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The Mystical Union in Sufism and Christian Mysticism: Inter-Experiential Reading of Hallaj's *Hulūl* and Eckhart's *Birth of God*

Mistična združitev v sufizmu in krščanski mistiki: medizkustveno branje Hallajevega Hulūla in Eckhartovega Rojstva Boga

Abstract: Mystical experience illustrates a fundamental aspect of human relations with the ultimate reality within the framework of religiosity. This article explores the mystical experiences of Hallaj and Meister Eckhart, both of whom came from different religious traditions. Employing a hermeneutic approach, this article attempts to read the experiences of both mystics by interpreting one with the other. Inevitably, although both mystics use different religious language and symbols, there is a strong resonance that allows us for inter-experiential reading of such mystical experiences. This article argues that mystical experience can be the strong basis of interreligious dialogue wherein although each mystical experience is personal and subjective in nature, there is something foundational that can be found as a pulse that is connected and can explain each other, rendering our interreligious understanding richer and more profound.

Keywords: Eckhart's mystical experience, fusion of mystical experiences, Hallaj's mystical experience, inter-experiential dialogue, interreligious dialogue

Izleček: Mistična izkušnja ponazarja temeljni vidik človekovega odnosa do najvišje resničnosti v okviru religioznosti. Ta članek raziskuje mistično izkušnjo Hallaja in Meistra Eckharta, ki sta izhajala iz različnih verskih tradicij. Z uporabo hermenevitičnega pristopa ta članek poskuša prebrati izkušnje obeh mistikov tako, da jih razlaga enega z drugim. Čeprav mistika uporabljata različen verski jezik in simbole, neizogibno obstaja močan odmev, ki nam omogoča medizkustveno branje takih mističnih izkušenj. Ta članek trdi, da je lahko mistična izkušnja močna podlaga medverskega dialoga, pri čemer – čeprav je vsaka mistična izkušnja osebne in subjektivne narave – obstaja nekaj temeljnega, kar je mogoče najti kot utrip, ki jih povezuje in jih lahko medsebojno razlaga, to pa bogati in pogloblja naše medversko razumevanje.

Ključne besede: Eckhartova mistična izkušnja, spoj mističnih izkušenj, Hallajevega mistična izkušnja, medizkustveni dialog, medverski dialog

Introduction

The spiritual currents of diverse religious traditions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and others, which often focus upon the relationship between the self and the ultimate reality, are called »mysticism« (Schimmel 2011, 4). The study of mysticism is often concentrated upon what the mystic experiences and what their experience looks like. Mystical experience seems to be something that goes beyond differences of institutionalized religions but is at times delineated in a specific religious language (Stace 1961, 42–44; Underhill 1912, 117).

Although mystical experience is at times described in such a specific religious language, it is not necessarily the same as religious one, for there is a difference between experience *per se* and interpretation thereof, which usually employs a religious framework (Stace 1961, 31–33). Mystical experience involves unitary consciousness wherein a mystic is immersed in such a deep sense of the unity of existence that in the mystic's mind there is no longer a distinction between subject and object (Gäb 2021, 235). Furthermore, mystical experience is nonspatial and nontemporal in nature, while religious one is structured in a certain doctrinal framework (Wainwright 1981, 1–2). Unlike spiritual experience that centres around the discovery of meaning and self-discovery, mystical experience is pertinent to a sense of the dissolution of the self because of a radically altered state of consciousness, epitomizing a specific idiosyncratic phenomenological experience (Gäb 2021, 234).

From a philosophical point of departure, several philosophers maintain that religious diversity vertically converges upon the same pole of esoteric expressions in religions (Schuon 2005, 55–59; Huxley 1947, 30–33; Nasr 1989, 69–70; Smith 2005, xi–xii), that is, mysticism (Stoddart 2007, 231–232). Such convergency is arguably fruitful for interreligious dialogue on the grounds that there is an equal footing wherein the adherents of different religions can have a dialogical conversation.

There has been a large initiative for interreligious dialogue particularly between Christianity and Islam, which is called *A Common Word*, which invites the two religious adherents to find the underlying principles of Islamic and Christian teachings that focus upon love for God and love



for fellow human beings (El-Ansary and Linnan 2010). Interreligious dialogue is pivotal for human understanding of differences and commonalities in conjunction with peaceful coexistence between fellow human beings. It can include many kinds, ranging from scriptures, theological doctrines, rituals and practices, ethics to experiences (Cheetham et al. 2011; Cornille 2013). In this respect, mystical experience can be the subject of interreligious dialogue.

In Sufism or Islamic mysticism,¹ there is a concept of union with God called *fanā* (self-annihilation), a mystical state wherein one has no longer felt that they and the entire cosmos exist as only God exists and is the existence itself (Schimmel 2011, 44–45; Chittick 2008, 43–45). Hallaj, one of the most controversial Sufis, expresses this kind of mystical state in a famous yet controversial utterance, »*Anā al-Ḥaqq*« (I am the ultimate truth). Such a mystical utterance led Hallaj to the gallows and has been a matter of debate among exoteric Muslim scholars, but it arguably reflects the entire system of Islamic mysticism itself (Nicholson 1923, 27–28).

