

St John of the Cross's Visions in the Night

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Abstract

The ecstasies and visions of the Iberian 16th Century *siglo de oro* are well known and described. This article analyses St John of the Cross's forensic approach to these phenomena and how his notion of the 'dark night' set a bench-mark for later caution regarding how they should be approached. In particular, the article analyses his notion of 'three nights' and how they might make sense in a contemporary psycho-spiritual setting.

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Introduction

The ecstasies and visions of the Iberian 16th Century *siglo de oro* are well known and described. In this article we analyse St John of the Cross's (1542 – 1591) forensic approach to these phenomena and how his notion of the 'dark night' set a bench-mark for later caution regarding how they should be approached. In particular, the article analyses his notion of 'three nights' and how they might make sense in a contemporary psycho-spiritual setting. We shall use this as the basic framework for this article prefacing it with some words on John's debt to the medieval tradition of *theologia mystica*, to which he is heir, and the place of the 'nights' within his overall spiritual anthropology.

John's Symbolic Night and the *Theologia Mystica*

St John of the Cross is notoriously difficult to categorise. Dean Ralph Inge, writing of him in his *Christian Mysticism* of 1899, said that John 'carried self-abnegation to a fanatical extreme, and presents the life of holiness in a grim and repellant aspect' (Inge 1899: 223). The association of the phrase '*dark night of the soul*' with his name has led to many misconstruals of his approach to the spiritual life – usually centred around, as Inge describes it, welcoming 'every kind of suffering' and 'always choosing that which is most painful, difficult and humiliating'.

Perhaps the clearest road into his thought is through the tradition that he himself studied, with great success, at Salamanca and Alcalá universities – the late medieval school of *theologia mystica*/mystical theology.¹ This tradition informs all his spiritual anthropology. This is made clear in the set of documents that appeared with the first complete edition of John's works in Spanish in 1618. These

¹ For an extended treatment of this category see Tyler 2011.

are the *Apuntamientos y Advertencias en Tres Discursos para Más Fácil Inteligencia de Las Frases Místicas y Doctrina de Las Obras Espirituales De Nuestro Padre San Juan de La Cruz/Notes and Remarks to Facilitate the Understanding of the Mystic Phrases and Doctrine of the Spiritual Works of Our Father Saint John of the Cross*² written by Diego de Jesús (1570 – 1621), the first editor of John's works. The *Apuntamientos* reveal John's own dialogue with the tradition of *theologia mystica* exemplified in the works of Dionysius the Areopagite. The *Remarks* thus show how John's work is grounded in this tradition.

Diego begins his *Remarks* by suggesting that just as each art, faculty and science has its own specific terminology, so too does theology. However, he states, *theologia mystica* has its own terminology distinct from that of scholastic and moral theology. This terminology, moreover, may sometimes appear as *impropiedades y barbarismos* (*improprieties and barbarisms*) to those not acquainted with the purpose of this type of theology:

This licence to use particular and out of the ordinary terms is especially true in the *mystical theology* as it treats of things very high, sacred and secret and touches on experience more than speculation – on taste (*gusto*) and divine savour (*sabor divino*) rather than knowledge (*saber*), and this in a high state of supernatural and loving union with God. Which explains the paucity of terms and phrases used in speculative thought, which in these non-material matters are surpassed by the extraordinary experience itself. (John of the Cross 1929 I: 353)

² To be found in John of the Cross 1929: Vol. 1. All references to John's works are to be found in the bibliography at the end.

Diego then proceeds to give examples from St Bernard and St Bonaventure before revealing his direct debt and interpretation of Dionysius:

The mystic therefore has licence (as long as it is known that in the substance of what they say they do not contradict the truth), in order to encourage and praise, to understand its incomprehensibility and height by the use of terms imperfect, perfect, over-perfect, contradictory and non-contradictory, similar and dissimilar as we have examples in all the mystical fathers, especially Saint Dionysius the Areopagite. Who, in Chapter Two of the *Celestial Hierarchy* carries a mystical locution which embraces almost everything we have said, speaking of the excellence of joy (*gozo*) and the quiet that these intellectual substances enjoy. (John of the Cross 1929 I: 353)

This, 'quiet' Diego tells us is a 'cruel and furious quiet'/*un quietud cruel y furiosa* that distinguishes the 'mystical quiet' from a 'lazy, insipid and cold' quiet of other states. Diego's remarks, then, point to the 'mystical theology' as:

- a) A particular form of theology to be distinguished from speculative, scholastic or moral theology.
- b) A form of discourse that subverts other forms of discourse, in particular:
- c) Destabilising 'knowing' in a process of 'unknowing' and

d) Preferencing experience or 'taste' as a privileged location to engage with the Living God.

e) All of this points to the *strangeness* of the mystical as a form of discourse.

