



# Mystical Contemplation and Other Ways of the Cognition of God According to Saint John of the Cross

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**Abstract:** This philosophical article analyzes the direction of changes in human knowledge of God under the influence of mystical contemplation in the teachings of Saint John of the Cross. The introductory part features the specificity of various types of knowledge of God: based on the beauty of nature, metaphysical analysis of the world, and faith. This serves as the backdrop for showing mystical contemplation, its nature, and the goal it pursues. The author makes a thorough analysis of the character of transformations in knowledge of God (including faith) under the influence of mystical contemplation. This idea is emphasized by John of the Cross. Yet, it is not well-developed. Conclusion: contemplation makes it possible for a man to free himself from thinking about God in worldly categories, in particular from categories of the anthropomorphic nature, because the aim of mystical contemplation is to prepare the human mind to see God after death.

**Keywords:** intellect, faith, love, union with God, purification

Representing the path to the union with God, Saint John of the Cross indicates how each of human spiritual faculties reaches this state. Here, we will focus on only one of them—the intellect and its cognitive acts. Speaking of the intellect, the Saint mentions four constituents related to human cognition. The starting point are the natural acts of cognition, insufficient for the union. Subsequently, John states that to direct the mind to God, acts of faith are necessary. Faith allows for the appearance of contemplation purifying human cognition, experienced in the form of the dark night. The last constituent described by the Saint are the cognition acts of an intellect united with God.

In analyses conducted by John, the process of transforming human cognition initiated by the contemplation is described rather generally, without explaining the transformation undergone by faith. The reason why contemplation purifies human cognition is also not entirely stated.

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This article is a modified, English version of some parts of my monograph written in Polish *Doświadczenie mistyczne w doktrynie świętego Jana od Krzyża* [Mystical Experience in the Doctrine of Saint John of the Cross: Philosophical Analysis] (Niziński 2021). This text deepens the topic of the effects of the mystical cognition of God presented in my monograph.

The aim pursued by the author of this article is to explain these matters. Thanks to their clarification, it will become easier to understand the specificity of cognizing God through contemplation compared to other kinds of knowledge about Him. The method applied here is a philosophical analysis of human cognition with consideration of the constituents employed by John of the Cross. Although the topic of the dark night described by the Saint has witnessed a great number of studies, it appears that no one has analyzed the transformation of the human cognition in the indicated perspective. Most of the contemporary studies analyze the topic in the context of Dionysius the Areopagite, theological virtues or anthropology.<sup>1</sup> Only few of them look at faith in the broader context of human knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Types of the Cognition of God Based on the Doctrine of John of the Cross

Cognizing God plays an important role in the doctrine of John of the Cross, because, at least at the initial stage, it sets a direction for human activities. John maintains that there are different ways to know God. The Saint writes: “It is noteworthy that the intellect can get ideas and concepts in two ways, naturally and supernaturally.” (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 10, 2)

John is not opposed to the natural cognition of God. He recognizes a certain similarity between creation and God, which in philosophical terms could be considered as John’s acceptance of the analogy (of being) between God and creation. It is thanks to this similarity that God can be known in a natural way: “On this spiritual road the consideration of creatures is first in order after the exercise of self-knowledge. The soul thereby advances in the knowledge of God by considering his greatness and excellence manifested in creatures [...]. The invisible things of God are known by the soul through creatures.” (John of the Cross, 1991d, 4, 1)

John claims that creation is the reflection of God. Therefore, at the initial stage of pursuing Him, he recommends using the beauty of nature to direct the mind towards God. We know from witnesses’ accounts that he taught his fellow brothers how to find God in the beauty of creation. John writes: “In the living contemplation and knowledge of creatures the soul sees such fullness of graces, powers, and beauty with which God has endowed them that seemingly all are arrayed in wonderful beauty and natural virtue. The beauty and virtue derive from above and are imparted by that infinite supernatural beauty of the Image of God.” (John of the Cross 1991d, 6, 1)

1 Blommestijn 2000, 228–41; Bosch 2019; Doohan 2013; Gaitán de Rojas 2018, 63–88; 2019, 35–61; Gianola 2015; McGinn 2019, 9–33; Guerra 2014, 330–348; Martín Velasco 2011–12, 123–69; Rodríguez Moreno 2018; Sanabria Chamizo 2021; Tatar 2019a; 2019b, 6–24.

2 Huguenin 2003, 79–116.

## 2. The Character of Knowledge Gained in a Metaphysical Way

In addition to the way of knowing God's perfections through His reflection in created things, there is also a way of metaphysical cognition. Some philosophers will say that the cause is known by the effects of its action. Metaphysics follows this path. It is enough to recall the well-known five ways proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas. Grasping an aspect of familiar reality which does not explain itself—e.g., the fact of the world's existence—one can come to its cause and learn, although to a very limited extent, about the nature of the cause which would be to be God.

In this case, He would be understood as a necessary existence (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, 4, 2). God known in this way is a certain postulate explaining the facts directly available to us, which in themselves do not contain this explanation. One could say that God known in such a way is some kind of "extension" of the world—its principle or cause (Barth 1997, 21–22). The world is beings of unnecessary existence, and God is a being of necessary existence, that is, an existence that exists by itself—as expressed by Saint Thomas Aquinas. In this case, God is a certain concept which helps the intellect to understand part of reality available to us.