In Christian mysticism, Meister Eckhart, one of the greatest Christian mystics, maintains that *unio mystica* can be attained once one has succeeded in doing *abgeschiedenheit* (the perfect detachment) (McGinn 1994, 12–13). Bernard McGinn (2001, 44–45) designates Eckhart's type of mysticism as the »mysticism of the ground«, referring to the mystical reality that there is no distinction between God's ground and the ground of the human soul, as Eckhart (2009, 109) explicitly asserts, »Here God's ground is my ground, and my ground is God's ground.« The outspoken remark of Eckhart is quite similar to that of Hallaj, both of whom seem to have conveyed their mystical experience as the union with God.

There have been some studies of both Hallaj and Eckhart. Nonetheless, the experiences of these two mystics are often perused in a separate way,

1 Broadly speaking, the terms Sufism and Islamic mysticism are loosely used interchangeably (Schimmel 2011, 3; Nicholson 2002, 6). However, there are indeed nuanced differences between these two. Islamic mysticism and Sufism both share a focus on mystical experience, thereby being connected in this regard, but Sufism has broader practices than just mystical experience, such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *taqarrub ila Allāh* (spiritual proximity to God), and other spiritual practices found in the Sufi order (*ṭarīqah*). Besides, Sufism also includes moral dimensions (*akhlāq*), which Islamic mysticism does not really address (al-Taftazani 1976, 17–18). In this vein, when we discuss mystical concepts in Islam, the terms Sufism and Islamic mysticism are interchangeable.



calling for inter-experiential perusal of both simultaneously. Hallaj was a controversial figure at the time and is still considered so due to his ecstatic utterances (*shatahāt*). Hallaj is regarded as the one who has spread the teaching of *ḥulūl* (divine indwelling) (Hidayat 2024; Kusuma 2021). Besides, some other Muslim scholars in later times, such as Ibn al-Jawzī (2009, 221–22) and Ibn Taymīyah (1995, 2:480) who were more textualists, condemn Hallaj as dangerous and accuse him of being a heretic and infidel since Hallaj's understanding of God is not compatible with what Islam really teaches. While several Sufis such as Ibn Khafif, Nūrī, and Shibli who were contemporaneous with Hallaj held the same belief as Hallaj (al-Hujwīrī 1911, 151; Mason 1999, 69–71), some more orthodox scholars, particularly *fuqahā'* (Muslim jurists), accused Hallaj of having propagated heterodoxy and blasphemy. On this basis, he was crucified in front of the mass, though it was more political than theological (Ramli 2013; Hodri 2015; Yaqin and Hadi 2022).

Although Eckhart did not face the same thing as Hallaj, he was summoned and tried before the bishop of Cologne due to some sections of his teachings and sermons which were deemed either heretical or dangerous (Schürmann 1978, 27–29; McGinn 2001, 14–15). Eckhart's conception of the indistinct union is rooted in his mystical understanding that God gives birth to His Word within the human soul (Kieckhefer 1978). In pursuit of divine union, Eckhart suggests that one should practise detachment (*gelassenheit*) from anything created in order that God grants Himself to such a person (Bruce Milem 2013). On this basis, not only does one's detachment from multiplicity bring about God within the soul, but it therefore leads one to break through God, that is, to the Ground of the Godhead, the silent oneness (Flasch 2015, 200; Charlton 2013, 50).²

There has been no specific study focusing upon Hallaj and Meister Eckhart, when in fact both were faced with accusation concerning their mystical teachings, in spite of the fact that Eckhart had died before the trial was done, and only twenty-eight articles from his writings count as either

2 There have also been several other studies that address mystics from different religious traditions in comparison, inter alia, between Eckhart and Rūmī (Ghazani and Uysal 2023; Hadi W. M. 2002; Zarrabi-Zadeh 2015), between Eckhart, Shankara, and Ibn 'Arabi (Shah-Kazemi 2006), and between Eckhart and Ibn Arabi (Almirzanan 2009; Sells 1994; Woods 2013; Royster 1995; Almond 2001).



dangerous or heretical (McGinn 2001, 17–19). In this article, I concentrate upon Hallaj's and Eckhart's mystical experiences as a reflective experiential dialogue between two mystics from different religious traditions. The focus upon such a subjective experience is of prime importance since even if it is very personal, it often illustrates a quite similar structure as to what two or more individuals experience. In short, this paper will contribute to putting forward inter-experiential hermeneutics and dialogue which puts much emphasis on experiences as living texts rather than on philosophical concepts and doctrines.

1 Research method

This study is a library research, involving searching, collecting, reading, understanding, and analysing textual sources pertinent to the matters that are discussed. The primary focus of this study is to expound and analyse the two mystics' experiences. To study a personal experience and juxtapose it with another experience calls for hermeneutics, or more precisely »inter-experiential hermeneutics«, wherein mystical experience, for our present context, is considered a »living text« which invites understanding and interpretation. The hermeneutical approach used in this study is philosophical hermeneutics of Hans Goerg Gadamer. In his philosophical view, understanding is the meeting of the reader's horizon and the text's horizon, that is to say, fusion of the two horizons takes place (Gadamer 2006, 305).

