

# “THE ECSTASY OF ACTION AND LIFE”

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## *Introduction*

In relation to the three main questions posed on the *Junge Theologie 2014 Forum*'s invitation (Which forms and interpretations of religious ecstasy are bequeathed to us by Judeo-Christian tradition? Which demarcations and dis-limitations are there in relation to other, apparently secular forms of ecstasy? With which (post-)modern forms of ecstasy are today's theology and religious studies confronted?), I have decided to focus in my presentation on that interpretation of ecstasy which approaches it from within the divine order of love and in relation to the wholeness of human life. Thus, what I would like to sketch can be primarily labelled as an integrative approach in whose centre is theological life and Christian humanism.

The title itself tries to allude to the intention of this presentation; to present that aspect of the contemplative ecstasy considered being the most important by St Francis of Sales and also named “the ecstasy of action and life”<sup>1</sup> by the saint himself. Of course, this does not mean that I wish to deny the understanding of ecstasy as a mystical phenomenon and as a supernatural gift of the Divine mercy that pervades a human being without destroying him/her. On the contrary, I want to remain within the area of theological dimension of Christian life, while pointing out that ecstasy, as a certain expression of the climax of one's union and relationship with God, leads to the “ecstasy of action and life”. While the ecstasy of life refers to the supernatural life, life filled with ‘heavenly inspirations’ (which lifts us up and draws us beyond our natural inclinations and impulses), the ecstasy of action refers to the re-incitement of concrete love that is attentive to all the needs of

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1 De Sales, F. *Treatise on the Love of God*, 263. <http://www.pathsoflove.com/pdf/francis-love-of-god.pdf>. Also available at: <http://www.ecatholic2000.com/desales/log.shtml>.

others or to the life which is not lived for itself but for what is outside of it — a sign of true ecstasy.<sup>2</sup>

My choice for this topic has been largely prompted by personal reasons. Namely, I read extensively on great mystics, states of mystical ecstasy, which characterised them and their ecstatic union with God. Though this might be perceived as a critique of my own contemplative life, I have never experienced anything similar; even in what I consider the deepest moments of my personal surrender to God. Although I have been fortunate enough to experience God's blessings, His presence, and His joy, these never led to the experience of going beyond myself, of ecstasy. However, my 'companionship' with mystics and especially their considerations of ecstatic experiences, led me to believe that the experience of union with God is not only a result of an extraordinary gift of God's mercy and love — of ecstasy, but that it also comes through more ordinary, perhaps more common experiences of the 'silent' presence of God's mercy that pervades one with the joy of life. Thus, whether we are dealing with extraordinary or more ordinary experiences, in both cases it is the work of God's self-giving intervention, which results with the sanctification of the everyday life, our neighbours and all the creation.

The presentation is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on initial inspirations of my own thinking about spiritual life in general and ecstasy in particular. On a reflective journey with Meister Eckhart, the great Dominican spiritual teacher and a man of prayer, down the path of discourse on relatedness of inner and outer, I will reflect on the authenticity of mystical life.

The wholeness of Christian life cannot be conceptualised without its mystical dimension, which means that the project of the new evangelisation is also unimaginable without the rediscovery of this dimension. In the second part I will reflect on the supernatural, theological dimension of the believer's life as a condition for the correct understanding of mysticism and ecstasy within Christian communities.

Finally, in the third part I will try to evaluate, in light of the Christian vision, so called pseudo-ecstasies, which include distorted forms of the union, the search for extraordinary, sensational, emotional, and transitory.

The concluding thoughts call for ecstatic love, intimate communion with God, and mystical love towards the neighbour that, at the same time, flows towards the meeting with God.

2 Cf. Benedict XVI. 2011. Saint Francis de Sales. General Audience. Accessed July 5, 2014. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20110302\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110302_en.html).

## 1. *On Relationship between the Inner and the Outer*

I have found the inspiration for my own reflection on spiritual life in general and ecstasy in particular in the thought of a Dominican, a great spiritual teacher and a man of prayer, Meister Eckhart. His insightful reflection on action and contemplation, soul and body, divine and earthly, extraordinary and ordinary, reveal that the authenticity of mystical life does not consist in the escape from the world (*fuga mundi*) or in the search for extraordinary or privileged mystical experiences (not even after they have already occurred<sup>3</sup>), but that its authenticity is in a certain way of being, in sanctification of all of our actions: "*We ought not to think of building holiness upon the action; we ought to build it upon a way of being, for it is not what we do that makes us holy, but we ought to make holy what we do*"<sup>4</sup>.

