishing was also the final and complete close-down of the relative mind" (p. 76).

Only after self dropped did Roberts (1993) claim to understand its inner workings. The immovable, temporary "no-self" was seen in retrospect to be as equally dependent as a self-notion:

Originally the awareness of no-self was merely the awareness of the absence of self with all its habitual reactions, feelings, movements, thoughts and experiences. For this reason the awareness of no-self is purely relative to what was—to self that is.... This means that there is no more awareness of the silent, still, immovable no-self that was necessary for making the journey—especially in the Great Passageway.<sup>5</sup> (p. 84)

I will conclude this section with Roberts' (1993) final words on her journey:

Nevertheless, if there is any aspect of this journey I would stress or emphasize, it is the necessity of coming to terms with the void and nothingness of existence which, for me, seemed to be the equivalent of living my life without God or any such substitute. Only when this came about, when the acclimation to a life without an ultimate reality was complete, with no hope or trust remaining, only when I had finally to accept what is, did I suddenly realize that what is *Is* Truth itself and all that *Is*. (p. 84)

## **Roberts and Christian Theology: Two Forms of Mysticism**

To understand Roberts' mystical theology, a basic distinction of hers needs to be understood (i.e., the radical difference between union and that beyond union). Roberts (1989) asserts:

So it is important to distinguish the difference between our human oneness with God (also the historical Christ's experience) and the much further and very different Trinitarian oneness of Christ's Godhead. One will lead to the other but one is not the other. What we experience in the unitive state[-stage] is not the Trinitarian oneness; rather, it is consciousness' or self's experience of oneness with the divine—a purely human experience. The Trinity or Godhead, however, lies beyond self or [subject-object] consciousness and all its experiences of the divine. The divine nature, neither is, nor has, [self] consciousness; thus our human experience of oneness with the divine (consciousness' experience that is) is not the Godhead's experience or condition of existence. (p. 132)

The foundation of this two-tier mysticism, she notes, is inherent in the dual natures of Christ. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., which articulated the final description of the reality of Christ, defines Christ as “One person, with two natures [one human, one divine], united but not mixed nor intermingled.” In other words, Christ is one divine person (i.e., the second person of the trinity) who in incarnated human form had two natures, one human and one divine. “Person” here does not mean person as in personality, especially human personality in our contemporary understanding of the term. Person, in this sense, is much closer to the Eastern metaphor of Self (i.e., Atman). In other words: “There is One Self, who in manifest human form always reveals itself as a combination of both Divine and Human.” That is to say, the Council of Chalcedon argued, in Eastern terminology, for the nonduality of Christ. That this is the case is shown by Roberts' own description of the trinitarian (i.e., absolute) nature of Christ. She writes:

There are two ways in which Christ is ‘one’ with God. In his eternal divinity this oneness IS the Trinitarian nature of the Absolute [nondual], and in this respect we cannot say Christ is merely one with God; rather, in the Trinity Christ IS God—is the Trinitarian Absolute. In his humanity or incarnation, however, there is a type of

oneness, a purely human oneness with God, and this type we ourselves can experience.... We are not claiming Christ's Trinitarian oneness [i.e., in the stage of union of spirits], but rather his human experience of oneness with God. And when we experience this oneness [mystical marriage] it is much the same oneness that the historical human Christ experienced. In this purely human experience it can be said we are equal with Christ [i.e., in his humanity]. (Roberts, 1989, p. 132)

If the mystic may claim an identity with the human nature of Christ, and therefore Jesus' mystical experience of oneness with the Father, may the Christian ever make the more daring assertion of identity with the divine nature of Christ?

Roberts (1989) points out that,

Sometimes we overlook this fact [of the dual natures and "mysticisms" of Christ] and base our whole understanding of God or the Trinity on our [causal] unitive experience and its knowledge of God. We forget that Christ's divine nature, his Godhead or Trinitarian Reality, lies beyond his human experiences of the divine, beyond his [causal] unitive experience of oneness with the Father.<sup>6</sup> (p. 133)

So, the mystical experience of Jesus during his earthly life is not the only or even the highest experience possible. Roberts (1989) drives this point home: "This means that the historical Christ's purely human [causal] experience of oneness or union was not eternal; it was not heaven or the ultimate divine condition of [non-dual] Trinitarian oneness" (p. 133).

