

"Although It Is Night": A Carmelite Perspective on Spirituality at the Juncture of Modernity and Postmodernity*

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Soon after the beginning of St. Theresa's reform [John of the Cross] was kidnapped by opponents . . . and disappeared. No one had any idea where he had gone and . . . nobody seemed to care. He was locked up in a cell without light or air during the stifling heat of a Toledan summer to await trial and punishment for what his persecutors seriously believed to be a canonical crime. . . .

The color scheme of John's imprisonment is black and ochre and brown and red: the red is his own blood running down his back. The movement is centripetal. There is a tremendous stability, not merely in the soul immobilized, entombed in a burning stone wall, but in the depths of that soul, purified by a purgatory that those alone know who have felt it, emerging into the Center of all centers, the Love which moves the heavens and the stars, the Living God.

. . . The religious police could not disturb the ecstasy of one who had been carried so far that he was no longer troubled at the thought of being rejected even by the holy!¹

—Thomas Merton

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1. Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O., "St. John of the Cross," *Saints for Now*, ed. Clare Boothe Luce (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1952) 251–53. For a discussion of Merton's work on John of the Cross, see "Thomas Merton's Practical Norms of Sanctity in St. John of the Cross," ed. and intro. Robert E. Daggy, *Spiritual Life* 36 (Winter 1990) 195–97.

For almost nine months, from December 1577 until the following August, the Spanish Carmelite John of the Cross lay imprisoned in the Order's monastery of Toledo beside the Tagus river, punished by his own religious confreres for alleged disobedience in their juridical dispute with the followers of St. Teresa's "reform," which John had helped extend to the friars. The physical sufferings he endured are well-known, and have often been described in lurid detail. But far more painful, it seems, were his spiritual and psychological torments: self-doubts about his own behavior and convictions, fears that the "Teresian" project to which he had devoted his life had been crushed (and that he had been totally forgotten by its members), uncertainty about his fate and the intentions of his captors, suspicions of poisoning—and, worst of all, the sense that he had been abandoned by God.² John found himself alone, in the dark, stripped of all his former certainties and without any familiar spiritual compass, perhaps with only the distant murmur of the Tagus River for his companion. Yet somehow, in the crucible of John's torment was born some of the most splendid poetry of any period or language: the *Romances*, the initial verses of the *Cántico espiritual*, and the "Song of the soul that rejoices in knowing God through faith," with its repeated refrain, "*aunque es de noche*."

For I know well the spring that flows and runs
although it is night.

That eternal spring is hidden,
for I know well where it has its rise,
although it is night.

I do not know its origin, nor has it one,
but I know that every origin has come from it,
although it is night.

I know that nothing else is so beautiful,
and that the heavens and the earth drink there,
*although it is night. . . .*³

2. For a recent and reliable account of John's sufferings in Toledo, see Federico Ruiz, O.C.D., and others, *God Speaks in the Night: The Life, Times and Teaching of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991) 157–88.

3. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., with revisions and introductions by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., rev. ed. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991) 58–59. Note from the title that the soul in this poem actually *rejoices* in knowing God through

In the final section of this paper, I will return to John, to consider briefly how his rediscovery of God in the midst of such profound anguish and abandonment may offer hope to those coping with the darkness and disorientation of our own times. But I want to begin with a special word of gratitude to the sponsors and organizers for inviting me to this Gethsemani retreat on "Spirituality at the Juncture of Modernity and Post-Modernity." The juxtaposition of topic and location is a happy one, since the monastic community at Gethsemani Abbey offers a living example of how to draw creatively upon the spiritual riches of the past in facing the needs of the present and future.

I should also confess at the outset, however, that I feel poorly qualified to address such a daunting theme, since my expertise tends to be focused in the area of Carmelite spirituality (not usually considered "post-modern"!), and since my editorial work with The Institute for Carmelite Spirituality (ICS) Publications and our journal, *Spiritual Life*, ironically leaves me little time to keep abreast of current scholarly discussions in contemporary spiritual theology.

Still, my own peculiar perspective may provide a useful counterpoint to the other contributions. In the following pages, therefore, after some general remarks on the proposed theme, and some observations on the "spirituality" scene today as it falls within my limited purview, I hope to offer some tentative suggestions as to how the Carmelite tradition, and especially John of the Cross, might address or contribute to the understanding of spirituality in a postmodern context. For if our contemporary world seems to many to be a chaotic "wasteland" of conflicting voices and competing interests, perhaps a spirituality born of the desert is precisely what we need for survival.

What Are "Modernity" and "Postmodernity"?

I'd like to begin with a few thoughts on the general theme of this retreat itself. If my remarks seem naive, obvious, wrongheaded, or even curmudgeonly, I apologize in advance. It may simply illustrate one of the points I want to raise: that it is not clear to what extent the "concerns of postmodernity" have really penetrated the collective

faith, rather than complaining of the darkness and confusion—not what one might have expected from John's sufferings.

awareness of Carmelites, those with whom we most commonly minister, and Catholics in general.

What precisely is meant by "modernity" and "postmodernity"? While these expressions are obviously interrelated (*post*-modernity presumably representing something that comes after, or stands in opposition to, modernity) it is no surprise to be told, I'm sure, that the meanings attached to these terms are as varied as those who use them. "Postmodern" architecture may have little relation to "postmodernity" in other fields. Intellectual historians continue to argue whether particular authors and thinkers should be classed as late modern or early postmodern figures. As Richard J. Bernstein has recently noted:

Anyone with even the most superficial acquaintance with recent debates can scarcely avoid noticing that the terms "modernity" and "postmodernity" are slippery, vague, and ambiguous. They have wildly different meanings within different cultural disciplines and even within the same discipline. There is no consensus about the multiple meanings of these treacherous terms. Furthermore there is the paradox that many thinkers who are labeled "postmodern" by others, do not think of themselves as "post-modern" or even use this expression. For example, when asked to name "postmodern" thinkers I suspect many would include Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, and perhaps Nietzsche. But none of them ever rely on the term.⁴

Yet, even at the risk of sliding "into a quasi-essentialism where we talk as if there are a determinate set of features that mark off the 'modern' from the 'postmodern'"⁵ it is perhaps sufficient to say that today the term "modernity" is generally used in theological circles as a shorthand way of referring to a certain set of principles, ideas, and presuppositions about truth, knowledge, language, morality, the world, and the place of human beings within it—principles and presuppositions "forged during the Enlightenment (c. 1600–1780)" by such thinkers as Descartes, Hume, Kant, Newton, and their intellectual and cultural heirs.⁶ Among the characteristics of modernity, the following are often included:

4. Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992) 11.

