

**Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal**  
A Study of *The Cloud of Unknowing* from the Perspective of the Psychology of  
Consciousness

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**I. Statement of the Problem and Background**

William James, in his essay titled "A Suggestion about Mysticism" published in 1910, introduced the notion that mystical states might be properly classified as experiences of expanded consciousness. Though the subject of human consciousness took center stage in the work of William James, the emergence of behaviorism saw a decline in interest in the topic until recently. The last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a renewed interest in the study of human consciousness. What characterizes this more recent study is its interdisciplinary character. For example, human consciousness is now studied from the perspective of such diverse fields as philosophy, neuroscience, physical sciences, cognitive science and medicine, to name only a few. More importantly for the study of spirituality, this recent work demonstrates a new openness to non-traditional sources of human experience, including those sources typically dismissed because of their subjective nature. It is in light of this combination of factors that mystical writings have become the subject of psychological investigation. Most notably, authors Arthur Deikman, Robert Ornstein and Charles Tart have all written extensively on mystical traditions in relation to the phenomenon of human consciousness. Deikman, Ornstein and Tart each make the case separately that these ancient traditions provide a valuable body of data gained from firsthand experience by individuals who themselves have experienced altered states of consciousness. In fact, these authors refer to these ancient traditions as works of early "psychology."

*The Cloud of Unknowing* and related works by the same anonymous fourteenth century English author follow in the Dionysian apophatic tradition, the *via negativa*, claiming dependence on the Areopagite for his teachings on prayer. Since, however, the English author received the works of Dionysius through the Latin translation by the Victorine Thomas Gallus, the Dionysian influence is more indirect. Thus the *Cloud* author, reflecting this Victorine-influenced Dionysianism, gives equal stress to both the negative work of purification of all sensory experience and the positive role of the affect and the will. The author's strong apophaticism places his work in line with other fourteenth century mystics like Eckhart, Tauler and Ruusbroec. Furthermore, much has been written on the striking similarities between the *Cloud* author's work and the teachings of the Carmelites of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, particularly St. John of the Cross. In this, the *Cloud* author appears to anticipate the Spanish mystics, though no clear line of influence has been demonstrated. Characteristic of the organic nature of the Christian mystical tradition in general, the *Cloud* author's own teaching is at times indistinguishable from the received sources, yet in the author's hands a new thread or two

was most definitely added and passed on. Written in the vernacular, the direct, often humorous, always practical teachings that characterize the *Cloud* author's corpus take a distinct place among the classic works of Christian apophaticism.

*The Cloud* author's attention to cognitive and perceptual processes as an integral part of the teachings on prayer has drawn the attention of psychologists to these works. These and other similar traditional texts are seen as works that chronicle the path to higher consciousness and are examined from this perspective. Because of this, such psychological studies on human consciousness provide a particularly useful lens through which the teachings of *The Cloud* can be accessed by modern sensibilities. The author's strong apophaticism and unrelenting insistence upon "unknowing" are particularly elucidated when brought into conversation with these studies of the nature of human consciousness.

## 2. Purpose

This dissertation will analyze the teachings on contemplative prayer of the anonymous fourteenth century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* by utilizing recent studies on the psychology of conscious awareness and states of consciousness.

## 3. Methodology

I will begin by explicating the teachings on the method of contemplative prayer that is the hallmark of the works by the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. I will then present relevant psychological studies on the nature of consciousness in the work of Arthur Deikman, Robert Ornstein, and Charles Tart, specifically their studies on the development of ordinary consciousness in relation to mysticism and the development of altered states of consciousness. Here I will focus on theories of habituation, automatization and de-automatization, modes of consciousness, and the role played by "intention" or "the will" in perception.

The third part of the dissertation will correlate the teaching of *The Cloud* author on contemplative prayer and his conception of human consciousness with these recent studies on consciousness from a contemporary scientific perspective. Using the constructive-relational model for interdisciplinary research I will employ this modern lens to elucidate the author's teaching on contemplative prayer focusing in particular on key terms repeatedly used throughout *The Cloud* corpus, such as "unknowing," "naked intent," "cloud of forgetting," "cloud of unknowing" and "naked being."

## 4. Contribution and Originality

Although there have been a number of interdisciplinary studies on *The Cloud*, this dissertation will be original in two respects. First, there are no in-depth studies on the anonymous author's teaching on contemplative prayer in relation to his understanding of human consciousness. Secondly, no previous study has brought the insights of modern scientific studies of consciousness into conversation with these specific works.

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## Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal

**Title:** The Three-fold Contribution of Gerald O'Collins' Fundamental Theology: Its Christocentric Outlook, Its Focus on the Resurrection and Its Groundwork for Ecumenism.

