

## TRINITARIAN AND MYSTICAL RECEPTIVITY: MODERN THEORY AND A MEDIEVAL CASE STUDY\*

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PASSIVITY IS one of William James's four characteristics of mysticism.<sup>1</sup> The present writer has spent the past several years in the company of two 13th-century Carthusian mystics, Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte, translating and analyzing treatises by Hugh (*The Roads to Zion Mourn*<sup>2</sup>) and Guigo (*On Contemplation*<sup>3</sup>) for the Classics of Western Spirituality series. Both of them describe the devout soul's relation to God as dependent and passive. Indeed, some late medieval "affective" mystics so strongly emphasized God's initiative and the receptivity of the human heart, or spirit (*mens*), that some of their less cautious imitators were labeled "quietists" and "*alumbrados*" during 16th-century controversies over grace and free will.<sup>4</sup> To early modern

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<sup>1</sup> William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Gifford Lectures, 1901–1902, Lecture 16 (London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902; repr. New York: New American Library, 1958) 292–93. A second characteristic of mysticism for James is noetic quality, which refers to the powerful conviction of the mystic that he has gained "insight into the depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect." While the Carthusian mystics under discussion here would agree with this to a degree, they would not describe mystical knowledge as a "state of knowledge," as James does. James's other two characteristics of mysticism are ineffability and transiency.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh of Balma, *Viae Sion lugent (The Roads to Zion Mourn, cf. Lam 1:4)*, published in various editions of the *Opera Omnia* of Bonaventura, e.g. the edition by A. C. Peltier, *Cardinalis S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia* (Paris: Vives, 1864–71) 8.2-53; critical edition by Francis Ruello forthcoming in *Sources Chrétiennes*; English translation by Dennis Martin forthcoming in the series *Classics of Western Spirituality (CWS)* (Paulist, 1996). The introduction to the CWS volume will deal with questions of authorship and with Hugh's context, including a revisionist argument for viewing Hugh as typical, rather than unique, in his Carthusian mystical theology. All references to Hugh's treatise in the present article are made to paragraph numbers in the forthcoming *Sources Chrétiennes* and Paulist Press editions. All translations are from the forthcoming Paulist Press edition.

<sup>3</sup> Guigo de Ponte, *De contemplatione*, critical edition by Philippe DuPont, *Analecta Cartusiana* 72 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1985). All translations in the present article are taken from my forthcoming CWS translation.

<sup>4</sup> Notably Hendrik Herp (Harphius, d. 1477). See Herp, *Spieghel der Volcomenheit*, vol. 1: *Inleiding*, ed. Lucidius Verschueren (Antwerp: Neerlandia, 1931) 135–37. The precise relationship between the influence of Herp and that of Hugh of Balma in Spain

Catholics, emphasis on affective receptivity could easily turn into a dangerous advocacy of passivity, a form of crypto-Protestant “cheap grace.” The present study tests William James’s “passivity” rubric against the writings of these two typical Carthusian mystical writers, concluding that one should employ the label only if its dynamic qualities are fully appreciated.

For Hugh, Guigo, and others, mystical knowledge is clearly a feminine, receptive, loving, orgasmic clinging to God. In the activist modern world, dependence and receptivity too often are assimilated to passivity and victimization, taken in a pejorative sense. In a modern money-and-credit economy, a beggar no longer exercises spiritual and cultural power by the act of receiving a benefactor’s alms but instead comes to be seen as totally powerless. Reception thus becomes a sign of dependent victimization—to suffer, to have things happen to one rather than to take initiative, is *in-tolerable*, insufferable. In the pre-modern gift-exchange economy, however, receiving, i.e. accepting,<sup>5</sup> a gift (and, analogously, permitting one’s body to be penetrated by one’s lover) is itself an active stance filled with positive symbolism; to suffer things to happen to one is a positive quality. Thus James’s fourth characteristic, *passivity*, when understood in his modern sense,<sup>6</sup> distorts by placing a negative gloss on what was traditionally a most positive, marvelous activity: *receptivity*.

We live in an age in which “theory” is all the rage for scholars. All sorts of theoretical frameworks have been applied to medieval sources. This article suggests that the application of the contemporary theology

still awaits careful study. Existing literature on that influence is cited in my introduction to the CWS translation.

<sup>5</sup> The range of meaning of the cluster of terms derived from *capere* (*accipere*, *recipere*, etc.) is remarkable and central to medieval mystical theology. The word can mean to take, receive, to obligate oneself, to comprehend (as in the Italian *capisce*, which has entered German colloquial language as *kapiert Du*). The polyvalence of the English equivalents of these Latin terms has been considerably narrowed in modern English.

