Return to Carmel: The Construction of a Discalced Identity in John of the Cross

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RETURN TO CARMEL: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A DISCALCED IDENTITY IN 
JOHN OF THE CROSS

By

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Ascent of Mount Carmel (A)
Dark Night (N)
Spiritual Canticle, redaction B (CB)
Living Flame of Love, redaction B (L)
Institute for Carmelite Studies (ICS)
JOHN OF THE CROSS’ DRAWING OF MOUNT CARMEL

Source: ICS Publications
ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the John of the Cross’ (1542-1591) construction of a uniquely “Discalced Carmelite identity” in his writings, with particular emphasis on his works, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night*. The focus of this study is placed on John’s interpretation of Teresa of Avila’s version of Discalced reform that she founded, with its special emphasis on reform as the quest for mystical union with God at the center of the Carmelite soul. To this end, John appropriated scholastic, monastic, apophatic and erotic traditions to define the reform, and to distinguish it from the many competing identities in sixteenth century Spain.

Previous studies have examined John’s construction of the self within theological, philosophical and literary contexts, and have located many of the influences on John and Teresa’s conception of the self, its structures and trajectories. As this dissertation reveals, however, most of the studies on John, unlike so many recent studies done on Teresa, fail to embed his texts in the thick context of his historical world. This study seeks to link John’s unique conception of the self and its construction with the many related conversations in Spain to which John was privy. Of particular importance to this study is the impact of this context with John’s attempt to trace a Discalced Carmelite identity capable of bearing the weight of a Teresian model of reform.
INTRODUCTION

Summary of Thesis

This is a study of John of the Cross’ construction of a uniquely Teresian Discalced Carmelite identity as it is found in his written works, especially the two major ascetical-mystical commentaries on his poem, One Dark Night: the Ascent of Mount Carmel and the Dark Night. The study of these texts is carried out in conversation with a wide spectrum of studies in European religious, intellectual, social, and cultural history. A special focus is placed on sixteenth century Spanish reform movements that helped give shape to Teresa of Avila’s own reformation of the Carmelite nuns and friars. Specifically, I examine John’s utilization of ascetical, mystical, theological, philosophical and literary traditions in his written works, in service to the construction of what both he and Teresa believed to be an authentic retrieval of a lost Carmelite identity. John’s reconstruction is deeply indebted to the local and regional histories of Castile and Andalusia, as well to broader historical currents of European history. This study examines how John can be seen in his texts to be in critical conversation with his environment, and how the seemingly otherworldly concerns of mysticism are deeply embedded in Spain’s cultural matrix. Sixteenth century Spain increasingly projected an image of national unity as it sought to solidify its status as a nation-state and a world empire, and looked more and more toward religion to offer a nationally unifying narrative. But the forces of diversity and division tore at the seams of that narrative. John and Teresa also sought in religion a unifying narrative for Carmel that would transcend the diversity and divisions that seemed to threaten its viability as a force for unity and reform in Spain, and throughout the world. This study is an exploration of the sanjuanist version of that narrative quest for identity, with a specific focus on the way in which John employed traditional tropes from the medieval Christian tradition (e.g. scholastic anthropology, neo-platonic eros, apophasis) and placed them in service to the unique demands of his historical moment. John’s written texts construct a “Discalced identity” capable of managing the tensions within and without his own Carmelite order in

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1 “Teresian” will refer to the life and work of Teresa of Avila, founder of the Discalced Carmelite reform.
2 “Sanjuanist” is a common term in scholarship on John of the Cross that refers to his thought and the thought tradition he gave rise to.
Spain, while proffering a forceful apologia for the vision of reform presented by Teresa herself.

Why this Thesis?

Religion embedded in history

Thomas Tweed, in his study of religion, *Crossing and Dwelling*, argues that the scholarly art of defining religion and analyzing its data requires an approach that apprehends its subject from a multiplicity of "positioned sightings." In other words, the study of religion requires a theory that refuses insularity or claims to transcendent objectivity, and is open to being modified by sightings from other vantages. In addition, Tweed privileges the use of "fluid" metaphors that allow for confluence and interchange among theories and data, and argues that theories only allow for "positioned sightings" of particular expressions of religion and never of "religion in general." All religious traditions, he contends, are the product of a complex and organic system of historically situated influences – e.g. social, cultural, intellectual, institutional – that can never be reduced to a static "essence" that supervenes those influences. The phenomenon of "religion" that is theorized, like the theorist who studies it, is always embedded in a delimited historical setting and can never truly be understood apart from that setting. However one settles on the question of defining religion itself, the key is that those definitional boundaries remain porous to the methods, theories and data of other disciplines. Recognizing this opens up the study of religion to conversations with a wide array of academic disciplines and renders it a rich source of insight for other fields of inquiry. Scholars of religion, Tweed contends, by always locating "the religious" within history bracket the temptation to seek causal explanations beyond empirical data. The study of religion is essentially defined by the de-essentializing forces of history, culture,

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4 Tweed plays on the Greek word *theoria* which bears the literal sense of a "sighting" from somewhere. He contrasts this "view from somewhere" with the Enlightenment epistemic heresy which claims a "view from nowhere." *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 14.
and language. The scholar must “attend to the multiple ways that religious flows have left traces, transforming peoples and places, the social arena and the natural terrain.”

Tweed especially finds that the metaphors of “crossing and dwelling” offer a most compelling vantage on the study of religion. He believes that religion, if to be defined, fundamentally serves as a way of locating oneself in a “social and cultural space” and of constructing a hermeneutical dwelling capable of granting both stability and a trajectory to identity; allowing one to “intensify joy and confront suffering” especially when one’s “terrestrial home” has been uprooted. Religion invokes the imagining of an ordered space or social group, but over time such a space and group is “continually figured and refigured in contact with others,” while its borders shift over time and across cultures. Religion, like culture itself, is fluid and dynamic and can never be seen apart from the flow of history.

Tweed’s approach to the study of religion contributes to our own study of John of the Cross a rich trove of perspectives that can fruitfully engage so much of the diverse scholarship that has been done in the past century on John, and on the broader contexts within which he acted. This study proposes to offer a Tweedian polyvalent analysis of John’s construction of a uniquely “Discalced Carmelite” identity, especially as that is found in his commentarial diptych, the Ascent of Mount Carmel and the Dark Night.

While so many of the scholarly commentaries on these texts limit themselves to intratextual exegesis, or their location in the history of thought, Tweed’s approach compelled me to read John through thicker layers of history, culture, and the like. In addition, so much of John’s conception of Discalced identity is bound up with what Tweed calls “fluid” metaphors. John portrays the pursuit of mystical perfection as a series of

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7 ibid., 54.
8 ibid., 110.
10 Aside from the decision to limit the material treated for the sake of a more detailed focus, there are three primary reasons I chose to treat only of these texts: (1) Because they represent the most complex interweaving of scholastic, monastic and vernacular traditions in John’s corpus; (2) because they treat most directly of the ascetic-apophatic-erotic process of identity construction that leads up to union with God; (3) because, unlike his other two great works, the Canticle and Flame, there is only one version of the Ascent-Night which avoids the problems of tracing the meanings of John’s own multiple redactions. By 1585 John had completed the final versions of the Ascent-Night, while his reworking of the Canticle and Flame continued up to his death in 1591.
“crossings and dwellings” on the way toward the exemplary ideal of achieving union with God on the summit of Mount Carmel. Here Tweed’s idea that religion is fundamentally about home-making, or navigating one’s way toward an “imagined space” in which a dwelling can be constructed, and a new/emerging identity “housed,” sets a useful context for interpreting John’s account of such a sojourn in the Ascent-Night.

John culls from the larger mystical tradition, which this study will examine in some detail, a worldview that engages in what Tweed calls the “kinetics of itinerancy.” For Tweed, this means that religion involves not only the work of mapping time and space in order to meaningfully locate oneself in the flow of history, but religion also offers a normative prescription for how one is to successfully navigate one’s way from one “place” or “time” to another. More specifically, according to Tweed, the kinetic character of religions gives rise to a hermeneutics of “crossing” that is of three types. First, there are spatial-geographical crossings that involve events like migration, pilgrimage or exile, and that require an imaginative interpretation in order to transport one’s *domus* across a shifting landscape. John, and the Carmelites as a whole, identified themselves as exiles in restless search for a home; and John’s texts can be seen as imaginative acts of home-making for exiles incapable of a geographical return. Second, these crossings are embodied, referring to “threshold moments” that transgress and redefine the limits and potential of the body as a place of dwelling by means of bodily rituals, illnesses, or natural disasters. For John, and the larger monastic ascetical tradition, the body plays a crucial, if often ambiguous role in creating and defining the boundaries of identity. The quest to transcend the body’s limits and redefine its meaning in light of a hierarchic anthropology that privileges spirit over matter dominates John’s ascetical theory. Throughout his texts, one is regularly invited to traverse the boundaries of flesh and spirit, and to relocate the centers of identity from the embodied senses to the transcendent spirit. Lastly, Tweed describes the kinetics of “crossing and

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12 ibid., 15-21.
13 ibid., 123.
14 ibid., 137.
dwelling” as “teleographical,” charting a path toward a telos, an “ultimate horizon,” drafting “cartographies of desire” that link the “self of the present” to the “self of a desired future” whose habitation is ever-longed for. In particular, Tweed identifies “transforming teleographies” as those journeys toward imagined horizons that effect a radical change in condition (enlightenment, purification, reform) that advances one toward the desired place of dwelling. Certainly John’s Ascent-Night could be read quite precisely as a “transforming teleography” that narrates the course that must be traversed if erotic desire is to arrive at its ultimate horizon of identity in God on Carmel.

It is the contention of this study that if we, in Tweedian style, situate our sightings of John’s “kinetics of itinerancy” within history, we can begin to pose questions of context that are capable of garnering new insight into why and how John set out to propose the narrative of identity construction that he did. While it is important to view John’s proposals as theological in nature, transacting with a specific cosmology and anthropology, it is equally important to interpret those same proposals as organically linked with the vagaries of his Spanish milieu. John’s ascent of Carmel also traversed Spain’s rugged landscapes.

From Whence?

The remote origins of this study began with an inquiry into a paradox that courses through much of the literature of Christian mysticism, and which has received abundant attention in the past century: the crisis of “the self” that attends the human quest for union with the divine. In the case of John, this crisis combines the ascetic desire to erase the

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17 ibid., 158.
18 The term “mysticism” has a long, complicated history that bears the (especially) nineteenth century modern bias against any dimension of religion that smacks of “irrationality.” In this work, the use of “mysticism” will remain confined to tradition-specific contexts where the term has concrete and identifiable (if varied) meaning. However, most of the tradition I will examine refers to what is classically defined as the “ascetical tradition” within Christianity, that is, the tradition of practices meant to facilitate the soteriological transformation of the Christian in Christ. Teresa Shaw raises this objection to McGinn’s attempt to offer an essentializing definition of mysticism as the consciousness of the presence of God. See her “Practical, Theoretical, and Cultural Tracings in Late Ancient Asceticism,” in Vincent L. Wimbush, and Richard Valantasis, ed., Asceticism (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1995), 75-79.
19 Though the scholarship on the question of “the self” in western thought is massive and far beyond the purview of this study, I will mention the studies that had the most direct impact on my own inquiries. First, Charles Taylor’s grand narrative of the evolution of western notions of selfhood offered me a language and method for joining the history of ideas with social history; and especially for marking out the particular influence of Augustine on western discourse. Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the
self before God – e.g. its desires, its cognition – and the simultaneous erotic desire to valorize the self in an ecstatic quest to unite with the erotic and ineffable God of the Christian tradition. The initial question I posed to John’s texts was: what purpose does this apparently irresolvable paradox serve for John and his monastic reform, and what particular kind of identity is he trying to construct in his texts? While these questions found no dearth of echoes among scholars, I began to search for new, more historically embedded sightings on this question that seemed to have been neglected among sanjuanist scholars.

Other Sightings of Mysticism and Co.


By using the word “ascetic,” I invoke a complex history of ascetical literature and practice as well as a scholarly field of inquiry that offers an analysis of that “ascetical tradition.” While it is beyond the scope of this study to trace these important fields of study, for the sake of clarity in this study I will define asceticism, like Max Weber, as a “methodological procedure for achieving religious salvation.” Like Gavin Flood, I will also use “ascetical” to refer to the strategies by which the ascetic-practitioner deconstructs and reconstructs his or her identity. Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwyn Hyman, 1930), 132.

Some examples of studies that treat of John’s paradoxes of identity include: Jacques Maritain’s attempt to reconcile the non-Thomist elements of John’s paradoxes, Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge, Tr. by Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Jean Baruzi’s groundbreaking study of the problem of the category of “experience” in constructing identity in John, Saint Jean de la Croix et le Problème de l’Expérience Mystique (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1924); André Bord’s detailed work on John’s conception of memory and identity, Mémoire et espérance chez Jean de la Croix, Paris, Beauchesne Éditeur (coll. Bibliothèque de spiritualité, 8), 1971; José Nieto’s work on John’s mystical paradoxes as social critiques of Spain’s structure of power, Mystic, Rebel, Saint: A Study of St. John of the Cross, (Genève: Droz, 1979); or Robert Ellis’ study of the similarities between John’s paradoxes and the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre, San Juan De La Cruz: Mysticism and Sartrean Existentialism. Medieval and early modern mysticism, vol. 1. (New York: P. Lang, 1992).

While massive numbers of studies on John have been produced in the twentieth century in Spanish, English, German and French, relatively little work has been done on John’s ascetical-mystical anthropology in relation to his historical setting. For a recent bibliography of sanjuanist scholarship, see for example Diego M. Sánchez, Bibliografía sistemática de San Juan de la Cruz (Madrid: Edit. de Espiritualidad, 2000).
Bernard McGinn, the author of a massive opus on the history of mysticism in the Christian tradition, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, describes a perspectival shift in the study of mysticism that gradually occurred between 1900 and 1975. That shift involved a change in emphasis from the pursuit for an “essential core” in the comparative study of mysticism, be that metaphysical or philological, to a focus on the historically embedded and particular nature of all mystical traditions. Steven Katz played a particularly important part in decentering the role of “essentializing” in the study of mysticism by emphasizing the insuperable function of language as a historical and cultural artifact from which mystical discourse cannot be extricated. In light of this critique, even the work of McGinn, whose study makes an enormous contribution toward realizing the demands of Katz’s critique, remains bound to a definition of history as a history of thought, or of textually transmitted ideas. In other words, although McGinn’s study opens up in stunning detail each thinker’s place within the textual tradition that McGinn defines as “mystical,” and offers a compelling exegesis of texts, he largely leaves aside the specific questions of social, cultural, and historical context that (in)form the authors of those texts. Michael Sells charges McGinn with investing the history of ideas with theological valuation judgments, thus threatening to make the history of mysticism into a theology of mysticism with only tenuous ties to its historical moorings. Sells avers that McGinn would do well to employ a postmodern deconstructionist methodology to problematize his tendency to evaluate the mystical

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26 But see McGinn’s response to such a critique in his review of Denys Turner’s *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (Apr., 1997), 309-311. Turner’s critique is that McGinn’s definition of mysticism as “consciousness of the presence of God” de-historicizes mystical texts and makes them beholden to modern conceptions of the self. McGinn responds that his definition functions in a descriptive and not a normative fashion. But neither Turner nor McGinn engage in thick accounts of historical context in their work of interpreting texts, and so are both susceptible of the de-historicizing charge.
27 It may be somewhat unfair to say that McGinn minimizes historical context, so it might be more fair to say that he tends to leave undeveloped the references to historical, social, cultural context and simply acknowledge that context without integrating it into his synthesis of mystical texts.
tradition from the vantage of a trans-historical meta-narrative of “orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy,” and to allow the exigencies of historical context to inform his evaluations of mystical traditions.28

On a related front, Catherine Mooney accuses Denys Turner of treating the development of apophatic and erotic traditions as an insular textual-history that appears to bear its own developmental logic apart from the concrete questions of historical audience, political intention, or gender-specific concerns. For example, Mooney says, Turner’s Meister Eckhart knows little of the interests and concerns of the monastic, female audience of his German sermons, or the Beguines of medieval Germany and the Netherlands.29 Gillian Ahlgren wonders why Edward Howells’ exceptional comparative interpretation of Teresa and John’s texts failed to marshal no more than nine pages of (un-integrated) commentary on the historical setting that helped shape those similarities and differences.30 Janet Ruffing contends that much of the literature on mysticism mostly ignores the questions of its capacity for social impact, preferring to define mysticism, or asceticism, in terms of the individual; or of the immediate concerns of the ascetic community to which an author belonged. She adjures that mysticism not only implies social transformation, but is itself socially constructed and so requires an equally social analysis.31 Caroline Walker Bynum has transformed ideologically charged discussions of gender in the middle ages with her inductive approach to history and text, and has rendered the medieval conceptions of women, the body, and theology less opaque by privileging historical context and especially the more marginal elements of that context.32

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historical inquiry into gender by asking more probing questions about veracity of texts transcribed or translated by men. Both question whether or not such second-hand accounts can speak faithfully for medieval women.\textsuperscript{33} Into the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, this historical and contextual trajectory in the study of mysticism would dominate more and more of the scholarship, especially where questions of gender are at issue.

It is through the filter of this paradigm-shift in the scholarship on mysticism that my own reading of John’s texts began to take shape, and the problem of John’s “paradox of identity” began to engage the other problems that shaped John’s social milieu. The great challenge of attempting such an engagement was that so much of the scholarship done on John, with notable exceptions,\textsuperscript{34} treated John’s texts in a fashion similar to that described by Carmelite sanjuanist scholar Kieran Kavanaugh: “If Teresa in her writings is so noticeably part of her culture and the problems and tensions of her times, St. John of the Cross in his writings seems almost abstracted from them, as though they could have been written in any age.”\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, it is Teresian scholarship that has set the mark for interpreting John’s texts within the intricate settings of sixteenth century Spanish religious movements, intellectual currents, ecclesio-political machinations, and the like. An immense amount of literature has been produced on Teresa, as well as on many of the


\textsuperscript{34} I think here of the pioneering, but dated, work of the magisterial work of Crisógono de Jesús Sacramento\textit{ – San Juan de la Cruz, Su Obra Científica y Su Obra Literaria}. 2 vols (Madrid & Avila: Sigirano Diaz, 1929). More recently, José Nieto’s attempted to read John’s texts as witnesses to his social critique of Spanish, though largely discounted for its vague thesis that John was passive-aggressive, introduced more socio-historical approaches to his writings. José C. Nieto, \textit{Místico, poeta, rebelde, santo: en torno a San Juan de la Cruz}. Sección de Lengua y estudios literarios (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982).

\textsuperscript{35} Kieran Kavanaugh, “Spanish Sixteenth Century: Carmel and Surrounding Movements,” in \textit{Christian Spirituality III: Post-Reformation and Modern}, World Spirituality Series, vol. 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 80. In private correspondence, Alison Weber said to me that while much has been done on Teresa to engage context, very little has been done on John as John has largely been of interest only as (a) a sixteenth century \textit{lira} poet or (b) as an apophatic mystic whose critique of language melds effectively with certain modern and postmodern concerns.
female beatas\textsuperscript{36} whose voices have been largely ignored in histories of Spain’s mystical tradition.\textsuperscript{37} Thanks especially to the groundbreaking work of scholars like Jodi Bilinkoff, Alison Weber, and Gillian Ahlgren,\textsuperscript{38} Teresian studies thickened the contextual nature of the interpretation of Teresa’s unique place in Spanish literature and mysticism. Even scholars of the Carmelite reform, so long plagued by the internecine battles between the Calced and Discalced, were influenced by the new studies on Teresa and began to produce a significant body of academic scholarship.\textsuperscript{39} Teresa was no longer seen as just a charismatic or supernatural anomaly whose mystical experiences overturned social boundaries, but rather she was seen as part of a much larger, complex array of movements in Spain that allowed women, if only briefly, a window through which they could make their voices heard with some degree of public authority.\textsuperscript{40} Much of the Teresian scholarship has centered around issues of gender, but interestingly very little has been said in that literature about John’s relationship with Teresa; or about his own view regarding gender.\textsuperscript{41} In fact, the majority of studies comparing John and Teresa do so

\textsuperscript{36} “Beata” refers to pious laywomen in Spain renowned for their asceticism, charity to the poor or mystical valor. They are the inheritors of the medieval Beguines of northern Europe.

\textsuperscript{37} For instance, E. Allison Peers’ study of Spanish mysticism contained no extended treatment of these beatas. See for example his \textit{Studies of the Spanish Mystics} (London: Sheldon Press, 1927).


\textsuperscript{40} An example of reading Teresa theologically as a miracle of nature is the excellent and prodigious English historical scholar of sixteenth Spanish mysticism, Allison Peers. See, for example, his Allison E. Peers, \textit{Saint Teresa of Jesus, And Other Essays and Addresses} (London: Faber and Faber, 1953). He also tended to view John in a similar way, though he ceded to John more of the “gifts of nature” because he was a university trained male cleric. See, for example, \textit{St. John of the Cross, And Other Lectures and Addresses, 1920-1945}. Biography index reprint series (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970).

\textsuperscript{41} In personal correspondence, Alison Weber agreed with my finding that little to nothing has been done on John’s view of gender; especially the lacuna in studies of John’s anomalous omission of gender-specific comments on asceticism or discernment that are ubiquitous in medieval ascetical literature. And that includes Teresa herself, whose constant references to gender difference Weber made much of in her \textit{Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity} (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990). Though I will not pursue this lacuna in depth, I plan to extend this interest into the future.
either by comparing their conceptions of mysticism expressed in their respective texts,\textsuperscript{42} or by a comparative analysis of their literary styles.\textsuperscript{43}

Engaging the scholarship that has been done on the life and writings of Teresa of Avila, the Carmelites, and on religious movements in Spain opened out this study of identity construction within John’s texts into the field of historiography, gender and cultural studies. What became apparent is that so much of the work done on John’s use of the apophatic and erotic traditions has regarded this dimension of his work apart from the contexts within which John worked, as if all he knew were texts. For example, most of the studies that interpret John within the broader apophatic traditions of the west concern themselves with textual-conceptual histories,\textsuperscript{44} or with the implications of John’s apophaticism within broader late-medieval concerns in scholastic epistemology or conceptions of language,\textsuperscript{45} or with the valence apophaticism has for deconstructing modern notions of mystical experience/consciousness.\textsuperscript{46} Few of these studies actually engage these texts with the historical environment in which John proposed his radical apophasis, and more specifically how John’s unique apophaticism functioned to construct or critique conceptions of Discalced Carmelite identity.\textsuperscript{47} Studies that have analyzed John’s eroticism also suffer from a similar disjunction of thought and context. Either


\textsuperscript{43} For example, Lopez Baralt, \textit{Simbologia Mistica Musulmana en san Juan de la Cruz y en Santa Teresa de Jesus}. Nueva Revista de Filologia Hispanica (Mexico City D.F., Mexico) 30, no. 1 (1981): 21-91; Elizabeth Teresa Howe, \textit{Mystical Imagery: Santa Teresa de Jesus and San Juan de la Cruz}, (Peter Lang New York 1988).


\textsuperscript{47} Kees Waaijman represents a recent attempt to link the history of Carmelite mysticism with the roots of John’s apophasism. \textit{The Mystical Space of Carmel: A Commentary on the Carmelite Rule}, (trans.) John Friend, The Fiery Arrow Collection, (Leuvun: Peeters, 1999).
they search for literary and exegetical precedents for John’s poetry or commentaries, or they read his eroticism as yet another sample of the influence of neo-platonism on medieval Christianity. Yet again, other studies interpret sanjuanist erotics in light of contemporary conceptions of eroticism that have little or no relation to John’s own erotic milieu. Very few studies have lingered over the specific role the erotic tradition played in allowing John to construct and critique conceptions of Discalced Carmelite identity.

In contrast, many Teresian scholars have speculated as to how Teresa’s own use of apophatic and erotic traditions served very immediate social, cultural, and gendered interests. Barbara Mujica argued, for example, that Teresa’s employment of apophatic language allowed her to critique the language of the scholastic clerical elite and valorize an unmediated illumination that circumvented (especially for beatas) the demand that religious authority be based on a formal education open to men alone. Alison Weber describes Teresa’s calculated use of erotic exegesis as a way to subvert a clerical culture that excludes women from interpreting Scripture, and open the vista of “the bride” of the Song of Songs to her nuns as a way to instantiate and exegete themselves within the Biblical text. Gillian Ahlgren interprets the significance of the evolution of Teresa’s


49 For example, Eugene A. Maio, *St. John of the Cross: the Imagery of Eros* (Madrid: Playor, 1973);


51 Sanjuanist scholar Keith Egan, in an unpublished essay, “The Éros of the ‘Dark Night’,” acknowledges that little has been done to link John’s eroticism to his specific audience in the Discalced reform; or even to Teresa’s eroticism; but even there Egan is interested in the question of the “fittingness of Bridal Mysticism in a contemporary sex-soaked culture.”


mystical theology inasmuch as it reveals her careful negotiation of the volatile space that beatas occupied in mid-late sixteenth century Spain. Teresa’s defends her erotic quest for union with God by skillfully employing influential collaborators, scholastic terminology, and rhetorical humility.\textsuperscript{54} And Jodi Bilinkoff offers a narrative of Avila’s social and economic history as a vital context within which Teresa’s success in combining mysticism and institutional reform can be understood more clearly.\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{John of Spain}

This study attempts to incorporate this broad reach of scholarship into its “sightings” in order to allow for a more complex reading of John’s conception of identity within the Discalced reform. As we have alluded to already, many excellent studies have been done on John’s texts, and recent scholarship especially has attempted to get at a more accurate picture of John’s place in the history of western thought. What has been lacking is a more robust engagement \textit{between} studies of John’s thought and those that treat the historical contexts in which he operated.\textsuperscript{56} Of particular interest in the present study is the way John employs scholastic, monastic, apophatic and erotic traditions to give shape to a Discalced Carmelite identity that, he believes, faithfully interprets Teresa’s original vision. Sixteenth century Spain, according to Alasdair Hamilton, was an “extraordinary experiment” in new religious ideas of reform that reflected the concerns of early modern Europe: the problem of the individual, of institutions, of knowledge, and of authority.\textsuperscript{57} Though sixteenth century Europeans very often conceived of progress as a return to ancient and original forms, much of what was claimed as “ancient” was deeply informed by the specific concerns of early modern society.\textsuperscript{58} John and Teresa both clearly saw themselves as traditional reformers, desiring only to return to the most primitive forms of Carmelite identity and insure its perpetual

\textsuperscript{56} Crisófono de Jesús Sacramento’s work, mentioned above, was an early and not much imitated example of blending historical research and sanjuanist thought.
\textsuperscript{58} Paul Gillen and Devleena Ghosh describe modernity as a radical shift in conceptions of national identity, race, gender, conscience, culture and time deeply marked by the colonial project. \textit{Colonialism & Modernity} (Sydney, NSW, Australia: UNSW press, 2007), 92-216. John, like so many sixteenth century thinkers, bore marks of both the medieval and the modern.
instantiation within the Discalced reformation. But in fact Teresa and John’s conception of return had been deeply formed by the rapidly evolving world of sixteenth century Spain, and the Calced Carmelite’s violent reaction to their “innovations” was a telling sign of how novel their “return” was perceived to be.

As Luis Bezares forcefully demonstrates, John’s writings betray all of the creative diversity and interest that characterized the university of Salamanca of the mid to late sixteenth century, where John received three years of education in philosophy, Scripture, and theology. Salamanca, like much of Spain, was on the threshold of change in the 1560s as the forces of unity flowing from the monarchy were gradually working to eliminate all elements of diversity that were perceived as threats to Spain’s volatile identity as a unified nation-state and world empire. The Inquisition, as the central machinery of the church-state union, gradually had shifted its sights from the late fifteenth century problem of the Jews and Muslims to the problem of Christian “heretics” – Luteranos, alumbrados – whose ideas and practices linked them to “foreigners.” A “crisis of certitude,” as Don Cupitt calls it, had gripped Europe since the breakdown of medieval unity in the fourteenth century and was, in the sixteenth century, coming to a crescendo. In Spain that quest for certitude in national identity would find particular focus in the Inquisition’s ferocious campaign against Jews, Muslims and the alumbrados, among others, but it would also play a powerful role in sparking the “mystical reformation” so beloved by Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros. As we will argue in this study, Cisneros sought to revive and unify Spain’s Christian core by promoting a return

59 Though it must be said that John seems to have had some idea that what he about in the Ascent-Night was in some way novel. In the Night he writes, “we will pass on to discuss more at length the spiritual night, for hardly anything has been said of it in sermons or in writing; and even the experience of it is rare” (N1 8.2).

60 In much of the historical literature on the Discalced reform, the Calced response is described in moral categories (e.g. prideful, corrupt, unwilling to reform) that lack a sense of the novelty of the cultural worldview Teresa and John had introduced into the order. In fact, the Calced targeting of John in his arrest, imprisonment and torture points to their perception of John’s crucial role in promoting Teresa’s “novel” vision.


to original sources of Christianity, as well as a movement of beatas whose immediate, oft apocalyptic experience of the divine would proffer a greater confidence in Christian Spain’s ability to unite the world.\textsuperscript{64} The quest for ecclesiastically sanctioned orthodoxy \textit{and} for access to an immediate illumination (\textit{lumbra}) from God apart from the structures of ecclesiastical authority created a powerful tension that definitively marked the works of John and Teresa.\textsuperscript{65} But by the last decade of the sixteenth century, according to Ahlgren, the institutional guardians of orthodoxy had, for the most part, crushed the mystical reformation and its quest for unmediated access to certitude; and in its train undermined the socio-cultural prominence of the beatas. In its place were inserted the certitudes of ecclesiastical institution, scholastic reason, national monarchy, and clerical authority.\textsuperscript{66}

In light of these considerations of Spain’s evolving identity, I would like to suggest that we can fruitfully see Teresa and John as intentionally liminal figures, and read their respective constructions of identity as mimetic, reflecting their social, religious, and political environment.\textsuperscript{67} In particular, we note that John’s itinerary of mystical transformation includes in stunningly vivid descriptive detail the experiences that accompany a “crisis of identity.” This crisis is captured by John in his all-pervasive metaphor of the “night,” and certainly mirrors the volatile character of Spain as a world-in-transition. In early and mid sixteenth century Spain, as Jodi Bilinkoff describes convincingly, the late medieval ideals that once defined one’s standing in the social

\textsuperscript{64} Cisneros reforms were part of the late medieval obsession with apocalyptic speculations in regard to Europe’s role in the unification of humanity around a final emperor and an angelic pope. See for example Bernard McGinn, \textit{Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages}. Records of civilization, sources and studies, no. 96 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 277-83.

\textsuperscript{65} The tensions between what Andrew Louth calls “logos” and “charismata,” between reason and mystical illumination, certainly mark Teresa and John’s texts. As we will see, this tension will find vernacular expression in Spain in the dispute between the Franciscan-aligned \textit{espirituales} and the Dominican-aligned \textit{letrados}. Andrew Louth, “Eros and Mysticism: Early Christian Interpretation of the Song of Songs” in J. Ryce-Menuhin ed., \textit{Jung and the Monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity and Islam} (London, 1994), 241-3.


\textsuperscript{67} I first thought of Teresa and John as “liminal” after reading Ana Barro’s fascinating study of John’s poetry. Barro cogently argues this point, using Victor Turner’s notion of liminality. She contends that the enthusiasm with which the Church assimilated these two figures witnesses to the threat their liminal status represented. Ana Barro, “Language and Mysticism in the ‘Spiritual Canticle’ by St John of the Cross,” in Philip Leonard, ed., \textit{Trajectories of Mysticism in Theory and Literature}. Cross-currents in religion and culture (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 3-24.
hierarchies were rapidly eroding and new models were taking their place. Not only was newly-united Spain’s quest for a national identity that transcended local difference being fully prosecuted by the monarchy, but within Spain monastic and mendicant communities were also looking for ways to adapt to the new demands imposed by change. The Jesuits, founded by Spaniard Ignatius of Loyola, had emerged in the early to mid century as a remarkable adaptation and synthesis of Spanish reform movements. The Franciscans and Dominicans dominated the Spanish religious landscape, though their spheres of influence would grow more distinct and more hostile toward one another as the century progressed. The Franciscans (and Jesuits) came to dominate the mass-movement of mystical reform – the recogimiento or “recollection” movement – that would come to be identified with the controversial and charismatic movement of pious women known as beatas. The Dominicans were largely identified with the monarchical and institutional reforms aligned with the Inquisition, and with the imposition of doctrinal orthodoxy and orthopraxy. While both of these mendicant orders would variously influence the Teresian Carmelite reform, and while the tensions between their respective approaches to reform would imprint themselves in Teresa’s and John’s works, it was the Franciscans whose influence would be decisive in the formation of the Discalced reform as an essentially interiorized, mystical reformation.

*John of Carmel*

John saw himself as first and foremost a Carmelite friar, and his writings betray a fundamental interest in forming a specifically Carmelite identity in the men and women

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70 Ignatius combined elements of devotio moderna, the recogitos, Juan de Avila’s educational and clerical reforms, and the military spirit of the reconquista in his Society of Jesus. Interestingly, he fled Spain early in his reforming career because the Inquisition suspected him of being an alumbrado. See Andrew Keitt’s excellent study of alumbrados and new orders in Spain, *Inventing the Sacred: Imposture, Inquisition, and the Boundaries of the Supernatural in Golden Age Spain* (Brill, 2005); and his “Religious Enthusiasm, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Disenchantment of the World,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Apr., 2004), 231-250.
in his order. In this sense, one cannot interpret John without a clear sense of how he might have perceived that identity within the larger context of Carmelite history. As was mentioned, Carmelite history has experienced a recent surge in scholarly interest, and a number of newer studies have focused interest on the Carmelite conception of its history and origins. The Carmelites originated in Palestine in the late twelfth century during the time of the Latin Kingdom crusader states as a loose association of hermits living on the slopes of Mount Carmel along the Mediterranean Sea. In the early to mid thirteenth century, as the Latin Kingdom began to fall under military pressure from the Turks, the hermits fled into exile to Europe. They quickly faced extinction in Europe’s vastly different social and economic climate, and were forced to radically adapt their eremitical rule of life and assume a more mendicant form of religious life. This profound change introduced the Carmelites into what Jane Ackerman calls a “crisis of identity,” leaving them, Janus-like, looking back to Carmel and forward to their mendicant future in Europe.

Andrew Jotischky further argues that a great majority of all reform movements within the Carmelite order from the late thirteenth to the sixteenth century sought to resolve the tensions of this crisis either by further distancing themselves from the Palestinian memory, or by seeking to recover that memory. Ackerman shows evidence of the attempt by medieval Carmelites to retain both identities by separating the mythical narrative of their eremitical history from the ecclesiastical legislation that made them into mendicants. Peter-Thomas Rohrbach says that the Carmelite crisis was further

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72 Even his “lay” addresses, like Ana de Peñalosa, seem to have been understood as “third order” Discalced Carmelites whose identity was to be shaped by the unique form of Carmelite origins. Arguments regarding John’s universal intent in writing based on references to these “lay” recipients are, for this reason, unconvincing. Carmelite authors often argue as much in hopes of rendering John useful to an audience outside or Carmel.


exacerbated by the introduction in the mid-fifteenth century of the quasi-monastic beguines (beatas) into the order in Italy and Spain. In fact, Teresa and John would both find themselves mired in these historically determined, unresolved “crises of identity” in Avila’s Carmelite convent, and in Salamanca’s Carmelite College of San Andrés. It was within these broader contexts that both John and Teresa would seek an identity capable of resolving the historical tensions. By calling for a mystical reformation, they proposed to return Carmelites to Palestine by a journey “within,” safe from the uncertainly and irreconcilable differences that, like Spain’s rugged mountains, prevented the achievement of the unity longed for by Christian narrative. Indeed, like imperial Spain itself, John was convinced that the slopes of Palestinian Carmel offered a uniquely sure footing for the Discalced in search of a unified sense of self.77

John of St. Francis

John’s Ascent-Night is, in Tweed’s language, a “transformative itinerary” written to Discalced friars and nuns to “return” to Carmel and ascend its heights to reclaim, as an act of reform, their primitive identity. In drafting this itinerary, John drew especially on the western Augustinian anthropological narrative of the interiorized ascent to God to recast this reforming call to return as a call to “go within.”78 Additionally, he infused that Augustinian anthropology with a Dionysian apophatic and erotic character that allowed him to both critique and enhance elements of the “mitigated” Carmelite tradition that he believed were faithful expressions of Teresa’s own vision of a reformed Discalced identity. Into this synthesis, John also incorporated elements of the Franciscan recogimiento79 movement that had so heavily influenced Cardinal Cisneros’ “mystical

76 Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, Journey to Carith: The Sources and Story of the Discalced Carmelites, (Doubleday & Co., 1966), 125-35. Rohrbach notes that these “second order” Carmelite nuns were neither cenobites nor beguines, but an undefined hybrid. This ambiguity left its mark on John and Teresa.

77 I allude here to the very recent work of Adam Beaver, whose dissertation I will make reference to again in the final chapter of this study. He shows how intimately tied Spain and Palestine were in the late sixteenth century Spanish imagination. Though I came upon his work only at the very end of mine, I hope to further explore the implications of this in future work on Carmelites in Spain. Adam G. Beaver (2008) A Holy Land for the Catholic monarchy: Palestine in the making of modern Spain, 1469-1598. Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University.

78 Elizabeth Wilhelmsen, Cognition and Communication in John of the Cross (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1985), 12-15.

79 “Recogimiento,” or “recollection” refers to the practice of prayer that required a “withdrawal” into oneself by quieting the senses and stripping the mind of images. The Franciscans placed this practice at the center of a reform movement meant to encourage personal piety, devotion and moral reform.
reformation,” and the beata culture that flourished under Cisneros’ protection. The recogimiento movement afforded Teresa, who counted herself among the beatas, a language and praxis for constructing a more interiorized sense of selfhood. It initiated her into what would become the guiding star of her reform: the attraction of the more primitive and eremitical Carmelite model of monasticism. The newly defined “sense of self” that arose from her performative reading of recogimiento literature allowed her to begin to sharply distinguish herself from the social-ascetical forms of monasticism that characterized life at the convent of Éncarnacion in Avila.

Whether or not John considered himself a practitioner of recogimiento before his encounter with Teresa, it is clear that he entirely supported Teresa’s placement of it at the center of the reformed Carmelite identity. It provided John with a specific interpretation of the interiorized Augustinian anthropology he was so at home with, as well as a language that could effectively engage the native “mystical reformation” that flourished, especially among the conversos like Teresa who were in search of new ways for defining religious identity in an increasingly Catholicized Spain. The recogimiento movement, dominated by literary works penned by Franciscan authors like Francisco de Osuna...

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80 Though this term is not used in any of the scholarly literature to describe Cisneros’ reforms, it seems to capture well much of what is implied by the distinctiveness of his emphasis on literary exemplars of female “mystical” piety like Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Siena and Brigit of Sweden whom he selected for translation into Castilian and publication throughout Spain. Erika Rummel, Jimenez de Cisneros: On the Threshold of Spain’s Golden Age. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 12-29.

81 Teresa often referred to the practitioners of recogimiento as the espirituales. Ronald Surtz offers a fascinating look at the “writing” beatas who paved the way for, and inspired Teresa’s work. See his Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain: The Mothers of Saint Teresa of Avila. Middle Ages series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995). Mari Díaz, famous beata of Avila who was part of Teresa’s early “consultation group” in conceiving the Discalced reform, is one of the most prominent examples of the direct influence beatas exercised on Teresa.


84 Conversos, those Jews who converted to Christianity especially under the duress of the 1492 expulsion, were excluded from many of the advantages of public life available to Old Christians. The “mystical reformation” and its attendant recogimiento movement had opened new venues for conversos to enter into public life in the church precisely because it sidestepped the usual requirements based on limpieza de sangre, purity of blood. See Alastair Hamilton, Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-Century Spain: The Alumbrados (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 12-23.
Spiritual Alphabet) and Bernadino de Laredo (Ascent of Mount Zion), also bore elements of another tradition dear to John’s theology: Dionysian apophaticism and eroticism. The recogimiento mystics heavily emphasized both the erotic desire for interiorized union with God through love and the loss of all images and concepts in the higher stages of prayer. The first (erotic) emphasis on union-through-love allowed the Franciscans to democratize their mysticism as an essentially affective and not cognitive reality, and their second (apophatic) emphasis on the critique of thoughts and images allowed them to avoid the growing attacks on the visionary culture of the alumbardos. Bonaventure had originally achieved this synthesis of Augustine and Dionysius, and its influence on Franciscan reform movements would remain powerful. John, whose own thought possesses many striking resemblances to that of Bonaventure, further augmented or reinterpreted this Franciscan tradition in light of Teresa and the reform she had birthed. In fact, I suggest in my study that Teresa and John “Franciscanized” the Carmelite tradition.

While John and Teresa both saw themselves squarely in the tradition of recogimiento, it is also clear that both of them recognized the precarious place it occupied in late sixteenth century Spain. Under the weight of the Inquisition’s increased hostility toward the movement, especially as it came to be identified by the Inquisition with the condemned alumbardos, John’s appropriation of recogimiento was intensely cautious. Though he embraced Teresa’s placement of this movement at the center of Discalced identity, I suggest in my study that like his Franciscan predecessors, John’s extreme apophaticism is intimately linked with the precarious place alumbardo-recogimiento mysticism held in mid to late century Spain. John’s radical emphasis on apophasis served not only to interpret the nature of the painful purgative “nights” that contemplatives were expected to endure as they approached union with God, or insure

87 Timothy A. Mahoney offers a powerful argument regarding Bonaventure’s influence, but as with so much sanjuanist scholarship, he fails to link the influence of “recogimiento” Franciscans in Spain with John and Teresa’s interest in Bonaventure. “Understanding the Christian Apophaticism of St. John of the Cross,” Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture - Volume 7, Number 4, (Fall 2004) 80-91
that the Discalced call to interior poverty was thoroughly applied to the depths of the spirit, but it also provided a way to excise from the essential definition of Discalced identity the phenomenal, visionary character the *alumbrados* post-1558 had given it. In many ways, this feature distinguished John from the more-visionary Teresa, and from so much of the female mystical tradition’s emphasis on visionary mysticism. This, I suggest, demonstrates his intense concern that the fledgling order faced the threat of certain extinction by the Inquisition if this element of the Teresian Discalced identity were to be perceived as *central* to the broader Discalced project. But unlike the Discalced provincial of the 1580s-90s, Nicolas Doria, who substituted a more legalistic asceticism in place of mysticism, John was passionately committed to retaining Teresian *recogimiento* mysticism at the core of the Carmelite reform. Here John would have seen himself as fulfilling a specifically gendered role that reflected Teresa’s implicit reason for choosing him: to provide a theological apologia for her Discalced reform, to insure not only its “Teresian” character, but its very existence as an institutionally viable movement in a rapidly changing post-Tridentine world.

*John the Erotic*

John’s employment of the neo-platonic and exegetical erotic tradition presented something analogous to his use of the apophatic tradition: he saw in it an effective resource for critically interpreting the Teresian ideal of seeking union with God through love, especially as that ideal pertained to the nuns of the reform. The exegetical tradition of commentaries on the Song of Songs had, especially since the time of Bernard of Clairvaux, saturated the non-mendicant monastic world. I suggest in this study that John’s employment of this well-worn tradition served to extend Teresa’s own nuptial-
erotic conception of identity among the nuns, and that because he was an ordained and educated cleric his claim to an authoritative interpretation was within the bounds of orthopraxy. As I also argue, John’s paraphrasing interpolation of the Song in his poems opened for him a loophole in the Inquisition’s absolute prohibition of vernacular translations of the Song after 1559.  

