



# Listening out for God's Breath – a Negative Hermeneutical Approach to Mysticism

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Received: 24 December 2022 | Accepted: 24 July 2023 |

Published online: 01 September 2023

## Abstract

This essay argues that a negative hermeneutics, i.e., a hermeneutics that takes its starting point from the experience of gaps, failures, and limits, is a suitable lens for the study of mysticism. It uses the concept of travail of the negative, which focuses on dynamics of a continuous 'unsaying' and 'subverting' of traditional expressions of faith and religious practice, to explore the connection between aspects of practical and theoretical negativity in mystical expressions. It suggests that this approach to mystical theology makes an important contribution to the wider theological discourse and encourages theology to take the fundamental character of negation seriously.

## Keywords

mysticism – negative hermeneutics – critical theory – negative theology – political theology

In a time of rising totalitarianism, irrationalism, and 'fake news,' it is essential not to surrender 'religious' and 'mystical' language and claims to hegemonic and authoritarian forces. In this article, I will outline what a negative hermeneutical perspective, and more specifically, the concept of a 'travail' of the negative, can contribute to the study of mysticism by emphasizing its subversive and 'micro-logical' potential.

## 1 Methodological Preliminary

Mysticism as a field of study has attracted more and more academic interest over the past few decades. Mystical texts and expressions have been studied from a variety of academic angles, including historical studies, textual exegeses, and a variety of social, pastoral, and philosophical approaches.<sup>1</sup> It seems that, compared to some of the more established theological subjects, mystical theology has preserved a certain ‘freshness’ and creativity, as well as attracting dialogue with the wider academic discourse. It provides a perspective that allows us to look beyond a rigid, methodical canon and enables a creative and enriching conversation. As Bernard McGinn states, “the growing interest in mysticism as a cross-cultural and multi-religious phenomenon argues for the need for new and more ambitious studies of its many aspects, not least the mystical theology (*theologia mystica*) of the Christian tradition.” This article aims to contribute to this enterprise by showing how the concept of the travail of the negative can connect aspects of apophysis and communicative desire within mystical theology.

Bernard McGinn suggests that “the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concern the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.”<sup>2</sup> This definition points towards one of the core challenges of the study of mysticism. As “preparation, consciousness, and reaction”, mystical texts and expressions necessarily escape the (always posterior) view of the theologian. Thus, being removed from and secondary to the mystical discourse itself, mystical theology requires complex, contextual hermeneutics. Mystical texts are not written for “a religiously unaffiliated thinker”<sup>3</sup> but within a specifically religious context, while at the same time fundamentally exceeding and transgressing it. This project argues that this ambivalence makes mysticism an object par excellence for a *negative hermeneutical* approach. Negative hermeneutics is a method that takes its starting point from the experience of gaps, failures, and limits in the process of understanding. The *negative hermeneutical* notion of understanding as a process oscillating between interpretation and deconstruction allows us to explore mysticism as a phenomenon strongly connected to community and practice without being reducible to it.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, it challenges us to reflect carefully on the lens through which we

1 Cf. Bingemer, *Mystical Theology in Contemporary Perspective*, p. 86.

2 McGinn, *The Presence of God*, p. 17; cf. also Hampton, *Mystical Poetics*, p. 242.

3 O'Regan, *Theological Epistemology and Apophysis*, p. 372.

4 Cf. Sölle, *Mystik und Widerstand*, p. 253.

study mysticism, and on the intentions and perspectives that we, as readers and academics, bring to this study.

Against a strict distinction between (prescriptive) theology and the (descriptive) study of spirituality,<sup>5</sup> this project suggests an ‘engaged,’ ‘hermeneutic’ observer. The hermeneutical principle of “looking for the question to which the texts provide an answer” is intensified for a hermeneutics of mysticism, as mystical texts acknowledge that they fundamentally fail to express the object which they try to express and therefore encourage the exploration of a ‘questionable’ reality. With Mark McIntosh, I argue that “mystical theology, also much like liberation theology, directly lives from and reflects upon the reciprocal relationship between Christianity’s texts, practices, and beliefs, and on the other side, the community’s sense of its ongoing encounter with God.”<sup>6</sup> I will, however, suggest that this is true even and especially where the nature of the religious/ecclesial community has been called into question.

As ‘mysticism’ can be understood as a journey towards detachment from categories of experience, canon, and tradition, and also from its corresponding religious practices and hierarchies,<sup>7</sup> any study of mysticism needs to carefully establish its reach and critical potential. The crux for every critical study of mystical expressions is the question of how it can do justice to the specificity of their contextual claim (e.g., St. John of the Cross: “This living fountain I desire, I see it here within this living bread, though it is night!”<sup>8</sup>) while taking their fundamentally negative structure into account. Bridging between the unspeakable superabundant nature of God and the reality of a “questionable” human experience, mysticism “must be said to be subverted as a whole relation to God, while finding a way to say that, at the same time, there is a real human experience of growth in relation to God.”<sup>9</sup> In this article, I will argue that the concept of *travail of the negative*, i.e. an approach to mysticism which focusses on dynamics of a continuous ‘unsaying’ and ‘subverting’ of traditional beliefs can help to make sense of this “conundrum.”<sup>10</sup> I suggest that a more subtle and nuanced understanding of ‘negativity’ in a practical and theoretical sense can enhance our theological discourse on mysticism as wrestling with the unusual, strange, even “alarming nature of God’s presence.”<sup>11</sup>

5 Cf. Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, p. 30; cf. also Craig/Hollywood, *Mysticism and the Politics of Theory*, p. 16.

6 McIntosh/Howells, *Introduction*, p. 2.

7 Cf. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, pp. 260–267.

8 Cf. St. John of the Cross, *St. John of the Cross*, pp. 131–133.

9 Howells, *Mystical Theology and Human Experience*, p. 49.

10 Howells, *Mystical Theology and Human Experience*, p. 49.

11 Faesen, *Mystical Texts*, p. 231.

I will do this in four steps. First, I will present the concept of mystical theology to situate my project within the wider discourse. In a second step I will present core aspects of negative hermeneutics and demonstrate how these provide a suitable and enriching perspective for the study of mystical theology. One of the difficulties in making this argument is that negative hermeneutics is not a method that can simply be applied to any context but rather an attitude towards texts and cultural phenomena. What this short outline can provide is an idea of potential connection points and further areas of study. Building on this foundation, I will, thirdly, present the concept of travail of the negative as a focal point for a negative hermeneutical understanding of mysticism, which allows us to creatively connect practical and theoretical aspects of the study of mysticism. In a final step, I will summarise my findings and outline the potential of the travail of the negative for connecting mysticism and other theological fields.