<sup>6</sup> “The mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power” (James, *Varieties* 292–93). Medieval affective mystics understood themselves to be grasped by their Lover’s embrace, but that did not preclude a clinging, wide-eyed, active reception of that embrace. The analogy to physical sexual union was not a matter of happenstance: penetration and “reception” take place in consensual coitus and forcible rape alike, but the presence or absence of active, welcoming permission, in short, the presence or absence of receptivity, makes all the difference. Significantly, some radical feminists deny this distinction and interpret the very fact of penetration as an expression of brute force (“all marriage involves rape”). I cannot trace here the shift from a society of multivalent and multilayered loyalties (medieval feudalism, ancient patronage) to a society of contractual power-relations (Hobbes, Locke), but wish to point out that the above-mentioned radical feminist understanding of sexual relations as an exercise in naked power simply represents the logical outcome of early modern social and political thought—which abandoned an understanding of relationality as receptivity (acceptance) even as it abandoned belief in an asymmetrical yet intimate communion established by creation *ex nihilo* between an omnipotent loving Creator and gratefully receptive creature.

of the "metaphysics of the person"<sup>7</sup> can take us a step along the path toward understanding medieval spiritual writers. This theory has the advantage of being grounded in a Christian doctrine known to medieval theologians, the doctrine of the Trinity. I should like to suggest that receptivity was an active positive stance for premodern Christians in a gift economy precisely because Giver, Gift, and Gifting form the ontological dynamics of the immanent Trinity.

Affective, aspirative upsurge to God is unquestionably a passive experience for Hugh; indeed, he uses grammar itself to make this point. The Latin translation of Pseudo-Denis that Hugh used (made by John Sarracenus in the twelfth century) shifted from the active to the passive voice in the crucial opening passage of *On Mystical Theology*. Pseudo-Denis instructs Timothy first to "rise up" and then to "be uplifted." In the "rising up," Hugh insists, nature and grace cooperate in the pursuit of unitive wisdom. But there is a point at which even persuasive reasons, aspirative prayer, meditative reading, and attention to the soul's best industries (Hugh's four categories in the first part of the illuminative way) must cease. Ultimately divine wisdom is taught by God alone, directly, immediately.<sup>8</sup> In this "learning" no medium of any sort is involved. It occurs by grace alone. Yet Hugh leaves no doubt that this "passivity" is a form of activation: the human person acted upon by grace is activated from beyond himself and thereby really becomes active!

Denis says "surge up" before he says "be uplifted," since nature and grace are at work in the ascent of unitive wisdom; yet in the highest elevation of the understanding, grace alone is at work, lifting up without any medium, lifting up in rapture, raising the spirit [*mens*] in the body, yet hidden away from bodily senses. In this final, affective-intellective uplifting of understanding the intellective and affective powers attain their consummate faithful service, not passively, but by being acted upon.<sup>9</sup>

For Hugh, mystical wisdom brings about perfected righteousness, making one properly disposed to oneself,<sup>10</sup> to earthly things,<sup>11</sup> to the body, to one's enemies,<sup>12</sup> to the cardinal virtues<sup>13</sup> and theological virtues.<sup>14</sup> Here Hugh is drawing on a venerable Carthusian teaching about the proper relation of the monk to God, to other people, to the created world, and to himself.<sup>15</sup>

Hugh addresses the grammar of grace and human effort precisely at

<sup>7</sup> As developed by Karol Wojtyła, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger, W. Norris Clarke, David Schindler, Kenneth Schmitz, and others, as discussed below.

<sup>8</sup> Hugh of Balma, *Roads to Zion, Via unitiva* par. 82–115.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* par. 111.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* par. 11–12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 23–26.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 27–29.

<sup>15</sup> See Gordon Mursell, *The Theology of the Carthusian Life in the Writings of St. Bruno and Guigo I*, *Analecta Cartusiana* 127 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1988) 125–30.

the point where he has employed all the possible rhetorical skills and tools of human learning, at the end of a section on the five persuasive reasons for the aspirative upsurge into God.<sup>16</sup> We are concerned here only with the last of these persuasive reasons and the correlative final human industry of the mystical upsurge. The last industry is to toss oneself away, for that act is what gives free sway to an increased longing and yearning which in the end is all that a human being can *do* (actively) to *be joined* (passively) to God: one can only yearn for what one still lacks. The disposing arm, the one arm by which the human spirit *does* something, is nothing more than to attribute nothing to herself but to return everything to the praise of the Giver. The other arm is worship, since praise of God provokes a greater largesse of grace that enables greater praise. One is persuaded to do this out of gratitude, having recognized and been persuaded by one's utter poverty.

Hence Hugh concludes his discussion of the reasons why one should surge up to God by invoking the ultimate scene of worship and praise found in Scripture, the worship of the enthroned Christ in heaven (Revelation 4 and 7). No summary can do justice to Hugh's language here—mixed metaphors and all. The passage must be read ruminatively as he intended.

There are, then, two arms by which the upward movement of the human spirit's affections is increased. On the one hand, she disposes herself in preparation for the ascent; on the other hand, she calls for the free gift of divine inpouring by which what she already has is made to merit greater and richer rewards.

