

The experience of Deification in the Spiritualities of the Night: from Early Eastern Christianity to Saint John of the Cross

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Abstract: According to the mystical Christian tradition, the utmost point of union with the Divine is experienced by humans as “deification”. In this study, I show the continuous trend of values and experiences proposed by what we can call “Spiritualities of the night”. For the spiritualities of the night, the knowledge of God is concealed to the mind unless the human person undergoes a process of purification and union with God in love, this culminates in ecstasy as an experience of ultimate union. The darkness involved in the senses and understanding is, nonetheless, valued as an itinerary of growth. The study traces the continuity of this tradition from Saint Gregory of Nyssa, then moves into Evagrius Ponticus, then on Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite, to Saint Symeon the New Theologian up to Saint John of the Cross.

Keywords: Spirituality of the night, John of the Cross, Deification, Eastern Christian Spirituality

Introduction

The use of the symbols of light and darkness, day and night, sun and clouds is a favourite metaphor of Christian spiritualities that emphasise both experience and the apophatic nature

of mysticism and the experience of the Divine. In this article, I would like us to call these spiritualities with the general term “spiritualities of the night” (though one might as well use terms such as darkness, cloud, etc.). This article proposes to establish that the spiritualities of the night are a continuous and growing tradition that originates in the early patristic times and flourishes in the works of St. John of the Cross. The goal of human life and of revelation is to bring human beings to their true end: transformation and union with the Divine. In the Eastern tradition, this is contained in the term “deification”. I will argue that the transformation and union that St John of the Cross testifies in his works is this same deification and that there is a consistency and deepening of the tradition received in his contributions to the mystical Christian Tradition. Sanjuanine understanding of deification and divinisation puts him in direct touch with the tradition of the spiritualities of the night.

In these lines the progression will start from the Capadocian fathers with particular focus on St. Gregory of Nysa, will then touch on some of the aspects of Evagrius Ponticus’ thought, then it will introduce the outstanding contribution of Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite and before entering into St John of the Cross will consider the ideas of St. Symeon the New Theologian. The list of authors is certainly longer but the space here is limited and we want to chiefly talk about the main similarities and progression that are relevant to the argument: we want to consider the way in which the spiritualities of the night allow the interaction of the triadic structure of theology: symbolic theology, cataphatic and apophatic theology. This proposal originally comes from Pseudo Dionysius but it reaches an impressive development and profundity in St John of the Cross.

The spiritualities of the night emerged, as Andrew Louth (2006) rightly points out, from the crisis of Christian

Platonism. Indeed, the work of some early Christian Platonists had the danger of considering the soul limited part and parcel of God's being, and the risk of Pantheism was real. Some early spiritualities such as Origen's, though not explicitly, had this risk. Origen's spirituality is a spirituality of the light, he follows St. Clement of Alexandria in considering ecstasy as a union with the Divine and this is given in terms of light. The recognition of the "*Creatio ex nihilo*" was a very definite move to cut every temptation of pantheism, and it also reminded Christians that God was completely and radically different in being from all creation, and thus the apophatic negative way was the natural approach that will be cautious of respecting God's sovereignty. However, the Christian Platonic mysticism did not disappear but transformed. The nature of this Christian Platonic mysticism was negative, but with this apophatic way gained a deeper grasp of the mystical experience: apophatic way leaves the door open to the inexhaustible nature of God's presence, and it recognised in a better way the always surprising and creative nature of God's love. This apophatic way is the original source of the metaphors that allow us to see God in the darkness, in the night and in the cloud. The light that can only be seen in the darkness and through the clouds then, develops the paradox of God's knowledge: we cannot know God through concepts, encapsulate his being in human comprehension, but we can know God in love. The mystical knowledge of love, nonetheless, has a very powerful cataphatic and symbolic depth and renders us a huge deal of spiritual knowledge of God: this is the reason why the negative way tells us so much about the Trinity and about our own souls, in the loving relationship the deeper nature of ourselves and the image and presence of God in ourselves is disclosed. This is the reason why the humble beginnings of the spirituality of the night get to the towering profundity of St. John of the Cross, who explains to the profi-