5. *Ibid.*, 200.

6. Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989) 2.

1. A belief in the radical autonomy and conscious self-determination of the individual human subject (traceable back to the Cartesian *cogito*).
2. A view of language as merely an instrument used by the autonomous subject to express pre-linguistic thoughts and feelings.
3. A confidence in the capacity of science and rationality to discover, progressively and cumulatively, all objective truth, and to explain all natural phenomena without postulating any God (except, perhaps, the deists' "cosmic watchmaker" who set the universe going).
4. An attempt to ground morality in principles evident to human reason, rather than in divine commands (Kant's categorical imperative).
5. A belief in the inevitability of human progress.⁷

The list, obviously, could be extended. One important but unsuccessful Christian response to such principles came from the group of Protestant theologians now identified with nineteenth century "liberal theology," usually viewed as an attempt to accommodate the presuppositions of modernity, but at the expense of traditional Christian content and truth claims.

Of course, as soon as we begin making these kinds of generalizations about the "modern" worldview, we must immediately qualify them. Any careful reader will find vast differences among the thinkers usually identified with "modernity," as well as surprising affinities between any one of them and certain premodern and postmodern figures. (I am always uneasy when our new students come home to the monastery after two or three introductory philosophy lectures at the nearby seminary, full of loud opinions about the demise of modernity and the bankruptcy of all post-Cartesian thought, before they have actually *read* anything of Descartes, Hume, or Kant; as I sometimes tell our older friars, what I spent years studying in the philosophy

7. For characterizations of "modernity" and "postmodernity," see Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*; David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland, *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989); David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

department at Cornell, they covered in an afternoon under the heading *Errores*.)

It is not altogether clear, either, whether we can really talk about a single, pervasive mindset named "modernity," or whether we are really talking about a cluster of related (but not always identical or even fully compatible) Enlightenment issues and concerns shared primarily among the Western intelligentsia. The Catholicism with which many of us were raised in the 1950s, for example, shared few of the presuppositions identified above. And while ordinary Americans may experience very concretely the negative social consequences of "modernity's" belief in inevitable historical progress, its "culture of separation," or its one-sided emphasis on the autonomous subject (see, for example, Robert Bellah's discussion of the dangers of "expressive individualism" in American culture⁸), in certain other respects modernity's conclusions have never won widespread popular acceptance on this side of the North Atlantic, except perhaps in the halls of academia. Americans remain among the most religious people of any developed nation, at least by such measurable standards as regular church attendance, Bible reading, and personal prayer.⁹ Moreover, in some recent controversies over school curricula and "scientific creationism," for example, as well as in the popular "New Age" movement, we now seem to see postmodern arguments and considerations brought to the defense of what many would consider "premodern" world views.

But perhaps this misses the point, since, however widespread (or not) the presuppositions identified with modernity once were, we can at least say that, over the last century or so, they have come under increasing attack. The positivistic dream of pure science as an avenue to uninterpreted, empirically verified "objective" facts, with exclusive claims to all knowable truth about the "world-out-there," has crumbled in the face of such developments as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and the mysteries of quantum physics. Attempts to base morality on fundamental axioms self-evident to all rational human beings have foundered on the apparent historical and cultural relativity of our ethical

8. Robert N. Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 142-63, 277-81.

9. George Gallup, Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York: Macmillan, 1989) 20-21 and passim.

and rational norms. Philosophers and psychologists have increasingly explored the ways in which our experience is linguistically shaped, while the "hermeneuts of suspicion" (Freud, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, etc.) unmask the various psychological, socio-economic, and cultural forces that systematically distort our interpretation of experience. No longer, therefore, can the embattled subject retreat into the security of an indubitable Cartesian *cogito*, the commentators tell us, since even the self is a social construct, shaped by a shared language, culture, and tradition with embedded systematic distortions. Recent history, moreover, has shattered the myth of inevitable human progress, as we discover that the very heirs of modern culture (in Nazi Germany and elsewhere) are capable of engineering genocide, and that the scientific accomplishments of modernity have confronted us with the possible annihilation of all life from the earth. The presuppositions often identified with "modernity" have been radically challenged, and we find ourselves, so it seems, in a different world, whatever terminology we may choose to describe it.

All of this has been stated more clearly, carefully, and insightfully by others. But even if these are the challenges usually associated with "postmodernity," the responses seem radically varied. Indeed, the very term "postmodernity," since it suggests no positive content of its own, is applicable to any number of perhaps mutually incompatible reactions to the alleged failure of "modernity," just as "postcommunism" can refer to a whole range of different and even contradictory responses to the demise of the former Soviet Union. David Ray Griffin, in his introduction to one of the volumes in his SUNY "postmodernity" series, identifies at least four basic types of postmodern theology: "(1) constructive (or revisionary)," which he seems to equate with some version of process theology; "(2) deconstructive (or eliminative)," associated with Derrida, Lyotard, and others; "(3) liberationist," under which rubric he would presumably include the various black, feminist, Latino (or Latina), Native American, and other liberation theologies; and "(4) restorationist or conservative," a label he awards to George William Rutler, John Paul II, and possibly Richard John Neuhaus.¹⁰ Other authors identify other brands

10. See Griffin, "Introduction: Varieties of Postmodern Theology," *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*, 1-7. Interestingly, there are discussions of John of the Cross from within almost all of these brands of "postmodernity." For a "process" ap-

of "postmodernity," particularly of a hermeneutical orientation. Yet we can see how confusing the terminology has become, when the current pope is counted a "postmodernist," and process theology (with its roots in the metaphysics of Whitehead's process philosophy) is as "postmodern" as the strongly anti-metaphysical bias of some deconstructionists. Certainly one can make a case for calling them all "postmodern" in some sense, but the label may obscure as much as it clarifies.