In conjunction with the perusal of Hallaj's and Eckhart's experiences, inter-experiential hermeneutics presupposes remarkable congruence through which interpretation and dialogue find their ground and therefore can take place. Such remarkable congruence is their rootedness in their respective religious traditions from which they were able to articulate what they had experienced. The mystical experiences of Hallaj and Eckhart indeed lie in their own horizons that have distinct symbolic expressions and different theological contexts, while my role is to interpret such experiences of those two mystics with each other. Nevertheless, reading Hallaj's and Eckhart's experiences at issue here leads me not only to fusion of horizons, that is, my horizon and those two mystics' horizons, but also to »fusion of experiences« wherein I interpret one mystic's experience with



the other's and vice versa. In this regard, I shall interpret Hallaj's experience of »*ḥulūl*« (divine indwelling) with Eckhart's experience of the birth of God in the human soul and vice versa. Put simply, fusion of experiences consists in an attempt to create a productive mystical dialogue between the experiences of those two mystics from different religions.

2 Hallaj's mystical experience

Hallaj is one of the most controversial Muslim mystics throughout the history of Sufism and Islamic thought (Bayat and Jamnia 1994, 14). In the town of Tur in the region of Bayda located in the southeastern Iran, Hallaj was born in 858 from Persian descent. Since his early age, Abū al-Mughīth ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj had commenced studying the Quran as well as commentary, grammar, and theology (Bayat and Jamnia 1994, 15). He was very enthusiastic about performing religious rituals. His spiritual masters were famous Sufis, inter alia Sahl al-Tustārī, 'Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, and Junayd al-Baghdādī (Massignon 1982, 69–79).

Hallaj is viewed as the epitome of the intoxicated Sufi who was drowned in the ocean of union.³ His spiritual concentration was only to be a sincere servant who was so obedient to God that he was careless of the repercussions, which was his execution in the gallows (Arberry 2008, 60) in 922 due to charges of heresy by virtue of his mystical experience, particularly his famous ecstatic utterance, »*Anā al-Ḥaqq*« (Ernst 1997, 70). In fact, the decision to execute Hallaj was based upon political pressure due to his potential political danger bolstered by the hatred of some Muslim jurists (*fuqahā'*) towards Hallaj (Ernst 1985, 102–110).

If you do not know Him, then know His manifestation. I am His manifestation, and I am the ultimate truth (*anā al-ḥaqq*) because I do not cease to be aware of the existence of the Truth. (Al-Hallaj 2009, 52; Massignon 2001, 107)

3 There were two types of Sufis in the Sufi school of Baghdad at the time, viz. the sober type and the intoxicated one. Junayd al-Baghdādī was emblematic of the former, whereas Hallaj was of the latter. The intoxicated type is exemplified by those Sufis who were typically drunken in their spiritual states and who expressed ecstatic utterances (*shatahāt*), which is in stark contrast to the sober type which emphasizes the control of the self (Picken 2021, 22; Ohlander 2021, 40–41; Yazaki 2015, 78–79).



The story of his execution has made him both praised and despised, and actually, it evokes comparison with the Christian account of the Crucifixion of which Hallaj himself was aware (Hallaj 2015, 105–106). It is worth noting that mystical experiences cannot be categorized as ordinary experiences. Although the Sufis themselves assert that such an experience is a gift from God, it still requires a personal effort from a seeker to undertake a spiritual journey. In the spiritual framework of Sufism, there are three processes of spiritual transformation, viz. *takhallī*, *taḥallī*, and *tajallī*. *Takhallī* is a process in which one seeks to empty and cleanse oneself as a stage of purification (*via purgativa*) from all things blameworthy so as to then experience *taḥallī* wherein one can adorn one's personality with praiseworthy characters (*via illuminativa*). Eventually, one can arrive at *tajallī* when one experiences spiritual unveiling and feels the *unio mystica* (*via unitiva*) with God (Nawawi 2008, 161–62; Schimmel 2011, 4).

Since his early age, Hallaj had been a person who was obedient in observing Islamic practices, both observing obligatory and supererogatory prayers, fasting, and other kinds of worship (Massignon 1982, 71). Hallaj performed the Hajj three times. His third Hajj in 902 lasted for two years and brought him to the realization of the truth (Mason 2007, 16). After this third Hajj, Hallaj experienced the disclosure of the veil of illusion that had been covering him. Therefore, Hallaj was able to behold the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*). At this moment of spiritual unveiling, Hallaj exclaimed »*Anā al-Ḥaqq*« in a state of extraordinary ecstasy (Massignon and Gardet 1986, 100; Mason 2007, 17). It is such an ecstatic utterance that led people to accuse him of being a heretic and infidel.

