

The Condemnation of Miquel De Molinos

- *Quietism and Heresy in the History of Christian Mysticism*



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Resume

The 3rd September 1687 the Spanish priest Miquel de Molinos was sentenced to life imprisonment for having taught heretical, erroneous and scandalous doctrines. Molinos is considered to be the pioneer of the last major mystical heresy movement, Quietism – a movement that was harshly persecuted by the Catholic Church in the end of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, there seems to be disagreement as to whether Molinos taught a heterodox doctrine or not. Some scholars have here stressed that it was historical circumstances that was the cause for Molinos condemnation. Others have emphasized the allegedly inherent subversive nature of mysticism. In light of these different theories the project investigates why Miquel de Molinos was condemned.

Resume

Den 3. september 1687 blev den spanske præst Miquel de Molinos dømt til livsvarigt fængsel for at have lært kætterske, fejlagtige og skandaløse doktriner. Molinos betragtes som pioneren for den sidste store mystiske kætterbevægelse, Quietismen – en bevægelse der blev hårdt forfulgt af den katolske kirke i slutningen af det syttende århundrede. Der synes ikke desto mindre at være uenighed om hvorvidt Molinos lærte heterodokse doktriner eller ej. Nogle forskere har her betonet at det var historiske omstændigheder, der var årsag til fordømmelsen af Molinos. Andre har understreget mystikkens angiveligt iboende subversive natur. I lyset af disse forskellige teorier undersøger projektet hvorfor Molinos blev dømt.

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Quietism and the doctrine of “detachment”

Part 1: Approaching the Study of Mysticism

The third of September in the Lord's year 1687 the Spanish priest Miquel De Molinos was taken from his prison cell in the Holy Office in 'Castel Sant'Angelo' to the Church 'Santa Maria Sopra Minerva' - the same halls where Galileo Galilei half a century earlier had abjured his thesis about the moving stars, afterwards allegedly mumbling "yet still they move". Molinos was being brought to the Dominican church for similar reasons; renunciation of heretical statements. We are told that crowds had been gathering outside from morning onwards, and that fights broke out between people without tickets to the church¹. As Molinos arrived, the masses shouted "To the fire", "To the flames with him" eager to see the infamous Spaniard condemned and punished. Around three o'clock the dignitaries entered the Church, and four Dominicans began reading the charges, interrupted by the shouts of the roman mob. In total sixty-eight heretical propositions in total were put forth, while Molinos, holding a candle between his hands, supposedly remained calm and imperturbable. As one witness puts it "*Molinos, not at all dismayed, stood undaunted on the platform with an arrogant look, as if the whole event were being put on for somebody else*"². Molinos never went to the stake, as suggested by the crowds; instead he was sentenced to life-imprisonment and condemnation of the sixty-eight articles, which were seen as "...heretical, suspect, erroneous, scandalous, blasphemous, offensive to pious ears, rash, as well as respectively corrosive, aversive, and seditious of Christian discipline"³. 9 years later, on the 29th of December 1696, he died in Castel Sant'Angelo.

Molinos was one of the very last in a series of Christian mystics who was condemned for heresy. In the aftermath of Molinos condemnation, mysticism was repressed and forgotten over the course of the following two centuries. It was only in the beginning of the 20th century when scholars started to take an interest in the mystics acclaimed experience of "union with the divine", that mysticism once again began to be studied. Since then the field of study has been growing steadily and different parts of the new terrain have been explored. Nevertheless it seems that still

¹ McGinn, Bernard " "Evil-sounding, Rash and Suspect of Heresy": Tensions Between Mysticism and Magisterium in the History of the Church". pp 198. Catholic Historical Review, Volume 90, number 2, April 2004,.

² Quoted in McGinn, Bernard " "Evil-sounding, Rash and Suspect of Heresy": Tensions Between Mysticism and Magisterium in the History of the Church". pp 193-212. Catholic Historical Review, Volume 90, number 2, April 2004,.
From the eyewitness Avviso Merescotii quoted in Ludwig von Pastor, "The History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages" pp. 453. St. Louis, 1940, XXXII,

³For the document of condemnation see the appendix to Molinos, Miquel de. "The Spiritual Guide" pp. 47 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

much remain to be clarified. One area which seems of particular importance for historians of religion is to investigate what role the “mystics” played in spiritual and religious renewal, and subsequently how mysticism related to the *Magisterium* – the official doctrines of the church. Is there something inherently subversive or heterodox in the mystic’s claim to direct experience of God, Jesus or the Virgin Mary which might undermine institutional religion, or has the mystic on the other hand been supportive and confirmative in relation to the mother Church?

Delineating the investigation

A simple answer to these questions doesn’t seem to have appeared with the increased research; on the contrary, both sides have been convincingly argued for. In 1973 Steven E. Ozment published his ground-breaking study *“Mysticism and Dissent”* wherein he argued for what might be called an *“inevitable theory”*. In tracking the influence of the anonymous medieval mystical work *“Theologia Deutsch”* on reformation leaders such as Thomas Münzter and Sebastian Franck, Ozment noted that mysticism:

*“... demands more than the normal institutional structures of the church can give. In the most literal sense of the words, the mystical experience is transrational and transinstitutional. And because it is such, it bears a potential anti-intellectual and anti-institutional stance, which can be adopted for the critical purpose of dissent, reform, and even revolution”*⁴

For Ozment then *“Even the most traditional, church supporting form of mystical theology carries a patent potential anti-intellectualism”*, thus implying an inherent and inevitable clash between mysticism and institutional religion. Such views are not only apparent in Ozment’s work, but seem to have been generally dominating the academic study of mysticism since its very conception, with prominent scholars such as William James, Evelyn Underhill and Aldous Huxley.

In stark contrast to this “commonplace view”⁵, as he calls it, Steven T. Katz has in his writings “rebelled” against his predecessors and colleagues in the field of study. Editing first the influential *“Mysticism and philosophical analysis”*⁶ (1978) and later *“Mysticism and religious*

⁴ Ozment, Steven E. *“Mysticism and Dissent – Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century”*. pp. 8 Yale university Press. New Haven and London. 1973

⁵ The *“Conservative” Character of Mystical Experience* in *“Mysticism and Religious Tradition”* pp 3. edited by Katz, Steven T. Oxford University Press. Oxford, New York, Toronto, Melbourne. 1983

⁶ Katz, Steven (ed) *“Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis”*. Sheldon Press. London. 1978

traditions”⁷ (1983), Katz emphasized the “*socio-cultural*” element in mysticism. Arguing from a philosophical point of view, that there is no such thing as a pure unaffected experience of “content-less” consciousness, mystical experiences are, according to Katz, “always already” culturally shaped and thus preconceived by religious symbols and dogma⁸. The mystic will in this way experience what he has been culturally brought up to expect. If that is a Christian loving father-figure and not a vast experience of a Buddhist *Nirvana* or a Hindu *Brahma*, then that is what your experience will consist of. For Katz then the religious experience is therefore normally used and interpreted in a way which “auto-confirms” dogmatic beliefs and values. In this way Katz arrives at the, for many, surprising thesis that mysticism *primarily*, although not exclusively, is a conservative force within religious traditions.

It appears then that we face a debate among scholars stressing the radical, progressive side of mysticism, claiming that it is inherently anti-institutional on the one hand and on the other hand scholars stressing the conservative auto-conformational aspect of the mystical experiences, wherein both viewpoints seem to draw their respective landmarks from the history of Christianity. From Augustine to Bernard of Clairvaux to Bonaventura, it seems clear that some of the Church’s most celebrated mystics have indeed been pillars of the Christian faith and orthodox theologians with enormous influence, thus supporting a conservative theory. However the history of Christian mysticism seems at the same time to display a tight bond with the history of heresy. Mystics such as Magurite Porete went to the stake for her convictions in 1310, Meister Eckehart had his views condemned as heretical shortly after his death in 1327 and later mystic groups such as the “Free Spirits” and the “Illuminists” (*Alumbrados*) were major targets for inquisition processes or “*Auto De Fé*” in accordingly late medieval Saxony and in counter-reformation Spain. How then are we to relate to this ambiguous relation between mysticism and heresy?