Meister Eckhart was not an ecstatic person, nor did he study ecstasy. Although he did not doubt that such experiences exist, he himself did not give them much attention. On the contrary, he believed that even if they do occur: "*And even if this really be love, it still is not the very best love. That can be seen when sometimes a man must abandon this kind of jubilation because of a better kind of love, and sometimes to perform a work of love, whether spiritual or bodily, when someone has need of him. I have said before: If a man were in an ecstasy, as St Paul was, and knew that some sick man needed him to give him a bit of soup, I should think it far better if you would abandon your ecstasy out of love and show greater love in caring for the other in his need.*"<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Meister Eckhart is speaking here on the relationship between the inner and the outer, between contemplation and action. True spirituality does not harbour a discrepancy between these two realities; on the contrary, the basic demand of spirituality is to keep the "balanced tension"<sup>6</sup> between the two, so that one would not end up in either the extreme of exclusivist-individualistic spirituality, or the extreme of immanent social-therapeutic activism.<sup>7</sup>

3 Cf. Eckhart, M. 1981. *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, 60. New York: Paulist Press.

4 *Ibid*, 247.

5 *Ibid*, 258.

6 Cunningham, L. 1996. *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition*, 19. New Jersey: Paulist Press.

7 Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 545.  
[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_just-peace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_just-peace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html).

Meister Eckhart does not deny that ecstasy is a good, which a spiritual person will have a tendency to pursue.<sup>8</sup> However, within the divine order of love and in relation to love for the neighbour it is a smaller good. In that sense, the highest good is *to be in love* — to open oneself and to be in God’s presence which is within us or, in Eckhart’s words to “let God be God in you”. Ecstasy is, therefore, not the “essence of love”; it is, primarily, “action or pouring out of love”, an extraordinary phenomenon of spiritual life that affects, primarily, the emotional dimension of being. Hence, Meister Eckhart points out: “*Often this appears plainly (...) and yet this is not always the best that could be. For it may be that it does not come from love, but perhaps it only comes from nature that a man experiences such savour and sweetness. It may be sent down from heaven, or it may be born in from the senses. And those who have more of this are not always the best man*”.<sup>9</sup> The best are those who do not pay the most attention to “the ecstasy of a sustained psycho–spiritual enthusiasm but rather (to) the plain, Gospel ecstasy of committed service to the neighbour. Active, devoted charity, therefore, not mere feelings or mere sensations of devotion, is what, in Eckhart’s opinion, most distinguishes the Christian disciple”.<sup>10</sup>

Eckhart emphasises that ecstasy is not the best thing that could occur. The essence of mysticism is not the ecstasy. The essence of mysticism is love

8 Ecstasy, as an act of love and its outpouring, is always God’s work and God’s gift. God himself is its cause, and not a human person. It is an experience of special grace and love of God. Therefore, a human being can only long for such love. However, a perfect love of God is constituted in willingness to forgo any spiritual consolation and gentleness: “*Yes, truly, when a man forsakes something and denies it to himself for the love of God, yes, even if it be that a man has a great desire to experience such consolations and inwardness and does everything he can to obtain this and God does not give it to him, and he willingly relinquishes and forgoes this for God’s love, then such a man will find in God what he seeks, just as if he had possessed as his own all the riches that ever were and had willingly relinquished, abandoned and denied them for God’s sake. He will receive a hundred times as much. For whatever a man would gladly have that he relinquished and goes without for God’s love, be it something material or spiritual, he will find all of it in God (...)*”, Eckhart, M. 1981. *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, 258. New York: Paulist Press.

Does that mean that God leaves his beloved ones without consolation? Eckhart replies: “*But you must know that God’s friends are never without consolation, for whatever God wills is for them the greatest consolation of all, whether it be consolation or desolation*”, Ibid, 259.

9 He continues: “*for even if such a gift be truly from God, our Lord often gives it to such people to entice and draw them on, and also to make them, through it, very withdrawn from others. Yet these same people, when later they have obtained more love, may then well not experience so much emotion and feeling, and from that it is well seen that they have love, if they cleave faithfully and steadily to God without such a prop*”, Ibid, 258.

10 Murray, P. 2012. Searching for God. *Contemplative Prayer in the Dominican Tradition*, 15. Accessed July 5, 2014. [http://iniciativas.dominicos.org/kit\\_upload/file/blogs/iniciativas/contemplation\\_in\\_the\\_dominican\\_tradition.pdf](http://iniciativas.dominicos.org/kit_upload/file/blogs/iniciativas/contemplation_in_the_dominican_tradition.pdf).

of God and one's neighbour.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is wrong to assume that mysticism consists in someone's personal experiences, private sensations, special visions, states of elation, or extraordinary joy. Such an understanding is not to be found in writings of any great Christian mystic. Mysticism is not selfish or individualistic; it is a call to share the union with God and God's presence in our life with others, to come out of our selfishness and to share God's love with others. That is the essence of mysticism. The highest love is not that love which we received in an extraordinary way, but the one which we share with our neighbours in everyday life, since the love of God cannot be separated from the love of neighbour. Thus, by coming out of ourselves through active love towards our neighbour, we also begin to understand God's love. This is an essential and correct frame within which one can understand an intensive mystical experience and religious ecstasy that follows from it.

