

Nothingness in Carmelite Spirituality, Royal Yoga and Zen: A Common or Separate Path to Spiritual Perfection?

Nicość w duchowości karmelitańskiej, jodze królewskiej oraz zen.
Wspólna czy oddzielna droga?

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Abstract: The article addresses whether Christians can employ classical yoga or Zen-Buddhism meditation techniques to attain Christian perfection by invoking the spiritual doctrines of the Carmelite saints John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesus, with particular emphasis on John of the Cross's concept of 'nothingness'. It investigates the interpretation of this term within these three traditions to ascertain if it is understood similarly. The findings indicate that it is not. The sole commonality among these traditions is the subjective experience of nothingness or emptiness. However, there is no deeper resemblance, as yoga or Zen practices also imply an objective nothingness in faculties, which contradicts the teachings of John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesus. The article further analyzes the statements of proponents who assert the proximity of these doctrines to determine whether they properly comprehend the teachings of John and Teresa. The conclusion drawn is that, considering the ultimate goals of each tradition, it is not feasible to invoke Carmelite spirituality to justify the use of yoga or Zen techniques in the pursuit of Christian perfection.

Keywords: meditation, emptiness, Ultimate Reality, passivity, contemplation

Abstrakt: Artykuł rozważa kwestię możliwości stosowania technik jogi klasycznej lub zen przez chrześcijan w celu osiągnięcia chrześcijańskiej doskonałości, powołując się na duchową doktrynę świętych karmelitańskich: Teresy od Jezusa a szczególnie Jana od Krzyża mówiącego o nicości.

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Autor artykułu przedstawia rozumienie pojęcia nicości w trzech omawianych szkołach, sprawdzając, czy za każdym razem mówią one o tym samym. Wniosek, do jakiego dochodzi, brzmi, że rozumienia te się nie pokrywają. Okazuje się, że jedynym wspólnym elementem tych szkół w omawianej kwestii jest subiektywne odczuwanie nicości/pustki. Innych podobieństw nie ma. Jest to spowodowane tym, że w jodze oraz zen jest mowa o obiektywnej pustce we władzach, którą należy osiągnąć, czemu przeciwni są święci karmelitańscy. Autor stawia sobie pytanie, czy teza zwolenników podobieństwa tych trzech doktryn, jest oparta na poprawnym zrozumieniu nauczania świętych Jana i Teresy. Wniosek — do jakiego dochodzi, zwracając uwagę na cel, który chce się osiągnąć w każdej z tych szkół — jest taki, że nie można się powoływać na doktrynę świętych Karmelu, aby usprawiedliwić stosowanie przez chrześcijan technik medytacyjnych (czy to jogi klasycznej, czy to zen), aby osiągnąć doskonałość chrześcijańską.

Słowa kluczowe: medytacja, pustka, Rzeczywistość Ostateczna, bierność, kontemplacja

Introduction

The convergence of the spiritual paths of the eponymous schools of spirituality is the subject of considerable debate. This discourse encompasses similarities, usefulness and applicability of meditation techniques, such as royal yoga or Zen, within Christian contexts.² Additionally, the discussion extends to the resemblance of the mystical experiences in the aforementioned spiritual traditions. Proponents exist on both sides of the debate, with some advocating for the exclusivity of these spiritual paths, while others, including Christian and Hindu adherents, support their complementarity or even similarity.³ Certain Christians adopt these meditation techniques to achieve Christian spiritual perfection,⁴ in which they emulate Christian clergymen like Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle SJ or Bede

² Royal yoga (Raja Yoga), attributed to Patanjali who likely lived around the 1st century BC, is recognized as a foundational system within Hindu philosophy. Conversely, Zen Buddhism emerged in the 12th century Japan within the Mahayana tradition.

³ W. Stinissen OCD, *Ani joga, ani zen. Chrześcijańska medytacja głębi*, trans. Justyna Iwaszkiewicz, Poznań 2000, pp. 18–19; K. Jakubczak, *Pozorne i rzeczywiste podstawy wspólnoty chrześcijańsko-buddyjskiej*, in: *Benares a Jerozolima. Przemysław chrześcijaństwo w kategoriach hinduizmu i buddyzmu*, red. K.J. Pawłowski, Kraków 2007, pp. 235–237; C.H. Choi, *A Comparative Study of the Spirituality of St. John of the Cross and Dogen's Zen Buddhism*, doctoral dissertation, Faculty of Divinity, New College, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh 2001, <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/19625> [accessed: 1.2.2022], pp. iii, 209, 350, K.J. Pawłowski, *Wąska ścieżka prawdy. Rozważania na podstawie filozofii jogi klasycznej oraz nauk św. Jana od Krzyża*, Kraków 1996; A.M. Schlüter Rodés, *Las religiones orientales: zenbudismo y paz*, in: *Seminario de investigación para la paz. La paz es una cultura*, ed. L. López Yarto, Zaragoza 2001, p. 239; S. Siddheswarananda, *Hindu Thought and Carmelite Mysticism*, Delhi 1998.

⁴ A.M. Schlüter Rodés, *Zendo Betania. Donde convergen zen y fe cristiana*, Bilbao 2016; R. Puglisi, C. Carini, *Monjas y sacerdotes católicos como maestros zen. Historia de la escuela Zendo Betania*, 'Revista Brasileira de História das Religiões' 29 (2017) 10, pp. 217–236.

Griffiths OSB.⁵ Conversely, some individuals, having attained the state of supreme yogic mystical experience, return to Christianity, cautioning against these Eastern practices as potentially diverging from Christian goals.⁶

Undoubtedly, there are elements that broadly connect Christianity with the aforementioned Eastern spiritual traditions. However, this comparison does not focus on those commonalities—such as moral perfection, asceticism, meditation, the unknowability of the Ultimate Reality and mystical experience—since they are present in all these traditions. Proponents of integrating royal yoga or Zen techniques into Christian practice often invoke the spiritual doctrines of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Jesus.⁷ Hence, it becomes pertinent to examine whether the doctrines of these Carmelite saints genuinely support such integration.

The primary element uniting the supporters of the doctrinal or practical closeness of Carmelite spirituality and yoga or Zen is often the concept of nothingness or emptiness. Therefore, this article aims to compare the understanding of this term across these traditions. The second reason for focusing on this term is highlighted by Federico Ruiz, one of most esteemed commentators on John of the Cross, who notes that understanding this concept is one of the greatest challenges in interpreting the saint's writings and is crucial for properly grasping his doctrine. This comparison will allow us to address the following questions, 'Is it justified to invoke the Carmelite doctrine to practice yoga or Zen meditation?' and 'Is the goal pursued by Carmelite spirituality concurrent with the goals of these traditions?' In other words, do proponents of the closeness between Carmelite spirituality and yoga or Zen interpret the Carmelite doctrine accurately? The aim of these analyses is to find answers to these questions. These analyses are largely philosophical in nature, as these traditions differ primarily in their metaphysical, epistemological, and anthropological concepts.

What we mean by mysticism

Mysticism, or a mystical experience, is typically understood as both an encounter with and a realization of the Ultimate Reality. Therefore, in a broad sense,

⁵ 'Al principio cristianismo y zen eran como dos paralelas, es decir, yo seguía fiel al cristianismo, pero en el zen seguía las instrucciones de los maestros. Sin embargo, con el tiempo estas dos líneas se convirtieron sin ningún tipo de reflexiones teóricas en una sola; simplemente así ocurrió. Para mí al menos no existe ninguna contradicción, me crean o no'; A.M. Schlüter Rodés, *Zendo Betania...*, p. 22.

⁶ J.M. Verlinde, *Zakazany owoc. Z aśramu do klasztoru*, Kraków 1999; W. Stinissen, *Ani joga...*, p. 19.