If the human Christ's experience was not the final normative grounding of Christian mysticism, how is the mystic to experience the absolute nature of Christ—must the mystic utterly abandon Christ altogether? Roberts finds in the crucifixion the answer to this important question. Traditional Christian mysticism, as stated, sees the mystical path as a threefold journey, from purification to illumination to union. The harrowing chasm separating illumination from union is the Dark Night of the Soul. God has entered so closely to the mystic, as if right behind her heart and mind and eyes, that she can no longer "see" God or sense the divine presence, particularly under the form of illuminations, locutions, ecstasies, and the like as perhaps were common during the illuminative, subtle phase. God has not abandoned the soul, but has in fact grown closer. The soul, however, does not know this and experiences this change as a loss of the divine. The spiritual energy and presence of God are so utterly transcendent as to be undetected by any human faculties, even the subtle faculties. The threefold mysticism historically and experientially grounds itself in The Paschal Mystery (the death and resurrection of Christ). The Dark Night of the Soul represents the mystic's participation in the crucifixion of Christ; the resurrection then is the movement into the unitive stage.

While this interpretation is not incorrect, Roberts forces us to question whether it is indeed the most accurate or at least the only valid one. According to Roberts, we cannot take the human Christ's (causal-union of spirits) mystical experience to be eternal. Christ's human nature is indeed created. Jesus was born at a certain point in time and space and died in another point of time and space. Jesus was not always manifest in the physical and has ceased to be so since resurrection and ascension. Jesus, the tradition maintains, as an incarnation (or avatar in Hinduism) was born in union with God. Jesus did not have to go through Dark Nights, purifications, and the like to attain union—"He was like us in all things except sin [i.e., separation]" (Letter to the Hebrews). While a non-Christian may not accept the belief that Jesus was born into union with God,



the reader can certainly believe that he had attained such a state-stage by the time of his public ministry. For our purposes the point is this: assuming Jesus was in a permanent state of (causal) union with God (i.e., union of created self with God), and the Dark Night of the Soul is in fact the complete participation in the death of Jesus, then the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus did not in fact engender a transformation of consciousness in Jesus to the causal. Every transformation of a stage of consciousness requires death to identification with that particular stage, to clear the way for a “rebirth” to a higher stage of consciousness. In this sense, paralleling the Dark Night-rebirth as unitive mystic with the death-resurrection is perfectly valid.

Roberts, however, provokes the reader to question whether the crucifixion is more adequately interpreted, for the mystic, as the death of the self, the unitive self itself (i.e., the transition from causal to nondual or union of spirits to indistinct union). She states: “To return to this original oneness [the nondual eternal oneness of the Divine Christ as Person of the Godhead] Christ had to die and, in dying, go beyond the human unitive experience of oneness with the Father. Surrendering this human [causal/relative] oneness for the infinitely greater oneness of the Godhead [nondual/absolute] is the true nature of Christ’s death...” (Roberts, 1989, p.133). Roberts here expresses an extremely important point. Christian mysticism, in its simplest terms, is the participation in the Paschal Mystery. Now The Paschal Mystery is usually taken to mean the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. All of these are certainly part of the Paschal Mystery. The completion of the Paschal Mystery, however, is the ascension, the return of the resurrected Christ into heaven. If the threefold mysticism of union grounds itself in the historical experience of Christ, *and*, as Roberts states, the crucifixion is the experience of Jesus losing his self-united-to-God in order to experience the absolute nature of Godhead, then may the Christian experience heaven (the absolute trinitarian Christ) in this life? Medieval theology, and even most forms of Medieval mystical theology (e.g., that of St. Bernard) answers no.<sup>7</sup> Roberts, however, from her own experience, answers yes.<sup>8</sup>

How then is the Christian to push even beyond causal union to the absolute nature of the trinitarian Christ? If, as she maintains, Christians whose selves are permanently united to God roughly recapitulate the experience of the earthly Christ, then how does one participate in the crucifixion, as she sees it, fully—that is dying to even their unitive self and rising in eternal oneness with the trinitarian Godhead?