## 2. *The Mystical Dimension of the Christian Life and Ecstasy*

The most valuable thing that has been given to us by Christian mystics are not their extraordinary moments of mystical experience and ecstatic elation, great joys or pain<sup>12</sup> that they experienced, but their pure hearts and relatedness of their "experience" of God to their praxis. Of course, the priority in their Christian-moral existence should be located in the theological dimension of their lives or, in Rahner's terms, in the "mystical dimension of

11 Cf. Interview: McGinn, B. 2007. Mistika je čovjekova svjesnost povezanosti s Bogom. Accessed July 5, 2014. [http://www.glas-koncila.hr/index.php?option=com\\_php&Itemid=41&news\\_ID=12948](http://www.glas-koncila.hr/index.php?option=com_php&Itemid=41&news_ID=12948).

12 "The principal forms of ecstasy are the gentle and delightful ecstasy and the violent and painful ecstasy. In the first, it seems that the soul is no longer in the body, and the body itself has the experience of losing its natural warmth. Nevertheless, this is accompanied by great sweetness and delight. This form of ecstasy is in no way harmful to health; rather, it often improves the individual's health. In its violent and painful form, the bodily suffering is so intense that the individual can hardly bear it. It seems sometimes as if the entire body has been dislocated. St. John of the Cross states that it seems as if all the bones have dried up and that the body has lost all its strength. Sometimes the body becomes completely cold and appears as if dead. The sweet and delightful form of ecstasy is simply ecstasy; the painful form is called transport, flight of the spirit, or rapture. Ecstasy sometimes produces noticeable effects on the body and soul of the ecstatic. The ecstatic has no sensation of any material thing, and there is no awareness through vision of any objects in the vicinity, as can be proved by passing some object, even a bright light, in front of the opened eyes of the ecstatic. The vital functions seem to be interrupted: there is no evident sign of respiration, of circulation of the blood, or any movement of the lips. The sweet and gentle ecstasy is never harmful to bodily health, but often restores or improves it; after the violent ecstasy, on the other hand, the body sometimes remains exhausted and painful over a period of days", Aumann, J. 1980. *Spiritual Theology*, 243–244. London: A&C Black. <http://archive.org/stream/SpiritualTheologyByFr.JordanAumannO.p/AumannO.p.SpiritualTheologyall#page/n0/mode/2up>.

Christianity"<sup>13</sup>. Through this, as mystics call it, "infused contemplation"<sup>14</sup> — the gift of unmediated grace of God, every Christian knows the longing for mystical experience, for God himself. This is the theological area of Christian life, which aims for realisation of grace and infused virtues of faith, hope, and love. However, this theological/mystical/infused dimension of life cannot be reduced to its passive forms in which God encompasses a human being directly by "closing his/her mouth" and that manifests itself through certain extraordinary and "unexplainable" phenomena or certain specific contents; that is, through something that one can put a finger on.

In the Christian–theological tradition the concept of "mysticism" primarily signifies "mysterious communion of a Christian with God", the communion and relationship that are "a real possibility for any authentic relationship with God" and that "are not simply an uncommon phenomenon or some 'addition' to the Christian life". As such, it is co-constitutive of foundations of understanding of what it means to "be a Christian".<sup>15</sup> In fact, even the "spiritual–contemplative" specification of mysticism shows that it concerns the supernatural and theological dimension of the life of a believer, which primarily and more than anything seeks our longing, our compliance, and our openness to a profound intervention of the grace of God. In that sense, the emphasis does not lie in the experiential, but on consciousness, on awareness of God's presence in us.<sup>16</sup>

13 "... in every human person ... there is something like an anonymous, unthematic, perhaps repressed, basic experience of being oriented to God ... which can be repressed but not destroyed, which is 'mystical' or (if you prefer a more cautious terminology) has its climax in what the classical masters called infused contemplation", Egan, H. D. 2013. *The Mystical Theology of Karl Rahner*. *The Way* 52: 44. <http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/522Egan.pdf>.

14 One could pose a question here concerning the "infused contemplation". Namely, is it a normal phase in one's growth in holiness or is it an extraordinary gift given to some saints? It can certainly be understood in both of these ways, depending on whether one emphasises its active forms (a person's effort) or its passive forms (God's intervention). Jakov Mamić explains the difference between the "mystical grace" and the "ordinary way of building up of our spiritual life": In ordinary development of grace in us "grace operates in such a way that it encourages and brings about our cooperation with God through prompting of the Holy Spirit. This is the ordinary way of building up of our spiritual life. The meaning of 'being in grace' should be found precisely in the attentiveness to these promptings. In this way, grace brings about positive acts of our will, while through these acts we are engaged in our activities that enrich us spiritually and help us to grow into a spiritual character which is in harmony with the promptings of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the mystical grace skips this process. In that case, God acts by going around natural capabilities and God's activity completely surpasses them. His graceful activity is immediate and activates the soul. The activity of the soul is limited to *receiving* that which is given to it by God", Mamić, J. 2009. *Temeljne odrednice mistike i mističnog iskustva*. *Živo vrelo* 26: 5–6.