Theologian, historian and scholar of spirituality Bernard McGinn has in this regard suggested a theoretical approach that recognizes and seeks to incorporate both views⁹. According to McGinn we need to advance from a double perspective, if we are to understand the relation in a more nuanced way. One approach recognizing and investigating the historical circumstances of the

⁷ Katz, Steven (ed) “*Mysticism and Religious Tradition*”. Oxford University Press. Oxford, New York, Toronto, Melbourne. 1983

⁸ Primarily “*Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism*” in “*Mysticism and philosophical analysis*” edited by Katz, Steven T. Sheldon Press. London. 1978. And “*The “Conservative” Character of Mystical Experience*” in “*Mysticism and Religious Tradition*” Oxford University Press. Oxford, New York, Toronto, Melbourne. 1983

⁹ See the introduction to Bernard McGinn’s comprehensive five volume work “*The Presence of God*” and the article “*Evil-sounding, Rash and Suspect of Heresy*”: *Tensions Between Mysticism and Magisterium in the History of the Church*” The Catholic Historical Review, Volume 90, number 2, April 2004, pp 193-212.

mystics in order to shed light on potential tensions which might temporarily have made the Church more prone to condemn mystics. The other analyzing and highlighting certain characteristics and doctrines within mystical thought and theology which, if stressed, makes it suspect to heresy. As an example of such a “characteristic” McGinn has pointed to a doctrine that emerged in the later middle ages as part of the vocabulary of Meister Eckehart and Marguerite Porete. For Porete it was called “annihilation of the created self”, for Eckehart simply “detachment”¹⁰, or in the vernacular tone, in which Eckehart tended to preach “*abgeschiedenheit*”. Briefly put, it signified a “letting things be” (*gelassenheit*) or a “letting go” of the personal will, thus giving ones personal will to God entirely. At first sight this “letting go” can seem quite harmless or even pious, but at a closer look it seems that it fertilized the ground for condemnation, heresy and in Porete case’s, death at the stake. Despite the great efforts of Pope John XXII, this doctrine was to live on in the minds of Christian devotes in the centuries to come. One finds it explicitly stated in Tauler and Suso¹¹, and when German mysticism entered Protestantism¹², the language of “annihilation” was put to use in Spain, most eminently by the pen of St. John of the Cross, thus surviving and flourishing in the sixteenth century as a tenet in a rapidly expanding Spanish mysticism¹³. Finally we find the doctrine expounded in the end of the seventeenth century as key principle in the last great heresy movement within the Catholic Church, “Quietism”.

Being the last major mystical movement within the history of Christianity, Quietism marks the end (or at least a lengthy pause), of an extensive tradition of Christians, not just studying, but embodying, practicing and for some experientially realizing the teachings of mystical theology. Quietism never claimed to be teaching something new or original, rather they would stress that their teaching had deep roots in already accepted doctrines, thereby also proving their orthodoxy and their aspiration to remain within the borders of Holy See. Despite this intention, the movement was nonetheless fervently repressed by church authorities, and their practices quickly put to a hold. This example of a group asserting orthodoxy and then subsequently suffering a harsh response from the Vatican makes Quietism an ideal case for clarifying the alleged tension between mysticism and *Magisterium*. More specifically I will examine the condemnation of the Spanish priest Miquel de

¹⁰ For Eckehart’s doctrine on detachment see: Radler, Charlotte. “*Losing the self: Detachment in Meister and its significance for Christian-Buddhist dialogue*” Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 26. 2006, pp. 111-117

¹¹ Both followers of Eckehart, and sometimes referred to as figures within the “Rhineland mystics” or more generally “German mysticism”

¹² How this came about is what Ozment shows in his earlier mentioned “*Mysticism and Heresy*” see above for details.

¹³ For a comprehensive study on Spanish mysticism see: Peers, Alison “*Studies of the Spanish mystics*” 3 vol. London Sheldon Press. London. New York. Toronto. 1927

Molinos, who is considered as the pioneer of the movement. In light of the different theories illustrated above, one could ponder whether Molinos was a victim of his historical circumstances, or whether there was something in his doctrine that undermined church authority and thus made it inherently heretical. More briefly put: *Why were the doctrines of Miquel de Molinos condemned as heretical?*

Historiography of Miquel de Molinos and Quietism

Before immersing ourselves in the life and teaching of Miquel de Molinos it is useful to expand a bit on the historiography of Quietism and Molinos. Regardless of my claim that Quietism is a fruitful case in the study of Christian mysticism, not many scholars seem to have taken particular interest in it, and fewer still in the case of Miquel de Molinos. Indeed it can be said that he is largely forgotten today, despite his profound effect on the history of the Catholic Church¹⁴. The two leading authorities on Molinos were both Jesuit priests and wrote their respective contributions to the field of study over a half century ago; the French Paul Dudon, who wrote his “*le Quietiste Espagnol – Michel Molinos*”¹⁵ as far back as in 1921, and the English Ronald Knox whose “*Enthusiasm*”¹⁶ from 1949 treats Quietism and Molinos thoroughly, but who’s overall theme is more generally religious attitudes in the seventeenth century. Both had a rather negative and condemning view of Quietism, which they considered as an outright threat to the teachings of the Church. Similarly the catholic Scholar E.W Trueman Dicken in writing about the connection between St. John of the Cross and Quietism, rather vehemently argues that Quietism:

*“... opens the door wide to every possible type of antinomianism. It leads directly to the most obnoxious form of religious individualism, and must therefore ultimately strike at the very root of the whole doctrine of the body of Christ. As a method of spiritual direction, it cuts away the whole groundwork of prayer, demanding that even the veriest beginner should use methods which are appropriate only to those who display all three signs given by St. John of the Cross that no further effort at discursive prayer will be profitable”*¹⁷

¹⁴ Introduction to Molinos, Miquel de. “*The Spiritual Guide*” pp. 1 Paulist Press. New York. 2010, by Robert P. Baird

¹⁵ Dudon, Paul “*Le Quietiste Espagnol – Michel de Molinos*” Gabriel Beauchesne. Paris. 1921

¹⁶ Knox, Ronald “*Enthusiasm*” Oxford University Press. New York. 1950

¹⁷ Dicken, Trueman E. W “*The Crucible of Love – A Study of the Mysticism of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross*” pp. 496. Darton, Longman and Todd LTD. London. 1963

It thus seems that the early, although still authoritative, research on Molinos and Quietism has been rather one-sided in their views. Nonetheless this tendency seems to have shifted somewhat more recently. Scholars, in dealing particular with St. John of the Cross¹⁸, or mysticism in general, have been more prone to establish a connection between Molinos and St. John of the Cross, some arguing that they fundamentally taught similar doctrines, in this way exemplifying the orthodoxy of Molinos. Professor in Religion and History Jose C. Nieto writes, for example, that modern scholars have proved “...beyond doubt that the main source of Molino’s mystical inspiration came from John of the Cross, whom he quotes in extenso throughout his Defense. Thus understood Molino’s quietism is nothing else than John’s doctrine of infused contemplation...”¹⁹. Likewise the famous Jewish Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem used Quietism as an example in arguing for the decisiveness of historical circumstances in condemnations of mystics:

*“ For it was not the doctrines of quietist mysticism as originally formulated by its representatives in the Spanish church that had changed when Madame Guyon was condemned; what had changed was the historical situation. One of the most dramatic conflicts in the history of the Church shows how such a struggle can arise against the will of the leading participants, if a historical situation that has no bearing whatever on mystical doctrine makes it seem desirable ”*²⁰

It would then seem, as Nieto puts it in his review of the first critical edition of Molinos’ *Guia Espiritual*,²¹ that “...Molinos is having a second trial among Catholics and he is now found not guilty, but rather misunderstood”²².

The latest development in the research about Molinos is a new publication of his key work “*The Spiritual Guide*”²³ with the rather extensive subtitle “*That frees the soul and leads it along the interior path to reach perfect contemplation and the rich treasure of interior peace*”. “*The Guide*” was published in 2010 in the series *Classics of Western Spirituality*, and accompanied by two introductions; one by the editor of the series, aforementioned Bernard McGinn, and the other by

¹⁸ St. John of the Cross was canonized as a saint in 1738 and made Doctor of the Church in 1938. A title that only 33 can claim, thus making him a solid example of orthodoxy in regards to mystical theology.

¹⁹ Nieto, Jose D. “*Mystic, Rebel, Saint: A Study of St. John of The Cross*” pp. 131 Libraire Droz S.A. Genève. 1979

²⁰ Scholem, Gershom. “*On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*” p. 25. Schocken Books. New York. 1969

²¹ Molinos, Miquel De. “*Guia Espiritual. Edicion Critica, Introduccion y Notas*. Edited by Tellechea, José Ignacio. Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca. Madrid 1976.

²² “*Guia Espiritual (review by Jose C. Nieto)*” pp. 113-114. The Sixteenth Century Journal. Vol. 10 No. 1 (Spring 1979)

²³ Molinos, Miquel de. “*The Spiritual Guide*” Paulist Press. New York. 2010

the translator Robert P. Baird. Alongside the Spanish critical version “*Guia Espiritual*” by Tellechea from 1974, this new publication of “The Guide” will be my primary source, from which I will quote. Furthermore, in the following description of the life and times of Miquel de Molinos I will make use of Baird’s biographical data supplied with Knox’s and Dudon’s, on which Baird also heavily relies. With this said we will now delve back in time; more precisely to Rome 325 years ago where we encounter Miquel de Molinos in one of the more dreadful scenes of his life.

The Story of Miguel de Molinos

In 1663 Molinos left Valencia and his home country for Rome, with letters of introduction to several cardinals. His task was to serve his order “*The School of Christ*” as “*syndicate, agent postulator, and prosecutor*”²⁴ for the beatification of Venerable Francisco Jerónimo Simón, who’s process he was to report on. However Molinos’ activities in his first decade in Rome were not limited to serving his order. He quickly built up a wide reputation across the city as “spiritual director”; an endeavor and reputation which eventually would make him known across the Christian world as the founder of Quietism. Molinos did certainly not restrict himself to guiding his own order in spiritual matters; he paid frequent visits to the household of Christina the exiled Queen of Sweden, he corresponded with the Princess Borghese and could furthermore count Pope Innocent XI among his friends. By 1675 Molinos had to confess to his superiors in Valencia that the beatification of Venerable Simón was a dead end, and he was therefore deprived of his position and line of credit in Rome. By then he had nonetheless build up such a strong reputation and number of acquaintances that he stayed in Rome, now focused solely on spiritual guidance.