## 2 Mystical Theology and the Subversion of Faith

The word ‘mysticism’ derives from the Greek verb *muo* (μύω), meaning ‘to close’ referring to that which is secret, hidden.<sup>12</sup> This ‘hiddenness’ and ‘enclosedness’ point us to the core challenge of any mystical theology: how can theology meaningfully engage with a practice which is by its very nature based on the assumption that its ‘object’ is beyond concepts and propositional thinking? However, this tension does not only occur on the level of theoretical reflection on mystical expressions but is already present within the dynamic of mysticism as ‘expression’ and ‘talk’ of a radically transcendent object.<sup>13</sup> Thus, one could argue that the question of how far mystical theology needs to be ‘mystical’ itself and how far all mystics have a ‘theology’<sup>14</sup> is already foreshadowed in the dynamic of mysticism as expression and practice. A one-sided reduction of mysticism to a referential language game or an immediate experience that evades any theoretical reflection fails to fathom the complexity that exists between its symbolic and theoretical thematizations.<sup>15</sup> As the relationship between contemplative theory and praxis has been an important concern of

12 Cf. Jones/Roderick, *A Greek-English lexicon*: μύω.

13 Cf. Rakoczy, *Great Mystics and Social Justice*, p. 8 et seq.; and McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, p. 42.

14 McGinn, *The Genealogy of Mystical Traditions*, p. 65.

15 Cf. McIntosh/Howells, *Introduction*, p. 2 and Howells, *Mystical Theology and Human Experience*, p. 46.

mystical writing,<sup>16</sup> so must mystical theology reflect on its own relationship to mystical expressions as it articulates its methodological framework.

While all theology “must seek to discern the mystical ‘more’ of God’s self-communication in all things which gives them their existence precisely as signs,”<sup>17</sup> mystical theology engages specifically with the “hiddenness” and dialectical “otherness” between God and the praying subject. As Turner pointed out, it is specifically not interested in a negative “experience” but in the radical negation of any affirmative or negative distinction.<sup>18</sup> A core characteristic of the phenomenon of mysticism is its continuous ‘wrestling’ with the limits of language and its subverting of traditional expressions of faith. Christian mystical writers use traditional images and language, and deploy to various extents and in various ways the Christian symbols of Christ, Mary, Trinity, grace, transfiguration, as well as general symbols of light and darkness, speaking and silence, narratives of conversion, progress, and regress, ascent, and descent,<sup>19</sup> while at the same time ‘stretching’ and even ‘breaking’ these codes to point to a reality beyond traditional dogmatic expressions. The challenge for a ‘mystical theology’ is then to find a meaningful way to analyze and describe this process of ‘code-breaking’ and to develop tools to discuss the dynamics happening in the ‘in-between’ spaces.<sup>20</sup> Mystical theology in a modern sense is not mysticism itself but rather a theological reflection on mystical expressions (formal object).<sup>21</sup> As a theological enterprise, it follows set linguistic and methodological expectations and needs to be communicable within the wider academic discourse. It is not the private pious reading of mystical texts but a discursive and communal practice for the deeper understanding of phenomena, which are characterized as mystical.

A hermeneutical approach will be interested in the question of what is considered ‘mystical,’ whether there is an underlying epistemological structure that unites these expressions, and how the tradition of ‘canonization’ and institutional ‘reception’ (e.g. pastoral and homiletic receptions) has shaped our ideas of what is considered ‘mystical.’ Rob Faesen SJ distinguishes different

16 Cf. Craig/Hollywood, *Mysticism and the Politics of Theory*, and Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, p. 151.

17 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology at the Heart of Theology*, p. 28; cf. also Marion, *The Mystical – or what. Theology Can Show*, p. 451.

18 Cf. Howells, *Mystical Theology and Human Experience*, p. 48.

19 O’Regan, *Theological Epistemology and Apophasis*, p. 370.

20 Cf. O’Regan, *Theological Epistemology and Apophasis*, pp. 369–371.

21 Traditionally, mysticism has been understood as a *theologia prima*, and a prominent source of theological insight. The modern approach to theology as divided into a variety of subdisciplines does, however, requires a more explicit distinction between method and content. Cf. McIntosh, *Mystical theology*.

categories and genres of mystical literature depending on the intention of the author and their relation to potential readers (e.g., spiritual diaries for personal use, letters, instructional texts). However, they each participate in a process of externalization and textualization and, through the process of writing them down (even if just for private use), become part of a discourse. Whether these mystical expressions are primarily set to communicate an underlying experience or whether they are spontaneous and immediate responses to it, in the process of their study, they are integrated into a specific communicative process of understanding. At the same time, they establish relationships with their potential readers, who are likely to be more diverse than (in most cases) potential readers of academic theology.<sup>22</sup> Through their linguistic structure as well as their claim of religious immediacy, they are necessarily situated at the fringes of institutional organized religion, making them suspicious to the mainstream discourse, but also uniquely placed to enact unusual, new, and subversive aspects of theology.<sup>23</sup>

Whether mystical expressions are primarily meant to communicate an underlying experience or whether they are spontaneous and immediate responses to it, in the process of their study, they are connected to a specific discourse and communicative process. This paper suggests that the best way to present the variety and diversity of aspects under which ‘mystical’ expressions can be viewed is via the overarching and mediating approach of a (cultural) negative hermeneutics. The specifically hermeneutical aspect of this is characterized by a fundamental interest in the dynamic between expression/text and recipient/reader. Hermeneutics as a discipline is concerned with the process of understanding and aims for the approximation of subject and object. In the context of mystical theology, a hermeneutical approach will have to engage with multiple layers of complexity. A hermeneutical approach that takes the individual mystical text and testimony as a starting point for articulating the dynamic between cataphatic (positive) and apophatic (negative) structures within it.<sup>24</sup> Mystical theology is interested in the expression of mystical consciousness as a complex and diverse object as well as the necessary integration of the recipient’s perspective as a theological subject. Against a reduction to a universal “precategorical transcendental consciousness”<sup>25</sup> of the mystic, a

22 Cf. Faesen, *Mystical Texts*, pp. 227–231.

23 Cf. Faesen, *Mystical Texts*, p. 231.

24 Anchored in the text it will be able to avoid “apophatic metaphysics” as well as “abstract indeterminacy” (for the dangers of these generalisations cf. Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, p. 21).