15 Cf. Mamić, J. 2009. *Temeljne odrednice mistike i mističnog iskustva*. *Živo vrelo* 26: 3–5.

16 McGinn, B. 2008. *Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal*. *Spiritus* 8: 44–63. Without consciousness of relation an experience is not possible or, more precisely, it does not even exist, cf. Mamić, J. 2009. *Temeljne odrednice mistike i mističnog iskustva*. *Živo vrelo* 26: 7.

"According to Rahner, the Trinity's deepest desire is that each person experiences the ecstasy of intimate communion with God–self".<sup>17</sup> God's longing awaits our longing. In that sense, the states of extraordinary ecstasies are but one expression of the exceptional depths of the relationship with God.<sup>18</sup> This depth can be existentially deepened, because it allows us to reach the foundations of our own existence. Therefore, to experience 'more grace' one does not need to escape from the world and everyday experiences, nor does one need to dive into an imaginary world of theistic deities or contemporary forms of animism.<sup>19</sup> The authenticity of "special spiritual echoes" or individual ecstatic experiences needs to be affirmed in discernment and reflection that is "in conformity with the contents of the faith and with the demands of the experience of the Christian life", and especially through "mysticism of everyday existence" with all its ups and downs.<sup>20</sup> The mystical theology that has been developed along these lines by Karl Rahner warns us that we are "on the threshold of the future"<sup>21</sup> and that his message to Christians of tomorrow has never been more relevant.<sup>22</sup>

In all this, one should keep in mind what (that is, who) is the most important when it comes to Christians and mysticism, Jesus Christ. Without a

- 17 Sunderman, M. 2011. Grace and Lived Christianity in the Theology of Karl Rahner and Leonardo Boff. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1: 280.
- 18 St Theresa proposes four levels of mystical life: "peace in which the spirit rests, while still not possessing freedom from all disturbances; the state of union, in which one experiences the feeling of constant presence of God and in which all disturbing phenomena cease to exist; ecstasy as a cessation of the activity of senses; engagement mysticism, in which the soul starts to taste the God's presence and which includes the body in one act of knowing and blessed immediate seeing of God that expresses itself through a flood of love", Bove, G. 2009. *Mistika*. In *Enciklopedijski teološki rječnik*, 657. Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost.
- 19 "Die Mystiker aller Zeiten und Traditionen stimmen darin überein, daß Gottheit im theistischen Sinn — der Gott oder die Göttin mit olympischem Eigendasein — reine Erfindung ist. Die theistische Gottheit steht nur eine Stufe höher als der Weihnachtsmann und ist das Produkt unserer Verfangenheit in Konzepten", Steindl–Rast, D. 2003. *Von Eis zu Wasser zu Dampf*. In *Wandel der Gottesvorstellungen: Was schätzeich am Christentum?* Accessed June 28, 2014. [http://www.christ-in-der-gegenwart.de/archiv/artikel\\_detail\\_html?k\\_beitrag=383005](http://www.christ-in-der-gegenwart.de/archiv/artikel_detail_html?k_beitrag=383005).
- 20 Cf. Rahner, K. *The Mysticism of Everyday Life*. In Egan, H. D. 1991. *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 616–633. Minnesota: Liturgical Press.
- 21 Cf. Steindl–Rast, D. 2003. *Von Eis zu Wasser zu Dampf*. In *Wandel der Gottesvorstellungen: Was schätzeich am Christentum?* Accessed June 28, 2014. [http://www.christ-in-der-gegenwart.de/archiv/artikel\\_detail\\_html?k\\_beitrag=383005](http://www.christ-in-der-gegenwart.de/archiv/artikel_detail_html?k_beitrag=383005).
- 22 According to Rahner there are three criteria of the true Christian mystical theology: A) be identified with the newness of life, which is grace, as made available through the Christ event; and therefore it will be B) incarnational (and this also means Trinitarian) and C) mediational. It is at the same time A) universal in its offer and B) both sacramental and ecclesial. Cf. Reeves Barron, K. 1983. *Karl Rahner's Mystical Theology*, 16. Accessed June 21, 2014. [http://keithocds.com/uploads/Karl\\_Rahner\\_s\\_Mystical\\_Theology.pdf](http://keithocds.com/uploads/Karl_Rahner_s_Mystical_Theology.pdf).

relation with him, it is not possible to correctly understand mysticism and ecstasy in Christian communities. In fact, the realisation of the dynamism of Christian life consists in "conforming to Christ that is progressively achieved through life of love devoid of egoism".<sup>23</sup> Karl Rahner bases his mysticism of everyday life precisely on everydayness of Jesus' earthly life: "That which is amazing and even confusing in the life of Jesus is that it remains completely within the framework of everyday living; we could even say that in him concrete human existence is found in its most basic and radical form. The first thing that we should learn from Jesus is to be fully human!"<sup>24</sup>

