

## Non-Dualism in Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne: A Theopoetic Reflection

James Charlton

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**I**t is unsurprising that the Australian poet James Charlton should write about the imagination, intuition and human experience. What is astonishing is the dexterous way he intertwines theology and poetry to create a unique “theopoetic reflection.” Right from the start, he articulates his two-fold intention. On the one hand, he seeks to draw attention to the tendency within Western Christianity to stress divine transcendence at the expense of divine immanence; and on the other hand, he wishes his readers to “awaken” to the “non-dual experience” of a unified cosmos.

To achieve this goal, Charlton engages in lively dialogue with three Christian mystics, theologians and poets: Thomas Traherne (ca. 1637–1674), a rural Church of England priest; Eckhart von Hochheim (ca. 1260–c. 1328), a German Dominican friar better known as Meister Eckhart; and Mother Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), an anchoress from County Norfolk. He devotes an entire chapter to each one, although it is not entirely clear why he prioritizes Traherne (38 pages) over Eckhart (27 pages) and Mother Julian (17 pages). He does clarify, though, that all three Europeans endorse a sense of interconnectedness with “the Source of All” (4). They share an experience of what he calls “moderate non-dualism,” the understanding that nothing exists independently.

Charlton creatively substantiates the non-dual viewpoint of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian by interweaving his own poetry into the book. He emphasizes a vision of relationality that identifies the inherent value of even the most trivial and fragile of things, such as the “Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos” (7), “Bluebottle Jellyfish at Manly” (13) and “Sister Spider” (16-17). Innovatively, he further validates his non-dual perspective by drawing on the writings of Shankaracharya (788–820), the Sufi mystic al-Hallaj (858–922), the Japanese Buddhist monk Dōgen Kigen (1200–1253), and a variety of Hindu and Christian non-dualists like Shri Ramana Maharishi (1879–1950), Bede Griffiths (1906–1993), Simone Weil (1909–1943), Abhishiktananda (1910–1973), Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010), Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Charles Taylor (1931–).

Although Charlton nowhere claims his work is an exercise in comparative theology, he fundamentally places Christian “qualified” or “modified” non-dualism alongside what he calls the “strong” non-dualism propounded in *Advaita Vedanta* and taught by Shankara and to an extent, by Shri Ramana Maharishi. In addition, he skilfully juxtaposes two *visual* theopoems—Andrei Rublev’s icon of the Christian Trinity (15th century) and the vibrant south Indian Hindu bronze image of Shiva Nataraja (“The Lord of the Dance” ca. 9th

century)—and elucidates how they make use of the senses to “dynamically ... illustrate the necessary balance of transcendence with immanence” (145). Importantly, Charlton observes the correspondence that exists between two non-dual philosophies, Christian and Hindu, but he also correct confirms that the two are not metaphysically identical.

Throughout the book, the author painstakingly employs precise diacritics to reference Buddhist and Hindu texts and terms. Unfortunately, his commendable effort is marred by the incorrect Romanised transliteration of the important Sanskrit word *ātman* (self), which consistently appears as *ātmān*. Another observation is that his brush strokes are sometimes overly expansive. For instance, he advises that the imagery of a spiritual journey is inappropriate in a discussion of the non-dual way (15, 94–95); and yet the very phrase “the way of interiority” or “the non-dual path” surely implies a journey. Or again, he asserts that the three European mystics do not preach self-denial (57) but *kenosis* (‘self-emptying’). This too is an over-simplification of the facts, because Mother Julian patently withdrew from the world to live a solitary life of prayer and mortification. Moreover, frequent use of the words “arguably”, “perhaps”, “possibly” and “it seems” requires attention. For instance, rather than blandly state that the three Christian mystics and Ramana Maharishi are “perhaps ... practitioners ... of *abheda bhakti*” (“devotion without difference”; 151), the reader would find it more satisfying if he were to justify his opinion with carefully selected textual evidence.

Unquestionably, the book is well written and highly original. And the inclusion of his own beautiful poems and a glossary of specialized Christian, Buddhist and Hindu theological terms only add to its value. Charlton has undertaken an excursion into comparative theology, crossing religious borders and providing a fascinating study of non-dualism. His work addresses the important but puzzling notion of the nature of Being that embraces both immanence and transcendence.

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