Such a mystical state ignited a passion in him to witness God's love for human by becoming a helpless victim like Jesus for the purification of his community. He was willing to be punished not only for the sins committed by every Muslim, but also for the sins of humankind. On the streets of Baghdad, in mosques, and in markets, Hallaj is said to have called out, »O Muslims, help me! Save me from God. O people! Kill me, for God has



made my blood *ḥalāl* for you, and I come willingly.«⁴ And Hallaj prayed to God, »Forgive them but punish me for their sins« (al-Hallaj 2009, 6–7).

Hallaj's mystical experience revolves around what is called *ḥulūl*.⁵ In this respect, *ḥulūl* is the infusion of one thing into another. One entity occupying another entity renders the so-called »mystical union«, and this mystical state is often labeled as *ḥulūl* in Hallaj's experience. The reason why it is called *ḥulūl* is that Hallaj formulates the two natures of God and of a human being (Massignon 1982a, 367).

According to Hallaj, God has two natures, viz. *lāhūt* (divine nature) and *nāsūt* (human nature) at once (Massignon 1994, 252), since such human nature of God was manifested in the creation of Adam (Schimmel 2011, 72). These two natures are also possessed by humans. In other words, humans not only possess *nāsūt*, but also possess *lāhūt*, because they were as a matter of fact created in God's image (Ibn Arabi 1946, 168). In addition, another ontological reason why human also possesses *lāhūt* is that God breathed His spirit into human as stated in the Quran.⁶

That God possesses the *nāsūt* nature in Himself shows that God is very near to human and even, as the Quran puts it, »nearer to him than even his jugular vein« (Q.S. Qaf [50]: 16). In addition, the *nāsūt* nature in God is that which allows God to be known by His creatures and is that which allows God's love to be felt by His servants so that His servants can also love Him. In addition, the *nāsūt* nature is an aspect whereby God reveals Himself to human so that human can obtain knowledge about God (Smith 2012, 36–37). In other words, the dialectic between the *lāhūt* and *nāsūt* natures of a human being and of God is the pivotal thing that allows *ḥulūl* in Hallaj's mystical experience.

4 Before his execution, Hallaj never wanted to change his beliefs in order to avoid the execution and be forgiven. In this case, Hallaj surrendered himself to God completely, doing self-sacrifice (Nicholson 2002, 32–36).

5 This word is an abstract noun (*maṣḍar*) derived from the basic word *ḥ-l-l* (*hall*), which means stopping, staying, descending, dissolution, incarnation, with the addition of the prefix *alif-mun* (*in*hall) which means melting or dissolving and union (Wehr 1976, 199–200). As a Sufi term, it suggests the divine indwelling in a human, and it is often understood as incarnation (Armstrong 2001, 76).

6 »When I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My Spirit...« (Q.S. Šād [38]: 72).



According to Hallaj, *ḥulūl* occurs when one has purified oneself intensely and consistently. Hallaj's spiritual purification technique begins with *zuhd* (asceticism) and *ṣabr* (patience), which made him detached from worldly matters. *Tawakkul*, or complete surrender to God, is an important practice that Hallaj underwent to let go of his ego and will (Mason 2007, 82–83). *Riyāḍah* (spiritual exercise) and *mujāhadah* (spiritual struggle) such as continuous fasting and including *khalwah* (spiritual retreat) that Hallaj consistently practised are techniques to empty the heart from everything other than God (Mason 2007, 7.16).

Hallaj also internalized the science of the heart (*ilm al-qulūb*) to know the secret movements of the spiritual heart because it is the epicentre of divine consciousness (Mason 2007, 83). In the end, Hallaj reaped the spiritual fruit after the long spiritual process as divine unveiling from which he experienced *shath* (ecstatic utterance) where there emerges an explosion of mystical consciousness that exceeds rational control.

Put simply, one must, generally speaking, go through spiritual stages by cleansing the heart (*tathīr al-qulūb*) and purifying the soul (*tazkiyat al-naḥs*) of worldly matters. This spiritual process aims to empty the self (the very soul) by which a servant becomes a vessel for God's spirit. It is spiritually possible to be a receptacle of God, so to speak, as soon as a person obliterates the *nāsūt* nature in himself and only leaves the *lāhūt* nature (Massignon 1982c, 40–41).

In other words, after one has cleansed oneself of one's own *nāsūt* nature and becomes annulled personality (*fanā' nāsūtīyah*) (Massignon 1982c, 48), all that remains is the *lāhūt* nature in them, and at this point one's awareness of everything other than God is replaced by awareness of God alone, leading one to the state of *fanā'* (self-annihilation). The *lāhūt* nature in them then meets the *nāsūt* nature of God. On this basis, human awareness of himself or herself is completely taken over by God. Put simply, *ḥulūl* is the total disappearance of human will in the will of God (Nasution 1995, 88–90). In this regard, Hallaj's mystical union might be confounded with mystical fusion. The latter refers to the collapse of the ego (*fanā'*) caused by an overwhelming encounter with the Numinous, while the former to a more stable and harmonious union.