She employs the first arm by the very fact that she does not attribute what she has to herself but redirects everything into praise to the Bestower of all things. In this way she scrapes out a cavity in herself by more truly fighting against herself. As this cavity wells up with divine graces that skip over mountains and hills [cf. Canticle 2:8] the humbler places within her are filled by the graces pouring into her. The more capacious the cavity of humility, the more grace she can hold. Now to the degree that any creature acknowledges its source, it denies itself, since the more something created from nothing attributes every good and all existence to its Creator, that much more does it recognize the magnificence of the Creator.<sup>17</sup>

Hugh does use the language of "facere quod in se est," "merits," and "virtues." Indeed, Dieter Mertens claims that Hugh considered mystical union to be a meritorious act of the soul, based on a proof-text from the opening paragraphs of the *Via unitiva*.<sup>18</sup> But Hugh is so clear on

<sup>16</sup> *Via unitiva* par. 30–57.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* par. 56.

<sup>18</sup> "How unitive wisdom disposes every contemplative affection for merit is plain, since, as often as the human spirit moves directly into God, she merits [*promeretur*] eternal life. As often as the soul disposed by wisdom wishes, she can actually be swept up by rapid movements that are more fleeting than tongue can tell. By merit she is thus raised up in glory by one of these surging motions. Since each merit corresponds to a

these matters elsewhere that the text cited by Mertens can only be understood when placed in a broader context. For Hugh, the very call to the monastic life of purgation, the opening path of the ascent to mystical union, is by the pure grace of God. There is a sacramental path of cleansing available to all; the monastic path is for a few, for those who know their own weakness and inability and cling to the promise of God's mercy.<sup>19</sup>

Hugh uses the language of "facere quod in se est," of "congruent merit,"<sup>20</sup> in such a way that it is the congruence of begging for mercy by the sinner incapable of doing anything except falling on his face, the congruence of a criminal pleading for pardon. Then, congruently, sorrow for sin is granted. If the sinner finds himself unable to arrive at the proper degree of sorrow for sin, having prostrated himself abjectly, then, Hugh says, let him trust in God, because sometimes God tests a

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particular glory (except for the essential crown, the crown of the vision of divine beauty), this confirms that the soul accumulates innumerable crowns through this wisdom" (*Via unitiva* par. 27). See Dieter Mertens, "Jakob von Paradies (1381–1465) über die mystische Theologie," in *Kartäusermystik und -Mystiker*, vol. 5, *Analecta Cartusiana* 55.5 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1982) 31–46, at 41–43. For additional uses of "promeretur," see *Via unitiva* par. 75, 79, 107.

<sup>19</sup> "These three steps make up the reflection on the general favors, those which the Most High grants not merely to some but to all. Their generality underscores the magnitude of divine mercy."

"After this he should consider what the Father of all consolation confers not on everyone but specifically on him, on someone called by divine mercy to the priestly office or to the religious life of the Carthusian Order. For this purgative path belongs solely to those who flock together far from the worldly path. Like a dove or a turtledove in the wilderness, in contemplative retreat, feeble though they may be, they strive to fly above themselves, undergirding by the verdict of conscience the process of the removal of all mortal guilt.

"7. First let him ponder that the Most High has called him from his miserable darkness to God's unchangeable truth, while leaving behind, mired in misery and worldly morass, many who are more worthy, more powerful, and in many ways prepared for a more abundant influx of divine grace.

"Second, the penitent should consider the favor of God's mercy less in light of this world's misery than in light of hell's misery. For many who are guilty of lesser offenses in the eyes of divine majesty nonetheless remain under the lasting penalty of divine malediction, while this penitent, who much more deserved the same penalty, has instead been summoned to radiance of grace in this present life and to the prize of eternal happiness in the life to come—not by his own merits, but by the Creator's free generosity. Consider the following analogy: An earthly king hangs a thief. To another thief guilty of greater crimes he then grants praise equal in measure to the ignominy meted out to the condemned man. Such a king acts justly and he acts solely in mercy—the mercy proper to an earthly king, a mercy that directly contradicts what the pardoned thief deserved" (*Via purgativa* par. 6–7).

<sup>20</sup> See Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1963; 3d ed., Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1983) 47–49, 131–45; Berndt Hamm, *Pactum, Promissio, Ordinatio: Freiheit und Selbstbindung Gottes in der scholastischen Gnadenlehre*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 54 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977). See also Mark S. Burrows, *Jean Gerson and "De Consolatione Theologiae" (1418): The Consolation of a Biblical and Reforming Theology for a Disordered Age*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 78 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991) 149–209.

person's patience, strengthening and sustaining it in the process. Clearly God is the one who does this, in Hugh's view. The key for the penitent is patience, but what is patience except waiting on God to do the work while doing what is humanly possible: being prostrate?<sup>21</sup> Lest anyone think that this still depends on the sinner's capability, Hugh continues in the next two paragraphs (8–9) by insisting that *special grace* is needed for this repentance.