cient the different nights (the *Dark night*) of the spiritual itinerary and the caverns of our own selves (the *Living Flame*). Since Christianity also has a positive knowledge of God by revelation and mediated by sacramental realities, its mysteries are also objects of cataphatic and symbolic reflection, in other words, the theology of mysticism is integrated by the acknowledgment of the Triune revealed God that is known in His acts of love. The intimate nature of Christian mystical experience is lived and described by St. John of the Cross as a “cauterisation”, a burning intimate experience that transforms, but the nights of the senses and the spirit are a necessary preparation across the tradition.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa

The most important of the three Cappadocian fathers (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Basil of Caesarea and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus) for the spirituality of the night is Saint Gregory of Nyssa. From his work, in addition to the continuation of the mystical tradition, we also have a strong biblical grasp of this spirituality, and, as it will become very clear below, there are two favourite Biblical sources that we will find continuously studied over and over again: The *Song of Songs*¹, that develops the spousal union in the mystical experience; and Moses’ ascent to the Sinai, which becomes the powerful archetype of the soul’s ascent (and inward descent) to God. God in Gregory’s Homilies on the *Song of Songs* appears as a lover who enamours the soul. He speaks of the soul’s successive entry into light, cloud, and darkness: *phos*, *nephele*, and *gnophos*. This is the guiding metaphor for the apophatic aspect of the encounter, but he also acknowledges the cataphatic and symbolic value of revelation and the mysteries (sacraments) of the

¹ However, the mystical path was already described by Origen by commenting the *Song of Songs*, so Gregory builds in this same established tradition.

church that provide us with real knowledge of God. Gregory's understanding of the three ways of knowing God is illustrated in his *Life of Moses*. And in this text from his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* he discloses how the three ways are manifested:

The revelation of God to the great Moses began with light as its medium, but afterwards God spoke to him through the medium of a cloud, and when he had become more lifted up and more perfect, he saw God in darkness. What we learn from this is something like the following: the first withdrawal from false and erroneous notions about God takes the form of a transition from darkness to light. More attentive apprehension of hidden realities, which leads the soul to the invisible realm by way of what appears, is like a cloud that casts a shadow on everything that appears but yet induces and accustoms the soul to look upon what is hidden. But the soul that has made its way through these stages to higher things, having left behind whatever is accessible to human nature, enters within the innermost shrine of the knowledge of God and is entirely seized about by the divine darkness; and in this darkness, since everything that appears and is comprehended has been left outside, only the invisible and the incomprehensible remain for the soul's contemplation—and in them God is, just as the Word says concerning the Lawgiver: "Moses entered into the darkness where God was"(Exod 20:21).²

St Gregory has an abundant vocabulary to express that the contemplation of the Divine departs from the initial light

² Gregory of Nyssa, "Homily 11," in *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Norris (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 339-41.

of faith that illumines the person and participates in the mysteries of God's loving *energies* (actions). He believes in *theoria*-contemplation, but wants us to be aware of the importance of entering the cloud and darkness of the senses in order to be truly contemplative. In the *Life of Moses*, he tells us:

The Divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness. Let us not think that this is at variance with the sequence of things we have contemplated spiritually. Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is un contemplated.

For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, 'No one has ever seen God', thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature.³

³ Gregory of Nyssa, "Book II," in *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), n. 162-3, p. 94.

The Cappadocians' contributions to the doctrine of deification are many and too deep to be summarised here. However, an important concept that marked their influence on the subsequent mystical tradition was the understanding of the Greek word "*Ektasis*", which means a lot more than our contemporary word "Ecstasy". It is a word composed of the preposition "*Ek*", meaning "outside" and "*stasis*" position; "*Ek-stasis*, *Ektasis*" then means a movement from an inside to the outside, and its theological use was to explain the divine movement of God's energies, i.e., God's way of acting: God created the cosmos in a movement out of nothing conferring being to reality. God loves by "*Ektasis*": by giving Himself; God saved us by an "*Ektasis*" in the incarnation and His Paschal mystery. There was an "ecstatic" deed in God's self-emptying (*Kenosis*) in the Incarnation and God's self-emptying (*Tapeinosis*) in experiencing death on the cross (Flp 2). Man is a being brought to God's otherness by an "*Ektasis*" of receiving faith. The ascetic life (the practical life, as the fathers like to say) is "*ektasis*" from our own ways into God's ways. Mystical contemplation is, then, for the Cappadocians (and more specifically for Gregory of Nyssa) a life of ecstatic contemplation. Thomas Merton, on this regards tells us:

The Fathers, unanimous in stating that divinization is the end of the Christian life, stress the transformation of the Christian in Christ. In all these treatments there has been present the acknowledgement that our gnosis and divinization involve a transitus, a passing over into a hidden realm, so that our "life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). This implies that the experience of union with Christ is a hidden experience, something secret and incommunicable, an experience of something that is hidden on the ordinary levels of

Christian life. Hence we must discuss the first appearance of the concept of mysticism and mystical experience in Christian tradition.⁴

Thus, Saint Gregory's mysticism is an apophatic (negative) "mysticism of night". Why did Gregory of Nyssa stress the mysticism of night and unknowing? The dogmatic reasons for this are to be sought in the treatises of St. Basil *On the Holy Spirit* and of St. Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius*. In these we can appreciate a needed acknowledgement of the limits of human reason, this care is also present in the homilies preached by St. John Chrysostom "*On the Incomprehensibility of God*." The Eunomians or Anomeans were Arians who held that the essence of God could be and was known, this was the core of the "gnostic" heresy that led to a false and oversimplified intellectualism in contemplation.

For Gregory and Basil, thus, the mystical ascent is negative: The ascent to God in Gregory of Nysa (*De Vita Moysis*) is a passage from light to obscurity to total darkness. To penetrate into the total darkness is to enter into the "Holy of Holies", the sanctuary of God, '*Lampros gnophos*'. Gregory describes the process of the spiritual life as a triple way, as stated above. The triple way unfolds as follows: First, the image of light represented by the burning bush means purgation—we die to the passions by *apatheia*. Second, the image of the cloud (obscurity) means illumination of the intellect (*gnosis*)—we die to intellectual knowledge on the natural level and attain *theoria (physica)*, i.e., contemplation. Third, we enter the "Holy of Holies," namely, the deep Darkness that means union—not *gnosis* (knowledge) but *ousia* (substance). For Gregory and Basil, the exercise of the spiritual senses is limited and analogical. In this exercise of "unknowing", grace, or

⁴ Thomas Merton, *A Course in Christian Mysticism* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2017), 46.

the action of the Holy Spirit, supplies for the inaction of the senses as well as the limits of our minds.

Evagrius Ponticus

For Evagrius, prayer is the activity that allows human beings to be themselves fully. In Evagrius's language this is understood as a conversation in which the human being needs to search for “purity of heart”. Stillness (*hesychia*) and dispassion (*apatheia*) are at the beginning of the itinerary, but their tension is towards peace (*anapausis*), delight and joy (*chara*), and love (*agapē*) through desire (*pothos*). The constructive phase in the movement of prayer, according to Evagrius is integrative, at this stage, he calls prayers “the issue of joy and thanksgiving”.⁵ In what ways do the dynamism of asceticism and mystical presence come together in a unifying joy? I believe that this can also be appreciated and compared with a liturgical analogy that Evagrius used: The daily monastic office in the desert settlements of Nitria, Sketis, and Kellia (in the golden age of the Desert fathers and mothers) included monastic service in the evening, this service was extended in Saturday nights to reach the time of Eucharist at dawn.⁶ The “gnostic life” as described by Evagrius is a similar itinerary: the *synaxis* of our life of prayer is encouraged by “thoughts of light”⁷ that help us persevere in the ascetic life, but the end in sight is the dawn of transformation and contemplation, the

⁵ Evagrius of Pontus, “Chapters on Prayer,” in *Evagrius of Pontus, The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, ed. Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: Oxford Early Christian Studies & Oxford University Press, 2003), n. 15, p. 194.