I argue that such mystical fusion was indeed experienced by Hallaj when he uttered »*Anā al-Ḥaqq*«, illustrating that the self is unsettled inasmuch as it is gripped by the divine presence so that Hallaj's identification of himself was unstable, resulting in such an ecstatic utterance. This sort of state is a mystical fusion. That being said, Hallaj himself later arrived at a more stable mystical union in which this spiritual stage reveals harmonious unity because one can already identify oneself in a complete union. Therefore, in such a state, Hallaj then felt the mystical union as he expressed his following verse:

Your Spirit is mingling with my spirit
 Just as wine is mixing with pure water
 And when something touches You, it touches me
 Now »You« are »me« in everything. (Massignon 1982b, 41; al-Hallaj 1913, 134)

Hallaj experienced a state in which the union between him and God took place on the grounds that his existence was totally dissolved into God, highlighting that after attaining a specific spiritual stage, he had no longer seen himself as a separate being but as a part of God. This mystical union is marked by Hallaj's awareness of his integration with God which is different from the mystical fusion due to his loss of self-awareness. In everyday life, one feels separated from God because of one's ego and one's attachment to the worldly matters. Nevertheless, for Hallaj, mystical experience transcends the boundaries of human ego, and even the ego itself vanishes due to the all-encompassing presence of God. Just as the statement »*Anā al-Ḥaqq*« is suggestive of *tawḥīd* (God's oneness) instead of arrogance, the expression »You are me« evinces deep acknowledgment that one consciously affirms that one's individuality is nothing but God (Massignon 1982c, 48).

Hallaj neatly delineates deep insight about how the relationships between human and God should be. In Sufi tradition, the highest goal of the Sufi is to attain the close relationship with God until the duality between »You«



and »I« disappears.⁷ In such a spiritual journey, the ultimate goal is when a servant is completely immersed in God's love until there is nothing left but God, or until there is nothing left but »I« which is God alone.

I have become the One I love, and the One I love
has become me!
We are two spirits infused in a (single) body
And to see me is to see Him,
And to see Him is to see us. (Massignon 1982b, 42; al-Hallaj
1913, 134)

Two spirits, as delineated above, become one, as if God's spirit entered into Hallaj's, symbolizing the perfect harmony between Hallaj and *al-Haqq* (God). In this respect, Hallaj seems to have wanted to assert that he became a divine reflection, that is to say, he became a manifestation of divine attributes, showing perfect spiritual realization (cf. Massignon 1982c, 48–49). Put simply, such a verse is suggestive of the relationships between God and the servant as a mirror for each other, as is common in all mystical literature (Ernst 1985, 26). In spite of Hallaj's ecstatic utterance »*Anā al-Haqq*«, he never said that he is God or God becomes he. Put differently, Hallaj also puts emphasis on the distinction between God and him.

7 For Junayd al-Baghdādī, the distinction between »You« and »I« can disappear because one truly perceives and accepts God's will in every moment, which brings one to feel God's unity and majesty that permeates everything. The awareness of union is caused by the constant remembrance of God (*dhikr*) which then imprints such awareness wherein the recollecting one is no different from the object of one's recollection (Schimmel 2011, 58). Put differently, *dhikr* is the chief method to attain such spiritual indistinction. Ibn 'Aṣā'illāh al-Sakandārī (1984, 32) delineates four levels of *dhikr*, viz. *dhikr* with forgetfulness (*ghaflah*), with vigilance (*yaqāzah*), with complete awareness of God's presence (*huḍūr*), and the peak being with the state in which everything but that which is recollected (*al-madhkūr*) disappears, which is a state of self-annihilation. Al-Qushayrī (2007, 91) expounds three stages of self-annihilation. The first self-annihilation refers to the state in which one eradicates one's evil qualities and adorns oneself with divine ones. The second self-annihilation leads one to no longer dwell on the distinction between the previous two, between evil qualities and good ones, but to the complete contemplation of God. In other words, one no longer views the qualities separately. Although the ego has been drastically weakened, one who witnesses God is still in a duality between oneself as the subject and God as the object of one's witness. Only in the third self-annihilation does one feel the indistinction between oneself and God; there is no longer »You« and »I« since one is not even aware of the two that can be distinguished due to the disappearance of the structure of such distinction.



I am the Truth
 And the Truth is not me
 I am only one part of the Truth
 Distinguish me from the Truth. (al-Hallaj 2009, 16)

Indeed, Hallaj was not a quiet Sufi figure, but rather the opposite. He even questioned why Sufis should not engage with society, should withdraw from political involvement and should be patient in dealing with tyrannical rulers. He took the opposite position that the Sufi should involve ameliorating the morals of society, which is contrary to the position of Junayd al-Baghdādī and other Sufis. For Hallaj, the Sufi has the moral task of reforming society. Thus, he took off his Sufi robe (*khirqah*) and became a *wā'iz* (preacher) to admonish the laity in various places (Mason 2007, 7–8; Massignon 1994, 12; Hodri 2015, 148).