Even the passage cited by Mertens is followed by what Hugh calls the heart of his book, in which Hugh makes clear that the soul's disposing is nothing more than weak humility, for she can only have a foretaste of glory while living in this life's wretchedness.<sup>22</sup> The soul must dispose herself, but this disposing is nothing more than indigence,<sup>23</sup> nothing more than hollowing out a cavity for God<sup>24</sup>; having opened a cavity for God, the soul can now cling to God in wide-eyed panting. To quote Guigo de Ponte, Hugh's Carthusian contemporary:

In this [third] step, as the godly spirit (*pia mens*) leaves behind mental and anagogical prayers and, inflamed with divine longing, pants for the face of her own Author, she is joined to heavenly things and separated from earthly things. With love growing from her own fervor she opens herself to receive, and in receiving is set on fire. Then with great longing she gazes widemouthed at celestial things and in some wondrous way tastes what she seeks to have. This tasting, moreover, is the clinging, the union, through which the godly spirit enjoys God, in whom she blissfully reposes.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For further development of this theme in Carthusian theology, see Dennis D. Martin, *Fifteenth-Century Carthusian Reform: The World of Nicholas Kempf*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought 49 (Leiden: Brill, 1992) chap. 4.

<sup>22</sup> "Come to him and be enlightened, etc. (Psalm 33:6 [34:5]) . . . If the soul is to be bathed by the superb beautiful brilliance of eternal light, she must, as it were, depart from herself and be raised above by the Creator's freely bestowed favor until an approximate similarity and conformity between the creature, who receives, and the benevolent Creator, who flows into her, is established. . . . With this we fully enter upon the theme of the present book. For, by a roundabout path, contrary to all writers on matters of theology and divinity, [this phrase from the Psalms] teaches that one attains unmediated cognition of the Creator not by the mirror of creatures nor by genius in research nor by exercise of intellect, but through flaming gasps of unitive love. By these, although living in sin and misery, we have an unflinching foretaste not only of the fact that God is but indeed of how the most blessed God himself is the beginning and origin of all beatitude. . . . Unitive love reveals hidden things and unlocks secrets. Rather than making the lover pursue earthly and human things, these secrets make him (now raised above himself) push directly for divine and heavenly formation.

"In the present work, which I have written in order to make the mystical theology of Blessed Denis more plain, my purpose is to reveal that work's theory of how the soul might inhere to her Creator and how she might be more effectively and heartily united to him, as to the sweetest Beloved. In mystical theology a few words encompass endless meanings, as will become apparent in what follows. For the outstretched union of the spirit yearning to attain her Beloved increases by the Beloved's own free gift, which, in this unitive wisdom is not for someone who assembles external things into a set of writings, but for someone who perceives inwardly" (*Via unitiva* par. 30–31).

<sup>23</sup> *Via illuminativa* par. 52.

<sup>24</sup> *Via unitiva* par. 56.

<sup>25</sup> Guigo de Ponte, *On contemplation* 2.10, 230, 232 (in the DuPont edition).

Speculative contemplation (out-thrusting *vision*) lacks the power to transform. Only the outstretched, receptive arms of deifying-“defective” *love* can do this. *Amor deficiens*<sup>26</sup> is in fact *amor deificans*; the very lack is the grasp. Citing Pseudo-Denis, Hugh says that “. . . he alone grasps divine things who does not look at his feet in cognitive contemplation,” but rather “stretches out to glimpse something at a distance.”<sup>27</sup> Be importunate, yearn so hard for God that your begging becomes obstinate and pertinacious,<sup>28</sup> but do not forget that you are still a beggar.<sup>29</sup> Mystical union then is nothing but God’s work in the soul:

*And forgive us our debts.* O kind creditor, when shall I know that the debts of my sins have been forgiven me? For if I were truly to love you, then I would know by some deep tasting that they have been forgiven. For just as my sin makes me your enemy, separating me in my misery from you, so love, uniting me to you, would compel the forgiveness of all debts and make me, who was once an offense to you, pleasing and gracious. When, therefore, will I bind you in love and, freed of every sin, know with experiential knowledge that you are pleasing to me?<sup>30</sup>

In the 19th-century edition of *The Roads to Zion*, the last sentence reads, “make you, who were once an offense, pleasing to me.” In the new critical edition, forthcoming in the Sources Chrétiennes series and edited by Francis Ruello, this phrase is inverted at first (“make me pleasing to you”), then reversed in the next sentence. Thus the text as found in either edition makes precisely the point that constituted Martin Luther’s great “discovery” about God’s righteousness: righteousness makes God pleasing to humans, and salvation reveals God’s love and mercy to humans, rather than being a process by which humans make themselves acceptable to God. This theology was present throughout medieval monastic theology. Bernard of Clairvaux’s *On Grace and Free Will* is typical, not exceptional, for medieval spiritual theology,<sup>31</sup> and its author deserves full recognition as a theologian, as

<sup>26</sup> See Kurt Ruh, “*Amor deficiens* und *amor desiderii* in der Hoheliedauslegung Wilhelms von St. Thierry,” in *Spiritualia Neerlandica: Opstellen voor Dr. Albert Ampe, S.J., hem door vakgenooten en vrienden aangeboden uit waardering voor zijn wetenschappelijke werk*, ed. Elly Cockx-Indestege et al. (= *Ons geestelijk Erf* 63.2–4, 64.1–3 [1989–1990]) 70–88.

