



SOUL ON FIRE: ***The Life of*** **SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS**

by

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This paper is one of a series presented by ICR which examines the lives of mystics and/or geniuses. It emphasises the characteristics that appear to be consistent with an active and evolving Kundalini, i.e., the evolutionary energy in the universe and in the human body.

Pandit Gopi Krishna is recognized as an authority on Kundalini. He spoke from detailed personal experience. ICR is committed to the study of this hypothesis:

The first thing that should be done to bring about a harmonious development of human beings in the eradication of present-day irrational beliefs in the spiritual realm is to embark on a scientific investigation into consciousness.

There is a huge volume of literature available in both the East and the West describing methods for attaining the higher states of consciousness and the nature of these higher states. Documentary research into these volumes, followed by systematic experimentation can, I am sure, lead to an understanding of the biological relationship between expanded states of consciousness and the brain.

When this is achieved, the next step would be to find the laws underlying this relationship . . .

. . . It is only when the evolving human organism and the cosmos are viewed in right perspective that the appropriate ways of life and conduct favourable for this transformation can be devised by science.

Try as we might, without a clear knowledge of the goals ahead, we can by no exercise of the intellect determine the right pattern of life essential for mankind on the evolutionary path: a united world, abolition of war, demolition of armaments, disbandment of armies, an environment more in harmony with nature, a life more natural and simple, removal of barriers between man and man, inculcation of altruistic and humanitarian principles, moral education, social equality, and universal brotherhood. These are some of the basic factors that contribute to the harmonious progress of mankind.

This may appear idealistic or even fantastic and impractical to many people. But the conclusion is unavoidable. At its present intellectual stature, the alternatives facing the races are either self-caused annihilation, with dreadful agony for myriads, or knowledge of and obedience to the laws of evolving consciousness.

- Gopi Krishna in *The Biological Basis of Religion and Genius*

SOUL ON FIRE: The Life of SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS (1542 - 1591)

Juan de Yepes, later known as St. John of the Cross, was born into an extremely poor family on June 24, 1542 in Fontiveros, Spain near Avila. His father eked out a meagre existence as a weaver and died when John was still quite young. From these very humble beginnings, the boy would grow up to become renowned in the field of Spanish literature, presenting his sublime mystical experiences in poignant, lyrical poetry.

A few years after his father's death, John moved with his family to Medina del Campo where he attended a Jesuit school for the poor. His teachers recognized his excellent aptitude for learning and, after only four years at the school, John was taken by Don Antonio Alvarez of Toledo, recently retired from the school, to a hospital to be trained in the Holy Orders. He also worked at the hospital and, two years later, enrolled at the Jesuit College at Medina, remaining there for four years. Here, his genius, humility and sense of detachment began to manifest.

In 1563, at the age of 21, John was offered the position of chaplain at the hospital where he had been employed. Declining the chaplaincy, he became instead a Carmelite friar and took his vows that same year. In 1564, John began a three-year arts course at the University of Salamanca and, in 1567, he was ordained as a priest. It was at this time that he met Teresa of Avila, who asked him to join her Carmelite reform order. The Order's goal was to redirect the Carmelites away from the lives of affluence they were living to a return to prayer, contemplation, austerity, and a way of life more likely to lead to mystical union. John agreed to join the reform order when he realized that the Carmelite friars were also to be reformed.

In November 1567, he returned to the University of Salamanca for a one-year theology course. The following November, John took his reform order vows as John of the Cross and for the next few years devoted himself to the Carmelite reform, becoming one of its most significant leaders. In the meantime, Teresa of Avila had founded small convents and monasteries throughout Spain and had attracted many members of the Carmelite order to her reform. This created a power struggle within the Carmelite order itself, its leaders wanting to prevent a further drain of its membership to Teresa's reform order. As a leader of the reform, John was seized by the Carmelites in the winter of 1575-76 and imprisoned at Medina. He was later released due to the intervention of the Papal Nuncio, who, as the representative of the Pope in Spain, had considerable power within the church.

