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A MEDIEVAL CARTHUSIAN MONK'S RECIPE  
TO MULTIPLE KENSHO

Hugh of Balma's Approach to Mystical Union and Some Striking  
Similarities to Modern Zen Teaching<sup>1</sup>

*Expertus infallibiliter novit.*

[Who has experience has flawless knowledge.]

*John Duns Scotus*

**SUMMARY** — The Carthusian Hugh of Balma (flourished around 1260) is one of the most important and least known writers of the Christian mystical tradition. He held that a unification of the soul with God was possible, following the Pseudo-Dionysian way of letting go of all mental operations. The result of this union is experiential knowledge of God. After describing what is meant by this concept it is contended that this is rather similar to some Zen teachings in modern times, thus opening up a bridge between the traditions. What Hugh had in mind is pure receptivity, similar to enlightened mindfulness in the Soto tradition, while at the same time acknowledging the fact that dramatic experiences of enlightenment might also be possible. The relationship between these two traditions and the open questions is discussed. One of them certainly is the question about the nature of this final reality.

Kensho, experiential realisation of one's true nature, is at the heart of Zen Buddhist teaching. Although in essence ineffable, this term denotes an immediate experience of the true reality of the world as well as the human mind, and some descriptions of such experiences have been published.<sup>2</sup> At its core is the realisation of connectivity and interdependence of all beings and the insight that

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<sup>2</sup> P. Kapleau, *The three pillars of Zen: Teaching, practice, enlightenment*, New York 1969.

there cannot be individual salvation without, or even at the cost of, the salvation of other beings.<sup>3</sup> Hence the first of the Four Vows begins with the vow to save all beings.<sup>4</sup> The method to attain realisation of one's nature traditionally is Zazen, sitting in silent meditation, abstaining from wilful cognitive activity, mindfully observing the breath until the mind becomes clear as a still lake. Sitting in still meditation without actively engaging in rational, cognitive activity or imaginative work has been a common denominator of different traditions in Buddhism, particularly of Zen.

While the Zen tradition places much emphasis on the right method of meditation and the experience of Kensho, as well as on the deepening of this experience in daily life, the Christian mystical tradition has not been very methodological. It placed more emphasis on 'grace', the notion that the final experience is not attainable by one's own effort alone, but is freely given by God, who offered himself in the mystical experience of union to the soul.<sup>5</sup> Although the context and the theological interpretation of what actually happens in the mystical experience, or Kensho respectively, is rather different, it has been observed by different writers that the experiences themselves seem to be remarkably similar.<sup>6</sup> This has been discussed with reference to Meister Eckhart, one of the best known German mystical writers of the middle ages: both his paradoxical formulations and his diverse pleas for purity of mind, abstinence from thinking, and his teaching that within the soul there is a spark of the soul, seem akin to Zen teaching.<sup>7</sup> Practically unknown is the fact that, around 1260, approximately two generations before Eckhart, and probably one of his sources of inspiration, there lived a literally unknown writer, who later became known as the Carthusian monk Hugh of Balma. He was one of the most important writers

<sup>3</sup> R.L.F Habito, 'Buddhist philosophy as experiential path: A journey through the Suta Nipata', in: *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1988), 125-139.

<sup>4</sup> R. Aitken, *Zen als Lebenspraxis*, München 1988.

<sup>5</sup> W. Zwingmann, 'Affectus illuminati amoris: Über das Offenbarwerden der Gnade und die Erfahrung von Gottes beseligender Gegenwart', in: *Citeaux* 18 (1967), 193-226; J. Sudbrack, *Die vergessene Mystik und die Herausforderung des Christentums durch New Age*, Würzburg 1988.

<sup>6</sup> H. Dumoulin, 'Die Zen Erleuchtung in neueren Erlebnisberichten', in: *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 10 (1963), 133-152; K. Albert, *Die ontologische Erfahrung*, Ratingen 1974; A. Ammann, *Die Gottesschau im palamitischen Hesychasmus: Ein Handbuch der Spätbyzantinischen Mystik*, Würzburg 1986.

<sup>7</sup> H. Hof, *Scintilla animae*, Bonn 1952; S. Ueda, *Die Gottesgeburt in der Seele und der Durchbruch zur Gottheit*, Gütersloh 1965; Idem, 'Der Zen-Buddhismus als "Nicht-Mystik" unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Vergleichs zur Mystik Meister Eckharts', in: G. Schulz (Ed.), *Transparente Welt: Festschrift für Jean Gebser*, Bern-Stuttgart 1965, 291-313; Idem, 'Das Nichts bei Meister Eckhart und im Zen-Buddhismus, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Theologie und Philosophie', in: D. Papenfuss & J. Söring (Eds.), *Transzendenz und Immanenz. Philosophie und Theologie in der veränderten Welt*, Stuttgart 1978, 257-266.

of the Christian mystical tradition,<sup>8</sup> and, among others, the source of the anonymous 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century treatise *Cloud of Unknowing*, whose author very likely came from the environment of an English charterhouse. It has been pointed out that *The Cloud* is most akin to Zen teachings.<sup>9</sup> Hugh of Balma also influenced the Dutch mystical writers of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century – Ruusbroec, Herp, Grote – directly, and thus the whole lay movement of the modern devotion – *devotio moderna* – which was so influential as the forerunner of reformist ideas.<sup>10</sup> But most notably, through the Spanish author Garcia de Cisneros, the *Vita Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony, as well as through early Spanish translations and printings, he was an important source for the Spanish mystics, Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and Ignatius of Loyola,<sup>11</sup> the founder of a distinct modern tradition of a Christian experiential approach.

Hugh of Balma is probably the writer closest to Zen teaching. Thus, he might be able to function both as a textual but also as a contextual bridge between Zen Buddhist and Christian teachings. By looking at possible links we might be able to better understand what Hugh's teaching, little understood up to now, actually meant, and we might also be able to find a description of what happens in deep meditation in terms of Western thinking.

In the following I would like to give a brief *aperçu* of Hugh of Balma's teaching, before pointing out some of the similarities and dissimilarities between his teaching and the Zen tradition, thereby using both traditions as the others' interpretant. I am going about this task with an experiential background in both traditions, having practised imaginative types of meditation in the tradition of Saint Ignatius and Zen meditation of the Sanbo Kyodan line for years, and with a scholarly background in Hugh of Balma's writing, having studied

<sup>8</sup> E. v. Ivanka, *Plato Christianus: Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die Väter*, Einsiedeln 1964.

<sup>9</sup> J. Walsh, *The Cloud of Unknowing in pre-Reformation English spirituality*, New York 1965; Anonymus, *The cloud of unknowing*, ed., trans. & introd. J. Walsh, New York 1981 (The Classics of Western Spirituality); R.W. Englert, *Scattering and oneing: A study of conflict in the works of the author of The Cloud of Unknowing*, Salzburg 1983 (Analecta Cartusiana 105); M.G. Sargent, 'William Exmewe, Maurice Chauncy, and the *Cloud of Unknowing*', in: *Spiritualität heute und gestern*. Bd. 4, Salzburg 1984, 17-20; N. Kocijancic-Pokorn, 'Original audience of The Cloud of Unknowing', in: J. Hogg (Ed.), *The mystical tradition and the Carthusians*. Vol. 1, Salzburg 1995, 60-77.