<sup>27</sup> *Via unitiva* par. 97.

<sup>28</sup> *Via purgativa* par. 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Via unitiva* par. 90. Guigo de Ponte makes much the same point, calling on the soul to be *improbis* and citing Virgil (via Bernard of Clairvaux) as corroboration; see *On Contemplation* 1.13. On importunate prayer, see John Cassian, *Conferences* 9.34 (*Conlationes*, ed. E. Pichèry, Sources Chrétiennes 54 [Paris: Cerf, 1966] 66–71).

<sup>30</sup> *Via illuminativa* par. 52.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the monastic tradition and modern misunderstandings of it, see Martin, *Fifteenth-Century* chap. 4; cf. Karlfried Froehlich, “Justification Language and Grace: The Charge of Pelagianism in the Middle Ages,” in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, ed. Elsie Ann McKee and Brian G. Armstrong (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 21–47.

Maurice Blondel realized but dared not openly admit.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, although all students of *The Roads to Zion* have failed to notice, Hugh clearly asserts that the descent of wisdom from on high is the key to the unitive upsurge in unknowing, the descent of a wisdom that cannot be known except by receiving.<sup>33</sup>

In a gift economy, the pioneering anthropologist Marcel Mauss tells us, receiving a gift places one in obligation to the giver.<sup>34</sup> In the potlatch system, one voluntarily bankrupts, empties, and despoils oneself, which places the receiver under the same obligation. Compare this with the language St. Paul uses in Philippians 2:6–10 (I follow the Vulgate, not the Greek):

Who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God a matter of robbery (*rapinam*), but emptied (*exinanivit*) himself and received the form of a servant, being made in likeness of men, and was found in the shape (disposition, enabling quality: *habitus*) of a man (Qui cum in forma Dei esset, non rapinam arbitratus est esse se aequalem Deo: sed semetipsum exinanivit formam servi accipiens, in similitudinem hominum factus, et habitu inventus ut homo). He humbled himself and *was made* [note the passive voice] obedient even unto death, the death of the cross (Humiliavit semetipsum factus obediens usque ad mortem, mortem autem crucis). On account of this, God exalted him (*exinanivit* becomes *exaltavit*) and gave (*donavit*) him the name which is above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. . . .

This is also the very language employed by Hans Urs von Balthasar's metaphysics of creaturely receptivity, in which, in the words of Christophe Potworowski, the fundamental attitude of the creature "is less

<sup>32</sup> Blondel's private notebooks clearly indicate a central role for Bernard of Clairvaux as a source of the ideas of *L'action*. He dared not, however, acknowledge in a philosophy dissertation of the 1890s the degree of his indebtedness to the Cistercian saint. See Chrysologue Mahamé, "Les auteurs spirituels dans l'élaboration de la philosophie blondélienne, 1883–1893," *Recherches de science religieuse* 56 (1968) 225–40, at 232–37. I owe this reference to Emero Stiegman, who included it in a paper read at the Cistercian Studies conference at Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 1995.

<sup>33</sup> According to James Walsh, this is the key to Thomas Gallus's mystical theology. See James J. Walsh, "Sapientia Christianorum: The Doctrine of Thomas Gallus Abbot of Vercelli on Contemplation" (dissertation ad lauream in Facultate Theologica, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, 1957) 30: "Et hec est portio Marie, que nemo novit nisi qui accipit: sapientia Christianorum, quam apostolos loquebatur inter perfectos: in cor nulum ascendit, sed descendit: sapientia celestis, que de sursum est (And this is Mary's portion, which no one can know without receiving it: the wisdom of Christians which the apostles proclaimed in the midst of the perfected. It does not ascend in any heart, rather, it descends, for it is a celestial wisdom that comes from above)." These phrases occur so frequently in Thomas Gallus's writings that Walsh does not give a specific citation for this particular quotation. Cf. Walsh, "Thomas Gallus et l'effort contemplatif," *Revue d'histoire de la spiritualité* 51 (1975) 17–42.

<sup>34</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967). See, for the medieval period, Georges Duby, *The Growth of the Early European Economy: Warriors and Peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century*, trans. Howard B. Clarke (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1974).



that of possession with regard to an absolute truth than of continued openness and receptivity, awaiting further unveilings of the truth."<sup>35</sup> Receptivity here is not primarily to be seen as an act or a potency on the part of the subject, "it is rather a capacity<sup>36</sup> whereby I allow another to dwell within me. It is not to be seen as an impoverishment of being, as something experienced on a 'lower' level, but as something to do with the full richness of being. In order to experience the richness of Being, I must undergo this impoverishment. I must freely consent to the other."<sup>37</sup> For von Balthasar, experience is expropriation rather than appropriation.<sup>38</sup> The experience of the Trinity is archetypal—the Son's obedience to the will of the Father, kenosis, self-emptying, manifestation of God's love for us—this is the heart of von Balthasar's theology.<sup>39</sup>

Building on the research of Carl Andresen, Joseph Ratzinger argues that Christianity contributed to Western civilization a unique idea of person, based on the dynamism of the Christian Trinity:<sup>40</sup> The Son, qua

<sup>35</sup> "Christian Experience in Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio* 20 (1993) 107–17, at 109.

