Bernadette Roberts, in her introduction, claims to be experiencing a state of being which is a full stage beyond what is documented in the writings of celebrated mystics in the Christian tradition. She claims to be experiencing a God that is beyond a personal or impersonal entity. She states that while there was some insight into what she was experiencing to be found in Meister Erkert and the notion of no-self from Buddhism, apart from this, she had precious little to orientate her in her journey into what she calls no-self. It was for her a journey into the unknown.

In this journey, she describes classic state experiences found in all traditions. For example, she describes gross (physical) nature mystical experiences where she finds herself watching a bird flying and experiences no difference between her own identity and that of the bird. She also describes being at one with the flow of life that flows through nature. She describes subtle experiences in which energies from without her try to and successfully enter into her. She describes casual state experiences where her sense of a personal self and a personal God dissolves entirely and there is nothing left except a sense of empty stillness. She describes a witnessing state where she has no sense of self except that of a seer looking out at the oneness of everything. She also describes a nondual state where the subject, what she calls the doer, is not doing anything to an object but is only the doing itself. She also describes a nondual state where God is not smiling at the person or the person is not smiling at God but there is only the smile and the smile is not two but one.

Christopher Dierkes, writing in the Journal of Integral Theory and Practice, uses the cartography of mystical states, composed by Bernard McGinn, to describe Bernadette’s experience of no-self as ‘Indistinct Union’. This, he says, is a mystical

state where the soul and God surrender themselves to one another to such a degree that there is no longer a distinction between the two. They are both one and the same. This he contrasts with Teresa of Avila’s highest state-stage where she is unified with God but still keeps her own distinct and separate identity. This he calls ‘Union of Spirits’. In my view what Bernadette is experiencing is not a “higher” state-stage than Teresa of Avila, nor does it transcend the personal / impersonal dichotomy. What Bernadette is experiencing is the impersonal side of mystical experience. She is experiencing God in the 3rd person as indistinct from self and as a Oneness or Isness. This is in contrast to Teresa’s 2nd person experience of the soul resting back into a personal God and co-creating with that God. So it is not that her experience is at a higher level it is at the same level just from a different perspective. Teresa’s experience is from a 2nd person perspective (God and I are one in a union of spirits) and Bernadette’s is from a third person perspective (there is only an Isness).

Consistently, she claims that there is no self, that the self has ceased to be. Yet from her writing one can tell that there is a self that is grappling with this experience of no-self. A spiritual director on a retreat points this very fact out to her. The self that is grappling with this experience of no-self and seeking to navigate is a modernist, rationalist, utilitarian behaviorist self. I say this because she, based on her experience, asserts that with there no longer being a self or a God that the only thing to do is to make money to provide for oneself economically and to get on with the daily chores of the external business of living. She explicitly refers to a new found embrace of behaviorist philosophy and asserts that matter and spirit are equivalent. She asserts that the brain and the mind are synonymous and that the self is just synapses in the brain. This modernist interpretation of her experience is sometimes coupled with a postmodern retro romantic notion that the nondual self is equivalent to the adual self of the newly born child pre the hatching of the individual self, and in one place, she has a pluralistic notion that all religious interpretations need to be considered when assessing a mystical experience.

2 Ibid.

In the second part of the book she clarifies what it means “to do” and applies this to her understanding of Jesus as the Christ. To use traditional terms for what she conveys I would elucidate that there are some translations of the Bible that do not say in the beginning was the “word” but say in the beginning was the “verb”. It is this sense of the verb (as opposed to a noun and verb) that she captures in her understanding of her new state and framework. She sees being and doing as happening simultaneously and not as two separate and distinct modes. However, to experience this new absolute perspective, one has to not only die to the relative human epistemological framework but also to the ontological self. She says that this is necessary, based on her experience, in order to truly move into seeing God as God sees the Godself rather than seeing God through human eyes.

In a section on the specifically on the self, she moves from her former retro romantic notion of an adual oneness to a postconventional transpersonal idea of the self. In this, she sees the self as a necessary part of the process of human development. Yet, in time, this falls away. How it falls away is through the falling away of the affective system with it roots in personal energy and will. For the contemplative, this means that heaven is not a state of bliss with the positive pole of the affective system constantly present, but the movement of God, beyond all notions of vice and virtue, for these require the presence of will, in the moment of ever present now. God is naturally arising in a trans-affective state of being in which no self exists. This, she says, is impossible to communicate, that one has to experience life from a non-relative perspective in order to understand for oneself.

In her concluding chapter, she primarily distinguishes between the orthodox theological position that Union of Spirit and self is the final stage of the contemplative journey and, the position she asserts, that there is a second movement beyond this of Indistinct Union where a person sees God in Himself as God in Himself sees Himself and not from a human epistemological point of view. This, she claims, means that who one is and what one is, are essentially the one and same thing. There are no longer two essences joined together in spiritual matrimony but only one divine
essence. In short, one has eternal access to the divine rather than a transient experience of no–self. God and self are not two, but one.

Her writing is gripping, fascinating and, in places, quite shocking. In my estimation the death of the ontological self is something most people will find difficult to accept. This book is destined to become a classic of modern spiritual literature on mystical experience. I recommend it to any person seeking to understand different states of being, particularly the causal state of no-self or the nondual state of indistinction from God. I particularly recommend it to Christians who are curious about the higher states of being described in Eastern traditions like Vedanta Hinduism or Vajrayana Buddhism as this book documents what it is like to experience these states from within a Christian Tradition.

Joseph Feely is the author of this review. He has twenty years experience of meditating within the John Main tradition of Christian meditation and has some taste of what Bernadette describes in her book. He also has studied mystical experience through the integral model at postgraduate level at JFK University in California. Here, he explored states of being experienced by mystics and the levels of consciousness development from which these experiences are interpreted.

**Bibliography**