Diego's exposition of the 'mystical theology' thus prepares us for what we will encounter in John - another land, as John calls it 'strange islands', where things are done very differently from what we expect. For, As Diego suggests, the gentle stroking of the Spirit is a 'terrible stroking', the 'cruel and furious quiet' (*un quietud cruel y furiosa*) that is received not in pleasant slumbers (the insipid and tepid quiet of the non-spiritual) but in 'the fear and trembling' spoken of by St Paul. As with Dionysius's mystical theology it is also a secret knowledge that can only be disclosed to those who already understand it. Having grasped that the discourse will be unlike any other we are acquainted with, Diego suggests we are now ready to enter John's account of the 'dark night'.

Thus the 'dark night', one of John's most celebrated metaphors, is no 'grim' exercise where, as Inge would have us believe, the spiritual life is taken to extreme, but rather John's beautiful poetic embodiment of the centuries old teaching of the *theologia mystica*, later to be embellished by the poetic fancy of the Song of Songs in the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love*. Here it will become *la noche sosegada en par de los levantes de la aurora*: 'the tranquil night at the time of the rising dawn'. For John takes the *sapientia oscura* (literally, 'dark knowledge') of the tradition and fills it with the warmth, poetry and beauty of the Southern night:

In this spiritual sleep in the bosom of the Beloved, the soul possesses and relishes all the tranquillity, rest, and quietude of the peaceful night; and she receives in God, together with this peace, a fathomless and obscure divine knowledge. As a result she says that her Beloved is a tranquil night to her. (*The Spiritual Canticle*, B 14/15: 22 in John of the Cross 1979: 471)

However, he is at pains to stress also that:

She does not say that the tranquil night is equivalent to a dark night (*oscura noche*), but rather that it is like the night that has reached the time of the rising dawn. This quietude and tranquillity in God is not entirely obscure to the soul as is a dark night; but it is a tranquillity and quietude in divine light, in the new knowledge of God, in which the spirit elevated to the divine light is in quiet. (*The Spiritual Canticle*, B 14/15: 23 in John of the Cross 1979: 471)

This reflects the notion that runs through his analysis of being able to distinguish the one night into three component parts: the first night as twilight comes and we move into darkness. The second night which is the darkest point at midnight and the third 'at the time of the rising dawn'. This latter, he says, is the 'morning light' of a new 'supernatural knowledge' that overtakes the previous knowledge. In the true tradition of the *theologia mystica*, having introduced the notion of the 'supernatural knowledge' he will not describe it, but rather, in the authentic

Dionysian fashion, he suggests a *symbolic function* to destabilise meaning and carry his reader across to this new place of epistemological revelation. Thus in the *Spiritual Canticle* the ‘dark night’ beyond the mystical encounter is presented by means of poetic symbols such as ‘the silent music’ (*la música callada*) and ‘the sounding solitude’ (*la soledad sonora*).

Having grasped, then, the grounding of John’s metaphor in the Dionysian tradition we turn now to the first of these ‘nights’, which we shall characterise as the purification of the psychological in readiness to the move to the spiritual. As much as his contemporary Ignatius Loyola (1491 – 1556), John grasps the psychological dimensions of the ancient tradition to which he is heir and thus acts as a bridge between the medieval symbolic theology and our own contemporary psychological mindset.

John’s Psychological Night and the Desert Anthropology

It is worth beginning this section by briefly summarising how John percolates his account of the dark night with his own psychology and anthropology. This is done by him taking the accounts of purification within the over-arching metaphor of the dark night to produce his understanding of the psychological process of the *theologia mystica* - thus complementing its symbolic ‘supernatural knowledge’. Unfortunately, in a psychological context, Dean Inge is not the only author to react negatively to John’s imagery. The phrase ‘dark night of the soul’ has often been connected with psychological categories of depression.³

³ See essay by C. Cook in Tyler and Howells ed, Forthcoming.