In 1577, an election for prioress was held at the Carmelite convent at Avila. This election was overseen by the Provincial of the Carmelite Order who threatened any nun who supported Teresa with excommunication. In defiance of this threat, the nuns elected Teresa, the Provincial declared the election void, and the nuns who had voted for Teresa were excommunicated forthwith. In early December 1577, in a further attempt to halt the reform's spread, John was again seized and imprisoned, this time in the Carmelite priory of Toledo, where conditions were grim. His cell was unlit and had no source of heat. The ceiling was too low for him to stand upright and the air was foul. He was given bread and water, along with sardine scraps flung on the floor. Wanting him to renounce the reform, the monks whipped John daily. However, in time, they relented and reduced the number of whippings to once a week. Given these conditions and no change of clothing, John's body soon became infested with lice and he suffered from dysentery. Even so, he did not give in to the will of his tormentors who wanted him to renounce the reform.

After about six months of imprisonment, at the age of 35 and in the midst of great suffering, John experienced a mystical ecstasy that transformed him and brought him into a closer union with God. One of his biographers described the presence of light during this experience: "His cell became filled with light seen by the bodily eye," even though it was night and there was no lamp or other source of light. The same account goes on to tell us that "St. John . . . later . . . told one of his brethren that the heavenly light, which God so mercifully sent him, lasted the night through, and that it filled his soul with joy and made the night pass away as if it were but a moment."¹ This account of the presence of light, the source of which could not be explained in purely physical terms, corresponds to that recorded in many other testimonies by those who have experienced the raising of consciousness.

As a result of this experience, John was moved to write poetry. In the next few weeks, in his prison cell, he wrote from seventeen to thirty stanzas of his *Spiritual Canticle*, all of *The Fountain* and, quite likely, *Dark Night of the Soul*. He also resolved to escape from prison. In mid-August, he fled in the dark of night to the Toledo convent of the Carmelite nuns, never again to return to a prison cell.

John's experience in prison is a clear case of illumination in that it suddenly transformed him to the point where he became "a poet unsurpassed in the Spanish language."² The mystical writing that followed his illumination was a great step forward for his time and would result in "Saint" being added to his religious name: "[T]he teaching of the Saint so far transcends that of other mystical writers that where they leave off, there it may be said to begin."³ St. John himself took no credit for the knowledge found in his writings, saying instead that "the Lord appears to have opened knowledge somewhat to me. ...I have taken courage, knowing for

certain that out of my own resources I can say naught that is of any value, especially of things of such sublimity and substance.”⁴

In the decade that followed his illumination, St. John completed his three major poems, *Dark Night of the Soul*, *Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame of Love*, and wrote lengthy treatises on them. The treatise on *Living Flame of Love* was completed in only fifteen days without his having to neglect his responsibilities as Vicar-Provincial of his religious order.⁵ Written by request, the treatises explain the poems’ meanings. Three of the four treatises bear the same titles as the poems and the fourth treatise, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, is actually a second treatise on *Dark Night of the Soul*.

St. John also drew an illustration of the mystic way, which he called *Mount of Perfection*. He considered this illustration to be even more important than his treatises in that it depicts three paths, one on either side of the mountain to be ascended, denoting the roads of imperfection, and one in the centre, the road of perfection: “Those on either side . . . are broad and somewhat tortuous and come to an end before the higher stages of the mount are reached. The centre road . . . is at first very narrow but gradually broadens and leads right up to the summit of the mountain, which only the perfect attain and where they enjoy . . . the heavenly feast.”⁶ St. John’s illustration bears a remarkable likeness to the spinal column and brings to mind the left and right channels *ida* and *pingala*, and the centre channel, *sushumna*, through which the *kundalini* is said to rise. That he used it in his teaching is testified to by at least one disciple: “By means of this drawing, he used to teach us that, in order to attain to perfection, we must not desire the good things of earth, nor those of Heaven; but that we must desire naught save to seek and strive after the glory and honour of God our Lord in all things.”⁷