<sup>36</sup> Note that *capax* is derived from *capio*; cf. note 5 above.

<sup>37</sup> "For Balthasar, only Christianity will provide a satisfactory explanation for what is implicit in the experience of awakening consciousness, namely that Being and love are coextensive. This implicit experience can be had only by a being who is spirit (cf. Thomas's *reflexio completa*), i.e., a full grasping of oneself as transcending oneself toward a thou who is known as the loving other" (Potworowski, "Christian Experience" 111). Frans Jozef van Beeck has recently employed the idea of receptivity in Karl Rahner and others to make space for interreligious conversation. Christian theologians might profitably take up his suggestion in conversation with von Balthasar's and Ratzinger's emphasis on the grounding of this receptivity in the intra-Trinitarian dynamic. Does the centuries-old Trinitarian stumbling block to conversation among the "Religions of the Book" actually provide the *dynamis* to explode the logjam? See van Beeck, "Faith and Theology in Encounter with Non-Christians," *TS* 55 (1994) 46–67.

<sup>38</sup> Von Balthasar "distinguishes between *experience* (where experience is the measure of itself) and *obedience* (where the measure is received from another): "Christian experience is the fruit of an active receptivity understood as obedience. Revelation is here fundamental, and the reception of revelation is seen as active receptivity. From a theological view, then, what is meant by pointing to human receptivity is God's absolute freedom and the primacy of his initiative over knowing and doing. To this primacy, there corresponds the ontology of 'a being whose fundamental act consists precisely in its ability to receive'" (Potworowski, "Christian Experience" 112–13).

<sup>39</sup> "The Christian's experience of Christ occurs preeminently in the Eucharist—it is not so much that, in the eating and drinking we take Christ's kenotic experience into ourselves, or transform his substance into our own, or even that we accept his gift of life in the hope of doing likewise, rather, we offer ourselves, the whole sphere of our life to the Lord who knocks, we place ourselves at his disposal. We move from disposing to allowing ourselves to be disposed" (Potworowski, "Christian Experience" 115). See also von Balthasar, *You Have Words of Eternal Life: Scripture Meditations* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991) 11–19.

<sup>40</sup> "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," *Communio* 17 (1990) 439–54, a translation of a slightly revised version of a lecture originally published as "Zum Personenverständnis in der Theologie," in Ratzinger, *Dogma und Verkündigung* (Munich: Erichewel, 1973) 205–23.

Son, is not an independent being. He has nothing of himself. He is totally one with the Father yet distinct in his Sonship relation to the Father. Precisely because the Son “exists *in total relativity toward [the Father]*, and constitutes nothing but relativity toward him, [constitutes a relativity] that does not delimit a precinct of what is merely and properly its own—precisely because of this they are one.”<sup>41</sup> So too, for Christians the idea of Word, Logos, ratio (i.e. relation) can be something only in being from someone else and toward someone else: a word is existence that is completely path and openness. Christ’s doctrine is he himself and he himself is not his own (he says, “My teaching is not *my teaching*” (John 7:16)—because Christ’s “I” exists entirely from the “you” of the Father. This theme is treated at length by Hans Urs von Balthasar, David Schindler, and others.<sup>42</sup>

Reading Hugh of Balma against the background of this contemporary theological metaphysics of person can be instructive. Here are Hugh’s words, from the opening of the section on the unitive way:

We shall show, therefore, how the rational spirit, faithfully instructed by wisdom, finds herself sweetly disposed toward all things through this wisdom which is mystical theology, by divine light radiating from on high. First, with