John introduces his categories of 'the dark night' with the famous poem of that title. It is worth quoting in full:

1. One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings
- ah, the sheer grace! -
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.

2. In darkness and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
- ah, the sheer grace! -
in darkness and concealment,
my house being now all stilled.

3. On that glad night,
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything,
with no other light or guide
than the one that burned in my heart.

4. This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he was awaiting me
- him I knew so well -
there in a place where no one appeared.

5. O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!

O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved in her Lover.

6. Upon my flowering breast
which I kept wholly for him alone,
there he lay sleeping,
and I caressing him
there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

7. When the breeze blew from the turret,
as I parted his hair,
it wounded my neck
with its gentle hand,
suspending all my senses.

8. I abandoned and forgot myself,
laying my face on my Beloved;
all things ceased; I went out from myself,
leaving my cares
forgotten among the lilies.⁴

⁴ John of the Cross 1979: 711 – 712:

1. *En una noche oscura,
con ansias, en amores inflamada,
¡oh dichosa ventura!,
salí sin ser notada
estando ya mi casa sosegada.*

2. *A oscuras y segura,
por la secreta escala, disfrazada,
¡oh dichosa ventura!,*

The first thing to notice about the poem is that John calls it a ‘song of the soul’s happiness’ as the soul passes into ‘union with the beloved’. This is no depression or suicidal imagery. This is the ecstatic voice of one who has reached the furthest limits of human existence.

The second notable aspect is John’s abundant use of symbol – they tumble from his pen in rich extravagance: the lilies, the ladder, the breeze, the house, the light and over it all the great overarching metaphor, night itself. Yet this is no cold

*a oscuras y en celada,
estando ya mi casa sosegada.*

*3. En la noche dichosa,
en secreto, que nadie me veía,
ni yo miraba cosa,
sin otra luz y guía
sino la que en el corazón ardía.*

*4. Aquésta me guiaba
más cierto que la luz del mediodía,
adonde me esperaba
quien yo bien me sabía,
en parte donde nadie parecía.*

*5. ¡Oh noche que guiaste!
¡Oh noche amable más que la alborada!
¡Oh noche que juntaste
Amado con amada,
amada en el Amado transformada!*

*6. En mi pecho florido,
que entero para él solo se guardaba,
allí quedó dormido,
y yo le regalaba,
y el ventalle de cedros aire daba.*

*7. El aire de la almena,
cuando yo sus cabellos esparcía,
con su mano serena
en mi cuello hería
y todos mis sentidos suspendía.*

*8. Quedéme y olvidéme,
el rostro recliné sobre el Amado,
cesó todo y dejéme,
dejando mi cuidado
entre las azucenas olvidado.*

wet Northern night, this is the warm erotic, sensual Southern night full of the smells, sounds and touches of a hot land baked by sun during the day and now at peace and rest in itself.

In his prologue to the poem John states that:

A deeper enlightenment and wider experience than mine is necessary to explain the dark night through which a soul journeys toward that divine light of perfect union with God that is achieved, insofar as possible in this life, through love. The darkneses and trials, spiritual and temporal, that fortunate souls ordinarily undergo on their way to the high state of perfection are so numerous and profound that human science cannot understand them adequately. Nor does experience of them equip one to explain them. Only those who suffer them will know what this experience is like, but they won't be able to describe it. (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* I.I in John of the Cross 1979: 69- 70)

From the start, then, John shows that he is concerning himself with a theological perspective rather than what we would broadly call a psychological one. The dark night for John is to be seen as a stage through which the soul journeys 'toward that divine light of perfect union with God which is achieved, insofar as possible in this life, through love'. Yet it would be unfair to say that John has no psychological understanding or perception of the role of psyche as well as spirit.

As with the early Christian desert fathers and mothers,⁵ John is keenly aware of the passions and desires of the psyche and if there is one theme that runs through John's writing it is this: the passions and desires are neither good nor bad in themselves. However, they become good when directed towards God and harmful when directed away from Him. In this respect the goal of the spiritual journey is the re-ordering or re-directing of the passions back towards God. Thus, in the first chapters of *The Dark Night of the Soul* John goes through the seven principle passions and assesses their spiritual and psychic behaviour in the journey towards God. The schema he uses, usually referred to rather negatively in the West as 'the Seven Deadly Sins', arose from the ascetic investigations of the early desert fathers and mothers. John takes up this venerable schema and indeed it is difficult to understand his psychology without having some understanding of this 'desert' (and ultimately Carmelite) typology.