⁷ For example: A.M. Schlüter Rodés, *Zendo Betania...*, p. 21.

a mystical experience also encompasses the practices that lead to it.⁸ Hence, in this analysis, meditation is considered a means leading to a mystical experience. The nature of a mystical experience is interpreted differently across various doctrines. Generally, it is characterized by direct contact with the Ultimate Reality and the passivity of the experiencing subject. While it can sometimes occur suddenly as a mystical phenomenon, it is usually experienced over a specific period. Moreover, this experience is marked by the absolute novelty of the mystically apprehended content and its profound impact on the individual's life. A distinction can be made between a mystical phenomenon—such as an ecstatic or peak experience (ecstasy, *samadhi*, *satori*, visions, auditory revelations)—and contemplation, which is a more sustained and intense mystical experience.⁹

Areas of the emergence of the term ‘nothingness’

The key consideration is recognizing that when discussing ‘nothingness’ within the mentioned spiritual traditions, the masters of spirituality identify it in different contexts, assigning various meanings to it. They do not always aim for precise definitions. In view of the above, it is necessary to specify the following spheres where this term is applied:

1. **Experiential Sphere:** Mystics refer to a state where individuals have the impression of experiencing emptiness. This is a subjective state—characterized by feelings of confusion, emotional burnout, or darkness. This emptiness can be experienced on an emotional, intellectual, or volitional level, either collectively or separately.
2. **Objective ‘Object’ of Meditation:** In yoga and Zen, meditation can be divided into two stages: objective meditation and non-objective meditation. In the second stage the object of meditation is systematically removed. Thus, emptiness or nothingness becomes the objective ‘content’ on which the faculties focus.
3. **Transcendence of Ultimate Reality:** A characteristic of these spiritual traditions is the recognition that the Ultimate Reality cannot be apprehended through discursive cognition, but rather through a direct mystical experience. This highlights the transcendence of this Reality concerning conceptualization, leaving the set of the notions adequate to its essence void.
4. **Ultimate Reality as Nothingness:** The Ultimate Reality itself, or the very object of a mystical experience, is sometimes defined as nothingness

⁸ Cf. by K. Albert, *Wprowadzenie do filozoficznej mistyki*, tłum. J. Marzęcki, Kęty 2002, pp. 22–23.

⁹ Cf. R.S. Niziński, *Doświadczenie mistyczne w doktrynie Świętego Jana od Krzyża. Analiza filozoficzna*, Poznań 2021, p. 174 f.

(emptiness). For Zen Buddhists, this reality lacks essence, meaning it is devoid of definable features.

5. Semantic Expression: Consequently, the content of such an experience can only be conveyed through silence. The inability to use words to express the content of a mystical experience is another manifestation of the use of the term 'nothingness', this time on a semantic level.

This preliminary overview necessitates specific clarifications within each of the compared schools. The contexts mentioned here are intended to indicate the areas that will be analyzed in detail.

I. Nothingness in Royal Yoga and Zen

A nut as a metaphor for the true and false 'I'

Royal yoga and Zen, when contrasted with Carmelite spirituality, exhibit significant differences, particularly in their anthropological perspectives. A characteristic feature of the aforementioned Eastern spiritual traditions is the distinction between the empirical 'I' and the real/essential 'I'. The empirical 'I', also referred to as the psychic 'I', is the self that we currently experience. This self endures suffering, transience and the necessity of reincarnation. It is considered the apparent 'I', and through ignorance, individuals mistakenly identify this empirical self as their true essence.¹⁰ Conversely, the true 'I' is the essential self, which remains unknown and unexperienced due to being obscured by the empirical 'I'.¹¹

This true 'I', which represents our authentic identity, is characterized as eternal, passive, always happy seer. As a manifestation of consciousness, it acts as a subject, although it lacks the personal attributes, commonly associated with personhood, such as thought, will, and love. Hence, it is frequently referred to as impersonal besides being a subjective consciousness. The seer is a transmental state, one that transcends ordinary mental processes. The lexicon available to us is insufficient to precisely define the nature of this seer.¹²

¹⁰ I. Whicher, *The mind (citta): its nature, structure and functioning in classical yoga* (2), 'Nagoya Studies in Indian Culture and Buddhism: Sambhasa' 19 (1998), p. 43; id., *Unifying knowledge of prakriti in Yoga: samadhi-with-seed*, 'Nagoya Studies in Indian Culture and Buddhism: Sambhasa' 28 (2010), pp. 27–28, 50; K.J. Pawłowski, *Wąska ścieżka...*, p. 59; T. Dean, *Masao Abe on Zen and Western Thought*, 'The Eastern Buddhist' 23 (Spring 1990) 1, pp. 80–82.

¹¹ I. Whicher, *The mind (citta): its nature, structure and functioning in classical yoga* (1), 'Nagoya Studies in Indian Culture and Buddhism: Sambhasa' 18 (1997), p. 39; J. Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce e lo zen buddismo. Un confronto nella problematica dello svuotamento interiore*, Roma 1982, pp. 118–119.

¹² I. Whicher, *The mind...* (2), p. 80; id., *Unifying knowledge...*, p. 2; K.J. Pawłowski, *Wąska ścieżka...*, p. 94; id., *Dyskurs i asceza. Kształtowanie człowieczeństwa w kontekście mistyki filo-*

The relationship between these two types of ‘I’ is reflected in the metaphor of a nut. The empirical ‘I’ is analogous to the shell that encases the nut, while the seed within represents the true ‘I’. The real ‘I’ only reveals itself when the empirical, apparent ‘I’ ceases to exist.¹³

A fully realized yoga or Zen mystic is one who has, at least once, reached a state in which the empirical ‘I’ has been temporarily suspended during meditation. Then, the real ‘I’ is revealed, liberated from the constraints of the psyche.¹⁴ Ignorance is thereby overcome, and the knowledge is gained that only the true ‘I’ exists, while the empirical ‘I’ is merely an illusion. This is a state of liberation.¹⁵ In royal yoga, this state is referred to as *asamprajnata samadhi*, while in Zen Buddhism it is known as *satori*. Both of these spiritual traditions share the ultimate goal of attaining true knowledge of one’s subjective identity.

Upon reaching the highest mystical state, the necessity of reincarnation is interrupted.¹⁶ When the mystical state subsides, the empirical ‘I’ reemerges, yet the knowledge acquired during the mystical experience remains. Henceforth, although the empirical ‘I’ continues to be active as long as the body is alive, the individual begins to live with an entirely different perspective. This shift in perspective profoundly alters one’s approach to suffering, the value of material and immaterial goods, and one’s own identity. The individual now comprehends everything through the lens of the mystical experience.¹⁷

zoficznej, Kraków 2007, p. 173; J.M. Verlinde, *Zakazany owoc...*, pp. 69–70; Patańdzali, Wjasa, *Jogasutry przypisywane Patańdzalemu i Jogabhaszja, czyli komentarz do Jogasutr przypisywany Wjasie*, tłum. L. Cyboran, Warszawa 2014, pp. 153, 159.

¹³ J. Mamić, *San Giovanni...*, p. 132.

¹⁴ G.J. Larson, *Classical Samkhya: An Interpretation of Its History and Meaning*, London 1998, p. 13; J.M. Verlinde, *Zakazany owoc...*, p. 62; J. Mamić, *San Giovanni...*, pp. 189–190, C.H. Choi, *A Comparative Study...*, p. 202.

¹⁵ K.J. Pawłowski, *Wąska ścieżka...*, p. 91; W. Johnston, *The Notion of Man in Zen*, ‘Studia Missionalia’ 19 (1970), p. 98.

¹⁶ I. Whicher, *The mind... (I)*, p. 49.

¹⁷ This is how Bryant describes the internal state achieved in *asamprajnata samadhi*, ‘The *vrttis* of the mind exist simply as potential, and the *samskaras*, the subconscious imprints that trigger thoughts, memories and *karma*, are also latent. Since the mind is now empty of all thoughts, the awareness of *purusha* now no longer has any object whatsoever to be aware of, and thus, for the first time, can only become self-aware (loosely speaking). The final goal of Yoga has been attained. Another way of considering this is that awareness is eternal, it cannot ever cease being aware. That being the case, the self’s only options are of what it is aware of: it can be object aware, or (again, loosely speaking) subject aware—that is, aware of entities or objects other than itself, or exclusively aware of itself as awareness with no reference to any other entity’; Edwin Bryant, *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, in: *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. A peer-reviewed academic resource*, <https://iep.utm.edu/yoga/#H7> [accessed: 5.1.2022]; Patańdzali, Wjasa, *Jogasutry...*, p. 8.