In any case, the question arises again: to what extent has such "postmodernity," and the alleged demise of modernity, really penetrated to the level of general awareness, particularly to the level of everyday spirituality? I cannot recall the last submission to our journal *Spiritual Life* that seemed even remotely influenced by Ricoeur, Foucault, Gadamer, or Habermas (much less mentioning them by name), and to the extent that any of our articles incorporate process or liberation perspectives, we are barraged with irate letters denying that these have anything of value to offer people today. (The "postmodernity" of John Paul II is apparently acceptable to our readers, however!) At a more academic level, in recent decades I managed to complete both undergraduate and graduate programs in philosophy at Cornell (with a heavily Wittgensteinian orientation at the time) without once hearing the names of Derrida, Lacan, and others, as far as I can recall; it was only at my insistence that I was able to study Heidegger, and then only as part of a directed reading course in *Being and Time*. Even today, while there is greater dialogue between the analytic and continental traditions, Derrida and others seem to be taken far more seriously in departments of theology, literature, and modern languages than in the philosophy departments of the United States (just as Anselm and Aquinas often receive a more careful reading from philosophers than from theologians these days).

proach, see Daniel A. Dombrowski, *St. John of the Cross: An Appreciation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); for a feminist perspective, see Constance FitzGerald, O.C.D., "Impasse and Dark Night," ed. Tilden Edwards, *Living With Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 93-116; for an approach influenced by Levinas, see Alain Cugno, *St. John of the Cross: Reflections on Mystical Experience* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); for the "postmodernist" pontiff, see Karol Wojtyła, *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Jordan Aumann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981).

My own experience is that many philosophers influenced by the analytic tradition have understood their "postmodernity" to mean primarily an end to linguistic positivism's veto on metaphysics.¹¹ Anglo-American philosophers with or without any particular religious affiliation have taken up again the classic arguments regarding the existence of God, the problem of evil, the possibility of miracles, and so on, with an enthusiasm and battery of rigorous analytic tools that make many scholastics look slipshod by comparison.¹² The ontological argument (which, it should be noted, exercised a tremendous fascination for thinkers as varied as Barth, Hartshorne, and many post-Wittgensteinians) becomes a classic illustration of the intricacies of modal logic.¹³ It is ironic, I think, that so many analytic philosophers with nothing obvious to gain from any resuscitation of "natural theology," and no stake in reviving "the thirteenth, the greatest of all centuries," are nonetheless taking these arguments more seriously than their counterparts in the seminaries and theology departments. If this is a "postmodern" phenomenon—and in some respects it might be described that way—it is one that deserves more serious attention from contemporary theologians, and yet seems worlds apart from Heidegger and the deconstructionists.

In short, there are no clear breaks or sharp divisions between premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity. On the contrary, it seems more and more clear that they continue to coexist side-by-side,

11. Diogenes Allen, for instance, argues that "the breakdown of the modern mentality" now makes it possible to argue once again that one should believe Christianity "because Christianity's true"; see *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, 1ff.

12. For examples of this revival of interest in philosophy of religion among Anglo-American philosophers influenced by the analytic tradition, see the articles and bibliographies in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytic Approach*, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974); *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987); *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, eds., William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989); the "University of Notre Dame Studies in the Philosophy of Religion" series; and the journal *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*.

13. See especially Plantinga's detailed and influential analysis of the ontological argument in Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967) 26–94; and Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974) 85–112.

even within ourselves, sometimes creating conflict, sometimes a fruitful interplay. One is reminded of Bultmann's famous remark, in "New Testament and Mythology," that "it is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."¹⁴ I can only say from my limited experience in publications and other ministries what has no doubt been stated often before: that many people—and not just the uneducated—not only *can* but *do* so believe, especially when "New Age" trappings are part of the package. Is this an indication of vestigial superstition or of intellectual schizophrenia? Possibly, but also possibly something more. At any rate, postmodernists willing to interpret sympathetically the "popular religion" of other cultures should presumably extend the same courtesy to their own heritage.

Some Contemporary Trends in Spirituality

What does all of this mean, then, for spirituality at this particular historical moment? And to what extent are "modernity" and "postmodernity" useful categories for understanding it?

The answer will depend, of course, upon our notion of spirituality itself. Here it is especially important to distinguish between "prescriptive" and "descriptive" approaches, since there is a tendency to specify "authentic" spirituality in ways that make our characterizations true *by definition*. Prescriptive definitions stipulate what the matter under consideration "really ought to be," or what "really ought to count" as instances; a descriptive definition, on the other hand, looks at how terms are actually used in ordinary practice. One might argue "prescriptively," for example, that all true instances of postmodern spirituality must explicitly include ecological concerns or process perspectives, but the fact remains that these elements are often lacking in much of what would ordinarily be described as spirituality in our present historical context.

Rather than deciding in advance, therefore, what "spirituality at the juncture of modernity and postmodernity" should look like, it may be more useful here to describe briefly certain obvious trends in

14. Rudolf Bultmann and others, *Kerygma and Myth* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961) 5.

contemporary spirituality as we find it. In true "postmodern" fashion, I need to acknowledge that my field of vision is to some extent limited by social class, occupation, religious affiliation, and so on. That is to say, among other things, that I tend to draw my impressions of contemporary spiritual trends from contacts with individuals and groups that explicitly *identify* themselves as interested in "spiritual" matters, from the kinds of books coming out and articles we receive for *Spiritual Life*, from conversations with people in the urban and suburban parishes where the Carmelites work, from second-hand reports from other Carmelites and friends throughout the world—and, more broadly, from whatever rises to the level of media or scholarly attention.