⁶ See Rufinus of Aquileia, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2009), XXIII, n. 1, p. 113.

⁷ Of Pontus, “To Eulogios. On the Confession of Thoughts and Counsel in their Regard,” in *Evagrius of Pontus, Evagrius of Pontus, The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, chap. 9, p. 35.

mind and the heart are transfigured and unified in love, the human being experiences the “contemplation of the worlds”, which is a way to express that the end of love is knowledge of God,⁸ a participation on the “*perichoresis*” and divine life of the Holy Trinity. Kevin Corrigan writes on this: “Impassibility and rest from dividedness (*anapausis*) raise the heart through soul into the mind where in the wisdom of God, the heart becomes enlarged with ‘contemplations of the worlds’”.⁹

Since the *nous* (mind, soul) is created for the knowledge of God and is constituted by three dimensions, then contemplation will have a consequence in each of the dimensions of the soul, one can also sense a hint that there is a Trinitarian participation convenient to each dimension of the soul, but for now it is enough to see how Evagrius sees them actualised:

Since the rational (*logiké*) soul is tripartite according to our wise teacher, when virtue arises in the rational part (*logistikón*) it is called prudence (*phrónesis*), understanding (*synesis*), and wisdom (*sophía*); when it arises in the concupiscible part it is called chastity (*sôphrosyne*), love (*agapê*), and abstinence (*egkrateia*); and when it arises in the irascible part is called courage (*andreía*) and perseverance (*hypomonê*); but when it penetrates the entire soul it is called justice (*dikaiosynê*).¹⁰

⁸ Of Pontus, “To Monks in Monasteries and Communities,” in *Evagrius of Pontus, Evagrius of Pontus, The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, n. 3, p. 122.

⁹ Kevin Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory. Mind, Should and Body in the 4th Century* (London: Ashgate Studies in Philosophy and Theology, 2009), 66.

¹⁰ Of Pontus, “The Monk: A Treatise on the Practical Life,” in *Evagrius of Pontus, Evagrius of Pontus, The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, n. 89, p. 111.

Interestingly enough, the “wise teacher” here is former teacher and guide, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, and this is relevant to understand that the unitive peace of contemplation is also a manifestation of the deification of our beings. But even Evagrius himself understands the need of the night and the darkness, the knowledge of the “holy ignorance”:

3.86. Blessed is the one who has loved nothing from the secondary natural contemplation except the contemplation itself [...].

3.87. Blessed is the one who has hated nothing from the primary contemplation of natures, except their evilness [...].

3.88. Blessed is the one who has reached the knowledge that cannot be abolished (beyond what cannot be, it cannot be gone).¹¹

Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite

The writings of Dionysius are a thoughtful fusion of Neoplatonist cosmology and a core of Christianity, with clear influences of Plotinus and Proclus¹². The prestige of these writings

¹¹ Evagrius of Pontus, “Third Discourse”, in *Evagrius’s Kephalaia Gnostika. A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac*, trans. Illaria L. E. Ramelli (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), n. 86-88, pp. 193-94.

¹² We still have four treatises and ten letters that are in close relationship with each other.

Treatises: *On Divine Names*: inquires on the essence and attributes of the Divine. *On Mystical Theology*: studies the union of God and the human soul. *On Celestial Hierarchy*: presents the different angelical beings and their grouping in triads with three choirs each (Seraphim, Cherubim, and thrones; virtues, dominations and powers; principates, archangels and angels). *On Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: He draws a parallelism between the triads of sacraments, three sacerdotal degrees and three lay degrees (of which the last one divides in three).

was huge in all the Middle Ages (Thomas Aquinas alone quotes him 1700 times). For Pseudo Dionysius the itinerary of mystical theology is necessarily triadic: there is symbolic theology, cataphatic theology and apophatic theology. The level of analogical thought had a powerful impact on Saint Thomas Aquinas and many other important mediaeval mystics, it will also have an important place to play in St. John of the Cross's continuation of the mystical tradition. As cause and principle of all things, God encompasses all names, but being infinite cannot be reduced to any definite description, not even the totality of things (transcends all) and then it is 'innominable'. From here we have to walk the apophatic way, which means negating everything that in any perfection, to the eyes of a knowing being, can have imperfection: i.e., we need to describe what God is not, reaching a mystical silence and the naked conception beyond knowledge.