Non-objective or contentless meditation

A common feature of royal yoga and Zen, aside from the practice of virtues and asceticism, is the gradual extinguishing of psychic activity during meditation until it is temporarily suspended.¹⁸ This state is achieved by focusing on increasingly subtle objects of meditation, culminating in the cessation of conscious activity. When the perception of time and space vanishes, the desired state of a seer is attained. This stage is achieved through non-objective (contentless) meditation, wherein nothing within the human faculties sustains their activity.¹⁹ Consequently, the psychic 'I' temporarily disappears, and the real 'I' is revealed—liberated from the obscuring psychic acts. Therefore, a mystical experience is not the unification of our current self-conception with the Ultimate Reality. Instead, it involves discarding the false 'I' so that the true one, which is identical with the Ultimate Reality, remains uncovered and freed. Both techniques emphasize enstasis, or delving into one's own self to discover one's true identity.²⁰

The inside of a nut

At this juncture, we encounter the fundamental difference between royal yoga and Zen Buddhism, particularly concerning the metaphysical interpretation of the nature of the true 'I', or seer. For a yogi, the real 'I' the seer—is being itself, characterized by substantial consciousness, known as *the atman*. In contrast, for a Zen Buddhist, the true 'I' is also a seer, but is understood as a non-substantial reality,

¹⁸ Patanjali writes, 'Yoga is the inhibition of the modifications of the mind' (Yoga Sutras I.2). Patanjali adds, 'Then the Seer is established in his own essential and fundamental nature' (Yoga Sutras I.2–3); I.K. Taimni, *The Science of Yoga: The Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali in Sanskrit with Transliteration in Roman, Translation and Commentary in English*, Adyar, Chennai, India–Wheaton, IL, USA 2001, pp. 12, 16; J.M. Verlinde, *Zakazany owoc...*, p. 168; K.J. Pawłowski, *Wąska ścieżka...*, p. 54 f.

¹⁹ Patanjali states, 'The remnant impression left in the mind on the dropping of the *Pratyaya* after previous practice is the other (*Asamprajnata Samadhi*)' (Yoga Sutras I.18) (I.K. Taimni, *The Science of Yoga...*, p. 44). Whicher (*Unifying knowledge...*, p. 1) explains, 'The last and fifth one—*asamprajnata-samadhi*—is "seedless". It is enstatic and without the object and thus transcending all mental content [...] trans-cognitive ecstasy'; K.J. Pawłowski, *Wąska ścieżka...*, p. 61; T. Dean, *Masao Abe...*, pp. 83–85; Kwong-roshi states, 'In zazen, samadhi eventually leads to shikantaza—which means *just sitting*. *Shikantaza* is objectless meditation, in which we don't concentrate on any object or goal, or expect any gain. We let go of thoughts. We are just sitting'; Jakusho Kwong-roshi, *Emptying into Spaciousness Learn to take the backward step that turns your light inward, illuminating your true self*, 'Tricycle. The Buddhist Review', January 20, 2022, <https://tricycle.org/article/mind-sky-jakusho-kwong/> [accessed: 15.3.2023].

²⁰ I. Whicher, *The Mind... (I)*, p. 49; J. Mamić, *San Giovanni...*, pp. 62, 136 f., 176; T. Dean, *Masao Abe*, pp. 88–89.

referred to as *the anatman*, where ‘an’ denotes a negation to distinguish it from the Hindu concept of *the atman*. If *the anatman* is a non-substantial reality, it is devoid of essence, internally undifferentiated, and featureless, thus described as empty (*sunyata*).²¹ This non-substantial reality is the Ultimate Reality—the Absolute, which is singular. Before experiencing *satori*, while living in an illusion, the world appears as a multiplicity of substantial entities, including the empirical ‘I’. However, one who has experienced *satori* understands, upon returning to the everyday state, that the perceived substantiality and multiplicity of all things, are illusory. The Ultimate Reality is, in fact, an undifferentiated, homogeneous, passive, eternal non-substantial seer, a supercosmic, transcendental mind.²²

Patanjali’s yoga does not exclude the existence of multiple real, substantial ‘I’s’. According to this tradition, there are as many essential ‘I’s’ as there are individuals. Depending on the interpretation, these ‘I’s’ may be viewed as completely independent entities or avatars of a single Ultimate Reality—*Brahman*.²³

The real ‘I’ is only accessible through a mystical experience

Practitioners of yoga and Zen commonly believe that the true ‘I’ transcends intellectual thoughts. This belief stems from the notion that our intellect can only comprehend reality that is unrelated to the true ‘I’. The real ‘I’, or the Ultimate Reality, does not fall within the category of an object, and therefore, cannot be objectified or become the content of thoughts. Thus, the real ‘I’ eludes logical

²¹ Patañdzali, *Wjasa, Jogasutry...*, pp. 5, 18; T. Dean, *Masao Abe...*, pp. 92–93; J. Mamić, *San Giovanni...*, p. 136.

²² Dean (*Masao Abe*, p. 88) writes, ‘Epistemologically, the principle of Nothingness, which is non-dually identical with the “true Self”, serves as the source of subject-object or ego-consciousness and hence of the world of differentiated things, and as the basis for overcoming these distinctions in the direct realization of wondrous Being’. Also *ibid.*, pp. 90–91; Sokei-an states, ‘One day I wiped out all notions from my mind. I gave up all desire. I discarded all the worlds with which I thought and stayed in quietude. I felt a little queer—as if I were being carried into something, or as if I were touching some power unknown to me. [...] I entered. I lost the boundary of my physical body. I had my skin, of course, but I felt I was standing in the center of the cosmos. I spoke, by my words had lost their meaning. I saw people coming towards me, but all were the same man. All were myself! I had never known this world. I had believed that I was created, but now I must change my opinion: I was never created; I was the cosmos; no individual Mr. Sasaki existed’; Sokei-an, *Sokei-an Says, ‘Zen Notes’* 1 (1954) 5, http://www.firstzen.org/ZenNotes/1954/1954-05_Vol_01_No_05_May_1954.pdf [accessed: 8.2.2023]; cf. D.T. Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind, The Significance of the Sutra of Hui-Neng (Wei-Lang)*, London 1949, p. 23.

²³ Patanjali writes, ‘The modifications of the mind are always known to its lord on account of the changelessness of the Purusa’ (*Yoga Sutras* IV, 18) (I.K. Taimni, *The Science of Yoga...*, p. 364); K.T. Behanan, *Yoga: Its Scientific Basis*, Dover 2002, pp. 56–58; I. Whicher, *The mind...* (2), p. 57; E. Bryant, *Yoga Sutras...*

understanding. This non-logical nature of the true 'I' is particularly emphasized in Zen Buddhism.²⁴ As a result, the real 'I' can only be known through mystical experience, otherwise it remains unknowable. This perspective can be described as a form of agnosticism concerning the Ultimate Reality.

Another effect of the unknowability of the Ultimate Reality through intellectual thoughts is the inexpressibility of the content of a mystical experience. In Zen Buddhism, this is manifested in the conviction that one can only remain silent about the experienced Ultimate Reality.²⁵ Consequently, this results in a kind of nothingness or emptiness in the semantic domain when describing the Ultimate Reality. If any expression is attempted, it is typically conveyed through negative terms, such as undifferentiated, invariant, without parts, and similar descriptors.

II Nothingness in Carmelite spirituality

Spousal Carmelite mysticism

Regarding Carmelite mysticism the author refers specifically to the doctrines of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Jesus. Both mystics represent the anthropology that diverges fundamentally from the perspectives discussed above. They conceive of humanity as relational beings engaged in dynamic communion with the transcendent, personal God, who is love. This relational dynamism stems from the belief that humans are incomplete beings²⁶ who achieve their fullness only through union with God after death. However, a semblance of this completeness can be attained during earthly life through mystical union. This transformative union, termed 'union transforming by love', involves the reconfiguration of human spiritual faculties to partake in the divine. This state is reached when God,

²⁴ I. Whicher, *Unifying knowledge...*, pp. 77–78; K.J. Pawłowski, *Wąska ścieżka...*, p. 53; T. Dean, *Masao Abe...*, p. 81; S. Morris, *Beyond Christianity: Transcendentalism and Zen*, 'The Eastern Buddhist' 24 (1991) 2, p. 57; D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, New York 1961, pp. 23–24.

²⁵ Cf. J. Mamić, *San Giovanni...*, pp. 171–172.

