

St john of the cross - a mystic for the 21st century



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Regnum 146874

Human beings have always cultivated a desire to meet God, to question him, to know his thoughts, to find out his plans. How to find him? Where can we meet him? In ancient times it was believed that the ideal place would be the peaks of the mountains. All nations had their sacred mountains-meeting places between heaven and earth, the abode of the gods and goal of human ascent-for the Greeks, Olympus; for the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Ararat; for the Ugarits, the Tzaphon. Israel also shared this belief. Abraham, Moses, and Elijah had their strongest spiritual experiences on the mountains: Moria, Horeb, and Mount Carmel. Saint John of the Cross follows in such a tradition. But how could one consider John of the Cross, a 16th century mystic in the scholastic tradition, as having relevance for the 21st century? McGinn, quoting Henri Bremond states; “ In short, it is not possible to ignore the mystics without disowning one’s self”. (McGinn, 30) what I believe John offers is a spirituality that attempts to transcend oneself, comes out of one’s experiences and moves close to divine union by forsaking self in relation to others and to God. Essentially, I believe John develops an existential approach to spirituality which offers a hand for the parched lives in modern society.

Known as a great advocate of St John of the Cross, Thomas Merton remarked,

“[T]hese words I underlined, although they amazed and dazzled me with their import, were all too simple for me to understand. They were too naked, too stripped of all duplicity and compromise for my complexity, perverted by

<https://assignbuster.com/st-john-of-the-cross-a-mystic-for-the-21st-century/>

many appetites.” (Egan, 62) How difficult is it to understand simplicity? In the 21st century, increasingly so. Our lives have become so complicated and dominated by a cacophony of soundbites, images and false truths that we seem to be further from finding God than ever before.

It was the Canticle I glanced at while seated in the school chapel. A joyful piece of poetry full of light and far from the Dark Night of my earlier knowledge of John of the Cross. If ever I needed a ‘sign’ it was on the feast of St. John of the Cross as I sat taking a deep breath removed from the hectic business of a day’s work. “Oh to be a mystic, shut away from the hustle and bustle of life engaged in prayer, spiritual reading and gentle manual work”. Such a view of the life of a mystic I am certain is common, yet far from reality. Sitting reflecting on the life of John of the Cross I was intrigued by how busy he was, how engaged in life’s activity. Further, I became aware of a saint for diaconal ministry and for a personal spirituality based on liberation and freedom. What Martin Heidegger would refer to as ‘anticipatory resoluteness’. Heidegger says that the “intelligibility of Being-in-the-world expresses itself as discourse” (Heidegger, 204) That discourse for John is with God and aids a transformation from self to other. For John, conversion is what the contemplative life is all about. ^[1]

Of course, John came from a family of converts to Christianity, as a *converso* he descended from Jewish converts to Christianity. While his early family life is well known; the rejection of his father by his noble family for marrying his mother who was of a lowly class, the poverty, destitution and homelessness following the death of his father. It is apt to consider such biographical

details to come to an understanding of how he developed a self-sacrificial approach towards life. At fourteen, John took on a job caring for hospital patients who suffered incurable diseases and madness. There is little reward for such tasks. For John he discovered his love of life and of God. Such love of God sustained him throughout his prison experience following his contact with Teresa of Avila and his agreement to join her reform movement. John supported her belief that the Carmelite order should return to its life of prayer. After nine months in prison John managed to escape taking with him his unfinished poetry. *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul* later became two of his books of practical advice along with *A Spiritual Canticle* and *the Bridegroom Christ*. His works were never intended to be published, they were merely *aide memoirs* to help initially the members of the order and others develop in their love of God. Initially John intended the reader to interpret his poetry for themselves. However, like Jesus before him John was prevailed upon to explain and help others to understand. Indeed, in the prologue to the *Ascent* John makes reference to others who will be attempting to guide directees towards the ' summit'. He says " they understand not themselves and lack competent and alert directors." (*Ascent* Prologue, 2)

In the prologue to the *Ascent* , John indicates his principal sources:

" I have to say, or at the least, in that which is most important and dark to the understanding, of Divine Scripture; for, if we guide ourselves by this, we shall be unable to stray, since He Who speaks therein is the Holy Spirit." (*Ascent Prologue, 2*) While predominantly from the New Testament John makes reference to over 1300 scriptural quotations from almost every book.

<https://assignbuster.com/st-john-of-the-cross-a-mystic-for-the-21st-century/>

He seems to have known the Bible from heart and he twists and moves such knowledge of the scriptures with his understanding of life and love of God. Shaped, as it was, by his very experience of life.

John bases his entire doctrine upon well-established dogmatic facts; nature of God; nature of man; man's purpose and the means by which one gets there. In the Ascent John begins his climb to the summit of divine union with the dark night, essentially a purge of the sensual self to develop passivity and reception of God's will into our lives. It is no happy accident that John makes reference to a young Tobias from the Old Testament; (Tobit 6: 4-5)

In the first (night) he commanded him to burn the heart of the fish in the fire, which signifies the heart that is affectioned to, and set upon, the things of the world; which, in order that one may begin to journey toward God, must be burned and purified from all that is creature, in the fire of the love of God. And in this purgation the devil flees away, for he has power over the soul only when it is attached to things corporeal and temporal.