John also had recourse to a neo-platonic ontological eroticism that came especially from Pseudo-Dionysius’ influence on the medieval tradition. Though it is clear that John’s preference for this tradition serves to explicate the Discalced ideal of the quest for union with God, I also suggest that it exercised other functions for John. As John O’Malley demonstrated in his work on the sixteenth century Augustinian reformer Giles of Viterbo, neo-platonic ontology shaped fundamental conceptions of individual and corporate identity, history and reform throughout the European medieval era. For John, as for Teresa and Giles, and countless other sixteenth century European reformers, the only path to true and lasting reform was to return to the original, deiform model of one’s religious community. Spain defined itself in a similar way, looking “back” to the Roman Empire, to the “Christianized” kingdom of the Visigoths, to Biblical Palestine for its own typologies to craft an identity that claims its roots in mythic deiformity. And John clearly shared the traditional Carmelite identification with its “originary” historical, eremitical, Palestinian roots, construed in terms of complex biblical typologies. As Denys Turner contends, the fundamental dynamic of neo-platonic eros – exitus et reditus, ecstatic procession and return – construes all human desire as erotic when it reflects, as an erotic “echo,” this movement and seeks primal unity in the return to its source. Jean Leclercq further demonstrates that, in the west, where this Dionysian tradition mingled

with the Song commentary and courtly love traditions – especially as mediated through Bernard of Clairvaux – a uniquely celibate, monastic interpretation of identity developed. He argues that this monastic interpretation produced a distinctive exegetical, ascetical, and liturgical praxis that served to cultivate individual and corporate identities defined by erotic longing for the next world.\(^8\) Turner also argues that the Augustinian “turn to the interior” shaped that erotic quest not into an ascent through ontic, ecclesial, or sacramental hierarchies, as in Pseudo-Dionysius, but rather into a highly individualized and interiorized journey within. John would thoroughly appropriate this eroticized Augustinian “inward turn,” though in a manner tailored to the demands of his immediate contexts.

**John the Eremite**

C.H. Lawrence contends that between the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries medieval fascination with eremeticism grew, in part, out of a mixture of a new cosmopolitan individualism, a *ressourcement* of eastern sources of monastic life that entered Europe through the exploits of the crusaders, and a resurgence of interest in Augustinian conceptions of the self.\(^9\) Jordan Aumann argues further that a late medieval “nostalgia” for the early church and early forms of anchoritic monasticism, as primal exemplars of reform, led to a significant rise in the number of monastic and mendicant reforms admitting various forms of eremitical life into their traditions.\(^10\) In fact, Martin Luther himself began his reforming work from within a recently formed branch of Augustinian Hermits.\(^11\) The Carmelites were, no doubt, particularly susceptible to this nostalgia as their own conflicted past involved titanic struggles to insert a seemingly irretrievable eremitical past into their mendicant (for the friars) and cenobitic (for the nuns) present.

Like the Franciscan reformers of the *recogimiento*, who saw in this radically interiorized mysticism a way to retrieve the “original” model of poverty found in Francis

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– a pursuit that had for so long vexed the Franciscan order – Teresa and John found in *recogimiento* a way to retrieve their eremitical identity rooted on the slopes of Carmel. In particular, I suggest that John’s Dionysian augmentation of the dynamism of *eros* within *recogimiento* transformed “the journey within” into a “return from exile” to the interiorized mountain of Carmel. I suggest also that for John the Discalced Carmelite friars’ retention of a mendicant identity, and the nuns’ cenobitic identity, possessed an inherent ambiguity that left John conflicted in his own work. It is this ambiguity, I argue, that informs much of the existential anxiety of the passive “nights” – an anxiety that John asserts is the centerpiece of his own works (A1 1.1). For John, this tension between eremite and mendicant-cenobite leaves even the “perfected” Discalced – united to God – with the irresolvable paradox of the “double self” that defines John’s anthropology.  

He is able to proffer only a restless resolve of the Carmelite identity crisis, and I suggest that the restlessness of his version of the Teresian reform insured the marginalization of John’s writings for centuries within his own order, and the Catholic world.

**Contributions of this study**

In this study, I argue that John’s apophatic and erotic anthropology is deeply shaped by the demands of the Teresian reform, which in turn is shaped by the historical exigencies of sixteenth century Spain’s cultural, political, and religious environment. While this assertion may appear to be obvious, I propose that my thesis addresses a lacuna in the scholarly literature on John of the Cross by interpreting John’s ascetical and mystical texts – especially the *Ascent-Night* – as responses to, and interpretations of that environment. In other words, much of the excellent scholarly work about, for example, the function of scholastic, ascetic, apophatic or erotic traditions in John’s texts fails to seriously engage the historically embedded character of those texts and to understand John as involved in a critical conversation with the world around him.

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More specifically, most of the scholarly treatments of John’s texts effectively ignore the *sitz im leben* of the Discalced Carmelite audience to whom John expressly addresses the *Ascent-Night*, tending to treat his thought as abstracted from history, or only setting him within a broader stream of related textual-thought traditions. This study attempts to engage more fully the tensions and emphases of John’s written texts with the broader tensions and emphases of the world in which John acted – the world of the Teresian reform, of intellectual histories, of Spanish religious movements, etc. I especially found the recent work of Edward Howells\(^\text{104}\) and Denys Turner\(^\text{105}\) on John’s mystical anthropology and epistemology, especially as it relates to apophatic and erotic traditions, to be useful partners in the conversations between text and context. Gillian Ahlgren, in her review of Howells’ study of Teresa and John’s conception of selfhood, offered an aside comment that revolutionized my own approach early on in my research. She marveled that Howells, though he made some good references to relevant historical contexts, did little to integrate those references, or exploit their relevance to his project of comparing the conceptions of “mystical selfhood in John and Teresa.”\(^\text{106}\) Like Ahlgren, I found that embedding John’s texts deeply within those polyvalent contexts brilliantly illumined the very points Turner and Howells sought to make in showing John’s traditional and non-traditional contributions to the tradition. John’s uniqueness within both mystical and ascetical traditions breathes an air of creativity that draws novel comminglings from the highly charged cultural atmosphere of Spain. He helped to construct an exemplary Discalced identity by the use and critique of an evolving, volatile, and complex Spain, and by attempting to interpret Teresa’s own evolving, volatile, and complex incarnation of Carmel.

This study contributes to the growing body of historiographical works on the mystical and ascetical traditions in Christianity. Its method represents a “history of

\(^{104}\) Edward Howells’ *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood*, (New York: Crossroad, 2002).


thought” approach found among scholars like Bernard McGinn, Michael Sells, Denys Turner, and Jean Leclercq, emphasizing not only philological or conceptual congruity and divergence among authors, but also meta-themes like gender, ethnicity, and culture. While these authors are generally not heavily concerned with the historically situated character of individual thinkers, they are attentive to the evolving nature of thought and to the general contexts within which those developments take place. It is crucial to locate John within the intellectual traditions of Europe, in particular within what McGinn defines as the scholastic, monastic, and vernacular traditions, in order to understand his place in the broader textual conversations that shaped his own thought. Of particular interest are the historical studies of conceptions of identity that shape, and are shaped by their cultural environment. This especially included the work of Charles Taylor, for the broader strokes of western history, and Henry Kamen, for the national narratives of medieval and early modern Spain. There can be no doubt that the John of the Ascent-Night was a man of his age, shaped by, and shaping the world in which he lived. This study brings this scholarship into constructive dialogue with John’s texts, so as to better illumine authorial intent and audience reception.

This study also contributes to the growing field of more explicitly historically contextualizing approaches to the interpretation of texts from mystical and ascetical traditions, and is in particular indebted to the work of scholars like Melquíades Andrés Martín, Alistair Hamilton, Alison Weber, Gillian Ahlgren, Jodi Bilinkoff, Andrew Jotischky, and Carlos Eire. John was firmly planted in the towns, cities and universities Castile and Andalusia, was formed by his early experiences of poverty, marginalization, and hardship, and came to identify himself with a particular form of the monastic ascetical tradition among the Carmelites of Spain. His monastic identity was eventually given over to the unique vantage of Teresa, a woman born in economic privilege, with a


converso background, and caught up in the fervor of the mystical reformation. This study draws into its account the social, religious, and political dynamics of Spain’s imperial origins in the late fifteenth century, and the potent and conflicting impulses of reform that originated under the aegis of Franciscan Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros. It examines the social pressures exerted by the Inquisition on intellectual and religious institutions or movements that impacted John’s thought. These influences are, in this study, an irreplaceable hermeneutical key for a thicker interpretation of John.

Much of the literature done on Teresa in this venue is of crucial importance to this study, and I have attempted to extend the fruits of Teresian scholarship, and relevant scholarship on women in Spain more generally, into my study of John. To interpret John’s own ascetic and mystical works apart from international, national, and local contexts is to impoverish our understanding of those texts and risk holding John captive to ahistorical ideologies or abstracted interests.

I also received immense insight from the recent work done by Gavin Flood\textsuperscript{110} and Richard Valantasis\textsuperscript{111} on ascetical constructions of identity. This study contributes to the work these and other scholars of the ascetic tradition by attempting to analyze the dynamics of ascetical discourse in John as a function of social identity construction. Flood’s study emphasizes the role of asceticism as an embodied, intentional and individual performance of social memory within a religious tradition, whose goal is to subvert the will of the individual ascetic, inasmuch as that will is not defined by its conformity to the telos of that tradition. What is undefined by that tradition’s telos becomes the “old self,” targeted for destruction, while all that is embodied in the telos becomes the desired exemplar of the “new self.” The paradox of this process for Flood is that the ascetic dwells in a “betwixt and between” identity, inherently ambiguous, as s/he is never fully identified with either old or new self. In this sense, John’s Ascent-Night can be seen as a proposal for the performance of the memory of the telos of the Teresian form of the Carmelite tradition – defined as union with God on Carmel – and the “nights”

interpreted as the experience of the ambiguity of a “transformation identity” that is neither what is rejected or what is ultimately sought.

Valantasis’ study examines the social structures of power in ascetical performance that lead to the construction of new social groups defined by a new cosmology, new social relations, and a clearly defined “other” against which the ascetical community defines itself. John’s *Ascent-Night* can, in this light, be seen as offering to the Discalced reform a cosmology and a clearly defined “other.” The “other” is a complex of identities in the *Ascent-Night*, and by reference to those criticized identities the Discalced can assert their own distinctive identity. Not only would the unreformed “Calced” be understood as the foil for reformed identity, but also much of the Spanish culture is shown to be inimical to the Discalced self. Though I do not explicitly employ either Flood or Valantasis’ phenomenological approaches in this study, I found in their general account of asceticism a useful and compelling strategy for thinking of John as (de)constructing identity drawn from the memory of Carmelite tradition.

Finally, this study contributes to scholarship that employs literary criticism to interpret texts of mystical and ascetical literature. Although I do not explore in depth questions of philology or engage in extensive literary criticism, I do relate many of the literary concerns of sanjuanist scholars to the question of John’s construction of a Discalced identity. Of particular interest for this study was the question of the interrelationship between John’s erotic poetry and his ascetic commentaries. In this study I argue, for example, that John’s curious practice of commenting on his poetry as if it were a Scriptural text becomes more intelligible when we consider that the Inquisition had prohibited commentaries on the Song of Songs in the vernacular; especially when their intended audience included *beatas*. I benefited immensely from the works of literary critics Colin Thompson,112 George Tavard,113 Michael Sells,114 and Leonard Philip,115 as well as Alison Weber’s fascinating approach to gender as a lens through

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which to read Teresa’s rhetorical strategies. All of these argue along with Steven Katz that mystical “experience” is, in a primal sense, constructed linguistically. Any attempt to interpret a mystic’s claim to “experience” must be an exploration into the function of language, and language in turn opens all claims to experience out into the empirically accessible realms of culture.

Chapter Outlines
Chapter 1: Context
Chapter One offers a contextualizing overview of those elements of history that are most pertinent to the focus of this study. After a brief look at the origins of the monastic ascetical traditions in western Christianity, we examine the importance of the impact of Franciscan models of reform in Spain on Teresa of Avila’s own conception of the reforming identity of her Discalced Carmelite movement. In particular, we examine the development of the recogimiento movement, under the powerful patronage of Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, with its highly interiorized and vernacular expression of mysticism that blends devotio moderna piety with humanist concerns with the individual. Then we briefly describe John of the Cross’s own life-story, and set it within the larger contexts of Carmelite and Spanish struggles for reform and, within those efforts at reform, a clearer sense of identity grounded in the memory of an idealized past.

Chapter 2: Text
Chapter Two offers an interpretive look into John’s construction of the “Discalced self” in the texts of the Ascent of Mount Carmel and the Dark Night by exploring some of the possible sources of that construction in the broad streams of western intellectual history, and the more local waters of sixteenth century Spain. After offering some background, we explore John’s theological anthropology found in the Ascent-Night by first looking at the scholastically defined “structures of the self,” and then seeking to understand how those structures unfold in John’s transforming narrative of the journey toward union with God as the fulfillment of the Discalced self. This chapter sets forth a thick description of John’s own manner of constructing identity within his texts, and attempts to interpret his

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eclectic use of the broader western Christian traditions as a unique way of shaping a specifically Discalced Carmelite identity.

Chapter 3: Ascetic-Apophatic Critique

Chapter Three attempts to view John’s use of ascetical and apophatic traditions to critique versions of the self that he considers inimical to the exemplary Discalced Carmelite self born of the Teresian reform. I engage the work of Edward Howells and Denys Turner on John’s conception of “mystical selfhood” with relevant historical scholarship that informs our understanding of the forces that helped shape the Carmelite reform, and suggest that John’s ascetic-apophatic critique of the self, far from being critical of a merely abstracted human nature, is rooted in real, historical identities that John, in some way, viewed as dangerous to the survival of the unique character of the Teresian reform. Those “other identities” include especially the culture of honor that had permeated so much of Spanish monastic, Carmelite culture, and the visionary culture, especially among beatas, that had come to define so much of the recogimiento movement in the mid to late sixteenth century.

Chapter 4: Erotic Critique

Chapter Four develops an inquiry into John’s use of the neo-platonic and exegetical erotic traditions to construct Discalced identity as, fundamentally, a return to the God of Mount Carmel. Some of the history of these two strands of the erotic tradition are developed, and related to John’s Ascent-Night; I focus in particular on his use of the image of the “erotic ladder” as a way to speak of a Discalced self defined by graced desire. Of particular interest in this chapter is the role the erotic quest for unity played not only in the Discalced movement, but in Spain’s larger project of nation and empire building. This chapter proposes that John’s employment of neo-platonic ontology participated in the much broader discourse of Spanish and European models of reform-as-return. John’s erotics also served as a way to interpret Teresa’s nuptial-erotic version of Carmelite identity among the nuns in a way that gender conflicts in Spain precluded Teresa herself from developing in depth. The chapters ends by harnessing the momentum of all the chapters and arguing that interpreting John’s textual version of the mystical ascent of Carmel, especially the Ascent-Night, can best be understood from multiple vantages deeply embedded within the confines of history.
CHAPTER I: CONTEXTUALIZING THE SANJUANIST SELF

The Monastic-Ascetic Traditions

John of the Cross sits squarely within the Christian ascetical tradition, and proposes for his fellow Discalced Carmelite ascetics a textual map that links their unique instantiation of that ascetic tradition with a concept of salvation that is also unique to this reforming community. Our study begins here with a ranging exploration of some of the key contexts out of which John’s ascetic soteriology emerged, and will set the stage for a more detailed look at the precise features of John’s version of salvation in a Discalced context.

The Christian tradition of asceticism, which Max Weber simply defined as a “methodological procedure for achieving religious salvation,” can be largely identified with a set of practices, both mental and bodily, meant to give rise to – construct – a “self” imagined and idealized according to patterns of meaning found within a particular religious or philosophical tradition. We might say, for the purposes of this study, that the individual and social achievement of Christianity’s idealized “self” by means of a coordinated strategy of ascetic practices constitutes a Weberian form of “religious salvation.” Traditions of ascetic discourse and praxis would evolve in the first six centuries of the Christian era as Christian thinkers brought their own versions of Judeo-Christian cosmologies and anthropologies into creative dialogue with Greco-Roman traditions. In particular, the monastic movement that emerged in the third century in Egypt and Syria gave rise to a vast literary corpus that would profoundly influence Christianity’s ascetic discourse, and define the basic outlines of John of the Cross’ conception of Discalced Carmelite identity.

Monastic ascetical literature of the fourth and fifth centuries was marked by distinctive emphases that manifested the definitive (and controversial) influence of the cosmology, anthropology and exegetical strategies of Origen of Alexandria (185-254). These emphases included the primacy of abstract thought in the ascent of the mind to God, the problematic role of the body and its passions, spiritual/allegorical exegetical


strategies that alone were capable of arriving at the inspired meaning of the biblical text, and the crucial role played by sexual abstinence in liberating the mind from the strictures of matter. Desert monks, drawing on Greek models of paideia, offered narratives of ascetic perfection that made the master-disciple relationship crucial in overcoming temptation and growing in virtues appropriate to monastic life, and disciplined regimens of bodily deprivation and manipulation pivotal for the reforming of the self in the image of the sacred texts that were incessantly recited. In addition, cenobitic monasticism idealized the monastic community as the exemplar of a redeemed humanity capable of anticipating now heavenly and angelic life, offering a rival ecclesiology that would soon create troubles for the bishop-centered larger church.

The gradual integration of monasticism with the episcopal churches in the west would reach a new phase in the election of the Benedictine monk, Gregory, to the papacy in 540, and this integration would insure an immense increase in the influence exerted by the monastic traditions in the western churches. Pope Gregory established a close working relationship between the monastic communities and the papacy, and employed (Benedictine) monastic models in service to the reform of the papacy and the churches throughout Europe. That relationship would continue to evolve through the time of the Carolingian reforms of the ninth century, and would reach a crescendo in 1073 with the election of the Benedictine monk Hildebrand (1025-1085) as Pope Gregory VII. He extended in law the monastic practice of celibacy to all of the secular clergy, applied the unique Cluniac model of centralized government to the papacy, and more deeply allied monastic communities with broader ecclesial reforms throughout Europe. Later, in the thirteenth century, the innovative “mendicant” monastic movements founded by Francis

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119 This relationship of disciple and master (geron) is at the heart of the monastic movement, and plays a crucial role in the ascetic construction of subjectivity. That relationship is structured around performances of teaching, of mimesis, and of obedience, and informs the monastic movement that John of the Cross will inherit. John’s corpus of writings are to be understood in the context of this ancient tradition, where John quickly (at Teresa of Avila’s behest) assumes the status of master within the male and female branches of the reformed Carmelite movement. For an excellent discussion of this aspect of the monastic, ascetic tradition, see Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God*. The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), and the older work by A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient. A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East I* (Louvain, 1958).


of Assisi (1182-1226) and Dominic Guzman (1170-1221), as we will see, would further advance the integration of papal and monastic interests in the service of reform. As the papacy’s influence over the political and religious landscape of Europe evolved, these new mendicants would offer a mobile force capable of implementing Rome’s vision for a unified and reformed western Christendom.\textsuperscript{122}

Both the Franciscans and the Dominicans would, in the ensuing centuries, come to deeply influence reform movements within other monastic communities, including the Carmelites. Their influence would eventually extend beyond the cloister and friary, and help shape religious movements among the laity. Their work would also become entangled in the increasingly ambiguous church-state relations that plagued the papacy’s quest for unity throughout Europe. Spain in particular would come to embody the challenges of this ambiguity, and would employ the mendicants in its own quest for a unified identity. The Carmelites, as we will see, represented a remarkably unique instantiation of this history of tensions between ascetic, monastic, mendicant and papal traditions that all competed for dominance within the European theatre. It is from this tense mix that John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila would conceive and give birth to a reform movement, and attempt to reshape the Carmelite tradition into one capable of yielding salvation for its own.

\textit{The Teresean Reformation}

\textit{Spanish reforms}

The beginning of the sixteenth century in Spain witnessed a powerful movement of religious transformation and reform that had a particular focus within local monastic and mendicant orders. These movements were characterized by remarkable creativity, experimentation and diversity, reflecting an ever-expanding influx of ideas from other parts of Europe, even while the unifying-mechanisms of the Inquisition were beginning to expand their influence.\textsuperscript{123} In particular, the works of biblical humanists like Erasmus

\textsuperscript{122} Pope Innocent III, considered the most powerful pope of the high medieval period, recognized in the vision of both Francis and Dominic a form of monasticism more suited to the rapidly changing shape of European society and the evolving interests of the papacy. See James M. Powell, \textit{Innocent III: Vicar of Christ or Lord of the World?} (Boston: Heath, 1963), 55-72.

\textsuperscript{123} Alasdair Hamilton argues that the “fear of novelty” in regard to religious movements in Spain increased after the death of the reforming Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros and the onset of the Protestant reformation in Germany. \textit{Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-Century Spain: The Alumbrados.} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 7-23.
of Rotterdam (1469-1536) and of authors in the tradition of the *devotio moderna* movement, like Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), exercised immense influence in Spain’s changing religious culture.124 As we will see in more detail later, the leadership of the Franciscan Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros (1436-1517) would prove to be decisive in shaping this emerging religious culture in Spain and synthesizing diverse movements of reform in Europe.125 His sponsorship of the translation of many spiritual and humanist works into Castilian opened a new world of learning for those – especially women – who did not have access to university education. His advocacy for reform in the universities led to the creation of the university of Alcalá de Henares, with its vernacular-friendly printing press, its reforming school of theology, and its biblical humanist scholars. But it was his support for reform within his own Franciscan order, and throughout the church in Spain that would, in many respects, have the most enduring (and problematic) effects on Spain’s religious culture.

Cisneros attempted to reform monastic communities and secular clergy in Castile by calling on precedents of reform from the past, and seeking to restore those communities, and the secular clergy to a more primitive observance.126 The religious communities that attempted Cisneros’ reform by a “return to observance of the rule” were called observants, while the communities that retained “mitigations” granted them (especially) during the crises of the fourteenth century black plague were called conventuals.127 Within the Spanish Dominican provinces all the conventuals became observants, while the Franciscan communities were deeply divided by the calls for a more primitive observance of the rule. At the heart of the call to “return,” especially

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125 For an excellent introduction to Cisneros’ influence in Spain’s religious culture, see Erika Rummel, *Jiménez de Cisneros: On the Threshold of Spain’s Golden Age* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999). She argues that Cisneros’ synthesis of Franciscan reform, biblical humanism and *devotio* pietism was unique in the late medieval period, and significantly shaped Spain’s unique religious movements. This is certainly the case with Teresa and John.

126 Rummel contends that Cisneros’ attempts to reform the secular clergy had little effect, and that it was not until the Council of Trent that much of Cisneros’ program – and that of his spiritual heir John of Avila – would come to pass. Erika Rummel, *Jiménez de Cisneros: On the Threshold of Spain’s Golden Age* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 18-42.

127 Mitigations, or modifications to the monastic rule have been a constant feature of the monastic tradition, but in the fourteenth century the casualties of both plague and war left many monastic and mendicant communities in Europe without sufficient numbers of religious. Most orders mitigated their rules to adapt to the radically changed circumstances, and the Carmelites were no exception to this.
among the Franciscan observants, was a renewed dedication to the life of poverty and of prayer modeled after the pattern of an idealized form of life embedded in their origins. As this Franciscan “observant” model of reform-as-return would, as we will see, offer a definitive model for both Teresa and John in their work of reform in Carmel, we will briefly sketch the outlines of its history.

*Franciscan precedents*

The Franciscan mendicant order grew out of the volatile period of transition in Europe of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries that witnessed massive shifts in early medieval patterns of life. The move to resurrect the western Empire, begun by Charlemagne in the ninth century had now begun to give rise to a more united western consciousness. In particular, the papacy, following the long and powerful reign of the Benedictine reformer-pope, Gregory VII (1073-1085), began a long struggle over “investiture” to secure ecclesial independence from secular political power. As we have seen, Gregory VII, like his namesake Gregory the Great before him, found in the monastic patterns of reform a model for general ecclesial reform. But even more than a model, he saw in monastic institutions a useful ally in effecting reform in the European church. Gregory’s successors extended this struggle, and continued to engage monastic reformers/reform movements to implement programs of broader ecclesial reform. When Francis of Assisi presented to Pope Innocent III his novel model for monastic life, based on radical poverty, a simple rule of life, and, in its most innovative aspect, a mobile “mendicant” identity that allowed members of this movement to travel in the more fluid environment of thirteenth century Europe, the pope found in this movement a unique monastic instrument of unifying reform. Innocent’s successor, Gregory IX, accepted the final form of Francis’ new rule, the *Regula Bullata* in 1223, and recognized the potential this mendicant movement, along with its Dominican twin, had as an instrument of papal policy to unify the church of the west. To this end, both the Franciscans and Dominicans were taken under the wing of universal papal jurisdiction and given immense independence from the local structures of regent, bishop and parish clergy.\(^{128}\)

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Shortly after Francis’ death, the order began to experience tensions over the proper interpretation of the Rule, and especially over the proper interpretation of the nature of Franciscan poverty. The *Regula Bullata* excluded property ownership, and required that all material needs be gained by begging. Francis’ successors in the leadership of the order, beginning with John of Parma, sought to obtain from the papacy mitigations of the requirements of absolute poverty, and obtained them in a series of papal bulls between 1230 and 1245.\(^{129}\) As the Franciscans began to enter the university system and became associated with ecclesiastical centers of power, they shifted their emphasis from itinerant preaching to study and lecture, and from radical poverty to a judicious use of material goods.\(^{130}\) In the last half of the thirteenth century, several popes issued bulls further mitigating the *Regula’s* call for absolute poverty, and the distinction between “use” and “possession” was developed with scholastic rigor. Pope Martin IV in 1283 said that Franciscan property belonged to the Holy See, but the Franciscans were free to dispose of it without direct consultation. Soon Franciscan communities began to amass wealth and gained immense prestige and influence throughout Europe.

The divisions within the order deepened rapidly, and by the late thirteenth century the Franciscans had split between the so-called Spirituals, who rejected the distinction between “use” and “possession” reflected in the papal mitigations, and the Conventuals, who supported the necessity of adapting to changing circumstances by means of selective mitigations. The Spirituals soon found themselves allied with the powerful apocalyptic vision of Joachim of Fiore (1132-1202), a Cistercian hermit whose stark call for reform in the church drew even the support of the papacy. Joachim’s complex visionary works interpreted history as the unfolding of a Trinitarian schema. The first age of God the Father corresponded to the time of the Old Testament, and was marked by servitude, fear and the keeping of the law according to the flesh. The second age of the Son inaugurated the rule of the clergy, and was characterized by the war of flesh and spirit, faith, grace,

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\(^{130}\) Franciscan theologian Peter Olivi, the “father” of the radical branch of the Franciscan reform, in his treatise on “*usus pauper,*” written shortly before his censure in 1283, argued for not only the non-ownership of any material property but also for the severely restricted use of anything that was deemed necessary in service to the apostolate of preaching. See John Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order: From its Origins to the Year 1517*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988; reprint of 1965 edition), 192f.
action, partial wisdom and ecclesial obedience. The third age of the Spirit, which was in Joachim’s mind an imminent prospect, would be the dawning of an eternal Sabbath in which all humanity would be caught up in the ecstasy of the contemplation and praise of God as a vast community of monks. The anti-scholastic Joachim believed that this “age of the Spirit” would no longer be an age of knowledge acquired by learning, but rather an age of revelation of the “Everlasting Gospel” when the angel of the “sixth seal” (cf. Rev. 14:6) would appear on earth, along with the Antichrist, and begin the new age of the Spirit. This age would also be signaled by the appearance of two new monastic orders dedicated to absolute poverty, which would soon spread to the whole church and abolish the need for ecclesial institutional structures. Spiritual Franciscan Gerard of Borgo San Domino, with the 1254 publication of his *Introduction to the Everlasting Gospel* inaugurated a fascinating relationship between the Spiritual Franciscans and Joachim’s apocalyptic vision as he argued that Francis was the angel of the seal and that the Franciscans would usher in the monastic age of the Spirit.

The tensions between the small faction of Spirituals and the Conventuals grew in the fourteenth century, and the Conventuals, by means of the Roman Inquisition, were able to secure condemnations related to the Spirituals’ call for universal poverty and their persistent Joachite rhetoric. Out of this controversy the reforming ideals of the Spirituals were translated into a new institutional form, the Observants, founded by Paulo de’Trinci in 1368. His vision was to reform the larger church by reforming each religious community, and to strive for the perfection appropriate to each monastic and mendicant order’s rule of life. The Observants quickly grew, within fifty years, to comprise half of the Franciscan population. They attracted zealous and ascetic novices, vigorously

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promoted devotion to the “poor, crucified Christ,” and were so successful in their preaching, missionary and reform work that they drew the favor of Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378). But in the fifteenth century, violent conflicts arose between the Observants and the Conventuals as the Conventuals viewed the Observants as enemies who wanted to divide the order, and whose spiritual and apocalyptic fervor teetered on the edge of heresy. Conversely, the Observants saw the Conventuals as perpetuating the wrongful mitigation of the original Regula Bullata’s call for radical poverty. At a General Chapter meeting at Assisi in 1430, under the leadership of John of Capistrano, the two camps reached a fragile compromise that did not last even a year. Pope Martin V in the same year nullified the compromise in his bull, Ad Statum, and reinterpreted the “vows of Assisi” in a mitigated manner that the Observants had long-ago rejected. This decision led to the inevitable, permanent and bitter division of the order into two juridically distinct communities of Observant and Conventual Franciscans. The Carmelites of sixteenth century Spain would soon find themselves in a similar struggle, and eventually would arrive at a similar resolution.

Pedro de Villacreces (1362-1422), called the father of the Franciscan reform in Spain, began a movement that was capable of being perpetuated in league with academic, ecclesial and political institutions of Spain. It seems he studied at the University of Salamanca as a Conventual Franciscan, but soon abandoned his studies for the deserts (meseta) of Castile to live a life of poverty and simplicity in imitation of the earliest Franciscan hermits. He gained a following of disciples, who eventually convinced him to travel Spain and preach the message of material poverty and the spiritual poverty of humility and obedience. His message, transmitted through the writings of his disciple Lope de Salinas y Salazar, contained the tensions inherent in earliest Franciscan circles between university education and the simple spirituality of the Gospels. Villacreces, who had abandoned his scholastic studies at Salamanca, adjured that if books beyond the Scriptures were deemed necessary, than only works by “spiritual authors” like Augustine, Bonaventure and Catherine of Siena should be encouraged. Here Villacreces showed himself to be a true forerunner of the influential reforming observant Franciscan,

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138 Ibid., 440-448.
Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, who also promoted such “spiritual” literary works as a means toward the goal of ecclesial reformation. The reforming work of Villacreces eventually led to a bitter break within the Franciscan communities of Castile and (eventually) Andalusia, between the Observants and the Conventuals.\textsuperscript{139}

\textit{Franciscan influence under Jiménez de Cisneros}

Gonzalo Jiménez de Cisneros was born to a poor family in Torrelaguna of Castile in 1436, and entered the priesthood. He quickly ascended the ecclesial ladder and, while in Rome, attracted the attention of Pope Pius II (1458-1564), receiving a letter permitting him to take the next vacant benefice in Spain. When a benefice came vacant in Uzeda, the Archbishop of Toledo refused to grant him the see and imprisoned him for six years for his refusal to acquiesce to the Archbishop’s choice. Finally, he was granted the benefice and quickly transferred to the chaplaincy at Siguenza, under Cardinal Pedro González de Mendoza, the bishop of Siguenza, who appointed him vicar-general of his diocese. It was at this time, at the age of forty-eight, that Cisneros suddenly and inexplicably abandoned his advancing ecclesial career and entered the Observant Franciscan \textit{recollectorio} at La Salceda near Guadalajara.\textsuperscript{140} Shortly thereafter he joined the Franciscan Friars Minor, entering Toledo’s newly established monastery of \textit{San Juan de Los Reyes} in 1484. His radical asceticism and fame in giving retreats eventually brought him to the attention of his former bishop, Cardinal Mendoza, now Archbishop of Toledo, who in turn recommended Cisneros as confessor to Queen Isabella.\textsuperscript{141} He accepted this appointment in the auspicious year of 1492 on the condition that he could continue to live in his Franciscan friary. Two years later he was nominated provincial of the Castilian Franciscan province, and in 1495 was named by Queen Isabella as


\textsuperscript{140} Erika Rummel, \textit{Jimenez De Cisneros: On the Threshold of Spain’s Golden Age}, (Temple, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 13-14. The word literally means “house of recollection,” and was part of the late fourteenth century reforming work of the Franciscans. They were retreat houses where clergy and laity could learn simple means of interiorized prayer, \textit{recogimiento}, as a means for advancing in the spiritual life. These would become the seedbeds of the theory and praxis of an emerging reforming-mysticism of the sixteenth century. Its primary Castilian-vernacular exponents, the Cardinal’s Benedictine cousin Garcia de Cisneros, the Franciscan Francisco de Osuna and the Franciscan doctor and theologian Bermadino de Laredo, would have a profound impact on both Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 15-17. The role of confessor was more than a sacramental role, but involved advisement on church and state matters. Cisneros would take ample advantage of this role.
Archbishop of Toledo and primate of Spain.\textsuperscript{142} After the death of Ferdinand’s son-in-law Philip of Burgundy in 1506, he briefly ruled Castile as regent, and in 1507 was made Cardinal and Grand Inquisitor. During his term as Archbishop and provincial, Cisneros began a course of programmatic and radical reform in both the secular clergy and religious orders, beginning with the Franciscans.\textsuperscript{143} As we have already noted, he imposed his own observant Franciscan model of monastic and religious reform-as-return to the original Rule’s commitments, though his attempts to reform the secular clergy and bishops of Spain after the observant model were vigorously, even violently resisted and bore little fruit. As he broadened his reforms to all religious orders in Spain, the resistance increasingly grew more hostile. He sought renewed commitments to poverty, an end to concubinage, and worked to improve education among both clergy and religious. It is said that a number of reluctant friars fled to North Africa with their concubines and converted to Islam, rather than embrace Cisneros’ reforms.\textsuperscript{144}

In 1500 Cardinal Cisneros began a new phase in his reforming agenda: the founding and funding of a new university at Alcalá de Henares to rival Salamanca as a center of higher education in Spain. Its focus, unlike the heavily scholastic Salamanca, was to be patristic theology and a humanist approach to the Scriptures. There was to be no civil law faculty, which in particular set it apart from the other universities of Spain. To the traditional chairs of Thomism and Scotism, he added Nominalism with an emphasis on the work of nominalist and champion of the devotio moderna movement, Gabriel Biel. He also established chairs in Hebrew and Arabic, and the study of Scripture was to include the best of humanist advances in philology and textual criticism. This emphasis was to receive interjectory punctuation by the publication of a Polyglot Bible, which set in parallel columns critical texts of the Bible in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. This massive undertaking, which would see final publication shortly after Cisneros’ death in 1517, would place Spain on the cutting edge of humanist scholarship in Europe, and would attract the attention of humanist reformers like Erasmus of

\textsuperscript{142} An anecdotal account of his appointment has him fleeing from Isabella when she shares the news of his appointment, but being returned to accept the position by the force of armed guards.
\textsuperscript{143} Melquíades Andrés, La teología española en el siglo XVI: 1:100.
Rotterdam. Interestingly, Cisneros was vehemently opposed to translating the Scriptures into Castilian, though he would, as we will see, sponsor the translation of certain devotional, mystical and humanist works.¹⁴⁶

The university at Alcalá was characterized by vigorous theological debate, especially between humanist and scholastic camps. At Alcalá a printing press was established to promote works of learning and piety among the laity and, after the Cardinal’s death, the Scriptures would eventually be made available in the vernacular. At least for a time. Cisneros intended for this university to become a vibrant intellectual and moral center of new reform movements he sought to inspire and protect, though written deep within this new experiment in “pluralism” was a script that awaited translation into an idiom of fear and mistrust. That time would come shortly after the death of the Cardinal, and the transfer of the reform-friendly royal court of Charles V from Spain to Germany. The Inquisition, increasingly staffed and controlled by Dominicans tied to the University of Salamanca, would cast an ever-more suspicious eye on the plural and conflicted impulses that emanated from Alcalá. It was indeed from Alcalá that many dynamic and diverse reform camps would emanate in the vernacular spirit, and prepare an environment ripe for the creation of a Teresa and a John.¹⁴⁷

Emerging from the new and energized atmosphere at Alcalá, as well as from the reformed religious communities – particularly the observant Franciscans – was a new wave of enthusiasm for the spiritual life, and a proliferation of “methods” to advance toward “union with God” in this life. The conceptualization of relating to the Christian God as a staged journey toward “union” facilitated by the use of specific methods or practices of prayer and asceticism has a long and complex history in the Christian

¹⁴⁵ Erasmus’ work was crucial to Cisneros and his reforming successors’ own attempts to revitalize and enlighten Spain’s religiosity, as Marcel Bataillon’s massive tome abundantly argues: Eraso y España: estudios sobre la historia espiritual del siglo XVI, (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966). Cisneros himself corresponded with Erasmus frequently, and after many attempts to convince Erasmus to come to Spain, Erasmus wryly quipped: “I don’t like Spain.” Erika Rummel, Jimenez De Cisneros: On the Threshold of Spain’s Golden Age, (Temple, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 39.

¹⁴⁶ No doubt Cisneros shared the general medieval suspicion that only (male) clerics and scholars could rightfully interpret biblical texts directly.

Here it suffices to say that this paradigm of “union” became a prominent and potent dimension of the Cisneran “mystical” reform, and was to be seen by many of the most influential religious reformers of sixteenth century Spain as the key to all reform within the church. In addition, the reforms of the Cardinal included not only the translations of devotional and mystical texts, but also scholastic and humanist scholarship, inasmuch as these were seen to serve Cisneros’ mystical preferences.

These reforming interests of Cisneros were drawn into his political alliance with the monarchy’s scheme to unify Spain, and with the continuing waves of apocalyptic fervor that were sweeping all of Europe. This diversified agenda of Cisneros embedded in the Spanish reformation a plethora of tensions – social, religious, political, intellectual – that would deeply mark its future.

Cardinal Cisneros, in addition to his patronage of vernacular devotional texts supported and defended Spain’s beatas, women (lay and religious) who were famed for their acts of charity and piety, their asceticism, and for spectacular spiritual gifts that

148 An excellent overview of this history can be found in Idel Moshe, and Bernard McGinn, Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue (New York: Continuum, 1996), 59-86.

149 In particular, Cisneros favored the Erasmian “interiorized” Christianity, and Nominalist scholasticism with its attention to the individual and the particular, as well as its mistrust of conceptualist accounts of knowledge. He established both Nominalist and Scotist chairs at Alcalá. Much has been said of his selective appreciation of humanism and scholasticism, and it is interesting to note the similarity between Cisneros’ eclecticism in this regard and John of the Cross’. Both reflect the ambivalence to learning that characterized not only the observant Franciscans, but popular reform movements in general. For a discussion of this, see John C. Olin Catholic Reform: From Cardinal Ximenes to the Council of Trent, 1495-1563: an Essay with Illustrative Documents and a Brief Study of St. Ignatius Loyola (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 1-46.

150 José Nieto relates the intimate link between Franciscans and apocalypticism in Spain to Cisneros’ interest in mystics who offered favorable interpretations of Cisneros himself, and the monarchy, as divine agents of a world-unifying epoch that would lead the entire human race to Christian faith. See his “The Franciscan Alumbrados and the Prophetic-Apocalyptic Tradition,” The Sixteenth Century Journal, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Oct., 1977), 3-16.

151 Cisneros’ belief that democratized mysticism would bring about the Christianization of the world left a deep imprint on the religious movements, and certainly helped shape John and Teresa’s view that mysticism was the key to an authentic reformation in Carmel.

152 The approach to ‘spectacular’ experiences, like trances, ecstasy, visions, levitations and the like will deeply divide the competing centers of power within the new reform movements. Cisneros, as with many of the Franciscan advocates of the mystical reform movement, place great weight and importance on these experiential dimensions of mysticism. A good example of Cisneros’ approach was in his publication of the works of Vincent Ferrer and Jean Gerson. He intentionally had omitted those sections of their writings that were critical or cautious in regard to visions or ecstasy. As much of the public authority of the beatas depended on this source of knowledge – immediate and somatic experience of the divine – Cisneros no doubt understood the implications of the more cautious approach championed by the Dominican letrados, who would eventually come to control the Inquisition’s approach to such things. See P.Fr. Vicente Beltrán de Heredia, “The Beginnings of Dominican Reform in Castile” in JRL Highfield, ed., Spain in the Fifteenth Century.
on occasion offered divine, apocalyptic approbation for the work of Cisneros and his royal patrons. These women, often forming informal communities of religious life (beaterias), resembled closely the Beguines of Germany and northern Europe. As the sixteenth century wore on, ecclesial pressure was placed on these women, and their informal communities, to merge with established religious orders. Women like Maria de Toledo, Juana de la Cruz and Maria de Santo Domingo, who were famed for their sanctity and for their extraordinary visions, offered Cisneros both an exemplary instantiation of the sort of piety he hoped to encourage, and a level of prestige and support that came with associating himself with such revered women. They were, for him, incarnations of women like Catherine of Siena and Angela of Foligno who had achieved an authoritative voice within the European church. Many of these beatas were of aristocratic and noble background, and so were able to support themselves economically apart from marriage or religious life. The wealthy widow Doña Ana de Peñalosa, for example, to whom John of the Cross dedicated his poem and commentary, The Living Flame of Love, was just such a beata. But others, like Mari Díaz of Avila, who so impressed Teresa of Avila, were from the lower class and lived a life of poverty.

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153 There has been a trove of new and excellent scholarship on the Spanish beatas. Angela Munoz Fernandez, professor of history at the modern successor of Cisneros’ Alcala, Complutense University of Madrid, argues in her Beatas y santas neocastellanas: ambivalencias de la religion y politicas correctoras del poder (ss. XIV-XVI), (Madrid: Comunidad de Madrid, 1994) that beatas were able to negotiate new freedoms and public authority by constructing identities that both conformed to Hispanic hagiographical norms (e.g. celibacy, harsh asceticism, care for the poor), and broke them (e.g. employing visionary experiences in the service of public preaching, founding communities [beaterias] independent from male supervision). Ronald E. Surtz examines the life and work of the most well known of the beatas of the early sixteenth century, Juana de la Cruz, in The Guitar of God: Gender, Power, and Authority in the Visionary World of Mother Juana de la Cruz (1481-1534), (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990). Surtz argues that Juana’s rapid rise to saintly fame and authority in Spain was due to the volatile milieu created by Cisneros’ new model of holiness. Juana was sought out for theological, political and spiritual counsel, and, though her visionary expressions were controversial in their construal of gender, the authority mediated by direct experience of God was seen as a justification for blurring the lines of orthodoxy. After Cisneros’ death, however, this more fluid approach to experience and language would pass into the more rigid strictures of an inquisitorial culture of fear and caution.

154 Jodi Bilinkoff argues that Mari Díaz’s spiritual authority in Avila centered on the perception of her as “sexless, ageless, and classless.” The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 101. However, it might seem more accurate to say that Díaz...
The importance of the *beatas* to the religious culture of sixteenth century Spain must be emphasized, especially as directly concerns the origins of the Teresian Carmelite reformation. It was out of a community of *beatas*, as we shall presently see, that Teresa’s Carmelite convent of the Éncarnacion would take shape. Teresa, arguably the most famous and influential of Spain’s *beatas*, would embody so many of the tensions inherent in Cisneros’ “new mysticism.” And John himself, entrusted with the reformation of the Discalced Carmelite friars and the spiritual care of the Discalced nuns, would concern himself with offering his own critical appropriation of Cisneros’ complex and conflicted reformation.