²⁶ John of the Cross explains, 'These caverns are the soul's faculties: memory, intellect, and will. They are as deep as the boundless goods of which they are capable since anything less than the infinite fails to fill them'; John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, in: *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, transl. by K. Kavanaugh OCD, O. Rodriguez OCD, Washington, D.C. 1991, III.18. Look also *ibid.*, III.69; Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, in: *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, transl. by K. Kavanaugh OCD, O. Rodriguez OCD, Washington, D.C. 1980, 6,11,5; C. Garcia, *Antropologia sanjuanista*, in: *Diccionario de san Juan de la Cruz*, ed. E. Pacho, Burgos 2000, pp. 140–141.

through the individual's consent, becomes the transformative force behind human knowledge, memory and love.²⁷

Thus, this discussion does not pertain to the disappearance of the empirical 'I', but rather to its transformation, enrichment and strengthening.²⁸ The condition for this mystical union involves a form of equivalence with God—the Ultimate Reality—as union can only occur with an entity that equal to God as the Absolute. Humanity is to become God not in the ontic sense, but through the transformation of one's actions, with a particular emphasis on the equality of love.²⁹

Here, we can observe a significant difference in comparison to yoga and Zen, which seek true knowledge and their essential 'I'. Neither John nor Teresa propose enstasis as a path to perfection; instead, they advocate for a turn towards the transcendent Ultimate Reality, with which they unite as subjects through love, since this, they assert, is the nature of God. Thus, their mysticism is ecstatic and spousal, proceeding from one subject to another, which is divine. For Teresa and John, moral perfection, intrinsically linked to the perfection of love, is paramount. This context is crucial for understanding the term 'nothing' in Carmelite mysticism, signifying the removal of all obstacles to the fullness of love, which is synonymous with the love that is in God.³⁰

Emptiness as an element of Carmelite asceticism

The Carmelite path comprises two essential elements: human activity and the corresponding divine activity. The first element, termed ascetic and meditative activity, involves the individual's efforts. The second element, referred to by mystics as contemplation, represents God's activity within the individual, manifesting as the presence of divine love infused into a person.

²⁷ John of the Cross states, 'it is a total transformation in the Beloved, in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life'; John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in: *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, transl. by K. Kavanaugh OCD, O. Rodriguez, OCD, Washington, D.C. 1991, 22,3; id., *The Living Flame of Love...*, 3,34; Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle...*, 7,1,5; 7,2,4; 7,2,7; A. Alvarez-Suárez, *Unión con Dios*, in: *Diccionario de san Juan de la Cruz*, ed. E. Pachó, Burgos 2000, p. 1503.

²⁸ M. Herráis, *Sensualidad*, in: *Diccionario de san Juan de la Cruz*, ed. E. Pachó, Burgos 2000, p. 1297.

²⁹ Teresa writes, 'In a rapture, believe me, God carries off for Himself the entire soul, and, as to someone who is His own and His spouse, He begins showing it some little part of the kingdom that it has gained by being espoused to Him'; Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle...*, 6,4,9. Look also *ibid.*, 6,4,3; 6,4,9. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle...*, 27,6; 32,6; id., *The Living Flame of Love...*, III.8,7.

³⁰ Cf. R.S. Niziński, *Doświadczenie...*, pp. 36–37.

Of the two Carmelites, it is particularly John of the Cross who emphasizes the necessity of emptying all faculties to allow for divine activity. It is in this context that the term ‘nothingness’ appears, a concept to which commentators frequently refer when drawing parallels between Carmelite mysticism with royal yoga and Zen, often leading to misinterpretations. John writes,

To reach satisfaction in all,
 desire satisfaction in nothing.
 To come to possess all,
 desire the possession of nothing.
 To arrive at being all,
 desire to be nothing.
 To come to the knowledge of all,
 desire the knowledge of nothing.
 To come to enjoy what you have not,
 you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.
 To come to the knowledge you have not,
 you must go by a way in which you know not.
 To come to the possession you have not,
 you must go by a way in which you possess not.
 To come to be what you are not,
 you must go by a way in which you are not
 [...] When you delay in something,
 you cease to rush toward the all.
 For to go from the all to the all,
 you must deny yourself of all in all.
 And when you come to the possession of the all,
 you must possess it without wanting anything.
 Because if you desire to have something in all,
 your treasure in God is not purely your all.³¹

The aforementioned words of John of the Cross should be applied both to his teaching on asceticism and the principles governing the ordering of the human spiritual sphere, as will be discussed subsequently. It is crucial to understand that John does not advocate for leaving human faculties empty in an objective sense, a significant divergence from the two Far Eastern currents previously discussed. While a superficial reading of John’s words might suggest an encouragement to fill the faculties with emptiness, this interpretation is certainly erroneous when viewed within the broader context of his entire doctrine.

³¹ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in: *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, transl. by K. Kavanaugh OCD, O. Rodriguez OCD, Washington, D.C. 1991, I, 13, 11–12.

When considering the level of asceticism recommended by John, it is important to recognize that he envisions both the spirit and the body as being united with God. Therefore, asceticism should organize the sensory sphere in a manner that does not interfere with the spirit, and prepare the human body to participate in union with God here on earth. John speaks not of its complete silencing, but of correcting what is disordered and enslaving. This approach constitutes the re-education of human sensuality.³²

This re-education is accompanied by a sense of emptiness in the sensory sphere, as it represents a shift in priorities within human activity. Previously, the passions of the senses predominantly influenced human choices. Now, it is the intellect enlightened by faith, and the will to seek God's love that guide choices according to the standards of the Gospel. This reorientation directs human activity, requiring the senses to submit, thereby experiencing 'hunger' and emptiness due to their inability to satisfy their former passions.³³

Henceforth, the discussion pertains solely to the subjective impression of individuals experiencing a diminished capacity to fulfil prior desires within their physical domain. This does not imply a wholesale negation of sensory requirements, but rather a selective adjustment thereof. It is essential to clarify that this approach does not advocate depriving the senses of objects suitable for their engagement. John's asceticism fundamentally serves the purpose of facilitating his pursuit of Christ, rather than aiming for the state of emptiness in sensory faculties.³⁴

Carmelite spirituality does not support the complete suppression of the psyche to attain the state of desirelessness. Rather, its emphasis lies in the transformative process that entails opening the psyche to the direct influence of God. This principle extends similarly to the practice of meditation within this tradition.

³² John of the Cross explains, 'Inordinate appetites for the things of the world do all this damage to the beauty of the soul, and even more. [...] One inordinate appetite alone, as we will explain, suffices to make a soul so captive, dirty, and unsightly that until the appetite is purified the soul is incapable of conformity with God in union. This is true even though there may be no matter for mortal sin in the appetite. What then will be the ugliness of a soul entirely disordered in its passions and surrendered to its appetites? How far it will be from God and his purity!'; John of the Cross, *The Ascent...*, I,9,3; M.F. de Haro Iglesias OCD, *Afectos*, in: *Diccionario de san Juan de la Cruz*, ed. E. Pacho, Burgos 2000, p. 28; id., *Apetitos*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 193–194; M. Herráiz, *Sensualidad...*, pp. 1291–1292.

³³ John of the Cross writes, 'By depriving itself of its appetites for the delights of hearing, a soul lives in darkness and emptiness in this sense faculty. And by depriving itself of the pleasure of seeing things, it lives in darkness and poverty in the faculty of sight. By denying itself the fragrances pleasing to the sense of smell, a soul abides in emptiness and darkness in this sense faculty. Then too by denying the palate the pleasures of delicious foods, it is also in the void and in darkness in the sense of taste'; John of the Cross, *The Ascent...*, I,3,2. Also *ibid.*, I,3,1.

³⁴ John of the Cross advises, 'First, have habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his. You must then study his life in order to know how to imitate him and behave in all events as he would'; id., *The Ascent...*, I,13,3.

Emptiness as a concept in structuring the spiritual realm

Similar to teachings in yoga and Zen traditions, the Carmelite saints, notably John of the Cross, emphasize God's incomprehensibility to the human intellect. However, distinct from these traditions, John and Teresa acknowledge that besides the mystical experience, indirect access to the Ultimate Reality is attainable through faith. According to the Carmelite saints, conventional human conceptions of God should be modified by faith, as the intellect ought to be directed towards God Himself, rather than anthropomorphic representations of Him. While Teresa of Jesus emphasizes Jesus Christ in His dual nature as the focal point for understanding God,³⁵ John stresses Christian revelation as the sole path that aligns the intellect with God. Following intellect, the faculties of will and memory ensue.³⁶ Ultimately, they concur that Christ represents the pinnacle of Christian revelation. By embracing Christocentric faith, human intellect disentangles itself from erroneous depictions of God, allowing God to act within it, for, as John asserts, God constitutes the essence of faith.³⁷

³⁵ Teresa of Avila argues, 'This practice of turning aside from corporeal things must be good, certainly, since such spiritual persons advise it. But, in my opinion, the soul should be very advanced because until then it is clear that the Creator must be sought through creatures. Everything depends on the favour the Lord grants to each soul; this is not what I'm concerned with. What I wanted to explain was that the most sacred humanity of Christ must not be counted in a balance with other corporeal things. And may this point be well understood, for I should like to know how to explain myself'; Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, in: *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, transl. by K. Kavanaugh OCD, O. Rodriguez OCD, Washington, D.C. 1987, 22,8.