Roberts characterizes causal union as the experience of oneness with the Father in Christ. This is the traditional depiction, going all the way back to St. Paul: “Have in you the mind [consciousness] that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). And again, “It is no longer, I Paul who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:19-20). Christ’s spirit lives within us by the free gift of God. It is Christ within us who cries out to the Father through the spirit in our hearts. For the mystic to push through, even beyond, causal union into indistinct nonduality, the first step is to realize that it is Christ within us who unites us with God. The unitive causal self is a self that is inexorably “hidden with Christ in God.” The self is united to Christ; it is Christ who is united to God. Who then is Christ? What is the “that” that is united to God in the causal? To delve into the “that” of the causal unitive experience is to place oneself on the brink of the Great Death and ultimate revelation.

No form of meditation or prayer can induce the nondual. That which is must be sought by the practice of inquiry—inquiring into the nature of the present moment. Roberts (1989) agrees:

What is “that” in us that is one with God? This inquiry remember stems from a particular experience of realization that Christ is “that” in us which is one with God... Inquiring into the true nature of Christ, the unknown link, or middle term between self and divine, is a major turning point of the journey, one that occurs toward its

ending... At this point, the impression that the burning flame (love between Christ and the Father) is about to completely consume or burn up the remaining self-experience, leaving no self at all. (pp. 140-141)

According to Roberts, Christ is “that” which is one with God in us. The moment of inquiry forces a deep re-thinking of the mystical journey up until this point:

Inquiring into the true nature of Christ, the unknown link or middle term between self and the divine, is a major turning point of the journey... This is when we realize that we ourselves were never one with God, that the love we experience is not now and never was our own, an that from the beginning to end the whole unitive experience was beyond ourselves. (Roberts, 1989, p. 141)

The mystic makes a false step by identifying himself or Christ as the true self, the deep center: “So the day we see that the union we experience is beyond ourselves is the day we realize that we [self] are not and never have been truly one with God—never” (Roberts, 1989, p. 142). Roberts notes that the living flame of love, the love of Christ for the Father that the causal unitive self has been adopted into, “spreads out to include all we are but our own awareness of it.” In other words, “As long as any sense of self or any self-experience remains, God cannot be all” (Roberts, 1989, p. 141). In other words, the mystic through inquiry learns that God is in a sense living through us. We are being prayed or meditated by God, not the other way round.

Recognizing that the living flame of love is outside the self, and that self-reflexive consciousness is the point of separation between the human and the divine, frees the self to inquire directly into the nature of Christ, in and as the Living Flame. When a person crosses this final line, both the self-sense and Flame dissolve:

To pass over the line takes not only the falling away of the self-awareness, which is the first step, but the extinguishing of the unitive flame or center of being along with all to which it gave rise—it gave rise to our self or consciousness. This is like having the divine Ground pulled out from under the whole self experience and taking the self with it. (Roberts, 1989, p. 143)

As these two co-dependent realities dissolve, God(head) alone remains. Roberts (1989) writes, “What is realized beyond self is the All and Everywhere of God, meaning that the divine is no-thing and no-one (discrete entity) and, therefore, cannot be pointed to or brought into focus” (p. 143). What does it mean to say that God is “All and Everywhere”? Roberts notes that to say that God is All and Everywhere means two very different things during the experience of causal unitive mysticism and then later nondual trinitarian oneness. The experience of God as Everywhere in the former, causal unitive experience is technically known as *panentheism* (“all-in-God,” *pan-en-theos*). Panentheism means that everything is in God but that God is more than creation. As she puts it,

The basic unitive view sees God IN all things and all things IN God which is the realization that the divine as immanent (within us) is, at the same time, transcendent (without or beyond us)... For this reason we say the divine is All or Everywhere because It is IN all that exists. (Roberts, 1989, p. 145)

God is the center of all that exists. For the latter nondual view, beyond the self, this panentheistic position no

longer holds:

Beyond [casual] union there is no divine Center anywhere. Few people realize that without the experience of a center there is also no experience of interiority or withinness. Without a center, nothing can arise within ourselves: no feelings, no energies, no divine presence—nothing. This means we can no longer experience or see the divine within ourselves and, consequently within anything else that exists. And when there is no divine within (immanent), there is also no divine without (beyond or transcendent). Thus beyond union the divine is not the center or anything; it is not immanent or *in* anything and also not *beyond* or transcendent of anything. (Roberts, 1989, pp. 145-146)

It is only by the existence of self that such a center can come into existence, thereby engendering the experience of an inside and outside, immanence, and transcendence.