This mysticism of the *beatas* would also, however, come under the scrutiny of the Inquisition, which would eventually come to find the visionary and apocalyptic culture perpetuated among the *beatas* and their Franciscan supporters dangerous and subversive. The technology of the printing press seized upon by Cisneros to aid in the democratization of mysticism as a means of reform had allowed freer access to the burgeoning vernacular textual traditions of interior piety. But, as with the northern European reformation, this new access to knowledge would offer a template for new ideas and approaches that would threaten a rapidly disintegrating medieval world. The Spanish Inquisition, that had, in its inception, focused its scrutiny on the racially defined heresies of *conversos* and *moriscos*, now felt the need to turn toward these *beatas*, the first fruits of this Cisneran mystical reformation.\(^{156}\)

*The Franciscan recogimiento movement*

As we have already seen, at the end of the fifteenth century observant Franciscans had begun to found houses of prayer – *recolatorios* – where methods of prayer were taught. At first, these houses were created as loci of reform among the clergy and religious, but soon their influence extended to the laity and, especially, the *beatas*. The

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\(^{156}\) The vast question of the *conversos y moriscos*, the Jewish and Muslim “new Christians” of Spain forced into conversion by the edicts of 1492 and 1501 is certainly relevant to our discussion, though it will not receive the extensive treatment it deserves. Henry Kamen offers a compelling analysis of the largely racial character of heresy in the Spanish Inquisition. Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 83-102.

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vernacularization of devotional and mystical literature, as we have seen, opened to women a new venue of learning, and a new source of female authority born out of a spirituality marked especially by affectivity, infused (not acquired) wisdom, and interiority. In addition, as Elizabeth Howe argues, Cisneros’ approbation, and publication of the works of contemporary visionary beatas in Spain like Sor María de Santo Domingo and Madre Juana de la Cruz inadvertently created a volatile situation by placing women in positions of remarkable influence in both religious and secular spheres. But it also allowed for, and encouraged, the development of a new religious idiom in the Castilian tongue that would soon grow at an increasingly rapid pace to meet the growing demands of the mystical reformation.

Cardinal Cisneros’ Benedictine nephew, García de Cisneros, the abbot at Montserrat in Valladolid, produced for his monks in 1500, as part of his efforts to reform his community after the “Cisneran” model, the first home-grown vernacular treatise on methods of interiorized prayer, Ejercitatorio de la vida espiritual. This work would influence other Castilian works on prayer, like Alonso de Madrid’s Arte para Servir a Dios, written in Seville in 1521, and Ignatius of Loyola’s highly influential guide to meditation and discernment, written in 1522, the Ejercicios espirituales. During this same time period a unique literature on prayer emerged from within the observant Franciscan houses of prayer, the way of “recollection” (recogimiento), which would have definitive influence on the Carmelite reform. It’s main representatives, whom we have already had occasion to mention, all were connected to the observant Franciscan reform: Francisco Osuna, Bernadino de Laredo and Bernabé de Palma. These wrote treatises on the recogimiento method in Castilian, treating especially of the “higher” forms of prayer that lay beyond discursive meditation as a sure means toward mystical union with God through an affective love. For them this way of prayer was a primary means for

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interiorizing the original spirit of Franciscan poverty, so that the original forms of Franciscan life that the Spirituals had long ago fought to preserve could be maintained in an internalized manner immune from the critique of institutional authority. These Franciscan reformers saw in this interior reformation a universal destiny: first it would be enacted in the members of the Observant communities, and then eventually would extend throughout the larger church. It was also seen by these *recogimiento* authors as a continuation of Cisneros’ intention to democratize the mystical reformation, opening it for all Christians. In a sense this project of Cisneros and his observant heirs was to realize the Joachist dream of a universalized monasticism, with the *beatas* like Teresa being the “first fruits.”  

The “recollection” movement spread rapidly through the influence of the observant Franciscans, and served as a critique of more traditional forms of religious practice, often associated with the Dominicans and based on vocal prayer, exercises geared toward the development of virtue and overcoming vice, or the “external” popular devotions that were very much part of Spain’s religious landscape. As we said, it emphasized the “democratic” nature of the call to contemplative perfection, which, because it was not dependent on access to monastic enclosure, education, race or class, was in principle open to all Christians – old and new. In addition, the goal of the recollection method was not simply the attainment of perfection by means of the acquisition of Christian virtues, but perfection through contemplative union with God in love. Interior union with God through affective love was, for these authors, to be sharply distinguished from the external dimensions of good works, rituals, devotions and ceremonies. This union also required an inner poverty and freedom from inner and outer attachments, so that much of the work of the spiritual life was seen to require, more than the acquisition of virtue, a radical interior renunciation and detachment from all things. Only in such liberty could God act freely in the soul and effect the union for which human desire, of itself, can only dispose itself.

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161 “New” Christians referred to those Jews and Muslims who converted to Christianity during or after the time of the edict of expulsion, who lacked *limpieza de sangre*. They lived under the suspicion of duplicity, and were excluded from many public secular and ecclesiastical professions.
Representatives of the recollection movement taught that such an “inner” disposition of poverty was, in true Franciscan fashion, best acquired by imitation of Christ in his Passion. Hence, the Passion was, for these authors, the best subject for discursive meditation and, as for Bonaventure before them, the most compressed symbol of the “apophatic” negation that characterizes the final union of the soul with God. At the end of the journey of recollection would come the “prayer of quiet,” where all discursive thought ceased. In this state one can only, in one of Teresa’s favorite phrases from Laredo, no pensar nada, “think of nothing.” In this thought-less state, only the intensity of affective desire remained. In sum, this final stage of union with God beyond thought or image, a union “in love,” required annihilation of the self, death to all attachments to creatures, so that God alone can be possessed as the only good of the soul. This movement and its “orthodox” representatives would offer the substance of the ideas that would drive Teresa’s reform, and which would inform the groundings of John’s own work. But before we continue further into the story of Teresa and John, we must for a moment turn our attention to those representatives of the recogimiento movement judged dangerous by the inquisitional church in Spain: the alumbrados, or illuminati.

As we saw earlier, the broad spectrum of religious movements begun especially under Cardinal Cisneros’ patronage cultivated a certain creative “vernacular space” in which new combinations of beliefs and practices could take hold in Spain, particularly in the circles of conversos, or New Christians, who were trying to find a place for themselves in Spain’s often repressive atmosphere. Two variant strains of the suspect

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162 This discussion of the Franciscan link of the Passion with apophasis will be discussed more later, but a good discussion of this theme is found in Denys Turner’s *The Darkness of God Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 131-33; and in Timothy A. Mahoney’s excellent discussion of John of the Cross’ employment of this Franciscan hermeneutic (which we will see more of later), *Understanding the Christian Apophaticism of St. John of the Cross*, Logos, Volume 7:4. 80-91.


165 What I define here as the “orthodoxy” of this movement is defined over against the alumbrados controversy that raged especially from the 1520s to the 1570s. We will examine this below, but in anticipation we note that the (Franciscan) authors that directly influenced Teresa, which we have mentioned here, saw themselves as responding to the (Dominican) critiques coming from the Inquisition. See Alastair Hamilton, *Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-Century Spain: The Alumbrados*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
alumbrados movement would eventually be distinguished in the inquisitional lexicon, one emphasizing a radical abandonment (dejamiento) of one’s whole self to the love of God. This movement was said to eschew the importance of vocal prayer, meditation on the Passion, penances, ritual, images and monastic life in favor of the simple act of abandonment, which the dejados believed to be the quickest and safest way to perfection. This form of alumbradismo was condemned by the Inquisition in 1524-25 in the trial of Franciscan Isabel de la Cruz and her lay disciple, Pedro Ruiz Alcaraz.166

The other form which the alumbrado movement, which José Nieto calls “apocalyptic alumbradismo,” placed a heavy emphasis on visions, ecstatic trances and other extraordinary phenomena. Members of this apocalyptic movement, like the Dominican nun Sor María de Santo Domingo, beata Francisca Hernandez, Franciscan Francisco Ortiz and Magdalena de la Cruz, all exercised immense political and religious influence in Spain. Their apocalyptic messages fed into the momentum of Spain’s rapid rise to world power, and their condemnations, Nieto notes, were muted in comparison to the dejados whose heresy was considered dangerously similar to the northern European “Lutheran” heresy. Eventually even these apocalyptic illuminati would all fall from the Inquisition’s favor, as a number of them were judged to be frauds; and the threat of female authority became increasingly problematic in Spain’s changing climate. But early on, something of the “visionary-apocalyptic” form of religious identity fit well with the mystical exemplars Cisneros had forcefully introduced into Spain through Alcalá’s printing press: Catherine of Siena, Bridget of Sweden, Angela of Foligno.

A second round of condemnations by the Inquisition in the late 1550s, following the “Protestant scare” in Valladolid and Seville in 1557 and 1558, led to the creation of an Index of forbidden books, created by the Dominican General Inquisitor Valdés in 1559. This list excluded many of the vernacular representatives of Spain’s new spirituality, as well as vernacular translations of the Bible. The Valdés Index was inspired mostly by Dominicans who saw in the Franciscan promotion of interior, “mental” prayer and the private interpretation of Scripture a dangerous venue for

166 José C. Nieto contends that these earliest alumbrados of Toledo had no clear doctrinal system, and were the early fruits of the Franciscan recogimiento that emphasized interior disposition over against exterior piety and doctrine. See his “The Franciscan Alumbrados and the Prophetic-Apocalyptic Tradition,” The Sixteenth Century Journal, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Oct., 1977), 3-16.
“ignorant” laity (especially women) who, like the luteranos to the north, all too easily succumbed to heresy and deception.¹⁶⁷

The pressures on the “recollection” movement created by the Inquisition’s condemnation of the alumbrados, and, later, by the banning of the movement’s most representative works, caused its promoters to develop a very careful presentation embedded in a uniquely Spanish form of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Laredo and Osuna both carefully distinguished themselves, particularly from the alumbrados dejados, with an emphasis on the value of meditation on the Passion of Christ, the practice of virtue, sacraments and images on the path to union with God, as well as the copious use of references to authoritative texts from the orthodox Christian tradition. Both Teresa and John also displayed a vivid concern with those elements of the recogimiento movement judged heretical, though Teresa, as we will see, because of her gender and her highly public role had to face those concerns more directly than John. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. First we must return to the origins of Teresa’s idea of a Carmelite reform in order to contextualize John’s work better.

Franciscanizing Carmel in Avila

Teresa’s life as a nun in the unreformed Carmelite convent of the Éncarnacion in Avila was to be radically changed by encounters with the vernacular texts of the recogimiento movement. The Éncarnacion had been founded in Avila in 1478 as a Beaterio, a house of beatas who lived together in loose association for the sake of prayer and charitable works under the sponsorship of a wealthy patron, Doña Elvira Gonzaléz. The rule of life governing the Beaterio limited the nuns to fourteen, and allowed the women great freedom to come and go. The distinctions of class and nobility marked the life of the beaterio, and its dependence on benefactors would weigh heavily on the activities of the beatas. Not long before the founding of Éncarnacion, in 1551, Carmelite provincial John Soreth had obtained from Rome permission to allow the Beguines in Italy and France, who had previously associated themselves with Carmelite friars, to form a Second Order of nuns. Doña Gonzaléz soon asked the beatas of Avila to enter the Carmelite Second Order, but there was a deep division in the community as many of the

¹⁶⁷ For some important discussions of this complex relationship between these movements, see Alastair Hamilton, Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-century Spain: the Alumbrados, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 18-52.
Beatas realized that the change would involve many restrictions on their way of life. However, in 1513 the beatas finally approached the Castilian Carmelite frairs and requested formal entrance into the Carmelite order. The request was granted in 1515, but the new convent apparently reached an agreement with the Carmelites to allow a compromise between strict enclosure and the former freedoms of the beaterio. Though there was a novitiate established, a common discipline of religious exercises and of praying the Divine Office, there was also great freedom in allowing visitors, extended stays outside of the convent with wealthy benefactors, and a continuation of the separation of nuns according to class and noble status. Some of the nuns lived on the edge of starvation while others had servants to wait on them.\textsuperscript{168}

The convent of the Éncarnacion developed rapidly, so that by 1550 it housed one hundred and fifty nuns. According to Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, a large number of these nuns entered for reasons other than a religious vocation. Some entered because of the prestige a daughter at Éncarnacion would afford a family in Avila. Others entered because the number of marriageable men was rather low due to the demands of Spain’s global expansions, and some families would place their husbandless daughters in the convent. The financial strain placed on the convent because of the large number of nuns eventually made the conditions of poverty for some of the nuns dire, and increased the pressure on the convent to accommodate to the demands of benefactors. Those demands included ceaseless vocal prayers for the deceased family members of benefactors, and the services of the nuns to women grieving the loss of children or husbands. The convent was always busy with visitors, and the nuns were prized for their ability to offer stimulating, edifying and witty conversation. The effects of the accommodation to the “observant” Carmelite rule in 1515, combined with the social pressures that shaped the demands placed on the convent provided tensions that would soon reach the breaking point in the life of Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda, as she was called before she began her reform of Carmel.\textsuperscript{169}

Teresa, born of a wealthy family of converso origins in Avila, decided to enter the convent of Éncarnacion against her father’s wishes, as she felt it was the only way that


\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 137-41.
she could avoid moral peril. Shortly after making her profession of vows at the Éncarnacion in 1537, Teresa was forced by illness to convalesce at her uncle’s home for eighteen months. There she discovered Francisco de Osuna’s *Third Spiritual Alphabet* and, after reading it, began to practice the prayer of interior recollection that it recommended. In only a short time she says she began to experience for the first time the “prayer of quiet” and of “union,” but soon her illness and, later, a return to the socially active Carmelite convent would make her continued practice of this prayer very difficult. For a time she even gave it up entirely, though she later would bitterly regret that decision after she had a vision of hell which showed her the perilous “state of her soul.” She would continue to experience visions throughout the mid to late 1540s, all deepening her inner sense of conflict between the call to an interior, contemplative life and the socially active reality of life at the Éncarnacion. In 1554 Teresa had two more visionary experiences that convinced her of the truth of the way of *recogimiento*, and of her own powerlessness to overcome the “worldliness” of her life as a nun apart from the contemplative way. 1554 would also mark her definitive “conversion” to a contemplative way of life that was no longer, in her judgment, compatible with the way of life at the Carmelite convent in Avila. The reform had, in her mind, begun. Now it only awaited translation into a socio-institutional monastic reform.

Around 1555 Teresa, now fully committed to a *recogimiento* form of contemplative life, began to experience a profusion of extraordinary mystical experiences. She sought counsel with Gaspar Daza, a prominent reforming secular cleric of Avila, but his conclusion that she was demonically deluded plunged her into despair. She then sought out the advice of the Jesuits at Avila’s new College of San Gil, and found in them ardent supporters of her inner mystical reformation. They introduced her to two local *beatas*, Doña Guiomar de Ulloa and Mari Díaz, as well as to the ascetic

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Franciscan observant Peter of Alcántara, and she began to meet with them regularly. These new relationships revolutionized her life, and when she followed the Jesuit Baltasar Alvarez’s advice to pray the *Veni Creator Spiritus* to ask for grace to break her many attachments at the Éncarnacion, she said she experienced her first ecstatic “rapture” (*arrobamiento*), where she heard the words, “No longer do I want you to converse with men, but with angels.”

In this experience, Teresa claims, she experienced a sudden liberation from the attachments to social convention at Éncarnacion that no amount of effort had weakened over twenty years. In the late 1550s her visions and raptures increased, and the nuns at Éncarnacion began to complain about her radical change in behavior which seemed, to them, a criticism of their own.

It was in 1561, though, that Teresa’s personal reform began to assume organizational purpose. As we saw above, she had a vision of herself in hell that terrified her, and turned her mind toward the apostolate, toward a mission by which she could save others from the same fate.

Her first resolution was to keep her own Carmelite rule as perfectly as she could, and to recover within her reform the most primitive form of that rule. Discussions with friends led her to the idea of a “Discalced,” observant reform, like the one begun by the severely ascetic Peter of Alcántara among the Franciscans of Avila. Though she at first doubted the financial feasibility of beginning a new convent in extreme poverty like the Discalced Franciscans, she says that she received a vision of the deceased Alcantaára who reprimanded her misgivings. She then claimed to receive a further vision of Jesus that commanded her to found a convent named St. Joseph. Here the Franciscan influence on the Teresian reformation that we have traced had come full circle: the idea of an observant Carmelite reform, committed to evangelical poverty and a return to the primitive rule, founded in the spirit of the *recogimiento*, nourished by the vernacular revolution begun by the observant Franciscan Cardinal Jimenez, conceived in

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175 Jodi Bilinkoff describes the origins of Teresa’s reform as born, in part, from a desire to “counteract” the effects of the Protestant reformation. Teresa believed that, as a woman, she could engage in a public apostolate by mean for her life of contemplative prayer. See “Woman with a Mission: Teresa of Avila and the Apostolic Model,” in *Modelli di santita e modelli di comportamento: Contrasti, intersezioni, complementarità*, Giulia Barone, Marina Caffiero and Francesco Scorza Barcellona, eds. (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1994), 295-305.

a missionary spirit and inspired by the unique empowerment afforded the beatas by the mystical reformation. It is into this newly formed reformation that John entered as a newly ordained Carmelite friar, and it is to this reformation that John sought to contribute his own version of what it means to be a Discalced Carmelite. And it is to his life that we must now briefly turn as we locate the Carmelite reform more clearly in its time and place.

John of the Cross: biographical sketches

Juan de Yepes was born in 1541 into a family deeply marked by the class conflicts of Golden Age Spain. His father, Gonzalo de Yepes, came from a wealthy family of silk merchants in Toledo. On one of his business trips to Medina del Campo, Gonzalo met and fell in love with Caterina Alvarez in her home town of Fontiveros. Caterina was of the lower class, from a family of weavers (possibly moriscos). When they married, Gonzalo’s family disowned him for the shame of marrying a woman from the lower class. He was pressed into taking up Caterina’s trade of weaving, and embraced the life of the lower class in Fontiveros. They had three sons, John being the youngest. The second son died of starvation at the age of two, and soon after Gonzalo, when John was only three years old, also died leaving Caterina and her two sons alone and destitute. After Gonzalo’s death, Caterina took her two sons to Toledo, Torrijos, Gálvez and Arévalo to implore the assistance of her deceased husband’s family. She was mercilessly rejected, as Gonzalo’s family had long before been driven by the force of cultural shame to sever their ties with Gonzalo and his fledgling family. So Caterina settled in the prosperous Medina del Campo where she would be able to find greater opportunity for her sons.177

It was in Medina del Campo that John would receive his earliest education. John was sent to a school for orphans, the Colegio de la Doctrina, where he learned to read and write. He also became closely associated with a convent of Augustinian nuns, Convento de Magdelena, where he served Mass each morning before school. To help support the family, John, only thirteen, was offered a nursing job at a local hospital, Nuestra Señora de la Concepción. This hospital was founded to serve the poor of Toledo who had

contagious diseases, especially syphilis. He was responsible for the care of patients, as well as the solicitation of alms and goods in the streets of Medina del Campo to support the work of the hospital. During this time of employment, John began attending a new Jesuit school in Medina del Campo. So in addition to working at the hospital to support his family, John studied Latin, read and translated classical Latin authors, composed Latin speeches, verses, and theatrical pieces based upon Scripture, and even performed those compositions in public. He would also have studied rhetoric, theology, mathematics, history, and geography, while most likely being exposed by the Jesuits to classical models of Spanish and Latin literature.\textsuperscript{178}

After completing his studies, the administrator of the hospital tried to convince John to seek ordination so as to become a chaplain at the Concepcion, but John declined. Instead, John, now twenty one years old, entered the Carmelite monastery in Medina del Campo in 1563 and became a novice. In 1564 he took his first vows, taking the religious name Juan de Santo Matía. Shortly after making his vows, John was sent to study philosophy and theology at the University of Salamanca from 1564 to 1568 while remaining in residence at the Carmelite College of San Andrés. It was during these years that John would receive his most intensive intellectual formation and begin to formulate his own vision of reform.

The University of Salamanca was among the great universities of sixteenth century Europe. As with so much of John’s life, very little reliable evidence is to be had about exactly what John’s education at the University of Salamanca was like. The best sources of information we have, University records, only tell us that John studied the Arts for three years and theology for one. The study of philosophy at the university relied heavily on a Thomist read of Aristotle. There was a Thomist, a Nominalist, an Augustinian and a Scotist chair, with other chairs dedicated to humanist studies of Scripture and classical literature. While scholastic methodology held sway, and Aristotle’s works were mandatory fare, the more historically and philologically conscious humanist approaches also had a strong voice, and John shows within his works the influence of both approaches. Indeed, the tensions between scholastic and humanist

approaches at Salamanca, as throughout Spain and Europe, offer an instructive backdrop to the tensions in John’s own work. Though little hard evidence can be gained about which of these schools of thought claimed John’s academic time and energy, what most scholars are in general agreement on is that the eclectic nature of theological approaches that the university afforded is reflected in John’s own very fluid approach to both theology and philosophy in his works.\(^{179}\) The intellectual strictures of Counter-Reformation Spain would not fully enter the university until after John’s departure, which placed John upon the threshold of change in Spain’s intellectual and religious culture.\(^{180}\)

While studying at Salamanca, John was appointed Prefect of Studies in the Carmelite College, a post that demonstrates the value the Carmelite superiors placed on John’s academic talents and leadership abilities. There is little reliable evidence in regard to the exact curriculum at San Andrés, though we do know that the standard curriculum involved the study of the Carmelite “masters” like John Baconthorpe. Bruno de Jesús-Marie notes that changes in the \textit{Constitutions} governing the Carmelite monasteries in Castile brought about by Nicolás Audet in 1524 allowed little time for contemplative leisure. Rather, he kept the friars occupied, outside of their active ministries or studies, with “with a multiplicity of liturgical and claustral observances” that kept the friars in the choir stalls for long hours hearing two or three Masses daily and singing the Office.\(^{181}\) We do know, as we will have occasion to explore in more depth later, that John requested, and was granted permission to practice the more primitive (and more severe)

\begin{footnotes}
\item[180] Little has been written on the yawning gap between John’s vision of Christian perfection and that of the Counter-Reformation, but it seems reasonable to argue that John’s university education at Salamanca before Trent had been implemented in Spain gave him a level of comfort with a relative diversity of approaches. While there are certainly overlaps between the two, the lack of sacramental theology and the radical critique of the value of works seems to distance John from some of the more prominent features of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Teresa, on the other hand, is much more careful about achieving congruence between her theology and that of Counter-Reformation Spain. For more on this, see Gillian T.W. Ahlgren, \textit{Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 167-68.
\end{footnotes}
monastic Rule that is based on what was believed to be the original Carmelite rule written by the Patriarch of Jerusalem in 412, the Liber de institutione primorum monachorum.\textsuperscript{182} 

This earlier rule, actually compiled in the late fourteenth century by the Catalanian Carmelite Filep Robot, accentuated the role of ascetical practices, solitude and prayer.

After completing his Arts degree, John was ordained to the priesthood in 1567 at the age of twenty-five, and celebrated his first Mass during the summer break between his third and fourth years at the University. It was during this time that John began to formulate a plan for leaving the Carmelites to enter the Carthusians, and it was only after his chance meeting with Tersea of Avila that he would alter this planned course of action. Teresa, who had begun a reform of the Carmelite nuns in Avila, was also counseled by the General of the Carmelite Order, John Rossi, to move ahead with her plan to found a male branch of the reform. When John, while visiting Medina de Campo, was introduced to Teresa by a mutual friend, Fray Pedro de Orozco, Teresa immediately recognized in this “half friar” the perfect combination of intellectual vigor and piety that she was seeking. In her own words:

And when I spoke with this young friar, he pleased me very much. I learned from him how he also wanted to go to the Carthusians. Telling him what I was attempting to do, I begged him to wait until the Lord would give us a monastery and pointed out the great good that would be accomplished if in his desire to improve he were to remain in his own order and that much greater service would be rendered to the Lord. He promised me he would remain as long as he wouldn’t have to wait long.\textsuperscript{183}

After this meeting, John returned to Salamanca for his fourth year to study theology, and then left the University in 1568 before completing his degree. Teresa obtained the necessary permissions from the Carmelite vicar general John Rossi to establish the first

\textsuperscript{182} Colin Thompson asserts that the Liber was decisive in shaping John’s teaching “on the passive and active nights of the soul.” Colin P. Thompson, St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 38. The text was standard reading fare in Carmelite monasteries, and certainly must have profoundly influenced both John and Teresa’s thought. While I am not certain that the text bears the weight of the specific insight Thompson mentions, it is clear that the eremitical ideal of Carmelite life that it represents may well have prompted John’s immanent vocational crisis. But we shall have ample time later to explore this in much more detail. Scholar of Carmelite history Keith Egan, in an unpublished essay he shared with me, argues that the “mysticism of love” found in the Liber sparked in John and Teresa their attraction to the erotic mysticism of the Song of Songs exegetical tradition.

male branch of “contemplative Carmelite” friars in her Reform, and John traveled to Avila where he and four other men took vows according to the “Primitive” rule.\textsuperscript{184} It was then, in 1569, that Fray Juan de Santo Matía took his new religious name, Fray Juan de la Cruz, and settled into a new reformed house in Duruelo as the master of novices. Because of the extremely harsh conditions in Duruelo, especially the poor and dangerous condition of their housing, the friars moved in 1570 to a new site in Mancera de Abajo.\textsuperscript{185}

Soon after this, in 1571, Teresa, who had been removed from her fledgling Reform convent in Avila, St. Joseph’s, was appointed as prioress of the “unreformed” Carmelite convent of the Éncarnacion from whence she had fled to found St. Joseph’s. Teresa, anxious to provide strong leadership in the attempt to reform the nuns of Éncarnacion was able to secure John’s transfer from Mancera de Abajo to Avila to be serve as confessor. John would spend much of five years in Avila collaborating with Teresa in developing the vision of the fledgling reform movement. Though, as with so much in John’s life, we have very little information about the exact nature of collaboration between John and Teresa during this time, there can be no doubt that the influence of each on the other was deep and lasting.\textsuperscript{186} John served as the confessor not only for the nuns, but for Teresa.\textsuperscript{187} During this time, he wrote only small aphorisms on loose scraps of paper for the nuns. The writing he did do for Teresa on the nature of perfection, as well as his letter correspondence with her, perished at his own hands near

\textsuperscript{184} Rossi requested that Teresa call them “contemplative Carmelites.” Even though the nuns were called Discalced, in reference to the Franciscan observant reforms in Spain, Rossi feared that the Carmelite friars would take offense at the term so freighted with the history of the Observant-Conventual conflict in the Franciscan order. But popular usage soon made the term ubiquitous in popular usage and in the language of the Holy See, and raised the anger of the now-dubbed “Calced” or “mitigated” Carmelites. Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, Journey to Carith: The Sources and Story of the Discalced Carmelites, (Doubleday & Co., 1966), 170-73.


\textsuperscript{186} Edward Howells says that this period with John was decisive for shaping Teresa’s “mature doctrine” of the nature of union found in the Interior Castle, which he himself references in CB 13.7; and that John most likely read Teresa’s Life and her Way of Perfection. See Edward Howells, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood (New York: Crossroad (Herder and Herder Book, 2002), 65-9.

the time of his arrest by the Carmelites. We also know that he spent much time in Avila preaching, counseling and teaching children.\textsuperscript{188}

During the five years John spent in Avila, the tensions between the reformed and non-reformed Carmelites deepened, and even within the “Discalced” reform movement divisions arose over how to balance the active and contemplative dimensions of religious life. Strong conflicts between Carmelite superiors and the Rome-appointed overseers of the development of the reform and, later, with King Philip II came to a crescendo in 1576. Through a complex series of circumstances involving disputes over jurisdiction of Discalced and non-Discalced monasteries, Carmelites of Toledo had John publicly arrested for refusing to obey an order from the Castilian Carmelite Vicar General Jerome Tostado to abandon his role as confessor at Avila and allow a non-Discalced friar to replace him. John claimed that his appointment by the Papal Nuncio, Nicholas Ormaneto, superseded Tostado’s jurisdiction. The Papal Nuncio at the time ordered his immediate release, but in 1577, after the death of the same Nuncio, John was arrested in secret and taken off to a Carmelite monastery in Toledo. Before he was arrested, aware that he was being sought out, John destroyed all of his writings, even eating some of the texts that he did not have time to burn before his arrest. Though we do not know exactly the nature of the work that he destroyed, scholars generally agree that the writings were related to the reform and most likely contained names of those whom John corresponded with regularly regarding the reform’s progress.\textsuperscript{189}

John was taken to the monastery in Toledo and placed in a 4’ x 6’ room that was formerly used as a latrine for guests. The room had no windows, and only a small hole through which light would filter from the next room’s window. John, suffering the punishment of a recalcitrant friar, remained in this “cell” for nine months, and was allowed only a diet of bread, water and, occasionally, sardines. He was not allowed to participate in the sacraments during this time, was deprived of all books save his Breviary, and was scourged and humiliated on a regular basis by the friars. After six months, John was assigned a new guard who allowed him paper and ink, and afforded

him greater freedoms. The main goal of this abusive treatment was to get John to renounce the reform, and to believe that his friends in the reform had abandoned him. Teresa, who deeply troubled by the arrest and disappearance of John, wrote King Philip II to ask for John’s immediate release. But to no avail. She even said that she felt John would be safer in the hands of the “Moors” than those of the Carmelite friars.\(^{190}\)

John eventually was able to orchestrate an extraordinary escape out a widow high above the Tagus river in the middle of the night and find refuge in a Discalced convent in Toledo. There the nuns eventually were able to hide John in the Toledo hospital of Santa Cruz where he could receive treatment for his injuries. It was during the very dark time of his imprisonment that John composed on small scraps of paper several poems,\(^{191}\) including most famously the first thirty-one stanzas of the ballad-poem, *Spiritual Canticle*, and it seems that much of his thought on the nature of religious development took definitive shape during this time. The importance of this time of John’s life, though only alluded to in John’s own works,\(^{192}\) cannot be underestimated or ignored. The fundamental insight that the whole of the religious development of the Discalced Carmelite involves a radical dying and rebirth that is both passively suffered and actively enacted, in the context of a radical solitude, finds its narrative core in these nine months of imprisonment.\(^{193}\)

After being released from the Toledo hospital, John fled south to Andalusia where the influence of those hostile to the reform could not easily penetrate. In 1578 John was appointed superior of the monastery of El Calvario, and would walk to the nearby Discalced convent in Beas to tend to the spiritual needs of the nuns. It seems that it was during the year he spent at El Calvario that he wrote a second major poem, *One Dark* 


\(^{191}\) He also composed a ballad on the Eucharist, the *Fonte*, on the Trinity, the *Romances*, and a paraphrase of psalm 137, *Super flumina Babylonis*. See Colin Thompson, *Songs in the Night*, (The Catholic University Press: Washington, DC, 2003), 50.

\(^{192}\) His only reference to the event is an allusion in a letter to Catalina de Jesús, a Discalced Carmelite nun in Baeza, on July 6, 1581. “There he says, after that whale swallowed me up and vomited me out on this alien port, I have never merited to see her again or the saints up there.” (Letters 1) John’s identification of the Jonah story to explain his imprisonment is pregnant with Carmelite resonances, as the *Liber* speaks of Jonah as the second Old Testament Carmelite after Elijah. Thompson notes the reference again to Jonah in the whale in the *Dark Night* 2.6.1 to describe the horrors of the passive night. Colin Thompson, *Songs in the Night*, (The Catholic University Press: Washington, DC, 2003), 48.

\(^{193}\) We will explore this in greater depth throughout this study.
Night, and began to write an extended commentary on it – *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night* - in response to the request of the nuns at Beas for an explanation of the poem’s meaning. In 1579, John was transferred again to help found a Discalced house of studies in connection with the University at Baeza. During his stay at Baeza time he continued to work on the *Ascent-Night*, and added stanzas 32-34 to the *Spiritual Canticle*.\(^{194}\)

In 1581 the Discalced were granted a preliminary independent status, and elected their first Provincial, Jeronimo Gracian. John was elected Definitor, an intensely administrative position of oversight of new foundations and a position he would hold for ten years. During that time John founded, and became Prior of a new Discalced monastery in Grenada, where he completed his work on the *Ascent-Night*, the *Canticle* and composed the *Living Flame of Love*. He also helped found a Discalced convent in Grenada with Teresa’s closest female collaborator in the reform, Ana de Jesus. There John met a laywoman, Doña Ana de Peñalosa, who would become his friend, a benefactress of the Discalced and a *beata* disciple. John would write his poem *Living Flame of Love* for her between 1585 and 1587, as well as a commentary on the *Flame*. In 1582 John redacted and added the final stanzas 35-39 to the *Spiritual Canticle*, including an additional stanza 11, and in 1584 completed the first draft of his complete commentary on the *Canticle* in response to a request from the prioress in Grenada, Ana de Jesús, for a more detailed explanation of the poem’s meaning.

In 1583, the Discalced held a chapter to determine the question of the balance between active and contemplative dimensions of the reform movement, and John found himself isolated, among other things, in his argument against the move toward a more active “mendicant” style for the friars and a more centralized form of government that would wrest from the nuns much of the independence Teresa had given them in the *Constitutions*. As events developed within the Discalced reform, John would fall out of favor with the leadership of the order. At a general Chapter meeting in 1588, the former Genoese banker, Nicholas Doria was elected to be the Discalced Vicar-General, and John

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was re-elected as Definitor and transferred to the monastery in Segovia. At this time, deep divisions continued to erupt in the Order and John soon found himself in opposition to Doria by defending the nuns of Beas who, in accord with the now-deceased Teresa’s own desire, wished to maintain administrative independence from the male branch of the reform.\(^{195}\) In addition, John defended Teresa’s close-confidant and early leader of the Discalced friars, Gracian, against Doria’s harsh treatment. Doria accused Gracian of diffusing the focus reform by trying to establish Discalced missions in Mexico and Africa. Although John agreed with Doria’s critique, he also felt that his treatment of Gracian was unfair. Allies of Doria in the reform, especially the consultor to Doria, Diego Evangelista (who intensely disliked John), began to build a case against John and the nuns of Beas, and planned to have John sent overseas to a mission in Mexico. John was fully ready to comply with whatever was decided, but suddenly fell ill in 1590. He requested to be sent to a small and isolated monastery in La Penuela, where the prior, Fr. Crisostomo, was already hostile toward John. John received harsh treatment in this new monastery, and it took the intervention of Anthony of Jesus, early founding companion of John in Duerlo and regional provincial of the Discalced of Andalusia, to bring an end to John’s harsh living conditions.

John developed a massive infection in his leg, and the condition worsened as the inflammation in the leg progressed and nothing could stop the spread of gangrene. On the evening of December 13, 1591, he asked the friars who were reciting the prayers for the dying to stop and read to him from the Song of Songs. At midnight as the bells rang for the office of matins, John asked what they were for. When they told him, he exclaimed, “Glory be to God for I shall say them in heaven.” He kissed his crucifix and murmured, “Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit,” and he died. He was 49 years old.\(^{196}\)

Identity crisis in Carmel

Teresa and John’s Carmelite reformation was an act of religious imagination that drew on an understanding of history embedded deeply within a broader medieval

\(^{195}\) John also opposed Doria’s rapidly expanding legislation, and his focus on the active apostolate. John thought that the spirit of Teresa’s reform necessitated the preservation of freedom from excessive control as well as a strong emphasis on the contemplative nature of the Carmelite charism. This opposition guaranteed John’s marginalization in the order the last years of his life. See Federico Ruiz Salvator, et al., *God Speaks in the Night*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 335-37.

theological and renaissance humanist\textsuperscript{197} worldview that was alive and well in the sixteenth century. That view posits that there is an inevitable flow in history toward corruption and disorder, and that the way to reverse the flow toward chaos is to return to the ancient sources of order. In a study of the early sixteenth century Augustinian monastic reformer Giles of Viterbo, John O’Malley analyzes this view of history as it impacted the reform movements of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe. O’Malley argues that Giles’ “thinking on reform took its rise from a conviction of the evil condition of his age and looked for renovation by a revitalization of forms and institutions of the past.”\textsuperscript{198} Teresa’s vision of hell, the symbol of chaos, evil and judgment, read through the lens of social, political and religious crises of the sixteenth century, immediately led her to consider as an effective response a return to the primitive rule of Carmel. Her experience of the positive effects of the contemplative practice of recogimiento was, for her, a definitive sign of the power contained in a return to the original identity of Carmelites as contemplatives withdrawn from the outer world of chaos and disorder and immersed in the inner world of spirit and order where God dwelt. Her crisis of monastic identity, and that of John, judged by the measure of an imagined historical memory of an exemplary Carmelite past, was by no means strange to the Carmelite experience.

Recent scholarship on the origins of the Carmelite order has thrown new light on the struggles that have shaped their history.\textsuperscript{199} In the late twelfth and early thirteenth

\textsuperscript{197} For a discussion of the Renaissance turn to the ancient models of reform, see Eugene F. Rice and Anthony Grafton, \textit{The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460-1559}, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 68f.

\textsuperscript{198} John O’Malley, S.J., “Historical Thought and the Reform Crisis of the Early Sixteenth Century,” Theological Studies, 28 (1967), 534. Also, two other excellent studies on medieval concepts of reform: the classic and encyclopedic work of Gerhart B. Ladner \textit{The Idea of Reform, Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers}; and a fascinating recent series of essays that revisit Ladner’s thesis, \textit{Reform and Renewal in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Studies in Honor of Louis Pascoe}, (ed.) Thomas M. Izbicki and Christopher M. Bellitto, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2000). Both of these studies focus on the Christian theological and institutional history of the idea of reform. Ladner’s definition of reform as “the idea of free, intentional and ever perfectable, multiple, prolonged and ever repeated efforts by man to reassert and augment values pre-existent in the spiritual-material compound of the world” (35), though largely detached from any history other than the history of ideas, suggests the same medieval trope O’Malley located in Giles’ work: reform is the attempt to restore a pre-existent order that has been corrupted or lost.

\textsuperscript{199} In particular, the work of Andrew Jotischky has done much to bring understanding to the unique approach medieval Carmelites have taken to narrating their own history. See his \textit{The Carmelites and Antiquity: Mendicants and Their Pasts in the Middle Ages} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
century a loose assembly of Latin Christian laymen and clerics on Mount Carmel around the “spring of Elijah,” living a quasi-eremitical existence, petitioned Albert, the patriarch of Jerusalem in 1206 to give them a “rule” to solidify their identity as a single community of hermits under the patronage of the Virgin Mary and Elijah, their “founder.” Albert responded to their petition with a brief, informal rule that confirmed their way of life and directed them to elect a superior. Within two decades the threat of Arab re-conquest of the Latin Kingdom in Palestine, and the growing controversy in Europe over the proliferation of new religious communities, as well as the growing power of the rapidly expanding mendicant orders of Franciscans and Dominicans, led the newly formed community on Carmel to petition Rome to “safeguard their juridical position.”

Their emigration back to Europe came in stages, and it was not long before their Palestinian identity was shaken by the greatly different social and religious landscape, and the harsh environment. Their survival depended on adaptation to the new situation, and they quickly sought counsel with the Dominicans who recommended an adaptation of Albert’s rule. In 1247 Pope Innocent IV added to the original eremitical rule a mendicant layer of “permissions” – to own property and to live in the city, to preach and to beg in the streets. In 1254 Innocent granted the Carmelites faculties to hear confessions, and the prior general of the Carmelites, Simon Stock, inserted the friars into the heart of Europe’s great universities. It was not long before the mendicant adaptations overwhelmed the hermit model, and a new identity emerged. The new prior general elected after Simon’s death, Nicholas the Frenchman, had spent his early monastic life as a hermit on Carmel, and left only after he was elected. When he made his first visitation of the western monasteries, he was deeply troubled and convened a general chapter in Sicily in 1267 where he denounced the changes approved by Innocent and Simon Stock in biting terms. Three years later, he issued the Ignea sagitta, a fierce statement condemning the mendicant adaptations and the abandonment of the fresh memory of the

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200 Federico Ruiz Salvador, et al., God Speaks in the Night, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 59. Andrew Jotischky concludes that although Nicholas’ Ignea represented a failed call for reform by return, the tensions embodied in this fierce letter would remain and resurface in other forms; not the least of which was John and Teresa’s own call for reform by return. Carmelite scholars traditionally played down the significance of the Ignea as much of Carmelite (up until the 1940s) scholarship was possessed by the need to see an irenic resolution to the mendicant transformation. See Jotischky’s The Carmelites and Antiquity: Mendicants and Their Pasts in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 79-105.
eremites of Carmel. The letter bemoaned the move into the city, and the common life that meant the loss of separate cells where “the heavenly Bridegroom and His bride, the contemplative soul, may be able to converse there in the tranquility of an intimate conversation.”

Shortly after penning this work, he resigned, and his successor, Ralph the German, also a native of Carmel, resigned three years after taking office and retired to one of the only remaining Carmelite foundations in Europe – Hulne in Briton – that retained a rural setting and a non-mendicant life.

Though the written record of the voices of protest against mitigation within Carmel were largely silenced after the end of the thirteenth century, as the order passed into a fully mendicant identity, the emerging narratives of their own telling of history produced a different, but no less ambivalent commentary on the conflicted identity of the Carmelites of Europe. As the Carmelites came to claim a stable juridical identity after Pope Boniface VIII gave them final confirmation in 1298, they still faced mendicant (especially Dominican) hostility. Those prosecuting their case against the legitimacy-claims of the Carmelites accused them, in scholastic insults, of lacking an “efficient cause” in a founder. This began a furious labor among the Carmelites to create what Paul Chandler calls “one of the great enterprises of historical fabrication.” They created an autobiographical history that argued for an unbroken, historical succession of hermits on Mount Carmel from the days of Elijah until the expulsion of the Carmelites from Palestine in the late thirteenth century. But what is most curious, in Chandler’s mind, is that the story-telling by these mendicants still represented an identity “strangely and permanently divided,” as the topoi of Carmelite narrative self-description retained its eremitical core.

So, while the Carmelite-mendicants talked about the importance of their active service in the world, the Carmelite-eremites spoke as if they still lived in the desert. Even John Soreth, the fifteenth century prior general and founder of the Carmelite

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202 Rohrbach states that there were several such quasi-eremitical Carmelite communities in Europe that were retained as an “option” for those Carmelites who still sought the primitive ideal. All of these houses disappeared, however, in the fifteenth century as the order went into decline. Teresa’s reform was the first attempt to resurrect such Carmelite communities. Ibid., 74.
204 Ibid., xxiii.
Second Order of nuns, described the Carmelite calling as the abandonment of the city in order to seek solitude, and appropriate Carmelite labor as gardening and basket weaving!\(^{205}\) \textit{L’homme est double.}

Jane Ackerman argues that the Carmelite’s fabrication of stories of an unbroken Elijan succession of monks on Carmel, their freehanded invention of biblical narratives that portray Elijah as a solitary contemplative, and their wildly implausible stories of the “sons of the prophets” receiving the Virgin Mary on Mount Carmel as a hermit must be read “as evidence pointing to the order’s experiential knowledge of an Elijan quality of the spiritual life that survived the shock of transplant to urban life in Europe.”\(^{206}\) In fact, the greater the distance was between that Carmelite eremitical memory and the \textit{de facto} realities of their mendicant form of life, the further the figure of Elijah was driven into “narrative solitude.”