³⁶ John of the Cross writes, 'As we said, the soul is not united with God in this life through understanding, or through enjoyment, or through imagination, or through any other sense; but only faith, hope, and charity (according to the intellect, memory, and will) can unite the soul with God in this life'; John of the Cross, *The Ascent...*, II,6,1). Also *ibid.*, I,2,3.

He also states, 'We can gather from what has been said that to be prepared for this divine union the intellect must be cleansed and emptied of everything relating to sense, divested and liberated of everything clearly intelligible, inwardly pacified and silenced, and supported by faith alone, which is the only proximate and proportionate means to union with God. For the likeness between faith and God is so close that no other difference exists than that between believing in God and seeing him. Just as God is infinite, faith proposes him to us as infinite. Just as there are three Persons in one God, it presents him to us in this way. And just as God is darkness to our intellect, so faith dazzles and blinds us. Only by means of faith, in divine light exceeding all understanding, does God manifest himself to the soul. The greater one's faith the closer is one's union with God'; *ibid.*, II,9,1).

³⁷ John of the Cross says, 'God is the substance and concept of faith (*Dios es la sustancia de la fe*'); *id.*, *The Spiritual Canticle...*, 1,10. Also he states, 'Faith, consequently, gives and communicates God himself to us but covered with the silver of faith. Yet it does not for this reason fail to give him to us truly (*nos da y comunica al mismo Dios*'); *ibid.*, 12,4.

In this context, the experience of emptiness reappears in an experiential sense. This phenomenon is associated with the notion, as John of the Cross elucidates, that faith entails a transformation in the object of cognition for the intellect. Through faith, the mind transitions from the known, anthropomorphic image of God to an understanding of God who is not only dissimilar to the world (and humanity), but also entirely incomprehensible. Thus, the mind shifts from the familiar to the unfathomable. Due to the intrinsic otherness of God, faith represents a form of obscure knowledge of the divine.

Living by faith does not imply the emptying of the intellect but rather grounding it in concrete revelatory content that directs towards God. Faith instructs us to conceive of God as, for instance, a benevolent father or a good shepherd who consistently forgives, patiently awaits, and safely guides. In this manner, faith imbues the intellect with specific content. Consequently, this scenario does not concern a void in the faculties, rather a subjective sense of darkness stemming from the essential otherness of God in relation to all prior conceptions the mind has held about the divine.³⁸

In addition, living by faith entails possessing a certain knowledge of God. This knowledge is characterized by its general nature, which stands in contrast to the detailed vision of God after death. According to the teachings of John, this knowledge is certain as the content of faith is intrinsically true, with its veracity guaranteed by God Himself, who reveals His nature to humanity. Therefore, a Christian, even without experiencing mystical encounters or direct visions of God during their lifetime, can attain a genuine understanding of Him through faith. These considerations underpin the assertion that the doctrine of John is fundamentally incompatible with agnosticism or negative theology, contrary to common misinterpretations.³⁹

Moreover, John considers living by faith to be a prerequisite for enabling God to operate within an individual. According to John, God, as the essence of faith, begins to impart Himself to man in contemplation when acts of faith are initiated. John posits that faith is indispensable at every stage of the spiritual journey. This implies that human faculties should never be devoid of focus perpetually oriented towards God through faith.⁴⁰ In addition to advocating for a life grounded in faith, John also emphasizes the importance of living with hope and supernatural love, which similarly engender a subjective sense of emptiness.

³⁸ Id., *The Ascent...*, II,3,3; II,8,3.

³⁹ John of the Cross writes, 'For though faith brings certitude to the intellect, it does not produce clarity, but only darkness'; *ibid.*, II,6,2. Look also *ibid.*, II,3,1; II,4,2. Cf. F. Ruiz, *Unidad y contrastes: hermenéutica sanjuanista*, in: *Experiencia y pensamiento en san Juan de la Cruz*, ed. F. Ruiz, Madrid 1990, p. 46.

⁴⁰ John of the Cross states, 'contemplation, which is imparted in faith'; John of the Cross, *The Ascent...*, II,10,4. Look also *ibid.*, II,9,1; II,13,2–5.

The teachings of Teresa of Jesus align similarly with this perspective. As a prerequisite for progressing towards union with God, Teresa asserts that during meditation, one must relate to Christ as the God-man in His human form. This requirement is imperative at every stage of the spiritual journey. Among the reasons Teresa provides to justify this mandate, her understanding of human nature is particularly noteworthy. Teresa posits that humans, unlike angels, require tangible references to direct their minds towards God. Without such concrete points of focus, the intellect is prone to fall into a void that leads nowhere, regardless of the degree of union with God. Additionally, it is significant that God chose to manifest Himself in this form. Thus, omitting Christ from meditation is invariably a mistake and a demonstration of a lack of humility.⁴¹

Therefore, in the teachings of the Carmelite saints, there is a distinct emphasis on engaging the intellect with concrete content derived from Christian revelation. This approach stands in stark contrast to the practices of yoga and Zen which advocate for the emptying of the mind. The saints of Carmel do not endorse leaving the faculties devoid of content; instead, they insist on continually orienting them towards specific, faith-based knowledge.

Emptiness as an element of Carmelite contemplation

In the realm of contemplation, John of the Cross identifies ‘nothingness’ as a significant concept, referring to the process by which God imparts Himself to a person. During contemplation, human faculties remain entirely passive while God actively engages them, bestowing His presence through love. John posits that only one entity can truly occupy human faculties at any given time, either creation or God. Just as faith necessitates moving beyond anthropomorphic con-

⁴¹ Teresa of Avila argues, ‘Returning to the second point, we are not angels but we have a body. To desire to be angels while we are on earth—and as much on earth as I was—is foolishness. Ordinarily, thought needs to have some support’; Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life...*, 22,10. Also she writes, ‘But that we should skillfully and carefully accustom ourselves to avoid striving with all our strength to keep this most sacred humanity always present (and please the Lord it would be present always), this, I say, is what I don’t think is good. The soul is left floating in the air, as they say; it seems it has no support no matter how much it may think it is full of God. It is an important thing that while we are living and are human we have human support. This disadvantage of not having human support leads to the other reason I referred to. With regard to the first reason, I already began to say that there is a small lack of humility in wanting to raise the soul up before the Lord raises it, in not being content to meditate on something so valuable, and in wanting to be Mary before having worked with Martha. When the Lord desires to raise up the soul, even if he does so from the first day, there is no reason for fear; but let us restrain ourselves as I believe I said before. This little speck of lack of humility, even though it seems to be nothing, does much harm to progress in contemplation’; Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life...*, 22,89. Look also *ibid.*, 22,1.

ceptions of God towards an understanding grounded in Christian revelation, contemplation drives out all that is not yet God from human faculties.⁴²

This form of divine action within the individual results in a sense of darkness and confusion, as previously, individuals approached God through their own ideas refined by faith. Now, however, the direct presence of God Himself in the human intellect and other faculties displaces these imperfect ideas, replacing them with the direct knowledge of God. John of the Cross asserts that this feeling of confusion and darkness is temporary; over time, individuals learn to perceive God in a new and profound manner. He describes the varying degrees of darkness in the spiritual night, which ultimately culminates in the dawn, when the darkness subsides.⁴³

Expressing the above in terms familiar to Far Eastern philosophies, we can affirm that in Carmelite spirituality, the empirical 'I' is constantly present and engaged in its activities. This engagement is characterized either by an active focus on God or by a receptive acceptance of His loving presence, which is initially general and dark but progressively becomes more detailed and clear.

The God of Carmelite mystics as the fullness of personal being

In contrast to the non-substantial and undifferentiated Ultimate Reality of Zen Buddhism and the substantial consciousness of Patanjali, characterized as the passive observer, the God of the Carmelite mystics embodies the fullness of being with precisely defined attributes. This God actively seeks humanity to bestow His infinite love. As the Ultimate Reality, God is a singular substance encompassing three different persons, each with specific attributes that become known through the mystical experience, albeit in a general sense. Complete and detailed knowledge of God is to be attained only after death with this understanding continuing to grow indefinitely.⁴⁴

⁴² John of the Cross explains, 'for two contraries cannot coexist in one subject'; John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, in: *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, transl. by K. Kavanaugh OCD, O. Rodriguez OCD, Washington, D.C. 1991, II,9,2. Look also *ibid.*, II,5,4; *id.*, *The Ascent...*, III,13,4; *id.*, *The Spiritual Canticle...*, 7,3,11.