25 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, p. 96.

negative hermeneutical approach will focus on the importance of the particular and distinct expression and perspective within it.

This focus on the relationship between ‘reader’ and ‘text,’ and on the supposed ‘perlocutionary’ force, i.e., the text’s ability to motivate and transform the hearer or reader, raises the question of whether ‘mysticism’ presupposes an engagement with the text that affects the reader’s own perspective and positionality.<sup>26</sup> Mystical theology describes and analyzes this process and reflects on a dynamic in which “the reader does not come to know God as an object, rather in overcoming those finite beliefs that separate the reader from God’s infinite reality they escape the ceaseless reifying of the transcendent into delimited language.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus, mystical theology suggests the process or practice of ‘unsaying’ and ‘negating’ as a connection point between the human and the divine.<sup>28</sup> As found in Eckhart, an apophatic dynamic takes “detachment [as] a point of convergence between God and the human being; it is the ground for the possible fusion of identities.”<sup>29</sup> As the human soul gets more and more detached from any ‘ground’ and any ‘why’ of its being, it becomes more open for a union with God’s otherness where “distinct names and pronouns, illustrative of an illusory reality of separateness, dissipate in an abyss of oneness.”<sup>30</sup> This opens space for creative (cataphatic) ways of self-expression and exploring the relationship between the human and the divine. Human identity is not perceived as a static entity but as a dynamic and open-ended process. The *Seelengrund* or ‘abyss’ is the field of an apophatic process, working through the various stages of negation and difference. Through apophatic contemplation and practice, the soul has, as Simon Critchley puts it, “created [...] the space of its own annihilation. This nihil is the « place », or better what Augustine might call the « no place », where God reflects on himself, where God sees himself of himself in her.”<sup>31</sup> This process of negation and paradoxical affirmation explores and encourages new and creative ways of talking about God and experimenting with various forms of poetic and paradoxical expressions which are “not domesticated and fitted into a smooth system of thought,”<sup>32</sup> but rather found in the paradox, unfitting, or even inappropriate.<sup>33</sup>

26 Sölle, *Mystik und Widerstand*, pp. 20–33.

27 Hampton, *Mystical Poetics*, p. 246.

28 Cf. Sölle, *Mystik und Widerstand*, p. 94.

29 Radler, *Depth, Ground, Abyss*, p. 314.

30 Radler, *Depth, Ground, Abyss*, p. 316; cf. also Sheldrake, *Anthropology*, p. 550.

31 Critchley, *Mystical Anarchism*, p. 291.

32 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology at the Heart of Theology*, p. 46.

33 Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, p. 55 et seq.

In this sense, mystical theology analyzes mysticism as an expression of a transformative process that ventures into negation and creative rearticulation of the self and its relationship to the world. This understanding moves beyond an early modern concept of mysticism as ‘technology of the self’ by focussing precisely on its unpredictable, anarchical and paradox elements. I suggest that this builds an excellent connection point for applying the notion of a travail of the negative, which allows us to focus on the dynamics of mysticism as an ‘unsaying’ and ‘subverting’ of traditional beliefs.<sup>34</sup> It does not let go of the “feminist and liberationist religious perspective’s assumption of earlier eras; namely, that living, practical involvement, in reality, is not a recipe for subjective beclouding of our understanding but is rather the prerequisite for true insight in conceptualization,”<sup>35</sup> but rather focusses on the negative dynamics within these involvements. The idea of a ‘negative’ connection with God opens up a space to explore new and creative ways to allow human community and action to be shaped by this renewed understanding of the divine.<sup>36</sup> It emphasizes mystical aspects of theology as an articulation of notions of ‘immediacy’ and ‘subversion’ of within specific religious (mediated) traditions (‘Who is God not’). This “negative” structure of mysticism makes it a suitable field for negative hermeneutics, i.e., a hermeneutics that focuses on gaps, breaks, and in-between spaces.

### 3 A Negative Hermeneutics of Mysticism

Based on these negative dynamics, this article argues that a negative hermeneutics, i.e., an approach that focuses on elements of necessary ‘difference’ and ‘non-understanding’ within communication and analyzes different forms of gaps and fractures within it, is a suitable method for the study of mysticism.<sup>37</sup> Etymologically, a ‘hermeneutics of mysticism’ seems like a methodological paradox: *mystikos* (μυστικός) meaning ‘secret,’ and *hermeneuein* (ἑρμηνεύειν) on the other hand meaning ‘to explain/open/translate.’ ‘Hermeneutics’ is the method and theory of interpretation and understanding. The need to develop a method around interpretation and its rules arose through encountering objects and traditions that were not self-evident yet seemed relevant enough to put effort into their correct understanding. Classical hermeneutics uses the

34 Cf. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, pp. 6–8.

35 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, p. 24.

36 Hollywood/Smith, *Christology*, p. 495.

37 Cf. Sölle, *Mystik und Widerstand*, p. 33.



concept of a “hermeneutical circle” to describe the idea that in conversation with an object, a person, or a situation, we are able to review our own perspective and the prejudices with which we first approach them. This renewed perspectivity leads to additional and more profound questions and a deepened understanding. Hermeneutics argues that understanding happens when we carefully fuse our own horizon with the horizon of the object, the context, or the person with whom we are communicating – through conversations with others in which reality is explored, and a renewed understanding is reached. This concept is intriguing due to its emphasis on perspectivity and discourse over absolute knowledge. However, the ideal of a fusing of horizons and the aim to reach an ultimate consent carries certain dangers.<sup>38</sup> Modern hermeneutics has been sharply criticized, e.g. by deconstruction and critical theory, for its potential to grant authority to tradition and predominant and colonial perspectives and eliminate any ‘otherness’ and marginal perspective, favoring forced consent and domination.