As with all the passions, the entrance into the 'Dark Night' is about re-ordering and re-directing. At no time does he state that it is about destroying our human nature, but in true Thomistic style, it is about grace building upon nature:

When the soul enters the dark night, all these loves are placed in reasonable order. This night strengthens and purifies the love that is of God, and takes away and destroys the other. (*The Dark Night of the Soul* I.4.8 in John of the Cross 2002: 495)

⁵ See Ward 2012 for a good introduction to this tradition.

Although John gives priority to the spiritual, as we have seen he does not ignore the importance of the bodily and the sensual.

The Purification of the Night: Freeing and Emptying the Self

Having argued that John's 'first night' can be understood from the dual perspectives of the medieval symbolic *theologia mystica* and his reinterpreted desert (Carmelite) psychology we are now in a position to consider just how John describes the purification of the self during this phase.

John begins his exposition of this purification process in Book Three of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Throughout his writings John stays with the classic scholastic anthropology (derived ultimately from Augustine, see Tyler 2016) of depicting human personhood in terms of understanding, memory and will. His exposition is thus intimately connected with the 'freeing and emptying' of the 'natural faculties' described in Book Three of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* to make room for the supernatural in the soul. For at the bottom of his exposition is the old adage of the *theologia mystica* that we 'must journey by knowing God through what He is not, rather than through what He is' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.2.3 in John of the Cross 1979: 215). This metaphysical point underlies his anthropology in that that which contributes towards a more distinct and clear image is thus not leading us towards God whereas the encounter with God is characterised chiefly by 'no form or image comprehensible to the memory' for 'the memory is without form, figure or phantasy when united to God' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.2.4 in John of the Cross 1979: 215).

I have spent time on this exposition of the metaphysical base of John's anthropology because without it, it is not possible to grasp the heart (and subtlety) of his teaching. This is drawn out in Chapter 4 of Book 3 of the *Ascent* where he makes a distinction between the 'formless' experiences of God from the 'form' given them by the distortion of the mind, or as he insists here, by the action of the evil spirit on the self. As he stresses in Chapter Five: 'the soul must go to God by not comprehending rather than by comprehending, and it must exchange the mutable and comprehensible for the Immutable and Incomprehensible' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.5.3 in John of the Cross 1979: 222 - 223).

From these general and metaphysical principles derive what is probably one of the most unique and original insights of John and sufficient reason for him to be granted the title 'Doctor of the Church'. This occurs immediately after the discussion above where he moves from the natural phenomena of the memory to the supernatural - in particular, concerning those which he classifies as '*visiones, revelacionces, locuciones y sentimientos por via sobrenatural*'/ visions, revelations, locutions and feelings of a supernatural origin' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.7.1 in John of the Cross 2002: 413). When these occur in the soul he suggests they leave no '*imagen, forma y figura o noticia impresa*'/ image, form, figure or notion impressed upon it'. This image at times being strong and convincing. From this derives the main teaching of this book:

I say that the soul, in order to obtain this gift [union with God in pure and complete hope], with regard to the clear and distinct objects which may have passed through it in a supernatural fashion, must never reflect upon

them so as to preserve the forms and figures and knowledge of those things. For we must always have before us this principle: the greater importance given by the soul to every apprehension, natural or supernatural, which is distinct and clear then the less capacity and disposition it has to enter into the abyss of faith where all else will be absorbed. (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.7.2 in John of the Cross 2002: 413) ⁶

This important principle of his spiritual teaching thus follows naturally from the metaphysics previously delineated: i.e. that all that is clear in our apprehension cannot be, by necessity, God, therefore we must be wary of these aspects of the self as they manifest themselves in our prayer, reflections and meditations. This he summarises in the motto: ‘every possession is against hope’. Even, in this case, intellectual ‘possessions’ which will obstruct the soul’s ability to embrace its relationship with the divine as the ‘I’ seeks possession:

In the measure that the memory becomes dispossessed of all things, in that measure it will have hope, and the more hope it has the greater will be its union with God (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.7.2 in John of the Cross 2002: 413)

⁶ ‘Y digo que el alma, para conseguir este bien, nunca sobre las cosas claras y distintas que por ella hayan pasado pro vía sobrenatural ha de hacer reflexión para conservar en sí las formas y figuras y noticias de aquellas cosas, porque siempre habemos de llevar este presupuesto: que cuanto el alma más presa hace en alguna apprehension natural o sobrenatural distinta y clara, menos capacidad y disposición tiene en sí para entrar en abismo de la fe, donde todo lo demás se absorbe.’ Author’s translation.