All of St. John’s poems have, as their subject, mystical union with God. Each poem reveals his spiritual awakening and his understanding of the spiritual world. The longest of these, *Spiritual Canticle*, portrays the soul as bride and God as bridegroom. At one point, the soul cries out for the return of the experience of union with God:

*Where are you hiding,
Beloved, having left me to moan?
Like the stag you fled
After wounding me;
I followed crying aloud, but you had gone.*⁸

In *The Fountain*, St. John rejoices in knowing God through faith: “Well I know the fountain that flows and runs, Although it’s night.”⁹ He is proclaiming that he knows God well and this knowing is strictly through faith. It is impossible, the mystic John explains, to know God through worldly understanding because worldly understanding hides the spiritual world as surely as the darkness of night hides the light of day. In another poem, *Songs Written About an Ecstasy of High Contemplation*, St. John explains that God cannot be known through the intellect or science:

*I entered I knew not where
And I remained, knowing nothing, where
All science was transcended.*¹⁰

St. John’s mystical experience was so strong, and his desire to be one with God so great, that his very soul yearned for God. This yearning is expressed in *Songs of the Soul that Pines to See God*:

*I live, but yet I do not live
In me. My hopes fly so high that
I die because I do not die.*

And also:

*This life I lead is only
A way of not living, that is,
It will be a constant death
Until I live in you.
Listen, my God, to what I say:
This life I do not want, for
I die because I do not die.*¹¹



Here, St. John is also expressing the complete absence of any fear of death now that worldly life is of no value to him when compared to the sense of eternal life experienced in union with God. In his introduction to *Living Flame of Love*, Peers explains the statement, “I die because I do not die”: “So exquisite is the ‘savour of eternal life’ which this experience produces that the soul desires to escape, by means of death, that it may know that life in its fullness.”¹² St. John categorized the obstacles to be surmounted before the fear of death is overcome as three webs from which we must disentangle ourselves. Once the first two are broken and all things of the world are put aside, the third is so delicate and fine that one’s actual dying and death is “sweeter and gentler” than the life itself. Whereupon, if all purgation is complete, there is perfect union with God.

The high nature of this mystic’s spiritual awakening is expressed in *Living Flame of Love*, also called *Songs of the Soul in the Intimate Communication of Union in the Love of God*:

*Oh living flame of love,
How tenderly you wound
The innermost centre of my soul!
Since you are no longer fleeing,
End finally, if you will,
Break the web of this sweet meeting.*

*Oh gentle cautery!
Oh delicate wound!
Oh soft hand! Oh gentle touch
That tastes of eternal life
And repays every debt!
By killing, death into life you have transformed!*

*Oh lamps of fire,
In whose resplendent light
The deep caverns of the senses
That were dark and blind
With strange new beauty
Give warmth and light to their beloved!*

*How tender and loving
You awake my breast,
Where in secret alone you dwell:
In your delicate breathing
Full of grace and glory!
How delicately you capture my love!*¹³

E. Allison Peers elaborates on this sense of light and heat in his introduction to *Living Flame of Love*: “Sublime and profound indeed is the application which follows the similitude of the lamp, which, with its double office of giving light and burning, represents the wonderful effects of the love of God within purified souls—that is, where the terrible purgations of sense and spirit have formed the ‘deep caverns of sense’.”¹⁴ Even so, St. John still felt separated from complete union with the Holy Spirit and from eternal life by the thinnest of threads:

*The soul feels itself to be at last wholly enkindled in Divine union. . . . [S]ince it is transformed in God with such vehemence and is in so lofty a way possessed of Him, and is adorned with such a marvelous wealth of gifts and virtues, it is very near to bliss, from which it is divided only by a slender web. And, seeing that that delicate flame of love that burns within it is . . . glorifying it with a glory both gentle and powerful . . . it believes that it is about to enter upon eternal life and that this web of mortal life will be broken, and that there remains but a very short space of time, yet during this space it cannot be perfectly glorified in its essence, the soul addresses this flame, which is the Holy Spirit, with great yearning, begging Him now to break this its mortal life in that sweet encounter.*¹⁵

In the first stanza of *Living Flame of Love*, St. John explains the nature of the purifying flame or fire:

[T]his flame the soul feels within it, not only as a fire that has consumed and transformed it in sweet love, but also as a fire which burns within it and sends out flame...and that flame bathes the soul in glory and refreshes it with the temper of Divine life This fire, as it is of infinite power, is able to consume to an extent which cannot be measured, and by burning with great vehemence to transform into itself that which it touches. But it burns everything according to the degree of the preparation thereof. . . . And since God is an infinite fire of love, when therefore He is pleased to touch the soul with some severity, the heat of the soul rises to such a degree that the soul believes that it is being burned with a heat greater than any other in the world. For this reason it speaks of this touch as of a burn, for it is experienced where the fire is most intense and most concentrated, and the effect of its heat is greater than that of other fires. . . . And it is a wondrous thing, worthy to be related, that, though this fire of God is so vehement and so consuming that it would consume a thousand worlds more easily than natural fire

consumes a straw of flax, it consumes not the spirits wherein it burns, neither destroys them; but rather, in proportion to its strength and heat, it brings them delight and deifies them, burning sweetly in them by reason of the purity of their spirits.¹⁶

In the third stanza of *Living Flame of Love*, St. John acknowledges his illumination and the gifts he has received:

*The soul gives deepest thanks to its Spouse for the great favours which it receives from union with Him, for by means of this union He has given it great and abundant knowledge of Himself, wherewith the faculties and senses of the soul, which before this union were dark and blinded by other kinds of love, have been enlightened and enkindled with love, and can now be illumined, as indeed they are, and through the heat of love can give light and love to Him Who enkindled and enamoured them and infused into them such Divine gifts.*¹⁷

Lastly, in the fourth stanza, St. John describes the two effects on the soul that can occur as a result of union with the Holy Spirit:

*The first effect is the awakening of God in the soul, and the means whereby this is produced are those of gentleness and love. The second effect is the breathing of God in the soul and the means thereof are in the blessing and glory that are communicated to the soul in this breathing. And that which is produced thereby in the soul is a delicate and tender inspiration of love.*¹⁸

Having explained the nature of union with the Holy Spirit in *Living Flame of Love*, St. John presents the means by which this union occurs in his poem *Dark Night of the Soul* and his treatise on it, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. The methodology requires an emptying of oneself of all that is not God in order that one can be filled with the Holy Spirit. This emptying of oneself is what St. John refers to as “the dark night of the soul”:

*In the darkness of night,
With love and longing seized,
Oh delightful happiness!
I went abroad unnoticed,
All then being quiet in my house.*

*In safety, in the dark,
Disguised, by the secret staircase,
Oh delightful happiness!
In the dark, stealthily,
All then being quiet in my house.*

*In the happiness of the night,
Secretly, unseen by anybody,
Looking at nothing else,
With no other light or guide
Save that which was burning in my heart.*

*This light guided me
More certain than the light of midday,
To where one awaited me
Whom I knew well
In a place where no one would appear.*

*Oh night that was my guide,
Oh night dearer than the dawn!
Oh night, that joined
Lover to beloved,
Transforming the bride into the lover!*

*On my flowering breast,
That was saved only for him,
There he fell asleep,
And I caressed him,
And a fan of cedar trees waved the air.*

*The breeze from the ramparts,
When I was playing with his hair,
With its serene hand
My neck wounded,
And suspended every one of my senses.*