In 1675, that same year of transition, Molinos published what was to become his most famous and influential work named “*The Spiritual Guide*”. *The Guide*’s structure and content will be the topic of the next part of the paper; here we will make do with a sketch of its reception and history in the years after its publication. To say the least *The Guide* was a huge success. The Spanish original was soon followed by an Italian, and by 1685 seven editions had appeared in Italy and three in Spain. Shortly hereafter it was translated into Latin (1687), French (1688), Dutch (1688), English (1688) and German (1699). The many approbations to the work likewise testifies to its general approval and popularity. The Minister General of the Franciscans, Fray Francisco Maria writes for example that “The Guide” “... declares a sound doctrine in accordance with the sayings of the

²⁴ Molinos, Miquel de. “*The Spiritual Guide*” pp. 3 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

saints”²⁵ and that the book “...dignifies the mystical science with spiritual rules” and Fray Diego de Jesus, General prosecutor and minister states that he “...finds nothing in it that is opposed to our holy Catholic faith or to good custom. In fact, it contains a healthy and secure doctrine that will serve to guide the many thirsty souls, along the narrow path of Christian perfection”²⁶.

However, despite these praises, controversy about how sound the teachings of *The Guide* actually were arose in the wake of its popularity. Foremost Molinos and his doctrine were challenged by the popular Italian Jesuit preacher, Paolo Segneri and a group of other Jesuits who claimed that Molinos was leading people astray with his doctrine on contemplation. Instead they urged people to continue with discursive meditation or spiritual exercises as taught by St. Ignatius of Loyola. In response Molinos wrote the treatise “Defensa de la contemplacion”²⁷ defending, as the title suggest, contemplation; more specifically the orthodoxy of leaving behind meditation, at a certain stage, in order to practice a non-discursive or silent contemplation. From here the debate took leave well beyond the sphere of Miquel de Molinos. We are told by Dudon that “*The archives abound in papers of all sorts, memoires, dissertations, letters that discuss the questions raised by the new spirituality*”²⁸. Now it was not solely a question about a few doctrinal issues discussed by learned clerics, but rather how a good Christian was to practice prayer in general; were one to actively reflect upon ones sins, the passion of Christ, the mystery of the trinity and other such mental exercises, or were all these discursive methods actually just a hindrance to a more intimate relationship with God, realized in loving stillness and passivity? Such were some of the questions that roamed the minds of devout Christians in the capitol of Catholicism around 1680.

Initially it seemed as though Molinos and other so-called quietists came out of the debate victorious. In late 1681 Paolo Segneri’s book attacking quietist doctrines was prohibited by a cardinal tribunal favorable of Molinos, and subsequently put on the *index* for forbidden books. Molinos, now famous and victorious, continued to guide people in “the prayer of quiet”, but his good fortune was about to shift rapidly. No more than three years after his apparent victory, Molinos was seized in his home near the Church of San Lorenzo in Panisperna. Supposedly the guards of the holy office found no less than between twelve and twenty thousand letters, testifying to his vast correspondence. From here he was taken directly to prison, where he sat waiting for more than two years before the investigation of his errors came to a close. The rest is history so to speak, quite

²⁵ Ibid pp. 47

²⁶ Molinos, Miquel de. “*The Spiritual Guide*” pp. 50 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

²⁷ Molinos, Miquel de “*Guia Espiritual seguida de la Defensa de la contemplacion*” Barral Editores. Barcelona. 1974

²⁸ Freely translated from: Dudon, Paul “Le Quiétiste Espagnol – Michel de Molinos” pp. 114. Gabriel Beauchesne. Paris. 1921

literally. Nonetheless, one is left wondering what brought this sudden shift about; how did this Spanish preacher go from being a celebrated spiritual master with good relations to the pope, the cardinals and nobilities to becoming imprisoned, condemned and remembered with horror as an arch-heretic in the centuries to come? To find out we will first have to examine the controversial teaching of the Spaniard, which will be the intent in the following part. Subsequently we will immerse ourselves in the historical circumstances to investigate the “religious climate” of the day and potential “socio-political” circumstances which might have brought the shift about, still pursuing our initial question; why was Molinos condemned?

Part 2: A Guide to Nowhere

As stated before, if one wishes to examine the doctrine of Michael de Molinos one will find his main tenets explained in “*The Spiritual Guide*”, and not surprisingly, when we look at the papal bull, *Caelestis Pater*, condemning Molinos, we find that the vast majority of allegations are directly related to the tenets of *The Guide*. Thus a thorough acquaintance with *The Guide* seems to be crucial in understanding the cause of his condemnation. In the following pages I will try as directly as possible to capture the Guide’s essence; what were its main doctrines and how were they argued for? This, however, cannot be done in a general summary of its content; rather I will try to explore and elaborate on certain themes that I find to be most essential. In this way I will be illustrating *The Guide*’s central message, but at the expense of its full width and form of the content.

Not to totally neglect the latter, I can here point out that “The Guide” is structured as three separate books, all containing chapters and verses. Furthermore Molinos have supplied the three books with a proem and a short notice to the reader, which is worthy of a slight elaboration as it makes a good entry point into my analysis. In the notice Molinos’ intent is not only to explain the purpose with the book, rather it seems that he sets out to defend his doctrines “in advance” so to speak: “*There are some learned people who have never read of these matters and some spiritual people who have not yet tasted them. Both condemn them: the former out of ignorance, the latter from lack of experience*”²⁹ He therefore urges the reader “... *not [to] criticize this book if you do not understand it*”³⁰, explaining that a person “... *who lacks the experience of this sweetness will not be able to judge these mysterious secrets. On the contrary he*

²⁹ Molinos, Miquel de. “*The Spiritual Guide*” pp. 54 Paulist Press. New York. 2010t

³⁰ Ibid pp. 51 Paulist

will be scandalized”³¹. Likewise Molinos makes it clear that his doctrine is not in any way a new one “Sometimes I will cite, though rarely the authority of a practiced and experienced author so that you may understand that I do not teach a rare or unique doctrine”³². Accordingly Molinos is merely explaining what earlier mystics, saints and church authorities have said before him. The setting is thus in place, and the reader, including the one of this paper, warned about potential scandalous doctrines expounded beneath that might shock the innocent and credulous.

The Way of Darkness

To understand the doctrine of Molinos it can be helpful to first and foremost distinguish between two kinds of prayer. As already hinted at earlier, these are respectively an active and a discursive one. The latter is often referred to as meditation. Contrary to a contemporary eastern-influenced conceptualization, meditation in the Christian scheme of things was always *reflection* about something. Take for example Jesus’ life, passion and death. Here one can mentally visualize the different scenes of his life or death; trying in this way to interiorize and strengthen the feeling of, say gratefulness for his suffering for our sins. Meditation is in this sense reflective and discursive; operating with mental images, objects and emotions. A key example of this form of prayer can be found in the “*Spiritual exercises*” as conceived by the founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius Loyola. In the *exercises* the goal is to intensely reflect on certain aspects of Christian dogma in order to interiorize them, so one might live by them in ones affairs.

The other form of prayer is on the contrary a passive, quiet and non-reflective one, most generally referred to as contemplation. In contemplation one tries to still the discursive mind by quieting oneself, ones thoughts and emotions; hence it is sometimes termed as “the prayer of quiet”. In this form of prayer one lets go of all inner talk, mental images or reflection – one merely sits silently seemingly doing nothing but remaining open and letting go of whatever arises in the mind. The emphasis in “*The Guide*” lies heavily on contemplation. Molinos doesn’t seem very appreciative of meditation, when he for example states that, “*All corporeal and sensible images are infinitely far from God*”³³ or when he asks, “*How can you hear the pure and divine spirit in the midst of artificial considerations and discourses?*”³⁴ Instead you need to let your soul rest and “...love God as he is in himself, not as the imagination forms and describes

³¹ Ibid pp. 51 Paulist

³² Molinos, Miquel de. “*The Spiritual Guide*” pp. 53 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

³³ Ibid pp. 57

³⁴ Ibid pp. 165

him³⁵. Not discarding meditation completely, Molinos does leave room for discursive prayer, but it is clear that he regards it as a practice for beginners; a stage that must be transcended if the soul is to reach its goal; union with God.

On this contemplative path to perfection not only mental images, distinctions and reflections are to be left behind, but also those spiritual consolations, ecstasies, raptures and visions, which many of the mystics have left testimony about, are to be discarded if one is to reach perfection. Here again it is possible to distinguish not only between meditation and contemplation, but also between different kinds of contemplation; one sometimes referred to as the “way of lights” consisting of visions, ecstasies and often accompanied by a certain spiritual pleasure or sweetness; the other, “the way of darkness”, described as arid, desolate, tempted and obscure. Again according to Molinos the latter is the most perfect, for here one does not attach oneself to feelings or sensations, but instead one walks in darkness and pure faith, while one abandons one's desire and need for consolations and supernatural knowledge. In this manner one negates whatever arises in one's mind, always being careful not to cling to sweet emotions, feelings of devotion or visions of any sort which merely entertains the soul. Molinos therefore gives the following advice *“Do not seek to know anything, and do not look for gifts, tenderness or sensible devotion. Do not desire anything but divine approval; otherwise you will only go in circles”*³⁶.