3 Eckhart's mystical experience

Meister Eckhart is a mystic, theologian, and philosopher whose mystical ideas, despite his being unjustly accused of heresy, have been considered influential and remarkable in the history of Christian mysticism (Fox 1983, 4; McGinn 2001, 1–2). Eckhart was born in Tambach near Gotha in Saxony, Germany, sometime before 1260 – his exact birth date is unknown – and died in 1328. He was a member of the Dominican Order and held an important position. He studied and taught at leading intellectual centres such as Cologne and Paris, and his thinking was heavily influenced by Aristotle, Neoplatonism, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. Eckhart was an important figure in the Middle Ages who played a role in the vernacularization of theology, bringing complex philosophical concepts into the laity through the use of German. He was an influential mystic, despite the fact that some of his sermons are considered either dangerous or heretical (McGinn 2001, 2–14; 1994, 9–10). Mystical experience of Eckhart is grounded in the intimate relationship between the human soul and God, epitomizing mystical union in the spiritual journey of the human being.

He has given birth to him [Jesus] in my soul. The Father gives birth to his Son without ceasing; and I say more: He gives birth not only



to me, His Son, but He gives birth to me as Himself and Himself as me and to me as His being and nature. (Eckhart 1981, 187)

Eckhart depicts his mystical experience as the birth of God's Word or Son within himself. In the Christian tradition, Jesus as the Word of God is the embodiment of divine wisdom and love. In this sense, the birth of God's Word within Eckhart's soul signifies that the human soul can be the place of a divine manifestation. Eckhart alludes to the Father giving birth to His Son eternally, without beginning or end, which, when related to human experience, refers to the fact that this kind of birth is a spiritual process that is continually taking place within the human soul (Charlton 2013, 55–56).

Furthermore, Eckhart not only explains the birth of the Word in himself but also asserts that God gave birth to Himself in Eckhart. Put simply, in Eckhart's mystical experience, the distinction between his soul and God becomes blurred, indicating that when the human soul is perfect, it can mystically be united with God, that is to say, such union is nothing but indistinction between God and human (McGinn 2001, 47). In this regard, the soul holds a pivotal role.

When the soul departs from the body, that is very painful, but when God departs from the soul, the pain is immeasurable. As the soul gives life to the body, so God gives life to the soul. As the soul flows into all members, so God flows into all the powers of the soul and suffuses them so that they overflow with goodness and love over all about them, so that all things become aware of Him. (Eckhart 2009, 187–188)

As for the existence of human and God, Eckhart asserts that not only is the existence of the former dependent upon the existence of the latter, but also the former is possible, and is only possible, by virtue of the existence of the latter. Further, Eckhart maintains that the human soul, something very close to God, is nothing other than God's being, implying that this divine indwelling is undeniable in human spirituality. Therefore, God is always present in the human soul (Kieckhefer 1978, 209), but many are unaware of it. To realize such mystical reality, one has to cut away everything.



According to Meister Eckhart, emptying oneself is crucial for God to be willing to enter the human soul. The effort to empty oneself is to release all human attachments and dependencies upon all worldly objects, fantasies, and desires. The soul can only receive another thing if it has emptied itself (Eckhart 1981, 220). Put differently, nothing can be realized in the human soul unless the person has detached their soul from all things.

I have often said ... that a man should be so free of all things and of all works, both interior and exterior, that he might become a place only for God in which God could work. [...] For if He finds a man so poor as this, then God performs his own work, and the man is in this way suffering God to work, and God is his own place to work in, and so God is his own worker in himself. (Eckhart 1981, 202)

Emptying oneself from everything is a human attempt to attain a state of detachment, which refers to letting go of everything altogether. For Eckhart, detachment, simply put, is a human effort that is centred upon the consistency to do everything only for God alone. Such a person is in the grip of the Good and acts according to the divine will since they have attained a sense of detachment (Almirzanah 2009, 198–201).

In other words, detachment is not an attempt to practise passive and contemplative asceticism whereby one withdraws from worldly activities, but rather practise active asceticism in the world, working with God and for God, not for anything else or personal gain (Schürmann 1978, 15), that is, living virtuously, which is called »living without why« by Eckhart (Connolly 2014, 198–199). For Eckhart, such detachment is not a sign of someone losing himself or herself, but rather that they achieve »the highest and best virtue« (Connolly 2014, 154).

In the eyes of Eckhart, detachment is not the final stage as there is still the next stage, viz. detachment from detachment. On this basis, when Eckhart attained the state of detachment, he then negated detachment itself, i.e. being detached from detachment (Flasch 2015, 44). Put differently, Eckhart not only observed detachment from everything and even from himself, but also detachment from such detachment. He simply no longer depended



on detachment. At this spiritual stage, Eckhart then experienced the birth of God in his soul, which he describes as follows:

As truly as the Father in his simple nature gives His Son birth naturally, so truly does He give him birth in the most inward part of the spirit, and that is the inner world. Here God's ground is my ground, and my ground is God's ground. Here I live from what is my own, as God lives from what is his own. (Eckhart 1981, 183)

In Eckhart's experience, the soul, which is the divine spark, is the locus in which God gives birth to the Word. Through this mystical birth process, human not only becomes the »Word of God«, but also experiences a mystical union with God, reflecting the spiritual realization of the human will and the divine will (Schürmann 1978, 22). It is significant to note that this birth discloses that what is born shares a likeness with that which gives birth, thereby the two being not completely different from each other (Mojsisch 2001, 77).