*I stayed, lost to myself,
My face upon my lover I laid,
All endeavour ceased, I forgot myself,
And all my cares were left
Forgotten among the lilies.*¹⁹

The instruction in *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is all from the first two stanzas of *Dark Night of the Soul*. The subject matter is complex and St. John’s analysis of these two short stanzas covers over three hundred pages of instruction. The basic premise of his teaching is that two opposites, i.e., love of the worldly and love of God, cannot exist within one individual and that one of the two will drive the other from the soul. He also maintains that to attain to the state of perfection, a soul must pass through two kinds of night, a word St. John used to convey the soul’s journey through darkness. This journey or process is also referred to as the purgation or purification of the soul. The first night or purgation relates to our more sensual, materialistic desires and the second night to our more spiritual attachments, both of which are obstacles to be overcome in order to attain union with God.

Detachment, therefore, is the first step of the dark night of the soul. St. John makes it clear here that a lack of things is not what is being discussed since that would imply that the soul that has no things, but has a desire

for them, is detached: “[I]t is not the things of this world that either occupy the soul or cause it harm, since they enter it not, but rather the will and desire for them, for it is these that dwell within it.”²⁰ He explained that all created things are crumbs that have fallen from God’s table and that while these crumbs whet the appetite, they do not satisfy the hunger. He likened desire to a fire that thrives when wood is thrown into it but must necessarily die when it has consumed the wood.

In the first night, the sensual part of the soul must “deprive itself of desire for all the worldly things which it possessed, by denying them to itself; ...which denial and deprivation are, as it were, night to all the senses of man”.²¹ Because a soul cannot help hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting and touching, St. John goes on, the soul must deny and reject the objects of its senses and have no desire for them.²² Why this is necessary is explained in this way:

*In order that we may the better prove what has been said, it must be known that the affection and attachment which the soul has for creatures renders the soul like to these creatures; and, the greater is its affection, the closer is the equality and likeness between them; for love creates a likeness between that which loves and that which is loved. . . . And thus, he that loves a creature becomes as low as that creature, and, in some ways, lower; for love not only makes the lover equal to the object of his love, but even subjects him to it. Hence in the same way it comes to pass that the soul that loves anything else becomes incapable of pure union with God and transformation in him. . . . The soul that sets its affection on the being of creation is likewise nothing in the eyes of God, and less than nothing.*²³

To make his point that love of worldly things, including knowledge, and love of God cannot co-exist, St. John referred to Saint Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians when he asked, what communion can there be between light and darkness? Further, St. John wrote, “All the wisdom of the world and all human ability, compared with the infinite wisdom of God, are pure and supreme ignorance.”²⁴

In the second night, the spiritual part of the soul must purge itself “of all spiritual imperfections and desires for the possession of spiritual things”.²⁵ The journey’s route through this dark night is described by St. John as a “secret staircase” because it cannot be known by sense or understanding, only by faith. In his treatise on the second stanza of *Dark Night of the Soul*, he explains:

*And thus the soul has remained in darkness as to all light of sense and understanding, going forth beyond all limits of nature and reason in order to ascend by this Divine ladder of faith, which attains and penetrates even to the heights of God. The soul says that it was traveling ‘disguised’, because the garments and vesture which it wears and its natural condition are changed into the divine, as it ascends by faith. And it was because of this disguise that it was not recognized or impeded, either by time or by reason or by the devil; for none of these things can harm one that journeys in faith.*²⁶

Understanding must be purged and transformed with faith because the soul’s understanding “of its own power, extends only to natural knowledge, although it has a faculty for the supernatural, whenever Our Lord is pleased to give it supernatural activity. Wherefore a man can know nothing by himself, save after a natural manner, which is only that which he attains by means of the senses”.²⁷ Only through faith can worldly understanding be overcome: “Faith...is a habit of the soul, certain and obscure...[so that we can] believe truths revealed by God Himself, which transcend all natural light, and exceed all human understanding, beyond all proportion”.²⁸