<sup>10</sup> J. Leclercq, F. Vandebroucke & L. Bouyer, *Histoire de la spiritualité chrétienne*. Vol. II: *La spiritualité du moyen âge*, Paris 1961; T. Mertens, 'Het aspiratieve gebed bij Hendrik Mande: Invloed van Hugo de Balma?', in: *Ons geestelijk Erf* 58 (1984), 300-321.

<sup>11</sup> J. Beyer, 'Saint Ignace de Loyola chartreux', in: *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 78 (1956), 937-951; F. d. Pablo Maroto, 'Amor y conocimiento en la vida mística según Hugo de Balma', in: *Revista Espiritualidad* 24 (1965), 399-447.

the historical background of his writing and having translated his text into German.<sup>12</sup>

I will be making a crucial presupposition: I suppose that from an experiential point of view experiences themselves are similar if not identical.<sup>13</sup> But since humans are cultural beings, and language is one of the prime constituents of culture, it is not possible to have experiences without reflection, description, and finding a framework for them in terms of known concepts of philosophy and religion. While an existential experience like that of love, or human loss, or for that matter Kensho, might be comparable in content and subjective quality, yet expression, valuation, importance, and cultural interpretation may vary. The interpretative framework depends on the cultural background, which makes available the language and concepts with which to order and interpret experiences. Some have argued that there is no way out of this apriori of language and culture.<sup>14</sup> With Robert Forman I beg to differ. The stance I shall take in this paper is a moderate realist one: I start from the assumption that the experience itself and the capacity for it is likely grounded in our human nature. But the way it is expressed, interpreted and lived is heavily dependent on history, language, and culture.

#### HUGH OF BALMA – THE MAN AND HIS WRITING

##### *The Author*

Although Hugh of Balma's text *Viae Sion Lugent* (The Ways to Zion Mourn) was one of the most widely copied and distributed texts of the middle ages – more than 120 copies are known and numerous translations and print editions are extant – virtually nothing is known about its author.<sup>15</sup>

While there is some consensus now that the main body of his teaching was written roughly around 1260, it is rather unclear who the writer was. The first

<sup>12</sup> H. Walach, *Notitia experimentalis Dei – Erfahrungserkenntnis Gottes: Studien zu Hugo de Balmas Text 'Viae Sion lugent' und deutsche Übersetzung*, Salzburg 1994; Idem, 'Notitia experimentalis Dei – Was heisst das? Hugo de Balmas Begriff der Erfahrungserkenntnis Gottes: Versuch einer Rekonstruktion', in: J. Hogg (Ed.), *The mystical tradition and the Carthusians*. Vol. 5, Salzburg 1996, 45-66.

<sup>13</sup> K.C. Forman (Ed.), *The innate capacity: Mysticism, psychology, and philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> S.T. Katz (Ed.), *Mysticism and language*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> See Walach, *Notitia experimentalis Dei*; Hugo de Balma, *Théologie mystique: Introduction, texte Latin, traduction, notes et index*, ed. F. Ruello & J. Barbet, Paris, 1995; Idem, 'The roads to Zion Mourn', in: *Carthusian spirituality: The writings of Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte*, tr. D.D. Martin, New York 1997, 67-170.

text witness is an anonymous text dated 1371, stemming from Trier charterhouse, and it is only 100 years later that texts bear Hugh (even Henry) of Balma, or Palma, Carthusian, as author.

I have argued extensively that the traditional version of who this author was is not very plausible.<sup>16</sup> This received view runs roughly as follows.<sup>17</sup> There is nobody in the extensive Carthusian documents and archives known by the name of Hugh of Balma who would fit the time of the writer. Even rather early historiographers and Carthusian scholars do not know, who this writer was. The diverse renderings of Carthusian history are full of contradictions. There is one Hugh of Balma mentioned in connection with the charterhouse of Meyriat in Burgundy, France, as a local knight and benefactor, but he lived about 100 years before the author of the text. Balma, on the other hand, is a rather frequent name of indistinct origin. Its Latin meaning is 'cave', and it is extant in all areas where lime-stone hills made cave formations a normal phenomenon, which is true for the whole Jura area running from Southern Germany across Lake Constance down to Burgundy, and again in the Southern French Alpilles, as well as the limestone areas of the Alps, and for that matter practically the whole mountain ridge of Italy and the mountains on the Balkans. Thus, it is not possible to conclude by a clear geographical indication from where the bearer of this name would have come. As it happens, there are quite a few families named Balma around Burgundy in France, and what is now Switzerland. There is one family de Balma, however, connected to the charterhouse of Meyriat. One member of this family, Hugo de Dorchiis, could be traced in the documents and was prior of the charterhouse of Meyriat around 1300. At the time of the writing of *Viae Sion Lugent* the 'Dorche' branch of the family died out. The construction within the received view would demand that therefore Hugo de Dorchiis, after having entered the charterhouse and after his family had died out and the property was transferred to the Balmeto branch of the family, would have converted back his name to the original line of 'de Balmeto'. Everyone knowing the Carthusian order and its absolute seclusion from worldly affairs even today<sup>18</sup> would

<sup>16</sup> Walach, *Notitia experimentalis Dei*.

<sup>17</sup> S. Autore, 'Hugues de Balma', in: *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*. Vol. 7, eds. A. Vacant, E. Mangenot & E. Amann, Paris 1922, 215-220; P. Dubourg, 'La date de la theologia mystica', in: *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 8 (1927), 156-161; A.M. Sochay, 'Hugues de Balma', in: 'Hugues de Balma', in: G. Jacquemet (Ed.), *Catholicisme: Hier, aujourd'hui, demain*. Vol. 5, Paris 1962, 1028-1030.

<sup>18</sup> I have made a visit to the German charterhouse at Seibranz, and spent a few days there. I was told that even now, family members are not allowed within the precincts of the charterhouse and have only very limited visitor's access to members of the charterhouse. There is no newspaper, no TV, no telephone connection for single members. The prior would make a summary of the most important happenings in the world such that the monks may pray for the world.

find it difficult to believe that a monk, let alone the officials of the charterhouse, would have changed the name, because a cousin of a professed monk lost her land. Thus, the whole construction of the received view of who Hugh of Balma was rests on rather boggy ground, considering external evidence.

I have also argued from internal evidence that the author of *Viae Sion Lugent* very likely was familiar with quite specialised discussions within the Franciscan order, especially raised by texts of Saint Bonaventure in Paris 1258. I have made a case that the last part of his text, the 'Quaestio difficilis', has to be seen as an inaugural disputation as was customary for a master of theology at the beginning of his teaching career, and that he implicitly addressed matters which fit more neatly into the context of academic debate at the theological faculty in Paris than into the educational context of mystical training and erudition of fellow monks, as would be implicated by the received view. From contextual evidence I have argued that the whole text corpus speaks a language of its own which puts it into the context of academic debate around the question: What is the most direct way of attaining knowledge of God? In this, the author of *Viae Sion Lugent* builds on two texts, one of which is of Franciscan origin, and which can be made out to be the immediate predecessor text,<sup>19</sup> the second one being Thomas Gallus. Thus my tentative conclusion was twofold: that the received view is probably wrong, and that the author possibly was a Franciscan who had to retreat into the charterhouse, for personal safety, or as a punishment, or out of personal commitment. This would explain the silence of the Carthusian sources. Until now, direct evidence has not been found about this author, and thus we have to rely on contextual evidence. The safest conclusion about the personal history of the author to date is in my opinion that he was a theologically trained author, meddling actively in the theological debate around 1260, attacking directly, and aggressively, the prevailing views of the leading scholars of the Franciscan and Dominican order concerning the knowledge of God, and that after roughly 100 years this author surfaces in historical sources as Hugh of Balma, Carthusian. The received view that this Hugh of Balma is identical to the prior of the charterhouse of Meyriat, Hugh of Dorche, is, if not impossible, weakly founded and rather implausible.