By stating that God is necessary existence, we have made little progress in the knowledge of God, because we only know what it means to exist unnecessarily, and the very knowledge of what necessary existence is remains inaccessible. Nobody has the experience of being able to exist always. The only thing that can be said about this existence is that it is not what all beings are, because they exist without necessity.

A similar situation is with another notion received in this way and which describes God. According to Aristotle, God was to be a pure act, that is a being which, thanks to the fullness of perfection, is not subject to change, but moves other beings itself. As a consequence, God understood in this way would have to be immaterial, unchangeable, timeless—that is, eternal, infinite (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, 4, 1, ad. 1; I, 10, 1; I, 44, 2, ad. 2). When we look at the positive content covered by these terms, it basically does not appear, because all these names indicate what God is not. God is not in time, God has no parts, God is not material, etc. In principle, we learn how we should not think about God (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, 10, 1, ad. 1; I, 4, 3, ad. 4).

The knowledge of God gained metaphysically is poor and not obvious. In addition, we can say that such cognition is not direct. It also lacks certainty and obviousness. Although for those who follow the reasoning of Thomas or Aristotle and adopt their vision of reality which we learn directly as well as accept their method of reasoning, the conclusion is obvious, yet the method or the departure point for everyone analyzing their texts are not so. It is enough to look at the history of philosophy to see how many people reject this type of arguments (explicitly: Charles Hartshorne, Xavier Zubiri, implicitly: René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, Gottfried Leibniz, Georg Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger).

Knowledge gained in such a way rather does not establish any relationship with God. Although the intellect may recognize the conclusiveness of reasoning, whether by Thomas or Aristotle, the result of this reasoning does not stimulate the will to establish a relationship with God understood in this way. How and why to love a pure act—an immovable being that sets in motion everything but itself? Why to love pure existence? The situation seems a little different in the case of getting to know the beauty of God in creation. Perhaps this beauty inspires man to admire the wisdom of God and to seek Him in some way. However, it does not ignite anything else in man.

### 3. Inability to Unite with God Through Indirect Forms

John lists two reasons for which it is not possible to unite with God using these above-mentioned indirect cognitive forms. The first one—resulting from longing for God Himself and not for his approximate figures. The second one—one can unite with God not with the help of some distant image, but only by getting to know Him.

John states that getting to know God in creation can, up to a certain point, stimulate man to seek God, because creation says something about His beauty and omnipotence. However, after some time, this type of cognition ceases to be sufficient for various reasons. In the quotation cited below, where feelings shape the relationship between God and man, longing for God Himself is the reason for which getting to know God in creation ceases to be enough: “The soul, wounded with love through a trace of the beauty of her Beloved, which she has known through creatures, and anxious to see the invisible beauty that caused this visible beauty.” (John of the Cross 1991d, 6, 1)

For the Spanish mystic, in order to unite with God, it is not enough to have in the mind a more or less approximative image to Him. The intellect, in order to unite with God, must get to know God Himself. If the will tends towards God by following the image which it receives from the intellect, then its love is imperfect when the image of God is imperfect. Moreover, a question always arises that it is true that we have some intuitions derived from natural cognition of who God could be—but which of these intuitions is true?

John, emphasizing some initial cognition of God through His traces left in creation, observes that none of these traces, however, offers the true cognition of God and thus cannot serve as a means of becoming united with Him.

It is noteworthy that among all creatures, both superior and inferior, none bears a likeness to God's being or unites proximately with him. Although truly, as theologians say, all creatures carry with them a certain relation to God and a trace of him (greater or less

according to the perfection of their being), yet God has no relation or essential likeness to them. Rather the difference that lies between his divine being and their being is infinite. Consequently, intellectual comprehension of God through heavenly or earthly creatures is impossible; there is no proportion of likeness. [. . .] Thus no creature can serve the intellect as a proportionate means to the attainment of God. (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 8, 3)

Therefore, John concludes:

Similarly, if the soul in traveling this road leans on any elements of its own knowledge or of its experience or knowledge of God, it will easily go astray or be detained. (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 4, 3)

Nothing in this life that could be imagined or received and understood by the intellect can be a proximate means of union with God. In our natural way of knowing, the intellect can grasp an object only through the forms and phantasms of things perceived by the bodily senses. Since, as we said, these things cannot serve as a means, the intellect cannot profit from its natural knowing. (1991a, II, 8, 4)

This does not mean that John rejects the helpfulness of our imperfect knowledge of Him at the initial stage of tending towards God. After all, we need even a minimal amount of knowledge of God in order to become converted and start looking for Him. Nevertheless, when John addresses those who want to mystically unite with God, he mentions the true knowledge of God, and not some preliminary or approximate one, as one of the conditions. Therefore, neither the knowledge of God achieved through philosophical considerations nor the reflection of God's beauty in creation can serve as a means to unite mystically with God.

#### 4. The Need to Direct All Faculties to God

According to John of the Cross, the necessary requirement for union is the subordination of all human spheres to God—not only the intellect. In order to meet this requirement, John states that it is necessary to properly direct cognition, and this is only possible through faith. Hence his known requirement to live by faith. Faith fulfills two functions in the doctrine of John of the Cross. The first one is personal openness to God. The second one is the true cognition of Him.