To help clarify Roberts' insights, I will use an ancient wisdom tool from the East: the notion of the two truths, relative and absolute. This notion is at least as old as the great nondual Buddhist sage Nagarjuna (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E.). The two truths doctrine states that when it comes to absolute truth, nothing can be said (Wilber, 2000a, p. 719). Nagarjuna famously employed the dialectic, using words to destroy the hold of words. He would state the absolute truth neither is nor is not, it cannot be spoken of nor not spoken of, nor both (speak-able and unspeakable), nor neither. The absolute truth, however, is real (i.e., it can be understood in a momentary flash of enlightenment).

Relative truth refers to the world of commonplace facts and experience. Here, one can make definitive statements as to what is right or wrong. The Earth does revolve around the sun; there are 24 hours in a day; five multiplied by two equals ten; Jimmy Carter was the 39<sup>th</sup> President of the United States; water does not melt at 10 degrees Centigrade. Both levels of truth are valid while not creating a new duality. The absolute is nothing other than the essence of the relative. Still, it is helpful to keep both separate for clarification purposes.

In the Vedanta-Vajrayana system, the gross, subtle, and causal dimensions then are in the relative sphere. In the causal, one does experience spirit, but as a separate state, as a Formless Ground, which only has validity in relation to the subtle and gross worlds of form. The nondual or absolute truth, on the contrary, metaphorically realizes the unity of formless and form, or better is the emptiness in which formless and form arise as mutually co-dependent. The nondual, the absolute, then, is neither formless nor form but rather the mysterious essence which transcends and includes both (Wilber, 2000a, pp. 722-723).

For Roberts, this mysterious link is the trinitarian Christ. She calls Christ *The Eternal Manifest*, hinting at this indescribable marriage of formless (eternal) and form (manifest). She then goes on to make this daring assertion: "There was no time when the divine was not Manifest, or that from all eternity the divine exists in some Eternal Form—or unknown substance" (Roberts, 1989, p. 146). This "eternal manifest" is the source of all created manifestation. From all eternity, in other words, the eternal unmanifest (the Father) "exits or divests himself" into his son, the Logos Christ-manifest. All of creation spills over from the eternal unmanifest Father through the Logos-form of the universe by the power of the Holy Spirit (the energy of the divine).<sup>9</sup> What this divine substance of the eternal manifest of the divine Christ is unknown:

We have to be very specific about what the Eternal Manifest is NOT. Science does

not really know what matter is or know its true nature, and nothing the mind is capable of studying or defining is the Eternal Manifest. This is because the divine is a dimension of existence beyond the grasp of [self-]consciousness, the mind, intellect and senses—intuition and insight as well. Whatever these know of the divine is purely on their own terms [i.e., relative to their mode of cognition]... But the divine solely on Its own Ground is beyond all possible ways of knowing and experiencing. (Roberts, 1989, p. 147)

The unitive self experienced The Living Flame of love that is the son’s love of the Father. The experience of The Flame, its searing heat, however, is seen to be relative to and partially caused by the existence of the unitive self. The Living Flame “heats up” in order to immolate the self. God is the Living Flame, but God has no need to burn “his self-consciousness up.” The “heat,” and therefore the experience of the Living Flame, are dependent upon the separate self sense. The absolute then must transcend the self-God (as a self experiences God) distinction. Or as Roberts (1993) says:

It is the divine PRIOR to all we know that exists, in other words the Eternal Manifest. This is why, in order to come upon the Eternal Manifest, all we know to exist must first be removed, must first cease to exist. It is only on the other side of this Great Void (beyond all we know that exists) that the Eternal Manifest can be revealed—revealed as all that remains when everything we know has ceased to exist...When nothing exists but the void, THEN we see that the void of all form IS Eternal Form or the Eternal Manifest [i.e., nonduality]. From this position we say that God IS ALL that exists because here we realize God is not only Formless, but God is Form as well. (p. 147)

The word *existence* means to “stand-out.” This is why Roberts says that to realize the fullness of truth, first we must remove all we know to exist, all that we know to stand-out (i.e., as apart from God)—even if those things are experienced, say as in our souls, as truly united to God. It is a radical unlearning. When nothing any longer exists (as separate from God as its ground), when everything is seen to be void of any intrinsic reality of its own, only then will the revelation of the eternal manifest occur. To go through this transformation is truly to undergo death and resurrection.