### *The Text*

It is telling that the author of this text has faded out of history as a concrete person, while his work survived the centuries. This is understandable from two

<sup>19</sup> Pseudo-Thomas Gallus, *Le commentaire du Cantique des Cantiques 'deiformis animae gemitus'*, crit. ed. Jeanne Barbet, Paris 1972.

perspectives: Standing in the stream of the mystical tradition, the text is a testimony of mystical experience and of fierce battle against mainstream theology. In consequence, its main teaching demands the final loss of personal identity, the gist of the teaching being perfect, total and repeated union with God, even here on earth, 'hundreds or thousands of times, day or night'.<sup>20</sup> This in consequence would naturally result in what has been known as the Loss of the Self.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the teaching of Hugh has come true in his personal history: he has passed out of historical records as an individual.

The main point which he made against the theological establishment of his time – mainly exemplified by Bonaventure, the minister general of the Franciscan order of those days and an eminent theologian, but also against the Dominican tradition as exemplified by Saint Thomas Aquinas who were both teaching in Paris shortly before or at the time of Hugh's writing – is in sum the following. He contends that

1. It is possible to attain direct knowledge of God which is immediate and experiential.<sup>22</sup>
2. This knowledge is beyond cognitive activity such as thinking, knowing, imagining, rational conclusion, linear thinking and cognitive activity, as well as imagination, which are even a hindrance.
3. There is no precondition for this experience, in terms of education, knowledge, or status; lay persons can attain it just as much as priests, theologians, or monks; women as much as men.
4. It follows a simple, threefold method (*triplex via*) which is well known from history and tradition and founded on the Neoplatonist tradition. First purify your senses and soul (way of purification – *via purgativa*). Then let yourself be illuminated (way of illumination – *via illuminativa*). Third, let yourself be taken into union (way of union – *via unitiva*).
5. This experience happens in what he calls *affectus* (affect) in the medieval terminology – we will come back to this term later, on 'fiery wings of love', and
6. it is real union with – and not just the reflection or an image of – God. It foreshadows eternal bliss already here on earth, and can be had as often as one chooses.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh of Balma, in: Martin, *Carthusian spirituality*, 0.B5. I am referring to the text in the critical edition, English translation, where Roman digits indicate the part, and Arabic numerals the paragraph. The *Prologue* is referred to as 0, *Via Purgativa* as 1, and so forth.

<sup>21</sup> B. Roberts, *The experience of no-self: A contemplative journey*, Boulder-London 1984; S. Segal, *Kollision mit der Unendlichkeit: Ein Leben jenseits des persönlichen Selbst*, Bielefeld 1997.



## 1. Experiential Knowledge of God

I have traced part of the underpinnings of this term elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> Briefly, Hugh's opinion rests upon the prevailing medieval psychology, which was written down in a kind of psychological-mystical textbook, the *Liber de Spiritu et Anima* (Book on the Spirit and the Soul). This text was possibly written by the Cistercian Alcher of Clairvaux who compiled what was known from the Augustinian and from other traditions.<sup>24</sup> Hugh combines two lines of tradition in his teaching: The Augustinian tradition of loving grace and the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition of mystical union beyond the intellect.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite was a Syrian monk of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, probably a student, but certainly influenced by the great neo-Platonic writer and systematic thinker Proclus, who had formed the ideas of his teacher Plotinos into a coherent whole.<sup>25</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius used the authority of the Apostle Paul, who, according to the Act of Apostles had converted one of the Athenian philosophers of the Areopagus, Dionysios, to Christianity, and thus he spoke as this direct disciple of Paul. What he handed down, however, was pure neo-Platonism combined with some Christian teaching.<sup>26</sup> In his *Mystical Theology* Pseudo-Dionysius demanded that one should abandon all thinking, all cognitive activity and rise in the darkness of the mind to the ultra-radiance of the One beyond all concepts and words. In the fifth chapter of the *Divine Names* he made explicit that there was a specific 'organ' for this mystical union within the soul, which in its Latin translation became known as *scintilla synderesis*, the spark of the synderesis, or spark of the soul. 'Synderesis' is a difficult notion, and it is not yet clear how this term was handed down through the ages.<sup>27</sup> What is clear is that the Stoic notion of seed of eternal fire in the souls was combined with the Platonic and Neo-Platonic teaching of an 'upper part of the soul', which was more akin to the Good, or godlike.<sup>28</sup> This teaching, originally coming from

<sup>22</sup> Walach, *Notitia experimentalis Dei*, V.14.

<sup>23</sup> Walach, 'Notitia experimentalis Dei – Was heisst das?'

<sup>24</sup> Pseudo-Augustinus alias Alcher von Clairveaux, *Liber de spiritu et anima*. (*Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina* [PL], ed. J.-P. Migne, Paris 1845, no. 40, 779-832).

<sup>25</sup> W. Beierwaltes, *Proklos: Grundzüge seiner Metaphysik*, Frankfurt 1965.

<sup>26</sup> J. Koch, 'Augustinischer und dionysischer Neuplatonismus und das Mittelalter', in: Idem, *Kleine Schriften*. Vol. 1, Rome 1973 (orig. publ. 1959), 3-25; D. Knowles, 'The influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on western mysticism', in: P. Brooks (Ed.), *Christian spirituality: Essays in honour of Gordon Rupp*, London 1975, 79-94; J. Leclercq, 'Influence and noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages', in: *The complete works*, London 1987, 25-32.

<sup>27</sup> M.B. Crowe, 'The term synderesis and the scholastics', in: *Irish Theological Quarterly* 23 (1956), 228-245.

<sup>28</sup> Ivanka, *Plato Christianus*; H. Walach, 'The higher self: Spark of the soul, summit of the mind. History of an important concept of transpersonal psychology in the West', in: *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 24 (2005), 16-28.



Proclus, propagated by Pseudo-Dionysius was revived in the West by an eminent writer of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Gallus or Thomas of St. Victor, later abbot of Vercelli in Piedmont, whence he was called 'Commentator Vercellensis' by his contemporaries and later generations, 'Commentator' ('one who has written comments') meaning here that he had commented several times on the work of Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>29</sup> In these comments he strove to combine the Eastern-Christian tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius with the Western Augustinian tradition. Thereby, he laid the foundation for what Hugh took up and propagated more radically: that there was a possibility of the soul's directly uniting with God in an upper part of the soul, which he called *scintilla synderesis* ('spark of the synderesis'), or *apex affectus* ('summit of the affect').