This is the starting point for negative hermeneutics, which focuses on elements of necessary difference and non-understanding within the process of communication and learning. Negative hermeneutics is a philosophical approach, which focusses on necessary limits and gaps in the process of understanding and communicating and analyzes different forms of otherness and incongruities within it. I argue that this perspective makes it an ideal method for the study of mysticism. Mysticism, as a human expression of an encounter with or consciousness of the divine, is accessible for human understanding, language, and meaningful discourse. At the same time, the form in which mysticism expresses the notion of the divine is negative and apophatic. Negative hermeneutics analyzes the dialectic between practical and theoretical aspects of negation.<sup>39</sup> It argues that theoretical negativity (that something is not) and practical aspects (that something should not be) overlap but cannot be reduced to a single common denominator. Theoretical negativity is more than a mere consequence of practical experiences of negativity. It emphasizes the connection between experiences of the reality of negativity, illness, violence, and injustice, which can deprive the subject of the possibility of coming to terms with themselves and of making sense of the world, and the fundamental challenge to ‘lend voice to the suffering.’ Negative hermeneutics emphasizes the relationship between hermeneutics and critique as it argues that hermeneutical understanding is engaging and wrestling with the limits and otherness of understanding and meaning-making. This approach assumes a concept of

38 Cf. Mendelson, *The Habermas-Gadamer Debate*, p. 44.

39 Cf. Angehrn, *Dispositive des Negativen*, p. 13 et seq.

negativity that oscillates between logical and experiential spheres. It is 'critical' on a theoretical level (inquiry into the conditions of possibility of meaning) as well as on a practical one (critical exposure of 'masked' power).<sup>40</sup> On this basis, negative hermeneutics discerns varying kinds of negativity between the possibility of a fundamental misunderstanding and a trust in the possibility of understanding.<sup>41</sup> I argue that this is a fruitful starting point for a negative hermeneutics of mysticism, as it shifts the focus to understanding as a process that constantly wrestles with the limits of language and understanding. Thus, it is tasked with suspicion and critique of deception and distorted communication, as well as of meaningless suffering as the ultimate expression of the non-sensical.<sup>42</sup> This is the space for a possible encounter between the human and the divine.<sup>43</sup>

The 'travail of the negative' as a process of moving through various manifestations of practical theoretical negativity is ineluctably connected to the specifics of experience. The experience of the instability and uncertainty of existence requires the human person to engage with the negative in its different forms from a place of (practical) resistance, but also to reflect on it to some extent theoretically.<sup>44</sup> For an engagement with mysticism, this leads to the question of how 'negative aspects' of our experience of the divine (absence of God, theodicy) and their expression in mystical theology are connected. Angehrn emphasizes the connection of hermeneutics and deconstruction while at the same time emphasizing more strongly than Derrida the relevance of an active interpreting moment within the process of understanding.<sup>45</sup> With deconstruction, a negative hermeneutics emphasizes the importance of non-identity and a continued differentiation and exploration of non-identical options within human understanding.<sup>46</sup> However, negative hermeneutics focuses more strongly on the hope that the human desire for an ultimate 'correlation' of saying and meaning might correspond to reality.<sup>47</sup>

A hermeneutical approach to theology does not aim to lead 'beyond' language but to pass through language, analyzing the concrete stories, practices,

40 Cf. Kearney, *What is Diacritical Hermeneutics?*, p 2.

41 Cf. Angehrn, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, pp. 319–324; Schurz, *Negative Hermeneutik*, p. 79; Ricœur/Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, p. 63.

42 Cf. Angehrn, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, p. 337 et seq.; Ricœur/Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, p. 100.

43 Cf. Angehrn, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, pp. 330–336.

44 Cf. Angehrn, *Dispositive des Negativen*, p. 36.

45 Cf. Angehrn, *Interpretation und Dekonstruktion*, p. 150 et seq.

46 Cf. Angehrn, *Interpretation und Dekonstruktion*, pp. 245–250.

47 Cf. Angehrn, *Interpretation und Dekonstruktion*, p. 272 et seq.; Finlayson, *On Not Being Silent in the Darkness*, p. 9.

texts, and traditions in which its 'truth' is lived and experienced.<sup>48</sup> Thus, a negative hermeneutical approach emphasizes the importance of the particularity underlying any encounter with radical alterity. More strongly than a 'Christian deconstructivism,'<sup>49</sup> it is a 'confessional' enterprise as it takes its starting point in the deconstruction of the individual and specific hope and faith of the reader. This focus on the particularity and relevance of a 'tradition' and its ongoing 're-interpretation' makes it a suitable interlocutor for a theological discourse on mysticism.<sup>50</sup>

This perspective follows a similar dynamic to Kearney's approach of "Radical Hospitality," i.e. the ethical and epistemological implications of opening our understanding towards the stranger. However, it focusses more explicitly on epistemological-descriptive aspects of otherness encountered in a strange and anarchical space, where subjects learn and receive from each other. 'Otherness' is found as much on the side of the receiving subject as on the side of the one that is 'welcomed.' This does not ward off the fear of "welcoming an axe murderer," but alerts us to the fact that the axe murderer might already be in.<sup>51</sup> Like anatheism, i.e. the possibility of a belief through and beyond experiences of un-belief, disbelief, negative hermeneutics "is a disposition rather than a position, a process rather than a program, an open questioning rather a final answer, a performance (orthopraxis) rather than a predication (orthodoxy)."<sup>52</sup> It focusses, however, more on the aspect of *Gelassenheit* and detachment, "a willing suspension' of belief and disbelief"<sup>53</sup> not so much as an 'expectation' of something new but an attentive, 'hyper-realist' joining into the rhythm of not yet and already in which human understanding is situated.<sup>54</sup>

Negative hermeneutics suggests three main focal points for the process of understanding: 1. language, 2. subject, and 3. sense. In the following, I will use these focal points as illustrations for how the emphasis on otherness and negativity within each of them contributes to the study of mysticism.

*Language:* One of the core areas that the study of mysticism has been concerned with is language and its limits. According to Dorothee Sölle, mystical

48 Cf. Boeve, *Naming God in Open Narratives*, p. 86.

49 Caputo, *The Good News about Alterity*, p. 463.

50 Cf. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 56; cf. also Bradley, *Without Negative Theology*, p. 145. Contrary, for example to Alois Haas' insistence that meaning can only ever be 'found' (cf. Haas, *Mystik als Aussage*, pp. 9–28) negative hermeneutic focusses more strongly on the process of meaning "making" through ongoing interpretation and re-interpretation.