⁴³ John of the Cross writes, 'If in the beginning the soul does not experience this spiritual savor and delight, but dryness and distaste, the reason is the novelty involved in this exchange'; *id.*, *The Dark Night...*, I,9,4.

⁴⁴ John of the Cross writes, 'And since the knowledge of them [truths infused by faith] is imperfect, she says they are sketched. Just as a sketch is not a perfect painting, so the knowledge of faith is not perfect knowledge. Hence the truths infused in the soul through faith are as though sketched, and when clearly visible they will be like a perfect and finished painting in the soul'; *id.*, *The Spiritual Canticle...*, 12,6. *Id.*, *The Living Flame of Love...*, III,3. Teresa of Avila writes, 'Some things I understood [in the mystical experience] more clearly than I understand what is told

Although John of the Cross postulates that silence is the most appropriate means of conveying the essence of the mystical experience, and Teresa admits that initially she is unable to articulate her mystical encounters, both mystics nonetheless describe specific divine attributes. They concurrently underscore the inadequacy of language to fully convey the truths acquired through the mystical experience.⁴⁵ This stance distinguishes them from yoga and Zen mystics, who do not acknowledge the possibility of describing the Ultimate Reality.

III. Evaluation of statements on the convergence of spiritual paths of the analyzed schools

Evaluation of statements highlighting the similarity of both types of mysticism

Having analyzed the interpretations of the term ‘nothing’ and related concepts within the studied schools, we can engage with assertions related to the doctrine of John and Teresa and their perceived alignment with Raja Yoga or Zen teachings. Our comparison commences with an examination of statements referring to the objectives pursued by these respective schools. This initial consideration is pivotal, as it is the goal that fundamentally shapes the methodologies employed within each spiritual path under review.

The same Ultimate Reality

Schlüter Rodés and Pawłowski allege that all religious mysticisms ultimately engage with the same Ultimate Reality. This conviction underpins their argument that a Christian can, in principle, practise Patanjali’s yoga or Zen, and still attain

me in words. I understood extraordinary truths about this Truth, more than if many learned men had taught me. [...] This truth, which I say was given to my understanding, is in itself truth, and it is without beginning or end; all other truths depend upon this truth, just as all other loves depend upon this love, and all other grandeurs upon this grandeur—although this statement is obscure if compared to the clear understanding the Lord wanted me to have. And what power this Majesty appears to have since in so short a time He leaves such an abundant increase and things so marvelous impressed upon the soul!'; Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life...*, 40,4.

⁴⁵ Teresa of Avila states, ‘God gave me in a moment completely clear understanding so that I knew how to explain His favor in a way that amazed me more than it did my confessors’; *ibid.*, 12,6. Also she writes, ‘For it is one grace to receive the Lord’s favor; another, to understand which favor and grace it is; and a third, to know how to describe and explain it’; *ibid.*, 17,5. Look also *ibid.*, 16,2; 18,8. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love...*, II,21.

the aspirations of Christianity.⁴⁶ Following this line of thought, scholars such as Rodolfo Puglisi contend that the final effect achieved in Zen and in the spiritualities of John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila, represents the same Ultimate Reality.⁴⁷

It is worth contrasting this perspective with the views of Suzuki. He argues that for Zen practitioners, the concept of a Christian God poses a significant obstacle to attaining enlightenment, as it confines the Absolute (as Zen understands it) by ascribing specific qualities to it.⁴⁸ Similarly, Mamić contends that the Christian concept of God impedes the liberation of the mind. In Buddhism, the emptiness of the Ultimate Reality transcends all categories; it is neither the most perfect being nor the person who creates and engages with the world and humanity.⁴⁹

Choi analyzes the logical consequences of equating the Ultimate Reality as understood by Zen and by John of the Cross. According to him, these two concepts are mutually exclusive. The Ultimate Reality cannot be simultaneously sub-

⁴⁶ A.M. Schlüter Rodés (*Las religiones orientales...*, p. 239) writes, ‘Las religiones son, pues, expresión de diferentes experiencias de la misma y única realidad trascendente’; K.J. Pawłowski, *Dyskurs i asceza...*, p. 213.

⁴⁷ Puglisi states, ‘Volviendo al caso de Zendo Betania, su especificidad radica principalmente en, por un lado, una cuestión de orden cosmológico. En esta dirección, la hermenéutica del grupo, tanto en sus relatos como en su literatura exegética, recupera de modo privilegiado a San Juan de la Cruz y a María Teresa de Ávila (místicos cristianos medievales) para ponerlos en diálogo con las enseñanzas zen, en especial con el ya mencionado primer patriarca, Bodhidharma, y con el sexto, Hui-Neng (637–713 d.C.), así como con su introductor en Japón, Dogen Zenji (siglo XIII d.C.). El resultado de estos diálogos se dirige a señalar que ambas tradiciones confluyen en una misma realidad profunda e intelectualmente incognoscible, pero no por ello imposible de ser experimentada. Para aventurarse dentro de esta experiencia se propone a la meditación zen (zazen)’; R. Puglisi, *El encuentro del catolicismo y el budismo en las espiritualidades argentinas contemporáneas. Una mirada etnográfica a los grupos Zendo Betania*, ‘Publicar en antropología y ciencias sociales’ 19/20 (2016), p. 60.

⁴⁸ D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, London 1958, p. 263.

⁴⁹ J. Mamić, *San Giovanni...*, p. 176. Look also what Dean states quoting Masao Abe, ‘The main reason for the difference of Zen Nothingness and Zen Being from Western Nonbeing and Western Being, says Abe, is that the latter are understood dualistically or dialectically, whereas in Zen: “True Emptiness [*Mu*] and wondrous Being [*U*] are completely non-dualistic: absolute *Mu* and ultimate Reality [*U*] are totally identical” [...]. In the Western tradition Being is dualistically conceived vis-a-vis Nonbeing, and Being is not “realized” through the prior realization of Nonbeing: “It is not considered to be beyond the antinomy of being and non-being but rather gains its ultimate status by virtue of its being metaphysically prior to non-being” [...]. In the Zen understanding, on the other hand “*mu* is not one-sidedly derived through negation of *u*. *Mu* is the negation of *u* and vice versa. One has no logical or ontological priority to the other. Being the complete counterconcept to *u*, *mu* is more than privation of *u*, a stronger form of negativity than ‘non-being’ as understood in the West”’ T. Dean, *Masao Abe*, p. 93.

stantial and non-substantial, personal and impersonal, possessing specific content and devoid of any content.⁵⁰

A similar perspective is confirmed in the statements and testimonies adduced by Stinissen. He asserts that both in practice and in the achieved goal, the paths of Zen and John of the Cross fundamentally diverge. Being a person in a loving relationship with the triune Ultimate Reality is entirely distinct from experiencing an impersonal essenceless consciousness understood as a cosmic, non-substantial mind.⁵¹

The aforementioned assertions advocating for the convergence of Zen's goals with those of Carmelite spirituality suggest that these authors interpret the spirituality of John of the Cross in a manner that contravenes his own explanations.

***Samadhi* and mystical union with God**

Siddheswarananda, a Hindu master, equates the passivity achieved in royal yoga with the passivity described by John of the Cross, affirming that both lead to the same ultimate goal. He assumes that yogic *samadhi* is identical to the mystical union with God. According to Siddheswarananda, infused contemplation commences only when meditation has been abandoned, a principle consistent with general mystical theology. Thus, in his view, when one relinquishes meditation in yoga, infused contemplation begins.⁵²

Moreover, Siddheswarananda contends that Christian theologians misconceive the yogic concept of the annihilation of mental waves (*citta-vrtti-nirodha*). He argues that, in yoga, this state is not entail reducing the mind to immobility but rather 'access to the correct view of Reality'. He posits that as soon as the empirical ego disappears, *purusha* (the true self) shines forth. Siddheswarananda claims that saint John of the Cross articulates a similar idea, suggesting that God appears once the third part of the night is completed.⁵³

⁵⁰ Choi writes, 'However, despite the fact that there are many similarities between Dogen and John, I have argued that mysticism in John and Dogen is also different, because differences emerge from their theological or metaphysical foundation, namely, "Ultimate Reality." John is really experiencing a personal God, and Dogen is experiencing a consciousness of an impersonal void. Thus they are ostensibly perceiving different "objects". Since both God and the Void are supposed to be "ultimate", and "ultimate" cannot be simultaneously personal and impersonal, they are experiencing different reality. Because it is logically impossible to claim a personal experience of God and impersonal experience of Reality or the Void as being the same'; C.H. Choi, *A Comparative Study*, p. 350.