He thereby used an Augustinian distinction which was codified by the *Liber de Spiritu et Anima*: the distinction between affect and intellect. The *Book of the Spirit and the Soul* teaches that there is a sense in the soul, which naturally strives towards the good. And this natural striving and knowing of the good is the sense of the heart, the *sensus cordis*. It belongs to the affect, while thinking and knowing pertains to the intellect. Thomas Gallus takes up this distinction and compiles it into the first full-fledged psychology which systematically accommodates mystical experience of direct knowledge of God.<sup>30</sup> This psychology, contained in his commentary on Isaiah poses two general faculties of the soul: intellect and affect. While the intellect is directed towards knowing the truth, the affect is driven by taking up the good. Both together make up the human mind. Thus the affect can be understood as a mental faculty which is driven by – affected by – the good. On a very basic level it is concerned with the good of the senses and the body, striving for what is good for basic living, on a higher level it is concerned with the moral good, distinguishing good from evil. On the highest level it is concerned with the attainment of the highest good, God himself. What is interesting in this context is that Thomas Gallus explicitly states, following Pseudo-Dionysius in that respect, that the highest kind of 'knowledge' of God is not intellectual or cognitive, but is only possible in the highest summit of the affectus, the *apex affectus*, *scintilla synderesis*, which 'alone is apt to unite with God' (*solus Deo est unibilis*).<sup>31</sup> Hence it is immediate knowledge, not mediated cognitively by concepts and cognitive operations but direct, 'unitive', brought

<sup>29</sup> J. Barbet, 'Thomas Gallus', in: M. Viller, F. Cavallera & J. de Guibert (Eds.), *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*. Vol. 15, Paris 1990, 800-816.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Gallus, "'Commentaire sur Isaie'", ed. G. Théry', in: *Vie Spirituelle* 47 (1936), 146-162.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Gallus, *Explanatio in mysticam theologiam: Grand commentaire sur la theologie mystique*, ed. G. Théry, Paris 1934. This commentary is practically unavailable. There is one copy in the the University library of Mainz, Germany.

about by unification with God. And there is one term which the tradition reserves for immediate knowledge: experiential knowledge. It is a direct experience of God and as such a unification, which takes place in the summit of the affect. This summit of the affect, we must not forget, is the summit of that part of the soul which is 'affected', passively, by the good, and does not actively engage in cognitive activity.

A few words regarding the philosophical obliqueness of this term 'experiential knowledge of God' for medieval ears with a philosophical background are in order here. The term 'experience' comes from Aristotle's theory of knowledge as laid down in his metaphysics.<sup>32</sup> There he states right at the beginning that experience is an immediate affection of the senses and that it only pertains to finite, contingent things. The prime mover, the Aristotelian God, was only knowable, but certainly not to be experienced, since experience was a category reserved for contingent things. Thus, 'experiential knowledge of God' was a contradiction in terms, following Aristotelian philosophy, which was the prevailing view in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, in his book *On the Soul* Aristotle says that there is a kind of perception which is direct, immediate, and without error.<sup>33</sup> This is the *aisthesis ton idion* – the perception of the objects which are perceptible by each sense organ.<sup>34</sup> We can be in error about *what* we see or hear, but we cannot be in error about the fact *that* we see or hear (except in states of disease or mental disruption). Even when we *hit* our eyes or ears (as opposed to hearing or seeing properly), we will have visual or acoustic impressions. Thus the sense impression specific for a sense modality is itself free from error, Aristotle says, 'Indeed the perception, at least of the proper object of a sense is not false, but the impression we get of it is not the same as the perception'.<sup>35</sup> What Hugh does following the direct line from Pseudo-Dionysius and Thomas Gallus and, using the psychological tradition of the *Liber de Spiritu et Anima* as an instrument (of course he does not say this directly, but this is my reconstruction of his argument, which I have backed by extensive quotes elsewhere),<sup>36</sup> is close to ingenious. The hermeneutic reconstruction, in brief, is as follows:

Aristotle says a sense organ perceiving its own modality cannot be mistaken in perceiving this modality. God is the natural percept of the 'sense of the heart' (*sensus cordis*). In other words, it is the natural orderly working of the sense of the heart

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *The metaphysics*, tr. H. Tredennick, London 1961.

<sup>33</sup> Aristoteles, *Vom Himmel, Von der Seele, Von der Dichtkunst*, transl. & ed. O. Gigon, München 1983.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *De anima*, tr. J.A. Smith, in: *The works of Aristotle*, ed. W.D. Ross & M.A. Hon. Vol. III, Oxford 1951, II.5, 418a.6f.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV. v.20-24, 1010b1f.

<sup>36</sup> Walach, 'Notitia experimentalis Dei – Was heisst das?'

to be affected by the good itself. This absolute good is God. Thus, if this 'sense organ' is affected, it is only by God himself, and it cannot be mistaken in that. Thomas Gallus teaches that this happens in the affect, which is beyond cognitive activity as thinking or rational conclusions, and that this is union with God, taking place in the soul itself. Hugh puts together these elements and calls this immediate experience, experiential, direct and immediate knowledge of God, which can happen only in the affect, leaving behind all operations of the rational mind.

## 2. Beyond Cognition

It has already been taught by Pseudo-Dionysius that this rising up to God can happen only if all mental activity is suspended. This is in direct and stark opposition to traditional Platonic and Aristotelian teaching which both make thinking the noblest act, worthy of the Gods. Whatever it is that the Platonist or Aristotelian God does, it is some kind of thinking. The Dionysian tradition, however, points out that one has to go beyond thinking, if one wants to attain this union with God or the One, which Plotinos has called *exstasis*.<sup>37</sup> In Thomas Gallus' psychology this teaching finds a natural explanation: Since God is the good, and the good can only be attained by the affect, not by the intellect, it is due to the natural distribution of mental work, as it were, that it is not by intellectual activity, but by the affect, or strictly speaking by being affected, that this union can be attained. Thus, in order to be able to be affected, mental operations like thinking, imagining, ratiocination, have to be stopped. This is a natural consequence, but it is a consequence which is not at all *en vogue* at the time of Hugh's writing. Saint Bonaventure had taught that a good theological preparation, thinking and meditating (in the medieval sense of the word, which means 'thinking about, pondering about something') is compulsory if one wants to climb the ladder of ascent to the mystical heights he is describing in his *Itinerary of the Mind to God*.<sup>38</sup> Also the Dominican tradition, following Aristotle, places much emphasis on thinking and on the fact that knowledge of God is necessarily imperfect, since it is gained by cognitive activity. Saint Thomas, following Pseudo-Dionysius whom, by the way, he quotes more often than any other author including Saint Augustine and Aristotle, maintains that in His essence God is not knowable by the human intellect, and that we can only follow His vestiges and know his workings.<sup>39</sup> Those, who have attained perfect knowledge,

<sup>37</sup> W. Beierwaltes, *Reflexion und Einung: Zur Mystik Plotins*, Einsiedeln 1974, 9-36.

<sup>38</sup> Bonaventura, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum: De reductione artium ad theologiam*, Lat. & German, trans. & introd. J. Kaup, München 1961.