<sup>41</sup> Ratzinger, “Person” 445.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 445–47. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Have Words of Eternal Life* 89. Cf. David L. Schindler, “The Church’s ‘Worldly’ Mission: Neoconservatism and American Culture,” *Communio* 18 (1991) 365–97. Schindler has carried on a debate with Michael Novak and George Weigel, critiquing their “Americanist” Catholicism by applying the concept of “person” we are discussing here, drawing heavily on Hans Urs von Balthasar. Here he points out that gift and receptivity remain the norm for authentic Christian spirituality. “The Christian’s activity in the world takes its primary form from within the Eucharist and the *fiat*” (369). “The unique love revealed in the Eucharist and the *fiat* carries a natural or philosophical *Vorverständnis* (pre-understanding) [von Balthasar, “You Have Words” 60]. This ‘pre-understanding’ consists in what Balthasar calls ‘personalism’ (love) and ‘aesthetics’ (beauty), which converge in that they both center on the experience of the gift: on the other as ‘miracle.’ This pre-understanding, this ‘dim awareness’ which man has of love already by nature, does not remove the *scandalum* of revealed love, and thereby does not remove the need for a radical conversion of heart and mind in order to perceive the latter in its uniqueness [von Balthasar, *Love Alone* 51]. The pertinent point is simply that the philosophical pre-understanding carries a definite idea of the human being, at the heart of which are already love and relationality. Gift and receptivity—and hence relation (love, dialogue)—are given *a priori* with or in the human existent” (370). “What this means is that relation is ontological before it is voluntary: it is something in which we always already find ourselves, and not something we *first* have to *choose*; it is something we are before it is something we have. Because relation is already built into the form of human being, the primary human activity must be to receive, in order to give (back)—and not, for example, to seek in order to acquire.” However, this does not mean that choice is devalued in effecting relation (371). Schindler also cites von Balthasar, “The Concept of the Person,” *Communio* 13 (1986) 18–26, expanded version: “Zum Begriff der Person” in *Homo Creatus Est* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1986) 93–102; on metaphysics of relation, see *Theologik*, vol. 2 (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1985) 27–57; *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991) 616–56. For the most recent installment in the conversation between Schindler, Norris Clarke, and others, see *Communio* 21 (1994) 162–90.

regard to supercelestial things. In the blessed Trinity, the Son goes forth from the Father, and the Holy Spirit, who is true love, proceeds from both and binds the Father and the Son. So too unitive wisdom proceeds from the fount of supernal goodness and descends to the human spirit underway here below, joining her by uniting her with the Uncreated Spirit. Just as the Father and Son, even though distinct, are nevertheless called one because they are bound by Love, so through this wisdom (which alone permits the human spirit to inhere nobly in the supreme Spirit) though the human spirit is nothing, she deserves to enjoy being called one with that supreme Spirit.<sup>43</sup>

Elsewhere, in his discussion of the illuminative way, Hugh asserts that

. . . the human spirit, the sanctuary of the entire Trinity, . . . ought to bend her ear to the kind Father who has begotten her in the life of love and she ought to open the eye of understanding inwardly, so that she might cling with all ardor of love to the spiritual Father and aspire to his dwellingplace. . . . For, desiring to share himself with her, the Most High himself created her to his image and marked her with the image of the entire Trinity. In other words, he

<sup>43</sup> The passage from *Via unitiva* par. 4, continues: "As the Apostle Paul says, *He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit* (1 Corinthians 6:17). This ordering is clear not only because of the order of the Persons acquired through the wisdom of unitive love, but also because of the divine activities. To God most blessed two acts are coeternal and consubstantial, namely, knowing himself and loving himself. When the human spirit burns in God and knows ardently with unfailling knowledge, as if basking and burning in the midday heat of glowing love, she loves him with inexpressible ardor. Through this ardor she knows him more intimately than through a sense-perceptible creature, and she is conformed to him as far as possible and transformed into him by deifying love. A human spirit disposed like this is an utterly precise imitator of the eternal actions.

"Par. 5. But the most blessed God is not only the fountainhead of the order of the persons and of the eternity of divine activities, but he is the overflowing source of all creatures, of both angelic and human spirits, as well as of all sensate and insensate creatures. Hence the creature's excellence is enveloped solely in its return to that source from which it has its primordial origin. For the rational spirit, created directly by the Fashioner himself and bearing the impress of the image of the very Trinity as a seal, excells the other creatures in dignity and emerges perfected and reshaped by divine decree when, pushing to transcend natural limits by outstretched love, she is united in an ecstatic upsurge of love to the very one from whom she came forth primordially—that a circle might become apparent in him, a circle by which she now begins to return to him from whom she came forth primordially.

"Par. 6. Moreover, in this eternal Fashioner, the beginning and origin of all creation, all things are regulated in an unshakable ordering by his eternal reasons so that, regulated by divine providence, all things whatsoever might ultimately come to rest in his orderings. Thus the human spirit rising through importunate, or intimate, affections, with her flesh somehow bathed in a wondrous watering, finds her inborn corruption slowly weakening in her—to the degree that she expands heavenward by ardent exercise. By divine compassion she enjoys this victory, so that the more the human spirit submits to her own Creator in undivided love, that much more is her flesh subject to the commands issued by her natural spirit. By divine decree love calls the human spirit forth into concord with her Superior, and, consequently, the now submissive body finds concord with the human spirit as she presides in the realm of her own body. With the Psalmist she says, *For you my soul has thirsted; for you, my flesh, O how many ways* (Psalm 62:2 [63:1])."

created her so that she might depend solely on him in the obedience of ignited love, whether underway in this life or in the heavenly homeland.<sup>44</sup>

Hugh of Balma assumes that receptivity is active and positive, actively and kenotically positive. A medieval Catholic soteriology could insist on the absolute and one-sided giftedness of the *commercium admirabile* in which human sinfulness is exchanged for Christ's righteousness while at the same time assuming as a matter of course that human free will actively clings to the proffered gift, completing the lopsided bargain in a mutuality of self-emptying and emptiedness. For medieval Christians beggarly "womanish" reception, far from constituting a demeaningly powerless passivity, represented the best way to be empowered, to be activated for the limitless beggarliness of kenotic *caritas*, to be empowered for the fullest form of *imitatio Christi*. When measured against Hugh and other medieval Latin mystics, Anders Nygren's critique of medieval mysticism that pits *agape* against *eros*,<sup>45</sup> an opposition unwittingly premised on post-Renaissance notions of human freedom and divine providence,<sup>46</sup> fades into the early morning

<sup>44</sup> *Via illuminativa* par. 42.