In what way does faith open one to God? It creates a personal relationship between man and God. John writes: "God is the substance and concept of faith." (John of the Cross 1991d, 1, 10) "Faith, consequently, gives and communicates God himself to us but covered with the silver of faith." (1991d, 12, 4)

In order to better illustrate the difference between the cognitive element of faith and the relational element, that is one that creates a personal relationship with God, the following example can be used. I believe that Ramses II existed, although I never met him. I also believe that he was a pharaoh. Thus, thanks to trust put in historians who are experts in matters related to the history of Ancient Egypt, I know something about Ramses II. However, it is cognition which is not based on vision, because I personally did not have the opportunity to get to know this individual, but on the basis of historians' authority—and in this sense my knowledge of Ramses II is similar to religious faith, because it informs about things which are unknown and unattainable for me with my current education. Thus, any knowledge based on authority contains an information element. However, faith, spoken about by John of the Cross, contains another element particularly important from the point of view of religion, which is the establishment of a personal relationship with the One in whom one believes.

Therefore, religious faith not only informs me about what God is like, but when I believe in Him, it establishes a personal bond between me and Him, opening me up to God, and He, as the substance of faith, comes to me with this faith. In the Gospel, a man begging Christ for a miracle, when questioned whether he believes in the Son of Man, is asked whether he is ready to accept Christ along with His teaching. Faith aroused in such a way allows Christ to enter into the life of a person who is asking for a miracle. This is the element of faith that Federico Ruiz mentions saying that according to the doctrine of John of the Cross it introduces a passive (i.e. mystical) character into a relationship with God, and thus gives God Himself. He states that God is a more active and personal subject of revelation, even before man believes in Him, than a passive object of human observation and search (Ruiz 1986, 169). Expressing it in other words, before man starts believing in God, God stimulates him to believe beforehand. Faith, therefore, first establishes a personal relationship with God and then informs man what God is like. This statement by Ruiz also explains why for John of the Cross faith is always an indispensable attitude at every stage of the way leading to God, even when man has already achieved the mystical union. Thanks to faith, man is always open to God, allowing God to work in him.

Thanks to faith we get to know God, because faith is based on revelation. In revelation God presents Himself to us in our cognitive categories (Barth 1946, 258). This is the character of revelation contained in the Holy Scripture. As part of this revelation, as Karl Barth says, it is God who presents Himself, using our language and images available to our consciousness (Josuttis 1965, 12). He selects some well-known elements from our reality and compares Himself to them. In other words, God uses a certain resemblance of the world to Himself to let Himself be known by us. For example, He compares His love for man to maternal, paternal, nuptial love, etc.

This type of cognition is also indirect cognition, because we are led from concepts known to us to reality which is directly inaccessible to us, but also is incomprehensible (it is God). The function of faith described here is informative. Thanks to

this positive, or informative, element of faith, we know what we can think about God, or what He is like, and in this sense faith puts man on the way to God.

The supreme example of adapting God's speech to our understanding is the Incarnation, in which God becomes reality best known to us, i.e. the human one. God becomes man. It could be said that Christ, possessing two natures—divine and human, is the most adapted form of translating incomprehensible divine reality into reality we know best, i.e. ourselves.

If metaphysical cognition, based on the beauty of creation, can be laden with poverty and a large dose of non-obviousness, then in the case of faith, the guarantee of certainty and truth of this type of knowledge of God is God Himself, because the shape of revelation is given by Him. Thus, it actually directs the mind towards God.

John states that the merit of faith is that it presents us with God as He really is—e.g., as omnipotent, merciful, loving, seeking us, etc. If man accepts the revealed content about God as true, then he can be sure he is focusing on God Himself. John writes in an explicit way:

We can gather from what has been said that to be prepared for this divine union the intellect must be cleansed and emptied of everything relating to sense, divested and liberated of everything clearly intelligible, inwardly pacified and silenced, and supported by faith alone, which is the only proximate and proportionate means to union with God. For the likeness between faith and God is so close that no other difference exists than that between believing in God and seeing him. Just as God is infinite, faith proposes him to us as infinite. Just as there are three Persons in one God, it presents him to us in this way. (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 9, 1)

This is why John states that in order to get to know God truly, man must keep believing. The feature of getting to know God based on faith is truth and certainty, because it was God Himself who decided how to present Himself to us: “they must lean on dark faith, accept it for their guide and light, and rest on nothing of what they understand, taste, feel, or imagine.” (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 4, 2)

However, there is a certain price to pay for following the path of getting to know God based on faith: “For though faith brings certitude to the intellect, it does not produce clarity, but only darkness.” (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 6, 2) The element of mystery related to faith concerns what given perfection in God is. When God says that His love for us is like the love of a mother or father, revelation, at the same time, contains a correction regarding this love. By way of addition, we learn that God loves more perfectly than a mother, because a mother can forget about her child, which does not happen to God. Moreover, when we begin to inquire what this God's love for man is like, we must take into account that it is not imperfect love, that is, changeable, self-interested, and we are loved by Someone who is bodiless, timeless, infinite, loving with all He is, etc. Ultimately, we come to the conclusion that God's love for us is

so perfect that it is difficult to comprehend. Therefore, faith, due to the incomprehensibility of things it teaches us about, is dark to our intellect.