Jesse Gellrich, in her work on medieval conceptions of Biblical exegesis, examines mythologizing uses of Scripture that the Carmelite’s employed in this eremitical Elijan narrative. Gellrich locates the medieval practice of mythologizing interpretations Biblical texts within a broader set of metaphysical presuppositions that preoccupied medieval exegetes. For example, the platonic view that history unfolds eternal verities, or that there is a discernable order (\textit{logos}) to Scripture that underlies, but is not necessarily bound to, the literal meaning of the text, governed medieval exegetical praxis and historiographic praxis. So if Elijah is understood as a “type” of certain idealized characteristics (e.g. contemplation, divine revelation), then the exegete can re-read the Scriptural texts in ways that allow the contingent, historical facts to find and fit their pre-set transcendent meaning.\(^{207}\) The biblical narrative of Elijah’s “Vesuvian


\(^{207}\) Jesse M. Gellrich, \textit{The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction}, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), cited in Ackerman. Gellrich locates the medieval practice of mythologizing interpretations Biblical texts within the broader metaphysical presuppositions of medieval exegetes. For example, the platonic view that history unfolds eternal verities, or that there is a discernable order (\textit{logos}) to Scripture that underlies, but is not necessarily bound to, the literal meaning of the text, governed exegetical praxis. So if Elijah is a “type” of a certain idealized set of human and divine characteristics (e.g. contemplation, rapture), then one can re-read the Scriptural texts in ways that allow the contingent, historical facts to find their transcendent meaning.
prophetic effectiveness graphically suggests what might come about if one were truly swept up in the divine,” and so a historical procession of symbolic figures are created to link the originary “Elijan Form,” dwelling on the mythical mountain, to the Carmelites now living far away in exile.208 And if reform for the medieval always means a return to the primal form, then the imagined form of Elijah-the-eremite becomes the perennial mimetic exemplar of all Carmelite reform. Ackerman concurs with this assessment: “Reform efforts arising in the order usually involved a call to return to the eremitic solitude of Mount Carmel embodied in the myth of Elijah’s hermit life.” There in the solitude of Carmel “he is said to seek God alone,” independent from all “mundane human relationship.”209

The identity conflicts within Carmel that had reached a critical point in the thirteenth century were followed by a series of new crises between 1300 and 1500. The immense changes that transformed Europe in those centuries also transformed Carmel, further removing its ideals, in the judgment of some, from the primitive Elijan form. But the mitigations had been driven by historical circumstance. The Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century decimated many of the Carmelite monasteries, and the Hundred Years’ War between England and France drew many of the friars into active service in military conflicts. The Great Western Schism that divided the papacy between Avignon and Rome also divided the Carmelite order’s jurisdictional unity from 1383 to 1411. In 1432, 1459 and 1476 the Carmelites, in desperate need of new members, petitioned for, and received further mitigations of the rule that lessened the amount of solitude, fasting and abstinence from meat required. These mitigations produced further agitation among many of the Carmelite communities of Europe – with the notable exception of the Spanish province, who accepted the mitigations without resistance – and multiple calls for “reform by return” to a more original form of the rule arose throughout Europe; though none of these efforts would produce lasting results.210

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209 Ibid., 139.
In the sixteenth century, during the first decades of the Protestant reformation “almost half of the Order suddenly disappeared” in Europe, as monasteries were confiscated and many of the friars either fled or joined various Protestant movements. There were insistent calls for reform from the general chapters of the order in the first three decades of the sixteenth century, but there was little to show by way of concrete change. The once flourishing provinces of Aragón and Castile in Spain had declined, numbering less that one hundred friars and nuns, so that Teresa would say when she contemplated founding a reform for the friars, “it even seemed to me that [the friars of Castile] were dying out.” But, Balbino Velasco asserts to the contrary, that when the new Cyprian general of the order, Nicholas Audet, began his reforming work in 1530 his greatest success, according to the Carmelite official records, was to come in 1554 in the province of Castile where the observant reform was reported to be a success. The Castilian friars were even founding new monasteries in Andalusia, where Teresa’s reform would eventually flourish.

As Europe was ablaze with movements claiming as their own the medieval trope of “reform by return,” and Spain had radically redefined its own plural ethnic, cultural and religious identity with a call to a “return” to the imagined unity of its Visigothic Christian past, John and Teresa likewise looked back to the story of an Elijan Carmel to find an identity serenely unchanged by the relentless march of history. But more had changed in that memory than either was able to imagine, as the forces of culture and history had transformed Carmelite self-understanding even in those texts that claimed the greatest antiquity. We have examined briefly the impact of the mendicant, and especially the Franciscan story, on the evolution of the Carmelites. This complex history forms the matrix from which John’s ascetic construction of the Discalced identity took

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211 Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, *Journey to Carith: The Sources and Story of the Discalced Carmelites*, (Doubleday & Co., 1966), 123. This exodus shook the Carmelites deeply, especially in Spain and Italy, and led to the deep anxiety over Protestantism that in-part inspired Teresa’s desire to effect reform.
215 John and Teresa both mistook the text of the mitigated Rule of 1247 for what they believed was a fifth century Rule crafted by the patriarch of Jerusalem for the “sons of Elijah” living on mount Carmel.
shape. It was, I will argue, John’s explicit and implicit engagement with these histories that formed his unique appropriation of the wider Christian ascetical traditions to construct a “Discalced” identity in service to Teresa’s reformation. In concert with Teresa’s own appropriation of (especially) the Franciscan mystical reformation of Spain, as a means of interiorizing the Carmelite narrative, John attempted to resolve the centuries-old Carmelite identity crisis. He did this by calling his fellow Discalced to ascend a Carmel whose summit was to be found in the deepest “Augustinian” center of the self. There the complexities of Spanish identities, of historical conflicts, could be excluded. There, by means of radical *via* of negation and a powerful drive of erotic desire, the exemplary memory of Elijah could be appropriated. Though no amount of interiorizing could dispel the demands of engagement with his environment, John wrote to ensure Teresa’s dream would find voice in the idiom of early modern Catholic Spain.

Much of the scholarship on John would, up until the 1950s, abstract John from his historical setting. In that vein, Kieran Kavanaugh had asserted that “if Teresa in her writings is so noticeably a part of her culture and the problems and tensions of her times, St. John of the Cross in his writings seems almost abstracted from them, as though his work could have been written in any age.”

In the subsequent chapters of this study, I will seek to re-read John’s “ascetical” and “erotic” construction of “the self” in lieu of the rich textures of that history. But first, it is to an account of John’s unique constructions of self that we now must turn.

**Summary**

The Teresian reform of the Carmelite order in Spain drew on a complex of historical precedents, textual sources and socio-cultural influences that shaped the unique construction of a “Discalced identity.” The monastic ascetical traditions of the East and the medieval mendicant revolutions of the West offered to Teresa a set of paradigms for reform and a tradition of tension and hostility that would inform both her and John’s approach to monastic reform. In particular, the influence of the Franciscan reform movements in Spain effected an immediate and decisive influence on both Teresa and

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John. Franciscan Cardinal Cisneros initiated reforms in Spain that privileged vernacular piety, the visionary culture of the *beatas*, humanist biblical scholarship, diversity of schools of thought in the universities, the reform of monastic communities by a call to “return,” and the Franciscan-driven *recogimiento* movement that would define John and Teresa’s conception of Carmelite identity. Indeed, one could say that the transformation of the Carmelite order represented a Franciscanization of Carmel Cisneros’ diverse legacy would, in time, lead to challenges to Spain’s emerging and growing drive for unity, and so to increasing tensions. Teresa and John would find themselves negotiating those challenges to diversity in their quest for a “different” Carmel. John’s own life, caught in the web of social hierarchies, would lead him to the center of many of the controversies of his age, and the tensions of a Spanish Carmel struggling for its own identity. John, along with Teresa, would attempt to retrieve what they considered to be a lost identity in Carmel and John would find his spiritual quest for change to be marked by the suffering that he would say is at the heart of all reform. John and Teresa sought to make the spirit of Elijah again present, deeply marked by the Spain of Elijah’s return.
CHAPTER II: THE “SANJUANIST SELF” IN TEXTS

Introducing the idea of the self in John

To find John’s conception of “the self” awash in the tides of history helps us thicken our understanding of the vital contexts in which he wrote. To understand the meanings he invested in his texts requires us to engage in an interpretation of his work that is at home in the worldviews with which he would have been comfortably conversant. Setting out the outlines of such a context has dominated our study thus far, and now we must turn to the actual texts of John – specifically, his Ascent-Night – to see where we might find points of congruence between text and context. What imagined “self” or “selves” does John construct in his written works as he gives particular voice to the Teresian reforms of Carmel. John wrote for a specific audience with a specific set of intentions, both explicit and latent. This study attempts a reasonable interpretation both of John’s explicit and latent intentions by seeking the intelligible confluences of the constructions of “self” in the Ascent-Night and the concrete persons who constituted John’s living audience. Here I wish to examine in some depth the intra-textual world of John’s Ascent-Night by (1) briefly discussing the textual sources of influence that scholars generally agree loomed largest in John’s works, and (2) bringing some sense of clarity to the specific form of “the self” that John describes in these texts. This summary will offer a fuller background to our later discussions of how John’s imaginative constructions of selfhood function in the social and religious world of the Discalced Carmelite reformation.

The Ascent-Night represents John’s most systematic attempt to address the central concern of the Discalced Carmelite reform: how to arrive at a new identity found in union with God at the “summit of Mount Carmel” by means of the “dark night.” To this end, John employs a menagerie of ancient and medieval approaches in service to his analysis of the way that each nun or friar must take to “quickly”\textsuperscript{217} arrive at this destination.\textsuperscript{218} In

\textsuperscript{217} In the Theme prefacing the Ascent of Mount Carmel, John refers to his method as “how to reach divine union quickly.” The Ascent of Mount Carmel in The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, rev. ed., trans, Kieran Kavanaugh, and Otilio Rodriguez, (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991); “en breve a la divina union” (San Juan de la Cruz: Obras Completas, (ed.) Eulogio Pacho, (Burgos, El Monte. Carmelo, 1990)). All texts taken quoted from John’s own works in English translation, unless otherwise noted, will be taken from the Kavanaugh and Rodriguez version. All texts quote from John’s works in the
the *Ascent-Night*, more than in his other works, John draws on his scholastic training at the University of Salamanca to analyze this “way” up the Mount and offer a compelling account to “some of the persons of our holy order of the primitive observance of Mount Carmel, both friars and nuns, whom God favors by putting on the path leading up this mount, since they are the ones who asked me to write this work” (Prologue 8). I say “compelling” inasmuch as John wrote with the intention of motivating the Discalced to make the arduous climb up Carmel’s slopes and become a certain kind of self. In articulating the meaning of that “self,” John employed a robust scholastic idiom in a manner that demonstrated its relative value as he adhered to no specific school or authority. Scholastic language offers a way, John says, “through which the divine truths are understood” (CB, Introduction 3). But scholasticism was subordinate to “mystical theology, by which divine truths are experienced and enjoyed” (CB, Introduction 3).

Teresa had consistently expressed her desire to have friars who could utilize “learning” (*letros*) to provide a satisfying rationale for her version of the Carmelite contemplative vocation, in terms of the orthodox forms of the *recogimiento* movement. And John was realizing that desire.

When considering the sources that shaped and informed John’s conception of a “Discalced identity” as it is expressed in, for our purposes, the *Ascent-Night*, the possibilities seem limitless. Sanjuanist scholars agree that John’s employment of sources is highly eclectic, and tailored to his own needs in offering practical advice to friars and nuns seeking to embody the ideals of the Discalced reform. John shows a remarkable
willingness to adapt the _auctores_, the authorities of the theological and ascetical tradition to his own vision. But unlike Teresa, or many of the _recogimiento_ authors of the early to mid sixteenth century, he does not show an evident interest in demonstrating his exegesis of Scripture with supporting texts from patristic or medieval authorities.\footnote{221} Also, unlike Teresa, John showed no interest in circulating his hand-copied texts outside of the boundaries of the Discalced community.\footnote{222} What does seem evident is that John’s copious use of quotations from the Vulgate, along with his own loose translations, represent a direct attempt to overcome the 1559 Valdes Index’s banning of all vernacular translations of the Bible in Spain.\footnote{223}

In the _Ascent-Night_, John utilizes the analytical tools of scholastic logic to subdivide the journey toward union with God into a more or less orderly pattern, and employs commonplace scholastic philosophical axioms to ground his analysis in a form of reasoned argument. In his two other major commentarial works, the _Canticle_ and the _Flame_, John’s close adherence to a stanza-by-stanza allegorical commentary on his poetry largely eschews all of his attempts to apply a logical analysis.\footnote{224} In these texts he

\footnote{221} There is a vast literature dealing with the question of gender and authority, especially in the context of medieval religion. Prominent among those scholars include Caroline Walker Bynum, Amy Hollywood, Jodi Blinkoff and Mary Giles. In particular, the work done on Teresa of Avila in this regard is extensive, though very little attention is paid in scholarship to the relationship of gender and authority between John and Teresa. On Teresa see, for example, Alison Weber’s *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*, (Princeton, N.J, Princeton University Press, 1990), and Gillian T. W. Ahlgren’s *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*, (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1996). Both Weber and Ahlgren argue forcefully that Teresa’s constant references to male and clerical authorities, as well as her rhetoric of humility, possessed a strategic dimension meant to ground her authority as an author and teacher. More will be said in a later chapter in this regard about the paucity of references to traditional sources in John.

\footnote{222} There is no evidence that John’s works were known to any outside of the Discalced reform before his death, though there is evidence, as we shall see later, that the male Discalced leadership of the late 1580s actively sought to suppress the influence of his texts within the reform.

\footnote{223} John’s generous use of translated quotations from the Bible in his commentaries was a common enough way for spiritual authors to circumvent the Index’s prohibitions and allow access for women to the texts. And his style of quotation is deeply rooted in the monastic style of _lectio divina_. See Colin P. Thompson, *St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night* (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 84-115. John shows no hint of the humanist concern with literal translation, original languages, etc. In this sense, John remains in the monastic-vernacular and not the humanist-vernacular tradition of Biblical interpretation.

\footnote{224} Though see his later redactions of the _Canticle_ poem, done to fit the poem more neatly into the classical threefold purgative, illuminative, unitive way, which also betray a scholastic concern with shaping the poetry/commentaries in a theo-logically ordered manner. See George Tavard for an excellent scholarly
follows the structure of the poetry, employs the metaphorical language of the poetic texts and, compared to the *Ascent-Night*, infrequently avers to scholastic argument or idiom to argue his points. Here I will explore the basic analytical patterns of John’s theological and philosophical anthropology, his view of “the self,” that appear in the *Ascent-Night*. I will begin this by first setting John’s idea of “the self” within some broader contexts of the western Christian intellectual tradition’s conceptions of selfhood.

**Sources of the Self in John of the Cross**

Charles Taylor, in his *Sources of the Self*, offers a bold and comprehensive narrative of the emergence of the uniquely western conceptions of “the self” that ground themselves in conceptions of moral goodness. His story begins with the Greek literary and philosophical traditions, epitomized by Homer, Plato and their successors. At the center of Taylor’s argument is the idea that people understand who they are in large measure by the “strong evaluations” they make about *what is good*, and how that understanding will direct their lives. Of particular importance in Taylor’s account is the fusion of the quest for “the good” with what he calls the “radical turn inward.” This tradition of “interiority” flowed from Plato through Augustine, and, by means of Augustine’s intellectual progeny, into the Latin Christian tradition of the medieval west. I will briefly recount a portion of Taylor’s “story of the self” in order to highlight in particular the central role of Augustine in shaping the “discourse of the self” that John of the Cross came to embrace as his own; and which he offered to the Carmelite reform movement as a way to articulate its own identity.

For Plato, the primary locus of authentic and grounding identity for the person is in the “rule of reason” that effects unity within the subject and offers mastery over the unruly and irrational passions. This disordered *chaos* is transformed by reason’s presidency into an ordered *cosmos*. In turn, Platonic reason finds an axis by means of its own contemplative gaze upon the world beyond the shadows of matter, in the

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226 Ibid., 25-52.
227 Ibid., 31.
transcendent world of intelligible Forms. For Plato, as for so many of his Greek successors, the highest end of the person is to be found in *theoria*, that contemplative gaze of reason on the immutable Forms. Plato’s underlying cosmology is embedded in a dualism that sharply distinguishes body and soul, material and immaterial, mutable and eternal, and the “good life” comes to be equated with a “turning from” the finite and imperfect world of unlikeness toward the realm of the eternal; the really Real. The right ordering of the inner person is, therefore, determined by a proper outer orientation, fundamentally shaped by a noetic gaze on the Forms. The “good life,” in this conception, flows from a love of the contemplated eternal Good, which in turn creates a requisite mimetic likeness between the soul and the Good. Finally, for Plato, as for Aristotle, knowledge of the order of things acquired in *theoria* is in itself a good. It needs no further justification, and can rightly be thought of as a proper end (*telos*) of the good life. Yet we cannot say that the Greeks conceived of the contemplative “turn toward the Good” as an inward turn, but rather for them it was a turn to an external and, in Plato’s case, transcendent order that gave pattern to right reason.229

After his précis of the evolution of Greek concepts of the self vis-à-vis the good life, Taylor turns his attention the figure he considers a watershed in the development of western ideas of the self: Augustine of Hippo.230 Augustine was, of course, heavily indebted to Plato, and to Plato’s “neo-platonic” heir, Plotinus. Though Augustine inherited an already impressive and varied stream of Jewish and Christian thinkers who had engaged in creative exchanges between Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian sources, Augustine, according to Taylor, took a new step in defining the nature of the self and its quest for fulfillment.

Augustine, like many of his Greek-speaking predecessors, is enamored at the likeness between Christian thought and Platonic, seeing “Plato as the ‘Attic Moses’.”231 The material-immaterial dualism of Plato becomes for Augustine a lens through which to read, for example, Paul’s opposition between spirit and flesh. The Ideas of the Platonic

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229 Ibid., 119-26.
231 Ibid., 127.
world of Forms become the *logoi*, the thoughts and attributes of God that are the objects of contemplation. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo, per Verbum* was blended with a Platonic ontology of participation that opened an ontology of *communio* between God and his creation. And, Augustine argued, if the eternal Word was the “pattern” after which the visible world was created, one could contemplate in the natural order as a reflection of the eternal God. Here, Augustine’s semiotic interpretation of the material and created order would argue that creation is an epiphany of the divine. Though, because the sign always gives way before the Reality it signifies, one can never rest in the sign but must leave it behind for the final end of the self: God alone.²³²

The Christian idea of *metanoia*, or conversion was, Taylor argues, thoroughly Platonized by Augustine, rooting the fundamental problem of sin in the enslaving immersion of spiritual reason in the material realm of the senses.²³³ The solution to this enslavement was a radical “turning toward” the realm of spirit, toward the immaterial and unchanging that is God alone. Additionally, for Augustine, this shift must not be only a turn in the manner of knowing, but also in the manner of loving and desiring. Where Plato privileges the rational contemplation of the eternal, Augustine privileges love and desire for the eternal. The problem then becomes at heart not the “two knowings,” but the “two loves” – love of the creation to contempt of God (*concupiscentia*), or love of God to contempt of the creation (*caritas*). In addition, whereas for Plato the basic cosmological dualities are spirit-matter, higher-lower, eternal-temporal, immutable-immutable, for Augustine they are inner-outer – *inner* being intellect-memory-will and *outer* being all that is grounded in the senses. For Augustine, as for Plato, the Good cannot immediately be known directly, but rather must be intellectually “seen” by means of likenesses. But whereas for Plato those likenesses are found primarily in the order of the outer world of the cosmos, for Augustine the most immediate path to knowledge of

²³² We will explore this neo-platonized conception of creation as something to be “passed beyond” in the quest for the highest Good, as it deeply shaped the western Christian tradition’s conception of human fulfillment in general, and John of the Cross’ conception in particular. See an excellent discussion of Augustine’s struggle with the “use” and “enjoyment” of creation in Gilson, Etienne, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, (New York: Random House, 1960), 165ff.

²³³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 138-9. This dialectical view of sin and the senses vis-à-vis reason will dominate much of the western spiritual tradition, though Augustine is far from being the only witness to this unique blending of Platonic and Christian thought. John of the Cross’ anthropology will be largely defined by this approach, and is yet another example of John’s indebtedness to Augustine.
God, the greatest likeness, is found in the “turn within.” This turn is, for Augustine, toward the very structures of knowing and loving in actus, in which is inscribed the image of the Trinity. The step toward inwardness is, therefore, the step toward God, making the first-person standpoint – the dynamisms of the reflexive self – integral to the quest for truth. Here, Taylor believes, is Augustine’s most novel contribution to western ideas of the self at its most radical, and most decisively influential.

Penetrating more deeply into the nature of Augustine’s quest for interiority, Taylor discusses Augustine’s theory of memory and its relationship to the Platonic idea of reminiscence. Plato believed that the rational soul pre-existed its life in the body, and that the soul bears within itself innate knowledge that originates in the realm of Forms from whence it once fell into matter. In this account, the quest for knowledge of the truth is to be seen as an act of recollection, teasing from memory the truth that is already known. Augustine’s post-Nicene doctrine of creation ex nihilo prohibited such a pre-existence ground for epistemology. But his theological anthropology did allow him to see within the soul’s rational ground the luminescence of the Trinity, whose image and indwelling presence make the journey from the exterior to the interior into a journey from the inferior to the superior. Going into the memory, therefore, takes one “beyond” to God, the supreme and ordering principle of life; and ultimately to union with that principle. This Augustinian “imago Dei,” the image of God in the soul, is imprinted in the tripartite structures of the knowing self: memory, intellect and will. In the memory resides the implicit knowledge of the “true self,” which is made explicit in a verbum, a word/concept formed by the intellect; and then that explicated “verbum-self” is loved. For Augustine it is in this tripartite dynamism of knowing and loving in the self that the Trinity is seen to be immanent in those very structures of selfhood, and is loved.


235 It is Edward Howells’ thesis that John of the Cross’ mystical epistemology is to be understood in precisely this sense: that the agencies of reflexive subjectivity are simultaneously an “opening out” into the reflexive subjectivity of God as Trinity. For Howells’ summary of this thesis, see especially John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood, (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 125-28.

Augustine, Taylor says, further transformed Plato’s notion of knowledge and love-desire by introducing into it a Stoic conception of rational deliberation/choice and their relationship to the passions. Taylor argues that Christianity emphasized the crucial role of personal commitment to the work of moral goodness, and that Augustine employed this in critique of certain Greek conceptions of accounting for moral goodness. Plato and Aristotle’s teleological conception of the good life explained moral failure by, in Plato’s case, ignorance or, in Aristotle’s case, distortive training and bad habits. Augustine, in his fierce debates with the Pelagians, developed the notion of Original Sin that painted humanity as radically perverse, morally impotent and in need of grace’s healing and restoration. Here the story of sin, of grace, of the fundamental incapacity of humanity to achieve the integration and unity of the person around reason apart from total dependence on God’s action enters the western tradition with new and controversial force. However, sin has not altered Augustine’s account of the journey to God as a journey within. For Augustine, sin has curved humanity in on itself (cor curvatus in se) in a false enclosure. But grace and redemption do not turn the person away from “interiority,” but rather, by means of humility, break open the false enclosure on the self in order to open out to God who is within. This redemptive process of returning within to the Source is the dominating paradigm of all of John’s account of the Discalced self, and John shows himself, in fully appropriating Augustine’s account of interiority as ascent to God, to be a faithful Augustinian. Though as we will see, John will re-interpret the Augustinian paradigms and adapt them to serve his own account of the Teresian reforming ideal.

More sources of the Sanjuanist self

Both Steven Payne and Edward Howells forcefully argue, against the grain of many of the early and mid-twentieth century attempts to style John a Thomist, that John was in fact most deeply an Augustinian. While John was clearly influenced by Aquinas, especially in important elements of his epistemology, he differs significantly from Aquinas on, among other things, the interrelationship between nature and grace, the value of natural theology and the capacity of the soul to experience before death the effects of the beatific vision. John’s vivid sense of sin’s ravaging effects on humanity, for example,
echo Augustine more forcefully than Aquinas, as does his Augustinian “faculty psychology,” which we described above, that privileges the three spiritual faculties of intellect, memory and will as the locus of union between the soul and God.\(^{238}\)

It is a cliché in Sanjuanist scholarship to say that the sources of John’s thought are largely opaque, for as we have seen John rarely refers to specific authors, texts or sources other than Scripture.\(^{239}\) John’s training at the University of Salamanca, according to biographer Crisócano de Jesús Sacramentado, imprinted on John a certain comfort with theological and philosophical diversity.\(^{240}\) The Salamanca faculty, still untouched in the 1560s by the neo-orthodoxy of Trent or the ever-strengthening arm of the Inquisition, included Thomist, Nominalist, Scotist, Avicennian and Averroist chairs, along with lately established humanist chairs of Greek and Hebrew.\(^{241}\) Debates among schools were known to be fierce, and riots would even erupt at times amid the public disputations. Though relatively little is known of which exact classes John took while at Salamanca between 1564 and 1568, John’s works betray a broad knowledge of the scholastic terms and debates.\(^{242}\)

\(^{238}\) Aquinas only posited two spiritual faculties of intellect and will. In reference to the Augustine-Aquinas debate I refer to works like Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange’s *Christian Perfection and Contemplation according to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*, trans. Sr. M. Timothe Doyle (London: B. Herder Book Co., 1937); and Jacques Maritain’s *Distinguish to Unite, or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (from 4th French ed.) (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1959). Both these authors, and those like them who were part of the Thomistic renaissance of the early to mid-twentieth century, attempted to show John as a merely pragmatic version of a Thomist epistemology and anthropology. More recent studies abound in arguments, which I find convincing, that John is more a part of the Augustinian/Neo-platonic renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For example, Steven Payne's *John of the Cross and the Cognitive Value of Mysticism: An Analysis of Sanjuanist Teaching and its Philosophical Implications for Contemporary Discussions of Mystical Experience* (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer, 1990), 23-40; or Edward Howells’ *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood*, (New York: Crossroad, 2002) 24-5, 27.

\(^{239}\) Interestingly, even when John does refer to specific authors like Augustine, Aquinas or Bernard, the texts he uses are mostly pseudonymous ones.


\(^{242}\) Luis Enrique Rodríguez-San Pedro Bezares, in *La Formación Universitaria de Juan de la Cruz* (Valladolid, Junta de Castilla y León, Consejería de Cultura y Turismo, 1993), draws on the growing evidence of the makeup of the faculty at Salamanca while John was matriculating as a student of arts and theology, though little evidence is offered as to which classes John himself took. We do know that from 1565-66 John studied logic (35-48), from 1566-1567 he studied natural and moral philosophy, and, after receiving his bachelor of arts degree in the summer of 1567, from 1567-1568 he studied theology. After 1568 he inexplicably abandoned his theology studies and entered Teresa’s Discalced reform. Bezares says,
A number of studies have likened John’s anthropology to the Rhineland mystical tradition, particularly to fourteenth and fifteenth century authors Jan van Ruusbroec and John Tauler. Helmut Hatzfeld compares Ruusbroec’s “bridal mysticism” of metaphysical account of erotic love to John’s own, as well as the crucial role both Ruusbroec and John assign to the metaphor of the “touch of the naked ground of God” to the “naked ground the soul” that effects union. He also notes the agreement of Ruusbroec and John in criticizing any emphasis on the positive value of mystical “phenomena” or, as Hatzfeld terms them, “charismata.” What is clear is John’s indebtedness to the larger neo-platonic and Augustinian revival that began in earnest in the early fourteenth century. Particularly, as we will later explore in more depth, John’s original blending of Augustinian anthropology, Thomist epistemology and Pseudo-Dionysian apophaticism mirrors, in many ways, that of Eckhart, Tauler and Ruusbroec.

Arguably, John was most decisively influenced by thinkers, like Tauler and Ruusbroec, in the apophatic tradition who radically denied the human capacity to comprehend and achieve union with an infinite God by natural/finite means. The fons et origio of this apophatic tradition in its Christian form was the Pseudo-Dionysius, the mysterious sixth century Syrian author who employed the metaphysical system of Proclus as a critique of Christian theological discourse and as a means of ascending to union with God. Though it is difficult to know how much of Pseudo-Dionysius’ work John was directly familiar with, the apophatic (and erotic) tradition he engendered left profound marks on John’s schema of the ascent of the soul to union with the infinite God. As Denys Turner argues, Pseudo-Dionysius offered to Christian thinkers not

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243 Tauler’s works were available in translation in Spain, Edward Howells references Jean Orcibal’s argument that the Pseudo-Taulerian Institutions, well known in Spanish translation, may have influenced John’s view of the passive intellect in the state of union. See Howells, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood, (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 153.

244 Helmut A. Hatzfeld, “The Influence of Ramon Lull and Jan van Ruysbroeck on the Language of the Spanish Mystics,” Traditio 4 (1946), 337-97. Hatzfeld’s detailed philological comparisons with John also include the work of the fourteenth century Franciscan of Andalusia, Ramon Lull, who was deeply influenced by his apologia with Islam. The problem with this study, and others like it, is that it dehistoricizes the question of influence by ignoring textual questions (e.g. did John read either author?), and broader literary questions (e.g. were the images and words used by Lull or Ruusbroec common currency in broader literary circles?).

245 John refers four times to the same text in Pseudo-Dionysius’ Mystical Theology, a prayer addressed to the Trinity that calls God a “ray of darkness.” See A2 8.6; N2 5.3; CB 14.16; F 3.49. Paul Rorem traces
only an apophatic theology that served as a method to critique Christian speech about God, but also as an apophatic anthropology that allowed those same thinkers to critique understandings of the human person in light of their fulfillment in union with the ineffable God. John would put both of these apophatic strategies to good use in proffering a theoretical and practical ground for the Discalced reform.

Along with the more remote textual candidates for influence on John we have already mentioned, a few more proximate and obvious sources stand out. John was a Carmelite, and in the studia at the Carmelite college of San Andrés he would have been exposed to some of the Carmelite “masters” like the Thomists John Baconthorpe and Michael of Bologna, though their differences from John are as pronounced as their similarities. Also deeply influential in the Carmelite psyche was the work of Filep Ribot, author of the Institute of the First Monks, whose work offered a creative and highly influential collation of Carmelite history, sources and primitive rules. Ribot’s texts served as an imaginative model for Carmelites to think through their conflicted identity, and retained the tensions that John and Teresa would struggle to resolve. Nicholas the Frenchman’s scathing critique of the Carmelite mitigations of their eremitical identity, the Ignea Sagitta, was also in wide circulation in Carmelite reform-minded communities, and though there is no evidence for John’s first-hand knowledge of the text, his awareness of its contents could not have escaped his (or Teresa’s) notice.

the fascinating history of Pseudo-Dionysius’ entry into the Latin theological tradition in his Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Of particular interest in John of the Cross’ regard is the story of the severing of the cataphatic Dionysian texts on liturgy and cosmology from the radically apophatic Mystical Theology. Rorem argues that this textual schism led to a tradition of mysticism adrift from a broader ecclesiology and ontology; one that was highly individual, interior and deconstructive. This certainly is suggestive as a way to read John’s own lack of ecclesial, liturgical and ontological content in his texts. Denys Turner says as much in The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 248-51, though he does not tie his observations to Rorem’s textual history.


Andrew Jotischky, The Carmelites and Antiquity: Mendicants and Their Pasts in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 104-5. There are as yet no comparative studies done between the Discalced reform and the Ignea, though it seems clear that the longing of both John and Nicholas for the mythic solitude of an eremitical Carmel bear more than accidental likeness. Though John shows no interest
Many of the authors translated into, or written in Castilian find an echo in John.\footnote{As we have seen, the Castilian and Andalusian Franciscan schools of reform, originating with the anti-scholastic Villacreses in the fourteenth century, would prove a decisive influence on both Teresa and John. Under the powerful advocacy of Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, himself a Franciscan reformer, a flood of “mystical” and humanist literature, both imported and native, would find its voice in the Castilian tongue and help give birth to a number of influential and controversial religious movements. The imported and translated “mystical” literature included the works of Hugh of Balma, Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, Bonaventure, Vincent of Ferrer,\footnote{This Dominican apocalyptic preacher traversed Castile in the 15th century, calling for reform. Cardinal Cisneros had Ferrer’s treatise on the spiritual life translated into Castilian and published in 1510, and had the chapters that were critical of visions and ecstasy omitted. This oft cited fact witnesses to Cisneros’ support for the form of mysticism that emphasized such experiences, though that same emphasis would, after his death, lead to the cultivation of a religious movement that would be targeted by the Inquisition – the so-called alumbrados. See Gillian T. W. Ahlgren’s Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity, (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1996), 10.} Jean Gerson,\footnote{Gerson’s treatise on discerning spirits had immense influence on Spain’s theological establishment, the Inquisition, and offered a highly critical view of visionary experience that bore misogynist tendencies. See Paschal Boland, The Concept of Discretio Spiritum in John Gerson’s “De Probatione Spirituum” and “De Distinctione Verarum Visionum a Falsis” (Washington, D.C., 1959). Gillian Ahlgren sees close resemblance between John’s severe approach to visionary experience and Gerson’s texts. Gillian T. W. Ahlgren’s Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity, (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1996), 98-9.} John Tauler and representatives of the devotio moderna, an anti-scholastic reform movement that began in the Netherlands in the late fourteenth century under the inspiration of the Dutch reformer, Gerhard Groote.\footnote{The devotio movement was broad and complex, and exercised immense influence as an “alternative” to the divided clerical institution under the Avignon Papacy. See John H. Van Engen, Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings. The Classics of Western Spirituality. (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 36-61.} Undoubtedly John, who himself belonged to this emerging tradition of “vernacular theology,” along with Teresa, was influenced by this new fervor embodied particularly in the Franciscan recogimiento movement.\footnote{Bernard L. McGinn popularized the term “vernacular theology” to describe a distinctive form of theological literature in the medieval period distinct from “monastic” and “scholastic” theology. For example, see his “Introduction: Meister Eckhart and the Beguines in the Context of Vernacular Theology,” in Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and}
or “recollection” emphasized the interior character of prayer, and deemphasized the importance of exterior religious practice. Important names in this movement, as we saw earlier, include especially Franciscans like Francisco de Osuna and Bernadino de Laredo, both of whom attempted to distance the recogimiento movement from one of its spiritual heirs, the alumbrados. The heretical alumbrados, or “illuminists” were so-branded by the Dominican-dominated Inquisition beginning in the 1520s based on their claim to immediate access to the meaning of the vernacular Scriptures. As many of the alumbrados were lay women, beatas, or religious women without access to formal theological education, they were considered easily led into error, and were suspect with their claims to divine authority to teach or preach. Most spiritual authors claiming orthodoxy after the 1520s, including John and Teresa, were highly critical of their views (even if they shared many of their tendencies). There were many other Spanish reformers who must have loomed large in John’s own formation, like the charismatic Franciscan reformer Peter of Alcántara who inspired Teresa by his extreme penances, or the secular cleric John of Ávila who established a system of seminary education for secular clergy before Trent’s mandate of such institutions.

Sanjuanist literary scholar Colin Thompson, after reviewing many of the sources of literary influence we have briefly discussed above, concludes that the overwhelmingly decisive source of his inspiration was the Biblical text in general, and the Song of Songs in particular. Among the many anecdotes that were collected in the early seventeenth century as part of the early process of John’s canonization cause, there were many references to his particular love for Scripture. John was said to be always carrying, reading and quoting from Scripture, and that he had “committed most of the text to

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Marguerite Porete, ed. Bernard McGinn (New Yourk: Continuum, 1994), 1-14. Here he marks out the basic distinguishing characteristics of vernacular theology: (1) it accompanied the democratization and secularization of mysticism that emphasized personal (visionary) experience, (2) it witnessed the first significant literary engagement between men and women, allowing women a new form of authority, (3) it employed a new language in the process of rendering Latin theological discourse into vernacular idiom. John and Teresa both fit into this general category, though the distinction among the three “styles” of theology should not be exaggerated.

Thompson avers to John’s monastic exegetical techniques as the driving force in his poetry and commentaries. His use of allegory, the liturgical patters of his Scriptural references, the use of very traditional tropes from the Song commentary tradition all speak to John’s primary influence: medieval monastic exegesis. Colin P. Thompson, St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 167-82.
There is a story that takes place in Lisbon, Portugal where John had traveled with several other friars to attend a Discalced Chapter meeting. There was a beata in the city who was famed as a “stigmatic,” and the friars urged John to join them in traveling to see her first-hand. John declined, and instead spent the day reading Scripture and looking for the very first time on the ocean. This story illustrates both John’s devotion to the Biblical text and his critical view of the religious culture of his day. For him, one needs nothing more than what is given in the traditional sources of Christian faith, and Scripture was for John the most significant monument of that tradition.257

John’s exegetical approach to the Biblical text engaged the complex of strategies utilized by medieval Christianity. The medieval couplet, Littera gesta docet/Quod credas allegoria/Moralia quod agas/Quo tendas anagogia, encapsulates the broad range of approaches – literal, moral, allegorical, anagogical – that John applied to the texts, though without doubt allegorical interpretation was most fundamental to his exegetical method.258 He also shared, as we have said, in the exegetical tradition of “monastic theology.” That tradition sees the inspired Biblical texts as an organic unity of interrelated parts that shed light one on the other. Proper interpretation requires a slow, prayerful and ruminating method of reading known as lectio divina, literally the “divine reading.” Most often among the Carmelites, the texts chosen for lectio-reading came from the liturgical cycles from the Mass or the Breviary. In fact, Jean Vilnet argues that the vast majority of John’s references to Scripture, and even his very few references to authorities from the tradition, come from the Carmelite Breviary.259

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257 Ibid., 265-66. While John’s singular devotion to the Biblical text as a source of authority is not unique in the monastic tradition, his blending of monastic, vernacular and scholastic approaches to Scripture is.
258 The literal sense teaches what happened/The allegorical what you believe/The moral what you should do/The anagogical where you are going. E. Ann Matter, The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity. Middle Ages series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 54. In his treatment of prophetic revelations in Scripture in A 2.19-22, John attempts to interrelate all four senses of the text, and argues for the supremacy of the allegorical (“spiritual”) sense.
259 Jean Vilnet, La Biblia en la Obra de San Juan de la Cruz, trans. by P M. de Lizaso, OFM Cap. (Buenos Aires: Desclee de Brouwer. 1953), 22-3. Since Vilnet, little has been done to examine the influence of the Carmelite liturgy on John’s use of texts, interpretive styles, and so on. The Discalced abandonment of the Palestinian Rite of the Mass in 1586, under Nicolas Doria, in many ways represented a further distancing of the order from its Palestinian memory. John seems to have opposed this move, and it would be fascinating to explore the impact of such a shift on John’s conception of Discalced identity vis-à-vis the Palestinian memory. See also, Miguel Angel Díez, “Un misal de San Juan de la Cruz,” in Federico Ruiz, ed., Experiencia y pensamiento en San Juan de la Cruz, (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1990), 155-67.
approach to exegesis also allows biblical and liturgical texts to mingle with what Bernard of Clairvaux calls the “book of experience,” so that the reader and the text can enter into a hermeneutical dialogue: text interpreting the reader’s experience and the reader’s experience interpreting the text.\textsuperscript{260} Certainly John saw his own poetry and commentaries as providing material for such a hermeneutical dialogue, and surely intended his own method of \textit{lectio} reflected in his use of biblical texts and interpretive commentary to serve as an exemplary model for his Discalced audience.

John himself claims, in the prologue of the \textit{Ascent}, that his all of essential arguments will be drawn from Scripture, and that his own interpretation of Scripture strives to conform to that of the Catholic tradition he identifies himself with:

\begin{quote}
...all that, with God's favor, I shall say, will be Sacred Scripture, at least in the most important matters, or those that are difficult to understand. Taking Scripture as our guide we do not err, since the Holy Spirit speaks to us through it. Should I misunderstand or be mistaken on some point, whether I deduce it from Scripture or not, I will not be intending to deviate from the true meaning of Sacred Scripture or from the doctrine of our Holy Mother the Catholic Church (Prologue 2).
\end{quote}

Just prior to this selected text, John also refers to the fact that, though he will make use of practical “experience” and scholastic “science,” they will only be employed when it seems useful; and then only in a very limited fashion. The assertion of the radical priority of the Biblical text flows naturally within the monastic milieu, and especially the Carmelite Rule’s insistence that the Carmelite “meditate in the law of the Lord day and night.”\textsuperscript{261} In addition, John’s marginalizing of “experience and science” flows from John’s own \textit{critical assessment} of the scholastic endeavor to employ natural reason in the quest for knowledge of God and of the self. One might say that, in the \textit{Ascent-Night},

\textsuperscript{260} McGinn attributes to Bernard an enormous innovation in the exegetical tradition inasmuch as Bernard placed the “book of experience” on par with the books of nature and Scripture as sources of revelation. As we will see with John and some of the sixteenth century Spanish reform movements, this book of experience will play a crucial and revolutionary role in shaping the “new mysticism.” See McGinn’s “The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism,” \textit{Church History}, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Jun., 1996), 197-219.

\textsuperscript{261} Kees Waaijman, \textit{The Mystical Space of Carmel}, tr. John Vriend (Peeters Publishers, 1999), 275.
John employs scholasticism only to have it subverted in the purgative nights where all recourse to natural knowledge is painfully deconstructed. As we will see, John’s critique of theology and anthropology will utilize the whole complex of influences we have briefly outlined, and offer a unique synthesis that responds to the pressing needs of the world inhabited by the Discalced Carmelites.

Structures of the self in the Ascent-Night

It is not known precisely when John wrote the poem, One Dark Night. Most scholars agree it was written shortly after his escape from the Toledo prison in 1578, and was completed by the time he reached El Calvario in 1579. The poem’s imagery, especially in the first four stanzas, seems to allude to John’s furtive escape from prison. In fact, Teófanes Egido argues persuasively that John’s experience of nearly nine months of severe deprivation – e.g. malnourishment, unsanitary conditions, near-total darkness – as well as his escape from prison at night, informed his uniquely “existential” apophaticism in the Ascent-Night, transforming the image of night into a polyvalent symbol of his ascetical mysticism.²⁶² The Ascent of Mount Carmel and the Dark Night were begun as commentaries on this poem after he received requests from the Discalced nuns and friars while in Andalusia for an “explanation” of the poem, and for an elaboration of John’s “doctrine.”²⁶³

Of all John’s written works, the Ascent, according to Truman Dicken, was written over the longest period of time, on and off between the years 1582 and 1586. The Dark Night, on the other hand, was written more quickly, probably in the year 1586. The Ascent is begins as a line-by-line commentary on the poem, but soon is transfigured into a systematic treatise on the ascetical life based on structural criteria foreign to the structure of the poem. The Dark Night returns to the originally proposed line-commentary structure, though even here John occasionally deviates from this pattern for the sake of distinctions foreign to the poetic text. In both cases, with the Ascent and the Dark Night, John ended the commentaries abruptly, without explanation or apology, completing a

²⁶³ While it was common medieval rhetoric to say that one wrote only under the pressure of requests and against one’s will, there can be no doubt that John wrote his commentaries on request. The lack of vernacular literature on the subject post-1559 no doubt loomed large in his (and Teresa’s) mind. However, it is also true that John’s decision to write – both poetry and prose – was strategic and reflected his own self-understanding as a co-founder with Teresa of this new reform.
commentary on only the first three of the eight stanzas. Whether or not this disruption is intention is a matter of dispute among scholars, but most scholars agree that if these sudden endings were intentional they communicate what John, in his prologue, said of the shortcomings of “experience and science.”

The Ascent is divided into three books, and the Dark Night, once a single work without chapter divisions, was later divided into two books.

The majority of scholars now consider the Ascent and the Dark Night as a single work that loosely conforms to the schema stated in the prologue of the Ascent. John undertakes the “arduous task” (Prologue 2) of writing these commentaries to offer direction to the members of the new Discalced reform, both “friars and nuns,” whom he says “asked me to write this work” (Prologue 9). The main topic of this work will be, John says, the nature of the “dark night” that those pursuing “union with God through love” must “pass through.” He intends to offer counsel to those who suffer these trials, and more often than not “fail to progress” when the suffering becomes too costly, or the way too “obscure.” It appears from the Prologue, and throughout the Ascent-Night that John is particularly intent on offering a critique of rival sources of identity-formation among the Discalced: “spiritual fathers,” “other directors” and “confessors” who lead souls suffering in the “nights” astray by failing to help them suffer in a way that leads to union with God. He says that his work will allow the reader to “discover the road they are walking along, and the one they want to follow if they want to reach the summit of this mount” (Prologue 7). Because, John says, the trials are so numerous and the darkness is so profound neither “human science” nor “experience” can adequately explain or interpret them. Nor can any but those who have suffered these “darknesses” know what they are like, though even the experience of them does not equip one to even “be able to describe it” (Prologue 1). He asserts, rather, that “only Sacred Scripture” is adequate to the task of providing language suitable to the topic (Prologue 2). The success of Scripture, and the failure of scholastic “human science” and human “experience” to adequately articulate the substance of John’s subject matter emerges from the heart of

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John’s theory of knowledge, and will have far reaching effects on the scope of his critique of religious belief and praxis.