While explaining the role of faith in the transformation of the spiritual part of the soul, St. John digresses to describe what he means by union of the soul with God. God, he tells us, is present in every soul and this presence or union is what preserves the existence of all beings. This union is one of substance and takes place continually. Eastern mysticism explains this kind of union as the gross and subtle manifestations of consciousness. This, however, is not what St. John means by union of the soul with God:

[Rather, it is the] union and transformation of the soul with God, which is not being wrought continually, but only when there is produced that likeness that comes from love; we shall therefore term this the union of likeness, even as that other union is called substantial or essential. ...And thus, when the soul rids itself totally of that which is repugnant to the Divine will and conforms not with it, it is transformed in God through love. ...And since no creature whatsoever, and none of its actions or abilities, can conform or can attain to that which is God, therefore must the soul be stripped of all things created, and of its own actions and abilities—namely, of its understanding, perception and feeling—so that, when all that is unlike God and unconformed to Him is cast out, the

soul may receive the likeness of God; and nothing will then remain in it that is not the will of God and it will thus be transformed in God. Wherefore, although it is true that, as we have said, God is ever in the soul, giving it, and through His presence conserving within it, its natural being, yet He does not always communicate supernatural being to it. For this is communicated only by love and grace, which not all souls possess; and all those that possess it have it not in the same degree. . . . Wherefore God communicates Himself most to that soul that has progressed farthest in love; namely, that has its will in closest conformity with the will of God. And the soul that has attained complete conformity and likeness of will is totally united and transformed in God supernaturally.²⁹

This union is thus a permanent and complete union with God, the return of the soul to the perfect consciousness from which it came. While we may strive for this total union, we cannot attain it while we are still alive because we cannot cut off our faculties of sense and spirit from the world permanently and completely: “[T]here can be no permanent union in the faculties, in this life, but a transitory union only.”³⁰ This is why St. John felt himself to be separated from God by the thinnest of threads. In addition to the negation of the soul’s understanding by faith, two other spiritual faculties—will and memory— must be negated in the night of the spirit:

[W]e shall go on to describe how the understanding is perfected in the darkness of faith; and the memory in the emptiness of hope; and likewise how the will must be buried by withdrawing and detaching every affection so that the soul may journey to God. ... [T]he soul is not united with God in this life through understanding, nor through enjoyment, nor through the imagination, nor through any sense whatsoever; but only through faith, according to the understanding; and through hope, according to the memory; and through love, according to the will. These three virtues...all cause emptiness in the faculties: faith, in the understanding, causes emptiness and darkness with respect to understanding; hope, in the memory, causes emptiness of all possessions; and charity causes emptiness in the will and detachment from all affection and from rejoicing in all that is not God. For, as we see, faith tells us what cannot be understood with the understanding. ... Then, as to hope, there is no doubt but that it renders the memory empty and dark with respect both to things below and to things above. For hope always relates to that which is not possessed; for, if it were possessed, there would be no more hope. . . . Similarly, charity causes emptiness in the will with respect to all things, since it obliges us to love God above them all; which cannot be unless we withdraw our affection from them all in order to set it wholly upon God.³¹

In his treatise, St. John stresses that emptiness in the will includes lack of affection for spiritual favours and feelings. All spiritual attachments must also be denied:

[F]or true spirituality seeks for God’s sake that which is distasteful rather than that which is delectable; and inclines itself rather to suffering than to consolation; and desires to go without all blessings for God’s sake rather than to possess them; and to endure aridities and afflictions rather than to enjoy sweet communications. ... For to seek oneself in God is to seek favours and refreshments of God; but to seek God in oneself is not only to desire to be without both of these for God’s sake, but to be disposed to choose, for Christ’s sake, all that is most distasteful, whether in relation to God or to the world; and this is love of God.³²

So committed was St. John to maintaining the necessary degree of detachment for union with God that he burned his letters from St. Teresa because he knew himself to be attached to them.