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### Background

In the nineteenth century the development of fundamental theology was fueled by a concern to combat the rationalist challenge to religion, with fundamental theology often taking the form of an apologetic prolegomenon to dogmatic theology. This apologetic-styled fundamental theology can be found both before and after the Second Vatican Council in such writers as Albert Lang, Adolf Kolping, and Germanus Van Noort. In this form fundamental theology mirrored the rationalism that it sought to counter. In the later twentieth century theologians began to reform fundamental theology in an attempt to provide theology with a critical epistemological and methodological framework. Among the resources such writers as René LaTourelle, Claude Geffré, and Karl Rahner drew upon were advances in critical historical research, transcendental philosophy, and philosophical hermeneutics.

Gerald O'Collins, former dean of the theology faculty at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, has contributed to the ongoing development of fundamental theology in the period following Vatican II. O'Collins does not attempt to build a comprehensive system, but rather suggests ways to advance several specific concerns within the discipline. O'Collins is particularly interested in the themes of revelation, tradition, and biblical inspiration. His analysis of the issues surrounding these themes has yielded a series of interconnected insights into fundamental theology with regard to the relation of revelation and history, Christocentrism, and the relation of Christianity to other world religions.

O'Collins, relying on the foundational teachings found in *Dei Verbum*, has proposed a rich view of revelation as an ongoing salvific encounter between God and humankind that is mediated through experience. Here O'Collins defines experience as what happens when reality intersects with a self-conscious being. While the original experiences of the apostles are unique and unrepeatable, God's historic self-revelation in Christ transcends the historic particularity of those experiences to constitute what O'Collins terms the "ongoing presence" of revelation today. The ongoing presence of revelation throughout history is mediated to each individual through experience of the Church's proclamation.

Within the foundational and normative revelation mediated through the experience of the apostles O'Collins locates Christ's passion, death, and more specifically the resurrection, as the climax and fulfillment of God's ongoing encounter and hence also the fullness of God's salvific self-disclosure. This climactic self-revelation of God in Christ continues to be mediated today and is thus the center of both humanity's ongoing encounter with God and the content of the Church's proclamation. In light of his position on Christ, revelation and history, O'Collins calls for a fundamental theology that is Christocentric.

This Christocentrism becomes for O'Collins a critical tool to evaluate fundamental theology and has led him to devote a significant portion of his scholarship to an examination of the historicity of the resurrection. Several aspects of his thought here bear directly on fundamental theology. First, while maintaining the resurrection as an event occurring in history, O'Collins nuances his understanding of the nature of history and its role in faith by walking a careful line between a rationalistic definition of history often associated with Wolfgang Pannenberg which holds that we can definitively prove Christ rose and the "agnostic" view towards the historical Jesus held by Rudolph Bultmann which believes the

resurrection lies completely beyond any form of verification. Between these extremes, O'Collins holds that the resurrection happened in history but we must distinguish between those aspects that can and cannot be examined via modern historical reconstruction. O'Collins holds that the biblical testimonies and accounts can be evaluated using modern exegesis and historical science. Using modern historical critical scholarship, O'Collins seeks to show the veracity of the Gospel accounts, most notably calling attention to the role of female witnesses and the unique nature of all the encounters between the early Church and the risen Christ. Second, O'Collins holds that faith is dependent upon the validity of the resurrection accounts, yet cannot be reduced solely to the Gospel testimonies. Other factors, such as grace and freedom play a part. O'Collins reflects on present day "coming to faith" by noting how the resurrection, as God's climatic revelation and salvific self-giving, requires a receptiveness in each person, which he calls the "experiential correlate". He develops his understanding of the correlational aspect necessary for faith in the resurrection by examining a variety of common human experiences.

In addition to its emphasis on and detailed treatment of the resurrection, O'Collins's Christocentric outlook leads him to suggest a positive Christian outlook towards non-Christian religions. This Christocentric outlook, alongside his interest in a transcendental anthropology, leads O'Collins to note that while Christianity holds a privileged position in having received the full revelation of God, it cannot deny the valid knowledge of God and the mediation of salvation found in other faiths. In scripture, most notably the Pauline corpus, and in various teachings of Vatican II, he finds that the riches of God are already given *implicitly* to all. Other religions and their cultures contain a "matrix" through which Christ is already at work. The missionary activity of the Church thus helps transform this implicit knowledge into an *explicit* one. Drawing on the image of "seeds of the word", O'Collins suggests that the creative and sustaining presence of Christ as Logos, as a seed already present in creation and implicitly at work in all religions, calls for a respect for other religions and the need for a serious commitment on the part of Christians to listen to Christ speaking through other peoples and religions.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation will be to determine and critically examine Gerald O'Collins's distinctive contributions to the ongoing development of fundamental theology since Vatican II.