Connectedness with Jesus Christ is of paramount importance because he is the unique and the greatest example of ecstatic existence, of going beyond oneself in love for others: "Jesus' ecstatic existence included his commitment to a preferential love of poor persons. To this end, he challenged religious and social structures of his day that denied such persons their dignity and rights. In a word, Jesus' person and activities embodied what it means to live out a grace-filled praxis of love".<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, it is in Jesus Christ that God offered himself to every human being and to the whole of humanity. God himself was the first who went out of himself so that he might unite himself with the whole world in love or so that he might become one with the world through a loving union. Therefore, the privilege of life in union with God does not belong only to Jesus Christ, but in Jesus Christ mystical understanding becomes available to everyone.<sup>26</sup> If the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is "the paradigm of perfect mysticism", Harvey Egan writes, then the Christian mysticism<sup>27</sup> will also participate in Christ's love for the world and, thus, "bring forth the fruit for the life of the world."<sup>28</sup>

All of the above points to the conclusion that "mystical life" is not something that is reserved only for specific elite groups or individuals with

23 Cessario, R. 2007. *Kreposti*, 198. Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost.

24 Egan, H. D. 2013. *The Mystical Theology of Karl Rahner*. *The Way* 52: 46. <http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/522Egan.pdf>.

25 Sunderman, M. 2011. *Grace and Lived Christianity in the Theology of Karl Rahner and Leonardo Boff*. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1: 281.

26 Cf. Steindl-Rast, D. 2003. *Von Eis zu Wasser zu Dampf*. *Im Wandel der Gottesvorstellungen: Was schätzeich am Christentum?* Accessed June 28, 2014. [http://www.christ-in-der-gegenwart.de/archiv/artikel\\_detail\\_html?k\\_beitrag=383005](http://www.christ-in-der-gegenwart.de/archiv/artikel_detail_html?k_beitrag=383005).

27 It is not our intention here to enter the discussion on various meanings of the term "mysticism". The term is used here as a signifier of the authentic religious feeling of a person who longs for mystical life, cf. Bove, G. 2009. *Mistika*. In *Enciklopedijski teološki rječnik*, 656. Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost.

28 Second Vatican Council, 1965. *Decree on Priestly Training*. *Optatam totius*, no. 16. Accessed July 8, 2014. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_optatam-totius\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_optatam-totius_en.html).



extraordinary mystical/spiritual experiences. It is, on the contrary, the dynamism of Christian theological life itself, an encounter between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit.

Ecstasy is an extraordinary phenomenon which can follow a mystical life, but not necessarily. Ecstasy is not an indispensable, intrinsic part of the authentic mysticism. That is why it can be seen as something that will be given only to particular individuals through infused contemplation. An ecstatic event cannot be identified with the feeling of those people who claim that they feel that their affective life of prayer is leading them towards ecstasy. Such a feeling can often lead to a state of delusion about what is perfection and holiness: "Unfortunately, many of these persons see no contradiction in the fact that in their daily life they are constantly falling into imperfections and venial sins. True progress in the spiritual life consists in the ever more perfect practice of the Christian virtues and not in the sweetness one experiences in prayer".<sup>29</sup> Francis de Sales says: "When you see a person who has raptures in prayer . . . and, nevertheless, no ecstasy in his life, that is, does not lead a lofty life of union with God, by the abnegation of worldly desires and the mortification of natural wishes and inclinations, by interior sweetness, simplicity, humility, and especially by continual charity, believe me, all these raptures are seriously doubtful and dangerous".<sup>30</sup>

Equally important, one should keep in mind that God communicates an ecstatic event, not the human being: "It is, in a sense, the experienced fulfilment of the first precept of charity: 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength (...)' Without the union with God in infused contemplative prayer, the ecstasy would be a natural ecstasy or trance, a falsification of mystical ecstasy caused by an evil spirit, or the *gratia gratis* data of prophetic ecstasy".<sup>31</sup>

In the final account, ecstasy as an element of an intensive mystical contemplation disappears in the highest levels of mystical life: "When the individual is accustomed to the divine illumination and is strengthened suf-

29 Aumann, J. 1980. *Spiritual Theology*, 229. <http://archive.org/stream/SpiritualTheologyByFr.JordanAumannO.p/AumannO.p.SpiritualTheologyall#page/n0/mode/2up>.