Obstacles to the more subtle forms of detachment were also explained:

And thus a soul is greatly impeded from reaching this high estate of union with God when it clings to any understanding or feeling or imagination or appearance or will or manner of its own, or to any other act or to anything of its own, and cannot detach and strip itself of all these. For, as we say, the goal which it seeks lies beyond all this, yea, beyond even the highest thing that can be known or experienced; and thus a soul must pass beyond everything to unknowing. ... [T]o enter upon the road is to leave the road. ... For the more emphasis the soul lays upon what it understands, experiences and imagines, and the more it esteems this, whether it be spiritual or no, the more it loses of the supreme good, and the more it is hindered from attaining thereto. ... [B]y blinding itself to its own faculties...the soul will see the light.³³

Stressing the point, St. John quotes Jesus: “I come into this world for judgment, that they which see not might see; and that they which see may become blind.”³⁴

A most remarkable sage and genius, St. John of the Cross has given the world a wealth of spiritual guidance based on his mystical experience and enlightened consciousness. His writings give us but a glimpse into the depth and scope of his insights into the union of the soul with its creator. That his accounts of illumination and spiritual awakening remain with us as one of the most respected sources of mystical knowledge and spiritual guidance, attests to their profundity. Although St. John was often portrayed as austere to the extreme, he is also known for the love and tolerance he demonstrated toward the sick and those who repeatedly faltered,

all of whom he humbly served. He was so free of ego that he was able to destroy his original manuscripts because, as some think, he feared that they would one day be venerated for reasons other than the value of their teachings. As for his beatification process, a nun, M. Francesca de la Madre le Dios, testified that on two separate occasions, when he was preaching to the nuns in her convent, St. John “was rapt and lifted up from the ground”.³⁵

If his genuine humility and beatification is not indication enough of Higher Consciousness, his capacity for work and the quality of it certainly are. In addition to writing the poems and treatises in record time, St. John knew the Bible by heart and completed a two-to-three year course in theology in one year. Although his literary style reflected his thought, it was quite unique and highly individualistic. He was more interested in explaining and developing ideas than in style, a trait often found in others who strive to express their illumination experiences. He responded to difficult questions on mysticism with certainty and conviction and has been described as an analytical genius. Because his writings were precise and eloquent, purged of Latinisms, St. John is said to have created a genuinely native language which Spanish writers have adopted when writing of mystical theology.³⁶ The critic Marcelino Menendez Pelayo put it this way: “So sublime is this poetry that it scarcely seems to belong to this world at all . . . The spirit of God has passed through these poems, every one, beautifying and sanctifying them on its way.”³⁷ Peers concludes that “nothing but natural genius could impart the vigour and the clarity which enhance all of St. John of the Cross’s arguments and nothing but his own deep and varied experience could have made him what he may well be termed—the greatest psychologist in the history of mysticism”.³⁸

While this mystic’s accounts are naturally articulated in the Christian context in which he was raised, lived and was inspired, they echo to the last chord the accounts of mystics from other cultural and religious orientations. If, as he said, God is like a spring from “whence everyone draws water according to the vessel which he carries,”³⁹ St. John of the Cross surely carried a vessel worthy of our study.

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21. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., p. 106.

22. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., p. 109.
23. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., pp. 111-112; 113.
24. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., p. 114.
25. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., p. 163.
26. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., pp. 163-164.
27. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., p. 168.
28. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., pp. 167-168.
29. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., pp. 179-180.
30. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., p. 179.
31. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., pp. 184-186.
32. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., pp. 190-191.
33. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., pp. 174-176.
34. *Holy Bible*, John 9:39
35. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit.
36. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, p. 50.
37. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., p. 51.
38. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit.
39. *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Op Cit., p. 277.