Everything created does indeed “spill over” from the eternal manifest; nevertheless, everything finite dies. It is not our created bodies, egos, wills, feelings, or minds that are eternal; rather it is the eternal substance or substrate of our created beings that is the eternal manifest. It is as this eternal substrate that Roberts (1989) can say, “God is All and Everywhere” (p. 148).

Beyond self, one realizes that it was the self all along that prevented the realization of What is All and Everywhere. Self-consciousness cannot imagine a reality beyond self. If self-consciousness were to visualize a state beyond self, it would be itself having an experience of no-selfhood. In other words, it would be a self, envisioning itself as having no-self, which is absurd. Self-consciousness can no more comprehend the reality of the beyond-self condition than hunger could understand what it means to be satiated. Self-consciousness is precisely that—consciousness of self. If there is no consciousness of self, then by definition this is not self-consciousness.

Roberts uses different phrases to point out this same basic paradoxical knowledge of the mystery of what

is (e.g., reality as opposed to experience; The Cloud of Knowing vs. The Cloud of Unknowing; Knowing Without a Knower, etc.). All of these point to the distinction between relative and absolute truth. Wilber states that spirit, when known in the causal, can be imagined as the highest rung of a ladder while spirit known in the nondual is the essence of every rung. Or perhaps better, he states, the nondual is like falling off the ladder altogether. As Wilber notes, relatively speaking one must develop all the way to the apex—the causal—before one falls off the chain of relativity and realizes there was never such a stepladder in the first place. Roberts (1989) agrees:

From one perspective, the snuffing-out of the particular energy that IS self or consciousness may seem to be a divine un-doing, that is, an un-doing of its original doing or creation. But if we understood the true nature of the human passage we would see that this un-doing is actually a divine creative act. In other words, by a single non-perceptible act the divine brings us (self or consciousness) into being, and by another such act we move into eternal life or the divine. This is no backwards movement; what we may think of as an un-doing, is actually a further doing. By one act we come from God; by another act we return to God. It is as simple as that. Between the coming and going, however, is our human passage, virtually the whole of human existence. (p. 152)

I want to stress the literal nature of Roberts' comment that the movement beyond causal union is a direct act of God. One cannot gain enlightenment, as there is a more profound realization after causal union, but that realization occurs once the self drops away. The most we can do, cooperating with the grace of God, is to reach the stage of causal union—actualize the highest state-stage potential of a self—the highest point of relative truth. From there, one may begin the process of inquiry and total detachment, but after that it is literally out of one's hands. This is why Roberts stresses the inquiry into the question of "What is?" What is that in us which is one with God? If I am aware of being one with God, who is the subject of that sentence? Or as she puts it, if I am aware of being outside a Living Flame of love between the son and Father, what is it that has allowed me to be connected to this miracle?

She states that letting go of God—of her notions of God's existence—were the most challenging. Here is why Christianity must re-learn the great art of inquiry. Prayer assumes God. Inquiry does not. It is not that God will actually disappear; rather, from our position of self-consciousness we are inherently biased in view of what God is—namely a God that could be experienced and imagined by a self. No matter how profound our contemplative experience of God, it is still at this point influenced—even if in the most minute of ways—by our self-conscious lens. To inquire is nothing other than to temporarily bracket the constant self-reflexive habits of the mind and will, and place oneself in a position whereby one can receive revelation of what "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has even entered into the mind of humans what God has in store for us" (1 Corinthians 2:9).<sup>10</sup> It is this theological truism—that causal union is the final state attainable in this life—that acts as the greatest barrier to the revelation of that which is beyond union. It is that barrier that is preventing the deepest embodied realizations that Christianity (and the world more broadly) needs for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Conclusion