Some of Dionysius' later medieval interpreters suggest that God possesses the attributes of creatures in their most proper and ideal form, but Dionysius himself does not suggest this. Instead, the most proper object of the names is the highest creature. The exemplary instances of "goodness," "being," and "life", for example, are the highest of the angels or intelligible minds, as Dionysius also calls them. For this reason, Dionysius frequently refers to this type of name as an "intelligible name."

Dionysius incorporates into the number of intelligible names the traditional Neoplatonic intelligible categories: being, identity, difference, rest, and motion, as well as the Neoplatonic triad of being, life, and intellect. The fact that God transcends the proper meaning of these names does not mean that He ought to be called "non-being," "non-life," or "non-intellect." Dionysius prefers simply to say that God is "over being," "over life," and "over intellect", or perhaps beyond every category (even possible not yet known categories). Now, sym-

bolic theology enters the picture once the knowledge by unknowing is embraced. Symbolic theology is also the gate for mystical theology: The Godhead is beyond the lifeless as well as beyond the living. For this reason, Dionysius says that our affirmations of the godhead are not opposed to our negations, but that both must be transcended: even the negations must be negated. The most controversial and arcane passages of the *Mystical Theology* revolve around the mystical as taken in itself and not as the act of negating the other forms of theology. Dionysius says that after all speaking, reading, and comprehending of the names ceases, there follows a divine silence, darkness, and unknowing. With regards to the relationship between God and the world, Dionysius uses the term ‘emanation’ to explain creation (*ek-stasis*), but it is clearly far from the pantheism of other neoplatonism, for he defends the spontaneity and freedom of God in creating. God is not ‘obliged’ to create, but creates out of a completely free will, that is unknown to us. Nonetheless, even creation is an act of self-giving, of love. Dionysius continues to argue about this as follows:

And we must dare to affirm (for ‘tis the truth) that the Creator of the Universe Himself, in His Beautiful and Good Yearning towards the Universe, is through the excessive yearning of His Goodness, transported outside of Himself (*exo heautou ginetai*) in His providential activities towards all things that have being, and is touched by the sweet spell (*thelgetai*) of Goodness, Love (*agapesis*) and Yearning (*eros*), and so is drawn (*katagetai*) from His transcendent throne above all things, to dwell within the heart of all things, through a super-essential and ecstatic power whereby He yet stays within Himself.¹³

¹³ Dionysius the Areopagite, “The Divine Names,” in *The Mystical Theology and The Divine Names*, trans. C. E. Rolt (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), chap. IV, n. 13, p. 106.

Dionysius consolidates the mystical tradition as a triple quest to love and know the loving Trinity: symbolic theology, cataphatic theology and apophatic mystical theology. With his comprehensive corpus of works, Dionysius will leave a heritage of movement from God (as the creator) to God (as the end of all things). St John of the Cross will receive this heritage in the works of the great scholastics, as a mysticism of *Exitus-reditus* (exit and return).

Saint Symeon the New Theologian

Saint Symeon the New Theologian (Greek: Συμεών ὁ Νεός Θεολόγος; 949-1022) was a monk and poet, he was the last of three saints canonised by the Eastern Church and given the title of "Theologian" (along with John the Apostle and Gregory of Nazianzus). "Theologian" was not applied to Symeon in the modern academic sense of academic theology. The title was designed only to recognise someone who spoke from personal experience of the vision of God. One of his principal teachings was that humans could and should experience *theoria*. Saint Symeon sings in one of his *Ethical Discourses* in joy very similar to that of St. John of the Cross' *Living Flame*:

O grandeur of ineffable glory! O excess of love! He Who embraces all things makes his home within a mortal corruptible an, He by Whose indwelling might all things are governed, and the man becomes as a woman heavy with child. O astonishing miracle and incomprehensible deeds and mysteries of the incomprehensible God! A man carries God consciously within himself as light, carries Him Who has brought all things into being and created them, including the one who carries Him now. He carries Him within as a treasure inexpressible, unspeakable, without quality, quantity, or form, immaterial, shapeless, yet with form in beauty

inexplicable, altogether simple, like light, Him Who transcends all light. Who can then adequately explain the joy of such a man? Will he not be more blessed and more glorious than any emperor?¹⁴

The mysticism of union and transformation is for St Symeon, an itinerary of being set on God's fire, but this requires being accustomed to having all the other lights turned off, the soul needs to be comfortable, as it were, in the darkness of unknowing. Symeon tells us on this:

God is fire and He is so called by all the inspired Scripture (cf. Heb. 12:29). The should of each of us is a lamp. Now a lamp is wholly in darkness, even though it be filled with oil or tow or other combustible matter, until it receives fire and is kindled... The man whose soul's lamp is still in darkness, that is, untouched by the divine fire, stands the more in need of a guide with a shining torch who will discern his actions.¹⁵

Saint John of the Cross

Saint John of the Cross is the final stage in our progression, in this short study we will amply see how he developed the received tradition to a new depth. Saint John of the Cross, actually, directly quotes many of the spiritualities of the night in his commentaries to his works. In this short space, we will briefly consider in which ways he developed the mystical tradition and how deep his understanding of the experience of deification came to be.

¹⁴ Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*, trans. Alexander Golitzin, vol. 1-2 (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 135.

¹⁵ Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, trans. C. J. De Catanzaro, vol. 1-2 (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 339.

For St. John of the Cross, we draw close to God in being called to depart from ways of prayer and devotion that give satisfaction in themselves and, out of love for God in Himself, to enter on the night of contemplation. We should remember that he writes for nuns and friars (and experienced lay people too) who are considered “proficient”. This means that he presupposes that there has been a progression that at least presupposes a night of the senses. So John says:

The first and chief benefit this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and of one's own misery. Besides the fact that all the favors God imparts to the soul are ordinarily wrapped in this knowledge, the aridities and voids of the faculties in relation to the abundance previously experienced and the difficulty encountered in the practice of virtue make the soul recognize its own lowliness and misery, which was not apparent in the time of its prosperity.¹⁶

What is indirect in the spiritualities of the night becomes very clear in the works of St. John of the Cross: while in the mystical tradition, the darkness and night are associated with knowledge, for John of the Cross there is a clear distinction of different nights: firstly, the night of the senses, then the time of proficiency and finally the dark night of the spirit.

The works *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (*Subida al monte Carmelo*) (1581-1585) and *Dark Night* (*La noche oscura*) (the *Declaración*, 1584-1586) are commentaries on the homonymous poem, explaining its meaning line by line. The *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is divided into three books that reflect the two

¹⁶ Saint John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez (London: ICIS Publications, 1991), Book I, chap. XII, n. 2, p. 385.

first phases of the dark night. The first is a purification of the senses (titled "The Active Night of the Senses"). The second and third books describe the more intense purification of the spirit (titled "The Active Night of the Spirit"). The active purification of the senses reflects the first of the classical three stages of the mystical journey, followed by those of illumination and then union. The passive purgation of the spirit takes place between illumination and full union, when the presence of God has already been felt but is not stable. At the beginning of the commentary *Dark Night*, John wrote:

In this first stanza, the soul speaks of the way it followed in its departure from love of both self and all things. Through a method of true mortification, it died to all these things and to itself. It did this so as to reach the sweet and delightful life of love with God. And it declares that this departure was a dark night. As we will explain later, this dark night signifies here purgative contemplation, which passively causes in the soul this negation of self and of all things.¹⁷

The dark night of the soul is a stage of final and complete purification, and involves experiences of confusion, helplessness, stagnation of the will, and a sense of the withdrawal of God's presence: these are all very important mystical experiences *per se*, real spiritual growth in ecstasy in the sense we considered in St. Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius, Dionysius and Symeon the New Theologian. This last night is the period of final "*un-selfing*" and the surrender to the Divine Will. The final stage is union in love (spiritual marriage) with the object of love, the Triune God. Here the self has been permanently

¹⁷ of the Cross, "The Dark Night," in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Book 1, n. 1, p. 360.

established on a transcendental level and liberated for a new purpose.