<sup>39</sup> W.J. Hoye, 'Gotteserkenntnis per essentiam im 13. Jahrhundert', in: *Miscellanea Medievalia* 10 (1976), 269-284; Idem, 'Die Unerkennbarkeit Gottes als die letzte Erkenntnis nach Thomas von Aquin', in: A. Zimmermann (Ed.), *Thomas von Aquin*. Vol. 19, Berlin 1988, 117-139.

like Saint Paul in his ecstatic raptures to the third sky, have probably not seen His essence but only an image thereof. Anyway, experiential knowledge of God, and for that matter knowledge which is not intellectual but coming from the affect, is theological nonsense in Thomasian terms. Thus, knowledge beyond cognition may be pious union, mystical ecstasis, but not knowledge. Hugh, following the line of reasoning sketched above, would contend that this experience is a type of knowledge. At some places he is quite precise – which is in fact unusual for his terminology – and he says the unitive experiences ‘leave behind in the soul a perfection of knowledge’.<sup>40</sup> Thus he does realise that the categories of knowledge and experience, or intellect and affect, are somewhat disparate. Yet he states that it is knowledge, which remains as an echo of the experience. Mainstream medieval theology would have denied this option outright. Although Thomas Gallus was generally honoured and kept in high esteem, this teaching of experiential knowledge was thought to apply to practical theology and ascetic life, but not to theology as a discipline professing to bring about *knowledge* of the divine. Hugh radicalises Thomas Gallus and says it is the *only kind* of knowledge which is worth its name, the knowledge coming out of the experience of union with God, the rest being theological gossip. Affective knowledge, direct, immediate knowledge of God’s essence, a near heretical position, was what he postulated. And even worse: he said, only if one stops thinking, or even better, does not start thinking and doing theology in the first place, can he or she attain this knowledge as an immediate experience: ‘the practical precedes the theoretical’.<sup>41</sup>

One has to relish this position *vis à vis* the teachings of St. Bonaventure, for instance. He had postulated that a necessary precondition for the mystical experience is training of the senses, training of the imagination, of the rational mind and the intellect. Forget it all, says Hugh, leave everything cognitive aside, imagination, mental activity, thinking, praying and doing theology. It is only when all mental operations have stopped that the affect will rise up to its determined goal: to God himself.

### 3. For Everyone

Perhaps politically the most pungent part of his teaching is that he tears down borders between laity and clerics, educated and normal people. Since cognitive activity and theological knowledge are not necessary for what Hugh has in mind, and are even an obstacle, it follows naturally that lay people, women, and less educated people have the same access to this experience as trained and theologically educated

<sup>40</sup> Hugh of Balma, in: Martin, *Carthusian spirituality*, III.B1.31.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 0.C9.

clerics.<sup>42</sup> If the other parts of his teaching are only theologically very provocative but certainly well founded, this part is revolutionary in the sense that in consequence it questions the mediating role of professional theologians and of clerics as an institution. We do not know what echo this teaching had. But it is easy to see from later writers that this was a particularly sensitive area. Theology is debatable but the special role of clerics and the church as a mediating institution has always been a taboo. We need only little imagination to understand what an outcry this teaching would have provoked had it been raised in any official context like a theological debate. Maybe Hugh was already inspired by the existing movement of lay piety, as visible in the Beghine movements, maybe he was an inspirer thereof.<sup>43</sup> It is a historical fact that from the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century lay movements and pious unions of lay persons were one of the backbones of Christian renewal movements, sometimes incorporated into the official church hierarchy like the moderate Franciscans, sometimes expelled like the radical Franciscan movement.<sup>44</sup> Hugh's writings were probably the earliest widely read and copied texts repeatedly stating that this experience of affective union with God was attainable by everyone, if he or she followed his instructions.

#### 4 Threefold Way

These instructions are simple: purify your senses and thinking first – he speaks of a few weeks to accomplish this. Then enter into illuminating practice. At last follow the path to union itself. At the basis of all practices is leaving aside cognition, mental-rational operations and thinking. This should be left behind as soon as possible. Short affective prayers, like 'Lord, have mercy', repenting one's sins, and letting oneself be affected by whatever emotional experience follows from that is the prime method here. The aim is to purify the soul from unwanted strivings and mental imbalance, as well as from excessive thinking. After this period of purification the soul enters the state of illumination. This means, as I understand it, that once the soul has freed itself from superfluous contents, a clear understanding of its state, as well as of theological truths and biblical texts ensue. The deeper structure of the holy texts becomes apparent, and this again entices the soul into striving for more. If she manages to leave behind all thinking and mental activity and 'surges on the fiery wings of the affect', 'totally

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 0.A4.

<sup>43</sup> R.E. Lerner, *The heresy of the free spirit in the later Middle Ages*, Berkeley 1972; A. Mens, 'Beghine, begardi, beghinaggi', in: G. Pelliccia & G. Rocca (Eds.), *Dizionario degli Istituti di perfezione*. Vol. 1, Rome 1974, 1165-1180; K. Ruh, 'Beginnenmystik: Hadewijch, Mechthild, Marguerite Porète', in: *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und Deutsche Literatur* 106 (1977), 265-277.

<sup>44</sup> H. Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 1977.

absorbed in love' she is unmistakably being united with God in an upsurge of love. This love is universally radiated. It extends to one's fellow Christians just as much as to those of other faiths, like Jews or Muslims, to those in hell, as well as to those in human bondage and suffering. It is uncompromising and disinterested compassion with all beings.

There is not much methodological teaching to be gleaned from Hugh apart from what I have sketched. He offers some contemplative exercises, which influenced Saint Ignatius later on. He practices and recommends a repetitive kind of short prayer which can be compared to the prayer of the heart of the Eastern Christian tradition, and which bears some resemblance to the Zen tradition of using a wato, or repetitive syllable, for meditation. But he is rather loose concerning posture. All he recommends is withdrawal from the world into a still room or chamber and disengaging from active work. But whether sitting, lying or ambulating does not matter much.

The most distinct part of his teaching, also very prominent in Eckhart, is certainly the instruction to leave aside all thinking and enter the darkness of the mind, which later has been termed the cloud of forgetting and unknowing. Apart from that there is not much of a method, because what happens then is something which is not made by the soul but happens to it. Perhaps the only hint is his frequent repetition that this union is attained by 'sighs of love and desire'. I am inclined to read this methodologically: If all thought has ceased, a sigh of desire is a deep in-breath that may catapult the experience into a state of bliss.

The theological construction behind it is this: it is God's nature to be good, and all he wants is to reside in every soul as the bridegroom, as poetically described in the Song of Songs, which by the same token becomes a guide to the mystical experience itself. Thus, if the soul opens itself up and leaves behind everything intellectual, steadfastly holding on only to the affect, using love as her guiding rope, as it were, God, by way of metaphysical necessity has to exact his grace, if He wants to be true to His own nature, and unite himself with the soul. The key principle is twofold: abstaining from cognitive activity and at the same time founding oneself in affect only, which is identical with nourishing love as the sole content of the soul. If this is accomplished, Hugh says, the uniting experience is something like a necessary consequence. He is eager, however, not to fall into the Pelagian heresy, which made away with grace altogether and taught that salvation can be brought about, and depended alone on, the free will of man. Hugh, on the contrary, emphasizes that the union still is a complete act of grace all the same, but that this grace is somewhat of a necessary consequence, following from God's nature itself. Hugo Enomyia-Lassalle once wrote that, from a Christian perspective, Zen is not, as many critics think, a suspension of grace for the sake of human self-salvation, but that in meditation the soul

comes as close as possible to God's grace, making grace more easy to happen.<sup>45</sup> Hugh would have seen it in the same way. The soul prepares for grace to happen. If the preparation is carried out well, then grace becomes a (metaphysically) necessary consequence, in Hugh's terminology.