Here John also references one of the other commonly recurring themes in his writings (in contradistinction to Teresa) as he points out that such apprehensions of the memory will also contain ‘*dulzura y sabor*’, ‘sweetness and savour’ (see Tyler 2013) which will cause attachment to the ‘me-self’ and thus hinder the progress of the soul towards God.⁷

Dark Night or Depression?

To summarise our exposition so far. John has presented before us a path that is lacking in ‘things that are sweet and tasty’. The ecstasies and visions so beloved of his contemporaries such as St Teresa are not on his agenda. Rather, they are to be treated warily as something that may be taking us away from our true home in God rather than returning to it. Rather, he sees his path as leading to a ‘nakedness of spirit’ (*la desnudez de espíritu*) which challenges us at our most fundamental level as human beings – psychologically and spiritually. In this respect the ‘first night’ acts as a bridge to the second, more theological or spiritual, night. Yet, before we turn to that I think it is important to clarify one misconception that John’s schema is prey to in contemporary analysis. We could categorise this as a ‘reductionism’ that sees his ‘dark night’ as somehow analogous to a form of depressive illness or psychosis.

In this respect whilst discussing the ‘dark night’ John states that he will rely on three things: experience, what he terms ‘the sciences’ (this would include our ‘psychological’ approaches) and Sacred Scripture. Of these three he cites

⁷ I derive the phrase ‘me-self’ (*Ich-selbst*) here from Edith Stein’s exposition of John in her *Science of the Cross*. For more on this analysis see Tyler, forthcoming, *The Living Philosophy of Edith Stein*.

Scripture as the most important for: 'taking Scripture as our guide we do not err, since the Holy Spirit speaks to us through it' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* I. Prol. in John of the Cross 1979: 70). The 'dark night' is, he assures us, a specific spiritual state which people may not have chosen to enter. Worse, once in it not only may we not recognise it but we may be advised badly by spiritual directors or 'other guides'.

Sadly, too often today, the movements of the spirit are misdiagnosed as a mental disturbance rather than what we might perhaps better call a 'spiritual emergency/emergence' (See Grof and Grof 1989). For much of the past fifty years a reductionist view of the mind has refused to acknowledge the emergence of mind *qua* mind as a psycho-spiritual phenomenon in itself. John compares those who misinterpret the mystery of the 'dark night' with the 'false comforters' who tell Job he must have done something wrong, otherwise these misfortunes would not have happened to him. Further, he cautions against the types of reductionism such that would misdiagnose a spiritual 'dark night' as a form of 'mental illness', where the 'dark night' is reduced to 'melancholia, depression, or temperament, or to some hidden wickedness, and that as a result God has forsaken them' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* I. Prol.4 in John of the Cross 1979: 71). *Melancholia* being John's term for what we would today call 'mental illness' or 'clinical depression'.⁸

'Some spiritual fathers' he tells us, 'are likely to be a hindrance and harm rather than a help to these souls that journey on this road. Such directors have

⁸ As with John, so Teresa of Avila had a profound understanding of what we would today call mental illness and she calls 'melancholia'. See, for example, *Camino de Perfección* 24.4, *The Concepts* 6.12, *Las Moradas* 3.1.6, 4.1.9, 6.1.8, 6.2.5,7, 6.3.2 , 6.8.3 and Chapter 7 of the *Fundaciones*. Teresa is particularly unhappy in *Las Moradas* 6.1.8 with confessors who dismiss spiritual movements as 'melancholia': 'he fears everything and finds in everything something to doubt because he sees these unusual experiences... everything is immediately condemned as from the devil or melancholy. And the world is so full of this melancholy that I am not surprised. There is so much of it now in the world and the devil causes so many evils through this means that confessors are very right in fearing it and considering it carefully' (Teresa of Avila 1997, author's translation).

neither understanding nor experience of these ways' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* I. Prol.4 in John of the Cross 1979: 71). Thus, he suggests that when it comes to the 'secret exchanges' that happen between the soul and God, it is more incumbent than ever for the psychologist, counsellor or spiritual director to acknowledge their 'unknowing' and allow the mystery to unfold 'in darkness and secure with no other light for a guide'.