In his mystical experience, Eckhart places more emphasis on habitual union, which is diametrically opposed to ecstatic union. It is clear that Eckhart's active asceticism focuses upon a persistent awareness of God, rather than upon an overwhelming and temporary ecstatic awareness, which is characterized by a loss of self-identity (Kieckhefer 1978, 224). This habitual union is arguably predicated upon his experience of the birth of the Word in the soul, signifying the mystical awareness of his union with God in everyday life.

Eckhart (2009, 48) interprets the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42 differently from conventional interpretations. It is said that Jesus entered a citadel and was greeted by Martha. Martha's sister, Mary, then sat at Jesus' feet to listen to his words, while Martha was busy with her activity serving the guests. As is common in interpretation, Martha is considered a person who is negligent in spiritual life, in contrast to Mary who stopped her activities to listen to the Word of God. However, according to Eckhart, Martha's spiritual level is actually higher than Mary's, because the former does not leave worldly activities while still being aware of God's presence, which refers to habitual union, while the latter, Mary, was engrossed in her contemplation by withdrawing from her worldly



activity because she had not been able to reach the level of habitual union (Almirzanah 2009, 187–192).

In short, Eckhart's mystical experience took place in three stages. *Firstly*, Eckhart emptied his soul of everything, or what is called »detachment«. This self-emptying is crucial on the grounds that only then can the birth of God in the human soul be possible. *Secondly*, the birth of God occurred in the soul, which is a spiritual process, not a biological one. By virtue of this, the human soul embodies God, because God only wants to be alone in the human soul, without »our this and that«. *Thirdly*, Eckhart experienced union with God, illustrating a mystical union through a spiritual process in such a way that God's will takes over and indwells the human will. Thus, Eckhart partook in the divine nature due to such habitual union (Kertz 1959, 334–335).

Eckhart (2009, 77–78) describes his mystical experience of the birth of God in the soul with a precise metaphor. The human soul must first be a virgin in order to experience such spiritual birth. To be a virgin means to be empty of everything, of all images, and even of the image of God itself (Sells 1994, 137; Almirzanah 2009, 213). After becoming a virgin, the soul then becomes a wife who allows the birth of the Word of God within it. Ultimately, the human soul becomes the spiritual mother of God (Connolly 2014, 159–160). The spiritual journey, briefly speaking, begins with being a virgin and ends with being a spiritual mother.

4 Fusion of mystical experiences

Hallaj's mystical experience of the divine indwelling (*ḥulūl*) implies a mystical union between human and God, and so does Eckhart's mystical experience of the birth of God in the soul. These two mystics did have different experiences, that is, Hallaj's experience is more inclined to a sort of ecstatic union, whereas Eckhart's is that of habitual union. That being said, we can see a strong resonance in both experiences. These two mystics speak of their experience in the form of the mystical union between God and human, viz. through the birth of God in the soul by Eckhart which does resemble the divine indwelling (*ḥulūl*) in human by Hallaj. Therefore,



there seems to be a dialogical understanding that can mutually explain one experience with the other.

In Hallaj's experience, *ḥulūl* refers to the divine indwelling in human, which is a spiritual phenomenon, not a physical one. Based upon Eckhart's mystical experience, such indwelling is indeed the birth of God in the human soul. The human soul has the potential for such mystical birth since the soul, as Eckhart explains it, is nothing but God's being based upon the fact that by no means does human possess their own proper existence, let alone the soul (Kieckhefer 1978, 29). In this respect, the nearness of the human soul with God's being is that which makes *ḥulūl* possible in the spiritual process.

The life of Hallaj was inseparable from his religious practices. It is reported that Hallaj was very persistent in living a life of asceticism and observing supererogatory practices every day so as to purify the carnal soul (Massignon 1982c, 433). In Eckhart's view, such religious practices are crucial to cut away all things from the human soul and mind. It is important to highlight that only if the soul has been the true poverty, does the birth of God take place within it, as the emptiness is the condition whereby one can contain the divine (McGinn 2001, 117). In this regard, due to being free from all things, from duality, that is, from something to nothing, the soul becomes united with God (Eckhart 2009, 208).

In fact, the famous expression of Hallaj, which is his ecstatic utterance, »*Anā al-Ḥaqq*«, evinces that God takes over his awareness of his self, his presence, suggesting that the Word of God is manifest in and takes over Hallaj's awareness, so that he could not control his own words. For Hallaj was a »virgin«, devoid of all things, and God could be taking over his very self. Indeed, Hallaj then became a spiritual mother through whom God's words were born during his ecstatic state.

Hallaj's surrender to execution is a symbol of his self-sacrifice before God. He fully accepted God's will because he let go of his own will and willed according to God's will, that is, Hallaj's ground is God's ground. In other words, Hallaj's suffering and martyrdom were the consequences of his mystical union with the divine. In this regard, Hallaj's surrender is arguably Eckhart's »living without why«, which is the principle that is not based



upon any search except in harmony with God's own will. That is to say, living without why is to dedicate life in God (Almirzanah 2009, 203–209).