When one considers the materialism and the 'need now' mentality in the culture of today's world a brief reflection upon the need to purge oneself of desire of all things seems ever more pressing. As we anticipate the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States the rise of populism creates an energy and drive which at the same time drives a wedge into society. Ghetto mentality has been seen in Warsaw and we needn't spend too long considering the cause of that or the horrific outcomes. So what fills the void when we exorcise Twitter, Facebook and things of no lasting value? John gives us prayer. However, he insists it is not

removed from the rest of life nor is it measured in time or quantity. Instead John gives us a life of prayer to help save us from evil, or at least the inordinate indulging of desires that injures the soul. Nothing is evil in and of itself. It is one's attitude.

Today's society has seen an inordinate growth in mindfulness, a need for alternative spirituality and a wholesale rejection of the institutional church, at least in the West. Even Apple load, by default, a Mindfulness ' App' on every iPhone they ship. By July 27th, 2016 they had shipped 1 billion units; one billion souls potentially saved by a single trans global corporation, all in the space of nine years. If only Jesus had met Steve Jobs down by the shores of Lake Galilee. One hundred years previously William James raised the same issues in his Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, or that John of the Cross and his interest in psychology and human nature got there 400 years before James? In lecture IX and X James refers to Conversion and a need to transform one's soul from sickness to wellbeing. Ironically, James' work was utilised by Alcoholic Anonymous some 25 years after his death to help treat sick souls. (Bevacqua, 440) One's addiction may be alcohol but there is also a plethora of addictions for which one must seek healing. Egan states: " For John of the Cross, the journey of The Ascent of Mount Carmel is but a prelude to the love that blooms in a heart that God has freed. Genuine freedom comes not through one's own efforts-the active nights. For John of the Cross, liberation from disordered attachments comes fully and finally through the purifying contemplative dark nights-the passive nights-that follow on what is described in The Ascent of Mount Carmel" (Egan, 67) There truly is nothing new under the sun.

Consequently, John's writings are neither a commentary nor a manual for those who devoted their lives to God in an enclosed convent or monastery. They are for every one of us who seek with a sincere heart the best way to spend our lives on earth.

Freedom to be and freedom from is alluded to by John's Ascent of Mount Carmel and his Dark Night of the Soul. According to St John "[H]uman nature can never attain to the ontological status of Being Itself inasmuch as it can never assume the divine nature (even while participating in it), the perpetuity of its becoming -that-always-verges-on-being remains an inviolable aspect of its created nature". Mondello, 2) Simply put, we are always moving towards God (or away from), we can never Be God, or attain divine unity. Within existentialism Mahon O'Brien argues for the structural and thematic coherence of Heidegger's movement from authenticity to the search for an authentic free relation to the world - as captured by the term "releasement". By demonstrating the structural and thematic unity of Heidegger's thought in its entirety, O'Brien paves the way for a more measured and philosophically grounded understanding of the issues at stake in the Heidegger controversy. (O'Brien, 119) In respect of St John detachment is grounded in his desire for self-sacrifice. It is simply the attitude that makes us value things in their true light before God and use them as He intended. For John the ontological is deeply radicated in the eschatological. Becoming is inexhaustible, for becoming, as such, occurs in eternity. Does John attain the summit? It would be most unlike his character to admit so. Detachment is necessary in, did ministry or indeed in the lives of all Christians. Who is my God? That which is worshipped in the temple of

Mammon situated in a shopping centre near each of us? Or the one true God revealed in the scriptures? It is in the prophet Zephaniah that the word “poor” is used with a new connotation: it indicates not only as a social and economic situation but, above all, an inner religious attitude. For Zephaniah, poor is he who, having no security, trusts entirely in God and submits to his will. John offers us a window through which to gaze at the mountain, but we, as beings in the world, must take the steps to climb that mountain.

There is no doubt that St John of the Cross must be read repeatedly and frequently. As a mystic he experienced life’s truly hard knocks, he lived his life in service of God and found love of God in doing for others. If there was ever a sign I received in November 24th 2016 then it was to begin to discover the depth and reality of John, and in doing so I share in some small way the incredulity of Thomas Merton who despite his deep desire to know John found his words, ‘all too simple for him to understand’. Saint John has the final word “...if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more.” (LFL 3. 28)

Bibliography

Abbreviations – Saint John of the Cross

Ascent – Ascent of Mount Carmel

LFL – The Living Flame of Love

Bevacqua, Tony, (2010). William James’s “sick-minded soul” and the AA recovery paradigm: Time for a reappraisal. *The journal of humanistic psychology*: 50, (4): 440

<https://assignbuster.com/st-john-of-the-cross-a-mystic-for-the-21st-century/>

Egan, KJ 2007, ' *Thomas Merton's Approach to St. John of the Cross* ' , Merton Annual, 20, pp. 62-78

James, William, (2012) *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* . Oxford, Oxford World's Classics

Kavanaugh, Kieran and Rodriguez, Otilio (Eds.) The Living Flame of Love 1. 1; 1. 3; and The Spiritual Canticle B, 29. 3 in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* , rev. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991.

McGinn, Bernard " The Mystical Tradition", in Woods, Richard and Tyler, Peter.(2012) *The Bloomsbury Guide to Spirituality*, London: Bloomsbury, 30 - 41

Mondello, Geoffrey (2010) *The Metaphysics of Mysticism: Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transcendence*

O'Brien, Mahon, (2011) *Heidegger and Authenticity: From Resoluteness to Releasement* , London: Bloomsbury

[1]. See The Living Flame of Love 1. 1; 1. 3; and The Spiritual Canticle B, 29. 3 in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, rev. ed., eds. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991).