### 5. Affect

We have already pointed out above that the decisive element in Hugh's teaching is affect. This term has been much misinterpreted, both by contemporary and ancient commentators. I have tried to argue that affect refers to that part of the soul which is affected by the good, while nevertheless remaining an intellectual faculty, belonging to the human intellect. Yet it is not a rational-cognitive faculty but rather a moral one. The mind can collect itself into one in the summit of the affect. It would be a complete misunderstanding to interpret this as the primacy of emotions over and above cognition. Rather, it suggests that the mind, in a state of pure one-pointedness and receptivity, can be affected as such, so to say. Collecting the mind within the summit of the soul would, in modern parlance, mean that mental activity, like thinking, imagining, wishing, striving, in short having one particular content as a focus, be suspended and that pure affectivity reigns. This is to be understood as the possibility to be affected. We must not forget that affect is derived from the Latin *affici* ('to be affected by something'). Thus it denotes the receptive faculty of the mind. When the mind is all collected in the highest summit of the affect in one-pointed awareness, Hugh would argue, the mind is directed towards the whole, towards being and goodness as such. And this, by definition, is God. Summoning the mind in the affect, then, is comparable to the mental effort of letting thoughts and mental contents pass until the mind becomes pure possibility or receptivity. Summoning all powers in the summit of the affect, though involving active effort, is paradoxically centering oneself in pure receptivity. What happens then is, in Hugh's terminology, union with God. Perhaps this is the same as Kensho, in Zen terminology?

### 6. Real Union

Hugh takes care to be as clear as possible about this: there is not only contact with an image of God's essence, as was the teaching of the Eastern Christian theologians, and not only contact with a notion or a concept, but with the living essence of God himself.<sup>46</sup> This is probably the most provocative formulation of

<sup>45</sup> H.M. Enomiya-Lassalle, *Zen und christliche Spiritualität*, München 1987.

<sup>46</sup> H.-F. Dondaine, 'L'objet et le medium de la vision béatifique chez les théologiens du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', in: *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 19 (1952), 60-130; Idem, 'Cognoscere de Deo "quid est"', in: *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 22 (1955), 72-78.



the Christian mystical position formulated so far. Later and earlier writers have mostly spoken in metaphors and paradox images. Hugh quite prosaically says this is real union with God. It happens, when the mind is stilled and summoned in its highest affective part. And it can happen as often as one wishes, many times, 'hundred, even thousand times a day'.<sup>47</sup> It is the bliss of eternal life already here on earth. This is bold. To say that this experience was possible, in general and in principle, with very exceptional persons gifted by grace, like Saint Paul, was theologically sober. Saint Thomas and others had claimed this. But to say that Tom and Paula could achieve this, without theological training, without thinking (even better than persons who were professional thinkers), and as often as they wished, and to say that this was indeed uniting contact with God's essence, and heavenly bliss already in this life, was quite a provocative statement. Again, it is easy to imagine what would have been the reactions of the theological establishment of those days, or even of today's. And yet Hugh points exactly at that, speaking plainly of a real union.

To sum up: what Hugh proposes is a way of experiential access to God, beyond cognitive activity, founded in a special faculty of the human mind, the summit of the affect. He thereby uses bits and pieces offered to him by the tradition, but interpreted and radicalised to a strict and consequent teaching of his own making. It is easy to discern a lot of motives brought forward by later mystical writers, especially the German Dominican mystical tradition represented by Eckhart and Tauler, but also other *topoi*. Hugh's work stands out of history like a rock monument in a plane. It is familiar in its parts, and utterly foreign in its totality. Thus it is both understandable, how it became influential, but only after the historical details around the author became lost in the haze of the past.

#### HUGH AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE CHRISTIAN AND THE ZEN TRADITION

##### *Union with God and Enlightenment*

The relationship of Hugh of Balma's writing to some teachings of the Zen tradition should be obvious by now. Like him, the Zen tradition places more emphasis on personal practice, exercise and experience than on intellectual accomplishment and training. Like him Zen teaching is adamant about leaving behind cognitive activity and centering awareness in a pure field of receptivity. Like him Zen tradition places much emphasis on personal experience, over and above, even before, received teachings, tradition and dogma. Like him Zen tradition maintains that enlightenment is a consequence of the total stilling of the

<sup>47</sup> Hugh of Balma, in: Martin, *Carthusian spirituality*, 0.B5.

mind in pure receptivity. I would even contend that Hugh's emphasising the affect and the summit of the affect as the 'organ' of the mystical experience can be aligned with Zen teaching without distortion. In Zen what is realised in Ken-sho is one's true nature, sometimes referred to as Buddha nature. In the Christian tradition this would be translatable into one's own Christ nature and the birth of Christ within the soul.<sup>48</sup> And in Hugh's terminology the *apex affectus*, or spark of the soul is the divine part of the soul. Concentrating all faculties of the mind in the summit of the affect, as Hugh postulates, is realising this divine nature of the soul and can be likened to realising one's true Buddha nature, as the Zen tradition calls it. Thus there seem to be striking parallels. Incidentally, Hugh even uses an example familiar to the Zen tradition. He says that this experience is so clear that even young and uneducated people cannot be mistaken, just as much, as the eye is not mistaken when it sees an ox pass by.<sup>49</sup>

One part of Hugh's teaching stands out, however, and it is at the same time the crucial question for interreligious dialogue between Buddhists and Christians: Hugh calls the goal of his unitive way union with God and the resulting knowledge experiential knowledge. That latter part is probably easy to be agreed upon: whatever happens in an enlightenment experience, it is a deeper kind of knowledge which is called experiential. Thereby we normally mean a type of knowledge which is holistic, comprising cognitive, emotional-affective, and motivational elements in one. Thus an enlightenment experience is not only something which gives us a clearer understanding of our own nature, but also carries an emotional-affective component, resulting in a serene ordering of emotions, and it also has a motivational part, which makes bringing the experience into practice compulsory. In that sense, both the Zen tradition and Hugh talk about experience or experiential knowledge as a clear, immediate, holistic type of understanding. But what about the theistic connotations of Hugh's teachings on the one hand, claiming real union with God, and the Buddhist notion of non-theistic realisation of the true nature of things on the other hand?

This is the difficult part and I would not proclaim to solve this puzzle here. But what could probably be said by way of agreement is that in both cases what is intended is a union with the final reality of things. The Christian tradition, following the historical Jesus and thus Jewish tradition, calls this final reality 'father' or 'God', while the Zen tradition, as far as I can see, refrains from personalising this final nature. However, the Buddhist distinction into absolute and phenomenal nature does ring familiar, and is suggestive of the distinction between God the father and God the son, i.e. Christ. What has to be left for

<sup>48</sup> H. Rahner, 'Die Gottesgeburt: Die Lehre der Kirchenväter von der Geburt Christi im Herzen der Kirche und der Gläubigen', in: *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 53 (1933), 333-418.