There is a positive element in the content of faith, because it informs us what God is like, but how it is realized in God exceeds our ability for cognition and hence faith is at the same time dark cognition. As a consequence, faith moves away from such understanding of God as man attains with the help of his own thinking, imagining or feeling about Him. In other words, there is also an element of mystery or an element of ignorance in faith, because our intellect is adapted only to getting to know the created world. In revelation, God uses reality which is known to us in order to later transport us to a fundamentally different, incomprehensible reality. Although we know how a mother can love a child, we are not able to comprehend how God loves us, because this love is essentially more perfect than a mother's love and exceeds it infinitely.

Faith, the theologians say, is a certain and obscure habit of soul. It is an obscure habit because it brings us to believe divinely revealed truths that transcend every natural light and infinitely exceed all human understanding. [. . .] The sun so obscures all other lights that they do not seem to be lights at all when it is shining, and instead of affording vision to the eyes, it overwhelms, blinds, and deprives them of vision since its light is excessive and unproportioned to the visual faculty. (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 3, 1)

Cognition through faith, though true, is imperfect because it is not vision. This is indirect cognition, because it is effected through words or images that need to be exceeded. The advantage of following faith is to give the right direction to the intellect, pointing to God being His "outline." Thanks to faith, the intellect rejects images that do not refer to God; therefore, faith makes our intellect open up to God, but it still does not see Him:

She says these truths are sketched deep within her, that is, in her soul, in her intellect and will. For these truths are infused by faith into her intellect. And since the knowledge of them is imperfect, she says they are sketched. Just as a sketch is not a perfect painting, so the knowledge of faith is not perfect knowledge. Hence the truths infused in the soul through faith are as though sketched, and when clearly visible they will be like a perfect and finished painting in the soul. (John of the Cross 1991d, 12, 6)

At this point, we are forced to expose this element of teaching by John of the Cross, which concerns the difference between natural cognition and the one based on faith. According to John, these are two different types of light that lead to cognition. However, one light excludes the other. John emphasizes that cognition based on faith does not rely on the light of the intellect, because it gets to know another reality and is not capable of getting to know divine reality: "The light of natural knowledge does not

show us the object of faith, since this object is unproportioned to any of the senses. Yet we come to know it through hearing, by believing what faith teaches us, blinding our natural light and bringing it into submission.” (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 3, 3)

In explaining the darkness of faith, John derives it from the fact that it itself is a light, but of such intensity that it blinds the mind, stopping its functioning. Faith is therefore a light for John, but at the same time, being another kind of light, it extinguishes the light used by the intellect: “Other knowledge is acquired by the light of the intellect, but not the knowledge of faith. Faith nullifies the light of the intellect; and if this light is not darkened, the knowledge of faith is lost.” (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 3, 4)

He who stops at faith gets to know in a pure way a reality other than that which is accessible to our intellect. “It [faith] has the characteristics of crystal, being pure in its truths, strong, clear, and cleansed of errors and natural forms.” (John of the Cross 1991d, 12, 3) The more someone departs from rational cognition and the more they stop at faith, the better they will know God and, consequently, unite with Him. “And just as God is darkness to our intellect, so faith dazzles and blinds us. Only by means of faith, in divine light exceeding all understanding, does God manifest himself to the soul. The greater one’s faith the closer is one’s union with God.” (1991a, II, 9, 1) This means that according to the teaching of John, the intellect should move from its understanding of God to how He is presented by faith.

In connection with the above, there is an important element regarding the nature of the purification of faith. I think that this topic is inadequately dealt with by commentators and John of the Cross does not stress it too much. According to John, cognition based on faith extends between two poles. On the one hand, John states that faith is pure as a crystal (cf. John of the Cross 1991d, 12, 3). Therefore, when man accepts faith with all simplicity, that is, he stops only at the objective formulations contained in revelation, then his faith is just as John writes: pure, clear and free from errors.

On the other hand, John states that when man learns something new, he tries to learn it through the content already known and faith teaches him about new and unknown things:

The intellect knows only in the natural way, that is, by means of the senses. If one is to know in this natural way, the phantasms and species of objects will have to be present either in themselves or in their likenesses; otherwise one will be incapable of knowing naturally. [...] For example, if we were informed that on a certain island there was an animal whose like or kind we had never seen, we would then have no more idea or image of that animal in our mind than previously, no matter how much we were told. (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 3, 2)

That is why the intellect tries to bring what it has been told about God closer to itself. It is an attempt to understand faith. The intellect cannot fail to make this kind of effort, because it wants to somehow grasp the revealed content. This natural human need is taken into account by God who reveals Himself in the form of man (i.e. Jesus Christ) in order to lead the human intellect to unknown reality.

Therefore, it is obvious that man who believes must play a certain role in interpreting the content of faith. Man always interprets revelation. This interpretation may be more or less correct. Hence, this type of cognition may improve. An example of the interpretation of faith is Job, who has a certain idea of God's care and justice. It is a similar situation with Saint Peter's understanding of what mercy towards one's neighbor should look like. Job's and Peter's attitudes show that faith is not a passive acceptance of the revealed content, but is always its interpretation. It is impossible not to interpret the revealed content, because this would mean the unnatural passivity of our intellect.