30 De Sales, F. *Treatise on the Love of God*, 266. <http://www.pathsoflove.com/pdf/francis-love-of-god.pdf>.

31 Aumann, J. 1980. *Spiritual Theology*, 243. <http://archive.org/stream/SpiritualTheologyByFr.JordanAumannO.p/AumannO.p.SpiritualTheologyall#page/n0/mode/2up>. "It is in this ecstasy of pure love that we arrive at a true fulfilment of the First Commandment, loving God with our whole heart and our whole mind and all our strength", Merton, T. 2003. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 294. Boston: Shambhala Publications.

ficiently to withstand it, as occurs in the highest degrees of the mystical life, all ecstasy will disappear".<sup>32</sup>

### 3. *Pseudo-ecstasies and the Christian Vision*

What has been said until now can be summed up in the following: the whole point is to enter the presence of God through one's own heart. At the beginning there is consciousness and longing to be in Him, the reality that we are reaching for by following in the footsteps of God's ecstasy in Christ's Incarnation and through our steps out of ourselves towards others in love. In light of such an understanding, one should not pay much attention to distorted forms of union and to the quest for extraordinary, sensational, emotional, or transitory, since one becomes what one loves.<sup>33</sup>

However, the contemporary human being still holds on to his/her old habits. S/he pushes God and mysticism away from herself/himself, while searching for those practices and experiences which are nowadays often categorised as being religious and mystical. Especially in moments of life uncertainties when s/he needs to create the feeling of certainty, s/he reaches for illusionary deities, various forms of spiritualism, and dangers of sentimentalism. For instance, in moments when one feels lost or has to start over, in moments when one poses great existential questions and tries to deal with problems, the desire to go within oneself and to escape what makes this person unique and indispensable can be overwhelming. In such moments there is a tendency to see 'mystical' and religious everywhere, while completely disregarding God, as if these two realities have nothing in common.<sup>34</sup>

Hence the fascination of the contemporary human being with ecstatic events, altered states of consciousness and their manifestations, pleasant and sweet feelings and states that will often be described as "being outside

32 Aumann, J. 1980. *Spiritual Theology*, 243. <http://archive.org/stream/SpiritualTheologyByFr.JordanAumannO.p/AumannO.p.SpiritualTheologyall#page/n0/mode/2up>.

33 "For by the fact that love transforms the lover into the beloved, it makes the lover enter into the interior of the beloved and *vice versa*, so that nothing of the beloved remains not united to the lover, just as the form reaches to the innermost recesses of that which it informs and *vice versa*. Thus, the lover in a way penetrates into the beloved, and so love is called "piercing"; for to come into the innermost recesses of a thing by dividing it is characteristic of something piercing", Aquinas, T. 2008. *On Love and Charity: Readings from the Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard (Thomas Aquinas in Translation)*, 124. Washington, D.C.: CUA Press.

34 The phenomenon of religion without God, which has been described under the slogan "Gott –nein, Religion — ja", has become more popular in the last two years, ever since the founding of the Church for atheists in London in 2013. Cf. Röser, J. 2014. Gott — nein, Religion — ja. *Christ in der Gegenwart* 66: 279–280.

of oneself”, while primarily having in mind their secular and self-sufficient aspect:

- Powerful and dangerous drugs, mechanical states of movement and going beyond oneself, especially those accepted in the world of rave/dance/techno culture that aim for ecstatic experience as a pathway to “oceanic experience”;<sup>35</sup>
- Distorted forms of sexuality, reduction to genital acts and exclusion of bodily wholeness and intimacy in relation to another human being with the goal of reaching orgasmic sexual ecstasy;
- Those body & mind philosophies and yoga exercises whose aim is to reach the enlightenment and ecstatic living, and spiritual constellations with ritual markings so that through unification with the spiritual “invisible would become visible”;
- However, also those forms of Christian spirituality and contemplative efforts that are often focused on reaching and practicing ecstatic states; where the object of longing becomes the gift itself, as opposed to God as the giver of every gift. If these two realities are confused, then one is dealing with the sin of idolatry and spiritual gluttony that perceives spiritual life as a vertical relationship of an alienated person with God.<sup>36</sup>

Although these shortly enumerated states promise mental liberation, violently produced ecstatic states and domination over the human mind are harmful for the human physical and mental life, as opposed to real ecstasies, which are a result of superabundant love of God and whose effects are beneficial for physical and spiritual life as well. This is the area of human appetites and sensual aspirations that, in proportion to their conformity with the totality of the good of human life, can direct one either towards healthy, nutritional values or towards those activities that have a poisonous effect on the total good of human life.

The question is why the human person so often directs his/her longing towards illusionary ‘gods’? Why does s/he reach for ecstatic experiences that are not a gift of love? On purely physical and sensual level, such going beyond oneself, especially if it is marked by hunger for physical pleasures and physical-sensual ecstasies that is unable to find its fulfilment in the other — is destructive; on the spiritual level, if it is marked by a selfish need

35 “Oceanic experience” is an experience of unification and oneness of an individual with various groups of ravers who dance together at a rave party, cf. Krnjić, R. 2013. Ples i upotreba droga kao značenjske prakse u sociologiji rave-kulture. *Sociologija i prostor* 51: 91–107.

36 Cf. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*. Book One. [http://www.catholictreasury.info/books/dark\\_night/index.php](http://www.catholictreasury.info/books/dark_night/index.php).

to grasp spiritual pleasures and psychological enthusiasm, it represents distorted realities or, possibly, extremes, that need to be recognised and managed correctly.