51 Cf. Kearney, *A Game of Jacks*, p. 582.

52 Kearney, *A Game of Jacks*, p. 575.

53 Kearney, *A Game of Jacks*, p. 576.

54 Cf. Kearney, *God after God*, p. 8.

expression is always wrestling with the limits of language between pre- and post-linguistical silence.<sup>55</sup> Classical hermeneutics already acknowledges the *gap between saying and meaning* as troublesome for any speech and recognizes the inconclusive, desirous, and transcendent elements of language and culture.<sup>56</sup> It insists, however, on the fundamental verbal and propositional structure of understanding.<sup>57</sup> Negative hermeneutics, on the other hand, emphasizes the limitation of language based on pre-linguistic and extra-linguistic dynamics that cannot be adequately articulated in propositional language. It distinguishes between phenomena that evade language because of their underdetermination (e.g., void, matter) and phenomena that exceed the limitations of propositional speech due to their overdetermination (*coincidentia oppositorum*).<sup>58</sup> It analyzes the necessary trust in the fundamental possibility of verbal communication but also the frustration about its limits and emphasizes the underlying drive and desire for language. This dynamic comes to the fore in mystical speech, which uses figures such as hyperboles, paradoxes, and double negations to express a reality that points constitutively beyond language.<sup>59</sup> Let us look at an example from St. John of the Cross' "Song of the Soul That Delights in Knowing God by Faith"<sup>60</sup> to illustrate how focusing on these elements is essential for understanding mystical expression:

Well I know the fountain that runs and flows,  
though it is night!

This eternal fountain is hidden deep.  
Well I know where it has its spring,  
Though it is night!

In this life's dark night,  
Faith has taught where this cold fountain lies,  
Though it is night!

Its origin I cannot know, it has none,  
And I know all origins come from it,  
Though it is night!

55 Cf. Sölle, *Mystik und Widerstand*, p. 100 et seq.

56 Cf. Angehrn, *Die Sprachlichkeit der Existenz*, p. 54.

57 Cf. Angehrn, *Interpretation und Dekonstruktion*, p. 54.

58 Cf. Angehrn, *Diesseits und jenseits des Sinns*, pp. 168–171.

59 Cf. Haas, *Mystik als Aussage*, pp. 110–132 and Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Volume 1, The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, p. 113.

60 Cf. St. John of the Cross, *St. John of the Cross*, pp. 131–133.

[...]

This living fountain I desire,  
I see it here within this living bread,  
Though it is night!

Expressing mystical consciousness in the form of poetry not only allows the author to convey a 'rhythm,' a 'flow,' and a 'breath,' that comes with the text, it also gives him the freedom to stretch metaphors to an extreme. In this short excerpt, we can see how St. John contrasts a variety of images with the notion of 'night.' "Though it is night" ends as a repeating verse every stanza. It brings the reader back to that underlying experience of darkness and paradoxical contrast of experience and expression. The image of the fountain that builds the center of this poem is continuously negated through paradox and hyperbole ("Its origin I cannot know, it has none, And I know all origins come from it") and stretched beyond the limits of ordinary imagery ("I see it here within this living bread").

*Subject:* The relational and perspective character of understanding is a central theme of hermeneutic thinking. The need for external mediation through language correlates with the orientation of negative hermeneutics towards expressivity and relationality. The relation between meaning and the communicating and involved subject has been a core concept for classical hermeneutics since Gadamer.<sup>61</sup> The experience of the limitation and ambivalence of this relation requires the subject to continue communicating, negating, and questioning their reality. This openness encourages engagement with otherness and incomprehensibility, driven by the power of open-ended questioning and desire for understanding.<sup>62</sup> It challenges a traditional hermeneutical understanding of the subject by emphasizing its incoherence and essential relatedness to an inconsistent external object (cf. dialogue with psychoanalysis).<sup>63</sup> While traditional hermeneutics are interested in the human mainly as an 'understanding' subject, negative hermeneutics moves past the reduction of the subject to a rational identity and rather describes a dynamic process mediating external expression and self-communication. Building on postmodern philosophical anthropology, a hermeneutic of the mystical subject emphasizes

61 Cf. Angehrn, *Subjekt und Sinn*, p. 239.

62 Cf. Angehrn, *Vom Sinn des Fragens*, pp. 62–64; and Angehrn, *Der hermeneutische Umweg*, p. 197. This understanding oscillates between a concept of radical otherness, as it is found in Waldenfels and Lévinas and a classical hermeneutic understanding of otherness and starting point of communication and understanding, cf. Waldenfels, *Spielräume des Möglichen und Überschüsse des Unmöglichen*, p. 11.

63 Cf. Angehrn, *Sinn und Nicht-Sinn*, pp. 42–45.

the non-rational, contingent, and material aspects of understanding.<sup>64</sup> The question of activity versus passivity in mystical prayer brings the analysis back to fundamental considerations about the subject and its role.

Simone Weil's famous quote, "It is not my business to think about myself. My business is to think about God. It is for God to think about me,"<sup>65</sup> exemplifies the relevance of this perspective. It expresses a radical sense of 'handing over' and giving up a preoccupation with the self without falling into passivity and dependence. Instead, the subject is charged with the (much greater) task of "thinking about God."

*Sense:* As a third key topic, a negative hermeneutic of mysticism engages with the concept of sense and non-sense and its application in a mystical context. From a negative hermeneutical perspective, 'sense' goes beyond a purely semantic relation of an 'x meaning y'. It emphasizes that understanding exceeds simple processing of information and is a complex engagement of a subject with its environment through language.<sup>66</sup> Angehrn distinguishes different, distinct yet related uses of the word:<sup>67</sup> 1) sense as '*sensus*' and '*sensorium*,' sensitivity, or even more, the ability to perceive external expressions,<sup>68</sup> 2) a semantic or hermeneutic sense. In this regard, sense is the coherence of signs and propositional expression (meaning); 3) normative or teleologic sense as the value of a cause or reason. Assuming the connection between these different aspects through their relation to an understanding subject and their connection to language, negative hermeneutics analyzes the polarity between the irreducible assumption of sense and its imminence, specifically in its withdrawal. It points out that sense in the hermeneutical process oscillates between the poles of an original misunderstanding and a trust in the fundamental potential of understanding. It argues that sense and understanding are always related to an 'other' as its critical negative,<sup>69</sup> and concludes that a hermeneutic based on this dynamic can only ever be 'critical': a critical view of understanding, but also of itself, its own conditions and limits.<sup>70</sup> The starting point for a negative hermeneutic of mysticism is an openness to an *insecure sense*. Sense is desired

64 In this sense it resonates well with Richard Kearney's approach of a 'carnal hermeneutics,' which emphasizes the bodily and sensual foundation of understanding. Cf. Kearney, *What is Diacritical Hermeneutics?*, p. 3.