This distaste for visions, ecstasies and raptures is part of what Molinos calls “the purging of the spirit”. In a way very similar to what St. John of the Cross before him depicted as “the dark night of the soul”, Molinos describes how the soul must go through horrible and terrifying tribulations in order to be purged and made ready for union:

*“Invisible enemies will persecute you with scruples, with libidinous suggestions and impure thoughts, and with incentives to impatience, pride, rage, malediction, and blasphemy of the name of God, his sacraments, and his holy mysteries. You will feel a great tepidity, tedium and annoyance toward the things of God; an obscurity and darkness in the understanding...”*³⁷

According to Molinos this is not at all anything negative for the person contemplating. Rather it is a necessary and skillful means with which God humbles the soul, which must be cleansed and purified from all self-cherishing activity. One therefore needs to confront the very roots that give rise to sin

³⁵ Ibid pp. 56

³⁶ Molinos, Miquel de. *“The Spiritual Guide”* pp. 76 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

³⁷ Ibid pp. 78

and evil. In other words one must bring to surface all that is lurking in what, with a modern psychological term, could be called the “unconscious” or “the shadow of the psyche”; an encounter which is not always very pleasant. Indeed you “... *will appear to yourself as the most miserable creature, the worst sinner, the most abhorred by God, stripped of all virtue, nearly suffering the pain of hell*”³⁸. The goal and intention with all these tribulations is to find the passage into ones nothingness, where “...*you will know that you are nothing and can do nothing, not even have a good thought*”³⁹. One is then humbled in such a degree that one lets go of oneself, or to put it more strongly; one abandon and annihilate one- “*self*” in order to give oneself fully to God. We have thus arrived at what I consider to be the goal and apex of Molinos’ teaching; the detachment from “self”.

Annihilating the Self

The notion of self-annihilation is crucial to understand, if one wants to penetrate the doctrine of Quietism. Indeed, as we pointed out earlier, it can be seen as a central notion in the line of Christian mysticism originating in the medieval ages with Eckehart and Porete, developed in Spain by John of the Cross, and praised accordingly here again at the pen of Molinos. So what does this peculiar annihilation of the self entail? How does it come about? And what are the effects once you, or rather the “you” that is absent, succeeds in this strange endeavor? To begin with Molinos gives us a good description of the crux of the practice:

*“To be perfect in the soul this annihilation must happen in your own judgment, in your will, in your affections, your inclinations, your desires, your thoughts, and in yourself, in such a way that your soul finds itself dead to wanting, desiring, obtaining, understanding and thinking. It should want as if it did not want, desire as if it did not desire, understand as if it did not understand, and think as if it did not think, all the while not inclining itself to anything and embracing scorn as much as honors, benefits as much as chastisements”*⁴⁰

What Molinos is descreying here is a radical letting go; a radical acceptance of everything that comes ones way, the point being that everything thus will become divine. Once ones personal will is gone,

³⁸ Molinos, Miquel de. “*The Spiritual Guide*” pp. 146 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

³⁹ Ibid pp. 85

⁴⁰ Ibid pp. 177

no form of events in life, whether interior or exterior, is deemed as bad: *“light is as agreeable as darkness, night as day, affliction as consolation. In this holy and celestial indifference it [the soul] loses no peace in adversity or tranquility in tribulation”*⁴¹. On the contrary one might end up being glad when one is scorned, happy when one is forgotten and grateful when “bad” things come onrdr way – all is seen as a courtesy of divine mercy⁴². So called “negative” events will in this fashion just provide the impediment to deepen ones annihilation and capacity for resting in what Molinos calls our nothingness: *“We look for our own selves whenever we leave nothingness, and because of this, we never reach the quiet and perfect contemplation. Enter truly in your nothingness, and you will be upset by nothing”*⁴³.

If we think that annihilation has anything to do with self-mortification and penances we are gravely mistaken. Although penances, if practiced modestly, can be good for beginners, it will not get one closer to annihilating the self. On the contrary:

*“...they will not even take one step toward perfection, as is proven by the experience of people who, after fifty years of exterior exercise, find themselves empty of God, full of themselves, and spiritual in name alone”*⁴⁴

With these forms of indiscreet penances; hair shirts, whips and the like, Christians go about thinking of themselves as spiritual or as devout, not realizing that they are actually just sowing the seed of self-love instead of uprooting it. It is a tricky business uprooting the will, for what kind of action is not an act of the will? Try to get rid of the will, and one will soon realize that this intention is also an act of the will. Thus trying exteriorly to beat oneself into submission is certainly a gross misunderstanding. Even the aspiration to become “spiritual” or to “attain union” is in this sense missing the mark, because it is still a desire; an act of the personal will. In this way one not only have to detach oneself from the “self”, with all its subtle ways of making itself manifest, but likewise the very notion of God is to be left behind and discarded on the way to union. As Molinos explains:

⁴¹ Molinos, Miquel de. *“The Spiritual Guide”* pp. 181 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

⁴² Ibid pp. 79

⁴³ Ibid pp. 178

⁴⁴ Ibid pp. 138

“The Person who comes to the mystical science must detach himself from and deny himself five kinds of things. The first is created things, the second is temporal things, the third is the very gifts of the Holy Spirit, the fourth is himself, and the fifth is God himself. This last is the most perfect, because the soul that knows how to detach itself thus is one who has come to lose itself in God. Only one who comes to lose himself in such a way is certain to find himself”⁴⁵

If one upholds and clings to the idea of “God” as an object, opposed to a subject “me”, then one simultaneously uphold duality, and then it becomes difficult to see how you can attain perfect union. You might have a “uniting” or what some mystics has described as “a spiritual marriage”, but a total absorption in “oneness” will be impossible without negating the very notion of “God”. Only when you move beyond the concept of God, will you realize true union. It is here that our normal ways of talking breaks down, or falls short one might say – hence the reluctance from many mystics to describe their experience. The description of the mystical union inevitably comes out as a failure, because language will inherently always be dual; dividing the world into fragments, so we can distinguish and make sense of it. Likewise one finds Molinos insisting that we move beyond our conceptual mind in order to realize the oneness of things. Therefore a well educated scholastic theologian with loads of learned concepts in the head will often have more difficulties realizing this wisdom beyond words, than a “simpleton”:

“Holiness does not come from forming high and subtle concepts about the knowledge and attributes of God: it comes from the love of God and the denial of one’s own will. Because of this, holiness is more usually found in the simple and humble than in the learned. How many little old men are poor in human learning and most rich in divine love! How many vain theologians go submerged in their vain wisdom and are most poor in true light and charity”⁴⁶

This is the root to understanding, why Molinos prefers the prayer of quiet; if one wants to experience God as he is “in himself” no concepts or image, however subtle or illumined, will suffice. On the contrary, they will surely mislead and deceive people. Prayer should therefore be an emptying of the mind – a clearing of the clouds so that one might behold and merge with the sky –

⁴⁵ Molinos, Miquel de. *“The Spiritual Guide”* pp. 175 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

⁴⁶ Ibid pp. 173

and life a continual detachment and dis-identification from one's own thoughts, ideas and values in order to deepen this divine unknowing.

Losing distinction

Finally, one can wonder what this sort of continual negation leads to. Is one to leave aside eternal salvation as well? And what about the good old Christian virtues, such as hope and charity, and doing well in the eyes of God? Just how far down the road to value monism does this sort of seeing "God in all things" take us? Although Molinos does not state it directly, it seems quite clear that one is fooling oneself if one is concerned about salvation. Statements such as: "*Want nothing and nothing will disturb you*"⁴⁷ and "*Your yearning should only be for indifference, resignation, and forgetting*"⁴⁸ leave one quite clear that thoughts about attaining heaven is just another guise in which self-love clothes itself. When one detaches oneself from God, one also detaches oneself from the thought of salvation – deliberately and permanently excluding it from one's thoughts because it arises from a self-centered perspective. Molinos is not arguing that salvation does not exist, but only that it does not have to disturb and trouble one's mind – if so, it becomes yet another hindrance. Sadly, the desire to attain becomes the main obstacle hindering our attainment. Indeed, if we were to realize this and give our desire up completely, we would be able to experience heaven here and now, on this very earth and in this very body, and not in some distant and dreamy afterlife; no says Molinos: "*Loving Jesus has his paradise here in this interior retreat, to which we can rise while still existing and conversing here on earth*"⁴⁹. Accordingly, salvation is something we can achieve while still alive, not by trying to live a life of strict obedience and penance, but by giving up our attachments and living a life free of "self". When we follow the notion through to the end, the emphasis on total detachment turns the whole discipline and ethics of Catholicism around, because it is not the act itself that is deemed as inherently good or bad, but on the contrary the motivation behind it that counts. Or put more precisely; whether there is an absence of motivation.