At the same time, although the net is thus cast fairly wide, I realize that my sources are in some respects a self-selected group of people who resonate with what Carmelites do and what we publish (and are therefore, at the very least, usually literate). I would not presume to generalize about contemporary Inuit spirituality, for example, or the "spiritual ethos" shared by the staff of the Apple Computer Corporation, or even the spirituality of the "Nubian Islamic Hebrews" who have their ominous-looking headquarters only a few blocks from our monastery in Washington; in some respects we share the same time and place in history, but in other respects we may be worlds apart, and in any case these are spiritual currents with which I have little direct acquaintance.

Moreover, one might argue that much of what passes for spirituality today is instead actually a distraction or escape from authentic surrender to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Without necessarily denying such a charge, my goal here is simply to list and comment briefly upon what would ordinarily be described as some of the major "contemporary trends in spirituality," particularly here in the United States. What are the themes and concerns, in other words, that loom large today in popular movements, workshops, retreats, lectures, and publications in the area of spirituality?

1. First, there is clearly a strong, and apparently still growing, interest in traditional spirituality (from which our own "ICS Publications," with its line of Carmelite classics, has certainly benefited). Whatever else may have changed since the Second Vatican Council, vast numbers of Catholics continue reading Louis de Montfort and the *Imitation of Christ*, listening to tapes of Bishop Sheen, wearing their

scapulars and Miraculous Medals, and saying their novena prayers and "Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary"; this same vitality of older forms of piety is also evident among Protestants and other groups, though obviously manifested in different forms. The influx of immigrants in recent years has only reinforced this trend. Sometimes the spiritual expressions of modern and premodern eras are carefully "retrieved," as in Paulist Press's outstanding "Classics of Western Spirituality" series. Sometimes they are almost defiantly "non-retrieved," by more conservative organizations and individuals, as if to say "whatever postmodernity may be, we don't much like it"; such attitudes seem to underlie some of the "fundamentalist" tendencies currently gaining ground in many religious groups. In either case, we are obviously not just dealing with classic texts here, but also with "old time religion" televangelism, pilgrimages, novenas, and so on, as well as the current fascination with apparitions, weeping statues, apocalyptic messages, and other extraordinary phenomena.¹⁵ Even though these are often promoted by use of the latest technology, they typically hark back to an earlier era of spirituality.

2. Publications and prayer groups focused on Scripture and biblical spirituality remain widespread, as a look at any recent religious publisher's catalog, magazine circulation statistics, or diocesan directory shows.

3. Much of spirituality today is influenced by liberation or social justice perspectives of various sorts, and lately by a growing concern for ecological issues.¹⁶ It is a mistake to assume that these are simply "liberal" preoccupations; more than ever, believers all across the spectrum readily agree that any authentic spirituality has social consequences. Both "conservative" and "liberal" groups and publications, after all, lionize Mother Teresa especially for her work with the poor. Disagreements certainly arise over the analysis of the systemic causes of social problems, and thus how persons concerned about spiritual growth should position themselves on such issues as abortion, gay

15. The award-winning weekly newspaper, *National Catholic Register*, now carries a regular supplement, *Mary's People*, on apparitions around the world.

16. See for example Segundo Galilea, *The Way of Living Faith: A Spirituality of Liberation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988); Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988); and (for a "green" perspective) see the writings of Thomas Berry, C.P.

rights, military intervention in Somalia, or the former Yugoslavian republics, and so on. But it is difficult to find any contemporary spiritual writings or movements that fail to recognize one's duty toward the world and its disadvantaged, however that obligation is perceived and whatever tactics are proposed. Whether that recognition is translated into liberating praxis or concrete action is, of course, another question.

4. There is a continuing flood of new publications and workshops on women's (and, more recently, men's) spirituality.¹⁷ Some of these explicitly incorporate liberation and feminist perspectives; others just as clearly do not, but rather offer a spiritual rationale or devotional sustenance for more traditional gender roles. Whether the more recent "men's movement" is complementary or contrary to feminist goals is still being debated.¹⁸ Meanwhile, however, most retreat centers, spirituality programs, and religious publishing houses now provide a whole line of products and services related to women's and men's spirituality.

5. There is a comparable explosion in Twelve-Step, co-dependency, and recovery-related spirituality. One of the consequent problems is that addiction and co-dependency have come to be defined so broadly that virtually every individual and every group is labeled "dysfunctional," and a new kind of "co-dependency" on the support group itself may be fostered.¹⁹ Alcoholics Anonymous has expressed some reservations about the tendency today to appropriate Twelve-Step spirituality for every individual and social problem. Nonetheless, it is clear that many today have found spiritual guidance from such programs, and from the challenge to "turn one's life over to a Higher Power."

17. See for example Susan Cady, Marian Ronan and Hal Taussig, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986); Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds. *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); Joann Wolski Conn, ed., *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1986); Charlene Spretnak, ed., *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1982).

18. See Kay Leigh Hagan, ed. *Women Respond to the Men's Movement: A Feminist Collection* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

19. See Wendy Kaminer, "Chances Are You're Codependent Too," *New York Times Review of Books* 95 (February 11, 1991) 1ff.; Lynette Lamb, "Is Everyone Codependent?" *Utne Reader* (May/June 1990) 26ff.; David Rieff, "Victims, All?" *Harper's* 283 (October 1991) 49-56.

6. In a similar vein, it is perhaps symptomatic of our times that Baltasar Gracian's seventeenth century "Art of Worldly Wisdom" has recently been successfully repackaged as a "self-help" book.²⁰ Indeed, "how-to," "self-help," and "healing" books now dominate the non-fiction bestseller lists, and related programs of every sort are springing up everywhere. Not all of these are explicitly "spiritual" in the traditional sense, but can be seen as one contemporary response to existing spiritual needs.²¹

7. Certainly one of the most important trends in spirituality today, for better or worse, is the so-called "New Age Movement," together with various related pop psychologies, holistic health programs, and so on. It is difficult to make any broad generalizations about "New Age" spirituality, since the terminology is used so carelessly by advocates and opponents alike. The "New Age" label has been applied in recent years to everything from transcendental meditation, yoga, "Christian Zen," acupuncture, centering prayer, the enneagram, intensive journaling, guided imagery, spiritual books written from a Jungian perspective, "global" and "creation-centered" spirituality, to crystal-gazing, channeling, witchcraft, satanism, and the light jazz sometimes labeled "New Age music." Alarmists detect in all of this a vast organized conspiracy against the Christian faith²² (to the point where, for example, any article *Spiritual Life* now publishes on, say, the theme of "divinization" in St. John of the Cross generates a spate of accusations that we are promoting dangerous "New Age" ideas!). I would guess, rather, that what these "New Age" practices and ideas have in common, if anything, is a certain eclecticism and willingness to appropriate from many different sources (albeit not always with sufficient critical discernment) whatever is useful in one's spiritual journey.