⁵¹ W. Stinissen, *Ani joga...*, pp. 19, 22, 27–28.

⁵² S. Siddheswarananda, *Hindu Thought...*, pp. 113–119.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 111.

One of Siddheswarananda's central assertions is that the dark night of St. John of the Cross is equivalent to 'annihilation of the *vr̥ttis*' described in *Yoga Sūtras* of Patanjali. He argues that, in both spiritual traditions, this step leads to the spiritual union with God. The annihilation of *vr̥ttis* corresponds to three distinct levels of the spiritual life as described by John of the Cross. (1) Siddheswarananda cites the saint's teaching that union with God necessitates two nights of the soul. The first corresponds to the active night of the senses. As John of the Cross states, 'It is thus clear that in order to succeed in uniting oneself to God by grace and love while here below, the soul must be in darkness relative to all that the eye sees, the ear hears, imagination represents, and the heart perceives' (Ascend to Mount Carmel, prologue, 3).⁵⁴ (2) The second night pertains to the active night of the spirit, focusing on the mind, which must struggle to live in (Christian) faith. Siddheswarananda quotes John of the Cross, who says that faith is a night for the mind. (3) After this active stage of purification, the disciple must passively endure (the passive night of the senses and the spirit) what God is doing within the soul. This is the period of infused contemplation. According to Siddheswarananda, this stage closely resembles *savikalpa-samadhi*, where the soul 'remains entirely passive'.⁵⁵ Siddheswarananda concludes that the soul 'must make every effort to know nothing'.⁵⁶

We may pose the question of whether the experience of being a solitary, passive seer equates to the experience of being united with God through welcoming and offering oneself to God via the love that God Himself instils in man by making divine within the individual? Verlinde asserts that the outcomes of Christian meditation and the techniques of yoga and Zen are fundamentally divergent. Upon attaining the yogic fullness of the mystical experience, he observes that its result is the pleasure derived from the existence of one's own consciousness and nothing more. It is, therefore, the experience of the joy of solitary being, undisturbed by any object, thought or sensory feeling.⁵⁷ To substantiate this, one might cite the yogi's description of the state achieved in *samadhi*, highlighting the attained state of knowledge and peace.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁷ J.M. Verlinde, *Zakazany owoc...*, pp. 74–76; the English translation of Verlinde's statement sounds, 'only the desire to experience consciousness, increasingly stunning as we transcend the limitations imposed by our poor individuality' (ibid., p. 88). And also his other words in English translation, 'It is, undoubtedly, selfless love as it will lead an ascetic to be separated from the empirical "I" always marked with egoism; nevertheless, it is the love of oneself that is relished in complete solitude' (ibid., p. 89.) Look also ibid., pp. 74–76.

⁵⁸ Sivananda confesses, 'This *samadhi* [...] bestows the supreme, undying peace or knowledge. The yogi enjoys the transcendental glories of the Self and has perfect freedom from the mental life. The sense of time is replaced by a sense of eternity. [...] All *vr̥ttis* or mental modifications

It can thus be observed that even the concept of emptiness in the faculties, as described by John of the Cross, leads to a different goal than that pursued in the other two schools. Therefore equating these two various types of emptiness is problematic. For John, emptiness is of an experiential and subjective nature, which eventually gives way to the exchange of love with God and knowledge of certain divine attributes. In contrast, in yoga and Zen, emptiness is also objective, leading to the dissolution of the current 'I' in favour of the hidden self. Overlooking this distinction results in the erroneous identification of mystical union with God as equivalent to attaining the state of a seer.

Aim: knowledge or the fullness of love?

The words of John of the Cross, 'To come to the possession [experiencing: adapted from Pawłowski] of all, do not want to have [experience: adapted from Pawłowski] something. To come to being all, do not want to be something in nothing. To come to knowing all, do not want to know something in nothing' are interpreted by Pawłowski in a manner reminiscent of yoga. They are intended to lead to the restraint of conscious phenomena in order to uncover the true 'I', which emerges when true emptiness manifests in the faculties. Generally, Pawłowski interprets Christianity through the yogic lens as a discipline of consciousness restraint and a thirst for discovering the authentic self. He posits that the truth attained through liberating knowledge in yoga aligns with the truth advocated by the Carmelite mystics in union with God.⁵⁹ Thus, Pawłowski's approach parallels that of Siddheswarananda in his interpretation.

Certainly, the words of John of the Cross, as quoted by Pawłowski, have a completely different meaning and cannot be equated with the goals intrinsic to

that arise from the mind-lake come under restraint. [...] In this *samadhi*, the yogi sees without eyes, tastes without tongue, hears without ears, smells without nose and touches without skin. [...] Eventually, the *purusha* realizes his own native state of divine glory, isolation or absolute independence (*kaivalya*). He has completely disconnected himself from the *prakriti* and its effects. He feels his absolute freedom and attains *kaivalya*, the highest goal of Raja Yoga. [...] He has simultaneous knowledge now. The past and the future are blended into the present. Everything is "now". Everything is "here". He has transcended time and space. The sum-total of all knowledge of the three worlds, of all secular sciences is nothing but mere husk when compared to the infinite knowledge of a yogi who has attained *kaivalya*. Glory, glory to such exalted yogins!'; Sri Swami Sivananda, *Raja Yoga Samadhi. Asamprajnata Samadhi or Nirbija or Nirbikalpa Samadhi*, 2017, <https://www.dlshq.org/discourse/feb2005.htm#asamprajnata> [accessed: 8.2.2023].

⁵⁹ K.J. Pawłowski, *Wąska ścieżka...*, pp. 61–62, 132–133; id., *Dyskurs i asceza...*, pp. 194–197; id., *Odnajdywanie kluczy poznania. Joga Patańdzalego a jarzmo Chrystusa*, in: *Benares a Jeruzolima. Przemysłość chrześcijaństwo w kategoriach hinduizmu i buddyźmu*, red. K.J. Pawłowski, Kraków 2007, p. 189.

yoga. For John, it is not primarily about restraining the phenomena of consciousness, but about following Christ in order to grow in love. John is not focused on attaining true knowledge of the 'I'. He writes, 'First, you have habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his. You must then study his life to know how to imitate him and how to behave in all situations as he would' (Ascend to Mount Carmel, prologue, 3).⁶⁰ The defining feature of Christ's attitude was love for God and humanity. As Verlinde points out, in yoga, love, as an altruistic attitude can be seen as an obstacle since it reinforces the 'I' within the illusion of its own reality. In Christianity, however, love is the path to God.⁶¹ This is also true for the teachings of John and Teresa, for whom union with God is accomplished through love.

Non-objective meditation

Certainly, a commonality between the Carmelite saints and the practices of royal yoga and Zen is the belief that the Ultimate Reality cannot be intellectually apprehended. Therefore, there is a shared emphasis on the need to transcend the discursive sphere in approaching this Reality. Pawłowski highlights this similarity.⁶² However, the methods of transcending discourse differ among these paths. In classical yoga and Zen, this is achieved through non-objective (contentless) meditation. Some authors, including Guerra and Schlüter Rodés, attribute this type of meditation to John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesus, describing a form of prayer without an object in their spirituality.⁶³ Mamić appears to support this interpretation as well.⁶⁴

Choi disagrees with the aforementioned opinions, proclaiming that there is no non-objective meditation in Carmelite spirituality. He states,

For Dogen [the founder of the Soto Zen school] the object of reality is not experienced in a personal relation. Reality is experienced as neither a Lord-self duality,

⁶⁰ John of the Cross, *The Ascent...*, I, 13, 3.

⁶¹ Cf. J.M. Verlinde, *Zakazany owoc...*, pp. 88 f., 105 f.

⁶² K.J. Pawłowski, *Wąska ścieżka...*, pp. 41–42.