*"Scarcely will you have seen yourself in a fervent new light when you will want to put yourself to work for the benefit of souls. But there is a great risk that what appears to you as pure zeal is really self-love"*⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Molinos, Miquel de. "*The Spiritual Guide*" pp. 163 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

⁴⁸ Ibid pp. 166

⁴⁹ Ibid pp. 170

⁵⁰ Molinos, Miquel de. "*The Spiritual Guide*" pp. 106 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

In this way one sees again that the notions of good and bad are relative and not absolute; virtues can be a subtle way of deceiving ourselves, and vices can become the very source and nutrition of our transformation. God in his ineffable wisdom is constructing “...a ladder to climb to heaven not only out of the virtues but also out of the vices and passions with which the devil tries to throw us into the abyss”⁵¹. One is stunned by the radicalism of Molinos’ thought. In the final stages of the mystical path, it seems that we must let go, not only of our proprietary interest in our own virtues, but of the virtues themselves. Thus not solely conforming ourselves to God’s will, but indeed becoming and transforming ourselves into God:

*“Oh what a happy soul that finds itself thus dead and annihilated! Already it is not living in itself, because God lives in it; already with all truth it can say that it is another restored phoenix, because it has been changed, spiritualized, transformed and deified”*⁵²

Such is the end and goal of the mystical path as apprehended by Molinos; man is able to become God. Or differently put; the innermost being of man is already divine; he is just blinded to the fact by his own self-love and vanity. With this drastic notion we conclude our treatment of Molinos’ “*Guia Espiritual*”, taking with us the distinction between different kinds of prayer, Molinos’ depiction of the horrifying dark night of the soul, the centrality of “self-annihilation”, its implication for the idea of salvation and finally its consequences for the apprehension of virtue.

Part 3: A Web of Contingency

Last time we left the life story of Molinos, we posed the question; how did this Spanish preacher go from being a celebrated spiritual master with good relations to the pope, the cardinals and nobilities to becoming imprisoned, condemned and remembered with horror as an arch-heretic in the centuries to come? Although we now have a clearer picture about how his teaching could be applied in a manner subversive to Christian authority and ecclesiastical structure, we still have to respond to scholars of mysticism such as Scholem, who claims that condemnations of Molinos’ kind “*depend entirely on historical circumstances*”⁵³. Summarizing once again the point that St. John of the Cross and other mystics before him taught very similar doctrines without the painstaking effect that fell

⁵¹ Ibid pp. 135

⁵² Ibid pp. 177

⁵³ Scholem, Gershom. “*On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*” p. 24. Schocken Books. New York. 1969

upon Molinos. In the following chapter I will explore what kind of “*circumstances*” that might have been decisive for the destiny of Molinos and the quietist doctrines at large.

Firstly we will take a short look at what one could call the “religious climate” of Rome in the 1680, and thereafter I will elaborate on the “socio-political” affairs of Molinos’ day.

Spiritual Greed and Suspicion

Looking at the religious climate in Rome about 1680 and searching for tendencies that could have influenced the proceedings on Molinos, it seems that one has to take notice of at least two important factors; “*the alumbrado scare*” and the “*experientialism*” of the times. By “the alumbrado scare” I want to suggest an awareness in the minds of clergymen, about what dangers and misconceptions the so-called “alumbrados” (“illuminists”) had led to in Spain in the end of the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth century. Still much is uncertain about the alumbrados; nonetheless they seem to have taught, that it was possible for a man to attain such a perfect union with God that he passes utterly beyond sin, justifying every act as the will of God⁵⁴. Though much doubt exists about their doctrine and whether it was heterodox at all, they were harshly condemned by the Spanish Inquisition, thus giving rise to a certain climate of suspicion regarding mysticism and inward prayer; a suspicion and atmosphere that presumably was carried on into the late seventeenth century and had an effect on Molinos. In his *Enthusiasm* Knox is at least not afraid of lending weight to this argument:

*“The condemnation of the Alumbrados has a definite importance for the story of Quietism (...) [it] produced a scare in the public mind, which was thenceforth prepared to suspect illuminism wherever a mystical tradition spread beyond convent walls and took on the form of a popular cult”*⁵⁵

The claim that the alumbrados was a topic of discussion even of scare, and furthermore that Molinos was associated with the movement, becomes more substantial and thus more likely, when reading Molinos’ aforementioned “*Defensa de la Contemplacion*”. Herein he is explicitly concerned with distinguishing his own teaching from that of the alumbrados:

⁵⁴ For more on the Alumbrados see ”Hamilton, A. H. “*Heresy and mysticism in Sixteenth-century Spain: The Alumbrados*” Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1992.

⁵⁵ Knox, Ronald ”*Enthusiasm*” pp. 242 Oxford University Press. New York. 1950

*“To make it more clear, one will now see the error of the alumbrados, their idleness, suspension and quietude (...) With which one clearly sees what difference there was between this idleness of the alumbrados toward the prayer of quiet and the contemplation that the saints and mystics taught”*⁵⁶

Whether this link between the alumbrados and Molinos was a determining factor for the condemnation of Molinos is doubtful, but that it had significance in what we here have termed the “religious climate” seems very likely.

Passing now to our second point, that of “*experientialism*”, it seems that most scholars are also prone to describe the period as one longing for spiritual “experiences”, and the Italian a public of Molinos’ day as one with special “*greed for new forms of spirituality*” to use the words of Knox. A brief look at the work of Denys Turner might be helpful in clarifying this tendency. In his book *The Darkness of God; Negativity In Christian Mysticism* Turner suggest that the *apophatic* or *negative* tradition within Christian mysticism gradually was transformed, or rather distorted, by what he calls “*experientialism*”; a term which he explains as follows

*“The deformations of the ‘experientialist’ derive from, the mistake of reinterpreting as a first-order practice of Christian piety that which is the second-order dialectic practiced upon and within that piety; from the error of understanding that which is a ‘moment’ of reserve, of denial and unknowing within worship, prayer and sacrament as if it were a rival practice which displaces that Christian ordinariness. ‘Experientialism’ in its most extreme forms is therefore the displacement of a sense the negativity of all religious experience with the pursuit of some goal achieving negative experiences”*⁵⁷

Turner is arguing here that the negative tradition, which Molinos draws so heavily on, never was intended to bring about certain “mystical experiences” and lesser still was it to advocate a certain type of prayer exterior of normal worship. In fact, this “*experientialism*” was according to Turner paradoxically the very opposite of what Pseudo-Dionysius conceived of in the sixth century as a way

⁵⁶Molinos, Miquel de. *“Guia Espiritual seguida de la Defensa de la Contemplacion – Por primera vez impresa”* pp.306 and 308 Ed. Jose Angel Valente. Barral editores. Barcelona. 1974

⁵⁷ Turner, Denys. *“The Darkness of God; Negativity in Christian Mysticism”* pp. 259. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1995

of *negating* religious experiences. Although Turner sees this shift taking place already in the High Middle Ages, it is not impossible to find similar tendencies in late seventeenth century. One source in particular stands out in this regard; a letter from the archbishop of Naples, Cardinal Caraccioli, to Pope Innocent XI, dated 30 January in the Lord's year 1682. In it one finds a remarkable complaint about certain tendencies in his diocese:

*"Recently, celestial father, in Naples, and as I am informed also other places in this kingdom, there has frequently been practiced the so-called inner prayer, as some call the pure faith or the prayer of quiet. They readily call themselves quietists, they neither make use of the existing meditation or faithful prayers, but when they pray they keep in silence and quiet, as if they were deaf or dead; they claim that they practice a totally passive prayer. They strain themselves to remove their spirit and their eyes from all that can give rise to thought and reflection, instead subjecting themselves, as they say, to the light of God and the infusion that they expect from heaven, without following any rule or instruction and without preparing themselves by reading or beholding anything what so ever"*⁵⁸

The despaired archbishop is furthermore complaining that the so-called quietists are discarding normal religious practice entirely, rejecting to pray by the rosary, to make the sign of the cross, to confess and so on. Likewise, in his short article on Molinos from 1906, Henry Lea writes, giving account his sources: *"It was observed that at mass the mystic devotees did not raise their eyes at the elevation of the Host or gaze on the holy images, but pursued uninterruptedly their mental prayer"*⁵⁹. What we have here is then "the prayer of quiet" practiced as an independent, exclusive and subversive form of religious behavior, and indeed by nuns and monks expecting to experience *"the light of God"* or *"infusion from heaven"* as Caraccioli puts it.