As Hans-Georg Gadamer (1993, 257) writes, we already approach every content that is given to us from a subjective perspective, which constitutes a certain pre-understanding of this content. It is enough to recall the example of paternal love. One knows difficulties that man experiences in accepting God as his father when he himself had a tyrant father or did not know him at all. Such a person undertakes the effort of faith, but his traumatic events from the past strongly distort this faith. In faith, one goes from the known (one's own father) to the unknown (God as a father). For someone who did not know their father at all, comparing God to a father means nothing. Faith is therefore also the active cognition of God, because faith is also an activity of the mind, that is, a certain effort made by man to understand its content. Consequently, in faith-based cognition, one can grow indefinitely, moving from less perfect forms of faith to more and more perfect ones. Faith can be great and little, correct or wrong (heresy). In general, we are inclined to think about God in human terms. Therefore, Job and Peter initially find it difficult to accept God as He reveals Himself to them, and they must undergo the purification of faith.

John clearly warns that the role of detailed reasoning regarding the content of faith in uniting the intellect with God should not be overestimated. For, in this case, reasoning is the natural light of the intellect:

Hence while the intellect is understanding, it is not approaching God but withdrawing from him. It must withdraw from itself and from its knowledge so as to journey to God in faith, by believing and not understanding [. . .]. In this way it reaches perfection, because it is joined to God by faith and not by any other means, and it reaches God more by not understanding than by understanding. [. . .] For its own well-being, the intellect should be doing what you condemn; that is, it should avoid busying itself with particular knowledge, for it cannot reach God through this knowledge, which would rather hinder it in its advance toward him. (John of the Cross 1991c, III, 48)

Consequently, a soul must strip itself of everything pertaining to creatures and of its actions and abilities, (of its understanding, satisfaction, and feeling), so that when everything unlike and unconformed to God is cast out, it may receive the likeness of God. (1991a, II, 5, 4)

Nevertheless, it seems impossible for the intellect itself to give up the function of interpreting revelation. After all, it is natural for us to try to understand what we believe in, but at the same time we move away from the purity of faith. The more we try to understand the image of God revealed to us, the more we move away from God.

## 5. The Purification of Faith

In what direction should the purification of faith proceed? It takes place in the context of comprehensive transformations preparing man for union with God. John shows two components determining the right path of these transformations: contemplation, i.e. inflow of God into the faculties, so that He could act in them, and preparation for seeing God. Union with God through love is the anticipation of the future vision of God. It is this goal that determines dynamics of the transformation of the action of all faculties, including the sensory sphere. It is here that we are able to discover the reasons for the radicalism of the Saint's doctrine also in matters related to cognition, i.e. the functioning of the intellect. Therefore, we must now delve into the nature of man's union with God, as understood by John.

### 5.1. The Mystical Union as the Fulfillment of the Faculties with God

God, in order to unite man with Himself, makes him similar to Himself in action. The first requirement for union is the equality of man's and God's love. This is a requirement resulting from God's absoluteness. John writes:

If anything pleases him [God], it is the exaltation of the soul. Since there is no way by which he can exalt her more than by making her equal to himself, he is pleased only with her love. For the property of love is to make the lover equal to the object loved. (John of the Cross 1991d, 28, 1)

With God, to love the soul is to put her somehow in himself and make her his equal. Thus he loves the soul within himself, with himself, that is, with the very love by which he loves himself. This is why the soul merits the love of God in all her works insofar as she does them in God. Placed in this height, this grace, she merits God himself in every work. (1991d, 32, 6)

In the mystical union, the Holy Spirit becomes the love that man has in himself as his own. And it is thanks to Him that he has the same love that God has:

Because the soul in this gift to God offers him the Holy Spirit, with voluntary surrender, as something of its own (so that God loves himself in the Holy Spirit as he deserves), it enjoys inestimable delight and fruition, seeing that it gives God something of its own that is suited to him according to his infinite being. [. . .] Nevertheless, it does this truly and perfectly, giving all that was given it by him in order to repay love, which is to give as much as is given. And God, who could not be considered paid with anything less, is considered paid with that gift of the soul; and he accepts it gratefully as something it gives him of its own. In this very gift he loves it anew. (John of the Cross 1991c, III, 79)

It is the breath or spiration of the Holy Spirit from God to her and from her to God. (1991d, 39, 2)

Then, the remaining faculties are adjusted along with the senses to actions focused solely on God. John illustrates the functioning of man united with God in such a way:

These souls, consequently, perform only fitting and reasonable works, and none that are not so. For God's Spirit makes them know what must be known and ignore what must be ignored, remember what ought to be remembered—with or without forms—and forget what ought to be forgotten, and makes them love what they ought to love, and keeps them from loving what is not in God. Accordingly, all the first movements and operations of these faculties are divine. There is no reason to wonder about these movements and operations being divine, since they are transformed into divine being. (John of the Cross 1991a, III, 2, 9)

John adds:

God now possesses the faculties as their complete lord, because of their transformation in him. And consequently it is he who divinely moves and commands them according to his divine spirit and will. As a result the operations are not different from those of God; but those the soul performs are of God and are divine operations. (John of the Cross 1991a, III, 2, 8)