For John, one of the worst torments a person suffers at this time is 'when it cannot understand itself or find anyone else who understands it' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* I. Prol.4 in John of the Cross 1979: 71). The simple act of what Carl Rogers termed 'empathy' can be the best gift a person can receive at this time from a 'guide' (See Rogers 1995, also Culligan 1983). The entry into the 'dark night' John tells us, is not a time for going over past sins and mistakes, it is rather a time 'to give comfort and encouragement that they may desire to endure this suffering as long as God wills, for until then no remedy - whatever the soul does, or the confessor says - is adequate' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* I. Prol.5 in John of the Cross 1979: 71).

Significantly from the perspective of our modern practices, and following from his spiritual anthropology presented here, John also gives directions as to how to distinguish the 'dark night' from 'melancholia or some other bad humour', i.e. from the spiritual movement of the soul and the psychological. So that by these signs, we can:

Recognize this purification of the soul that we call the dark night; whether it is the purification of the senses or of the spirit; and how we can discern whether this affliction is caused by melancholia or some other deficiency of

sense or spirit. (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* I. Prol.6 in John of the Cross 1979: 71 - 72)

This he does in Book One, Chapter Nine of *The Dark Night*. John begins this chapter by making a distinction between the 'sensory night and purgation' (spiritual sense) and the dark night caused by 'sin and imperfection, or weakness and lukewarmness or some bad humor (*algún mal humor*) or bodily indisposition' (*Dark Night of the Soul*, I.9.1 in John of the Cross 1979: 313). From a psychological point of view this statement is interesting. To make his distinction between the two John proposes three guidelines.

First:

As these souls do not get satisfaction or consolation from the things of God, they do not get any out of creatures either. Since God puts a soul in this dark night in order to dry up and purge its sensory appetite, He does not allow it to find sweetness or delight in anything. (*Dark Night of the Soul*, I.9.2 in John of the Cross 1979: 313)

As part of the nature of the 'dark night' John had proposed earlier that the individual seeker loses a savour for 'spiritual things':

It is at the time they are going about their spiritual exercises with delight and satisfaction, when in their opinion the sun of divine favor is shining

most brightly on them, that God darkens all this light and closes the door and spring of the sweet spiritual water they were tasting as often and as long as they desired... they not only fail to receive satisfaction and pleasure from their spiritual exercises and works, as they formerly did, but also find these exercises distasteful and bitter. (*Dark Night of the Soul*, I.8.3 in John of the Cross 1979: 312)

According, then, to this first 'guideline of the dark night' John suggests that when there is a decrease in interest of things to do with the spirit there is not a corresponding increase of interest of the things 'of the world' e.g. of sensual/sensory pleasure. However, John rightly perceives that such a distaste or lassitude towards the things of the world may also be found with 'melancholia' or 'bad humour'. So he suggests the second guideline:

The memory ordinarily turns to God solicitously and with painful care, and the soul thinks it is not serving God but turning back, because it is aware of this distaste for the things of God. (*Dark Night of the Soul*, I.9.3 in John of the Cross 1979: 313)

As we experience the dark night, the one thing that distresses us more than anything is the thought that we have somehow lost our spiritual home in God. We could face anything if this was not the case, without this we are lost. It is this continual return to our spiritual root in God that drives 'the dark night' and it is to this that the soul 'solicitously returns with painful care.' The 'melancholia' leads

to collapse of self and self-interest, the 'purgation of the dark night' leads to a deepening of self and understanding in God. The key passage in this section is:

The reason is that now in this state of contemplation, when the soul has left discursive meditation and entered the state of proficients, *it is God who works in it...* At this time a person's own efforts are of no avail, but an obstacle to the interior peace and work God is producing in the spirit through that dryness of sense. (*Dark Night of the Soul*, 1.9.7 in John of the Cross 1979: 315)

As with Teresa's fourth mansion of *Las Moradas*, this is the point where we move from the natural to the supernatural, from our own efforts to those of God. Up to now our efforts have brought us closer to God – our discursive meditation, going on courses, going to church, working for peace and justice etc. – but now that is coming to an end, not only do our efforts no longer help, they may in fact impede the action of God. We are entering the beauty and mystery of 'the night' – and very often our 'ego' will do everything it can to resist and struggle.