<sup>49</sup> Hugh of Balma, in: Martin, *Carthusian spirituality*, II.E27.

further discussion between theologians is how and whether these concepts and their meanings can be reconciled. What is enough for our purpose here is to realise that Hugh actually speaks of a true union with this final reality, called God in the Christian tradition and interpreted as Love. In Hugh there is no distance and no mediation anymore but true union. If we use a contemporaneous medieval philosophical definition for God, which certainly was familiar to Hugh since it was published at the time of Hugh's studying and training, namely the one proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, we would call this final reality the identity of existence and essence, where being, being real, being one, and being whatever it is in its deepest essence is one and the same. Thus, the Zen notion of being united with reality as it is, and unification with God as an immediate realisation and union in love as with Hugh of Balma do not seem to be as far apart as one would think at first sight. Hugh was a writer truly rooted in the Western Christian tradition who formulated this concept of experiential union in a strikingly similar way as it is known in Zen Buddhism.

*Experiential Union and 'Salvation of all Sentient Beings'*

A central part of Buddhist teaching is that the experience of Kensho is not only a private moment of bliss and happiness but a fundamentally cosmic experience contributing to saving all sentient beings. It has even been said that the first of the four great vows in Zen 'Innumerable are the sentient beings, I vow to save them all' is identical with the vow to strive for enlightenment. This does not seem to be a component of Christian mysticism in general, but is more part of the practical side of Christianity, which emphasises charitable action and social commitment. Again, here Hugh is one of the writers who clearly point out that this experience also has consequences. He states several times that this experience of union is a kind of salvation, and that each one of these experiences brings the soul closer to salvation and to forgiveness of all sins, thus identifying the mystical uniting experience with salvation (which would put him on the list of endangered species in the Catholic world). He suggests that one who has had this experience of union cannot but pray for the salvation of all souls, sinners and heathens alike, since he knows them to be connected to him in a universal brotherhood, and that the souls truly united with God yearn as God does himself for the coming of the heavenly kingdom, thereby exerting a kind of cosmic pull towards God which extends to others and especially to those far from God. Hugh states:

[A]nyone insensitive to the pains and incurable wounds of his fellow members is no living and effective member united to Christ the head (...) This industrious effort brings down from heaven no small mercy, and thus he who approaches it with his whole heart, with all his pleading, with his godly affections coated with

compassion, with fiery word for widespread preaching, and intense toil in all things will be covered with dawning wisdom from on high. In this way divine majesty mercifully stoops to send forth wisdom, teaching, and faith, so that every creature, from East to West, from North to South, Christian, Jew or Gentile, for all of whom the Prince of Glory deigned to appear on earth, might come to true knowledge of truth; so that no creature might miss out on the happy company of the one who gave himself not for one but for all as a priceless prize on the altar of the cross; so that no creature might lack the happy vision of him...<sup>50</sup>

This teaching is still very much alive in modern Carthusian practice where a certain time during the day is allotted for prayer for the world. Thus, in Hugh of Balma we can clearly discern that the mystical experience is not only a personal private lunch with God but has a uniting dimension which also incorporates the awareness for the want of healing of other humans and the world at large. This also is the starting point for a grounded practice to work for a more human world, as is typical for some modern branches of Zen. Although Hugh, being a medieval and a reclusive mystical writer, was not concerned with the improvement of social welfare, political structures or equal distribution of wealth, his writings bear the seed for such teachings and action. Emphasising, as he does, the necessity to include all beings into the great salvation, he lays the foundation for expressing the experience of unity with God and thus with all Being(s) in an action reflecting this experience. If we bear in mind that he states several times that this experience empowers individuals to live their lives according to this experience, women and men, lay persons and clerics alike, he clearly implicates a more egalitarian and rightful system of living together and sharing power than was common in the Middle Ages and still is in the modern era for that matter.

#### *Experiential Knowledge and Radical Questioning of Authority*

Zen tradition has been indifferent to scholarly and ritualistic authority, and only personal experience is what conveys true authority, at least in theory. This can be traced to the historic Buddha Gautama who has tried everything and arrived at last at his own true experience, making personal experience the chief signpost for truth, not adherence to any tradition. Thus Buddhism, as it emerged, was inherently critical of tradition, and Zen tradition can again be seen as a radical aversion from the entrenchment of traditional teachings. Hugh, as other Christian mystics, was not critical of church authorities or scriptures for the sake of being critical. But their experience led most of them, and certainly Hugh of Balma, to being aware of the fact that only experiential under-

<sup>50</sup> Hugh of Balma, in: Martin, *Carthusian spirituality*, III.C6.78.

standing of the teachings of the scriptures generates true understanding. This was called understanding the 'mystical', 'anagogical' or 'uniting' sense of the scriptures, as opposed to the literal and moral sense. In understanding the mystical sense of the Scriptures, and in the whole process of uniting experience with its resulting experiential knowledge of God, only Christ himself can be the teacher within. So every authority of a teaching tradition is denied here, empowering the individual with direct and privileged access to understanding, where no mediation between him or her and God is necessary any more. This is revolution against clerical control in a nutshell, and can be likened to the Zen tradition which demands thorough experiential understanding of the Dharma with the consequence of individual expression of this understanding, even if it has to go against tradition and ritual. It is immediately clear that at a time with strict clerical and worldly hierarchies and the common understanding that only the church authorities, bishops and clergy can be mediator between the individual and God, this teaching is in effect, if not in intention, rather anti-authoritarian and subversive. In fact, this can be said of most later Christian mystics. They all emphasise that in the mystical experience the soul becomes her own authority taught directly by Christ himself. Hugh was one of the first authors in the West, as far as I see, to have explicitly stated that. Thereby, a teaching empowering the individual, whether clergy or lay person, emphasising direct access to truth via the mystical uniting experience with God, entered Christian tradition, or rather arose out of it, which has never been calmed down since. It has reached its climax in the modern era of the Vatican Council and its various documents. Even though today's church practice would like to bury it in a quiet grave, a Christian principle applies here, too: What has once truly lived, never dies, or will see a resurrection.

### *Love and Compassion*

Hugh is very repetitive in stating that this union with God is one of Love, that it can only be accomplished by love, that love is the guiding arrow, and the result of the experience again love in an unending chain. This love extends, as was mentioned in the above paragraph, to all other beings, and is thus of universal nature. In Zen as well as in other forms of Buddhism compassion is the result and goal, as well as the precondition of enlightenment, too. For only if one has understood the true nature of oneself and thereby of the universe and other beings, is it possible to step out of the self-centred view which comes with the reification of the individual ego. In the same sense, Hugh's teaching implies that the unification with God in love is the way to overcome our inherently selfish nature and tendency, because it aligns us with the universal love of God, who is, as the letter of St. John says, love.