8. Whether one regards it as part of the "New Age Movement" or as a distinct phenomenon, there is certainly widespread interest

20. See Baltasar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom: A Pocket Oracle* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

21. St. Mary's Press, for example, has recently begun offering a fine and very successful "Companions for the Journey" series, each entry bearing a similar title of *How to Pray With . . .* some particular saint.

22. See, for example, Randy England, *The Unicorn in the Sanctuary: The Impact of the New Age on the Catholic Church* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN Books, 1991), for a call to arms against the "New Age" that lumps together everything from Teilhard de Chardin and Modernism to Matthew Fox and Silva Mind Control.

today in the spiritual insights to be gleaned from other faiths and traditions, including Eastern religions, Native American spirituality, and so on. Sometimes archaic traditions are selectively pillaged or reinvented in a very anachronistic way (as when, for example, sanitized "wicca" or "druidic" cults are established that the original practitioners would scarcely have recognized); sometimes the very sources of alleged "ancient wisdom" are themselves problematic.²³ Still, today there is an increasing number of even-handed and insightful studies of other religions, and excellent opportunities to acquaint oneself with other spiritual traditions.

9. Finally, there are certain "cottage industries" of spirituality resources focused on particular movements (e.g., Focolare, the charismatics), target groups (e.g., parishes, RCIA, religious communities), individuals (e.g., Thomas Merton, Thérèse of Lisieux, Hildegard of Bingen, Mother Teresa), stages of life (e.g., midlife, aging), disciplines (e.g., centering prayer, spiritual direction), and so on.

This is only a brief, and necessarily incomplete, listing. But when we consider all this, however, what if anything counts as distinctively "postmodern" (or even "modern")? Perhaps those involved in some of the trends mentioned above no longer believe in the inevitable progress of history, for example, but then, neither did the "premoderns." Perhaps the increased emphasis on affectivity and the power of myth and symbol represents a loss of confidence in classical science as the privileged avenue to truth and reality (though in some quarters the "scientism" of the past seems to have been replaced by faith in the unlimited potential of computer technology). Perhaps attempts to develop a "global" spirituality, or to situate Christian uniqueness claims in respectful dialogue with other traditions, might be considered "post-

23. The current debate surrounding the authenticity of Forrest Carter's *The Education of Little Tree* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1976) or Chief Seattle's oft-quoted speech recalls similar controversies over the reliability of Carlos Casteneda's books on the Yaqui "don Juan" some years ago. See, for example Henry Louis Gates, "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of Little Tree," *New York Times Book Review* 96 (November 24, 1991) 1ff.; John Leland, "New Age Fable from an Old School Bigot?" *Newsweek* 118 (October 14, 1991) 62; Jerry L. Clark, "Thus Spoke Chief Seattle: The Story of an Undocumented Speech," *Prologue* 17 (Spring 1985) 58-65; Malcolm Jones, "Just Too Good to Be True," *Newsweek* 119 (May 4, 1992) 68; Richard de Mille, *Casteneda's Journey* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1976).

modern." Certainly, spiritualities incorporating the perspectives of liberation theology and feminism are "postmodern" if those movements are; it may be "postmodern" in some sense, as well, to apply the interpretive categories of codependency and recovery to institutions and groups rather than to individual subjects.

Still, it seems to me that if true "postmodernity" not only accepts but even revels in pluralism, relativism, ambiguity, and the loss of the rational subject, then few of the trends described above are fully "postmodern." On the contrary, the spirituality most popular today seems to represent not so much a celebration of the demise of modernity, but a search for some sense of meaning, truth, and self-identity in the face of an increasingly fragmented (and fragmenting) world. Individuals and communities are searching for something to rely on when all the roadmaps and familiar landmarks have disappeared, and they often seek it in other traditions (often distant in time, place, or cultural mindset). Carmel offers one such tradition.

The Carmelite Contribution

I want to suggest that the Carmelite heritage in general, and John of the Cross in particular (especially in his "dark night" doctrine), can make an important contribution to spirituality at the historical juncture we have just described. Certainly Carmel is not unique in this regard, as Thomas Merton himself clearly showed in his creative retrieval of the Cistercian heritage and other traditions. In fact, Carmelite spirituality might be regarded in some circles as part of the current problem, rather than part of the solution, since (more so than many monastic traditions) it places so much emphasis on the quality of the *individual subject's* interior relationship with the divine. (Recall Leibniz's enthusiastic endorsement of the Teresian maxim, taken out of context, that "the soul ought often to think as if there were nothing but God and itself in the world."²⁴) Certainly, in the hands of later manualists, John's and Teresa's narratives of the soul's journey become dissected into increasingly more refined hair-splitting over the stages and degrees of meditation and infused contemplation. Little

24. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. G.H.R. Parkinson (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1973) 42 ["Discourse on Metaphysics"] and 122 ["New System, and Explanation of the New System"].

wonder, then, that even today the friars continue to get numerous vocation inquiries from those who assume they are "called to Carmel" because they seek a refuge to cultivate their own private experience of God, unmediated and untainted by any contact with products of "modernity" and "postmodernity" (including the bothersome others in community).

Again, it must be admitted that Teresa and John of the Cross were people of their own times, living in a Post-Tridentine era not usually regarded today as the high point of liturgical or ecclesial spirituality. This is only to admit that Carmelite spirituality is not all-inclusive, and needs supplementing with other traditions.