These and similar issues are an opportunity for Christianity to develop its discourse on contemplative dimension of life for contemporary human beings that, nevertheless, has to start with us and the way we live our life of faith. In that sense, Meister Eckhart's words (mentioned at the beginning) strike me as being challenging, and though they might seem too harsh for some, they certainly point out what is essential: "Love' — there it is, that small Gospel word, that harbinger of the grace of attention, that reminder to all of us of what contemplation — Christian contemplation — really means!"<sup>37</sup>

I have already pointed out that action and contemplation, immanent and transcendent are important elements of the holistic vision of Christian spirituality. It is also important to add that faith is not just a matter of a good feeling, our personal wellbeing, prosperity, enlightenment, and pleasure. As Timothy Radcliffe states: "Faith is not primarily a matter of choosing what to believe, as if one were a consumer in a spiritual supermarket, filling one's trolley with religious goods to match one's personal needs and preferences. Faith is our response to the astonishing discovery that we have been chosen".<sup>38</sup> Benedict XVI points out that such spiritual understanding offers the human person "loving personal concern".<sup>39</sup> Although one cannot deny that these are nice experiences — these religious experiences that make us feel safe and holy — nevertheless, enlightenment and pleasure are not the goals of Christian spirituality. The goal of Christian spirituality is growth of the human person in Jesus Christ and discovering of God's presence in our human experiences. It is what Archbishop Rowan Williams calls "contemplative humanity": "To be fully human is to be recreated in the image of Christ's humanity; and that humanity is the perfect human 'translation' of the relationship of the eternal Son to the eternal Father, a relationship of loving and adoring self-giving, a pouring out of life towards the Other. Thus the humanity we are growing into in the Spirit, the humanity that we seek to share with the world as the fruit

37 Murray, P. 2001. Recovering the Contemplative Dimension. Accessed July 11, 2014. <http://www.dominicans.ca/Documents/articles/murray1.html>.

38 Radcliffe, T. 2012. Take the Plunge: Living Baptism and Confirmation, 9. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

39 Benedict XVI. 2005. Encyclical Letter on Christian Love. *Deus caritas est*, no. 28. Accessed July 11, 2014. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html). Cf. Migles, S. 2013. Vjera ljubavlju djelotvorna. Katehetski glasnik 12: 49–68.

of Christ's redeeming work, is a contemplative humanity".<sup>40</sup> A contemplation which allows us to see ourselves, others, and the whole creation with God's eyes and not in the way we would like to see them by subjecting them to our personal and sensual satisfaction. This is why Archbishop Rowan Williams rightly calls contemplation "a deeply revolutionary matter".<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. *Instead of the Conclusion: A Call to Ecstatic Love*

At the end of this presentation it would be sufficient to point out the following: we are all called to *amor exstaticus*, ecstatic love that allows us to grow into genuine *virī spirituales*.<sup>42</sup> The Second Vatican Council makes the same claim by its call to holiness, to existence in love. Hence, Rahner's famous statement that the Christian of tomorrow will either be a mystic or he will be nothing. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, every human being can reach the highest level of prayer and contemplation, no matter his/her vocation or anything else. This is why Christianity, following Thomas Aquinas on this point, sees the 'human being's end' and his/her final goal in the final self-transcending act and eternal ecstasy — "the natural life in its entirety gathered up and taken beyond itself in the act of desire for God and exposure to God."<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately, there are many who do not have an experience of such intimacy with God. Many are looking for such a spiritual path that will answer their deepest existential longings of their hearts. Often they look for such a path outside the Church, because they are not satisfied with mere 'dogmatic' answers. This leads them to spiritual wellness centres that provide holistic services, such as previously mentioned yoga centres and so called centres for mind, spirit, and body. However, it is precisely in centre of Christian anthropology that one finds the complete image of the human being in which mind, spirit, and body constitute an integral whole.

Pseudo-ecstasies of the contemporary human being are not a threat to Christianity, but primarily a challenge to Christians to be active so that they might re-ignite awareness of the contemplative dimension of the Gospel

40 Williams, R. 2012. The Archbishop of Canterbury's Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, no. 5. Accessed July 11, 2014.

<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome>.

41 Ibid.

42 Cusato, M. F. 2012. Mysticism in the Spiritual Franciscan Tradition. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. J. A. Lamm, 317. United States: Wiley-Blackwell.

43 Williams, R. 2014. *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*, 131. London: Darton Longman & Todd (DLT).

and Christianity. The life of the Church testifies that God is at work, which then asks for our response, our engagement so that the contemporary human being, including the Christian, might be brought closer to the heart of Christian spirituality.