65 Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 50.

66 Cf. Angehrn, *Sinn und Nicht-Sinn*, p. 10 et seq.

67 Cf. Angehrn, *Sinn und Nicht-Sinn*, pp. 8–18 and Angehrn, *Interpretation und Dekonstruktion*, p. 18 et seq.

68 Cf. Angehrn, *Sinn und Nicht-Sinn*, p. 9.

69 Cf. Angehrn, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, p. 322.

70 Cf. Angehrn, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, p. 324.

and claimed in the mystical expression, but it remains unattainable and withdrawn and thus insecure. Mysticism within a particular historical and social setting is a human expression driven by the desire *to communicate* oneself before the divine or to other people. Mysticism expresses a consciousness of a radical absence (dark night) or overwhelming presence (bright light) of the divine. For mystical theology, the desire to make sense of this experience and communicate/understand it becomes a central theme. Yet, it remains always challenged by the constitutive failure and inadequacy of any mystical expressions. Two quotations from Angelus Silesius' *Cherubinic Wanderer* can help illustrate the concept of an insecure sense:

5 (I. 25)  
 GOD IS NOT GRASPED  
 God is an utter Nothingness,  
 Beyond the touch of Time and Place:  
 The more thou graspest after Him,  
 The more he fleeth thy embrace.<sup>71</sup>

24 (V. 358)  
 GOD BECOMES WHAT HE WILLS  
 Eternal Spirit, God becomes  
 All that He wills to be – but still  
 Abideth ever as He is,  
 Without a form, an aim, a will.<sup>72</sup>

Both of these quotations express the radically evasive nature of God. They leave open whether God is “a nothingness” just for the perception of the desiring which can never grasp God, or whether the divine is in itself so radically “other” that he becomes “what he wills,” yet without any will at all.

Angehrn suggests that any form of human self-deception is ultimately grounded in fear of indeterminacy. It is an attempt to escape “this fundamental uncertainty by means of determination.”<sup>73</sup> For a mystical theology, this correlates to the attempt at ‘determining’ God’s nature which evades a patient working through of the various steps of negation and openness.<sup>74</sup> This is where negative hermeneutics builds an interesting connection point for

71 Angelus Silesius, *Selections from the Cherubinic Wanderer*, p. 101.

72 Angelus Silesius, *Selections from the Cherubinic Wanderer*, p. 105.

73 Angehrn, *Self-Understanding and Self-Deception*, p. 80.

74 Cf. Coakley, *Response to Denys Turner*, p. 158.

negative theology. It leaves the question open as to whether the negativity within human understanding corresponds to a negativity in being, or whether there is room for an ultimate hope for a reconciliation between language and reality.<sup>75</sup> Negative hermeneutics articulates hope but leaves open the ultimate question of whether this hope is justified. This project suggests that an awareness of the possibility of an ultimate 'no' to reconciliation will deepen the discourse, allowing for a creative and playful rearticulation of theological questions without necessarily leading to agnosticism.<sup>76</sup> In this sense, negative hermeneutics can be understood as a process towards a hermeneutical *Gelassenheit*, allowing a negative work to move through various stages of negation and re-interpretation of faith and hope.

The following section will focus on the concept of a travail of the negative, i.e., a work that discerns and works against deception and distortion,<sup>77</sup> and its potential for a negative hermeneutics of mysticism which might articulate the relationship between a *Deus absconditus*, and a *homo abyssus*.<sup>78</sup>

#### 4 The Work of the Negative

A negative hermeneutical approach is interested in the negative, which underlies any human understanding and being in the world. Angehrn distinguishes between practical (rejecting) and theoretical (negating) forms of negations. A theoretical negativism is interested in negation as a constitutive moment of human understanding (regarding their expression, e.g., limits of language) or their objects (e.g., negative anthropology). Practical negativism, however, takes its starting point from the experience of something that should not be (*Nicht-Sein-Sollendes/malum*). The relation between the two challenges the subject to situate itself in relation to the negative and articulate a response between acceptance, reconciliation, and resistance.<sup>79</sup> Negative hermeneutics emphasizes the diversity of different types and events of negativity which preclude a schematic and generalized response. Angehrn aims to articulate parallels between dialectical and negative dialectical approaches as they both distance themselves from the postmodern suspension of negativity as well as

75 Cf. Bradley, *Without Negative Theology*, p. 135.

76 Cf. Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, p. 332.

77 Cf. Rentsch, *Negativität und dialektische Sinnkonstitution*, p. 62.

78 Cf. Sölle, *Mystik und Widerstand*, p. 190.

79 Cf. Angehrn, *Dispositive des Negativen*, pp. 13–34; cf. also Schurz, *Negative Hermeneutik*, p. 79.



from its nihilistic absolutizing.<sup>80</sup> He suggests an ongoing engagement with the negative and a constant work on the limits of our understanding as a challenge for a hermeneutics which takes the radical experience of the negative seriously without succumbing to it.

Travail of the negative<sup>81</sup> (*Arbeit des Negativen, travail du negative*) is an expression first used by Hegel and reintroduced into the philosophical-psychoanalytical discourse by Jean Lacan and André Green. The notion of a 'travail' of the negative is fundamentally linked to an understanding of 'negativity' as a concept that oscillates between theoretical and practical aspects. A 'working through' the various expressions of negativity is not simply a conceptual-intellectual enterprise. As the concepts of negativity had to be rearticulated beyond a dialectic hope for an ultimate synthesis, they were reclaimed by various authors through a rigorous methodological negativism (Michael Theunissen, Thomas Rentsch, Theodor Adorno).<sup>82</sup> These thinkers emphasize the particularity and ambiguity of the negative, which poses anew the question of whether an ultimate reconciliation is possible in every individual instance. Against the theoretical claims of a negative dialectics, which affirms the irrevocability of the negative, a 'travail' affirms its sobering phenomenological reality. Instead of a radically removed negativity (e.g. the disruptive otherness in Bernhard Waldenfels' phenomenology<sup>83</sup>), it suggests a concept of a 'working' through various stages of differences and recurring negations. The term suggests a rhythmical engagement that focuses not on a negation or negation of the negation but on the 'in-between space' of a systolic and diastolic interplay.<sup>84</sup> In this sense, the concept already refers to its own limitations and the question of how it can be carried out at all. Rather than an abstract dialectical term, it remains always connected to the work that an individual (or a group) can accomplish between the infinite aspiration and the limits of temporal reality.<sup>85</sup> The experience of suffering and injustice as practical experience of negativity does not allow for an indifferent acceptance (or rejection) of the negative but insists on a careful retracing of its impact and

80 Cf. Angehrn, *Dispositive des Negativen*, pp. 34–36.

81 I chose the more unusual term of 'travail' rather than 'work', to move the term away from an explicitly Hegelian but also production-oriented context.