The 'sensory' part of ourselves cannot 'enjoy' these spiritual 'delights', it is not ready yet. So it experiences this time as a time of dryness. As with Teresa, John emphasises the sensuality of the *gustos*⁹ in bringing us closer to God. And like

⁹ This is an important word for both Teresa and John, but difficult to translate into English (Italian readers may have less trouble...). 'Joys', 'tastes', 'favours' and 'delights' will all do. It is a deliberately ambiguous word and it is noteworthy that when Teresa first uses it in the *Libro de La Vida* it is in reference to sensual pleasures rather than the things of God. As she moves through the book it becomes more associated with spiritual matters. This studied ambiguity towards the sensual and the spiritual in both Teresa and John may account for increased contemporary interest in their work.

Teresa, he employs the strategies of the medieval *theologia mystica* we explored earlier to stress this part of the journey:

If in the beginning the soul does not experience this spiritual savor and delight, but dryness and distaste, the reason is the novelty involved in this exchange. Since its palate is accustomed to these other sensory tastes, the soul still sets its eyes on them. And since, also, its spiritual palate is neither purged nor accommodated for so subtle a taste, it is unable to experience the spiritual savor and good until gradually prepared by means of this dark and obscure night. The soul instead experiences dryness and distaste because of a lack of the gratification it formerly enjoyed so readily. (*Dark Night of the Soul*, I.9.4 in John of the Cross 1979: 314)

Reflection at this point, he tells us, is so delicate that when we try to grasp it or name it, it is 'like air that escapes when one tries to grasp it in one's hand'. Which leads to the third guideline for the dark night:

The powerlessness, in spite of one's efforts, to meditate and make use of the imagination, the interior sense, as was one's previous custom. At this time God does not communicate Himself through the senses as He did before, by means of the discursive analysis and synthesis of ideas, but begins to communicate Himself through pure spirit by an act of simple contemplation, in which there is no discursive succession of thought. (*Dark Night of the Soul*, I.9.8 in John of the Cross 1979: 315)

John's third guideline relates to forms of prayer, meditation and contemplation. Psychologists have recently begun to appreciate the value of meditation and what is today termed 'mindfulness' for good mental health and recently many in the West have found much of interest in the great meditative traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism.¹⁰ Yet, within the Christian tradition there is an equally strong and well thought out meditative tradition, not least in the works of John and Teresa. Here we see John applying his knowledge of prayer and meditation to the subtle questions raised by the 'dark night'.

Commenting on this guideline he suggests that it allows us to distinguish 'melancholic states' from authentic spiritual movements, for the former are 'by nature changeable'. St Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* suggests that we observe what he calls the movements of the soul and note how these movements come and go – equally, John suggests that mental pathologies may come and go but the deeper 'spiritual purgation' of the dark night is something more permanent and lasting.

In John's scholastic anthropology, God at this point:

Binds the interior faculties and leaves no support in the intellect, nor satisfaction in the will, nor remembrance in the memory. At this time a person's own efforts are of no avail, but are an obstacle to the interior peace and work God is producing in the spirit through that dryness of sense. Since this peace is something spiritual and delicate, its fruit is quiet,

¹⁰ See Tyler 2018 for an extended treatment of this subject.

delicate, solitary, satisfying, and peaceful, and far removed from all the other gratifications of beginners, which are very palpable and sensory. This is the peace that David says God speaks in the soul in order to make it spiritual. (*Dark Night of the Soul*, 1.9.7 in John of the Cross 1979: 315)

Thus, John suggests, if a person is exhibiting the three signs shown here then what they are experiencing may well be the theological ‘dark night of the soul’ – not necessarily and immediately, but possibly so. This would be then the movement from the ‘first’ to the ‘second’ night – the entrance in the darkest part of the journey.

The Three Nights

What we see in John’s exposition of the dark night, in distinction from what we would call today ‘psychological disorder’, is thus a clear example of, to paraphrase St Thomas Aquinas, ‘grace building upon nature’. We are not having our basic human anthropology excised or removed, but rather, our whole human personhood is being subjected to a radical *transformation*.