It is not difficult to imagine how the practice could have caught on in an environment hungry for new forms of spirituality - tired of old, dry and exterior ways of obedience. Accounts of union and deification could indeed have sounded like sweet angelic music in the ears of monks and nuns already resigned to a life in servitude of God. Why not abandon the old beaten tracks of

⁵⁸ Freely Translated from; Scarling, Carl Emil *"Michael Molinos og quietismens begyndelse"*. pp. 72. Sankt Angars Forlags Bogtrykkeri. 1994. Copenhagen. The book is composed of excerpts from Scharlings original manuscript *"Mystikeren Michael Molinos's Lære og Skæbne"* Published in 1852. Copenhagen. Segments from the same letter is published in: Dudon, Paul *"Le Quiétiste Espagnol – Michel de Molinos"* pp. 150 Gabriel Beauchesne. Paris. 1921

⁵⁹ Lea, Henry Charles *"Molinos and the Italian Mystics"* at pp. 251 *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Jan., 1906) pp 243-262

discursive prayer, and instead try out the silent and secret path of the mystic? Not only ordained people caught on to the “prayer of quiet”, but according to what appears to be the first scholarly treatment of Molinos done by the 19th century Danish theologian, Carl Emil Scharling: “*an enormous amount of people of both sexes, of every age, and of the most different social layers were drawn to Molinos’ teaching on beholding and the inner prayer*”⁶⁰. In this sense the anti-intellectual and practical nature of Molinos’ teaching, that stressed the importance of “unknowing”, gave way for all too liberal interpretations. Quotes such as “*Christ our Lord constantly taught perfection to all. He always wanted everyone to be perfect, especially the unlearned and simpletons*”⁶¹, could well be misunderstood as validating, or even encouraging, the practice of contemplation for complete beginners in the life of prayer. Along with this practice all kinds of mischievous behavior could furthermore be justified under the guise of sanctioned mystical theology – a theology that was perhaps never meant to climb outside the convent walls, or at least never meant to be practiced without a spiritual director who was experienced in mystical theology. In this sense one could make a strong argument that Molinos was no more than a scapegoat for enclosing a larger and unmanageable dissemination of Quietism; the cause of a symptom with which he had no control, thus falling victim for the misrepresentations of a spiritually greedy public, trying to imitate the great mystics and simply getting it wrong.

A Battle of Giants

We shall now raise our gaze from the common devout Christian in the convent, to the court of “The Sun King” Louis XIV and the Vatican City of Innocent XI – in this argument, Molinos can be seen not as a scapegoat, but rather a mere pond, in a chess game of much larger proportions than initially imagined. As we shall see a stunning intricacy and interconnectedness reveals itself upon looking at Molinos’ case.

We mentioned briefly in “*The Story of Molinos*” that our spiritual director was met with opposition from the Jesuits; foremost the celebrated priest Paolo Segneri, who most likely was driven by Molinos’ emphasis on contemplation and disregard for meditation, including the discursive “*spiritual exercises*” as taught by the Jesuit founder, Ignatio of Loyola. As we saw Molinos came out of this attack victorious; Segneri was silenced, and his book put on the *index*.

⁶⁰ Freely Translated from; Scarling, Carl Emil “*Michael Molinos og quietismens begyndelse*”. pp. 102. Sankt Angars Forlags Bogtrykkeri. 1994. Copenhagen. The book is composed of excerpts from Scharlings original manuscript “*Mystikeren Michael Molinos’s Lære og Skæbne*” Published in 1852

⁶¹ Molinos, Miquel de. “*The Spiritual Guide*” pp. 69 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

Thus the Jesuits were confronted with a movement that didn't have particular interest in debate, claiming that mystical theology was a science of practice and not theory, and whose leader and doctrines grew more and more in popularity – not only in the public, but within the Vatican as well. According to *the papacy: an encyclopedia*: “*The pope did not hide a certain sympathy for Molinos*”⁶², and accordingly there was even talk of promoting Molinos to cardinal⁶³. Therefore Fioriani, the author of the article on Innocent XI, also seems quite baffled about the rapid change of opinion of Molinos, saying that “... *it is difficult to understand the role of Innocent XI, and it was opportunism that led him to adopt certain positions*”⁶⁴. Although the case is an obscure one “*opportunism*” seems like a vague answer. To avoid such a statement one must not look further, than to the Society of Jesus; stronghold and defenders of post-reformation Catholicism. Dissatisfied with the success of Molinos and his doctrine, it seems that the Jesuits cunningly took advantage of the tense relationship between Louis XIV and Pope Innocent XI. There are several reasons why Louis XIV and Innocent XI had a bad standing. First of all there was the dispute about the so-called *regalia* – the right of the King to decide and govern over certain aspects of religious life in his dioceses; fundamentally a dispute about the gradual “nationalization” of the church, signaling the transition of authority from the Vatican to independent “States”. Secondly the pope had supported and sympathized with the Janseits at Port-Royal, thus opposing the Jesuits and the Sun King on a prior occasion. And finally it became more and more clear that Innocent XI supported Spain, Austria and the house of Habsburg against the grandiose plans of Louis XIV⁶⁵ and the Bourbons. As the Jesuits had a major influence in the court of Louis XIV, the Italian segment allegedly procured the Jesuit confessor of Louis XIV, Father La Chaise, to have a word with the Sun King about the perceived danger of Quietism.⁶⁶ Louis XIV, already working on an annulment of the Edict of Nantes⁶⁷ thus proving himself to all Europe as a “Most Christian King”⁶⁸, was not to dismiss the proposal of La Chaise – a proposal that not only suited his religious image, but which also would

⁶² Fioriani, Luigi. “Innocent XI” *”The Papacy; an encyclopedia”*. pp 806 Ed. Phillippe Levillain. Routledge. New York and London. 2002

⁶³Ibid. pp 806

⁶⁴ Ibid pp 806

⁶⁵ For more on the relationship between Louis XIV and Innocent XI see Orcibal, Jean “*Louis XIV Contre Innocent XI; les appels au future concile 1688 et l’opinion francaise*”. J. Vrin. Paris. 1949

⁶⁶ On this connection see Lea, Henry Charles “Molinos and the Italian Mystics” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Jan., 1906) pp 252 and “Scarling, Carl Emil “*Michael Molinos og quietismens begyndelse*”. pp. 81-82. Sankt Angars Forlags Bogtrykkeri. 1994.Copenhagen.

⁶⁷ Edict made in 1598 by Henry IV of France allowing for more religious liberty for Protestants in France

⁶⁸ Renoux, Christian. “Quietism” in *”The Papacy; an encyclopedia”*. pp 1267 Ed. Phillippe Levillain. Routledge. New York and London. 2002

allow him to counteract his long time opponent Innocent XI. In this way Versailles became interested in the downfall of Miquel de Molinos.

Cardinal D'Estrees, the French ambassador in Rome, was the one who was assigned to the case. D'Estress, who on prior occasion had expressed the utmost admiration and warm-heartedness for Molinos, was in other words to; "...*labor unceasingly for the removal of the scandal caused by the teaching of Molinos*"⁶⁹, in this way suddenly switching sides and becoming his friends unrelenting persecutor. Although the inner motives for D'Estress remain hidden, it is certain, that he was the one, who accused Molinos to the Pope; making use of old private letters sent between them and highlighting controversial passages from *The Guide*. For Innocent XI, there was now no way of escaping further inquiry into the theories of Molinos, and allegedly without uttering a word he transferred the case to the inquisition⁷⁰. D'Estrees now presented the same material to the inquisition, confessing his connection to Molinos, but shrewdly claiming that it had all been a masquerade with the secret intention of gathering evidence in order to eliminate the dangerous heresy from within⁷¹. Not very noble behavior of a presumably well renowned man, but also an explanation that today seems quite unrealistic. As Scharling expresses, it is probably more likely that D'Estrees was merely following orders and possibly, that he over time had come to change his opinion about the quietist movement – perhaps, as we saw, due to the rapid spread of the doctrine and the conduct it accordingly gave rise to. D'Estress was certainly not the only one of Molinos' former friends that abandoned him in these crucial years when his luck started to run out; the wind had shifted and it was time to change ships. As the Inquisition began their proceedings, "mutiny" came out into the open, and the cardinal hat was replaced by a life-sentence in Castel Sant' Angelo.

It can then also be argued and emphasized that the Jesuits, Louis XIV and his Vatican ambassador had a decisive impact on the condemnation of Molinos. Remembering "the alumbardo scare", "the spiritual greed" of his day and finally the influence by the Jesuits and the Sun King a thorough argument for the role of historical circumstances has now been made. Are we saying then, that Molinos was but a mere fly caught in a spiders web of contingency? Or are we on the other hand to discard the temporal affairs and emphasize the allegedly inherent subversive nature of

⁶⁹ Lea, Henry Charles "Molinos and the Italian Mystics" pp 252 *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Jan., 1906) pp 252

⁷⁰ Scarling, Carl Emil "*Michael Molinos og quietismens begyndelse*" . pp. 83. Sankt Angars Forlags Bogtrykkeri. 1994.Copenhagen

⁷¹ Scarling, Carl Emil "*Michael Molinos og quietismens begyndelse*" . pp. 83-84. Sankt Angars Forlags Bogtrykkeri. 1994.Copenhagen

mysticism? In the final chapter of this paper we will broaden our view a bit, and apply our new gained knowledge to discuss the different theories expounded at the outset of the paper.

Chapter 4; A Joint Effort

In this final chapter the aim is to integrate the two seemingly opposed theories; one claiming the inherent subversiveness of mysticism and the other stressing the historical circumstances. My intent is to show that these explanations are not mutually exclusive, but rather that they actually rely on each other for heresy to arise. I therefore want to suggest that any explanation of the relation between mysticism and heresy necessarily demands both views in order to be complete. In other words the scholar of mysticism and the historian will have to come together in order to account for “mystical heresy”.