Eckhart's experience that God was born in his soul is closely related to the two human natures, *lāhūt* and *nāsūt*. For human has the *lāhūt* nature in himself or herself, human can give birth to the Word or God in the soul, referring to the spiritual birth and mystical union, not to biological and physical processes. Such mystical birth is possible because God also has two natures, *lāhūt* and *nāsūt*. It is God's *nāsūt* nature that can »incarnate« into human.

While God's *nāsūt* nature meets Eckhart's *lāhūt* nature, God's *lāhūt* nature remains transcendent, unknown, and unmixed – what Eckhart calls the Godhead, whose being is darkness and is concealed in nature, and thus unknown (McGinn 2001, 170). Be that as it may, the condition that allows the birth of God in the soul is detachment, viz. self-purification (*tazkiyat al-naḥs*) and cleansing of the heart (*taḥīr al-qulūb*). If Eckhart had still been trapped in his own *nāsūt* nature, namely the carnal soul, he would not possibly have given birth to God's *nāsūt* nature in himself. Therefore, the annihilation (*fanā'*) of Eckhart's *nāsūt* nature, and leaving only the *lāhūt* nature, is the spiritual key to the birth of God in his soul.

God's presence in Eckhart which refers to union between him and God, in other words, indistinction between Eckhart's being and God's being, evinces the principle of *tawḥīd* held by Hallaj, that is, there is no duality between »You« and »I« in the self. In this respect, to see Eckhart is to see God, and to see God is to see both of them on the grounds that »two spirits were infused in a single body« (al-Hallaj 1913, 134). Thus, Eckhart's will is nothing but God's will manifested in Eckhart's being, exemplifying a perfect manifestation of divine attributes (*al-ṣifāt al-ilāhīyah*).

The soul, which is the divine spark, is the vessel wherein the *lāhūt* nature could be born in Eckhart. When such a state took place, Eckhart became a divine reflection. It is worth nothing that »reflection« cannot necessarily be likened to that which reflects. If it is to be portrayed through Hallaj's mystical expression, Eckhart might be saying, »*Anā al-Ḥaqq*«, but at the same time he was surely not *al-Ḥaqq*, since the two are not



ontologically the same. Hence, Hallaj would say, »Distinguish Eckhart from the Truth (*al-Haqq*)« (al-Hallaj 2009, 16).

Though mystical experience is inevitably subjective, i.e. referring to what an individual feels and experiences, it evinces the same pulse of such individual experiences in the adherents of different religions (Mitias 2021, 102), as Hallaj's and Eckhart's experiences illustrate. That is to say, examining a subjective experience of the ultimate truth helps unravel the constraints of theological doctrines. While the expressions of religiosity are commonly confined to theological doctrines, mystical experience which is abundantly imbued with such doctrines often transcends them and in essence seems to hold the same ground (Mitias 2021; Bahri 2021), considering that the mystics in different traditions often delineate what they experience in a quite similar symbolic language (Underhill 1912, 153–156; Keller 1978). Put differently, even though it is a subjective experience of each mystic, such experience seems to reveal something intersubjective and even shows peculiarity that does not fall prisoner to theological boundaries.

In Muslim and Christian contexts, Hallaj and Eckhart describe their experiences as an indistinct union with God or the ultimate truth. Investigating such individual yet peculiar experiences as an experiential dialogue leads us to seemingly universal aspects that cannot be constrained by religious doctrines. This study of experiential dialogue can foster interreligious dialogue in a more personal and deeper level rather than in a rigid theological one, since the dialogue on mystical experience proffers, instead of dogmatic differences, a deeper perspective that highlights spiritual unity and profundity.

Conclusion

It is inevitable that the mystical experiences of Hallaj and Eckhart have a profound resonance. Even though they clearly differ in their use of symbolism and in their theological point of departure, both emphasize the ascetic life and the spiritual effort to empty oneself of worldly attachments as the starting point for attaining mystical experience. Eckhart talks about the birth of God in his soul, while Hallaj speaks of the divine indwelling



(*ḥulūl*) within himself, both of which refer to the mystical union with the ultimate reality.

Despite the deep resonance of both mystical experiences, Hallaj and Eckhart stand upon different types of experience. On the one hand, the contour of Hallaj's experience is an ecstatic union that shows divine intoxication, in order that he expresses ecstatic utterances. On the other hand, Eckhart emphasizes a more calm and sober experience, viz. habitual union, so that Eckhart's emotions were not as overwhelming and intoxicating as Hallaj's.

The resonance and difference of those two mystics' experiences notwithstanding, mystical experience can, properly speaking, be the subject of interreligious dialogue to understand each other's spiritual pulse. Furthermore, understanding the experience of a mystic from the viewpoint of another religious tradition can enrich one's understanding of his or her own religion. In other words, interreligious hermeneutics can be operative in inter-experiential hermeneutics, particularly mystical experience, which is often viewed as the main pulse in almost all religious traditions.

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