#### **Method**

This dissertation will have the following sections. The first section will provide a textual analysis on the following aspects of O'Collins's fundamental theology: the relation of revelation and history; the Christocentric character of revelation, and the relation of Christianity to other world religions.

The second section of the study will critically evaluate the originality and systematic coherence of O'Collins's work in light of the development of fundamental theology by comparing his work first with the pre-Second Vatican Council fundamental theology of Gerardus Van Noort and then with the early post-Second Vatican Council fundamental theology of René Latourelle with the aim of placing O'Collins's work within the ongoing development of fundamental theology. This second section will also evaluate O'Collins's original contributions from within the context his own explicitly stated goals in terms of its clarity, cohesion, and possible future development.

#### **Contribution**

This dissertation will offer an in-depth critical analysis and evaluation of Gerald O'Collins's contribution to the on-going development of Catholic fundamental theology. To date there is no in-depth examination of O'Collins's fundamental theology that takes into account both his later writings on fundamental theology and his work's distinctive place in the development of theology since Vatican II.



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## Ph.D. Dissertation Proposal

Title: "She Labored to Give Birth": A Study of the Birth-Pangs Motif in Rev 12:2

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### 1. Statement of Problem and Background

The motif of birth pangs has many layers of meaning and is used throughout the Old and New Testaments. On the most basic level, the motif of birth pangs points to humanity's ruptured relationship with God (Gen 3:16). The prophets develop the meaning of this metaphor further when they speak of the difficulties associated with the coming of the messianic era (Isa 26:17-18; 65:23; 66:7-8). This motif is further developed in New Testament texts that refer to Jesus Christ's passion (John 16:20-22), spiritual rebirth into Christ's image (Gal 4:19), and the waiting of all of creation—including humankind for the redemption of the body (Rom 8:18-24).

The drama of Revelation 12 centers on the woman (the "Great Sign") and the dragon ("Another Sign"). While the identity of the dragon is clearly presented, that of the woman is not. Grasping the full significance of the birth pangs motif is crucial for understanding the significance of the "Great Sign" of Revelation 12. The narrator highlights the birth pangs of the woman in the vision of Revelation 12 by mentioning them immediately after he describes the heavenly splendor of the woman's garb (clothed with the sun and crowned with the stars) and position (standing on the moon). Feuillet notes that nowhere else in Scripture are these two motifs of heavenly splendor and birth pangs joined together.

Scholars who approach Revelation 12 as an adaptation of the Leto-Apollo myth cycle (Yarboro Collins) tend not to mention the birth pang motif. Most scholars, however, discuss the significance of the birth pangs in Rev 12:2 in the context of Old Testament prophecy (Prigent, Feuillet, Tavo, Brown, Aune, Resseguie, Vanni, Bauckham, Fekkes). Prigent represents the common view in his explanation, "The pains of childbirth are a traditional metaphor in Judaism to designate the sufferings of the difficult times that are a prelude to the Messianic era." In a survey of the use of the motif of birth pangs in the Old Testament, Bergmann concludes that the birth pangs motif indicates extreme crisis. But like most scholars (Cerfaux and Corsini excepted), she does not discuss the striking use of the motif of birth pangs in Gen 3:16.

Corsini, Prigent, and Feuillet wrestle with the question of what the birth pangs mean in a New Testament context. Each, in different ways, takes into account the spiritually fruitful suffering that birth pangs represent in the New Testament. None of the three, however, offers a comprehensive analysis of how the use of the motif in the New Testament material might assist in interpreting the metaphor of birth pangs in Rev 12:2. Furthermore, no previous study offers a full survey of the Old and New Testament use of the motif of birth pangs.

## 2. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the significance of the motif of birth pangs in Revelation 12 in light of the Old and New Testament use of this motif.

## 3. Methodology

This study will make use of both historical-critical and literary-critical methods of exegesis.

In a first chapter, I will provide a survey of research on Revelation 12 with a special focus on how the motif of the birth pangs has been interpreted.

In a second chapter, I will survey the occurrences of the motif of birth pangs in the Old Testament and related materials (Qumran and the Pseudepigrapha). I will give particular exegetical attention to Gen 3:16; Isa 26:27; 66:7-9.

In a third chapter, I will survey the occurrences of the motif in the New Testament. I will give particular attention to Rom 8:18-24; Gal 4:19; and John 16:20-22. The purpose of this section is to establish specific and general New Testament interpretations of the motif.

In a fourth chapter, I will provide an exegesis of Revelation 12, giving special attention to the birth-pangs metaphor in light of its Old and New Testament background.

## 4. Contribution and Originality

By thorough investigation of the use of the motif of birth pangs in the Old and New Testaments and related literature, this dissertation will provide a unique approach to understanding the significance of the "Great Sign" in Revelation 12.

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