This means that getting to know such man no longer has signs of human action. The only administrator of the activity of the human intellect is God. The consequence of union with God understood in this way is John's expression of the nature of human acts in maximalist terms. Man acts only when God acts in him, and everything that man does has a divine character, embracing the entire human existence: "Thus in this state the soul cannot make acts because the Holy Spirit makes them all and moves it toward them. As a result all the acts of the soul are divine, since both the movement to these acts and their execution stem from God." (John of the Cross 1991c, I, 4)

John also expresses this in the following quote:

O enkindled love, [. . .] [you are] bestowing divine knowledge according to all the ability and capacity of my intellect, communicating love according to the greater power of my will, and rejoicing the substance of my soul with the torrent of your delight, your divine contact and substantial union, in harmony with the greater purity of my substance and the capacity and breath of my memory! (John of the Cross 1991c, I, 17)

And also in this one: “Thus all the movements of this soul are divine. Although they belong to it, they belong to it because God works them in it and with it, for it wills and consents to them.” (John of the Cross 1991c, I, 9)

This means that the transformation of human cognition based on faith should go in the direction of increasing submission to God’s action, i.e. increasing passivity and, consequently, reducing the degree of the interpretation of the content of faith.

## 5.2. Preparing the Intellect to See God

At this point, we touch upon a sensitive point of the doctrine of the Saint Carmelite, which is systematically overlooked by commentators. We can ask a question: where did John come up with such a concept of union, which so totally concentrates man on God?

John writes that man is called to see God, and contemplation granted in life does not provide it, although it pours into the intellect God Himself, but in a dark and general form. Therefore, union in this life, even if it is the most perfect, due to the inability to see God, is not the final phase of man’s union with God. Only seeing the essence of God after death will complete the mystical union with Him during life (John of the Cross 1991d, 38, 5). John writes: “One of the main reasons for the desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ (Phil 1:23) is to see him face to face and thoroughly understand the profound and eternal mysteries of his Incarnation, which is by no means the lesser part of beatitude.” (1991d, 37, 1)

I think that answering the above-mentioned question should follow the path that I will present now. For John, the mystical union with God is the anticipation of *visio beatifica*. If the mystical union means a state similar to the contemplation of God in heaven, the path leading to this state of union must aim not so much as to attain union with God during life but, above all, prepare for *visio beatifica*. This means that the process of spiritual maturation must adapt us to directly seeing God after death.

So, what would it be like to be with God after death? John of the Cross knows the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas writes about *visio batifica* in the *Summa theologica*, as well as other works. He offers a vision of this state in accordance with Aristotelian terminology. Happiness after death will consist in updating the intellect

with the absolute Truth, which is God, and the will with the absolute Good, which is also God. God is absolute. Hence, in heaven the intellect apart from Him will not be able to get to know anything else, and the will will not be able to love but God, because God will update the entire potential of these faculties. In other words, there will be no place for other acts of knowing and loving outside God, because God, being infinite, will completely fill them with Himself. Therefore, according to Thomas, after death, God becomes the only object of cognition and love (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, 12, 1, 8–10; I–II, 3, 1). Getting to know only God, the intellect participates in the divine cognition of the world, because God is the creator of this world and at the same time maintains it in existence. Hence, in God, the intellect gets to know everything. Loving only God, the will participates in divine love, and thus loves creation with the same love as God. Hence, God, as the Absolute, completely absorbs and fulfills human spiritual faculties, and these remain passive, because all their ability to get to know and love is realized by seeing God and possessing His love.

The mystical union described by John is just a foretaste of *visio beatifica* presented above. It is a state close to *visio beatifica*, but not the same due to corporeality. Therefore, the process leading to this union must be aimed at gradually making God the only object of human cognition.

This is where the principles concerning the transformation of human cognition and the functioning of other faculties derive from. When God is not yet the sole object of human faculties, that is, when these are not yet completely purified, contemplation, that is, the divine light present in man, causes everything that is not God to be removed from these faculties. John derives the application of this principle from the philosophical rule: “for two contraries cannot coexist in one subject.” (John of the Cross 1991b, II, 9, 2; II, 5, 4)

Commentators of this doctrine only mention that this is the principle that John uses, but they do not give reasons for its validity. However, it can be noted that this principle finds a reason for its application in the understanding of the nature of contemplation only if it is assumed that its ultimate stage looks exactly as Thomas Aquinas explains: when man sees God after death, God is the only object present in human faculties.

When we analyze how John describes the mystical union with God to which man is to strive for in his spiritual life, it is clear that it is understood maximally. Three spiritual faculties: the intellect, memory and will are to be focused solely on God and moved only by Him. Even the corporeal sphere is to be subordinated to this logic. This is well-reflected in the following quote where John describes the state of the inner disposition of man who unites himself with God:

Ridding oneself of what is repugnant to God's will should be understood not only of one's acts but of one's habits as well. Not only must actual voluntary imperfections cease, but

habitual imperfections must be annihilated too. No creature, none of its actions and abilities, can reach or encompass God's nature. Consequently, a soul must strip itself of everything pertaining to creatures and of its actions and abilities, (of its understanding, satisfaction, and feeling), so that when everything unlike and unconformed to God is cast out, it may receive the likeness of God. And the soul will receive this likeness because nothing contrary to the will of God will be left in it. Thus it will be transformed in God. (John of the Cross 1991a, II, 5, 4)