Still, I believe there are several important areas today in which the Carmelite tradition has a contribution to make. Begun in the late Crusader period at the beginning of the thirteenth century by men from the West living in the East (on the slopes of Mt. Carmel), in a lifestyle reminiscent of the desert fathers, "hermits in community," then driven West by the fall of the Latin kingdom and assimilated to the mendicants, attending the great universities while always retaining a certain "dangerous memory" of their eremitical roots, preaching far and wide while longing for the silence and solitude of the desert, Carmelites seem at least one apt model for those today struggling to maintain a sense of spiritual identity in the face of massive social changes, even radical transformations in the externals of their lives.²⁵

And the Carmelites confronted this challenge using several tactics. First, despite enormous pressures to adopt a classic religious *Rule*, they held on steadfastly to their own original "formula of life," given by Albert (the patriarch of Jerusalem), and grounded in their own experience, with its emphasis on "following in the footsteps of Christ" and "staying in your cell, meditating on the Law of the Lord day and night and keeping watch at prayer, unless attending to some other

25. For a more detailed history of Carmelite origins, summarized here in a single sentence, see Elias Friedman, O.C.D., *The Latin Hermits of Mount Carmel: A Study in Carmelite Origins* (Rome: Teresianum, 1979); and Joachim Smet, O.Carm., *The Carmelites: A History of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, vol. 1 (Darien, Ill.: Carmelite Spiritual Center, 1975). Based on dated historical information, but still worthwhile, are Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, O.C.D., *Journey to Carith: The Story of the Carmelite Order* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966); and Thomas Merton, "The Primitive Carmelite Ideal," *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960).

duty."²⁶ And their choice of biblical paradigms was equally felicitous: *Elijah* (because of their location near his fountain) and *Mary* (patron of their first chapel built at Albert's directive, and thus the "Lady of the the place").

From *Elijah*, the Carmelites inherited a strong sense, still crucial today, of always "standing before the face of the living God," of needing to repeat the Exodus journey through the desert to Sinai/Horeb, and of finding God not in the predictable places or extraordinary phenomena, but in the "tiny whispering sound." As "sons and daughters of the prophets," they recognize as well that this encounter with the divine always imposes an ethical demand to speak out against injustice and expose the false gods of one's own time. Medieval Carmelites, in fact, allegorized the whole Elijah cycle in the First Book of Kings as a paradigm for all those whom God calls (see 1 Kgs 17:2-3) to "leave here, go east" (against sin), and "hide in the Wadi Cherith" (charity), where "you shall drink from the stream" (taste God somewhat even in this life) and be fed by the ravens (in morsels, not with a surfeit of consolations).²⁷

The other classic paradigm for Carmelites is *Mary*, from whom they learn an attitude of radical availability to God's will, without counting the cost ("Let it be done to me as you say" [Luke 1:38]). John of the Cross points to Mary as the prime example of someone utterly responsive to the Spirit, free of her own agenda.²⁸ But at the same time this implies not merely a passive enjoyment of spiritual privileges, but an active engagement on behalf of those in need (e.g., rising up "in haste" to go serve her cousin Elizabeth [Luke 1:39]).²⁹

26. See Bede Edwards, O.C.D., trans., *The Rule of Saint Albert* (Aylesford and Kent: Carmelite Book Service, 1973); Michael Mulhall, O.Carm., ed., *Albert's Way: The First North American Congress on the Carmelite Rule* (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1989).

27. For this allegorical interpretation, see Michael B. Edwards, O.C.D., trans., *The Book of the First Monks (chapter 1 to 9)*, Vineyard Series #3 (Oxford: Teresian Press, 1969). In the time of Sts. Teresa and John of the Cross, this book was still regarded (incorrectly) as the earliest rule of the Carmelites, given them in A.D. 412.

28. See *Ascent* 3, 2, 10 in *Collected Works*, and Emmanuel Sullivan, O.C.D., "Mary and the Holy Spirit in the Writings of John of the Cross," ed. Steven Payne, O.C.D., *Carmelite Studies 6: John of the Cross* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1992) 109-22.

29. See Elizabeth of the Trinity, "Heaven In Faith," para. 40, *Complete Works*

These two models, and the memory of their origins, guided Carmelites through the vicissitudes of an often paradoxical and uncertain history. If, as Merton observes, "it can be said that the Carmelite spirit is essentially a 'desert' spirit, a prophetic ideal,"³⁰ then perhaps this tradition can help those today who find themselves negotiating a contemporary social and cultural wilderness, littered with the debris of "modernity." Its essentially narrative structure—telling again and again the story of those who have sought and been found by God—can offer support to those for whom grand theological systems have become problematic. This is a spirituality that speaks of the perennial possibility of inner silence and solitude before the living God, mediated in many ways but able to survive the successive deaths of every mediation. This is a spirituality that is at once profoundly contemplative and prophetic, "mystical and political," even if contemporary Carmelites themselves have yet to grasp fully their prophetic role in the contemporary world.

The Teresian and Sanjuanist Contribution

The riches of this Carmelite tradition come to full flower in Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Though both describe, perhaps in more detail than any of their predecessors, the wide range of possible "spiritual experiences," both offer a healthy antidote to the modern notion (perhaps grounded in modernity's preoccupation with the experiencing subject) that spirituality and mysticism have essentially to do with generating certain unusual feelings or states of consciousness. This misunderstanding can be found at all levels today, from the academicians who try to decide whether mysticism is "everywhere the same" by comparing phenomenological descriptions of mystic states (divorced from the context of a religious way of life), to the thousands of white-collar executives in stressful jobs who practice a half-hour of "meditation" every day, simply to achieve some state of inner equilibrium in order to become more effective competitors in the marketplace.

For John and Teresa, the goal of the spiritual journey is never merely some private inner bliss, but total transformation in the love

of *Elizabeth of the Trinity*, trans. Aletheia Kane, O.C.D. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1984) 110–11.