82 Liebsch, *Ein- und Aussetzen der Arbeit des Negativen*, p. 127.

83 Cf. Waldenfels, *The Question of the Other*.

84 Liebsch, *Ein- und Aussetzen der Arbeit des Negativen*, pp. 138–140. Using the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step-program as an illustration, a 'travail' would emphasize that the first step is not the 'admitting that we are powerless', but the engaging with the program/showing up.

85 Liebsch, *Ein- und Aussetzen der Arbeit des Negativen*, pp. 150–152.

practical insistence on justice. As a ‘travail,’ it connects the insistence on an irreconcilable reality to the need to minimize suffering and injustice. Against a generalizing focus on abstract terms of an ultimate reconciliation, ‘travail’ emphasizes the need for a descriptive accuracy that retraces negativity (and the wounds, scars, and injuries it leaves).<sup>86</sup>

I suggest that travail of the negative as a focal point for a negative hermeneutical understanding of mysticism is a suitable concept to clarify the relationship between theoretical negativity (understanding) and practical negativity (experiencing) in the context of spirituality, i.e., the transcendence of the individual towards an infinite reality.<sup>87</sup> As ‘work,’ mysticism is not simply reactive but creative and active, i.e., it cannot be reduced to a response to practical (e.g. ascesis) nor theoretical (apophasis/negative philosophy) negativism, yet it is also not completely independent from them. The idea of a travail emphasizes that we need to work through various levels of negation of experience and propositional thinking, not knowing where this process may lead. I suggest that for a negative work of mysticism, this builds a suitable connection point to Turner’s distinction of ‘first’ and ‘second order’ negation within mystical theology. The distinct first-order negations of experience, in which negation functions as the contradictory opposite of affirmation and interactions of affirmative and negative language, build a counter dynamic to a second-order negation of the negation, in which we negate but no longer know what our negations do (e.g. Thomas Aquinas: *Et hoc omnes dicunt Deum*).<sup>88</sup>

I suggest that this negative ‘work’ allows for a deepened understanding of mystical expressions of a continued ‘starting’ and ‘ending’ of faith – a dynamic staging of expressions which are continuously exceeded, left behind, and challenged but also of a fundamental detachment of a specific image of God.<sup>89</sup> Or as Kearney writes of the “atheist” God as “one of perpetual departing and arriving, conjoining negative capability with constant rebirthing of the divine in the ordinary.”<sup>90</sup> It is this sense of ‘restlessness’ and the inability to stop talking about what cannot be said which is characteristic of mysticism as a continued work against the limits of understanding and existence. As de

86 Cf. Liebsch, *Ein- und Aussetzen der Arbeit des Negativen*, pp. 145–149.

87 The concept of ‘negative work’ has some parallels with Alois Haas’ description of the “work of the night” in Johannes Tauler. Negative work, however, emphasizes more strongly the dialectic and dynamic elements of an engagement with practical and theoretical negativity, rather than its pure passivity; cf. Haas, *Mystik als Aussage*, pp. 411–445.

88 Cf. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p. 270.

89 Cf. Tippelskirch-Eissing, *Glaube als negative Fähigkeit*, p. 182.

90 Richard Kearney, *God after God*, p. 17; cf. also Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Volume 1, The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, pp. 150–153.

Certeau writes, the mystic is someone “who cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that is *not that*; one cannot stay *there* nor be content with *that*. Desire creates an excess.”<sup>91</sup> This overflowing, (almost manic) energy is contrasted by experiences of darkness and detachment which keep the mystic equally ‘engaged’ and committed to the process.

Applying the concept of a ‘travail’ to mysticism will allow for a double focus of articulating it as a task of continued ‘metanoia’ (transformation of the heart)<sup>92</sup> as well as the description of an already present reality of non-identity. ‘Metanoia’ as a reorientation towards the divine allows for a rearticulation of notions of apophasis as a dynamic process which aims “to abandon everything familiar in pursuit of that which is radically unlike oneself”<sup>93</sup> containing both elements of critic and detachment, as well as a bold rearticulating of social dynamics.<sup>94</sup> This process is not simply a theoretical negation asserting transcendent security through dialectics but needs to start with ‘self-emptying’ and detaching of the subject. The experience of an encounter with God in the ‘radical void’ does not precede or succeed the act of imaginative creation and dialogical ‘being in the world’ (neither epistemologically nor ontologically) but occurs in its very rhythm.

As Angelus Silesius puts it:

Deep calls to Deep.  
My spirit’s Deep doth cry amain  
To Deep of God: say,  
which is deeper of the twain?<sup>95</sup>

This couplet shows a strange, almost provocative comparison how the human communicates (“calls”) with the divine though its utter emptiness and absence (“deep”). While the negativity found in the divine is fundamentally different from human negativity, the ‘negative’ is what ultimately connects them (“which is deeper of the twain”).

Within the apophatic tradition, it is a core question whether the negation of negation or denial of all beings yields any positive knowledge of God or

91 Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Volume 1, The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, p. 299.

92 Cf. Rakoczy, *Great Mystics and Social Justice*, p. 204 et seq. and Schillebeeckx, *Jesus in our Western Culture*, p. 74.

93 Newheiser, *Desacralizing Political Theology*, p. 83.

94 Cf. Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Volume 1, The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, pp. 226–228.