⁶³ Schlüter Rodés writes, 'A través de este rodeo son muchos los que vuelven a encontrar el camino a la práctica religiosa en la Iglesia y, sobre todo, a la mística cristiana tradicional sin objeto, tal como la comprendieron y desarrollaron el maestro Eckhart, Tauler, Teresa de Jesús, Juan de la Cruz, los monjes del Monte Athos y otros místicos cristianos. El desarrollo de la humanidad se aparta de las estructuras religiosas tradicionales externas y se orienta en la dirección del *hombre nuevo* que, intuitivo y místico, será radicalmente nuevo'; A.M. Schlüter Rodés, *Zendo Betania...*, p. 21; S. Guerra, *Zen y Juan de la Cruz*, in: *Diccionario de san Juan de la Cruz*, ed. E. Pacho, Burgos 2000, p. 1561.

⁶⁴ J. Mamić, *San Giovanni...*, pp. 189, 191.

nor a 'union' in the strict sense of the word. In the attainment of the Buddha-nature, Reality is always realized from the standpoint of the oneness of practice, every 'sentient being is the Buddha-nature', it constitutes a non-objectifiable subjectivity. Therefore, Dogen's mystical experience is self-awakening in character, it comes from realization of the Buddha-nature. It is non-relational. It is not receptive. It comes not from somewhere but from self-within. Thus, unlike John, it is not anthropocentric, which excludes all beings other than human beings. It is based on a cosmological structure. On the contrary, since John's mystical experience comes from God, it is not a self-awakening experience as in Dogen. John's mystical experience is receptive, or passive, because it depends on God. Thus while in John's mysticism there is a personal relation which exists between two separate personal beings who remain two and yet are unified as one, Dogen's Zen, by contrast, asserts that humans are ontologically identical with Reality or the Buddha-nature. It is a non-reflexive awareness or awakening of primary Being, not a consciousness of a distinct self. Moreover, Reality, the Buddha-nature, is devoid of all sense of personal reference'.⁶⁵

To achieve Buddha-nature, Dogen's practice necessitates the absence of any object of concentration during meditation. Choi states, 'Thus, contrary to the discursive characteristics of John's meditation, Dogen's meditation is characterized as "not-thinking". Dogen's "not-thinking" is essentially the negation of all mental acts'.⁶⁶

Similarly to the aforementioned statements, Siddheswarananda interprets the teachings of John of the Cross on the inactivity of the intellect, will and memory, as analogous to the concept of *samadhi* in yoga. *Samadhi* is a state in which mental waves cease, resulting in silence that facilitates the dissolution of the sense of 'I'.⁶⁷ Siddheswarananda explains that the concentration in *Raja Yoga*, aimed at achieving *samadhi*, must ultimately become objectless. He affirms,

Consequently, the particular attention whose reality is of the temporal order must give place to the objectless attention, that is non-temporal Attention [...] which one can represent symbolically by a fixed and empty look [...] In the state of *samadhi*, the tension borne between two poles of existence (object and thought) is reduced to zero.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, Stinissen, like Choi, refers to John of the Cross (Ascend to Mount Carmel 2, 14, 2) and emphasizes that in Christianity, there must always be some content occupying the faculties during meditation. This content, while becoming increasingly general and obscure over time, remains centered on a personal God.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ C.H. Choi, *A Comparative Study...*, p. 353.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁶⁷ Siddheswarananda, *Hindu Thought...*, p. 112.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁶⁹ Cf. W. Stinissen, *Ani joga...*, pp. 202–203.

Agnosticism—faith—Jesus Christ

In discussing the knowledge of God, Pawłowski, like many other scholars, attributes to John of the Cross a position akin to that of Pseudo-Dionysius, specifically apophatism. It is indeed true that John of the Cross is familiar with the doctrine of Dionysius the Areopagite and references him in his works. Consequently, Pawłowski aligns the doctrine of John with that of Patanjali's yoga, suggesting that both view the Ultimate Reality as accessible only through the mystical experience, which he interprets as a form of agnosticism. However, Pawłowski's analysis of John of the Cross's doctrine overlooks the significant roles that John attributes to both faith and the reference to Christ in the cognition of God.⁷⁰

The above analyses of the Carmelite doctrine demonstrate that neither John of the Cross nor Teresa of Ávila can be accurately categorized within the apophatic tradition, and thus, they cannot be accused of any form of agnosticism. For these mystics faith, or the knowledge of Jesus Christ, serves as a sufficient means for truly knowing God indirectly even if not yet seeing Him fully. Choi notes that Christocentrism is a distinguishing feature of John's doctrine, setting it apart from Zen, 'If the essence of prayer for Catholics is to be Christocentric, and Zen meditation is objectless, we must state that these two forms of relating to the ultimate reality are disjunctive'.⁷¹ The essence of an object in Zen meditation precludes any knowledge that allows for approaching the Ultimate Reality which is only accessible through *satori*. Conversely, for the Carmelites, the Ultimate Reality is present in the praying individual in a preliminary form through faith. Hence, mysticism, while beneficial, is not strictly necessary on the path to the Ultimate Reality. Ruiz also emphasizes this point, noting that categorizing John's doctrine within the apophatic tradition is a misunderstanding.⁷²

For the Carmelites, faith provides a means for the mind to be directed towards the Ultimate Reality and, consequently leading to love. This Christocentric focus, with Christ as the fullness of revelation, underpins the Catholic Church's stance on the exclusivity of its spiritual paths in relation to those of the Far East. Saint Teresa of Jesus' teachings further reinforce this view. In Zen and yoga, meditation without an object or content is a crucial step towards achieving liberation. However, in the Catholic tradition, particularly as reflected in the doctrine of Carmelite mystics, every believer must center their meditation on an object—Jesus Christ, the God-man.⁷³

⁷⁰ K.J. Pawłowski, *Wąska ścieżka...*, pp. 53, 118–121.

⁷¹ C.H. Choi, *A Comparative Study...*, pp. 214, 249–250; J. Mamić, *San Giovanni...*, p. 158.

⁷² F. Ruiz, *Síntesis doctrinal*, in: *Introducción a la lectura de San Juan de la Cruz*, ed. S. Ros García, Valladolid 1991, p. 270.

⁷³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, Vatican, October 15, 1989, no. 10–12 and the footnotes!

Conclusions

The references made by some to Carmelite spirituality in an attempt to demonstrate its convergence with classical yoga or Zen, and thus justify the use of these meditation techniques by Christians, stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of Carmelite spirituality. As elucidated in this comparison, the concept of ‘nothingness’ is pivotal in distinguishing these spiritual paths. Undoubtedly, each of these traditions speaks of nothingness or emptiness as a subjective experience at a certain stage on the spiritual journey. However, this is where the resemblance ends. In the mysticism of the Far East, the empirical ‘I’ must disappear, necessitating an objective state of emptiness in human faculties. This notion is fundamentally incompatible with the teachings of Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross. Ultimately, the goals these schools seek to achieve are divergent, leading to mutually exclusive methods.

Given that Carmelite spirituality holds a normative status within the Catholic Church—both Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross are recognized as Doctors of the Church in the domain of interior life—a broader question emerges. Are those who employ methods from the Far East to attain Christian perfection consistent in their Christian practice, or have they, in effect, become Buddhists or yogis? This inquiry is warranted as the preceding analyses demonstrate that these spiritual paths are fundamentally divergent. The conclusion drawn is unequivocal: one can either adhere to the path of a yogi or Zen Buddhist, or remain within the Christian tradition, but cannot straddle both. Jakubczak’s assertion, although specifically addressing Buddhism, encapsulates this reality, ‘Buddhism and Christianity are two radically different visions of existence, two philosophical poles that will never meet unless they lose their constitutive features. But then it will no longer be Buddhism or Christianity’.⁷⁴

In relation to this affirmation, another pertinent issue emerges. The extent to which yoga or Zen techniques, when adopted by Christians seeking communion with the Christian God, align with the doctrines of Patanjali’s yoga or Zen, remains an open question that this article does not explore in depth. Proponents of a ‘middle way’ argue that these disparate perspectives can be harmonized. However, the metaphysical and epistemological analyses presented herein indicate that such a ‘middle way’ is challenging to conceptualize.

The factors contributing to the divergence between Carmelite mysticism and the spiritual schools of the Far East, as discussed in these analyses, primarily hinge on two issues: the conception of the Ultimate Reality and the corresponding anthropology. The paths that these traditions prescribe for attaining this Reality are predicated upon underlying metaphysical and anthropological premises.

⁷⁴ This is the English rendition of Jakubczak’s statement, *Pozorne i rzeczywiste...*, p. 235.

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