30. Merton, "The Primitive Carmelite Ideal," 228.

of God and complete identification with Christ; their spirituality thus is essentially and necessarily relational. Teresa herself was one of the first founders to articulate so clearly the ecclesial mission of a contemplative way of life; Christian spirituality, and the contemplative vocation, ultimately only make sense if they are undertaken for the sake of the Church and world, and not simply for the salvation of one's own soul.³¹ Neither saint talks much about "mysticism" as such. They prefer instead to speak of "mystical theology" (which for them means not the study of mysticism but the experiential knowledge of the divine [see *Canticle*, Prologue, 3]), about union with God, about prayer, about contemplation as a "secret, loving inflow of God into the soul" (*Night*, 1, 10, 6). And although both describe the inner joy and peace that comes from finding God, they would be surprised, if not appalled, at the idea that these are somehow the direct goal of one's spiritual efforts. Teresa insists that the transforming mystical union of the seventh of the "dwelling places" of the *Interior Castle* is given not for our own satisfaction, but for the sake of "works, works, works."³² John likewise continually criticizes those who "seek themselves in God":

I should like to persuade spiritual persons that the road leading to God does not entail a multiplicity of considerations, methods, manners and experiences . . . but demands only the one thing necessary, true self-denial, interior and exterior, through surrender of self. . . . [Nor does the journey] consist in consolations, delights, and spiritual feelings, but in the living death of the cross, sensory and spiritual, exterior and interior. I will not enlarge on this, though I would like to continue discussing the matter because from my observations Christ is little known by those who consider themselves his friends. For we see them going about seeking in him their own consolations and satisfactions, loving themselves very much, but not loving him very much by seeking his bitter trials and deaths . . . (*Ascent* 2, 7, 7-12).

Both saints, in short, do indeed hold out a final prospect of unshakeable inner peace and joy, yet not as personal achievement but as gift,

31. See *Way of Perfection*, 1, 1-6; 3, 1-10; *Book of Foundations*, 1, 7-8, in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., vols. 2, 3 (Washington: ICS Publications, 1980, 1985).

32. *Interior Castle*, seventh dwelling places, 4, 4-6, in *Collected Works of St. Teresa*, vol. 2.

the fruit of self-transcending love. And both saints insist these are attained, not by anesthetizing ourselves to the world's pain, but by suffering courageously the cost and consequences of that love.

More generally, I believe John and Teresa can be helpful in grappling with the apparent "postmodern" loss of confidence in the Cartesian ideal of the autonomous rational subject, fully conscious and in control of its beliefs and behavior. For both mystics, human beings are essentially relational. Recall that in Teresa's master symbol of the soul as a crystalline castle of seven progressively more interior "dwelling places," God dwells permanently in the center as the sustaining source of the whole edifice, whether we are aware of (and respond to) this divine presence or not; we would not be the creatures we are without that presence. Similarly, John of the Cross insists that "the soul's center is God" (*Flame* 1, 12), so that the human subject cannot exist or be understood except in relation to the divine, the term of its fulfillment, which (as John so forcefully stresses) transcends any human thought or feeling. In this sense, the human person is radically "de-centered" into mystery, into the unknowability of God. Thus the contemporary spiritual search for complete "self-possession" and control of one's own life is ultimately doomed to failure, precisely because we are constituted by this unlimited capacity for the infinite we cannot grasp or define, what the scholastics would call an "obediential potency" for participation in the very inner life of God:

One should not think it impossible that the soul be capable of so sublime an activity as this breathing in God through participation as God breathes in her. For, granted that God favors her by union with the Most Blessed Trinity, in which she becomes deiform and God through participation, how could it be incredible that she also understand, know, and love—or better that this be done in her—in the Trinity, together with it, as does the Trinity itself! . . . Accordingly, souls possess the same goods by participation that the Son possesses by nature. As a result, they are truly gods by participation, equals and companions of God (*Canticle* 39, 4–6).³³

But it is perhaps in relation to the so-called "hermeneutics of suspicion" and his own teaching on the "dark night" that John has

33. See also John's comments on the "deep caverns of feeling" in *Flame*, 3, 18–26.

most to contribute to the "postmodern" dialogue. As Merton again observes:

[John of the Cross] is the Father of all those whose prayer is an undefined isolation outside the boundary of "spirituality." He deals chiefly with those who, in one way or another, have been brought face to face with God in a way that methods cannot account for and books cannot explain.³⁴

John takes to its most radical conclusions the ancient principle that God infinitely transcends everything finite, including all human methods, thoughts, images, and feelings, however exalted. He is likewise a brilliant diagnostician of the myriad forms of human evasion and self-deception possible even in the most seemingly sublime religious matters. In the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night* treatises, for example, he takes us through a detailed taxonomy of natural and "supernatural" experiences, and shows how easily apparently holy people can end up unconsciously twisting religious ideas and feelings to their own self-serving purposes if they begin to mistake them for the divine reality to which they are only meant to lead.

And while he is obviously a sixteenth-century author, not a member of the Frankfurt School, John's teaching can be easily broadened to incorporate whatever is legitimate in Marxist, feminist, and other critiques of religion. Some years ago, for example, Jesuit theologian Michael Buckley noted that John's analysis of the human capacity for projection has an uncannily contemporary ring:

With Feuerbach, John is sensitive to the humanization which consciousness works upon its God; with Freud, he is acutely aware that the religious movement towards God can emerge either from the desire for satisfaction or from the drive to be morally reassured. In contrast to both, what he elaborates is not a process of assimilation or of psychotherapy, but of the transformation of the person by grace, the gradual becoming God by participation in the divine nature. . . . This continual contemplative purification of the human person is a progressive hermeneutic of the nature of God, the gradual disclosure of the One who infinitely "transcends the intellect and is incomprehensible to it." . . . Whatever knowledge one has does not move into the objectification of God but

34. Merton, "St. John of the Cross," *Saints for Now*, 259.

passes through objectifications, contradicts their adequacy, and in faith "reaches God more by not understanding than by understanding." . . . [John insists] that the evolution or personal development of faith must pass through the desert and the cross. . . . What I am suggesting is that the contemporary interest in spirituality may not be of incidental importance or of accidental occurrence, that for the reflective and sensitive mind—one which grasps the conditionality of imaginative and cultural structures, the necessities which issue from a background of which one can only be half aware, the profound limitations of one's knowledge and social situation—for such a person, the alternative may well lie between atheism and contemplation.³⁵

To be sure, believers have always known the danger of remaking God in our own image. Modern authors such as Feuerbach, Freud, Nietzsche, Habermas, Durkheim, and feminists, however, have alerted us to the dynamics of projection, and to the complex, subtle, and often previously unrecognized ways that our class interests, patriarchal presuppositions, culture, and even language itself systematically distort our religion. Taking their "hermeneutics of suspicion" seriously might seem to leave us forever trapped in a house of mirrors; each newer, seemingly purer faith-stance we adopt as the old ones are "unmasked" proves to be just a more subtle projection of our own needs and interests.