Therefore, our primary duty is the following: to lead people into the deep unity with God, to reveal God’s presence in their lives and in everything living, because a truly spiritual human being does not see himself/herself in everything, but, instead admires the beauty of God’s presence in everything. This important task has been pointed out by John Paul II in 1998 in his address to Austrian bishops in which he said that the primary task of bishops is not to run projects and to organize things, but to lead people towards an intimate communion with God.<sup>44</sup> If we do not follow this path and appropriately respond to the challenge of contemporary spiritual aspirations of many people, then pope Francis’ warning in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* à propos: “Unless these people find in the Church a spirituality which can offer healing and liberation, and fill them with life and peace, while at the same time summoning them to fraternal communion and missionary fruitfulness, they will end up by being taken in by solutions which neither make life truly human nor give glory to God”.<sup>45</sup>

In order to reach the highest potential of spiritual life “the interior/mystical dimension needs to be balanced by the external/social dimension”.<sup>46</sup> In that sense, Carl McColman, a Roman Catholic lay believer and the author of several books on spiritual life and Christian mysticism points out: “The social/external/activist dimension of Christian spirituality is essential, and I believe a truly contemplative spirituality needs an activist dimension (just as a peace—and— justice-oriented spirituality requires a contemplative dimension).”<sup>47</sup>

44 “Today there is an urgent need to support the renewal of the Church’s spiritual dimension. Questions about the Church’s structure automatically take second place when the decisive question about God is put on the Church’s discussion agenda. This question should be patiently addressed in a sincere dialogue of salvation with men and women inside and outside the Church. In the Church–mystery we also find the key to our mission as Bishops at the service of God’s People. The first question we can be asked as Pastors is not: “What have you organized?”, but: “Whom have you led to communion with the Triune God?”, John Paul II. 1998. Address To The Bishops Of Austria On Their “Ad Limina Apostolorum” Visit, no. 6. Accessed July 12, 2014.

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1998/november/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19981120\\_ad-limina-austria\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1998/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19981120_ad-limina-austria_en.html).

45 Holy Father Francis, 2013. Apostolic Exhortation on The Proclamation of The Gospel in Today’s World. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 89. Accessed July 12, 2014.

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

46 McColman, C. 2013. Answering the Contemplative Call: First Steps on the Mystical Path, 81. United States: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc.

47 Ibid.

This is, in Francis of Sales’ terms, the ecstasy of life and action, the most important ecstasy “because it necessarily involves communicating oneself to other human beings (...) It is this kind of ecstasy that is necessary to establish contact with others and is the basis of community because it involves a continual communication of oneself”.<sup>48</sup> It is an ecstasy that moves us to do what God himself does — to share his love.

Ecstatic love, according to the words of an anonymous Dominican father, inscribes the needs of the neighbour in the book of heart (among the things “a man ought to see in contemplation”, and ought “to write in the book of his heart”, are “the needs of his neighbours”).<sup>49</sup> Ecstatic state that does not result with the deep respect for each individual human person is not an experience of the deep intimacy with God. The dignity of the human person has its source in God’s self-giving love, while its fulfilment is found in love for the neighbour. The fruit of the intimate union with God is heaven in one’s heart, in which one’s neighbour should find his/her place and with whom one is connected through the lifelong process of growth in *imago Dei*. Thus, the key of growth and flourishing of each human person here on Earth is her/his dignity. Her/his life experience contains in itself a great potential — to form the image of God in itself or to destroy it. The joys and the hopes, the sorrows and the anxieties in each human person have a potential to build or to destroy. We have been created as social and relational beings so that we might be of help to each other in Christ, as we labour to build up the image of God. If we exclude the other from our spiritual life, either God or our neighbour, we are not cooperating with the image of God in us, and therein lies the secret of the true human growth and flourishing: There is “a mystical fraternity, a contemplative fraternity. It is a fraternal love capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbour, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does”.<sup>50</sup>

48 Pocetto, A. T. Community, Communication, and Ecstasy, 3. Accessed July 11, 2014. <http://web1.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/Pocoettoecstasy.pdf>.

49 Murray, P. 2001. Recovering the Contemplative Dimension. Accessed July 11, 2014. <http://www.dominicans.ca/Documents/articles/murray1.html>.

50 Holy Father Francis, 2013. Apostolic Exhortation on The Proclamation of The Gospel in Today’s World. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 92. Accessed July 12, 2014. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

*Abstract*

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“THE ECSTASY OF ACTION AND LIFE”

This presentation focuses on a specific interpretation of ecstasy within the divine order of love and in relation to the wholeness of human life. It primarily utilises an integrative approach in whose centre are theological life and Christian humanism.

The purpose of this paper is to present that aspect of the contemplative ecstasy considered being the most important by St Francis of Sales and also named “the ecstasy of action and life” by the saint himself. This does not mean that the author wishes to deny the understanding of ecstasy as a mystical phenomenon and as a supernatural gift of the Divine mercy that pervades a human being without destroying him/her. The author wants to remain within the area of theological dimension of Christian life, while pointing out that an ecstasy, as a certain expression of the climax of one’s union and relationship with God, leads to the “ecstasy of action and life”.

KEYWORDS: Christian life, ecstasy, ecstatic love, mysticism, pseudo-ecstasies, social dimension, spirituality, theological dimension