<sup>45</sup> Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982; first published in English in 1932 and 1939). "Eros and Agape are the characteristic expressions of two different attitudes to life, two fundamentally opposed types of religion and ethics. They represent two streams that run through the whole history of religion, alternately clashing against one another and mingling with one another. They stand for what may be described as the egocentric and the theocentric attitude in religion" (205). "[I]f God is Agape, Eros is totally contrary to His nature. Agape is a love that loves to give, freely, selflessly; Eros is a love that loves to get, a highly refined form of self-interest and self-seeking. Therefore it must be regarded as sinful by the Agape that 'seeketh not its own'" (xxi). "Agape . . . excludes all self-love. Christianity does not recognize self-love as a legitimate form of love" (217). "The conception of love in Augustine or Dante is not a simple interpretation of Agape, but a transformation of it. Medieval Caritas is a complex phenomenon, containing elements both of Agape and of Eros" (55). Nygren fails to grasp that medieval spiritual writers intertwined *desiderium* and *gratia* based on the theology of creation *ad imaginem Dei*. This is not the place to develop the topic, but Nygren has forced biblical, patristic, and medieval theology into a procrustean bed based on a misunderstanding of *eros* even in Plato. See Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 27, 72.

<sup>46</sup> This article cannot detail the process by which "making trial of his own powers" (see Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970]) developed in late medieval theology and Renaissance philosophy toward modern structuralism and the "anthropological turn." Nygren's sharp disjunction between self-love and selfless love was unknown in medieval Christianity, as Bernard of Clairvaux's *De diligendo Deo*, which begins and ends with self-love, at first selfish self-love, at the end, selfless self-love, reveals. (Much the same is found in Aelred of Rievaulx, *Speculum caritatis*; the principle is, of course, fundamentally Augustinian.) In addition to the brief comments in note 6, above, I refer the reader to a somewhat more detailed discussion of this in my *Fifteenth Century Carthusian Reform*, esp. chaps. 6, 7 and the Epilogue, and to Louis Dupré's *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven: Yale, 1993), for an analysis of the process that I would largely endorse. Note also Ratzinger's application of the metaphysics of person to the Spanish conquest of America and Bartolomé de las Casas in a study of Reinhold

mists of the modern Protestant snipe hunt for medieval Pelagianisms.<sup>47</sup> If one defines Agape and Eros the way Nygren does, one will in fact have no choice but to view grace in a quietistically passive way.<sup>48</sup>

With William James we may legitimately highlight the passivity of mystical knowledge, as long as we constantly remind ourselves that passivity in the modern sense made no sense in a gift economy, whether the gift economy of premodern human cultures, the Gift-economy of salvation history,<sup>49</sup> or the Gift-*oeconomia* of the immanent Trinity. That reminder, in turn, could help us reassess contemporary debates ranging from views of gender relations and socio-economic class-conflict to interreligious dialogue, and stimulate us to reconsider conventional interpretations of historic and contemporary imperialism and totalitarianism in our contemporary theologies of liberation and empowerment.

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Schneider and 20th-century totalitarianism. See Ratzinger, "Conscience in Time," *Communio* 19 (1992) 647–58, a translation of a lecture given in 1972. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Reinhold Schneider: Sein Weg und sein Werk* (Cologne and Olten: Hegner, 1953; rev. ed., Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> The present writer's graduate-school studies of late medieval and Reformation history (1974–1979) were shaped by a context in which a search for medieval Pelagianisms loomed large. Some scholars have begun to question the legitimacy of the search. In addition to the article by Karlfried Froehlich (n. 31 above), see Graham White, "Pelagianisms," in *Viator* 20 (1989) 233–54. However, that the 16th-century polemics are by no means a thing of the past is evident in the treatment of the Middle Ages and Reformation found in a major publisher's survey textbook on the history of Christianity: Howard Clark Kee and others, *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History* (New York: Macmillan, 1991) 274–421, esp. 334–46.

<sup>48</sup> In response to Nygren on the theoretical and theological underpinnings of mysticism, one might consider von Balthasar, Ratzinger, Wojtyla and others on Trinity and person. On Wojtyla, see Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1993), and Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993). The best overview of theories of mysticism is now McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism* 265–343.

<sup>49</sup> Which begins when God first entered into *commerce* with human beings by creating them in his image and culminates in the ultimate transaction, the *commercium admirabile* of the Incarnation, Cross, and Resurrection.