Nonetheless this suggestion needs some clarifying. Firstly of what we signify with “the inherent subversiveness of mysticism”; what kind of mysticism are we talking about? And just how is it subversive? Secondly we need to expound on what kind of “historical circumstances” we mean to imply – is it for instance possible to highlight certain “circumstances”, which seem to be more crucial than others? Or is this completely arbitrary? To keep the order the scholar of mysticism will have the first word, and then the historian will conclude the chapter, before they hopefully manage to come together in a joint conclusion.

Defining the ineffable

One of the major problems within the study of mysticism is that, despite considerable effort and many attempts, a clear definition of “mysticism” still has not been articulated.⁷² The term “mysticism” is not something that the mystics themselves utilized, but rather a construction which modern scholars in the end of the nineteenth century loosely used to describe certain religious experiences. According to Turner “...the idea that there is a ‘mysticism’ or that there are practitioners of it, ‘mystics’, is an idea of very recent provenance, perhaps as recently as our century itself”⁷³. Molinos for example never talks about “mysticism” but rather of “mystical theology” or “mystical union”. This loose usage of the term “mysticism” has been helpful in order to

⁷² A discussion of this is found in McGinn, Bernard: “Mystical Consciousness; A Modest Proposal” pp 44-63 in *Spiritus: A journal of Christian Spirituality*. Volume 8, number 1, Spring 2008

⁷³ Turner, Denys. “*The Darkness of God; Negativity in Christian Mysticism*” pp. 260. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1995 On the etymology of “mysticism”. See also Certeau, Michel “*The Mystic Fable*” The University of Chicago Press. 1992

compare and include all kinds of “unitive experiences” not just in Christianity, but in world religions as such. On the other hand it looks as if it has created a good deal of terminological confusion as well. Therefore the need for distinguishing and specifying different kinds of “mysticisms” seems to have been apparent. To quote the seminal work of Katz:

*“Care must be taken to note that even the plurality of experience found in Hindu, Christian Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist mystical traditions, etc., have to be broken down into smaller units. Thus we find for example in Hinduism monistic, pantheistic, and theistic trends, while Christianity knows both absorptive and non-absorptive forms of mysticism.”*⁷⁴

Thus a statement like “*mysticism is inherently subversive*” becomes very broad and unclear. We have to specify. Looking at Christian mysticism it is possible to distinguish, at the very least, between two lines of mysticism – what Katz here calls absorptive and non-absorptive, but which I prefer to call dualist and non-dual mysticism.

The dualist mysticism is what one finds in authors such as Bernhard of Clairvaux, Ruysbroek and Teresa of Avila – a *love* and *will* based mysticism, often characterized by brief experiences of rapture, ecstasy and visions. Here you typically find the mystical experience described as a “spiritual marriage” between the soul and its spouse. When at its highest, it daringly plays with the erotic imagery from the Song of Songs, which is used to describe the intimate feeling of union. Although it may reach heights bordering to heterodoxy, this kind of erotic mysticism never constituted a real threat to institutional Christianity. As Katz argued, it seems it actually affirms orthodoxy, because the experiences tended to be determined by concepts and ideas already culturally shaped, thus “auto-confirming” dogmas. More fundamental, I believe, to explain why this type of mysticism never constituted a danger is the fact that it maintained a *dualism* between creator and the created. Although united as closely as the heart could desire, mystics such as Ruysbroek, Teresa of Avila or Bernhard of Clairvaux never claimed to be numerically one with God. In the language of sexual union, distinction always remained and thus the complete “one-ing” was never attained.

The other type of mysticism, the absorptive as Katz calls it, tended on the other hand to transgress dualism and move into the no-thingness of *non-duality*. This is what could be called been called “apophatic mysticism”, where the soul achieves not just temporal union of two entities, but rather full divinization by the absolute *via negativa*. The central idea is not to cling to a certain idea

⁷⁴ Katz, S.T “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism” pp. 27 in “*Mysticism and philosophical analysis*” edited by Katz, Steven T. Sheldon Press. London. 1978.

of God, but rather to transcend every thought of the divine. As Meister Eckehart puts it “*I pray to God that I may be free from God, because my innermost being is above God*”⁷⁵. Contrary to the love and will mysticism, non-dual mystics will often criticize and depreciate visions and locutions with the warning not to create any conceptual and thus limited construction of God. The foundation of this mysticism was laid mainly by the 6th century peculiar figure of Pseudo-Dionysus, who’s “*Mystical Theology*” was heavily drawn upon by later apophatic mystics. Perhaps it was expounded most famously by Meister Eckehart in the beginning of the 14th century and later by St. John of the Cross in the 16th century Spain. Taken our analysis of *The Guide* into account it hopefully doesn’t come as a surprise that Molinos is indebted to this apophatic tradition and not the love, will and vision based of Bernhard of Clairvaux. With this distinction between dual and non-dual mysticism, much terminological confusion has been avoided, and we will now turn to the question about why and how *non-dual* mysticism (and not merely any type of mysticism) can become subversive to institutional Christianity.

Non-duality in the history of Christianity

If practiced consequently, the apophatic dialectics will negate and therefore transgress even the notion of two parts uniting, thus arriving at complete oneness with God, where separation all together disappears. Here in “*the ground*” (*grunt*), as Eckehart called it, there is no longer any lover and beloved, but rather a no-thingness, where distinction, language and form dissolves. Contrary to the teachings of orthodox Christianity the gulf between God and man and creator and creation is thus eradicated. Instead the mystic is left *deified*; his being completely transformed into God. Likewise, from a non-dual “*view*”⁷⁶ the distinctions between heaven and earth are basically false opposites; instead paradise is to be revealed here on earth. More so, the non-dual mystic will finally have to let go of the distinction between good and bad, replacing it with a sort of “*value-monism*”, where everything is seen as divine. As we can see, it seems clear that this non-duality is in its core subversive to any institutional religion claiming monopoly to mediate between God and man – indeed, for the non-dual mystic there was never any real gulf between God and man, and therefore ultimately no need for a bridge. For a radical non-dualist as Eckehart, institutions therefore had

⁷⁵Freely translated from Eckehart, Meister “*Prædikener og Traktater*” s. 55. Sankt Ansgars Forlag. København

⁷⁶ A paradox because the non-dual view will always negate “*views*”, thus a “*non-dual view*” would be yet another view that had to be negated. This is what one could call the “*view of no view*” or the “*emptiness of emptiness*”. For more on this see: Huntington, C.W “*The Emptiness of Emptiness; an introduction to early Indian Madhyamika*” University of Hawaii Press. Honolulu. 1989.

worth only to the extent to which they assisted the seeker to realize non-duality. As Ozment puts it “institutions existed, so to speak, to be used against institutions”⁷⁷.

The above description is non-duality in its pure form, or rather formlessness.

Nonetheless, the non-dual mystic will always have to make his way back to form in order to express his experience. He will try to convey his ineffable experience in a more or less radical manner dependent on how daring or rebellious he is, and how much he is pressured by his contemporary theologians and ecclesiastical structures. Therefore one seldom finds non-duality expressed directly in Christianity, but rather one finds leanings toward non-duality. Eckehart perhaps comes closest to a pure non-dualist. What we are saying here is then that even though non-dual mysticism is a flat contradiction to institutional Christianity, it was not always sufficient cause for heresy. Again one has to specify. What is subversive need not become heresy. Going back to the roots, as the literal meaning of *radical* implies, one can indeed argue that non-duality paradoxically is at the very core of Christianity. It doesn't require fanciful or creative biblical exegesis to demonstrate that Jesus, at least on occasion, taught a non-dual doctrine: “*The kingdom of God is within you*” (Luke 21:10), “*I have told you: You are Gods*” (Joh 10:34) and “*I and the Father are one*” (Joh:10:31) - where after the Jews once again picked up their stones in order to punish him for blasphemy. Ironically, you could claim that the whole construction of Christianity began, and was build upon, a heretic who died on the cross for teaching a non-dual and thus subversive doctrine. Not only do you find non-duality in the sacred scripture of Christianity, but indeed you also find in neo-platonism; the line of thought which quite singularly inspired the Church Fathers⁷⁸. All of this, just to say that Christian non-duality, was not the unexpected invention of a few random mystics scattered throughout the history of Christian spirituality, but rather I would suggest that it lies at the very root of Christianity. Only it was forced underground as Jesus was kicked upstairs and made into an idol to worship and not a reality to attain, accordingly making possible Christianity as a power-structure mediating the otherwise unbridgeable gap between two fundamentally different realities (i.e dualism).

Nonetheless you could say that non-duality remained as one of those dangerous and deceptive undercurrents which pulls you down below the surface and draws you back to the waterfall. Although maintaining a strong hierarchical structure Pseudo-Dionysos made access to this undercurrent available with his apopathic dialectics, but it wasn't until the 14th century that non-

⁷⁷ Ozment, Steven E. “*Mysticism and Dissent – Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century*”. pp. 12 Yale university Press. New Haven and London. 1973

⁷⁸ For further reading on this see: McGinn, Bernard. “*The Foundations of Mysticism*”. Vol. 1 in “*The Presence of God*”. Crossroad. New York. 1991

duality was articulated fully by Eckehart. Eckehart did not invent a new line of thought or a completely new system in order to be condemned as a heretic. As a learned theologian, twice holding a Dominican chair at Sorbonne, he took the perfectly orthodox Neo-Platonist heritage, synthesized it with the Gospel and showed that it was possible for ordinary people to realize their oneness with God. As Bernard McGinn emphasizes in his explanation of mystical heresy, what was innovative at the time of Eckehart was the language of annihilation.