John would certainly not agree here with those whose proposed solution is simply to move "out of our heads and into our hearts." While the recovery of the affective dimension and the suspicion of modern "rationality" may be an important component of some kinds of "postmodernity," John clearly believes that human affectivity severed from reason is as suspect, and as much in need of redemption, as reason divorced from affectivity. Indeed, for John love of God and neighbor is not primarily a matter of our affections in the superficial way these are often understood today, since our emotions are as often grounded in illusion as our concepts, and we can as easily fall in love with our own good *feelings* of love as with the real persons to whom those feelings are ostensibly directed. Thus, I end up "loving" not the poor as they really are, but my own sentimentalized image of the poor

35. Michael Buckley, S.J., "Atheism and Contemplation," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979) 694–99.

because of the comfort it gives me. For John, our natural capacity for love is constrained by the limits of our concepts and imagination; what our affectivity is drawn to of its own power is not God as God is, but our own image of God, and thus our desires are initially as distorted and misdirected by conscious and unconscious interests as our rationality.

So, for John of the Cross, it is the *whole* human person in every dimension—rationality, feelings, memories, presuppositions, unconscious drives and so on—that needs to be radically purified. Indeed, one important consequence for scholars is that even our own interpretation of John and his spirituality needs a "hermeneutic of suspicion," since it can become an idol. Ironically, those otherwise recognized as brilliant authorities on Sanjuanist doctrine can themselves sometimes display as "inordinate" an attachment to their own exegesis and scholarly reputation as any spiritual "beginner" frantically searching for consolation in prayer. As Gustavo Gutiérrez notes:

Even here [among theologians] I seem to find a danger of idolatry: our own reflection, no matter how honest, can be transformed into a hindrance. Once again John of the Cross cuts away whatever is infected, whatever impedes the vision of God, with the scalpel of his experience and of his poetry. This makes him important for us.³⁶

Despite his own reputation for physical austerities, John would surely have agreed with the wise comment of Teresa's friend Domingo Bañez, evaluating a Carmelite novice master overzealous for penance: "If he is looking for mortifications, here is one in very truth: to believe that he is mistaken."³⁷ Surely there is a lesson here for many leading "postmodern" figures, who seem to become so defensive when their own ideas and texts are criticized or "deconstructed."³⁸

36. Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Rereading Saint John of the Cross from a Latin American Perspective," *Spiritual Life* 38 (Winter 1992) 233.

37. Crisógono de Jesús, O.C.D., *The Life of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kathleen Pond (New York: Harper & Bros., 1958) 67.

38. See for example Thomas Sheehan's criticism of the deconstructionists' attempts to explain away Heidegger's sympathies with National Socialism, in Thomas Sheehan, "The Normal Nazi," *New York Review of Books* 40 (January 14, 1993) 30–35; and the subsequent heated exchange between Sheehan and Derrida in the "Letters" column. On the other hand, one sign of the maturing of the mod-

To sum up, then, John is as willing as any "postmodern" to concede our human incapacity to escape the bounds of our own history, culture, class interests, and so on. Left to our own devices, we would remain trapped forever in an irresolvably pluralistic world of fundamentally relativized values. This is the kind of scenario we see played out all too often today in arguments over "politically correct" speech, university curricula, polarization in the churches. Confidence in the possibility of rational debate has broken down, because all differences are reduced to historically and culturally bound opinions, and disputants no longer agree on any common ground or shared principles from which to start. And so discussion and moral persuasion are replaced by pressure tactics, shouting at each other across an unbridgeable cultural gulf.

Where John parts company with such "postmodernity" is in his conviction that grace is always possible, and can break through the cycle of self-interest and dysfunctionality. Intellect, memory, and will are, indeed, culture-bound and distorted by our past, but they can be progressively purified through God's self-communication in faith, hope, and love. To be sure, each new step along the way is always provisional, with further and more subtle evasions and prejudices to be "unmasked." None of us in this life is ever fully free and loving, or ever in full possession of the ultimate we seek. Yet, to the extent that we open ourselves to the painful and purifying questions and challenges that "postmodernity" and ordinary life today pose, we grow beyond what we once were, our horizons expand, and we travel further on the journey. Faith, hope, and love communicate God only in an obscure manner, says John, but they do not for this reason fail to communicate God truly (see *Canticle* 12, 4). And therefore, like good "postmoderns" (though perhaps for different reasons) we can afford not merely to endure "modernity's" demise, but even to rejoice in it, because we realize that the death of all penultimate certainties merely clears the way for the truly ultimate, for God. ("I am happy with St. John of the Cross among the rocks," writes Merton.³⁹) That is why

ern feminist movement is its growing capacity for self-critiques; these run the gamut from the wildly provocative fulminations of Camille Paglia to the more thoughtful critique of "difference feminism" in Katha Pollitt, "Are Women Morally Superior to Men?" *Nation* (December 28, 1992) 799-807.

39. Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O., *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas*

John of the Cross can walk fearlessly through the desert and the darkness of his time and ours, singing:

I know that [the spring] is bottomless
and no one is able to cross it,
although it is night.

Its clarity is never darkened,
and I know that every light has come from it,
although it is night. . . .

It is here calling out to creatures;
and they satisfy their thirst, although in darkness,
because it is night.

This living spring that I long for,
I see in this bread of life,
although it is night.

Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction, selected and ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 33.