The question of audience, I suggest, is crucial to interpreting John’s texts. In the Prologue to the Ascent John asserts that his “main intention is not to address everyone, but only some of the persons of our holy order of the primitive observance of Mount Carmel, both friars and nuns, whom God favors by putting on the path leading up this mount, since they are the ones who asked me to write this work” (Prologue 9). In this project I will argue that John’s texts are indeed intended as a means of forming the identity of the nascent Discalced reform, in both its male and female declinations. As such, I will seek to discover within the Ascent and Dark Night the shape of the “Discalced self” that John wishes to construct, as well as the shape of the “other” identities John wishes to critique.

Shortly after John and his companion-friar Antonio de Jesús founded the first convent of Discalced brethren at Duruelo in 1568, Teresa passed through on her way to Toledo to visit the two friars. She was favorably impressed by the order and simplicity of their life and surroundings, but expressed concern over the severity of their penitential practices. Her main fear was that their harsh penances would damage their health and bring an end to the young reform, and to that end she asked them not to be so rigorous. She notes that, “since they engaged in practices that I did not, they paid little attention to my words about giving them up.”

Although much of the evidence we have of John’s penitential practices, given in testimonies given after his death, is colored by the hagiographical-cultural expectations of Spanish Catholicism, there can be no doubt that the severe tenor of those accounts is reflective of the author of the Ascent-Night. John, no doubt, saw himself as an exemplar of the Carmelite tradition he was interpreting. As we will see in a later chapter, for the Christian ascetical tradition John “performed,” the discipline of the body was integral to the life of the spirit in the journey to union with God. How John textually constructed that “integral vision” in service to the Discalced and in the language of his age will now be the focus of our exploration.

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266 Quoted in Gabriela Cunninghame Graham, Santa Teresa; Being Some Account of Her Life and Times ... Religious Orders (London: A. and C. Black, 1894), 325.
Crafting a Discalced anthropology

“L’homme est double.” In this celebrated phrase André Bord captures the pith of John’s conception of the self in his 1971 study of John’s approach to the problem of memory. In keeping with the Augustinian view of the human person we discussed above, for John being human is at heart an experience of a tumultuous inner division wrought by sin. On one hand, the finite world of change beckons us through the senses with its panoply of goods, while at the same time threatening to fragment the inner self by the force of that same multiplicity. On the other hand, the infinite and immutable God draws the same inner self toward union with the one Good. These two incommensurable “final causes” of human striving present, for John, the two fundamental orientationsthat present to the self two fundamental choices: to renounce the self entangled in the realm of sensual attachments and be turned in liberty toward the only true Good, or remain entangled and imprisoned in a finite world incapable of offering ultimate fulfillment to a spirit capable of the infinite God. The narrative of the Ascent-Night can be seen, in this light, as an enactment of this binary worldview, counseling the Discalced reformers to interpret their life as a progressive, painful “tuning,” and offering a thick description of what becomes of a person committed to this ascetic work of radical re-orientation. In order structure his reorienting narrative, John developed an epistemology and attendant anthropology to explain what precisely happens in the journey toward the “union of knowledge and love.”

John is essentially a dualist, though as we will see, his dualism is highly qualified. As with Augustine, the dualism present in John’s anthropology is hierarchical, and is not at root a duality of body and soul, but rather of sense and spirit. And while John

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268 Quoted in Edward Howells, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood (New York: Crossroad (Herder and Herder Book, 2002), 21.
271 For Augustine the Platonist, the first anthropological hierarchy was body-soul, with the soul ruling over the body, e.g. De Animae Quantitate 13.22. But in his epistemology, the fundamental dualism becomes sense-spirit, e.g. De Libero Arbitrio II. See a good summary of Augustine’s epistemology in Eleonore Stump, and Norman Kretzmann, The Cambridge Companion to Augustine (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 171-85.
occasionally refers to the body as the prison of the soul,\textsuperscript{272} inasmuch as the soul remains inordinately bound to the created world to the exclusion of God, the vast majority of times John’s use of “soul” (alma) refers to the whole person as a unified composite of body and soul (in John’s words, un solo supeuesto, one supposit).\textsuperscript{273} For John, the Janus-like self is reflective of the Pauline divisions of old self and new self, of flesh and spirit (see A2 19.11; A3 26.4; N2 3.3),\textsuperscript{274} and is grounded in ontological distinctions within the person that are \textit{relationally constituted}. In other words, the two “parts” (partes) of the soul are not separate substances, but rather refer to orientating capacities of the knowing and loving self either \textit{toward} God or \textit{toward} creatures.\textsuperscript{275} Some additional discussion is required to clarify the precise sense in which John understands this distinction.

The soul considered in its orientating capacity toward the created, material world as accessed through the sensible faculties (\textit{las potencias sensitivas}), the five senses is called by John the “sensual” part of the soul (\textit{la parte sensitiva}). This part of the soul is \textit{la parte inferior}, the “lower part” that bears within it both the exterior and the interior senses and its natural, epistemic tendency is toward the material world. According to the scholastic-Aristotelian model John employs, the five exterior bodily senses (\textit{los sentidos corporales exteriores}) translate the objects of sense perception into forms accommodated to the inner sense (\textit{el sentido corporal interior}), or the common sense (\textit{sensus communis}) of imagination/fantasy (\textit{imaginación/fantasía}). The role of imagination is discursive, organizing images and abstracting sensible forms, while fantasy stores and retains them, acting as an archive for sensible forms abstracted from sense data by imagination. Once stored, imagination can “re-invoke” sensible forms using the spiritual faculty of memory.

\textsuperscript{272} Examples would include A1 3.3, 15.1; A2 8.4. Many scholars see John’s references to prison in the commentaries on the \textit{Dark Night} poem as metaphorical references to his imprisonment rather than a disparagement of the body itself. For example, Alain Cugno, \textit{St. John of the Cross: Reflections on Mystical Experience} (New York: Seabury, 1982), 108-21.


\textsuperscript{274} I do not imply here that John’s position is equivalent to the Pauline flesh-spirit dualism, but rather that John, in keeping with the long exegetical tradition before him, read Paul’s dualism in a largely platonic sense.

\textsuperscript{275} Edward Howells, \textit{John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood} (New York: Crossroad (Herder and Herder Book, 2002), 126.
to recall them.276 By John’s analysis, as we will see later, this capacity of the soul, limited to the finitude of material creation, cannot access the immaterial, infinite God immediately but only mediately. Hence the soul in quest of unmediated union with God must cease to place its center of gravity in the capacity of the senses, and turn toward the spirit.

The soul considered in its orientating capacity toward God, and the realm of the non-material as accessed through the three spiritual faculties (las potencias espirituales) of intellect (el entendimiento), memory (la memoria) and will (la voluntad) is called by John the “spiritual” part of the soul (la parte espiritual). This part of the soul is la parte superior, the “higher part” also referred to by John as simply el espíritu. Again, in accord with John’s Aristotelian epistemology, the natural tendency of the spiritual faculties is toward the interior senses. The imagination presents to the “active intellect” the sensible forms it has created, and the intellect abstracts particular “intelligible forms” (intelligencias, A2 8.5) that access essential knowledge from an object of sense, stripping it of all its accidents. Indeed, the intellect is empty (tabula rasa) until informed by the senses: nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu (A1 3.3). The intellect stores these intelligible forms in the “passive intellect,” which is intimately related to memory. But the memory, for John, is not seen as a storehouse for sensible forms, thus preserving its wholly “spiritual” role. The will is the spirit’s “appetite,” its capacity to seek its proper good, and the will, being a rational appetite seeks intelligible goods presented to it by both the intellect and memory. The “natural” state of the three spiritual faculties is to be turned toward, and informed by, the exterior and interior senses.277 But this primary

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277 Steven Payne. John of the Cross and the Cognitive Value of Mysticism: An Analysis of Sanjuanist Teaching and Its Philosophical Implications for Contemporary Discussions of Mystical Experience (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 24-41. This is crucial for John inasmuch as the painful journey to union is not painful simply because of sin but also because it adapts the soul to an entirely new manner of knowing and loving that is beyond its natural orientation (literally super-natural). In personal correspondence, Edward Howells acknowledged that little has been written on whether or not John understand this supernatural capacity to be created in the soul, or simply an “awakened” natural capacity as with Eckhart and the Rhineland mystics. This debate relates to John’s relationship to Thomism, since Thomas sees a continuum between grace and nature. Since John was not a speculative theologian, he showed no interest in such a manner of posing the issue. See Helmut A. Hatzfeld’s comments on this in, “The Influence of Ramon Lull and Jan van Ruysbroeck on the Language of the Spanish Mystics,” Traditio 4 (1946), 357-8.
“natural” tendency of the spiritual faculties also coheres with a second capacity, the fulfillment of which is the goal of Discalced identity: the capacity for union with God through knowledge and love.

John’s theory of knowledge affirms that the knowing subject participates in the objects of cognition, and thus the mind becomes what it knows (and loves, since the will is a rational appetite) by means of intentionality (A1 4.3). The intelligible forms abstracted from the imagination’s sensible forms literally in-form the (passive) intellect, and so by association the memory and the will (A3 1.1). By means of this natural process of knowing, “remote knowledge” of God is possible (A2 8.3). This constitutes the foundation of theological knowledge contained, for example, in the creed. But for John, this knowledge offers meager fare for the soul that wishes to come to immediate union with God, since everything the intellect can understand in its natural operation is unlike and disproportionate to God (A2 8.4-5; also 3.2-4; 4.4; 8.2-6; 12.4-5; 16.3-9; A3 12.1). Knowledge of God via the epistemology grounded in sense can be by means of analogy (A3 21.2) or, more perfectly, by means of negation (A3 2.3). While this knowledge is in itself good and useful, it is only a beginning and, in John’s view, must ultimately be wholly rejected in view of “making space” in the spiritual faculties for a new form of knowing that is the proximate means to union with God.278

Building on the Platonic theory of knowledge as participation in that which is known, John makes plain that the only way to make the spiritual faculties capable of being informed by God is to blind and strip them of all natural and particular knowledge, and of any attachments to created things that will tether the spirit to the finite goods. Here John finds a language for offering a critique of religious belief and practice. Any form of religious belief and practice that does not envision all mediate, created means to union with God as subordinate to those means appropriate to an unmediated union is to be judged unworthy.279 And the only means suited to the end of union with God are the

279 For example, John’s discussion of the will in A3 17-45 offers a robust criticism of all aspects of religious and secular culture that are seen other than as a means to the end of union with God. Attachment even to the “outer form” of the Mass is, for John, a hindrance to union with God. For an excellent discussion of the critique of sacramental-religious culture in John, see Hanna Eleanor’s dissertation, Eucharistic Communion as Mediating an Experience of God According to St. John of the Cross, The Catholic University of America, 2004.
three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, which, respectively, reconfigure and inform the intellect, memory and will with “the infinite form of God.” Thus these virtues become the architectonic means of offering a totalizing critique of all religious belief and practice. Indeed, the Ascent-Night is largely structured as an application of this critique, offering the Discalced a grand-narrative by which to construct and shape identity.\(^{280}\) For example, John locates the value of discursive meditation and vocal prayer in the “remote” realm of the senses where the natural process of knowing remains active. But as one progresses toward union, these practices should eventually be relinquished in favor of the superior state of contemplation. Contemplation is the reception into the spiritual faculties, by means of the theological virtues, of the passively received inflow of God without engaging knowledge garnered by the senses. By this means, John places a vast spectrum of Spanish religious piety, bound to the “realm of sense,” under the force of his critique. And as we will see, he spares no one in defining and protecting the Discalced ideal from a multitude of competitors.\(^{281}\)

As Edward Howells vigorously argues, this division that emerges in “mystical knowing” is radical, permanent, though not, in John’s mind, irreconcilable. John of the Cross constructs a classical Greek hierarchic epistemology, privileging certain forms of cognition that are associated with non-material reality and abstract concepts. But what is unique in John, according to Howells, is his willingness to allow these two manners of knowing - sensual and noetic/spiritual\(^{282}\) – to remain wholly distinct even as they

\(\text{\textsuperscript{280}}\) “H. Delacroix calls him one of the ‘grands simplificateurs du monde’” Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Fessio, and John Kenneth Riches, The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 133. This reference to John’s reduction of the entire Christian life to the theological virtues constitutes Hans Urs von Balthasar’s essential critique of John’s own critique of “finite forms” as a proximate means of union with God. He sees John’s radical Augustinian semiotics and Dionysian apophatics combine to offer an over-critique of created being. What Balthasar does not consider in this critique is the monastic-ascetical context in which John is writing, and how John’s critique grows out of a reform movement seeking to deconstruct the present forms of Spanish-Carmelite culture to access an idealized memory of life on mount Carmel. As with so much of the commentary on John’s work, the critique is offered bereft of the exigencies of the historical context.

\(\text{\textsuperscript{281}}\) Though John offers a broad critique of “Spanish” pieties, it must always be kept in mind that his primary audience is the Discalced reform. John’s main concern seems to be addressing the piety brought into the order by new members – what they learned in their former cultural milieu must now be forgotten in the new monastic culture they are shaping.

\(\text{\textsuperscript{282}}\) In the monastic tradition, “noetic” referred to spiritual knowledge of immaterial realities accessible to the nous. Origen and Evagrius privileged this form of knowledge over and against the “materialist” conceptions of many of the Egyptian and Syrian monks, like Antony himself. John shares this Evagrian emphasis and its associated critiques of knowledge. See Marilyn Dunn, The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 20-4.
As we will see later, John understands these two ways of knowing to reflect and determine basic distinctions in faith, life and culture. By means of this binary distinction he privileges certain epistemological, social and religious worldviews, and relativises others. Scholastic and humanist learning, indebted to sensory experience, in the end fall silent before the ineffable knowledge of the recogimiento contemplative whose knowing is informed by God alone.

As we mentioned, this epistemology offers John a means of criticizing the religious culture around him. The cult of images and devotion to sacred spaces must point relentlessly beyond themselves lest they become idols which hinder the contemplative soul in flight. The claims to nobility, honor, wealth, power and beauty shade into darkness before the naked spirit of the Discalced disencumbered by the realm of sensual goods and open to the unlimited. The fame that clings to those possessed of spectacular feats of mystic prowess, heroic ascetic rigor or stunning eloquence in the pulpit stands as an emblem of, at best, mere means to a greater end or, at worst, a ruse of diabolical origins meant to quell the hunger pangs of hubris. For John, the only manner in which these two epistemic ways, and their attendant two religious worlds, can find a rightly reconciled order is within a radically theocentric teleology that subordinates all finite, created media to the pursuit of unmediated union with God alone. And that is precisely what John proposes as the raison d’être of the exemplary Discalced friar and nun.

The spiritual faculties’ natural orientation toward the senses is rendered problematic, for John, by the effects of sin. Sin “enslaves” the spirit to the senses, and renders the spirit’s faculties incapable of the exercising the liberty required to turn toward God and progress toward union. In particular, the will finds itself most ravaged by the sway of disorder caused by sin, and around the will cluster a host of potencias, faculties that clamor for the will’s attention. The rational and spiritual will is, in John’s understanding, the final arbiter and governor of the whole self. In addition to being an appetitive faculty, naturally and spontaneously seeking fulfillment in its good, the will is

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284 John’s summa of this “Discalced critique” is to be found in Book Three of the Ascent, where he applies his epistemological critique of memory and will to religious practices in Spain and in Carmel.
capable of engaging in rational deliberation and freely acting on what is judged to be good. But the will is bound to the other set of appetites that John locates in the senses, as it, along with the intellect, naturally tends toward the senses. The sensitive appetites, those tendencies of each of the sense faculties (interior and exterior) to seek its own pleasure (gustos) and satisfaction (satisfacción), draw the will “downward” into the “house of the appetites” (A1 15.2) and thereby constrict the will’s liberty to seek first the goods proper to it. John acknowledges an important distinction between voluntary (i.e. offering consent) and involuntary (i.e. spontaneous) appetites, and limits the “damage” done to the soul to the voluntary appetites by which one creates a habitus.\textsuperscript{285}

The pattern of sensitive and volitional appetites habitually seeking pleasure and satisfaction in creatures – which for John is disordered precisely because such habits constrict genuine liberty – is described by John as an attachment (afición). An attachment is an involuntary proclivity to seek some good in a disordered manner.\textsuperscript{286} The will’s disordered attachments, bound up in those of the sensitive appetites, have to be systematically and relentlessly purged, voided, denied by a program of detachment (desasimiento) in proportion to the severity of the disorder. Although detachment is practiced in all parts of the soul, in the end the will is the ultimate referent of attachment and detachment (A1 3.4; A2 16.2). Our disordered appetites must be starved and re-set toward the new end of union with God. The process of detachment begins with the senses and progresses to the spirit, in which the “roots” of all attachments are to be found. The purgation of higher part is, therefore, much more important and much more painful as grace, through faith, hope and love voids the three faculties respectively of all that is “not God.”\textsuperscript{287}

As we complete our brief look at John’s “faculty psychology” that constitutes the self, a mention of the passions is warranted. Truman Dicken, based on an analysis of John’s extensive discussion of the passion “joy” (gozo) in Book III of the Ascent, defines the passions as the affective impact on the soul of the movement of the appetites toward

clearly apprehended goods. John numbers four passions, joy (gozo), hope (esperanza), sorrow (dolor, tristeza) and fear (temor). The passions arise spontaneously from the lower part of the soul, the senses, and either motivate or inhibit the will from acting. Joy is present delight in sense-based pleasures, akin to the “fruitio” of Augustine and his heirs (article). Hope is the anticipation of future sensual delight or pleasure. Sorrow is grief over the present privation of sensual pleasure. And fear is the expectation of the future loss of sensual delight. As with all dimensions of fallen humanity, John judges the passions, at the beginning of the journey toward union, are disordered and inhibit the spirit from seeking God alone. They either are the source of all virtue or of all vice (A3 16.5). The work of the will is to govern the passions, enlightened by the memory and intellect, by holding in check the appetites that give rise to the passions. The right-governance of the passions leads to inner peace (N1 13.3; A3 6.3), while the abdication of the will, which permits the reign of the appetites and passions, leads to dissipation and inner turmoil that clouds the intellect’s judgment and limits the will’s freedom.288 The Discalced Carmelite, governed by the single goal of union with God through noetic love, must strive to put the passion to sleep; and allow them to awaken only when they have succumbed to the force of transformed eros.289

The embodied Discalced self

Alain Cugno says pointedly, “Although the body as such gets no special mention, most of the questions in John’s work assume the body in their treatment”290. Indeed, John’s own body is first and foremost assumed as he enacts his Carmelite monastic vocation by means of a collage of bodily performances: early experiences of hunger and poverty, eating restrictions, sleep deprivation, hair shirts, wearing a monastic habit, suffering starvation and beatings during imprisonment, performing the ritual of the Mass, and so on. John was revered and feared for his bodily austerity, and chastised by Teresa of Avila for what she considered his excesses.291 Many of the anecdotes we posses in

289 Dicken argues that John does not seek the extinction of the passions, but apatheia in the tradition of Cassian that is understood as the freedom of the will to love God above all else. Ibid., 335-41.
291 Although Teresa respected John’s balanced ascetical vision, she at times showed disapproval over his practices, or over the severity of his doctrine of ascetical negation. For her comments regarding his harsh
regard to John’s life, collected posthumously as part of canonization proceedings in the early seventeenth century, picture a man given to severe bodily penance. Though these accounts no doubt are deeply shaped by the cultural models of sanctity in late sixteenth century Spain, they conform in substance with the John we know by means of his own ascetic discourse. The flesh, along with the world and the devil, is a potential enemy of humanity, and is the last remaining “veil” that prevents full union of the soul with God.²⁹² But as with the larger Christian ascetical tradition, John’s view of the body is far more nuanced than any label of “negative” or “positive” could indicate.

John’s poem *One Dark Night*, on which the *Ascent-Night* comments, is lavish in its employment of gendered bodily images of heterosexual erotic love that, in the allegorical exegetical tradition of commentary on the *Song of Songs*, serve as icons of the divine-human encounter.²⁹³ As Colin Thompson asserts, what John does not accomplish by means of his *via negativa* in opening space for union with the ineffable of God, he effects by means of an excess of images that overwhelm both by their sheer number and paradoxical inter-weavings.²⁹⁴ But it is clear that such an appreciation of the value of embodied representations of the soul’s journey to God can, for John, only come after a radical program of ascetic discipline has been undertaken and the primacy of the spirit has been achieved. Such an “ascetical aesthetic” approach structures John’s entire project. He says in the introduction to the *Spiritual Canticle*, his “mystical” poetry, “composed in a love flowing from abundant mystical understanding” is addressed to the “pure in spirit” (CB Prologue 2, 3). Hence the commentary that leads one into the

²⁹² John referred to the flesh as the “sensitive veil” that had to be violently torn to open in death for the soul to achieve the consummation of its desire for God, as in the *Living Flame of Love* 1.29-35. For comments on this image, see Colin P. Thompson, *St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night* (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 255-56.

²⁹³ Colin Thompson locates John’s eroticism in the patristic and medieval exegetical traditions in his dated, but excellent study, *The Poet and the Mystic: A Study of the Cántico Espiritual de San Juan De La Cruz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). While interpreters like José Nieto argue that John’s texts represent a renaissance eroticism that primarily bears a literal sense, Denys Turner counters that John’s texts were written as overly transparent allegories. See José C. Nieto *San Juan de la Cruz, poeta del amor profano* (Navacerrada, Madrid: Swan, 1988); and Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*. Cistercian Studies Series (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 185-99.

meaning of the poem simultaneously leads the reader through an ascetic narrative that re- 
orders the relationship between body and spirit. One must first perform the commentary 
before reaching a true understanding of the poetic texts. Here John’s literary hermeneutic 

is bound up with his ascetical, anthropological and epistemological theory, placing the 

body in a complex network of meaning. And in the Ascent-Night, much of that “theory,” 
as we have seen, is set in the conceptual world of medieval scholasticism that places a 

high, if problematic value on the role of the body. 295

John posits a conceptualization of the body that is, as with so much of his work, 

uniquely his own blend of traditions. First, he embraces the hylomorphism of Aquinas’ 

Aristotelian anthropology, uniting body to soul as a single unity or, as John words it, in 

one “supposit,” in solo supuesto (N2 1.1). 296 As in Aquinas, this anthropology is wedded 

to an empirical epistemology that admits no knowledge into the intellect that is not first 

possessed in the five “exterior” senses. In this limited sense, John refers to the body as a 

“prison” (A1 3.3; 15.1) inasmuch as it holds the intellect captive in the epistemological 

bonds of the created and finite, sense-bound world. The intellect, and consequently the 

will, when it is fundamentally tethered to things corporeal, is incapable of coming to a 

ture knowledge of God suitable to the demands of unmediated union. This construction 

of the body as epistemologically delimiting leads us to consideration of John’s other 

major anthropological tradition, Augustinian neo-platonism, with its sharply dualistic 

anthropology. For John, God is pure spirit and is capable of being known as such only by 

that which is like itself. By means of the mediation of the body, only “remote” and 

“natural” knowledge of God is possible through image, word and distinct concept, and 

though this knowledge is valuable for John, it is only a preparation for that knowledge of 

God which is beyond all images, words and distinct concepts. This distinctive blend of 

anthropologies and their attendant epistemologies creates for John a fundamental and 

irresolvable tension in the “self” between embodied sources of knowledge and those 

defined as spiritual. We will revisit this problem again later, but suffice for now to say 

that the role of the “Discalced body” for John is largely defined by these tensions.

295 One only peruse the work of Caroline Walker Bynum to appreciate the crucial role of the body in 

medieval theologies, and the great variety of (gendered) strategies that were employed in achieving 

commerce with the divine. See especially, Caroline Walker Bynum. Fragmentation and Redemption: 


Intimately related to the epistemological questions surrounding John’s interpretation of the body are the questions regarding “the good,” or what ultimately fulfills the person. John offers scant explicit attention to the meaning of the body as constitutive of human fulfillment in the *Ascent-Night*, and when he does aver to its role, the treatment is often is negative. His reference to Wisdom 9:15 in N2 1.2, “the corruptible body weighs down the soul” is used to evince the weakness in “proficients” of the “sensory part” of the soul, with its attendant bodily sufferings, as “spiritual communications” begin to increase before the still-impure sensory part has been sufficiently strengthened and purged. Indeed, for John the bodily manifestations of spiritual communications – e.g. raptures, transports, dislocations of bones – are signs of imperfection, and at times these communications require a temporary suspension of the spirit’s relation to the body (A2 24.2-3). The entire trajectory of the self toward the fulfilling end of union with God includes the gradual turning of the body, embedded in the “sensory part” of the soul, toward the spirit, and it is the work of the active and passive “nights” to effect this turning. Only at the end of this journey is the body seen in a more positive light, as it begins to share in an “overflow” of the goods of the spirit and is no longer unaccustomed to the spirit’s primacy in all things.\(^{297}\) Indeed, the Discalced body becomes, for John, a microcosm of the macrocosmic tensions that historically tore at Carmelite identity: are they Palestinian hermits or European mendicants? The Discalced body becomes, for John, a cell in which the eremitical Discalced self can dwell hidden, while still reaming actively engaged with the world.\(^{298}\)

John’s unique blending of multiple traditions – especially scholastic – in constructing his conception of the self within the *Ascent-Night* serves as a conceptual framework for his narrative of the nature of the transformation of the self that approaches union with God by turning within. And it is to that narrative of transformation that we will now turn to further explore John’s unique conception of the Discalced self.

*Trajectories of the self in the Ascent-Night*


\(^{298}\) We will treat this tension more in later chapters, but I suggest that we could read into John’s binary sense-spirit distinction the alternate binary mendicant-hermit distinction that the Discalced reform was unable to resolve *in jure.*
A deeper enlightenment and wider experience than mine is necessary to explain the
dark night through which a soul journeys toward that divine light of perfect union
with God that is achieved, insofar as possible in this life, through love. The
darknesses and trials, spiritual and temporal, that fortunate souls ordinarily undergo
on their way to the high state of perfection are so numerous and profound that human
science cannot understand them adequately. Nor does experience of them equip one
to explain them. Only those who suffer them will know what this experience is like,
but they won't be able to describe it (Prologue 1).

Thus John begins the prologue of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and, in spite of his
traditional rhetorical protestations of ineptitude, he proceeds to explain in great, even
excruciating detail the “dark night” that marks the journey to perfect union with God.
Having already sketched out above some of the main outlines of the structures of the
“Discalced self” found in the *Ascent-Night*, we will now proceed to examine briefly the
dynamics of development that govern the journey of the Discalced soul to God.

*The general narrative of the self in the Ascent-Night*

As we have seen above, John inherits a dualist anthropology that grounds identity
in relation to God mediately through the senses and immediately through the spirit, and
as he schematizes the development of the self through classically pattern stages of
purgation, illumination and union, this duality remains. In addition, John’s largely
Augustinian conception of sin’s devastating effects construe humanity as mired in the
externality of the senses to the exclusion of the inner life of the spirit that alone is capable
of union with God. But this proclivity toward the sensory world is not *per se* a disorder
occasioned by sin, but, for John the Thomist, is rather the natural orientation of the
epistemological structures of the soul. What sin does effect is the enslavement, or
attachment of the soul to the senses in a manner that binds the spirit and makes it
incapable of presiding over and unifying the soul’s operations. For John, the return of the
soul to its proper orientation, and ultimately to God, involves both the dismantling of the

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presidency of the sensory part of the soul and the reconstruction of the soul’s natural epistemological orientation away. It is this process that we will now briefly explore.

The scholastic axiom, *quidquid recipitur, secundum modum recipientis recipitur*, what is received is received according to the mode of the receiver, governed the foundations of John’s epistemology. What the subject desires to receive by means of knowing and loving shapes, and is shaped by its own given structures. We recall John’s Thomist stance that the soul in its natural state is a *tabula rasa*, informed by the activity of the senses and formed into the likeness of that which it comes to know (A1 3.3). He also argues that knowledge leads not only to participation in the form of the object known, but, in our sinful state, creates an “attachment” of desire to the object known. “Attachment to a creature makes a person equal to that creature” (A1 4.3), John argues. This is problematic for John, as attachment limits the freedom of the spirit to properly govern the soul in its new orientation, and because this attachment limits the openness of the spirit to the infinite. It is primarily the will, as the “appetite of the spirit” and the locus of love and freedom, which becomes attached to the creatures known by the intellect through the senses. The will’s attachment to creatures “effects a likeness between the lover and the object loved” (A1 4.3), and so, in John’s conception, cripples the spirit’s ability to grow in the likeness of God. Here John’s radical apophaticism creates a critical disjuncture in his theological anthropology as he accepts no degrees of likeness between the created and the uncreated, but rather considers them “contraries” that cannot coexist as intelligible forms in the same knowing and loving subject (A1 4.2, 4-6). There is no analogical ladder to ascend to God on, but only the dark abyss of faith to leap into (A2 29.5). While, as Edward Howells argues, some of this language is hyperbolic and retains its full force only in the early parts of the *Ascent* where sin’s disordered effects still command the soul, it indeed presents to John a radical problem that demands a radical solution.

As John presents unmediated union with God as the goal of the Discalced self ascending Mount Carmel, the ascetical project is wholly determined by the problem John has laid out: how to convert the self from its noetic, affective attachment to created

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300 Ibid., 18.
objects, mediated through the senses to the spirit, toward the uncreated God, mediated through the spirit to the senses. The spiritual faculties of intellect, memory and will are epistemologically capable of being rendered fit for the infinite (e.g. A2 17.5-8), though John insists that this capacity can only be realized if one first empties the spiritual faculties of all attachments to the created world. This radical prescription of detachment requires the spiritual faculties be “purged,” “voided,” “annihilated,” and “darkened” as to the life of the senses, that they may open within themselves a “space” for God to begin to in-form those same faculties. The metaphor of “night,” central to the imaginary world of the poem on which the Ascent-Night is based, refers to these negations and the painful deprivation they entail.

John divides the “night” into three phases that will generally structure the order of his discussion, and gives three “reasons” for calling the journey a “night”: (1) dusk = the bitterness that accompanies depriving the senses of their usual objects of pleasure; (2) midnight = the darkness that overcomes the intellect as the supernatural light of faith replaces the natural light of reason; (3) pre-dawn = the unmediated communication of God to the spirit is darkness for the soul “in this life” (A1 2.1). These three phases of the night, while logically distinct for John, occur simultaneously with one phase predominating at different points in the progress of the soul toward union with God. He confirms this threefold division with a complex allegorical exegesis of Tobit’s three-night preparation for his marriage (A1 2.2-5), and with reference to the threefold pattern of the night – dusk, midnight and dawn. Thus the “two books” of revelation so dear to the medieval theological tradition, the book of Scripture and the book of nature, lend authority to John’s use of the nocturnal metaphor. In addition, the first phase of the night will constitute the subject of the first book of the Ascent, the second phase will govern the discussions in books two and three of the Ascent, and the third phase inform both books of the Dark Night.

In Augustinian fashion, the questions of the relationship between nature and grace, between human and divine agency will decisively structure John’s analysis of this

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302 Howells says that before union John’s epistemology admits of a posteriori knowledge of God, while after union knowledge of God and of creation becomes a priori. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood, (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 125.

303 Though this division is in general accurate, John often intermingles different stages in the three books of the Ascent.
processional journey toward the goal of union with God. Reflecting the grace-nature paradigm, John subdivides the night into both “active” and “passive” nights of purgation. Drawing from his scholastic formation, he uses the Aristotelian causal language of “active” and “passive” to describe the dual nature of the purgative nights. “Active” refers to the intentional agency of the self enacting some power (potencia) inherent in one’s given nature, while “passive” refers to the agency of the self as acted upon, engaging some power (potencia) capable of receiving the action of an agency other than itself. In other words, “active” refers to the experience of oneself as the source of agency, while “passive” refers to the experience of another as the source of agency. In John’s ascetical worldview, the process of transforming the self is experienced both as an active labor of human agency and as a passive effect of divine agency. In John’s Augustinian theological framework, the reorientation of the self is fundamentally a work of grace in both its active and passive forms, though the most radical reorientation is experienced passively as grace alone can dismantle sin-infected agency and effect the union of the soul with God.

Within the active and passive nights John makes an additional distinction between senses and spirit, as both the sensory and spiritual part of the soul must undergo both active and passive purgation. For him, the journey begins with the “lower” and more exterior senses and ends with the “higher” and more interior spiritual faculties both from the perspective of human and divine agency. One must first bring the sensual appetites under the control of the spiritual faculties before those same faculties can begin to themselves be detached from the senses and turn toward God. The active night of the sense, discussed mostly in Book One of the Ascent, involves the voluntary renunciation of all attachments to sensory pleasure that do not immediately refer themselves to God as the highest good, and the active pursuit for all that opposes desire for such pleasure. This active night, on which John says “much has been written” (N1 8.2) is the sine qua non of any advancement toward the goal of union. The active night of the spirit, discussed

304 We might say that “purgation” in John’s language is equivalent to reconstruction, as the purification that grace works in the soul creates a whole new capacity and intention that is, as we will see later, erotic.

305 Denys Turner argues that John’s theology of grace stands among the radical Augustinians of his age in its emphasis on the primacy of divine agency, though this is counterbalanced by John’s equally radical ascetical program. For a fascinating examination of John in the context of medieval scholastic debates on nature and grace, see Leslie Ross Collings, Passivity in the Spiritual Life: From the Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross, D.Phil. dissertation (University of Oxford, 1978), 23-35.
mostly in Book Two and book Three of the *Ascent*, involves the voluntary renunciation of all attachments of the intellect, memory and will to any created object, whether natural or supernatural. John structures the active night of the spiritual faculties by means of the three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity which respectively “void” the intellect, memory and will of all created attachments and, as the only “proximate” means of union with God, open those faculties to the unmediated communication of God “in his essence” (A2 16.9). The active night of the spirit, in the *Ascent*, involves the voluntary renunciation of all attachment to sense-bound knowledge of God in the intellect, in the memory, and to all sense-bound goods that claim the will. As a willingness to surrender knowledge based on the senses, it also stands at the juncture between meditation, which involves imagination and discursive reasoning, and contemplation, which is a wholly passive experience of being acted upon by God alone in the spiritual faculties.306

But alas, for John, all of the ascetical rigor of these two active nights does little more than stay the chaos of the soul’s disorder, as John says: “no matter how much an individual does through his own efforts, he cannot actively purify himself enough to be disposed in the least degree for the divine union of the perfection of love” (N1 3.3). It is only the work of grace in the passive nights, given especially in contemplation, that can strike at the roots of the disorder, and dismantle the foundations of the old self that is in itself incapable of union with God. The passive-contemplative is the Discalced center of identity, a living embodiment of a radical Augustinian account of grace. Here, the primacy of the passive nights, and the paucity of written accounts regarding especially the passive night of the spirit (N1 8.2), witness to the uniqueness, for John, of Teresa’s “recovery” of the lost spirit of the Palestinian Carmelites who once truly privileged the contemplative over the active. In a sense, John theologizes this difference of Carmelite

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306 Far from being anti-intellectual, John is one of the few late medieval reformers in the mystical tradition who valorizes the role of the intellect in union. John’s critique of the intellect is a critique of finite knowledge of God inasmuch as such knowledge is allowed to obstruct the intellect’s capacity to know God as infinite and uncreated. This critique is not meant only for the scholastic philosophical theology of the universities, but also for the newer brand of *alumbrados* who equate the experience of God with claims to visionary mystical experience. John would say that both forms of knowledge fall infinitely short of contemplative knowing, and lack the requisite prequel of an excruciating purification. See Bernard McGinn’s discussion of the late medieval debates regarding the role of the intellect in union with God: *Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity: Twelfth to Sixteenth Centuries*, Church History, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Mar., 1987), 7-24.
models in his novel account of the active-passive nights of sense and spirit that open the Discalced self to the eremitical core of their identity.

John’s descriptions of the passive nights in the Dark Night fundamentally differ from those of the active nights recounted in the Ascent inasmuch as the passive nights signal an emerging awareness of a loss of the sense of control over the self that was gained in the hard-fought active nights. We will recall that the logical distinctions John makes between active and passive nights do not stand as chronological or sequential markers, but rather as different dimensions of the single experience of the synergy of human and divine agency. But as the journey to God progresses, John seems to assert that this “synergy” becomes strained, breaks down and divine and human agents begin to appear as opposed (N2 17). Unlike Aquinas, who posits a rather steady continuum of grace building upon nature, John holds out a more dire grace-nature dialectic that requires the momentary “destruction” of nature by grace in order to ascend to the heights of the mount of union with God (A3 2.7). This key feature of John’s thought flows naturally both from John’s Augustinian pessimism over sin’s radix effects and his eschatologically charged teleology. First, John believes that the true good of humanity is the love of God as the only ultimate good, and that the extent of sin’s distorting effects renders the person incapable of anything resembling such a love. The effects of this “distortion” run so deep, that the experienced effect of purgative grace is a painful and disorienting uprooting in the very center of the self. Hence, it is experienced as destruction, and even as violent. Second, John goes much further than Aquinas in likening the knowledge of God in union to the beatific vision, so the extent of transformation needed is far greater.

307 John’s mysticism offers what Iain Matthew refers to as a “realized eschatology,” which affirms that state of the beatific vision is anticipated in the life of the mystic now. The rupture between this life and the next, symbolized by death, is enacted in the life of the mystic, according to John. See his The Knowledge and Consciousness of Christ in the light of the writings of St. John of the Cross, D.Phil. dissertation (University of Oxford, 1991).
308 Again, in the Rhineland tradition John views the experience of grace at work in the soul as “violent” love since nature, until it has been fully habilitated in preparation for union, cannot preserve stability under the action of the “naked” essence of God. As Barbara Cook argues, the caritas of Bernard, characterized by disinterested benevolence toward the creature is transformed by Ruusbroec into the erotic “minne” that desires what it loves. Barbara Gist Cook, Essential love: The erotic theology of Jan van Ruusbroec, Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Chicago (2000), 128. This kind of love as present in God would be unacceptable to Aquinas since desire implies lack in God. See also Fergus Kerr’s argument in favor of Aquinas’ critique of eros, “Charity as Friendship,” Language, Meaning and God: Essays in Honour of Herbert McCabe, ed. Brian Davies (London: Chapman, 1987).
for John. The Discalced Carmelite is called live a celestial identity now, like the “angelic watchmen” of the Egypt, Syria and Persia.

John’s diagnosis of the distortions that can afflict the emerging Discalced self offer insight into what he, no doubt, perceived in his work as confessor and spiritual director for members of the reform. His caricatures of those distortions provide his foil for what he will later describe as the perfected self-in-union. At the beginning of his discussion of the passive night of the senses in chapter one of Book One of the Dark Night, John makes use of the traditional seven “capital vices” to expose the state of “beginners.” Beginners are those who, having been drawn away from sin to God by a multitude of sensually gratifying spiritual practices, have merely exchanged sensual pleasures for spiritual ones. As he examines each vice, he offers vivid descriptions of why such a beginner is in need of the contemplative passive nights that will “dry up” all of the pleasurable sensual feedback that has thus far motivated all their spiritual exercises. Pride, for example, gloats over spiritual progress; greed seeks to sate its insatiable appetite in the goods of religion; lust translates pleasurable spiritual consolations into sensual, sexual desires; anger broods over imperfections in the self and in others; and so on. But with the onset of the passive nights, all the mechanisms of pleasure are undone and rendered incapable of feeding the pleasure-starved ego.

In N1 9.1-9 John offers “signs” for the Discalced contemplative to discern entry into the passive night of sense, all three of which must be present if one is to distinguish this night from “melancholy or some bodily indisposition”: (1) the loss of pleasure in things earthly and heavenly; (2) the inability to meditate on particulars; (3) the desire to be alone with God. The third is the most decisive sign that distinguishes the night of sense from something like depression, and it is a key sign that the erotic longing of the soul for God alone is at last being untangled from the heteronomy of created loves. This night starves the senses, and quiets them so that the spirit alone can be fed in contemplation. Here John is not only offering signs to recognize natural states, but rather he is offering a defined worldview that demarks a normative Discalced experience; and


310 Christopher Buck, Paradise and Paradigm Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Baha'i Faith. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1999), 59. Little scholarship has been done on the role of middle-eastern models of monasticism on Teresa and John’s conception of Discalced identity.
so, by implication, is meant to actively shape the experiences that mark one's progress toward the fully actualized Discalced identity.

The war between the senses and the spirit that is stirred up in these nights – in many ways this “war” is the pith of the narrative of the Ascent-Night\textsuperscript{311} – threatens the unity of identity in the soul (N2 9.8). For instance, John says that the loss of the ability to meditate which results from the passive disabling of the sensory part of the soul creates the fear that the soul has been abandoned by God, since it has only known how to identify itself by means of distinct images and concepts (N1 10.1). John also describes the effects of the night of the senses as exposing the disorder rooted deep in the spirit, a disorder that was only masked and held at bay by the sheer force of ascetic discipline (N2 2.1). Thoughts of fornication, blasphemy, and cognitive perplexities over ideas never before questioned assail the soul (N1 14.2-3), though these “trials” leave the tempted stronger in virtue and with a greater desire for divine Wisdom (N1 14.4). The length and intensity of the passive night of sense, John concludes, depends on the depth of the roots of sin in the spirit, on “how high” God wishes to raise a soul, and on the soul’s capacity to suffer (N1 14.1).

The final passive night of the spirit, and the conclusion of the Dark Night, involves the most terrifying experience of loss and the most painful experiences of yet unfulfilled longing for God. The passive night of senses has effected a “certain reformation and reining in of the [sensual] appetite” (N2 3.1), but has not yet struck to the roots of the disordered appetites that lie in the spiritual faculties at the center of the self. It has turned the senses away from their attachments to creatures, and so has freed the spiritual faculties from the “narrow prison” of attachment to the sensory part (N2 3.1). After the passive night of the senses has passed, John says that there may be a lengthy period of time where one experiences great peace and freedom, as well as raptures, ecstasies, tremblings, all of which are signs of weakness and imperfection still left in the unpurged spirit. But as God communicates himself to the soul in “infused contemplation,” everything in the soul that is not yet conformed to the “form of God” being infused begins to experience unspeakable pain, darkness and confusion. John

describes the night of the spirit in vivid terms saturated in texts of lament and suffering taken from the Old Testament, as the soul experiences the full force of its own disorder in the presence of the all-holy God. The experience is, in the language of Iain Matthew, a “realized eschatology” as the soul experiences purgatory, and even hell, in itself (N2 6.5-6) before it is able to experience the vision of heaven (N2 20.4-5). As the purging nears completion, like fire transforming the wood into itself (N2 10.1-5), the soul now finally entering into union with God begins to experience everything as “strange” (N2 9.5). As the final imperfections in the spirit are “burned out,” the torments cease “and only joy remains” (N2 10.5). The soul feels within the substance of the spirit “touches” of the “naked substance of God” (N2 12-13) that are the beginning of the “way of the perfect.” These touches produce an erotic “inebriation” and an “impassioned will” that causes one to “do things for love of God” that boldly strike against cultural conventions of behavior (N2 13.5).312

In the final chapters of the Dark Night, fourteen to twenty-five, John comments on two images from the second stanza of his poem: “secret ladder” and “disguised.” The inner spirit united to God is now hidden secretly from the external world, in a vast desert alone (N2 17.6).313 John now, for the first time in the Ascent-Night, takes up the language and imagery of the Song of Songs as the clarified soul is now capable of speaking this “mystical” language. He uses the classical image of the ascent of the ladder, and plays with the paradoxical inversions of ascent and descent: to rise to go down and to go down is to rise; God exalt sin humbling and in humbling exalts; trials and consolations constantly alternate; self-knowledge and knowledge of God go hand in hand; annihilation of the self seems worst from one vantage, but from another is the best (N2 18.2-4). The ladder, which we will treat in more depth later, also stands for the

312 Hatzfeld argues that John’s language of “touch,” which itself is a traditional part of the Song’s erotic exegetical tradition, bears also the Rhineland mystics’ sense of the metaphysical ground of both God and the soul coming into unmediated contact; and the touch of these naked “grounds” signals (in both Ruubbroec and John) the beginning’s of union. Helmut A. Hatzfeld, “The Influence of Ramon Lull and Jan van Ruysbroeck on the Language of the Spanish Mystics,” Traditio 4 (1946), 382-83. The role of “inebriation” in mystical union is also traditional Song commentary rhetoric, and evokes the disorientation of the soul entering into union with God.