*Multiple Kensho*

What is particularly provocative in Hugh's teaching is his claim that this experience of union with God can be had by one who has progressed accordingly on the path of mystical union many times a day, 'hundreds, even thousand times a day'. While with other Christian writers this mystical experience seems to be a single, or at least rare event, Hugh seems to preach an inflation of enlightenment, making it a natural consequence of a typical kind of mental state. There are many reports of Christian mystics and saints who seem to have experienced some state of exceptional clarity, enlightenment or ecstasies. It is biographically reported from saints as Saint Francis, who had at least two such strong experiences. His Franciscan follower and possible opponent of Hugh, Bonaventure, also seems to have had at least one such experience, and accordingly makes this type of experience the summit of a long journey in his *Itinerary of the Mind to God*. Saint Thomas Aquinas, contemporary to both of them, is reported to have had several exceptional experiences, the last being the one on 6<sup>th</sup> of Dec 1271, after which he stopped writing in the midst of his *Summa Theologiae*, declaring that everything he had written so far – and this is probably the greatest treasure of insight and clarity of Christian theology and philosophy ever written – was straw in the face of what he had seen.<sup>51</sup> Saint Catherine of Siena, a 15<sup>th</sup> century mystic and saint, went into a kind of stupor and ecstasy repeatedly. Saint Ignatius of Loyola dictated an autobiography which makes it easier to trace his spiritual development.<sup>52</sup> He, apart from his conversion experience which made him choose a spiritual rather than a worldly career, had a strong experience of immediate insight which would probably, in Hugh's terminology, count as an experience of union. He reports several other experiences later in his life saying that they never reached the depth of the single one at the end of his hermit period. To my knowledge it has not been reported in Christian hagiography that any saint was in a kind of permanent state of rapture. So what is Hugh meaning, really, by saying that this kind of experience can be had frequently during one day? Is he overstating his case to get more attention? Is he just bluffing? Or what is his intention?

It is, perhaps, useful to note at that point that the concept of Kensho or Satori is treated rather differently within several traditions of Zen. It is a hallmark of the Rinzai tradition ever since its renewal by Hakuin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, who himself has had several Kenshos, that the striving for this experience of realisa-

<sup>51</sup> Gulelmus de Tocco, *Ystoria sancti Tome der Aquino de Guillaume de Tocco*, Toronto 1996. The interpretation given by Flasch, (*Das philosophische Denken im Mittelalter: Von Augustin zu Machiavelli*, Stuttgart 1986) that Saint Thomas' refraining from finishing his *Summa* was due to a profound depression could not be a deeper misunderstanding, in my view.

<sup>52</sup> Ignatius von Loyola, *Der Bericht des Pilgers*, trans. & comm. B. Schneider, Freiburg 1977.

tion and subsequent unfolding through koan training is central to teaching and practice.<sup>53</sup> Kensho is conceived here as a rather unique and distinct event, possibly repeatable. The Soto tradition on the other hand seems to place less emphasis on it. S. Suzuki recently de-emphasised the centrality of Kensho by placing much more weight on the simple practice of zazen and the consequent realisation of mindful presence in daily life.<sup>54</sup> And in a passage full of beauty and hindsight he says that this is like continuous little moments of Kensho:

At least we must have some enlightenment experience. You must put your confidence in the big mind which is always with you (...) To find yourself as someone who is doing something is the point-to resume your actual being through practice, to resume the you which is always with everything, with Buddha, which is fully supported by everything. Right now! You may say it is impossible. But it is possible. Even in one moment you can do it! It is possible this moment! It is this moment! That you can do it in this moment means you can always do it. So if you have this confidence, this is your enlightenment experience. If you have this strong confidence in your big mind, you are already a Buddhist in the true sense, even though you do not attain enlightenment.<sup>55</sup>

I propose to use this description as the background against which Hugh's teaching is understandable. Translating Hugh into modern Zen terminology his intention probably was: If you collect yourself into what is called summit of the affect, being pure receptivity, laying aside all selfish thoughts and cognitive activity, just being a single ray of love tending towards the One with intention beyond words, then unity is already realised. This is Kensho, or in Hugh's term union with God. While there might be space for an initial single, impressive and quasi-implosive experience of Kensho, as witnessed by the reports in Kapleau and in Christian hagiographies, for that matter, and as intended by Rinzai training, there might also be a place for that rather quiet type of continuous state of enlightened mindfulness as cherished by the Soto school. Hugh, I would guess, covers both: the ecstatic experience of union,<sup>56</sup> and the fact that this, by the virtue of repeated training, aligns with a more continuous and less spectacular state of heightened presence, in which union with and presence in life become more 'normal'. I suggest that he has in mind the more extraordinary and exceptional experiences, when he talks about the fact that this experience of uniting love is bliss and a foreboding of the life of the Saints already here on earth. And he intends this less explosive, continuous type, when he says that this experience can be had

<sup>53</sup> Hakuin, *The essential teachings of Zen Master Hakuin*, ed. N. Waddell, Boston 1994.

<sup>54</sup> S. Suzuki, *Zen mind, beginners mind*, New York-Tokyo 1975.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>56</sup> In fact he speaks of *ekstasis* only two times, in IV.110 and V.48, pointing out that these are the special moments.



several times a day. Hugh is an imprecise writer, using several notions for the same fact, and for different referents the same concept also. My guess is that this is what can solve the puzzle with Hugh. He intends both: he wants to entice the reader into an experiential path beyond words and mental concepts, and into the different quality of the experiential union of love with God as a single, remarkable experience, which turns upside down previous notions, empowers the individual, is an atonement for all previous sins and negligence. And he also wants the reader to realise that this is not just a single event but a state of the soul which can be cultured towards a quasi-continuous state of union. Thus, Hugh is rather like a Christian combination of the Rinzai and Soto teachings, and thus can be a true bridge between Christian mystical teaching and experience and the Zen traditions.

#### OPEN QUESTIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This cursory overview of the main points in the teaching of a fascinating medieval mystical writer may have suggested that there is one author who comes close to many points germane to Zen Buddhist teachings. Some may argue that he is an exception, untypical of Christian mysticism, and in points even heretic. This is partially true, at least at the time of his writing. But I have also tried to show that he stands in a long tradition of writers and has, in fact, done nothing else than systematising and radicalising teachings which were already present. He did not bring in any new element except that of radically restricting access to God to this experiential level, which is rather untypical for medieval writers. But he is certainly no outsider. I have also tried to make clear that he was the major source for many later Christian mystical writers. I have elaborated on that at other places and gave some hints in this paper. There is no influential mystical writer within the Christian tradition after 1300 who would not have been influenced by Hugh one way or another. Thus either one drops the whole mystical tradition from Christianity, or one has to face this writer. Explaining him away would not be a good solution. Owing to the lack of clarity in his writings and the imprecise use of concepts, he leaves considerable space for understanding and misinterpretation. So it will be the task of future generations of scholars to clarify what remains unclear. This task has hardly been tackled, and it is only since a few years that his writings are available in modern editions and translations. My, certainly biased, interpretation is just one reading. If it spurs others to correct the bias and to tease out other shadings of his meaning, my work has fulfilled its intended goal.

On the other hand, Hugh's text might offer a reading of Christian mysticism which is closer to Zen Buddhist teaching and experience as that of other

writers. Hopefully, authors rooted in the Buddhist tradition will take up this thread and look into the commonalities and differences between Zen and this author.

Obviously, Hugh writes within a clearly theistic context and uses theistic language to express his thoughts. I have tried to form a bridge using theological-philosophical concepts from the time of Hugh's writing. It is certainly open to debate whether this is a feasible approach. This has to do with the presuppositions mentioned: if experience is primary, and theory secondary, then this interpretation is both plausible and feasible, for then both the theistic language of Christianity and the non-theistic language of Buddhism are subject to relativity, in terms of culture and history. This means that both would have to adapt their respective concepts according to experience and according to dialogue. For truth, after all, is found in dialogue.

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