This requirement must be met in an unconditional way. According to John, man is of such a nature that when he concentrates on even the smallest thing that is not God, he ceases to strive for Him. This further emphasizes the rigorous characteristic of John's doctrine, but it must be remembered that the goal is to be a state in which only God fulfills human faculties:

Any little thing that adheres to them [the faculties] in this life is sufficient to so burden and bewitch them that they do not perceive the harm or note the lack of their immense goods [which is God], or know their own capacity. It is an amazing thing that the least of these goods is enough so to encumber these faculties, capable of infinite goods, that they cannot receive these infinite goods until they are completely empty. (John of the Cross 1991c, III, 18; cf. III, 72)

The consequence of such requirements to be united with God is a well-known set of aphorisms: "To come to the knowledge of all desire the knowledge of nothing." (John of the Cross 1991a, I, 13, 11) And further on (1991a, I, 13, 12): "When you delay in something you cease to rush toward the all. For to go from the all to the all you must deny yourself of all in all. And when you come to the possession of the all you must possess it without wanting anything. Because if you desire to have something in all your treasure in God is not purely your all."

Every love, every knowledge, every possession and even movement of the senses, when it is not related to God, even the smallest, is so focused on itself that it obscures God, preventing union, since God is to be the only object to be seen after death.

So, what is the right direction for transformations that purify faith? It is getting closer to seeing God, where the intellect only admires and no longer interprets. It is a passive state when God Himself fills the human intellect with Himself. Hence, the nature of the purification of the intellect consists in the increased simplification of faith. This also explains the appearance of a period of darkness on the way to God. This darkness is associated with abandoning the anthropomorphic forms of thinking about God. This can be seen in the example of Job and Saint Peter.

When discussing the nature of contemplation, John constantly explains it by stating how man becomes equal to God in the action of his faculties. In the following text, we read that what individual faculties are to be cleansed of is, of course, all that

is not God in them. At the same time, it should be noted that the presence of this something is the result of the activity of the faculties. Hence, the action of contemplation is to lead to complete passivity of the faculties, and purification must reach the deepest essence of man. Therefore, it is not surprising that the purification to which man must be subjected is something terrible for him.

That the intellect reach union with the divine light and become divine in the state of perfection, this dark contemplation must first purge and annihilate it of its natural light and bring it actually into obscurity. It is fitting that this darkness last as long as is necessary for the expulsion and annihilation of the intellect's habitual way of understanding, which was a long time in use, and that divine light and illumination take its place. Since that strength of understanding was natural to the intellect, the darkness it here suffers is profound, frightful, and extremely painful. This darkness seems to be substantial darkness, since it is felt in the deep substance of the spirit. (John of the Cross 1991b, II, 9, 3)

Along with the purification of the intellect at the initial stage, one can feel emptiness that God will quickly fill: "Once the soul disencumbers these faculties and empties them of everything inferior and of possessiveness in regard to superior things, leaving them alone without these things, God engages them in the invisible and divine." (John of the Cross 1991d, 35, 5)

### **5.3. Contemplation as the Purification of the Intellect**

In this way, we can render the process of cognition taking place in a believer who has imperfect faith. On the one hand, he fulfills the acts of faith. These acts are both divine, because they refer to revelation, and human, because man accepts this revelation in his own way. On the other hand, faith opens man to the direct communication of God in contemplation. As a result, God Himself, pouring His presence into the human intellect, becomes a direct and experimentally present object of its cognition. This means that a believer has in his intellect both the image of God based on faith and God that directly infuses Himself into the human mind. The image of God received on the basis of faith is certainly imperfect in some aspect due to the activity of the human intellect interpreting revelation. On the other hand, this direct presence of God in man adapts man to the future direct vision of God and thus gradually silences the activity of the intellect consisting in the interpretation of revelation, because according to the principle adopted by John, two contraries cannot coexist in one subject: the human image of God, although stemming from faith, and God Himself. The intellect in its understanding of God purifies itself so that it becomes more and more passive, thus freeing itself from everything that distorts faith. This means that under the influence of contemplation, it prepares itself to see God. It should be noted that the same process also occurs in memory and will, according

to the nature of their action. Therefore, as part of contemplation, hope and love are also purified.

Consequently, contemplation simplifies faith by silencing all human activity of the intellect in favor of pure acceptance, making it more and more perfect: “the affections, feelings, and apprehensions of the perfect spirit, because they are divine, are of another sort and are so eminent and so different from the natural that their actual and habitual possession demands the annihilation and expulsion of the natural affections and apprehensions.” (John of the Cross 1991b, II, 9, 2)

A feature of the light of contemplation, which is God in His simplicity, is simplicity and purity. He can infuse Himself in a man and it takes place during contemplation, when the faculties are passive. This state of passivity is identical with the purity of the faculties: “the spirit must be simple, pure, and naked as to all natural affections, actual and habitual, in order to be able to communicate freely in fullness of spirit with the divine wisdom.” (John of the Cross 1991b, II, 9, 1)

The fruit of the purifying action of contemplation is to make the action of the soul faculties divine. This means that God becomes their object, and they, in turn, remain passive. Nevertheless, these are still human faculties: “My intellect departed from itself, changing from human and natural to divine. For united with God through this purgation, it no longer understands by means of its natural vigor and light, but by means of the divine wisdom to which it was united.” (John of the Cross 1991b, II, 4, 2; cf. II, 13, 11)

A “new” man arises as for the way of action and henceforth freely allows God to fill his own intellect and other faculties with His presence.