As Fr. Ronald Rolheiser (2018) explains, the different nights can be understood as stages of Christian discipleship: the night of the senses as the essential discipleship that struggles to get our life together; the stage of proficiency as the period of generative discipleship, in which we learn to give our lives away; and the dark night of the spirit as the stage of radical discipleship, or the struggle to “give our deaths away”.

Without a doubt, the Dark Night is really the greatest masterpiece of Spanish mystical poetry, but not only that, the commentary that accompanies it is really a well of insight in the nature of both God, the soul, and the transformative relationship between them. The words used for the poem “*Noche obscura*” really connect with the spirituality of the night in the ways mentioned above, for not only the term “night” but the Spanish word “*obscura*” not only translates to “darkness”, it actually translates to the mist or haze that the cloud effects *obscuring* the light. In other words, there is a sense of indeterminacy to the word “*obscura*” that goes beyond pure “darkness”.

The *Living Flame of Love (Llama de Amor Viva)* is a very important poem different to the *Dark Night* and often is recommended as a prolegomenon to the study of John of the Cross’s work. Indeed, for the *Living Flame* is as though the view from the summit helps us start the journey. The different dark nights are bearable because the cauterising power of the Holy Spirit is the tending force that guides the return (“*Reditus*”, “*Telos*”) to the creating Love.

When John of the Cross writes the commentary to the poem, he uses the Spanish word “*Declaración*”, this word more than commentary has the meaning of “Statement”, i.e., he is going to reveal the meaning of the poem in a similar way in which a person can provide a testimony. Thus, in the commentary to the Stanza III St John explains the “deep caverns of

feeling” within the soul, each of them corresponding to the potencies of the soul: memory, understanding and will. A soul that has been purified by the dark night is ready to experience the innate unfathomableness of God. St. John tells us:

It is an amazing thing that the least of these goods is enough so to encumber these faculties, capable of innate goods, that they cannot receive these innate goods until they are completely empty, as we shall see. Yet when these caverns are empty and pure [namely, when the soul is in complete detachment] the thirst, hunger, and yearning of the spiritual feeling is intolerable. Since they have deep cavities they suffer profoundly, for the food they lack, which as I say is God, is also profound.¹⁸

The caverns mean the triple understanding of the soul as having potencies: understanding, will and memory. However, the point of the caverns is that there is an infinite potential capacity and longing for God in the soul, one that speaks of the Image of the Trinity that created it. The fourth Stanza talks about spiritual marriage, the moment of union by which the Holy Spirit kisses, and cauterises, the soul. This union is transformative and divinising: the experience of complete union in love that gives the full completion of the itinerary of the soul into searching for the beloved God, and the God that emptying Himself gives Himself fully to the soul. Let us remember the Stanza IV:

How gently and lovingly
you wake in my heart,
where in secret you dwell alone;

¹⁸ of the Cross, “Living Flame of Love,” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Stanza 3, n. 18, p. 680-1.

and in your sweet breathing,
filled with good and glory,
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.¹⁹

Conclusion

The spiritualities of the night are spiritualities of deification and transformation, it is a continuous mystical christian tradition that nonetheless has been increasingly deepened by the works and experiences of the great Christian mystics. They have offered us a dynamism and an itinerary of the soul into the Triune God, the goal is the same in all of them: the union in love, the spiritual marriage of God and the soul that culminates the universal vocation of deification. St. John of the Cross, through the lens of this study, comes across as the summit of this tradition.

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¹⁹ of the Cross, "Living Flame of Love," in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Prologue, p. 639.

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