“Although some have seen claims to mystical identity with God, as distinct from the more traditional category of mystical uniting of two distinct entities in love as the key to late medieval mystical heresy, expressions of merging into identity with God were not unknown in the earlier Christian tradition. So too passivity in the face of divine action had been a staple of mystical literature for centuries. What was novel in the mysticism of the late Middle Ages, as we see it in the passages from Porete just cited, was the notion of the annihilation of the self, especially of the created will.”

As McGinn describes it, the notion “self-annihilation” was a doctrine on its own; one which he attributes to Augustinian theology, as the need for the fallen will to be cleansed - now just pushed a stage further. As this might be, I believe that it is also possible to see the notion of self-annihilation as the *practice* of non-duality. In this sense it is a mistake, as McGinn does, to separate the notion of “self-annihilation” and “expressions of merging into identity with God”, thus making the latter heretical and the former approved by history. Rather I would suggest that they are two sides of the same coin, standing in a relationship as *praxis* and *theoria*: If you annihilate the self, there is no longer “a self” to uphold separation and naturally you will experience the result of oneness.

Although we are getting close, self-annihilation cannot claim to be heretical *per se*, as the doctrine found a perfectly orthodox expression with St. John of the Cross. Although poetical and daringly erotic in his descriptions of union, John was highly apophatic in his approach – negating all visions, ecstasies and the like – and finally also transgressing duality in his description of unity. He states for example that the Mistress is “transformed into” her Lover; again man deified. Also startling to remark about St. John is a text he wrote as the motto at the top of a drawing which he drew to illustrate the upward way to the mystical life: “*Here there is no longer any way because for the righteous man there is no law, he is a law unto himself*”. So you have both theory and practice in the St. John of the Cross; the non-dual deification and the strong emphasis on self-annihilation, plus

a rejection of fixed moral values- a highly subversive combination yet still finding orthodox approval. Why then was Molinos condemned only a century later for teaching a similar doctrine? Are we concluding then that heresy is entirely dependent on historical circumstances?

Democracy in the Kingdom of Heaven

As we found it important to distinguish between non-dual mysticism and dual mysticism in order to clarify why mysticism is at one and the same time confirming and negating dogmatic theology, we can't say that mystical heresy depends entirely on historical circumstances. A thorough investigation of the mystical doctrines is therefore necessary for investigating the tension between mysticism and heresy. With that in mind, we saw with the example of St. John of the Cross, that non-dual mysticism is not sufficient cause for heresy in itself. It therefore seems dependent on certain historical circumstances in order to become heretical. So then, one must consider which "circumstances" that seems decisive.

As stated earlier it seems unlikely that an atmosphere of mistrust due to prior mystical groups could by itself be sufficient for the condemnation of Molinos. Surely it could have had an impact on Molinos' case, but other arguments seem to weigh more. Although one could defend the statement that it was Louis XIV and the Jesuits who got Molinos condemned, this too seems to be a superficial explanation. I believe one could say was only "the triggering" cause; like saying that the murder in Sarajevo was the cause for 1st World War. Instead I believe we need to look at the relation between the subversive mystic and the masses. What I would like to suggest then as a key ingredient in mystical heresy is what one could call the "democratization of mysticism"; whether the mystic doctrine becomes available and utilized, not only in a small learned elite, but in a larger population of society. It seems that it is perfectly safe to practice a subversive doctrine, as long as it is limited to a small number of people confined within the monastery walls. St. John of the Cross for instance never taught outside the monastery walls. Moreover he made very clear the hierarchical nature of his teachings; one had to start with discursive meditations, and then the very few souls who were called by God to contemplation by three distinct signs, could practice it under the careful guidance of a spiritual director. The application of St. John's contemplative teachings was thus only for select few monastic devotees. But what happens when this elevated teaching for the ones with special grace, gets out into the open, and become adopted by what Molinos calls the "unlearned" and the "simpletons"? As we saw people then began dispersing with the sacraments, showing indifference about salvation and behaving in ways that conflict with the given moral norms. It then

becomes a major threat for institutionalized religion. Looking at the history of mysticism and heresy this “democratization” seems to be a general characteristic. Marguerite Porete and the subsequent heresy of the Free Spirit were radically democratic in their nature, basically teaching “annihilation of the self” and its implications to everyone who was interested. Eckeharts doctrines were condemned by Pope XXII accompanied by the remark that he “...*made many dogmatic pronouncements that clouded the true faith in the hearts of many, and he taught them in his preaching before the uneducated crowd, and even introduced them into his writings*”⁷⁹. Likewise with the “alumbrados” who supposedly consisted of, and taught to, people from “the uneducated crowd”. This emphasis on the “democratic” element is also illustrated most clearly in Molinos’ case. As mentioned earlier the Holy Office investigated Paolo Segneri’s attack on Molinos in 1681, and finding no ground for it, they put his book on the *index*, thus implicitly sanctioning the teaching of Molinos, which was then allowed to flourish. But when the spread of his doctrines got out of hand and reached the streets, its result became visible and the judgment of the theologians took a 180 degree turn. In order to enclose the spread of “democratic” mysticism you had to condemn doctrines and teachings that were once sanctioned as orthodox – thus throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Although many of the propositions of the bull *Caelestis Pater* are clearly transferable to doctrines of Molinos *Guide*, one also find exaggerated statements, which seem unlikely to be held by Molinos⁸⁰. Likewise you find many of the most daring quotations completely taking out of their context – a method that was not unknown in such inquisitional proceedings.⁸¹ Finally it is peculiar to notice that Molinos was accused of sexual impropriety, which also seems to be a common feature in mystical condemnations⁸². My point being that you somehow had to overstate, radicalize and maybe even manufacture evidence in order not to condemn exactly the same propositions, that you had been defending and sanctioning some four years earlier.

What we see here can then be said to be the actions of a power-structure trying to preserve itself, even if that means condemning previously authorized doctrines. If one takes non-duality to be at the very core of Christian theology, as I argued for above, then it’s a very precarious situation, for the Church then had to reject and hide a part of its own foundation every time larger

⁷⁹ “*The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*” pp. 496 Ed. Bernard McGinn. Modern Library. New York. 2006

⁸⁰ See for example proposition 47, 39 and 26 of “*Caelaestis Paeter*” Molinos, Miquel de. “*The Spiritual Guide*” pp. 26 Paulist Press. New York. 2010

⁸¹ Another example of this can be found *In Agro Dominico* from 1329, condemning the doctrines of Meister Eckehart.

⁸² Bernard McGinn describes accusations of sexual impropriety as “...*one that was of moment in almost all condemnations of mystical error*” McGinn, Bernard “Introduction: part two” in Molinos, Miquel de. “*The Spiritual Guide*” pp. 26 Paulist Press. New York. 2010.

groups were able to peel of the outer layers. You then have a structure disconnected from its roots and operating with its own rationality. What matters is then ultimately not the mystical doctrine in itself, but whether it becomes a threat to the existing power-structure by being spread to the masses. *Molinos was therefore condemned because he became the symbol of a larger dissemination of behavior that threatened the power of the Catholic Church, and thus had to be enclosed in order to maintain authority.*

Epilog

Caelestis Paeter became the birth certificate of the last heresy of mysticism, which was followed by a two century long, dark and arid night for mystical theology. Even though quietist doctrines were propagated by Madame Guyon and the French Bishop Fénelon in the wake of Molinos condemnation, both were effectively persecuted and silenced. From the beginning of the eighteenth century then, it seems that the connotation “quietism” was transformed from a set of mystical doctrines to a form of “spiritual incest”; something not just theologically unsound, but moreover socially frowned upon⁸³. Mysticism was thus repressed and rejected, as power slowly shifted from the church to “the state”. Even though it was brought to life again as a scholarly subject in the 20th century, it seems that the study of mysticism is still a minor and rather peripheral area in most of the academic world. Nonetheless, if we want to renew and question our current understanding of the history Christianity, it is a crucial one. By getting into a hermeneutical dialog with the mystics and their texts in, we can take on novel and challenging perspectives of the western history of ideas, which in turn can bring about a better understanding of our own times. Furthermore, and perhaps less applied in the field of study⁸⁴, it can likewise open up ways of analyzing past power-relations and forms of subjectivity in a more structuralistic way. As Foucault emphasized in his article “The Self and Power” from 1982 “... *in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations*”⁸⁵. I therefore hope that this paper can be an inspiration to explore the inner and outer worlds of the mystics from different approaches, in order that we might better understand our western spiritual heritage.

⁸³ Choudhury, Mita ”A Betrayal of Trust: The Jesuits and Quietism in Eighteenth- Century France” *Common Knowledge*. Symposion: Apology for Quietism, Part 2.

⁸⁴ Certeau’s “*The Mystic Fable*”(The University of Chicago Press. 1992) seems to be the only work that approaches the topic of mysticism with a structuralist approach.

⁸⁵ Foucault, Michel. ”The Subject and Power” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (summer, 1982) pp 780