313 In John, the desert image largely refers to the experience of being withdrawn from the sensually accessible world and placed in the estranged land of the spirit. Though McGinn contends that the desert symbol in much of the mystical tradition refers to the experience of an indistinct union with God, in John it refers rather to the sense of exile. See Bernard McGinn, “Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition,” The Journal of Religion, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Apr., 1994), 155-81.
“secret wisdom” infused into the soul in contemplation, and each of the “ten” rungs of the ladder are known by the gradual transformation of love: from the death of attachment to creatures on the first rung to the divinization of the soul after death in the full vision of God on the tenth rung. The soul on this ladder is “disguised” by faith, hope and charity from, respectively, the three traditional enemies of the soul, the devil, the world and the flesh (N2 21.1-12). John’s progressive account of the deconstruction of the soul in Book One, and the first fifteen chapters of Book Two of the Dark Night has now opened into a description of the new self that has begun to emerge.

The final four chapters of the Dark Night describe the radical gulf that now exists between the senses and the spirit, as the spirit, “hidden” now from the activity of the senses, communes with God in an interior solitude (N2 23.14). The “alienation” between sense and spirit is so great they seemingly now have no relation to each other, “and,” John startlingly asserts, “this is in a way true” (N2 23.14). In this final state, the soul alternates between the exquisite delight of the “touch of God,” and the ineffable pain of the “naked” spirit to spirit encounters between the devil and the soul – “the greatest suffering possible in this life” (N2 23.9). The soul at the end has been “returned to Adam’s innocence” (N2 24.2), has reached the apatheia of quieted “passions and appetites” and awaits the “full espousal” with divine Wisdom (N2 24.3). The commentary suddenly ends here, at the threshold of union with God, with the soul, having been deprived of all satisfaction, asserting that “love alone, which at this period burns by soliciting the heart for the Beloved, is what guides and moves her, and makes her soar to God in an unknown way along the road of solitude” (N2 25.4). Hence, the ascetical struggle and the experience of purgative grace leave the soul with a love that longs to ascend to God from the solitude of the summit of mount Carmel. The return to Carmel is arduous and treacherous, requiring a “martyrdom of love” (A2 19.13), but for John it is where the Discalced must go if they are to enact the reform begun by “la bienaventurada Teresa de Jesús, nuestra madre” (CB 13.7), blessed Teresa of Jesus, our mother.

Summary

The conception of the “Discalced self” found in John’s texts has its roots in the early history of Christian appropriations of Hellenistic philosophy. Charles Taylor’s
narrative of the self, especially as it was shaped by Augustine, plays a pivotal role in grasping John’s own paradigms for the self. The fundamental dualities of interior and exterior, spirit and sense that shaped Augustine’s epistemology and anthropology would define John’s own conception of selfhood. The construction of the self in the *Ascent-Night* is marked by a remarkable fluidity in regard to sources, as well as by a concern with rendering intelligible the Discalced ascetical and mystical life. John appropriates a largely scholastic manner of structuring the person, with a unique synthesis of Augustinian and Thomistic epistemology. His conception of the development of the soul in the journey to union with God resituates those same structures within a dynamic of erotic ascent that alternates synergistically between active and passive purification as the “self” is gradually unmoored from its former, defining “attachments” and reoriented toward God alone as its only good. John offers the *Ascent-Night* to the Discalced reform as a means of interpreting, in the scholastic language of his training at Salamanca, the Teresian vision of the Discalced self as in quest of union. In particular, he sees a need to offer an interpretation of the “terrors” that accompany the transformation of the self; the experience of the passive nights of grace that complete the “destruction” of the old self and effect the reconstruction of a new self that is hidden in the deepest interior of the Discalced soul.
CHAPTER III: THE ASCETIC-APOPHASIS OF DISCALCED IDENTITY

Erasing the self-of-experience

The Ascent of Mount Carmel and Dark Night represent a version of western Christian thought that defines identity vis-à-vis God in terms of metaphors like ascent and inwardness, light and darkness, and critically engages those metaphors by making use of the dialectics of a neo-platonic epistemology. Those dialectics, reducible for our purposes to the interplay between the via positiva of cataphatic “saying” and the via negativa of apophatic “unsaying,” serve an important function in the construction of a theo-anthropology that is capable of critically engaging alternate worldviews. For John, these dialectics allowed him to exclude elements of Cisneros’ “mystical reformation” that defined the journey to “union with God” by means of phenomenological criteria: raptures, visions, ecstasies. Those dialects also allowed John to interpret the monastic praxis in terms of a radically interiorized understanding of detachment, allowing the Discalced to effectively deconstruct all forms of identity that were judged to be incompatible with Discalced identity. One might say of John that his asceticism was thoroughly imbued with neo-platonic dialectics, and that for John the Discalced reform was located in the innermost thoughts and desires of the Discalced friar and nun. The labor of the ascetical life was to reconstruct religious imagination as a return to a distant and high mountain where the exemplars of Discalced identity live, and to engage in ascetical praxis that facilitated that return. In this way John’s texts witness to a project of critical engagement with the forces of his historical context, and display his intention to establish Teresa’s ideal within that context. John writes to his fellow Discalced Carmelites as one authorized to both theorize and offer practical counsel as to how one can best internalize the Teresian ideal, and avoid the encroachment of alternate and competing identities that that threaten the distinctiveness of the reform.

Undoing the cycle of attachment

John is clearly most concerned in the Ascent-Night with the effects of “attachment to creatures” on the freedom of the soul to become capable of entering into union with the

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infinite God. These attachments are driven by insatiable appetites in both the senses and
the spirit for creatures, and John avers that if one is to end the attachments the first target
of ascetical practice must be the severing of the appetites from their objects of desire. But for John it is never enough to merely deprive oneself of the objects of one's appetites, but rather the appetites themselves must be subverted and “dried up” (A1 6.6). In fact, for John the very “self” that desires has to be subverted by refusing to allow its “proper good” to be defined by created objects. For John such a subversion is achieved by strenuous effort, but more than that it is a work of divine grace that is passively experienced and which ultimately renders all human effort defined apart from God’s action powerless. In John’s language, detachment ultimately requires the death of the self (A2 7.7).

John’s description of the ascent to God appropriates the classic exegetical trope from Exodus: “You cannot see my face…a man may not see me and live” (Ex 33:20). The emergence of this exegetical tradition in the fourth century can be closely linked with Gregory of Nyssa’s Life of Moses which interweaves the narrative of ascent taken from Plato’s allegory of the cave found in the Republic 7, with the Exodus story of Moses on Mount Sinai. For Gregory, the death required of the imitator of Moses was a death to the condition of stasis, resting in the finite. As Moses passed out of visible sight into the dark cloud atop the mountain where God dwelt in inaccessible light, so the soul in erotic pursuit of God must remain ever open to an infinite progress into God that surpasses the mind’s capacity. Pseudo-Dionysius, whose influence on the west was far more decisive than Gregory’s, continued the tradition of Gregory’s blended narrative by bringing Proclus’ neo-platonic philosophical mysticism into dialogue with the Exodus story of Moses’ ascent. For the Pseudo-Dionysius of the Mystical Theology, the journey to union with the transcendent One requires a progressive loss of all definitions of God and of the self that depend on finite language, so that one who has entered union with God “is no longer oneself nor someone else.”

John, who appropriates the Dionysian dialectical ascent to God with great rigor, calls the Discalced Carmelite to meet the condition of death.

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Though John employs the traditional apophaticism of neo-platonism in describing this ascent to God, his novel contribution to that tradition is to attach great importance to the lived experience of the suffering of deprivation that accompanies entry into the divine darkness through the “clouds” of “forgetting” and “unknowing.” He details what Denys Turner calls the “experiential feedback” of the soul’s encounter with God, and marks the “stages” of the ascent of Mount Carmel by those experiences.\(^{316}\) Such a concern with the experiential character of religious development might be interpreted as an expression of John’s location as an early modern thinker, as de Certeau argues.\(^{317}\) Certeau argues that early modern thinkers show increasing interest in the individual, and in the psychological experiences of the individual. John and Teresa, he contends, both represent a shift in the textual tradition of mysticism with their heightened concern over the role played by the experienced self – the “I” – in charting the mystical itinerary. But there are also other possible explanations for this characteristic of his thought.

John himself alludes to the reason that he concerns himself with such a thick experiential account of the pain of enduring the “apophatic” ascent of Mount Carmel. John says in the prologue to the Ascent that “so little is written” on the experience of the passive night of the spirit, and how to properly interpret the experiential signs that accompany the final purgation that he felt compelled to himself write a detailed account so that spiritual directors would not be left without assistance in directing souls so afflicted. In the Ascent-Night, John gives what both Turner and Howells consider to be unprecedented attention to the cognitive and affective experiences that accompany the ascetical life, especially in his lengthy treatment of the passive night of the spirit (especially N2 6-13).\(^{318}\) There he discusses the affective and cognitive experience of confusion and pain that besets the soul that is undergoing a radical transformation of identity from the “old self” (viejo) to the “new self” (nuevo hombre). Teresa also found such attention to psychological nuance and descriptions of her experiences in various

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\(^{316}\) Ibid., 227-28.


stages of prayer an effective way to help the women in the Discalced reform interpret
themselves after the pattern of a “Teresian” Carmel.  

José Pereira argues that the attention to the systematization of individual
experience is characteristic of early modern, baroque mystical literature. Born out of the
crisis over “certitude” that characterized the fourteenth and fifteenth century nominalist
debates over the boundaries of reason in theological discourse, the attention to interior,
affective, “experienced” forms of rationality dominated many of the reform movements
springing from monastic, mendicant and lay circles. The scholastic era’s concern with
employing Aristotelian logic in theological discourse became, in the baroque era of
spirituality, an obsession with distinctions in the discernment of true and false spirits, or
with the rightness of intention. In the medieval period, a tradition emerged in Christian
ethical discourse that offered an increasingly complex and psychologically nuanced
account of what Richard Newhauser calls “the ambiguity of vices masquerading as
virtues.” The early monastic movement, epitomized in the works of Evagrius, offered a
moral taxonomy of virtues and vices that explored not only the ethical meaning of public
behavior, and its adaptation to social norms, but with the analysis of possible
psychological states that shape the intention behind those behaviors. The question of
intentionality in the medieval period is, according to Newhauser, particularly important
for moral theologians who styled themselves as the authoritative interpreters of the moral
good. In addition, as Caroline Walker Bynum and others have argued, the idea of the
primacy of the “inner self” was first consistently developed by theologians in the twelfth
century, which served to intensify the problem of moral ambiguity and the scrutiny of
intention. Evagrius’ formulation of the eight “thoughts” or “passions” (gluttony, lust,

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319 Alison Weber argues that Teresa made careful use of her experience to negotiate between the spiritual
authority of the beata and the limitations imposed by her gender. In particular, Teresa used thick
descriptions of her inner experiences to allow the women of the new reform to identify with her own
struggles; struggles that were particular to the experience women in religious life, like the fear of deception
or the frustrated desire to engage in public apostolates. Though John himself did not share these limits, he
seems to be highly attentive to similar concerns in his works that were written primarily for the Discalced
nuns. See Weber’s “Spiritual Administration: Gender and Discernment in the Carmelite Reform,” *The
123-46.

320 José Pereira, Robert Fastiggi, *The Mystical Theology of the Catholic Reformation: An Overview of
Baroque Spirituality* (Lanham, MD : University Press of America, 2006), 276-82. Jean Gerson, whose
influence in Spain was broad and deep, represented a certain crescendo of this concern especially with
discerning spirits.
avarice, wrath, sadness, sloth, vainglory and pride), reduced to seven in the west by Gregory the Great, became the standard model for engaging in analysis of the moral value of the private intention that lay behind public acts. Gregory refined the internal-external distinction by distinguishing between spiritual vices (*vitia spiritualia*), which deal largely with questions of intention, and carnal vices (*vitia carnalia*), which, because they are by their nature externally manifest are easier to distinguish. Gregory, and the subsequent tradition to an increasing degree, viewed spiritual vices being far more deadly for their being more hidden and ambiguous.\(^{321}\)

With what Robert Markus calls the “ascetic invasion”\(^ {322}\) of the early middle ages, when ascetics assumed a more powerful role in the Church’s hierarchy, the idea of morality as ultimately a struggle against veiled powers of evil in the individual soul took on increased importance. Peter Damian, Richard of St. Victor, Bernard of Clairvaux all offered examples of the innumerable ways that vices could be clothed under the guise of virtue, and the devil could assume “the appearance of an angel of light in order to conquer by pretense those whom he was unable to overcome by force.”\(^ {323}\) Theologians increasingly argued that grace alone could remedy the inherent instability of right intention in the exercise of natural virtue. Aquinas represented this growing consensus in his differentiating between infused virtue, given to the person by God through the immediate, and passively received infusion of grace, and acquired virtue, which represents the highest virtue achievable of the person acting from his or her own natural agency. Infused virtue, perfect in the simplicity inasmuch as it intends God as its ultimate end, whereas acquired virtue will always remain threatened by “*a falsa similitudo virtutis.*”\(^ {324}\) Later treatises on the subject, like that of the fourteenth century Augustinian canon of Erfurt, Henry of Frimaria, *On Vices Disguising Themselves as Virtues*, further developed the emphasis on the need for grace to rectify the ambiguities of vice and virtue and create in the individual soul a right intention, i.e. with God as the

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ultimately intended end. Debates in the late medieval period, finding a crescendo in the
work of Jean Gerson, so complexified the question of intention that it led to what Jean
Delumeau calls a climate of “paralysis of the soul.” It is within this culture of a highly
individualized moral ambiguity, especially endemic to monastic life, that John’s diagnosis
and remedy to the problem of intentionality and discernment in the Ascent-Night emerged.

There can be no doubt that John’s experience of privation in the Toledo prison
colored his interest in the importance of understanding the meaning of interior states of
pain, despair and the effects of sensory deprivation. It was during his imprisonment that
John began to write use poetry as a means of interpreting his experience, as he clearly
says in the introduction to the Canticle. The very fact that the poem One Dark Night,
which serves as the textual base for the Ascent-Night commentary, makes use of the
narrative of John’s midnight prison escape as a metaphor for the spiritual experience of
ascetic privation/liberation suggests that the nine months John spent in the Calced Toledo
prison raised in John a new awareness of the importance of “rightly” interpreting human
suffering. Colin Thompson asserts that Toledo opened to John a wholly new reading of
the Scriptures in light of the “book of suffering,” and deepened his attentiveness to the
subtleties of psychological and physical suffering that challenge a theological
interpretation of that experience.325 For John, the radical privation of prison offered what
he called in his introduction to the Ascent a breve, a “brief” path to holiness. Toledo was,
as Kavanaugh contends, John’s moment of insight which he, unlike Teresa, translated not
into autobiographical memoirs but rather into poetry and ascetical-mystical texts that
offered to others insight into how to fruitfully replicate his experience of nada and make
it into an exemplar of Discalced ascetical performance.326

John’s attention to psychological details of suffering in the “nights” is remarkable
in ascetic genre, and, as Turner forcefully argues, he effects a unique melding of
apophatic and ascetical traditions that is unparalleled. But, Turner further argues, John

325 Colin P. Thompson, St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of
America Press, 2003), 188.
326 George Tavard sees the importance of the Toledo experience as a key for interrelating the poetry and
commentaries, since Tavard believes that John’s aesthetic theory is simultaneously an ascetical theory.
John’s version of the Platonic ascent to Beauty inserts the experience of pain that accompanies the
renunciation of lesser pleasures. See his Poetry and Contemplation in St. John of the Cross (Athens OH:
employs the apophatic tradition most forcefully in his “apophatic critique of mystical experience.”

As we saw in chapters one and two, John’s scholastic/religious psychology was highly critical of all claims to mystical experience, cognition and affectivity that involved the senses or sensory forms. In the religious culture of late sixteenth century Spain, much of what was broadly named the alumbrados movement (and its beatas) would have fallen into that pejorative category for John. Before marginalizing those experiences in his critique, though, he offers psychologically acute, detailed descriptions of those religious experiences: where they come from, which part of the self they enter through (i.e. senses, spirit), and what ends they serve (or don’t serve) in lieu of the goal of union. His critique begins in the first Book of the Ascent with a discussion of how one must go about breaking all external attachments to sensual pleasure, and exposing all attempts to justify those attachments (A1 76-13). In Book Two of the Ascent he turns inward and calls for an active renunciation of all attachments in the “spirit” to particular experiences of God that still bear resemblance to the senses. His treatment of the extraordinary mystical experiences – visions locutions, etc. – in Book Two clearly presumes that they are normative among the Discalced, though all of the external evidence seems to suggest that such visionary culture was found exclusively among the Discalced nuns.

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328 Alastair Hamilton argues that the post 1559 alumbrados became almost exclusively associated with raptures, visions and other mystical phenomena. John’s critical attitude toward this was shared by the Inquisition, though their approach to its sources and resolution was very different. See *Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-Century Spain: The Alumbrados* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 156.
Kieran Kavanaugh describes the university town of Baeza, where John resided as wrote part of the Ascent, as containing over one thousand beatas known for their culture of visions and such. Kavanaugh concludes that John’s severe attitude toward all such “visionary culture” arose in direct response to this situation. The “safer” route, for John, was to eschew all such claims and press ahead on the way of renunciation and suffering as the foundational religious experience. See “Faith and the Experience of God in the University Town of Baeza,” *Carmelite Studies VI: John Of The Cross* edited by Steven Payne, OCD (Washington Province of Discalced Carmelites, Inc., 1992), 156-84.
329 Though very little has been written on this form of distinction between the friars and nuns, all of the references I found in the scholarly literature regarding the early Discalced movement and the problems associated with claims to visions, raptures and the like offer no evidence that friars displayed any proclivity to such claims. The exception may be John himself. The collection of hagiographical stories after his death contain numerous references to visions, raptures, levitations and the like. This distinction certainly offers some promise for future research into the role of gender in the two branches of the Discalced Carmelite reform. See Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 85-144. For a description of the narrative accounts of John’s “mystical
John’s assumption at the beginning of the Ascent is that the soul, awash in both natural and supernatural “experiences,” possesses a set of possessive appetites and desires that define that self by means of those experiences. John calls for a radical “elimination” of those appetites (A1 5.6), their “extinction” (A1 8.3), and that the soul make a “a complete break with [any] little satisfaction, attachment or affection” (A1 11.4). He qualifies this call for “detachment” by targeting only the attachments that are “imperfections” freely consented to (A1 11.3), “disordered” attachments, and not just any form of attachment to anything created. For John, this ascetical assault on attachments leads to a person who has achieved “apatheia” not the extinction of all desire, but the possibility to desire “all” freely without the limits imposed by attachment to this or that. Only this freedom for the “all” can make the soul capable of freely desiring God. This is, indeed, the clear sense of his dialectical counsels in Ascent I 13.12-13.

John, who counsels the relentless pursuit, through ascetical effort (i.e. the “active nights”), this state of detachment nevertheless despairs that this effort can ever fully achieve its goal of liberating the self from all attachments. Why? Because the self, in exercising its own agency to master its own desires ends up reaffirming the most fundamental object of attachment: the self itself. The pain of ascetical renunciation of the external objects of the senses yields an internal reward of pleasure for the self-who-renounces, thus only shifting centers of pleasure from the exterior to the interior. Thus the detachment from objects external to the self can end with a literal self-indulgence. This narrowing cycle of attachment to “satisfaction” can lead to masochistic penitential practice, what John calls the “penance of beasts” where “spiritual people” disguise their attachment to pleasure under the auspices of ascetic self-denial (N1 6.2). He examines this “state” in the first chapters of the Dark Night as he argues for the necessity of the passive nights wrought by grace to effect the detachment necessary for one to become capable of desiring “All.”

For John, who was so deeply influenced by the pervasive Augustinian theology of grace promoted especially among Franciscans in the late medieval period, active

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330 For example, John speaks in A2 34.2 of forms of prayer and asceticism that are no more than a “recreation for the senses.” And in N12-7 John makes use of the seven deadly sins to discuss the ways that asceticism is used to satisfy the relentless desire for a self defined by sensually based pleasure.
asceticism cannot achieve “pure detachment” and can be very dangerous by creating an illusion of self-lessness. Only the passive nights of grace, which disable the very power of enjoyment and satisfaction itself, and starve the self of both the objects and the sources of its possessiveness can achieve such complete detachment. The passive nights described in the *Dark Night* are the experience of the crippling loss of agency in the possessive self-of-experience that defines itself by means of attachment to *this* or *that* experience of some created object (be that natural or supernatural created objects) given through the senses. There is, for one immersed in the passive night, no satisfaction in any created good, “earthly or heavenly,” first in the senses and then in the most inner/central dimension of the self, the spirit. Hence, for John, the night of the spirit is the most painful and most terrifying as the center of agency and identity is unmoored from all that once defined it. And, in addition, as grace replaces the self as the center of agency – the definition of union – the self loses its formerly defined “autonomy,” self-agency that is defined apart from divine agency. The self that has entered union appropriates the “strange” (N2 9.5) vantage of the infinite divine vantage, which causes further sense of alienation from the world around – interior and exterior, sense and spirit seem to have “no relation to one another” (N2 17).

What has been achieved in this process, for John, is not the erasure of the self but rather the reconstruction of identity that involves a critique of other identities and sources of identity. As with the tradition before him, what is of supreme importance in the construction of the self is the question of internal intention and desire since, for John, it is not behavior but desire that shapes one’s identity. “To love something is to become like it” (A1 4.3). Asceticism, inasmuch as it involves bodily practices or the material culture of monastic life, is not enough to achieve the end of Discalced identity: union with God. Asceticism must reconfigure desire so that it seeks God alone as its only Good, and ultimately such reconfiguring requires passively enduring the work of grace in the

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331 John’s critique of an asceticism that clings to what Nicholas Doria called “observance” of the Rule is stinging, as John believed that the Discalced reform would fail unless Teresa’s emphasis on radical interiority (recogimiento) was first and foremost observed. As de Certeau observed, John’s to this among the friars led to his being ostracized. It seems clear that the vision represented by Doria sharply distinguished between the form of Discalced identity had by the nuns and that had by the friars. As we will see, this tension between eremetical/cenobitic monastic identity and mendicant identity would be reflected in the tensions found in John’s own life and work. Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Religion and Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 130-31.
soul. One might say that, as a mirror of his imprisonment experience, grace achieves the surest results when it is experienced as disabling and rendering helpless one’s ability to assert the self. But also as with the imprisonment, the self that is “made” by the experience of powerlessness itself assumes a new power. In the case of mystical transformation, the power is the assumption of divinity as a constituent element of the self-in-union. In the case of the imprisonment, the power is the assumption of martyrdom which, in Christian culture, wields great authority. “What the Calced had unwittingly done,” as Peter-Thomas Rohrbach asserted, “was to provide the reform with a martyr.”

And what John developed after his imprisonment was an ascetical vision that called all Discalced to perform the same martyrdom, the same renunciation of autonomous power that would allow the assumption of a new and more powerful identity to emerge; and identity capable of sustaining the reforming critique of Carmel Teresa had begun. But for John not all paths of renunciation led to the goal of union with God, and he offered his own criteria for judging counterfeits.

**Distinguishing the passive nights from other “causes”**

John invites the distinction between the crippling effects of the passive nights and the crippling effects of “indisposition or melancholic humor” (N 1 9.2) – what we might call physiologically based depression. He acknowledges that the experiences of both bear great resemblance, that the causes are unsearchable in themselves, but that the result or effects of each can be radically distinguished. Two criteria for distinguishing are proposed in N1 9.3-7, though only the second one proves decisive. For John, one who has entered into the passive night of sense, and later of spirit, is left, amid all of the growing inability to receive satisfaction or pleasure in anything “earthly or heavenly,” with a growing desire for God alone. The passive nights disable all of the “apparatus of

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sensory ego-compensation,” as Denys Turner puts it. In other words, for John human beings are wholly motivated to act by a cycle of pleasure compensations drawn from a host of “creatures” by means of the senses. Active asceticism is meant to break that cycle by depriving the ego-self of what it formerly defined itself by – desired. The passive nights – grace – continue this rupture, but at the same time begin to reveal a new source of agency within that could not have been detected had the natural powers of agency not been disabled. This new agency is experienced as a purely passive power, a desire for God not determined by the need to possess for oneself but for the sake of God alone. And, like Augustine, John understands that this “pure desire for God alone” has to be God’s own desiring in us, and not the desiring of a self other-than-God. The agency of the self, once disabled in the painful purgations, is revealed at the end of the passive night of the spirit to be nothing other than the agency of God’s longing love. This is the self defined by “union,” and is the self that John (and Teresa) believe to be the only authentic Discalced selves capable of true reform.

It is at this point that we can begin to appreciate what is for John the crucial distinction between the “graced” loss of the sense-of-self and the loss of a sense-of-self that arises from psycho-physical causes: “If this humor is the entire cause, everything ends in displeasure and does harm to one's nature, and there are none of these desires to serve God that accompany the purgative dryness” (N1 9.3). Both causes lead the soul through a destruction of what Turner names the self-of-experience, the self that lives in the cycle of compensations of pleasure drawn from sensory experience, but for each the prognosis is radically different. In the case of “melancholy” the loss is transcended by a restoration of the former possessive self-of-experience, even if it is reconstructed in a new way. In the passive nights, not only is the possessive self-of-experience deconstructed, it is never recovered and the desire for its restoration is lost. Turner comments that the irony of the passive nights is that they end up deconstructing the inner-logic of active asceticism that reaffirms the self-of-experience in the very act of denying its desire for objects of attachment. The passive purgations displace the autonomy of

selfhood won by active ascetical achievements with a new center in divine agency. The
active nights of ascetic praxis build up precisely what the passive nights seek to
demolish. However, without the striving of the active nights there would be no self to
demolish, only a riot of clamoring appetites and sensory desire - what Turner calls “pre-
selfhood.” The active nights bring some order to this riot, “quieting the house,” but the
self so-constructed is only a self-absorbed egoism that now feeds on higher, “spiritual”
objects of pleasure that ultimately have the self as their intended end. The Discalced self
can only intend one end, and that is God alone. John’s assessment of the ascetic prior to
the passive nights, still wallowing in the cycle of attachment, is bleak: “No matter how
much individuals do through their own efforts, they cannot actively purify themselves
enough to be disposed in the least degree for the divine union of the perfection of love.
God must take over and purge them in that fire that is dark for them, as we will explain”
(N1 3.3).

The onset of the passive nights which starve the self of all capacity to wring
pleasure out of even the spiritual goods, shows this “ascetic self” to be a house of cards
that collapses quickly. But at the same time the self-constructed ascetical-self begins to
collapse, God communicates himself immediately to “substance of the soul,” the ground
and center of the spiritual faculties, bypassing the senses and increasing the space
between interior and exterior (N2 16-17). As God draws near to the center, the ascetic
self begins to collapse in death, and what rises from the “sepulcher” of that death is a new
self that has lost all desire to recover the self-of-experience once constituted by sensory
attachment to finite ends. Faith, hope and love, which for John are the divine agents of
purgation in the intellect, memory and will, have only God as their end and now become
the sole determinants of Discalced identity.

Interestingly, this vision of a total undoing of all that is foreign to union with God
inspired “terror” in many of the Discalced friars who picked up John’s Ascent-Night,
according to the testimony of the compiler of his works, Fray Diego de Jesus. John and

336 The Darkness of God Negativity in Christian Mysticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995),
240. This “riot” is exactly what John describes in book One of the Ascent where he imagines a pre-
ascetical self ruled by the antinomian chaos of the appetites without the rule of reason. A1 6-12.
his vision seemed to them more angelic than human. And though John’s works were slowly assembled for publication in the early seventeenth century, the texts were heavily edited and were prefaced with introductions that attempted to rethink John’s account of the passive nights of contemplation by means of a Tridentine Thomism that was rapidly gaining ascendancy within the Discalced.

**What Self Remains?**

What self remains after the erasure of the self-of-experience? *Nada.* This is John’s radical proposal to describe the ineffable nature of the self united to the ineffable God, and here John’s apophatic theology becomes an apophatic anthropology. The self, after its mystical death, is defined fundamentally not by its relation to the created world accessed through the sensory part, but rather by its relation to God in the immediacy of union. There is no language adequate to describe this new self, other than language that is analogically applied; language whose semiotic power emphasizes its

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338 James Arraj, in his somewhat polemical treatment of the “reception” of John’s works from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, presents a sizeable amount of evidence that early seventeenth century Discalced Carmelites like Tomás de Jesús sought to reframe John’s doctrine in Thomist terms, reconciling John’s critique of speculative thought with a burgeoning revival of Thomism within Carmel. His scholarship focuses on John’s reception among the Discalced friars, whose interest in defending their own scholasticism exposed the tensions present in John’s own work between Discalced identity and the scholastic project. See his *From St John of the Cross to Us: The Story of a 400 Year Long Misunderstanding* (Inner Growth Books, 1999).

339 *Nada*, or “nothing” is a common trope of the medieval – especially Rhineland – apophatic-mystical tradition, often used to emphasize either the transcendence of God or the radical contingency of the creature. In John’s “Sketch of the Mount,” which he offered as a visual depiction of the doctrine contained in the *Ascent-Night*, the way that leads straight to the summit is traced by six repetitions of the word “nada.” For John “nada” was a polyvalent term, privileging the sense of an ascetic will of absolute renunciation required for ascending to God alone. Discalced identity was, for John, inherently ambiguous in terms of language and conceptualization. See John of the Cross, and Kieran Kavanaugh. *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 44-5.

340 N. Grace Aaron’s analysis of the symbol of “night” in John’s work argues that the “nada” of night functions positively, to open a “space” for union between God and the creature, since for John there is no natural likeness between the two (A1 4.2). The likeness that does arise in the transformation leading to union – what John everywhere calls the likeness of “love” – transcends even analogy. Hence, Aaron argues, “nada” offers a theological, philosophical, literary and psychological manner of expressing the suffering of unknowing and of becoming what one was not before; and a way to critique the anthropologies that compete with John’s own. N. Grace Aaron, *Thought and Poetic Structure in San Juan De La Cruz’s Symbol of Night* (New York: P. Lang, 2005), 176-98.
unlikeness to what is signified by utilizing “strange figures.” The language of union blurs the boundaries of difference and distinction, but for John, as for the other “apophatic mystics,” this inability to distinguish and differentiate the soul from God is not the result of a blending of substances (A2 5.7), but rather the inability to make a distinction at all because the self has been united (by God’s grace, and so unilaterally enacted) to the ineffable God. It is this quality of the divine that, for John, is at the heart of the “dark” character of the second and third phases of the night: the night of faith and the night “that is God” (A1 2.1). The night of faith (and also hope and love) blinds the intellect and memory that are accustomed to the knowledge of finite forms, and blinds the will that is accustomed to loving finite goods, conversely opening up in them a capacity for infinite knowledge and good that is God.

It must be recalled that the selfhood-of-experience that is undone in the passive nights is the selfhood that defines itself by attachment to the objects of experience given through the senses (which, because John has a Thomist epistemology, is the only experience we can have apart from the work of super-natural grace). The self that emerges from the nights now defines itself by its immediate relationship to God in the spirit that is not mediated by the senses. The re-orientation of the self away from the sense-accessed world toward God redefines the relationally-defined self. It also allows John to exclude all sources of identity outside of the Discalced identity from the redefined self, and, like a monastic community itself, to construct a new worldview in contradistinction from its environment. In this sense, the “cultural dissociation” effected by performance of John’s ascetical-mystical allows members of the reform to more deeply root the Discalced identity, allowing a critical distance to buffer contrary influences. Richard Valantasis sees this “dissociation” as the heart of ascetical strategies that seek to make room for the construction of new worldviews (cosmologies), allowing the opening of a “social space” both in the evolving ascetical community and in the individual selves that seek to internalize the worldviews of that community. The sense, for John, are the window to alternate social worldviews that are seen to be in conflict

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341 In defending his use of the erotic language of the Song of Songs, John says in the prologue to the *Canticle*, “the Holy Spirit, unable to express the fullness of his meaning in ordinary words, utters mysteries in strange figures and likenesses” (CB Prologue 2). The Song of Songs represents a sort of supreme semiotics, which John amply draws on to define the new selfhood formed by the destruction of the old self.

There is for John no selfhood which can any longer be the object of sensory experience, as it is united to God who is not an object of sense. John refers to this occult quality of the soul that emerges after the final passive night as a “being hidden in secret” (N2 17), and argues that after union the center of the self has “no relation” to the exterior world of the senses (N2 23.17). And all of the “mystical experiences” that flourish in the soul advancing toward, and in union, are not the experience of God but rather of what Turner calls the “experiential feedback” that reverberates intro the senses from the truly “mystical” center of the soul – hidden, secret, beyond experience. Faith, the “obscure habit of union” (A2 5.2), of its nature denies that God can be experienced via the senses, and so John’s treatment of faith leads him to a systematic and total rejection of all “mystical experiences” that derive their content in any way from the finite forms of sensual experience. Clearly this critique redounds on the many religious reform movements, stemming from Cisneros’ mystical reformation, that were coming under attack in Spain. These movements, especially tied to the \textit{beatas}, would have claimed experiences of God that were, in the language of late medieval scholastic anthropology, deeply sensual.\footnote{Aside from the testimony of Teresa herself, other such claims to a sensual experience of God in Spain would have included \textit{beatas} like Juana de la Cruz, Maria de Santo Domingo and Lucrecia de León. Alison Weber describes the attacks by the Inquisition on the \textit{alumbradas} of Extremadura in the 1560s as including accusations not just of claiming sensual access to the divine, but of sexual misconduct among the group’s “ecstatics.” While these visionary women were held in high regard during the first few decades of the sixteenth century, by the time of John’s writing their claims to authority based on such experiences were being marginalized. See “Demonizing Ecstasy: Alonso de la Fuente and the alumbrados of Extremadura.” In \textit{The Mystical Gesture: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Spiritual Culture in Honor of Mary E. Giles.} Ed. Robert Boenig (Hants, U.K.: Ashgate Press, 2000), 147-65; Ronald E. Surz, \textit{The Guitar of God: Gender, Power, and Authority in the Visionary World of Mother Juana De La Cruz (1481-1534).} Middle Ages series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Richard L. Kagan, \textit{Lucrecia’s Dreams Politics and Prophecy in Sixteenth-Century Spain} (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1990).}

The most painful character of the passive nights for John is that interim, ambiguous space where union with God has not yet occurred, and the breaking of the last vestiges of a self defined by anything other than God alone is not yet complete. Here, as...
Turner says, the only experience of self that we have access to is the *loss of self*. Faith despoils the intellect of any power to construct any meaningful concept of the self, the world or of God, but rather prepares the intellect to receive the divine vantage. Hope dispossesses the memory of its grounding in the former “possessive-self” not wholly centered in God. Love strips from the will all desire to possess any good other than God alone. The *Ascent-Night*, as Howells argues, is an unfinished work that leaves the reader with a sense of incompletion. Though at the end of the *Night* John refers to the beginnings of union, even there it is left still “in the night” (N2 23) and the final chapter deals with the painful assaults of the devil on the “naked” soul. In the case of the *Ascent*, the text ends after John has so multiplied his scholastic distinctions that he, in the words of Kieran Kavanaugh, “entered a forest from which there is no exit.” But this ambiguity does not only flow from the unfinished nature of the transformation of the self. It also reflects what we might call a “crisis of agency” that arises as the Discalced internalizes the tensions built into John’s understanding of grace and nature.

John, like Aquinas, could not conceive of God interfering with the order of his own creation. As we mentioned earlier, the nights remove from the self any need to define itself “autonomously” apart from God, and the soul’s faculties are no longer seen by way of contrast or distinction from God’s moving them, but “God now possesses the faculties as their complete lord, because of their transformation in him. And consequently it is he who divinely moves and commands them according to his divine spirit and will. As a result the operations are not different from those of God; but those the soul performs are of God and are divine operations. Since the one who is united with God is one spirit with him, as St. Paul says [1 Cor. 6:17], the operations of the soul united with God are of the divine Spirit and are divine” (A3 2.8). As we will see more in the next chapter,

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344 Howells says that if John had “finished” the *Ascent* and the *Night*, as he did the *Canticle*, the tensions of ambiguity would not have been so prominent. However, with Trueman Dicken I contend that John’s decision to leave both the *Ascent* and the *Night* incomplete possessed a heuristic value: it highlighted the essential character of the “nights” as inherently ambiguous in their incompletion. John’s unfinished texts are also suggestive of the unfinished and ambiguous state of the Discalced reform. See Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood*, (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 130; and E.W. Trueman Dicken, *The Crucible of Love: A Study of the Mysticism of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 215-44.


John’s apophaticism does not allow him to contrast grace and human freedom any more than it allows him to contrast union and distinction. What is experienced for John is the coincidence of being freely moved by grace, where divine and human agency no longer are seen as contrasting. This aspect of the apophatic tradition effects what Turner calls the “dialectic of transcendence,” or the resolution of binary oppositions by transcending the categories of logic that necessitate their being opposites in the first place. In concert with Aaron’s insight about John’s “nada,” we might say that John’s apophatic ambiguity opens a “space” for a new definition of freedom and agency that includes divine agency in its operation while preserving the unknowable character of that agency by means of negation. So again, John’s ascetic and apophatic desconstruction of the self does not simply negate identity, but opens a new horizon for defining that identity.

Michael Sells refers to apophaticism’s “subversive character” which, in the case of theism, refuses to allow language to rest long enough to reify God or God’s creation into another “thing among things.” John fully employs this destabilizing character of apophasis in service to the Carmelite reform, offering a theory of progressive reform that embraces individual, structural and social reform. Sells proposes late medieval mystics like Eckhart and Porete as isolated examples of ways in which apophatic discourse has been used to critique ideas of gender, equality, difference and identity. But what Sells’ examples fail to demonstrate are ways that apophatic thinkers engaged in institutional reform. Robert Lerner asserts that many of the representatives of the apophatic tradition in the fourteenth and fifteenth century “Free Spirit” movement were incapable of effecting institutional reform because their antinomianism per se marginalized them from institution’s need for conceptual and moral clarity. Carole Slade contends that Teresa of Avila’s attempts at “social reform” did not come from her apophaticism but rather from the unique vantages she possessed as a woman and a converso. Indeed, even

350 Carole Slade, “St. Teresa of Avila as a Social Reformer” in Mysticism & Social Transformation, ed. Janet Ruffing, (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 91-103. Ruffing, in her introduction to the collection of essays that include Slade’s work avers that the “negation” in the mystical tradition that has
though John stood at the center of Teresa’s institutional reform of the Carmelite friars, his progressive marginalization even among the Discalced friars seems to indicate that his extreme apophaticism was too ambiguous, too destabilizing to serve as a basis for the institutional flourishing of the Teresian reform. Not only was John himself marginalized during the last decade of his life from the emerging leadership within the reform, but his writings were largely banned from the friars and gradually taken from the nuns. The next generation of Discalced (male) authors in the seventeenth century tried to tame the more radical elements of John’s version of Discalced identity by setting it into a more stable Thomistic framework where grace and nature integrate more naturally.\footnote{Kieran Kavanaugh traces this history of John’s influence in the Discalced reform of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He argues that concern over heresy – *alumbrados*, quietism – motivated the move to routinize and systematize John’s work. John’s works were not printed in Spain until the late seventeenth century, and then only with heavy editing. But I suggest that the marginalization of John’s texts in the Discalced is also rooted in the radicalism of his apophatic asceticism, and his tendency to identify both friars and nuns with the quasi-eremitical Carmelites in Palestine; and this against Doria’s desire to secure a mendicant identity for the friars. See Kieran Kavanaugh, “Spanish Sixteenth Century: Carmel and Surrounding Movements,” *Christian Spirituality III: Post-Reformation and Modern*, World Spirituality Series, vol. 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 69-92.}

John’s uncompromising rejection of all selves-of-experience, and his attendant radical apophaticism, seems to flow from multiple sources. First, the powerful influence exercised, vis-à-vis the Discalced reform, by religious movements born of the *recogimiento* mystical reformation in Spain. These movements in their later forms, as we have seen, emphasized what Kavanaugh calls “extraordinary experiences”\footnote{Kieran Kavanaugh, “Spanish Sixteenth Century: Carmel and Surrounding Movements,” *Christian Spirituality III: Post-Reformation and Modern*, World Spirituality Series, vol. 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 69-73. Also see his more extensive treatment of this “mystical culture” in “Faith and the Experience of God in the University Town of Baeza,” *Carmelite Studies VI: John Of The Cross* edited by Steven Payne, OCD (Washington Province of Discalced Carmelites, Inc., 1992), 156-84.} as either definitive or criterial of the “way of perfection.” Though Teresa in many ways belonged to that tradition, she was critical of its excesses and discouraged the Discalced nuns from imitating the more extraordinary aspects of her spirituality.\footnote{Alison Weber refers to Teresa’s critical attitude to Discalced nuns in Seville who were putting into writing their experiences in prayer, seeing such a practice as potentially dangerous. Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 123-57.} But John was far more critical than Teresa, and one might read John as critical Teresa herself\footnote{That is the opinion of authors like Jodi Bilinkoff and Carole Slade, who believe that John represents either the late medieval suspicion of all embodied mysticism or shares the Inquisition’s mistrust of visions} or (as we will
see below) of those in the reform who saw a model in her. Again, John’s radical apophatic critique can be seen to stem from the radicalness of the Discalced reform, based on Teresa’s desire to return to the “primitive” model of Carmel. The need to break with the Calced, as well as the ideological distance that was perceived between the way in which Carmelite nuns and friars lived out their identity in Castile and Andalusia and the idyllic eremitical community on Carmel was immense for both Teresa and John. For John’s Ascent-Night, reform could only be achieved by a total renunciation of all attachment to the present order of things, by a total death and a de novo resurrection of the primitive form of Carmel as the “deiform” ideal. This perception of “distance” was exacerbated by the traumatic nature of the break within the Spanish Carmelite provinces as the Discalced reform progressed. Teresa’s belief that reform could only come to Carmel by means of an institutional break required a total redefinition of the “Carmelite self-of-experience” that had been formed by centuries of adaptation. John, entrusted with commencing the same “rupture” among the friars would come to enact that rupture in the experience of the Toledo prison. There the Calced friars would attempt to coerce John to give up the reform, though it was precisely in the experience of rejection that John began to produce the texts which would serve to articulate his radical expression of Discalced identity as the surrender of all that was previously known. The Discalced were severing their last attachments to the Calced and were, after the pattern of Teresa, bringing into existence a uniquely Spanish instantiation of the hermits of Carmel.

Critique of the experience of honor

Carmelites and aristocracy in Avila

that allow women to exert public influence. Denys Turner takes a more moderate position and says that John is critical of Teresa’s tendency to make mystical “experiences” criterial of development. Edward Howells says that Teresa’s earlier emphasis on the positive role of visions was later (under John’s influence) supplanted by a critique of visions in favor of the positive value of suffering in uniting the soul with Christ.