## Conclusion (And Broader Context)

The aim phrased in the introduction, related to the clarification of rules governing the transformation of human cognition under the influence of contemplation, narrows down to an emphasis of two issues. According to the Saint, the process undergone by the human cognition during the dark night, leading to union with God, aims to prepare one for seeing God after death. It seems that John of the Cross shares with Thomas Aquinas the view, though he does not mention it, that contemplation of God after death will rely on possessing God as the sole object of human cognition. Moreover, John suggests that then, the intellect will be seeing the divine essence only passively, which we can understand as that the intellect, on its part, will no longer perform any acts related to interpreting that which it is seeing. This results in the generality of cognizing God, which occurs during the lifetime of a person united with God (only after death will this cognition be of specific character). John, showing the path undergone by the human cognition that prepares the man for seeing God,

depicts the purification of the human intellect as liberating it from all cognitive forms produced by the man. The same process is also undergone by faith. Transition from the imperfect faith to the purified faith relies upon progressive liberation of the intellect from anthropomorphic ways of cognizing God. Generality is the first feature of the cognition that contemplation is.

For the sake of complementing the understanding of contemplation in the teaching of John of the Cross, it is worth recalling its other features, which were not analyzed in this article in detail. And so, the second feature of contemplation, at the same distinguishing it from other types of the knowledge about God, is that it is the knowledge that flows from love, as it is love that causes conversion and drawing closer to God. When love increases, cognition of God intensifies, though there is no increase in concepts that bring closer to Him. Hence, the reason for growth in getting to know God is growth in love, not the perfection of reasoning. John writes:

This divine contemplation has the property of being secret and above one's natural capacity, not merely because it is supernatural but also because it is the way that guides the soul to the perfections of union with God [. . .]. Speaking mystically, as we are here, the divine things and perfections are not known as they are in themselves while they are being sought and acquired, but when they are already found and acquired. (John of the Cross 1991b, II, 17, 7)

In other words: mystical cognition is not about thinking, but about opening up to God through love. Only then does He allow us to experience Himself directly. However, getting to know Him through intellectual search does not give this type of knowledge.

Thirdly, contemplation is more tasting than comprehending the particulars of the doctrine. Writing to a certain nun, John mentions this type of knowledge and compares it to theological (speculative) knowledge that includes only the informative aspect of faith: “Even though Your Reverence lacks training in scholastic theology, through which the divine truths are understood, you are not wanting in mystical theology, which is known through love and by which these truths are not only known but at the same time enjoyed.” (John of the Cross 1991d, “Prologue,” 3) This enjoyment of God—that is, experiencing certain feelings or spiritual emotions—is getting to know Him directly without the necessary prior theoretical knowledge.

Therefore, contemplation is the emotional presence of God (John of the Cross 1991d, 11, 4) which arises thanks to the mutual sharing and union of loving God and man (1991c, III, 24). At this point, it should be remembered that spiritual feelings are completely different, because they are higher than those we usually have in mind. They also have a different nature than the emotions that psychology mentions. Contemplation, in its final phase, is a kind of enjoyment of God that brings us closer to seeing Him.

Fourthly, as it is a knowledge resulting from love that provides closeness, therefore, a mystic will not explain very well what he feels. At the same time, however, he more and more unwaveringly abides by such-known God. His knowledge, being close to seeing, gives him more confidence than any other knowledge. This knowledge is the most important, because it relates to getting to know what is the most crucial in the absolute sense, i.e. God, hence this knowledge is of an existential character. John of the Cross equates mysticism with wisdom and distinguishes it from scientific knowledge, which he values less because it relies on details concerning God:

The reason is that God transcends the intellect and is incomprehensible and inaccessible to it. Hence while the intellect is understanding, it is not approaching God but withdrawing from him. It must withdraw from itself and from its knowledge so as to journey to God in faith, by believing and not understanding. [. . .] Since the intellect cannot understand the nature of God, it must journey in surrender to him rather than by understanding, and thus it advances by not understanding. For its own well-being, the intellect should be doing what you condemn; that is, it should avoid busying itself with particular knowledge, for it cannot reach God through this knowledge, which would rather hinder it in its advance toward him. (John of the Cross 1991c, III, 48; cf. 1991a, II, 16, 7)

Such a drawn up background reveals the uniqueness of contemplation as a special form of cognizing God. Human intellect in its natural acts of seeking God, whether through metaphysical thinking or discovering His signs in creation, produces an image of God subject to the world it lives in. Satisfying oneself with such an image of God makes uniting with Him impossible. It is also Revelation, which is the basis of faith, that employs images derived from the created reality in order to say something true about God. A man beginning to live in faith, setting their mind on God while simultaneously opening up to Him, involuntarily thinks of God in anthropomorphic categories. Such a form of cognition does not allow for uniting with God. It is only contemplation, understood as God pouring into the human faculties, and hence the intellect, that gradually allows to make human cognition based on faith a pure reception of God. Only then, when God Himself will become the proper object of human cognition, will the man unite with Him.

*Translated by Karol Matysiak*

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