95 Angelus Silesius, *Selections from the Cherubinic Wanderer*, p. 129.

“whether God’s being is and remains utterly transcendent and is to that extent never immediately present.”<sup>96</sup> Focusing on the travail of the negative as a lens for studying mysticism allows us to refocus this question and articulate apophatic elements within mystical thinking as ‘critical’ practice. As negative dialectic’s “critique of representational thinking is not only, and not primarily, an epistemological doctrine, but a practical one,”<sup>97</sup> mystical theology needs to pay attention specifically to the transitions from mystical thought and expression to mystical life and praxis as expressions of the continued work of the non-identical. Apophasis as linguistic and intellectual detachment is interpreted through the practice of a mystical ‘work.’ This work is not opposed to ordinary life and expression, but rather opens it up to a notion of living and working ‘without a why’ (*sunder warumbe*), i.e. a detached immediacy which aim for the greatest possible openness for the here and now.<sup>98</sup> In this sense, mysticism is the work that prepares the consciousness not simply for the presence of God in all things, but also for God’s absence and ‘nothingness’ in them. In this sense, the mystical work is not opposed to the idea of temporality and contextual boundedness. But the mystic loves life as it provides a space not simply for unity but for progress towards God.<sup>99</sup> The rhythmic movement of a work of the negative allows for an attentive description of cataphatic and apophatic elements within mysticism. The creative production of pictures and images and their negation and letting go are both part of a process of relating to God and working through various stages of mediation and practice.<sup>100</sup> Through the lens of ‘negative work,’ it is especially the ‘strange,’ ‘distinct,’ and ‘non-streamlined’ moments of mystical imagery that contain its theological value.<sup>101</sup>

## 5 Conclusions

The interest in a realm beyond understanding which opens space for epistemological and ontological ambivalences is a shared terrain of mystical theology and negative hermeneutics. While both are rooted in specific traditions and epistemological contexts and cannot simply be equated, I argue that they

96 Finlayson, *On Not Being Silent in the Darkness*, p. 19.

97 Finlayson, *On Not Being Silent in the Darkness*, p. 26.

98 Radler, *Depth, Ground, Abyss*, p. 314; Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckharts Predigten: Predigt 5b*, pp. 90–92.

99 Cf. Sölle, *Mystik und Widerstand*, p. 217.

100 Cf. Albertson, *Cataphasis, Visualization, and Mystical Space*, p. 449.

101 Cf. Hollywood/Smith, *Christology*, p. 485.

are mutually enriching in as much as they challenge each other to push their respective paradigms of negativity to an extreme. While this article has shown how negative hermeneutics can provide an enriching and critical method for mystical theology, vice versa, a negative hermeneutics will be interested in mysticism as an extreme case of an engagement with limits of understanding and creative responses to it.

By focussing on the specificity of the non-said and non-understood, this negative hermeneutical approach opens a new perspective on the dynamics of religious particularity and universal negativity.<sup>102</sup> This ambivalence makes it particularly suitable for a mystical theology which does not reduce elements of negativity to negative theology as ‘reversed’ positive ontology, but rather opens our understanding to the specificity of the mystical vision. While negative hermeneutics leaves the question open as to whether or not the hope it articulates is justified, in the movement of a “travail” it avoids dangers of a generalizing nihilism, as well as uncritical conformity, by focussing on the particularity of the negative as well as the intrinsic connection of intellectual and practical response. It does not, however, provide a basis for an articulation of a synthesizing form of strong ‘hope’ or ‘doxology’, but contents itself with a weak and critical ‘practice’.<sup>103</sup>

Mysticism is just as much entangled in power struggles and oppression as other religious practices, yet as claim and practice, it can function as a corrective. A simple equation of the specific ‘otherness’ encountered in a stranger and divine ‘Otherness’ is dangerous as it appropriates specificity of experience and the reality of violence/suffering. A negative hermeneutics does provide an approach for distinguishing various forms of otherness and our relationship to it. As Michel de Certeau recognizes: ‘the other’ is not to be tied down to some controlling category of experience but is returning to ‘haunt’ the present.<sup>104</sup> Applying the concept of a travail of the negative as an engagement with this ‘haunting,’ this article has shown how mystical theology needs to be radically critical and self-critical. Negative work is not simply a self-referential negation but, through its emphasis on the particularity of the negative, it opens up a space for a rearticulation of the subject’s renewed, “disintegrated” relationship to God, the community, and itself.<sup>105</sup> As Sarah Coakley suggests, “intentional practices of contemplative unmasking might begin to shift the distortions

102 Cf. Boeve, *Negative Theology and Theological Hermeneutics*, pp. 198–204.

103 Cf. Prevot, *Negative Dialectics and Doxological Hope*, p. 141.

104 Cf. Certeau, *Heterologies*, p. 3; cf. also Barnes, *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 628.

105 Cf. Critchley, *Mystical Anarchism*, p. 296 et seq.

and paralyzes of forms of self-deception.”<sup>106</sup> This builds a starting point for engaging freely and boldly with a “holy disarray” and the attentive application of “weak” attitudes, which articulate this ambivalence and participate in the project of deconstructing and criticizing hierarchical structures.<sup>107</sup> As such, the understanding of mystical practice as negative work is inextricably linked to the idea of detachment and dispossession, but also of community building and creative rearticulation of solidarity and yearning for justice.<sup>108</sup>

This perspective emphasizes the importance of practice, participation, and shared exploration as an essential characteristic of mystical theology. Focusing on these dynamics can be a starting point for rearticulating theological traditions faced with the challenges of a postmodern pluralism and the dangers of populism and a “post-truth” society. I suggest that this approach to mystical theology makes an important contribution to the wider theological discourse and encourages theology to take the fundamental character of negation seriously, and not content itself with a mechanical external mediation and self-assurance. This article aims to open up a negative hermeneutical approach for mystical theological text studies, but also for a comparative study of mysticism and a fundamental theological exploration of the potential of mystical theology in dialogue with other theological and extra-theological subjects. Some of the core questions for these endeavors could be: How is the perspectivity of the theologian a crucial feature? What are the intrinsic limits of theological language? Where does theology benefit from focusing on elements of paradox, negation, and non-sense? How is a theological canon established and transgressed? How is academic theology tangled up in social and ecclesial hierarchies?

## Bio

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<sup>106</sup> Coakley, *Response to Denys Turner*, p. 158.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Konacheva, *The Political Aspects of Weak Theology*, p. 156; Sölle, *Mystik und Widerstand*, p. 91.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Prevot, *Negative Dialectics and Doxological Hope*, p. 154 and Williams, *Mystical Theology and Christian Self-Understanding*, p. 17 et seq.

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