Wayne Hankey offers a fascinating look at the influence of neo-platonic theories of memory in late medieval reform movements. He says that those in the neo-platonic and Augustinian traditions believed that the remembrance of the original forms or ideal types of self, church, society was at the foundation of all authentic reform since such forms were essentially deiform. Wayne Hankey, “Self and Cosmos in Becoming Deiform: Neoplatonic Paradigms for Reform by Self-Knowledge from Augustine to Aquinas” in Reforming the Church Before Modernity: Patterns, Problems and Approaches, edited by Christopher M. Bellitto and Louis I. Hamilton (Aldershot, England/ Burlington, VT.: Ashgate Press, 2005), 39-60. John’s call in A3 2-15 for the radical forgetting of all memory linked to the present age, while remembering God alone is clearly linked to the Carmelite ideal origins of the contemplative hermits rather than the active mendicants of the mitigation.
As John sought to implement Teresa’s vision for the reform of the Carmelite order, to create a new identity based on an ancient model, he created a flourish of texts that would serve to implement that reforming vision, and offer a critique of all other identities that in some way threatened the success of a Discalced Carmel. At the heart of Teresa’s critique, according to Rowan Williams, was the hold that the aristocratic nobility had on monastic life in Spain. Not only did the nobility hold the purse strings that sustained monastic foundations, but their notions of honor and privilege permeated the monastic culture. Teresa’s assault on this culture and economic stronghold was both forceful and tactful, as Teresa realized that the displacement of one means of support had to be replaced by another. Teresa was largely responsible for all of the public negotiations required to effect these new arrangements, and John, though engaged in developing new monastic foundations in Castile and Andalusia, was able to remain mostly outside of the political and ecclesial machinations required to secure the existence of the Discalced reform as a recognized monastic institution. Scholars who have addressed the question of why Teresa did not utilize John to carry out broader leadership in the reform point to his stark and shy temperament. But Teresa may have also recognized that John’s effectiveness in the reform lay in an intellectual and ascetical power that could effectively communicated Teresa’s radical vision, and that positions of leadership required the arts of diplomacy and compromise that John may have lacked. Whatever the reason, John’s influence in the evolution of the Discalced was to come from his practice of spiritual direction; whether through word or through text. And through his texts we can discern Teresa’s critical approach to the aristocratic ethos and economy that had seized the monastic establishment in Castile.

Avila, the city that birthed Teresa’s Carmelite reformation, was a city marked by the broader social evolutions that coursed through Spain in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. As Jodi Bilinkoff noted in her study of Avila in this time period, it was a “thoroughly aristocratic city” dominated by a small number of elite, “Old Christian”

families. This urban aristocracy articulated a set of social values founded on notions of family honor and lineage that deeply shaped the religious institutions of Avila. Ideas of honor and its opposite, infamia or shame, shaped social relations, defining individuals by means of fixed categories of race, religion and class. Certain kinds of people are with or without honor in the social hierarchy, and this fixed notion of honor made attempts at social advancement an arduous endeavor. To offend against the public reputation or name of an individual or family led to the public obligation to make what Henry Kamen calls the “satisfaction of honour” through some form of debt or punishment. One’s honor was entirely bound to one’s family, and the transgression of social boundaries could lead to the dishonoring of a family name, as in the case of John’s converso father who, himself a member of the new aristocracy in Spain, married a peasant woman who may have also been a morisco. His family disinherited him and his new family, leaving John to be raised in poverty. Interest in genealogy and in local history that emphasized the noble lineage and virtues of the aristocracy ran high in Avila, and definitions of honor were deeply marked by concern with limieza de sangre, the purity of “old” Christian blood free from the “taint” of Jews or Moors. As Avila once possessed a large Jewish population prior to the pogroms of 1391, and the expulsion edict of 1492, this obsession with pure blood possessed especially acute relevance.

In the quest to accentuate and perpetuate the honor of one’s family name, a number of elite nobles of fifteenth century Avila established monastic foundations that retained multiple levels of debt to their founding families. The leadership of these monastic communities were often dominated by members of the founding family. Those establishing foundations would demand assurance of burial on monastery grounds, and would demand that the communities offer continuous vocal prayers and masses in perpetuity for the souls of all departed members of the founder’s family. The calls for


360 Much has been written on Teresa’s own relationship to her converso heritage, highlighting its influence on her egalitarian spirit as well as her seeming ambivalence (and silence) regarding her Jewish ancestors. See for example, Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila*. Outstanding Christian thinkers. (Harrisburg, Pa: Morehouse Pub, 1991), 34-45.
ecclesial reform in late fifteenth century Spain, tightly woven into the political agenda of
the new monarchy, were expressed in the unifying reform of the clergy and monastic
orders. Hence, the sponsoring of monastic foundations would serve to enhance a
family’s power and prestige, as well as address the growing obsession with ensuring
salvation in the afterlife.\(^{361}\) Noble widows known for their devout lifestyle (many of
them \textit{beatas}) also benefited from the linking of elite interests and monastic institutions by
using their wealth to establish communities of pious women that they themselves could
lead. The widow Doña Catalina Guiera, who founded in Avila a community of \textit{beatas} in
1463, would set the pattern for other noble women. Her \textit{beaterio} was built on the land
and sustained by the financial resources she had inherited from her deceased father and
husband. She would serve as the community’s first Abbess, and provided for the future
of her “daughters” in her will. In 1478 this informal community would become the
Dominican convent of Santa Catalina.\(^{362}\)

Many other monastic foundations were established in a similar way by noble
\textit{beatas}, and these communities would continue to maintain the social values grounded in
concerns of lineage, nobility and honor. Living family members would continue to
influence the choice of leadership, and impose demands for spiritual and pastoral services
of the nuns that would make fidelity to cloistered life difficult. Deceased family
members would claim burial rights on convent grounds, the erection of ostentatious
memorials and perpetual commitment of prayers and masses.\(^{363}\) As we have seen,
Teresa’s Carmelite convent, Encarnación, was likewise founded by a wealthy \textit{beata} Doña
Elvira Gonzaléz. After her death and the incorporation of the \textit{beaterio} into the
Carmelites, Encarnación was bound to the claims of a noble patron, Bernardo Robles,
who not only detailed for the nuns his burial requirements, but demanded that “one nun

\(^{361}\) Carlos Eire’s fascinating study of the explosive growth in sixteenth century Spain of interest in assuring
release from Purgatory after death offers ample evidence of the crucial role played by financial and
spiritual transactions between the aristocracy and the clerical and monastic establishment. Carlos M. N.
studies in early modern history (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Interestingly, John’s
“realized eschatology” proposes a religious culture that seeks the pains of Purgatory now and not in the life
to come. As with so much of popular religious culture, John gives no place to the intercessory role of
monastic life, which was, as Eire’s study argues, a financially lucrative transaction for monastic and
clerical establishments.

\(^{362}\) Jodi Bilinkoff, \textit{The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City}, (Ithaca: Cornell

\(^{363}\) Ibid., 47-52.
continually kneel before the Blessed Sacrament, holding a candle in her hand, and pray for his soul.” The strain of this requirement on the nuns led to over thirty years of legal negotiations that would finally be settled under the leadership of Mother Teresa of Jesus, as she began her reform of the Encarnación under a new vision of religious reform that was gripping Spain in the sixteenth century.

The symbiotic relationships built into the aristocratically endowed religious reforms of clerical and monastic institutions were challenged by the influx of new ideas and of new people into Avila in the early sixteenth century. “New men” from the rural areas sought new opportunity in Avila’s growing urban, merchant economy, and many of these immigrants – many of them of *converso* background – lacked the claims of lineage and pure blood that had dominated the established elite class. Their early attempts at violent revolt were crushed, and so they sought alternate – especially economic and religious – ways to establish prestige and honor. These “new men” offered their financial support to the novel religious reform movements inspired by the *devotion moderna* and Erasmian movements that had come into Spain through the sponsorship of Cardinal Cisneros. The result of their patronage was “an outpouring of ideas concerning education, charity, prayer, the proper role of the clergy and the nature of the Christian community.” A new set of religious movements, with cultural, political and economic ramifications, had been unleashed in Spain; and the Carmelite Order was about to have its identity shaken.

Powerful voices of this new conception of religious reformation emerged in Avila: John of Avila, Gaspar Daza, Alvarez de Aguila, Peter Alcántara, Mari Díaz, and the Jesuits who opened a College of San Gil in 1553. They emphasized, in

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364 Ibid., 50-1.
366 Ibid., 80.
367 Many monographs have been done on these figures, but it was the ground breaking work of Marcel Bataillon and Melquiades Andrés Martin that situated these and other reformers in the complex intellectual and social currents of sixteenth century Spain. Bataillon’s work in the 1950s opened up for scholarship the powerful influence of the northern European Renaissance, and the *devotio moderna* in Spain’s religious and cultural revolutions. Martin’s work on the distinctive character of Spanish mysticism, and the complex influences that shaped its discourse and practice offered a more sophisticated approach to a subject largely isolated in previous scholarship from interdisciplinary approaches. See especially Marcel Bataillon, *Erasmo y España* (2nd Spanish rev. ed., Mdxico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966); and Martin’s *Historia de la mística de la Edad de Oro en España y America* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1994).
contradistinction to the aristocratic models of reform, the practice of interior mental prayer over vocal prayer, faith over liturgy, direct religious experience, an interiorized asceticism, formation in virtue over heredity, alms for the poor over ecclesiastical and monastic endowments, pastoral care of the individual and missionary zeal over clerical contracts with wealthy families.\textsuperscript{368} This new “reform party,” that would decisively influence Teresa of Avila, received the financial and (growing) political support of the non-noble “new men” of Avila, as this new vision of social values overturned the lineage model of nobility and honor of city’s traditional landed elite. These new men held to a new code of honor based not on family lineage or purity of blood, but on virtue and economic success in the evolving market economy of Spain. They sought to support religious movements and monastic communities that held to this notion of honor, and who sponsored the new emphases in piety and education. And the monarchy, seeing the usefulness of these “new men” and their more fluid approach within imperial Spain’s growing international market also favored monastic reform movements that represented these ideas.\textsuperscript{369} Teresa would adapt the features of Carmel to the characteristics of this new ethos: “apostolic service, religious autonomy, mental prayer and asceticism, and the reception of direct religious experience [adapted] to a female, monastic and contemplative context.”\textsuperscript{370} She, along with John of the Cross, would break the crushing grip that the aristocracy exerted on her monastery, and all of the “new” Carmel by inserting these new conceptions of religious identity and practice into the Carmelites of Avila.

“I curse the day I ever had honor” – The Teresian reform in Avila

Teresa’s convent of the Encarnación was deeply embedded in Avila’s aristocratic system of social values, not only in terms of its economically determined spiritual

\textsuperscript{368} Melquíades Andrés Martín, Los recogidos: Nueva Visión de la Mística Española 1500-1700 (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1976), 20-89.

\textsuperscript{369} Cisneros’ sponsorship of novel religious and humanist ideas in Spain as a means of reform and of unifying the newly expanded Spanish empire set a pattern that would have limited, but enduring influence after his death in 1517. Erika Rummel contends that Cisneros represented a complex wedding of church and state interests that admitted of no easy characterizations. See her Jiménez de Cisneros: On the Threshold of Spain’s Golden Age [Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, Volume 212.] (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 58-65.

obligations, but also in terms of the ethos of the convent itself. The demographics of the Encarnación reflected Avila’s hierarchic social strata, with nuns differentiated on the basis of nobility, wealth and lineage. In addition, as we mentioned already, the Carmelite rule’s call for the enclosure of nuns was mitigated in Avila, and the convent retained a porous boundary that allowed the nuns to come and go, and receive guests as they pleased. This open exchange with its environment failed, in Teresa’s mind, to offer the Encarnación the requisite “space” needed to construct an alternate social system formed by the Carmelite rule. As Teresa, through her embrace of the texts and ascetic practices of the Franciscan-inspired recogimiento movement, began to create an internal “space” in which her identity was reformed and distinguished from its environment, she also began to look differently at the Carmelite community she lived in.

The tensions created by Teresa’s new interior space caused her immense anxiety, and her changed behavior began to appear to the other sisters as a critical “withdrawal.” As she internalized the values of the “new reform” sweeping through Spain, she came to notice the alternate social relations it was creating for her within her community. She no longer felt comfortable living in relative luxury while other sisters went hungry, and the trappings of honor and rank began to look twisted in her new vision of interiorized poverty and humility. She disliked being beholden to the needs of wealthy benefactors, being required to spend long periods of time away from the convent to keep wealthy widows company. Her longing to practice interior recollection in silence and solitude conflicted with the socially active convent, and the long hours spent in vocal, choral prayer. She discovered the need for her social context to change, to adjust to her own internal changes if she were not to remain in constant conflict. Her mystical experiences, reflective of the broader religious movement ignited by Cisneros’ Franciscan

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371 Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt offers evidence that a number of nuns at the Encarnación had to live away from the convent in order to live the observant Rule. Others, around the time of the closing of the council of Trent, isolated themselves within the convent in an attempt to live a cloistered life. Teresa shared in the discomfort of these groups. Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt, Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 175-216.

372 Jodi Bilinkoff, The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 108-15. It is interesting to note that studies on the effects of vernacular literature in Spain on the shaping of women’s (religious) identity, as well as allowing them a public voice, finds particular instance in Teresa’s textually informed “conversion.” For a nice example of such a study, see Elizabeth Howe’s “Cisneros and the Translation of Women’s Spirituality” in Blumenfeld-Kosinski et al. (eds.), The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 283-95.
reformation, ruptured her identity with the given social world of Avila as it was lived at Encarnación. And this restless internal desire for a new social group, a new community of women capable of bearing the character of the “new reform” that Teresa had imbued, would give birth to the new convent of St. Joseph; and so to the reform of the Carmelite order as lived in Avila.

As we have seen, John of the Cross, himself living an inner turmoil in the Carmelites of Salamanca, was ripe for his encounter with Teresa in 1567. John had already resolved to enter the eremitical order of the Carthusians after his ordination when he first met Teresa. Teresa had already received permission from the Carmelite provincial, Rubeo, to begin a male branch of the reform. She was on the lookout for a Carmelite friar who was educated, spiritual and experienced, who could help her reform the nuns and offer a theological compliment to her own work. After meeting him and finding in him the man she wanted, she promised John he could live his ideal of the Carthusian eremite in a Carmel reformed according to its original “Elijan” pattern. John soon found himself as a founding father of the Teresian reform of the Carmelite friars. Teresa, who had been ordered back to her original convent of the Encarnación after surreptitiously founding the reform convent of St. Joseph’s in Avila, quickly enlisted John’s help and had him appointed (in place of non-reform friars) as the confessor for her convent. Thus began his lifelong work of translating, interpreting and implementing Teresa’s vision of monastic life among both the Discalced nuns and friars. The resistance to the implementation of her version of Carmel would be sustained and, at times, fierce, and the creation of an institutional structure capable of bearing the dynamism this woman’s charismatic worldview would prove difficult. But before long, the nuns of Encarnación would refuse to receive any of the Calced friars into their convent, since they now identified themselves with Teresa’s new vision that John embodied.

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**Footnotes:**

373 Bilinkoff says that Teresa’s “raptures” initiated radical changes in her perception of the culture of Avila’s Carmel, and “in an instant” broke her attachment to that culture that had “held her bound” for over twenty years. Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 116-23.


**Imitatio Christi and the curse of honor**

When Teresa went to visit John of the Cross and Antonio de Heredia in 1568 at the new and humble monastery in Duruelo, she saw the older Antonio sweeping the floor and said, “What has become of your honor?” He replied, “I curse the day I had any.” Teresa, who offered in her writings vivid recollections of when she had once eagerly sought such honors at Encarnación, was delighted with this comment and saw in it the soul of her monastic ideal.\(^{376}\) In the *Ascent-Night*, one could say that John of the Cross offers a sustained “curse” on the aristocratic ethos of honor, and in its place he honors the life of virtue which, for John, is above all else the life of renunciation and detachment from all that does not conspire to the good of union with God. The Discalced was to seek honor in God alone, and the only means to such honor was through the imitation of Christ on the cross. John’s appropriation of the medieval passion-piety would serve to ground what was to him the most radical call of the reform: to perform “the living death of the cross” (A2 7.11).

The *devotio moderna* movement, born in northern Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This largely lay movement looked to the origins of Christianity for a simpler, purer form of Christianity which the ages had diluted. It called the clergy to reform, and valorized the interior life with a de-emphasis on ritual piety and the external dimensions of religious praxis. The *devotio* contrasted the knowledge of God gained by the scholar with that of the peasant of simple faith, and held that affective knowledge of God gained in prayer and expressed in virtue was superior, and less dangerous, than the knowledge gained by university training. It emphasized the corruption of humanity and the corresponding urgency of the need for salvation, finding in the practice of ardent meditation on the passion of Christ a powerful means of receiving that salvation.\(^{377}\) It was brought into Spain’s vernacular world in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, especially under the patronage of Cardinal Cisneros, and exercised an immense influence. Spread largely by the work of Franciscans, and taking root in the reform movements associated with the *recogimientos*, and later the *alumbrados*. The heavy emphasis in the *devotio* on the depravity of the world and of humanity was expressed in a

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profound mistrust of worldly ambition and ecclesial institutions. Elena Carrera describes the popularity of the *devotio moderna* as intimately linked to a growing hostility among the reform-minded toward university scholastic theology and clerical corruption, especially during the Great Western Schism. While this critical stance was in many ways effective in serving the purposes of Spain’s political and ecclesial establishment in the first decades after the unification, it soon was perceived as a threat to the interest of those establishments.\(^{378}\)

The two most popular vernacular texts of the *devotio* movement in Spain were Thomas á Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, known in Spain under the title *Contemptus mundi*, and the *Vita Christi* by a Ludolph of Saxony. The *Contemptus* emphasized inner prayer, humility, detachment from the world for the love of God, while the *Vita* offered meditations on the narrative of Christ’s Passion as a means of imitating Christ’s virtues. Two authors of the Spanish Franciscan tradition who would come to exercise a powerful influence over Teresa by means of their writings, Bernadino de Laredo and Francisco de Osuna, offered a unique translation of the *devotio* themes into the vernacular tongue. Laredo and Osuna appropriate all of the major themes of the *devotio*, but add a special emphasis on the practice of *recogimiento* and the goal of the devout life as mystical union with God. Both also link, in the tradition of Bonaventure, the ascetical call to humility (which they refer to as *aniquilada*, or annihilation) with the apophatic rejection of all finite images and language as the surest way to achieve union with God.\(^{379}\) Again, as with Bonaventure before them, participating in the Passion of Christ is the uniquely privileged form that apophatic theology takes: the way of negation is not an ascent through more refined levels of abstraction, but is rather the meeting of the “condition of death” that the Exodus trope demands for those desiring to approach God: “You cannot see me and live.”\(^{380}\) And here, where apophatics and Christ’s Passion intersect, is where we might say John’s Discalced Carmelite vision is at its most “Franciscan.”

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\(^{380}\) Exodus 33:20. In a recent article, Timothy Mahoney argues that John’s apophaticism, unlike that of Pseudo-Dionysius, is thoroughly Christological after the pattern set by Boneventure’s unique synthesis of Dionysian apophaticism and Francis’ passion piety. Timothy A. Mahoney, “Understanding the Christian
In the *Ascent-Night*, John offers a stunningly radical summons to detachment from every finite and created object of sensual and spiritual desire. “Two contraries cannot coexist in the same subject” (A1 4.2), and the Discalced reform can claim only one end as its true good: union with God in the solitude of a radical interiority. Without a doubt, John believes that the only safe route back to Carmel’s original solitude is to divest oneself of every dimension of identity that defines the self by means of the senses. If we locate John’s scholastic epistemology in the historical world of Carmel in Spain, his call to detachment from the world accessible to the senses can be seen as a call to a “critical distance” from the socio-cultural values that shape the members of the Discalced reform: values of honor, conceptions of the good life, cultural habits, and so on. Conversely, John invites his readers to compliment the struggle to detach, to “turn away from” with the call to “turn toward” the ascending slopes of Carmel and allow its power, its grace and its God to reconstitute and reshape their identity. This process, spoken in the language of medieval Christian theology, is characterized by the alternating experience of acting and being acted upon, of exteriority and interiority, of familiarity and strangeness, of pleasure and pain, of presence and absence, of sin and virtue. And at the center of this “ascent” is the “descent” of humility (N2 18.2) and the stripping of every self-definition not governed by reference to God alone.

*Performing contempt: Ascent 13*

The *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, as an expression of the active nights of sense and spirit, is a text that is meant to be performed in successive stages that represent progress toward the goal of a reconstituted self built around the Discalced ideal. As with most of John’s writings, the texts offer little in the way of practical counsels for ascetical practices such as fasting or spiritual exercises. This general absence of practical advice is somewhat unusual in ascetical literature, and even Teresa’s works contain copious examples and pieces of practical advice.381 Kavanaugh asserts that this absence of concern with the practices of Carmelite asceticism in his major treatises is supplemented

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381 Alison Weber, for example, details Teresa’s advice, scattered throughout her writings, concerning the choosing of a confessor, dealing with melancholy, dietary practices, and so on. “Spiritual Administration: Gender and Discernment in the Carmelite Reform,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Special Edition: Gender in Early Modern Europe (Spring, 2000), 123-46.
by the practical advice he does offer in his letters. What seems to govern John’s lacuna is the very substance of his critique of forms of piety that emphasized external observance at the expense of the primacy of intentionality. What matters most for John is not how one practices asceticism, but why one practices asceticism, and in this he is very much a disciple of the ancient ascetical tradition. In the Ascent-Night John centers all his attention on the proper mode of intention and desire that underlies Discalced Carmelite ascetical praxis. The life of poverty, chastity, obedience, fasting, study, liturgy, and so on have no value for John unless they are expressions of an intention that has God alone as its object and motivation. And the road to such a right-intention is the ascetical performance of the death of Christ on the cross.

If we can say that the nights of sense and spirit are the purging of all self-definitions not in conformity with the “Discalced” self imagined as united with God alone on Mount Carmel, then we can also say that the essential crisis of these nights that John explores in such vivid experiential detail is the experience of a loss of the self not defined in this sense. In chapters one through twelve of the Ascent John describes the soul, distinguished by the faculties and appetites of sense and spirit, as tragically enslaved to the senses by their attachment to “creatures.” These general attachments to creatures, effected by the insatiable appetite of the sensory part for those creatures, involve the “disordered” valuation of things other than God, who alone is the proper end of fulfillment. For John, not only can God and creatures not co-exist simultaneously as fulfilling ends, but creatures cannot even serve as a “proximate” means toward “union” with God. In chapter four, he examines the analogical power of created beauty, goodness, truth, freedom, wealth and power to lead the soul to God, and declares that this ascending “ladder of being,” so beloved by medieval scholasticism, to be useless in the pursuit of union with God. All of these “goods” of human life and culture are, compared to God ugly, evil, false, enslaved, poor and miserable, and those who set their desire on them “become ugly, abject, miserable, and poor because of their love for these worldly things” (A1 4.8). For John, the absolute transcendence of God obviates the value of creatures as a means to union with God, and so radically relativizes their value for the Discalced Carmelite who seeks God alone. Colin Thompson further argues that John’s stunning rejection of the analogy of being here is quite different from that of Pseudo-
Dionysius, who allows a powerfully crucial role for creation in ascending to union with God. He thinks, and I concur, that this difference is rooted in John’s Augustinian view of the ravaging effects of sin on the human capacity to not turn creation-as-icon into creation-as-idol. For John, the only “safe” route of ascent to God is to simply surrender all claims to creation as a means toward God.

In the Ascent chapter thirteen, a key text for interpreting the entire Ascent-Night, John sets out in synthetic form his ascetical “way of entering this [active night of sense]” (A1 13.1) that leads to the subverting of the former self defined by values foreign to Carmel’s slopes. As I mentioned above, John’s focus in his ascetical teaching is on the critique of the desire and intent that stands behind all monastic praxis. If we place this text in the context of Teresa’s war against the “culture of honor,” or the more general social hierarchies that she seeks to subvert in Carmel, we can read this chapter as a critique of one worldview with a view toward establishing a new one. John rejects the notion that honor is inherited through family name, an not acquired through the practice of virtue; that it is bound to specific notions of purity of blood; that it is conferred by social convention and human opinion and not by God. But he also rejects notions of honor tied to virtue, seeing only in the cross the paradoxical nature of Discalced honor as the experience of being shamed. The only honor John leaves space for in his thought is God’s honor, which is wholly incongruous with all worldly notions of honor. This sense of honor can find positive expression in the Ascent-Night only after one has passed through the final passive nights that complete the unmaking of an identity defined by anything other than union-with-God. Only after one has suffered the “living death” of the cross.

In line with the traditional devotio emphasis on imitating Christ, John counsels the “habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity

383 Denys Turner highlights the chasm between John and his medieval forebears in the apophatic tradition who allow a positive value for creation in the ascent to God. John’s radical rejection, Turner argues, expresses the late medieval divorce of speculative theology and ascetical/mystical theology. However, I argue that John’s rejection is conditioned heavily by the context of the Discalced reform and the problematic expressions of mysticism among the alumbrados in early modern Spain. Denys Turner in The Darkness of God Negativity in Christian Mysticism, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 213-18; 249-51.
with his” (A1 13.3). He further specifies that if this “desire” to imitate Christ is to be “successful” (A1 1.14), one must renounce and remain “empty of any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honor and glory of God” (A1 13.4). Here John’s imitation of Christ crucified directs sensory pleasure (gusto) to its only proper end: God. This renunciation and emptying is performed “out of love for Jesus Christ” (por amor de Jesucristo) (A1 13.4). After detailing an example of renouncing “pleasure” for each of the five senses, he adds that if “you cannot escape the experience of this satisfaction, it will be sufficient to have no desire for it” (A1 13.4). Here again, John’s ascetical theory is wholly geared to the reconfiguring of the intentional desire that motivates behavior. By the “emptying” (vacio) of the senses of all “satisfaction” in created objects of desire unrelated to God’s glory and honor, the ascetical life achieves its goal of redirecting desire and intention to a new end.

John continues in chapter twelve of the Ascent with a series of “maxims” intended to aid in the achievement of apatheia, the “harmony and pacification” of the four passions. The Christian notion of apatheia, originating in the Hellenized anthropology of Christian theologians like Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Augustine, is, as Richard Sorabji argues, a diverse and conflicted tradition. At heart, the ascetical tradition argues that the virtues, especially charity, are unable to freely rule the soul until the irrational passions are brought under reason’s control. For John, a life dominated by the irrational passions is a life enslaved to values defined by the insatiable appetite of the senses for “creatures,” and so a life defined against God’s glory and honor. In addition, a life dominated by irrational appetites prevents the rational appetites from seeking and achieving their true end in God. Such an inner orientation makes the Discalced self impossible to realize. The only remedy for such unruly passions that thrust all of the soul’s powers into such a “sensory orgy” is to starve them by means of intending their

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384 Richard Sorabji, Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation. The Gifford lectures (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 343-417. Sorabji contends that Augustine reinterpreted the Stoic sense of apatheia by weakening the link between cognition and the passions. This led to a more hostile attitude toward the passions, and a greater sense that they could not be effectively reintegrated with reason. Hence apatheia came to mean the either the domination or the extinction of the reasonless passions in the Augustinian tradition, of which John was a part.
opposite.\footnote{Evagrius first presented the strategy of intending conflicting vices and virtues to achieve the mean of virtue, and to subdue the passions. For a summary of Evagrius’ and Cassian’s virtue theory, see Gavin Flood, \textit{The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 149-53.} Again, John’s critique is a critique of desire that is meant to subvert all desire that does not conform properly with what is for him the inner logic of the Discalced rule: God alone is to be sought. But how does one work such a change in the orientation of desire? John answers this question with a series of maxims.

Endeavor to be inclined always:
not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;
not to the most delightful, but to the most distasteful;
not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;
not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;
not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;
not to the most, but to the least;
not to the highest and most precious, but to the lowest and most despised;
not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing.

Do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst, and, for Christ, desire to enter into complete nakedness, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world (A1 13.6).

These nine antitheses of desire, taken from the words found at the base of Mount Carmel in his sketch, starkly contrast the rejected non-Discalced desiring-self that seeks ease, delight, gratification, rest, consolation, the most, the highest, the most precious, wanting something and looking for the best temporal things, and the exemplary Discalced self that seeks rather the most difficult, the distasteful, the least pleasant, the hardest work, the unconsoling, the least, the lowest and most despised, wanting nothing and desiring the worst temporal things. As with John’s earlier counsels to “imitate Christ in all things,” John completes the antitheses by asking that, for the sake of Christ the reader “desire to enter into complete nakedness, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world” (A1 13.6). The Discalced, in seeking Christ, must unmake all of the culturally normative patters of behavior in pursuit of worldly goods by simply, for the sake of the “new good,” seeking its opposite.

The performance of these antitheses, toward which one is to “endeavor to always be inclined” (A1 13.6), is meant to be “sufficient for entry into the night of senses” (A1 13.7). In John’s scholastic psychology, this means that actively intending against a habitual inclination leads, after repeated performance, to a new habit of the mind. In this
case, John’s goal is primarily to undo, to detach the soul’s “disordered” habit of seeking its own “satisfaction” in the senses. For John, the inclination toward ease, gratification, and so on, undermines the spirit of the Discalced rule, and so is prohibitive of union with God. The Discalced ascetical community, in this scheme, engages in a revaluation of values by actively choosing what is naturally repulsive. This active ascesis of desire, paradoxically, opens the self to “great delight and consolation” (A1 13.7) in the goods of the spirit by quelling the appetites and the passions, allowing the Discalced Rule to begin to shape the identity of the nun or friar.

After treating of the imitation of Christ and the antitheses of desire as effective and “sufficient” means to entry into the active night of the senses, John offers two further sets of “exercises” and “counsels.” First, he counsels the Discalced to act, speak and think “lowly and contemptuously of yourself and desire that all others do the same” as a remedy for the concupiscence traditionally divided into the three categories of “flesh,” “eyes” and “pride of life” found in 1 John 2:16 (A1 13.8-10). This counsel to practice humility by means of contempt is, again, intended as a remedy for what John presumes is the universal condition of fallen humanity turned in on a self defined by the sensory appetites. It is, in a sense, John’s final blow to the “culture of honor” that Teresa sought to unmake in terms defined by her culture, and remake in terms defined by the Discalced Christian ethos: “soli Deo honor et gloria.” Any desire to be shown honor by others for the sake of one’s own goodness (A3 27), for marriage or family (A3 18), for ecclesiastical “prelacies” or positions of power within the monastery (A2 30.4), or for any reason other than for God’s glory and honor, is demolished in the every performance of this new “culture of self-contempt.” In the passive nights described in books One and Two of the Dark Night, this cultivated attitude of contempt for a self defined by anything other than God is so deeply internalized that it leads to a crisis of identity as the soul. Seeing how much it is still defined by things other than God alone, the soul begins to believe that it is hopelessly lost and that it is even despised by God (N2 6.2-4). It is not until union that the soul is able to rightly judge the value of honor before God, and to naturally disdain all honors afforded by the world. So for John, only a soul in union with God is able to live the Discalced identity in its fullness.
In John’s scholastic language, the perspective of the “spiritual faculties,” in which the grounding (*sustancia, supuesto*) or center/depth (*centro/fondo*) of identity lies, must be fully identified with the vantage of the summit of Mount Carmel to lose all need for the contempt of self. Once the horizonless vista has been achieved in union, as Mount Carmel has been wholly internalized, the self is no longer “other than” its desired goal. Hence, there is no remaining dimension of the “self” to despise as the self is now indistinguishable from its goal of union with God on the summit of the mount. This process that began with the active performance of contempt is soon, in John’s schematic, replaced by “passively” experienced divine agency – grace – that disables the soul’s natural activity and reconfigures the complex of spiritual and sensory faculties, passions and appetites to seek God alone as their fulfillment. John’s critique of the “culture of honor” seeks to remove not just the desire for honor, but the whole basis on which that culture is founded. He critique is a conspiracy of nature and grace that recreates, in accordance with the Discalced Carmelite ideal, a self that intends only God in all its acts. This unfolding self, described in chapters twelve to twenty-five of Book Two in the *Dark Night*, is increasingly lost in the solitude and isolation of Mount Carmel as the spirit becomes more estranged from the senses. The soul, in the language of the poem *One Dark Night*, is hidden, disguised, in secret, “going out” to have “her conversation in heaven” (N2 22.1) where she now has begin to live. Questions of defining oneself by the measures of culture foreign to the Discalced self seem irrelevant as an inner eremiticism has completed the rupture of the “inner society of the self”387 from the larger society that her ascetical praxis was meant to distinguish her from. John makes the social glue of honor irrelevant by creating a Discalced identity that is largely solitary.

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386 Gavin Flood describes this dynamic found in most ascetic literature as the internalization of a tradition’s goals by means of performances that include text, ritual and bodily manipulations. These performances are intended to reconfigure subjectivity according to the patterns established by the tradition. Union with God is, in this view, the internalization of the entire Discalced tradition so that subjectivity and tradition are one. See Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-27.

387 Richard Valantasis uses this phrase to describe the unique social constructions of identity that the eremitical ascetic tradition puts forth as the ideal of monastic life. For them, the ultimate boundary is not between monastic community and the world, but between the inner society of the soul and the world. See Richard Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Winter, 1995), 808f.
We have looked briefly at the linkage between John’s “exemplary Discalced self” and the historical form that the Discalced reform took. More specifically we have glanced at John’s critique of Teresa’s nemesis, the “culture of honor,” and how John applied his ascetical, theological and anthropological theories to proffer a critique of worldviews inimical to the Discalced conceptions of honor. We saw that John’s appropriation of elements of the tradition of the devotio moderna, such as the imitation of Christ, were placed in service of reconstructing the “desiring” self so that God alone is intended. And we suggested that John’s internalization of the eremitical ideal of Mount Carmel allowed him to locate his asceticism in a specifically Carmelite context. John sees this process of “internalization” as both “actively” enacted by human ascetical effort and “passively” effected by the divine agency of grace. In particular, we see how John not only attempts to undo the social bonds of “worldly” honor by a dialectical critique of desire, but he also eschews those bonds by positing a “solitary” identity as the ultimate goal of the Carmelite. This critique of what Turner calls the “self of experience,” which we have so far applied to the culture of honor in Spain, also was extended by John to the visionary culture born of Cisneros’ mystical reformation. And it is to that critique that we now turn.

Critique of Visionary Culture

Cisneros’ Mystical Reformation: The historical debates

Elena Carrera, in her study of the nature of authority in Teresa of Avila’s writings says that Teresa, “like many medieval devotional and mystical writers, male and female…defends the idea that experiential knowledge, which can be safeguarded by an attitude of humility, is superior to the knowledge of learned men, the ‘letrados.’”\footnote{Elena Carrera-Marcén, Teresa of Avila’s Autobiography: Authority, Power and the Self in Mid-sixteenth-century Spain (Modern Humanities Research Assn, 2005), 43.} Bernard McGinn believes that this trend, particular marked by the emergence of women in vernacular theological discourse, emerged in force in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century. Women, McGinn says, though they were not allowed to engage in theology \textit{ex officio}, by virtue of a ecclesiastical office, they \textit{were}, beginning in the thirteenth century, allowed to teach \textit{ex beneficio}, by virtue of the immediate illumination
of grace, provided they “possess sound doctrine.”\textsuperscript{389} Around this time, McGinn observes that there was a veritable explosion of visionary literature, mostly among women, which led to new controversies about the public authority of women,\textsuperscript{390} the role of the vernacular with its democratizing and localizing character,\textsuperscript{391} the value of bodily and visionary experience in theology and mysticism,\textsuperscript{392} and the relationship between orthodoxy and mystical experience. This trend continued largely unabated up through the sixteenth century, and produced a massive body of literature that both supported and was harshly critical of the claims of immediate access to divine illumination that bore with it the weight of authority.\textsuperscript{393}

Carrera traces the rapid growth of the broader movement of Franciscan-led recogimiento mysticism in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Spain to the growing availability of vernacular versions of Scripture and devotional literature that allowed for immediate “textual access” to the sources of divine revelation; and so to new constructions of identity and religious experience based on that immediate access. The texts, Carrera argues, that were most influential on Teresa appropriated the devotio themes of the superiority of experiential knowledge over the intellectual knowledge accessed by educated (male) elite, the universality of the Christian call to interior perfection through affective prayer, and the practice of humility as a means of acquiring spiritual knowledge and safeguard against deception.\textsuperscript{394} These Franciscan authors that influenced the Carmelite reform directly drew heavily on the classics of the devotio moderna, which were themselves born out of a critique of late medieval scholasticism.

\textsuperscript{390} Gillian Ahlgren places Teresa at the end of the epoch in Spain that granted women an authoritative voice based on such visionary claims, while she locates John in the trend to marginalize such claims. Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, \textit{Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 97-104.
\textsuperscript{393} In an unpublished paper shared privately, Euan Cameron argues that the balance of medieval sources of authority – scripture, tradition, reason and immediate illumination – began to break down in the fourteenth century, and came to a full crisis in the sixteenth. He further argues that the marginalization of mystical illumination during this period reflected the dominance of ecclesial and university politics over claims to authority. Claims to individual illumination came to be seen as threats.
The wildly popular work of à Kempis, *Contemptus mundi*, which we have already had occasion to mention, contrasted the practice of virtue with theorizing virtue, wisdom acquired by learning and wisdom acquired by loving wisdom given immediately in prayer, and the arrogance of the intellectual with the humility of the pious soul.⁴⁹⁵ Laredo and Osuna counseled the practice of interior recollection or mental prayer as the “quickest” (*breve*) route to the understanding of “mystical theology,” the knowledge of God gained by immediate experience.⁴⁹⁶ Alastair Hamilton says that the *recogimiento* movement contrasted the “proud scholars” with the “humble devout,” and asserted that only the latter had access to union with God. This tension found specific expression in *recogimiento* authors who observed that the “higher” stages of prayer, which set aside all discursive thought utilized in meditation, passed beyond all bodily, sensible and intelligible knowledge to ineffable contemplation through faith and love. This knowledge was immune to translation into the modes of discursive reason, as it surpassed them and left them behind in favor of the superior mode of *intelligentia amoris*, the knowledge of love. Osuna counseled that the highest states of prayer in union required that all images and distinct ideas be left behind, and that faith alone be allowed to open the heart to “become inflamed by love.”⁴⁹⁷ Carrera asserts that knowledge that “changed the knowing subject” was, according to the Franciscan *recogitos*, “more effective and far-reaching than scholastic knowledge in attaining knowledge of God and moral perfection.”⁴⁹⁸ García de Cisneros had strenuously argued that “erudition can be an insuperable obstacle to his method.” He humorously remarked once that these *letrados* were “alien to true devotion and place all their learning in talking to God as though they

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⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 45.
⁴⁹⁶ The emphasis among many of these reform movements on the safe and brief way to sanctity was severely criticized by the Dominican-led assault of the Inquisition. John and Teresa saw the Discalced reform very much in this tradition of the “safest and most direct way” to perfection, though Teresa’s emphasis on the role of rapture and John’s emphasis on the role of suffering distinguished their approaches. See, for example, the critique by Dominican Juan de la Cruz, his *Diálogo* published in 1555, that valorized vocal prayer and the practice of virtue as the safer way and held the mystical way of *recogimiento* to be the ore dangerous way. Summarized by Elena Carrera-Marcén in *Teresa of Avila’s Autobiography: Authority, Power and the Self in Mid-sixteenth-century Spain* (Modern Humanities Research Assn, 2005), 63-88.
were talking to Lorenzo Valla or someone else who could accuse them of speaking bad Latin."

This hostility to certain forms of learning – scholastic and humanist – led to a growing tension between the (largely Dominican) *letrado* representatives of the Inquisition charged with enforcing doctrinal orthodoxy, and the (largely Franciscan) *espirituales* who claimed immediate illumination from God. However, the Franciscan authors who argued in the vernacular for the universal availability of this “new mysticism” also contended that humility was the key that granted access to this “superior” form of theological knowledge. And humility not only opened one to being taught directly by God, but also insured openness to being corrected by one’s confessor, spiritual master or the Church. In fact, authors like Laredo and Osuna were very careful to anticipate the criticisms of the Inquisition that had become acute in response the *alumbrados* crisis that followed the trials of the Franciscan tertiary Isabel de la Cruz and her lay disciple Pedro Ruiz de Alcaraz in Toledo in 1525. Though Osuna and Laredo, in their earlier works, both expressed a greater trust in the value of visions and sensual experiences in mystical experience, the later work, impacted both by the growing *alumbrado* crisis and the emerging Protestant movements in northern Europe, cast suspicion over such experiences and laid heavier emphasis on humility, fear of delusion and the apophatic denial of the value of sensual experience in the highest stages of prayer.

The 1525 edict condemning the “errors” of the *alumbrados* of Toledo represented a crucial moment in Spain’s evolving religious culture as, for the first time since Cardinal Cisneros’ public and active support for the “new mysticism” of the vernacular *recogimiento* movement, the “edict cast doubt on internal revelation and was used as a

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400 In an important study, Jodi Bilinkoff examines the evolving role of the confessor in constructing identity among women in sixteenth century Spain. *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450-1750*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). Teresa placed the highest value on this relationship, and enlisted John’s assistance in reforming Ávila precisely in this capacity.

401 Jose Nieto sees these trials as a watershed event that brought about the shift of the Inquisition’s interest from the *converso* problem per se to the growing problem of the reform movements inspired by texts coming in from the north. See Jose C. Nieto, “The Franciscan Alumbrados and the Prophetic-Apocalyptic Tradition,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Oct., 1977), pp. 3-16.
resource for inquisitors for decades to follow." 402 The edict represented a “triumph” for the letrados who claimed primacy for doctrinal knowledge of the public tradition of the Church and limited the practice of mental prayer and interiorized mystical experience to the elite monastic culture that claimed access to education. They argued that making such practices available to the mujercillas e ydiotas, the “poor little woman and ignoramus” opened the door to heterodoxy. 403 The limited focus of the Inquisition’s 1525 edict against a specific set of beliefs clustered under the term alumbrados would later be taken up in the 1550s and 1560s to “accuse people, especially women, of false revelations and of even having been deluded by the devil.” 404

The Valdés Index of 1559, created after the “Protestant scare” in Vallodolid and Seville in 1578, further developed the Inquisition’s attack on the recogimiento movement as the 253 titles listed included many of its vernacular texts that promoted mental prayer. Melquíades Andrés, in his study of Spain’s recollection mysticism, explains that the Valdés Index created a fault line between the vernacular, affective, highly interiorized character of the recogimiento and the spirituality promoted by the letrados that emphasized dogma, vocal prayer, devotion to the liturgy and sacraments, the practice of virtue and the destruction of vices. 405 The Index drew shape lines between Latin and vernacular texts, excluding the publication of theologically speculative works in the vernacular. “[F]ew authors,” Ahlgren says, “wrote spiritual tracts in the second half of the century…and books written by women disappeared.” 406 Teresa and John both wrote in the wake of the Valdés Index, and its harsher sequel, the Quiroga Index of 1584 that included bans on vernacular versions of the Scriptures. They saw themselves, in Ahlgren’s words, to be “filling a void” in vernacular literature that once nourished the mystical reformation that flourished in the first half of the sixteenth century. 407

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407 Ibid., 32-66.
Carmelite reform was formed and inspired by this vernacular mysticism, and so the possibility of falling under the Inquisition’s censure threatened the very lifeblood of the fledgling order. In response to the climate of intolerance and suspicion, both John and Teresa, though in significantly different ways, attempted to theologize mysticism in a manner that reconciled (or at least addressed) the concerns of the letrados with the praxis and doctrine of the espirituales.

**Supernatural existential: Critique of the charismatic culture of Carmel**

The Carmelite reform of Teresa was, according to Joachim Smet, represents not only a return “to the primitive sources of the Order,” but a return that “bears the force of her forceful genius: it is Teresian.” John of the Cross’ works were meant to serve as formative texts for the Discalced friars and nuns, translating this “Teresian” vision into a language saturated with traditional medieval exegetical strategies, and into a method drawn from scholastic theology. These approaches were denied to Teresa by the fact that she was a woman, lacking access to formal education, though her mastery of the vernacular literature available before the Valdés Index have her a sophisticated language which she tuned to advantage in defending her interiorized Carmel. John’s translation of Teresa’s new language of an interiorized Carmel in the Ascent-Night bore all of the marks of her appropriation of the Cisneran “mystical reformation,” though it also bore the marks of the caution that decades of public debates had engendered. As Gillian Ahlgren remarks, “Teresa’s mystical doctrine was clearly consistent with orthodox Christian tradition, yet polemical debates in sixteenth-century Spain made it difficult to express such truths, particularly when they were designed to encourage women’s spiritual growth.” But John, as Ahlgren also says, “reflected the distrust of many people” in his highly critical view of the embodied nature of this mysticism, especially as it related to the “visionary” dimensions of experience.