This transformation, as we have said throughout this article, can usefully be described as the passage through the ‘three nights’ which he summarises at the beginning of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Here, he states that the first night corresponds to what we have referred to here as the ‘purgation of the appetites’ and derived ultimately from the Desert Tradition. In the episode from the Book of Tobit to which he relates it, this is the point where the young Tobit has to burn the fish heart in the fire for ‘this heart symbolized the human heart that is

attached to worldly things' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 1.2.2 in John of the Cross 1979: 75, c.f. Tobit 6: 18 - 22). This type of 'dark night' is, he says, 'common and happens to many' (*Dark Night of the Soul*, 1.8.1 in John of the Cross 1979: 311) and from the point of view of the present article we would characterise this as work on the psyche in preparation for the transition from the psychological to the spiritual with all the dangers and problems inherent in that.

The 'second night', which he compares to the episode in Tobit where he is admitted into 'the company of the patriarchs' is a 'dark night to the intellect' which is 'the lot of very few' (*Dark Night of the Soul*, 1.8.1 in John of the Cross 1979: 311). This is the specific province of the counseling psychologist today who is able to have the humility to lay psychological categories to one side and admit the possibility of a 'spiritual emergence' at this point. This second night, following the categories of the mystical theology (and in accordance with the limits to the discursive intellect as laid down by John) will move from the dialectic to the symbolic as 'intellective discourse' dies down and properly speaking, is more amenable to comprehension through the symbolic theology of the *theologia mystica* than the ministrations of psychology as currently practiced.¹¹

John compares the final 'night' that the soul must pass through to the blessing of God that Tobit receives at the end of his journey. The first and second stages had led to increasing darkness, indeed the second 'night' is the darkest point of the process. But in this second 'extreme darkness' the Wisdom of God is given as 'God's communication to the spirit' leading to union. In his famous analogy used in *The Dark Night*, Book 2, Chapter 10 he compares the first night - the 'purification of the lower instincts of the self' - to the darkness and 'bad

¹¹ Although see Tyler 2016 for some suggestions as to how the traditional theological categories could be incorporated into contemporary practice.

odour' that is emitted when a damp log is thrown on a fire. The second night, the distinction of the spiritual and the psychological is the point where the fire of the Divine catches light of the wood. This final night, the third, is the point where 'the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself' (*Dark Night of the Soul*, 2.10.1 in John of the Cross 1979: 350). This 'third night' is effectively beyond academic discourse and it is the point at which we must leave John and his journey of the soul to God in the night. For the vision of God encountered here is a 'dark night to us in this life' (*Dark Night of the Soul*, 1.8.1 in John of the Cross 1979: 311) as the 'spiritual light is so bright and so transcendent that it blinds and darkens the natural intellect as it approaches' (*Dark Night of the Soul*, 2.16.11 in John of the Cross 1979: 366).

In his last completed treatise, *The Living Flame of Love*, John stood on the edge of this abyss of meaning as he tried one last time to comprehend this third darkness, but even he admitted here that:

I have felt somewhat reluctant... to explain these four stanzas... since they deal with such interior and spiritual matters, for which communication language normally fails (as spirit transcends sense) and I consequently find it difficult to say anything of substance on the matter. Also, it is difficult to speak well of the intimate depths of the spirit (*entrañas del espíritu*, literally 'entrails of the spirit') if one doesn't inhabit those depths oneself. And as I have not much done that up to now I have delayed writing about these matters. (*Living Flame of Love*, Prol.1 in John of the Cross 1979: 577)

If John himself felt unqualified to expound such matters it would be very foolish of me, a simple academic, to jump in where he hesitates. However, in conclusion, I would like to suggest that this exposition of John's three 'nights' has revealed the importance to his understanding of 'night', 'vision' and 'ecstasy' in the delineation of the natural (i.e. the 'psychological') from the super-natural (i.e. the 'spiritual') and how a finely detailed distinction such as he presents in his writing can be of enormous contemporary benefit, especially to those engaged in pastoral care and counselling psychology.

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- A** = *Ascent of Mount Carmel*
DN = *Dark Night of the Soul*
LF = *The Living Flame of Love*
CB = *Spiritual Canticle – Redaction B*

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