Christianity lacks a framework that includes nondual realization both in its formal theology and spiritual practice—*indistinct union* in Christian terminology. I have argued that such an inclusion of indistinct union-nonduality is long overdue. The writings and experience of Bernadette Roberts were analyzed as an authentic



witness to a Christian nonduality. Roberts makes a clear and compelling case for the Christian mystical life being broken up into roughly two sections: the union of a personal self with a personal God and the more radical realization of a place beyond the self and beyond the personal God. Roberts opens a door that has too often been locked or altogether ignored in the history of Christian theology: the realization of the union of both the formless divine and the world of form (nonduality).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> White states occur in all four quadrants of the Integral model, in this article I will focus on their occurrence in the Upper-Left quadrant. Incidentally, this is also how Wilber himself tends to employ the concept.

<sup>2</sup> Her strength is also at points her Achilles heel. She is particularly incorrect and almost prejudicial at points when it comes to Eastern religion. Hopefully this essay, by framing her work in relation to the Vedanta-Vajrayana system, will correct this issue.

<sup>3</sup> Bernadette Roberts had not read Eckhart prior to her realization. She did however encounter him afterwards and writes (not surprisingly in my view) that Eckhart was the only Christian mystic she found who spoke to her own experience. In integral terms, since they shared the same developmental (state-stage) signified (Upper Left), the signifiers (Upper Right) of written text communicated a shared semantic worldview of experience (Lower Left).

<sup>4</sup> See *The Path to No-Self* (Roberts, 1992). This book is a profound though sometimes difficult-to-follow account of the unitive stage (stage three in the traditional Christian path). I will not focus on that work, as here I am interested more in the less explored fourth stage of nonduality.

<sup>5</sup> Roberts' "no-self" really then, in my view, is more likely the move into the Witness. The Witness, as the seat of the soul, in a certain way of speaking is still "a self" or sorts. But her words do help to differentiate that period from her earlier, unitive self-period.

<sup>6</sup> Roberts uses the masculine pronoun "he" or possessive "his" when referring both to the historical Christ (which is accurate) but also the divine Christ. In the latter case it must be taken as metaphoric, as Godhead is neither male nor female.

<sup>7</sup> The technical term is the *beatific vision*. Although there was some hesitancy on the part of some theologians to come down one way or the other definitively, and while even John of the Cross admitted a foretaste of heaven (i.e., a temporary loss of self), it was never considered possible as a permanent reality in this life.

<sup>8</sup> Following this typology then, where the crucifixion = Dark Night of the Soul, resurrection = union, then ascension = nonduality, or most technically *sahaj samdhi*. Pentecost, of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, would then be the equivalent of *bhava samadhi*, represented best by the Black Madonna, recorded as having been at the event.

<sup>9</sup> Compare this saying with that of Meister Eckhart that everything (including our souls) pre-existed in the mind of God.

<sup>10</sup> A major flaw in Roberts' work is her lack of an evolutionary nondual perspective. While the formless certainly does not change, the world of form does. If the eternal manifest (the mystical body of Christ) is the void of all forms *as* form, then in a manner of speaking, we may say that the mystical body is still growing. For Roberts, the Father is the eternal unmanifest, the son the eternal manifest, and the Holy Spirit the eternal manifesting energy of the two. An evolutionary perspective, gives greater weight to the on-going "in-forming" of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit acts in this scheme very much like Shakti in the Eastern tradition—the eternal energy of God. Christ then, like Shiva, is the non-experiential essence-less essence of all that is (pure consciousness) that is nothing other than its manifestation as pure energy (Holy Spirit-Shakti).

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CHRISTOPHER DIERKES, M.Div., is a priest in the Anglican Church of Canada. He holds a Master's of Divinity degree from the Vancouver School of Theology. Chris has been writing and thinking about the relationship between Integral Philosophy and Christian theology since 2002, when he first encountered the writings of Ken Wilber. He has been studying the Christian mystical tradition both as a scholar and as a contemplative-practitioner since he was 18 years old. He lives in Vancouver with his beloved wife Chloe.