As we have seen, the culture of “mystical” religious experience in Spain engendered by Cisneros’ reform work, given shape in the literature of the Franciscan-led recogimiento movement and made notorious in the condemnation of the alumbrados in the 1520s and 1550s imprinted itself deeply on the Teresian reform of Carmel. This

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culture was particularly marked by debates over the role of visionary experience in public life, ecclesial reform and in the journey to “mystical union” with God. The *letrados*, mostly Dominicans like Alonso de la Fuente, Juan de Lorenzana and Juan de la Cruz criticized this culture and called for a return to more external forms of piety and practice (e.g. vocal prayer, the life of virtue, works of charity) that remained in the purview of verifiable orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Teresa’s attempt to defend the way of interior, mental prayer for her sisters and to argue for the “integration of visions with mystical union…affirming the visionary epistemology so challenged during her day” made the Carmelite reform vulnerable to attacks from without, or to accommodations from within that would strip from the reform this uniquely Teresian stamp on Carmel. The *Ascent-Night* can be seen, in this light, as an *apologia* for the validity of this “stamp.” I will argue, though, that John’s *apologia* took a somewhat critical view of Teresa’s “visionary epistemology” in order to protect the new Carmelite mysticism from the dangers that threatened it, from both within and without. The delicate balance between Discalced identity and the person of Teresa of Avila seems to bleed through the pages of John’s texts.

*Baeza*

John’s approach to mystical, visionary experience – what he calls “supernatural knowledge” (A2 10) – is at best ambivalent. In his commentaries it is clear that he takes such experience as the normal expression of the entry into the contemplative life, and makes it the exclusive subject of his discussion of the role of knowledge in the night of faith. This remarkable fact points to assumptions regarding Discalced Carmelite identity that, as Smet said, bear that uniquely Teresian imprint. Teresa herself shared this assumption in her own writings, offering narrative accounts of her own experiences and more formal treatises, like the *Interior Castle*, that offered a structured account of

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411 There was a storm of criticism of Teresa’s writings shortly after her death in 1582, especially by Dominican Alonso de la Fuente, but it was Augustinian friar Luis de León who came to her defense and helped insure the posthumous publication of her writings. Ahlgren suggests the danger that loomed around Teresa’s work no doubt shadowed the Discalced reform, which may explain in part the marginal influence of John’s works within and without the reform. Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 114-23.

progress through such experiences to union with God. If Carmelites understood that their identity lay in the “perpetuation and imitation of her spirit,” Carmel would, among other things, be a charismatic Carmel founded on the quest for immediate union with God through the practice of interior prayer.

Kieran Kavanaugh says that as John wrote the *Ascent-Night* while he was serving as prior in Grenada, he wrote with his recent experience of the university town of Baeza in mind. John had been sent to establish a monastery and house of studies for the Discalced friars at the college John of Avila had established in service to his reforms in Andalusia. Teófanes Egido says that in John of the Cross’ time Baeza “was a city living in a permanent atmosphere of religious enthusiasm” where catechism was “shouted in the streets,” preaching everywhere and anywhere was “loud and ostentatious,” students dressed in clerical garb “as if they had been reared in a religious order,” mental prayer “was a subject of concern and discussion” and an all-pervasive perception of the “presence of the devil” made discernment and exorcisms a normal part of public life. A later witness placed these words regarding Baeza in John of the Cross’ mouth: “All that was needed for Baeza to be a monastery was to close the gates of the city as with monastery gates.”

There were, by some estimates, two thousand *beatas* who practiced *recogimiento* living in Baeza either in their houses, or in small informal communities. This large number of celibate women were allowed an autonomy that was rare for non-religious women of the time, and much of their support derived from their “devotees and admirers.” They also developed around them a retinue of “confessors” who, Egido says, often encouraged their public performances of mystical experience: “the stranger and

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more flamboyant their austerities, graces in prayer, struggles with the demon, diabolical possessions…the better they were.”

The Inquisition had been active in Baeza during the time of the founding of the new Discalced Carmelite college, and saw Baeza as the “cradle of the alumbrados.” Hamilton says that the Inquisition’s concern with the explosive growth of the beatas in Andalusia in the 1560s and 1570s was directly related to the alumbrados crisis in Toledo of the 1520s, the “Protestant scare” in Seville and Valladolid of 1558, and the second alumbrado outbreak in Extremadura in 1570. Hamilton points to the Inquisition’s special concern with these pious women who were “so attracted by a mysticism” that emphasized visionary claims demonstrated by public performances of ecstatic behavior. These performances of “ecstasy, rapture and other things that were much admired” afforded these women great prestige, and a number of beatas offered prophetic interpretations of the death of King Phillip as an apocalyptic event that would usher in the end of the world. Even the reformed Carmelites, and their founder Teresa became the topic of prophetic utterances in Baeza, claiming that they would be an “order of martyrs.”

Most of the accusations against Teresa to the Inquisition arose from the region around Baeza as a result of the intimate ties between the beatas and the Carmelite reform.

There is no doubt that Teresa owed an immense debt to the beata culture of Spain that had grown out of the Franciscan mystical reformation, and many of the women who joined her reform early on were beatas. Teresa’s writings contain the assumption that her nuns will experience visions locutions, raptures and such, and while she applies many of the principles of discernment (especially of Jean Gerson) that were common to the late medieval period, Teresa considers such experiences to be “criterial” signs of progress toward union with God. Alison Weber asserts that Teresa’s move toward the strict cloistering of her nuns was motivated out of a desire to protect them from public and inquisitional scrutiny, allowing them to pursue the inner world of mystical “self-

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418 Ibid., 219.
actualization” and a certain independence in the “spiritual administration” of women by women.\textsuperscript{421} Though Teresa herself voiced a vigorous \textit{apologia} for the truth of her mystical experiences in the public forum, making use of the authority that came with them to secure the survival of the Discalced reform, she did not counsel the same for her nuns.\textsuperscript{422}

Alison Weber states that the rationale of the Inquisition and of Trent used to justify the move to cloister women religious, based on a growing mistrust of women’s religious movements in Europe, was quite different from Teresa’s motives. After Teresa’s death, Nicholas Doria, who succeeded Teresa’s close collaborator Jerónimo Gracián, attempted to integrate the Discalced reform with Trent’s call for centralization of government around a highly juridicalized clerical authority. He established a governing council (\textit{consulta}) of Discalced friars to oversee the nuns and, in a move that John of the Cross would oppose, attempted to emend Teresa’s constitutions to assert greater control by the friars over the nuns. After Teresa’s death, many of the nuns, joined by John and Gracián, protested against Doria and secured from Rome the permanence of Teresa’s Constitutions. Doria, infuriated by their secretive “machinations,” wrote a spirited letter to the Prioress Ana de Jesús that manifests his judgment on the incommunicability of the Teresian spirit: “How inappropriate [is your protest] coming from women, and how far from the spirit of humility which is proper for the Discalced! For although God on occasion permits a woman to teach and be of assistance to the Church, that is one thing, and when God gives her this gift, her prelates will give her license…but the universal doctrine of the Church is that woman wait in silence and full submission.”\textsuperscript{423} The public role of Teresa’s charismata as a source for female ecclesial authority was, for Doria, limited to Teresa herself and the nuns should not attempt to imitate her in this way. He believed that the essence of the Carmelite reform was \textit{not} to be found in the mystical culture of the \textit{beatas}, but in the ascetical practice of the primitive

\textsuperscript{422} Teresa severely disciplined Beatrice of Nazareth in the Discalced convent of Seville for publicizing her visions.
rule. He would shout at the Discalced Council meeting at Alcalá in 1589 – John’s last – “Observance, observance!” But John was of a different mind.

John’s supernatural soul

There are a number of striking features about John’s treatment of the “critique of knowledge” found in book Two of the Ascent, where he analyzes faith’s “voiding” effect in the intellect. First, there is the absence of any sustained treatment of knowledge acquired by the “natural” means of rational reflection. In other words, unlike many of the monastic or clerical authors of the late medieval mystical tradition, John largely ignores the fierce debates that raged among what McGinn would call the camps of “scholastic theology,” “monastic theology” and “vernacular theology” over the question of the value of natural theology in the ascent to God. For example, the greatly revered secular priest and theologian at Paris, Jean Gerson, whose translated writings were highly influential in Spain’s “mystical reformation” and who no doubt had influence on John and Teresa, struggled mightily to achieve an irenic solution to the battles between mystics and scholastics. While John clearly employed scholastic technique to elucidate his thought, his disregard for its capacity to bring understanding to the passive nights (A Prologue 2) as well as his dismissal of the role of analogy in raising the mind to knowledge of God “toward union” (A1 4.3-5) makes it clear that the role of such theological training is extrinsic to the core of Discalced identity. As Maureen Flynn says, the Carmelite, for John, had to embrace an approach to theology that was “in league with the other great sixteenth century critics” of reason’s place in theology; and which “brought his theology into conflict with traditional Western philosophy.”

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425 In chapter eleven, John makes a passing reference to such natural knowledge: “we already discussed this kind of knowledge in the first book” (A2 11.1). In book one, chapter four, John lays waste to the “analogy of being” by denying any value to the progression in knowledge, by way of eminence, from beauty, goodness, truth, freedom, wealth or power to a knowledge of God (A1 4.1-8). Wayne Hankley argues that the resurgence of neo-platonism in the late medieval period rejected the scholastic claim to an ascent to God by means of sacra doctrina, and thus decentered the value of scholastic theology and natural reason. John clearly shared in this movement. It reflected a deeper schism in Europe between the university and popular reform movements like the devotio moderna. See Wayne Hankley, “Self and Cosmos in Becoming Deiform: Neoplatonic Paradigms for Reform by Self-Knowledge from Augustine to Aquinas” in Christopher M. Bellitto, and Louis I. Hamilton. Reforming the Church Before Modernity: Patterns, Problems, and Approaches, (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate Pub, 2005), 39-60.

Discalced friars were expected to receive university a fairly standard mendicant training in philosophy and theology before and after ordination, and so among the friars such questions would have been seemingly crucial to consider if John’s texts took seriously the pressing issues of a male audience. It seems to suggest that John wanted to offer the reformed Discalced vision as a criticism of these approaches, and to resituate the debates within a more contemplative, mystical-theological framework. His eschewing of these debates may also indicate that John’s primary intended audience in these texts is the nuns, and the friars inasmuch as they are charged with the spiritual formation of the nuns. The question of audience, though addressed within Sanjuanist scholarship, seems to leave much for consideration since exactly who John is writing for would enrich our reading of his approach to issues like gender within the reform.427

A second striking feature of his treatment of the role of knowledge is the operating presumption of all of his work: that the Discalced should expect as a matter of course the whole panoply of mystical experiences – locutions (A2 24), visions (A2 25-27), rapture (N1 2.3; N2 1.2) – as the normal means to knowledge of God (A2 11.1). He calls the people subject to this alternate epistemology the “espirituales,” a term usually used to describe those who claim primacy for the interior experience of God over scholastic learning or exterior piety.428 Recogitos would fall into this group, and would by John’s time be associated largely with the heretical alumbrados that emphasized the phenomenal and apocalyptic elements of mysticism.429 Hence, for John it seems that critical approach to the theological formation that most mendicants – including the Carmelites – received, it must be kept in mind that the “traditional” philosophy she refers to points more to the Aristotelian version rather than the platonic-Augustinian. John’s critique of knowledge is, indeed, very Augustinian and neoplatonic in tone.

427 In private correspondence, Alison Weber admitted that, while much has been done on the question of gender in Teresa very little has been done on John. Interesting to note a comment by Victoria Lincoln who says that John was highly respected by the nuns of the reform, but was often dismissed by the friars who thought of him as only carrying symbolic authority. Her explanation of this, that John came across as “asexual,” does not seem to me helpful. Examining the gendered perceptions of John in reformed Carmel might more helpfully relate the interaction between John and Teresa and John’s personal commitment to perpetuating Teresa’s vision among the friars (which Doria was, at best, ambivalent about). Victoria Lincoln, Elias L. Rivers, Antonio T. De Nicolás, *Teresa, a Woman: A Biography of Teresa of Avila* (State University of New York Press, 1984), 334.

428 See Gillian Ahlgren for a brief overview of the debates between the espirituales and the letrados, especially as these terms are bound to gender issues in sixteenth century Spain. Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 6-31. See also

429 Nieto makes this point, and argues that the visionary culture within the alumbrados was more tolerated than the more humanist forms of alumbradismo that emphasized what were considered “Lutheran” themes by the Inquisition: the primacy of faith over reason, Scripture over scholastic theology, and the
Teresa’s transformation of Carmelite identity in the tradition of the Franciscan *recogimiento* mystical reformation remains normative as a given identity in the *Ascent-Night*. It is also true that his radical *apophatic* critique of that identity requires the *recogimiento* particular construction of identity in terms of an Augustinian “interiority.” For though John does critique the quest for a sensory experience of God, and so of exterior forms of piety and mystical performance, he does not set aside the quest for experience itself. Rather, he simply redefines experience in terms of the Augustinian binary of interior-exterior, sense-spirit, and privileges that which is defined as interior and spiritual. And it seems plausible to argue that John’s radical critique is intimately related to his conceptualization of Carmel identity as fundamentally eremitical, and of the eremitical identity as primarily a question of interiority. The inner world of experience becomes the contentious theatre in which Discalced eremitical identity is played out, as the soul passes from an interiority still engaged with the exterior world of the senses to an interiority that is defined entirely by the myth of Carmel where the soul and God dwell alone. The mystical phenomena that John ultimately rejects – and that define so much of the mystical reformation at the end of the sixteenth century in Spain – are for him still too local, too culturally bound, too Spanish. Mount Carmel, from which the (Discalced) Carmelites live in perpetual exile, transcends the time and space of Spain and, by means of John’s radical apophaticism, serves as a perpetual critique of religious identities foreign to the founding myth.\(^{430}\)

Another striking emphasis in John’s works regarding Discalced identity, as we have to some extent touched on, is his profound pessimism over what Nicholas Doria would consider the heart of the Discalced reform: a robust asceticism that is protected and promoted by a growing body of new legislation regulating its practice, and a strengthening commitment to a more mendicant style of Carmelite identity. As we saw vernacularization of theology and piety. See Jose C. Nieto, “The Franciscan Alumbrados and the Prophetic-Apocalyptic Tradition,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Oct., 1977), pp. 3-16. See also Antonio Márquez who describes the “waves” of *alumbradismo* throughout the sixteenth century. *Los Alumbrados: Orígenes and filosofía* (1525-1559) (Madrid: Taurus, 1980), 28-30.\(^{430}\) Wilfred McGreal argues something like this, though he shows at length the relationship between Filep Ribot’s *Institute* as the mythic narrative John and Teresa use to construct the Carmel that is the model for the Discalced reform-as-return. He avers to the persistent Carmelite belief that Carmel is a “mythical space” that every Carmelite bears within as an exile. At the Fountain of Elijah: The Carmelite Tradition (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 37-70. Kees Waaijman calls this process a “continual interiorization” in *The Mystical Space of Carmel*, tr. John Vriend (Peeters Publishers, 1999), 271.
above, John places his strongest emphasis not on ascetic labors, but on passive contemplation that shows all of one’s carefully constructed ascetic works to have been literally, in the final analysis, “self-indulgent.” John, in ways stunningly reminiscent of the works of Luther and other northern European reformers of the sixteenth century, asserts that grace alone, working through the theological virtues, is capable of effecting a final moral renovation capable of centering all of one’s moral agency on God alone. For John, a Discalced would only be of service to the Church’s mission if they were first and foremost contemplatives. In this John was deeply reminiscent of Nicholas the Frenchman’s battle against mendicant mitigations. Though the entire Ascent-Night privileges the contemplative (eremitical) identity of the Discalced, it is the Canticle and the Flame that, by means of an intensely solitary eroticism, argue this point. For example, in the Canticle John is arguing with those who would require that the soul entering union “get back to work” and cease its rest in contemplative leisure. To this position John replies (in a quote whose length seems justified in making m this point):

Great wrong would be done to a soul who possesses some degree of this solitary love, as well as to the Church, if we were to urge her to become occupied in exterior or active things, even if the works were very important and required only a short time. Since God has solemnly entreated that no one awaken a soul from this love [Sg. 3:5], who will dare do so and remain without reproof? After all, this love is the end for which we were created. Let those, then, who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they might not have reached a prayer as sublime as this. They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labor, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm. God forbid that the salt should begin to lose its savor [Mt. 5:13]. However much they may appear to achieve externally, they will in substance be accomplishing nothing; it is beyond doubt that good works can be performed only by the power of God (CB 29.3).

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Grace Jantzen sees the closest relationship, for example, between Luther and John to be in their critique of religious experience and of natural theology as it is expressed in their (differing approaches to) a “theology of the cross.” See “Luther and the Mystics,” King’s Theological Review 8 (Autumn 1985): 43-50.
Here, as in the *Ascent-Night*, John envisages the Discalced exemplar to have entered into a wholly “passive” state, withdrawn from engagement with the apostolate or even (presumable) activities within the convent or monastery. The debate over the role of eremetical or cenobitic monasticism in the face of the growing influence of mendicant orders raged for centuries before John, and, as we have seen tore at the heart of the Carmelites from the time of their entry into Europe in the mid-thirteenth century. But within the Carmelite reform this debate took on a particular kind of tension.

Teresa was the first woman in the history of monasticism to actively initiate and form a male reform movement, which made her work all the more controversial (especially among the Calced Carmelite friars). Teresa seems to have begun her reform with the intention of reforming the nuns only, and it was only after a mystical vision, and at the suggestion of the Carmelite provincial⁴³² that she set out to begin a reform among the friars. When she found John he was a perfect match for her ideal of the educated, ascetical and experienced priest, and he was also discontent with the state of Carmel enough to seek a transfer into Europe’s most eremitical order. Teresa, whose interest lay mostly in the service the friars could offer the nuns, wanted a contemplative Carmel for the friars, and a return to a more austere form of life. But Teresa was also convinced that the friars – unlike the nuns – had to retain their mendicant apostolate and ties to the university. This tension, so endemic to the Carmelite identity, and which in the past was left in a restless resolve by setting side by side a mythical eremitical history and an active mendicant apostolate, now found a new restless resolve in John. Though John showed no obvious interest in those mythical narrative histories as a way to somehow preserve the “primitive” Carmelite identity, he did find the medieval tradition of a radically interiorized mysticism to be a suitable means of such a work of preservation. Indeed, just as their was no clear interrelationship between the myth of eremites and the reality of mendicants, so their seems no clear link between John’s radically contemplative/eremitical vision and the actual mendicant life among the friars he was tasted to reform.

Doria’s progressive exclusion of John from positions of leadership and,

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eventually, the silencing of John’s voice by recommending him to the Mexican missions and suppressing his writings among the friars, reflects his awareness of the distance of John from his own vision. Even as Doria localized Teresa’s mysticism, and held it away from the reach of the nuns, he also seemed to find John’s own emphasis on mysticism to be problematic and destabilizing among the friars. No doubt he recognized the significance of John’s siding with Grenada prioress Ana de Jesús during the struggle over the Constitutions, and was aware of the influence of John’s writings among the nuns and some of the friars. John’s attempt to integrate the conflicting elements of Teresa’s vision did not find a receptive audience in the generation after Gracian and Teresa, and his writings, incapable of serving the emerging Discalced identities of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, became Diego de Jesús’s “terrifying” witnesses to the impasse that separated them. What friar could pick them up? We do know that John’s influence among the nuns continued into the seventeenth century, as several studies have explored.

*John’s critique of Teresian mysticism: seeing or suffering?*

John embraces Teresa’s vision of a Carmel reformed by incorporating much of the *recogimiento* movement, but is also highly critical of certain elements of that tradition that emphasize the “experiences” of mystical phenomena like rapture, visions and the affectivity of “sweet feelings” and “consolations.” While Teresa is also critical of those

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433 Kieran Kavanaugh’s brief overview of the reception of John among the friars demonstrates this point well. Kavanaugh says that the Discalced friars attempted to re-read John’s (modified) texts in light of post-Tridentine scholasticism, reducing his more integral vision into innumerable distinctions that were used to argue points regarding the nature of cognition or the debates over the relationship between nature and grace so endemic to the seventeenth century. Kavanaugh argues that John’s vision of the spiritual life (or what I would call Discalced identity) was not engaged by the Discalced friars as an “integral whole” until the twentieth century; and then only as a curiosity of Discalced Carmelite scholarship. Kieran Kavanaugh, “Spanish Sixteenth Century: Carmel and Surrounding Movements,” *Christian Spirituality III: Post-Reformation and Modern*, World Spirituality Series, vol. 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 84-90.

434 Evelyn Toft’s fascinating study of Cecilia de Nacimiento (1570-1646), a Discalced nun from Valladolid, shows the influence of John’s writings at the convent in Valladolid where manuscript copies were preserved after his death. See Evelyn Toft, “Cecilia de Nacimiento: Mystic in the Tradition of John of the Cross” in *The Mystical Gesture: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Spiritual Culture in Honor of Mary E. Giles* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2000), 169-84. Ana de Jesús, who was also marginalized and exiled by Doria and his successors for her opposition to his policies was also deeply influenced by John and spread his vision to convents she would found in the Spanish Netherlands. See Introduction in Concepción Torres’ publication of Ana’s letters, *Ana de Jesús, cartas* (1590-1621): religiosidad y vida cotidiana en la clausura femenina del Siglo de Oro (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1995).
who place such experiences at the center of their mysticism, she is much more prone to, as Turner says, “distinguish the different stages of spiritual development (the ‘Mansions’ of her Interior Castle) in terms of the ‘experiences’ which are typically associated with them.”

John’s grave concern in regard to Discalced who construct their identity in reference to the “sensibly” accessible experiences of the mystical life is both theological and practical.

Theologically, John is convinced that the transcendence of God requires a mysticism that eschews all attempts to construct a bridge of ascent from the materials of the analogia entis. For John, all such attempts at entering into union with God result in the construction of idols that reduce God to a functionary of ego curvatus in se, curved in on itself, and make religion into an end rather than a means. This is the summation of the doctrine of the Ascent-Night. Union with God requires the deconstruction of the self build around the sensory “rind” of the “articles of faith,” and a reconstruction of a self built around unmediated access to the “substance of the fruit” (A2 14.3) which has “no relation” to a sensory epistemology. Hence, the panoply of embodied, sensory mystical phenomena constitute a rind which must be rejected, or transcended if the soul wishes to enter into union with God in se. This transformation also requires a new language that sets aside the literal and moral senses of Scripture for the anaogical and allegorical senses that allow more immediate access to the “substance” of the “articles of faith.” And that new language is supremely to be found in the Song of Songs, which is capable of bearing the “strange” language of the Spirit (CB Prologue).

Practically, I suggest that John’s negative attitude toward the phenomena of recogimiento mysticism reflected the dangers posed to the Discalced reform by the mounting rejection by the Inquisition of those (especially women) whose public influence was powered by their public performances of the supernatural. Attacks on Teresa herself as an alumbrada were common, and both Teresa and her advocates strove mightily to

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situate her in the contexts of orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{437} But while some in Spain were seeking to correct the “abuses” of recogimiento and bring its practitioners back into the fold of orthodoxy by means of a call to more exterior forms of piety, John rejected such a call as foreign to the spirit of Carmel’s radical interiority. Rather, he emphasized an apophatic interior critique of all knowledge, all language and all practice that would safeguard against all error not by simply reconciling conceptual horizons (e.g. personal and Tridentine), but by laying claim to a new set of horizons determined by the interiorized heights of Mount Carmel. Identity constructed on the language and praxis of orthodoxy, while necessary for the beginning of the mystical ascent, are ultimately transcended for the Discalced whose true “home” is not Catholic Spain, but Mount Carmel. Thus, in a sense, John sidesteps the debates that rage around Teresa and the Discalced reform by positing a Discalced identity that is, in the end, something wholly “other” than what the debates envision. For John the danger of an imitatio Terestiani is a misplaced emphasis on what can be subject to accusations of error and heresy – the epistemology of sense – and not on the “hidden” identity of the true Carmelite who crouches with Elijah at the “spring of Carith.”\textsuperscript{438} I argue that this approach was, for John, motivated in part by a desire to protect the Discalced reform from the growing climate of suspicion within the Inquisition over the danger posed by mysticism to the unity of Spain.\textsuperscript{439}

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\textsuperscript{437} Carrera makes the point that discernment of orthodoxy in the post-Tridentine context (i.e. after 1563) intensified the demand that interior piety conform with the language, practice and culture of Tridentine orthodoxy. In Spain, that translated into an intensified emphasis on vocal prayer and doctrinal meditation as the only “safe” means of such a synthesis. Elena Carrera-Marcén, \textit{Teresa of Avila’s Autobiography: Authority, Power and the Self in Mid-sixteenth-century Spain} (Modern Humanities Research Assn, 2005), 63-86.

\textsuperscript{438} Narrative references to Elijah journey to Carith to find a hidden spring became, for Carmelites, a metaphor or eremitical “hiddenness.” The mendicant revolution in the Carmelite order of the thirteenth century gave birth to a radical re-reading of eremitical identity as not social and physical, but interior and mystical. See Wilfrid McGreal, \textit{At the Fountain of Elijah: The Carmelite Tradition} (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 37-70.

\textsuperscript{439} The evolution of the Inquisition’s concern with the threats posed by Protestantism and alumbradismo to Spanish unity is well documented. For example, see Helen Rawlings, \textit{Church, Religion and Society in Early Modern Spain} (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 27-49. Rawlings emphasizes the intent, but inability of the Inquisition to carry out a well defined and effective program of unifying reform. Alastair Hamilton argues that the disaffection of the Inquisition with the mystical reformation was largely linked to its perceived political links with Spain’s enemies. \textit{Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-Century Spain: The Alumbrados} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 65-114.
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Some additional differences between Teresa and John

Since John affirms that the “natural” human tendency is toward intra-worldly natural knowing, and that sin intensifies this inclination to idolatrous dimensions, his ascetical program serves as a remedy to break the sinful attachments and turn the spiritual faculties from their “natural” orientation toward the infinite horizon of Carmel’s summit. While the ascetic strives to empty the spiritual faculties of all particular knowledge, and to break down the natural operation of the bodily senses so as to not distract the spiritual faculties from the process of reorientation, the three theological virtues simultaneously void and darken these three faculties as they begin to allow the “inflow of God” to commence without mediation through the senses. This simultaneous experience of active deprivation and the passive inflow of grace brings darkness, aridity and pain, but it also brings an array of “supernatural” experiences that, in the early stages, communicate knowledge that is, as Howells calls it, “mixed” between sensory and spiritual forms.\footnote{John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood, (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 43-7.}

John uses Augustine’s discussion of the three “types” of visions, corporeal, imaginative,\footnote{De Trinitate, bk. 12.} intellectual to structure his discussion of these “communications” in chapters 10-32 of Book Two of the Ascent, and, in accord with his epistemology, rejects all forms of vision tethered to sensory knowing. All three forms of vision can be of supernatural origin, passively received by the action of grace, but not all supernatural visions are spiritual. Spiritual visions contain no corporeal representations, so cannot be “seen” by the intellect but only felt in the “substance of the soul” (A2 24.4).\footnote{What is translated as “feeling” in most English renderings of the verb sentir is better understood in the sense of “touch” rather than emotion. For John, God is “felt” in the soul in union in a manner that yields a fundamentally cognitive, and not affective result. John’s preference for the sensory analogy of “touch” rather than vision, rooted in the Song commentary tradition of Origen and his heirs, is also heavily influenced by the Rhineland mystics’ metaphysics of union. See, for example, Steven. John of the Cross and the Cognitive Value of Mysticism: An Analysis of Sanjuanist Teaching and Its Philosophical Implications for Contemporary Discussions of Mystical Experience. The New Synthese Historical Library, v. 37 (Dordrecht [The Netherlands]: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 41-4.}

Here John’s departure from Teresa’s claim to a positive role for both intellectual and imaginative visions becomes most pronounced. The role of the interior, “spiritual senses,” given classic form by Origen, is crucial to the Christian mystical tradition as it offers a way of talking about “inmaterial” realities using the language of materiality as it
is encountered in the five senses. John structures his account of supernatural knowledge imparted to the intellect by describing divine communications given according to the “interior bodily senses” (A2 16-22), and critically analyzes the value of these “interior spiritual senses” of sight (A2 24-27), hearing (A2 28-31), taste, smell and touch (A2 32) relative to the Discalced goal: union with God. All knowledge that is gained by the direct action of God is termed by John “supernatural,” separating his manner of discourse from more common modes current in late medieval theology. Such supernatural knowledge can come “through” the exterior senses, like natural knowledge. It can come directly through the interior senses or imagination by an “infusion” of race, or directly through the spiritual faculties, bypassing all corporeal forms. The first two are “supernatural goods,” rooted in sensory knowing, and are given gratis data, for the good of others. The third consists of “spiritual goods,” which are without sensory form and communicate “goods” as they exist in God, effecting a transformation in the soul that receives them. For John, only the last category of “experience” is considered entirely “safe,” and is the only one that should be sought as an end in the quest for union with God.

This radically interiorized notion of religious experience that John counsels as the “safe path” up Mount Carmel severs the Discalced from the ability to use public displays of mystical experience that are fraught with such danger in Spain, and which distract from John’s ultimate goal: the journey to the center beyond all sensory experience (and so beyond the reach of conventional language). John, even by the standards of medieval discernment found in an author like Gerson, took a radically uncompromising stance by calling for the rejection of all supernaturally acquired knowledge other than that which was wholly devoid of all sensual content or transcended the grasp of discursive reason. John’s unyielding rejection of all religious experiences in any way touched by sensory forms stands apart from Teresa’s greater ease with a “visionary epistemology.” In a sense, Teresa’s authority in effecting the Discalced reform depended on the very epistemology John rejects. For Teresa to embrace John’s critique would remove her from

444 Ibid., 28.
the one venue in religious culture in which women were permitted to teach and exercise
some vestige of public authority: the claim to visionary experience of God.  

In looking at patterns in medieval mysticism, Caroline Walker Bynum noted the
strong, though not exceptionless, tendency for women mystics to express their experience
in terms of bodily, sensual terms, while their male counterparts tended toward more
abstract and intellectualist expressions that marginalized the role of the body. Though
there are notable exceptions in each case, like Bernard of Clairvaux whose sensual
mysticism ushered in a new expression of eroticism in the west, and Marguerite Porete,
whose radically apophatic mysticism influenced the most intellectualist of all mystics,
Meister Eckhart. Although we must say that gender certainly does play a significant role
in shaping the manner of constructing the language of religious experience, it is more to
the point for our purposes that patterns of embodied and disembodied language tend to
distinguish schools of religious thought in the medieval period. Teresa and John
diverge in some significant ways over the value of certain forms of religious experience,
and looking further at some these divergences will aid our understanding of some of what
stands under John’s radical rejection of experiences born of the recogimiento movement
that had so decisively formed Teresa’s reform.

Elena Carrera describes the Dominican critique of Teresa’s mysticism as founded
on the letrado concern that over-emphasis on interior experience can lead to the
valorization of the self as an autonomous source of authority, severed from orthodoxy
and open to delusion by the devil. Mysticism, for Dominican Melchor Cano, “could not
be seen as a general spiritual vía,” and inspiration by the Spirit was to be seen as “an

446 Alison Weber contends that Teresa’s authority emerged precisely by a skillful negotiation of religious
visionary culture at the very time that culture was coming under attack. Alison Weber, Teresa of Avila and
447 Caroline Walker Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval
Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). In this book, Bynum argues that women
negotiated a new “space” in religious discourse by combining the medieval alignment of feminine identity
with materiality and the increasing (esp Bernardine) emphasis on the Incarnation. A flurry of critiques
followed this “Bynum thesis,” though the critiques served to reaffirm the central thesis. See for example
Amy Hollywood, “Beatrice of Nazareth and her Hagiographers,” in Catherine Mooney, ed., Gendered
Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 78-98.
448 Gordon Rudy, Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages (Routledge, 2002), 1-16.
Rudy’s main thesis is that language in theology is reflective of theological ideas that undergird that
language. For example, he says that the sharp distinction between the language of sensual and spiritual
analogies reflects an underlying metaphysical dualism. Bynum and others have argues that women’s
religious conceptions tended to minimize more masculine dualisms.
extraordinary event.” If people were taught to trust faith more than reason, he cautioned, “devoting one’s time to prayer would become more important than studying…[so that] books would become obsolete and universities would have to be closed.” The Dominicans generally opposed the Franciscan emphasis on mental prayer, as well as the “typically Franciscan view that intellectual pursuit, symbolized by the tree of knowledge in Eden, can actually hinder the knowledge symbolized by the tree of life which is attained through the experience of eating.” For Cano, subjective, mental prayer was seen to replace the study of the “objective” tradition, attracting those traditionally excluded from the power that comes from education, especially women and conversos. Antonio Pérez-Romero equates this concern of Cano with a general negative response among the Dominicans with the “democratization” of mental prayer, which, for Cano, relativized the role of the clergy, and opened the “way of perfection” for the masses. But this critique was very different than that of John, whose concern was not as an outsider of the recogimiento movement, nor with concern over clerical control, but as an insider who brought to bear his education and experience in service to Teresa’s reform.

As we have seen, the most prominent difference between John and Teresa is that John’s theology is, according to Howells, far more committed to the via negativa as the most perfect manifestation of the Discalced spirit. While both Teresa and John view the painful aspects of the journey to union as normative, John alone makes the experience of suffering to be the normative criterion of the way of perfection. For example, while Teresa, like John, speaks of the pain that accompanies the “voiding” of the faculties when mystical theology begins, she also allows the soul to experience God’s presence in the midst of the suffering. For John, until union has been reached, the only genuine experience the soul can have of God is of his absence. Teresa also says that the soul, as it

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450 Ibid., 83.
451 Ibid., 49.
advances in prayer, alternates between the experience of “misery” (miseria) and “lowliness” (bajeza). Misery is knowledge of one’s sinfully construed baseness before God, and produces self-absorption while lowliness, the awareness of God’s “grandeur” that makes the creature realize the immensity of its own capacity for greatness, leads to hope. For John, both lowliness and misery are essential components of the experience of God’s absence in the unpurified soul: “the difficulty encountered in the practice of virtue make the soul recognize its own lowliness [bajeza] and misery [miseria],” and “God esteems this lack of self-satisfaction and the dejection persons have about not serving him more than all their former deeds and gratifications” (N1 12.2).

God’s absence also manifests itself, for John, in the material world as the soul progresses toward more intense interiorization and spiritualization. While John calls for the rejection of all supernatural knowledge in any way clothed in the image and form of the senses as a way to render the spiritual faculties more capacious for God’s “inflow,” Teresa retains her reverence for the role of imaginative visions, or intellectual visions that draw on “intelligible forms” drawn from sense experience. She sees these are forming an epistemological “bridge” between God and the creature, and as a recognition of the role of the humanity of Christ in union. Therefore she holds a special and exceptional place for visions of Christ that are either imaginative or come through intelligible forms. “Unlike John, Howells says, “she regards the corporeal image as a direct mediation of Christ as ‘both man and God.’”

John sees no need for such exceptions to the way of negation, as he argues that the dangers of seeking and accepting such sensory “apprehensions” far outweigh the benefits; while the way of suffering that accompanies negation (nada) is a safe and direct means of ascending Mount Carmel. For John, negating all images is not a denial of the mediating role of the humanity of Christ, but rather a way of imitating and entering into that humanity in the “moment” most crucial to the union of God and humanity: the Passion of Christ. Here is the crux of the difference between John and Teresa, not in the value of the humanity of Christ for mediating union with God to the soul, but “in the

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456 Ibid., 137.
means of receiving” that humanity.\footnote{Edward Howells, \textit{John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood}, (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 133.} For John, the supreme means to union with God is through the suffering and death of Christ in which the mystic is allowed to share. And if Turner is right in saying that Bonaventure was the first to bind Dionysian apophaticism and the cross, then the Franciscanization of Carmel by both Teresa and John runs deeper still. “More radically still, Bonaventure locates that \textit{transitus} [from knowing to unknowing] in the broken, crucified Christ, in a ‘similarity’ so ‘dissimilar’ as to dramatize with paradoxical intensity the brokenness and failure of all our language and knowledge of God.”\footnote{Denys Turner, \textit{The Darkness of God Negativity in Christian Mysticism}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 203.} John’s apophaticism is similarly located in the “living death” (A2 7.11) of the cross, which offers critique not only of language and knowledge, but of desire, affectivity and the body.

John develops this “theology of the cross” in chapters six and seven of the second Book of the \textit{Ascent}. There John introduces his treatment of the active and passive nights of the spiritual faculties by means of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. These theological virtues, because they are both divine gift and habitual virtue, engage the soul both actively and passively, preparing it for the contemplative “inflow of God” that will purge the whole person. The theological virtues lead the soul through the narrow gate and the constricting path, which require “supreme nakedness and emptiness of spirit” (A2 7.3). This way is the way up Mount Carmel and the way of the cross: “this path on the high mount of perfection is narrow and steep, it demands travelers who are neither weighed down by the lower part of their nature nor burdened in the higher part. This is a venture in which God alone is sought and gained; thus only God ought to be sought and gained” (A2 7.3). The experience of suffering that accompanies the way of renunciation constitutes the core of John’s Discalced identity.

But this “way,” in John’s mind, excludes much of what passes for mysticism in Spain. He says, “I think it is possible to affirm that the more necessary the doctrine the less it is practiced by spiritual persons [\textit{espirituales}]” (A2 7.4). Indeed it is on this point of his doctrine that he sees himself at greatest variance with the \textit{espirituales}, the \textit{beatas} and \textit{recogitos} that belong to the “experiential mysticism” we have briefly discussed.
already. The “difference between the method many of them think is good and the one that ought to be used in traveling this road!” They think that any kind of “withdrawal from the world,” or “reformation of life,” is sufficient. They seek after “spiritual feelings and consolations” instead of “divesting and denying themselves,” and desire not the “solid, perfect food” of “annihilation of all sweetness in God,” but rather to satisfy their “spiritual sweet tooth [sino golosina de espíritu].” When they are offered this “solid food” in the form of “dryness, distaste, and trial, they run from it as from death and wander about in search only of sweetness and delightful communications from God.” In short, John says, they “never achieve the nakedness, poverty, selflessness, or spiritual purity.” “Through this kind of conduct they become,” John asserts, “spiritually speaking, enemies of the cross of Christ” (A2 7.5).

The “genuine spirit,” however, “seeks rather the distasteful in God” and knows that “the other method is perhaps a seeking of self in God - something entirely contrary to love.” In words reminiscent of his counsels for entering the active night in A1 13 John says, “Seeking oneself in God is the same as looking for the caresses and consolations of God. Seeking God in oneself entails not only the desire to do without these consolations for God's sake, but also the inclination to choose for love of Christ all that is most distasteful whether in God or in the world; and this is what loving God means” (A2 7.5). To drink from the “chalice of Christ’s suffering” means to “annihilate” humanity’s curvatus in se, Augustine’s “love of self to the contempt of God,” and to walk the straight road up the mount on which “there is room only for self-denial (as our Savior asserts) and the cross” (A2 7.6).459

This indeed is John’s caricature of pseudo-mysticism, one that refuses to choose the pain and suffering required to strip oneself in the senses and the spirit of all that is not in conformity with union with God.460 For John, participation in the total negation of a

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459 Civitas Dei 14.28
“Christological death,” what Edward Howells calls a “mystical death” (*mors mystica*), opens the way to the construction of a “new self” patterned according to Christ’s resurrection (N2 6.1). In fact, John’s explicit (and only) explicit treatment of the Passion, in this same chapter seven, represents the culmination of his reflection on the active and passive nights as a manner of imitating Christ. One “makes progress only by imitating Christ” in his suffering on the cross, and this imitation is “a death to our natural selves in the sensory and spiritual parts of the soul.” Then John proceeds to describe the “way to union” as modeled and effected by Christ’s supremely “apophatic moment” on the cross:

This was the most extreme abandonment, sensitively, that he had suffered in his life. And by it he accomplished the most marvelous work of his whole life, surpassing all the works and deeds and miracles that he had ever performed on earth or in heaven. That is, he brought about the reconciliation and union of the human race with God through grace. The Lord achieved this, as I say, at the moment in which he was most annihilated in all things: in his reputation before people, since in watching him die they mocked him instead of esteeming him; in his human nature, by dying; and in spiritual help and consolation from his Father, for he was forsaken by his Father at that time, annihilated and reduced to nothing, so as to pay the debt fully and bring people to union with God (A2 7.11)

“Mystical theology” is the total identification of the self with Christ in his inner “annihilation,” an enactment of the “living death of the cross.” Truly spiritual persons (*espirituales*) must “understand [that] the mystery of the door and way (which is Christ)


464 Matthew argues that the astonishing absence of any narrative references to Christ’s passion in the *Ascent-Night* does not set John in contrast to the popular piety of Spain, but rather John’s apophaticism required him to interiorize the passion and translate passion piety into a lived experience of suffering. Interesting to note that the *alumbrados* were accused of substituting the personal experience of suffering for passion piety. See Jose C. Nieto, “The Franciscan Alumbrados and the Prophetic-Apocalyptic Tradition,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Oct., 1977), 3-16.
leading to union with God” requires that it is only when they are “reduced to nothing, the highest degree of humility, [that] the spiritual union between their souls and God will be an accomplished fact” (A2 7.11). John has combined the memory of Carmel’s contemplative solitude, the darkness of Pseudo-Dionysius’ “cloud of unknowing” and the desolation of Golgotha to construct a via to union with God.

Denys Turner remarks at the end of his study of John’s apophasis that it was “largely on the issue of ‘experience’ and ‘experiences’ that the differences between [John and Teresa] arose.”465 But, as Grace Jantzen says, Turner treats of the evolution of medieval apophatic critiques of “experience” in the abstract apart from the historical contexts of, for example, the Beguines of Eckhart, the Free Spirits of Ruusbroec or the beatas of John.466 Like Jantzen, my argument regarding John’s critique of certain forms of identity attempts to localize the discussion of John’s approach, and show that shifts in theological emphasis are largely conditioned by historical circumstance. They challenge is arguing for cogent and causal links between context and ideas. I suggest that Teresa and John’s divergences over the value of varying forms of “religious experience” were shaped most prominently by issues of gender and the demands imposed by the need to establish the new reform within the institutional cultures of church and state in Spain.

Critique of Teresian mimesis: A Discalced Nun

As we read John’s texts in light of the context of the Discalced reform, a number of critical issues come to light that I am suggesting helped determine the distinctive form John’s version of the “Discalced identity” took on. But because John makes so few clear allusions to historical contexts or persons, the work of interpreting John’s intent in the Ascent-Night becomes difficult. However, among the letters of John that have survived, one fascinating text in particular calls our attention. This letter467 from John, written some time between 1588 and 1591 in response to a request from Doria, examines the writings of an unnamed Discalced nun who was claiming extraordinary mystical “graces.” Kavanaugh says that “other learned men had judged her favorably,” and that

Doria decided to ask John for an additional opinion. As with Teresa, we see in the reform a reverence for John’s judgment in things spiritual, though we remember from history that Doria would soon seek to exile John for his opposition to Doria’s own reforms. Although we do not have the text of the nun’s testimony, it appears to have been written, as was so common in the medieval world, at the command of her confessor. Teresa herself wrote at the command of her confessors in an attempt to offer what Ahlgren calls an “apología por la mística femenina,” a defense of the truth of her claims to divine inspiration. Many Discalced nuns would come to imitate Teresa in offering an *apología* of their claims to genuine and authoritative mystical experience, and this anonymous nun under John’s scrutiny was no exception.

The letter is divided into two sections. First, John offers a negative opinion of the truth-claims of the nun, and claims to detect “five defects” that manifest “a lack of the good spirit.” All five of these judgments reflect the principles annunciated in the *Ascent-Night*, and are concerned not with the contents of the nun’s experiences but rather examines her character and manner of expression. John’s most often repeated counsel in the *Ascent* is that it is “sufficient to insist on rejection of all [supernatural] knowledge as a control against any error” (A2 26.18), and that the only appropriate “experience” to claim as authentic is the “nocturnal” experience of faith annihilating all attachments to all that is not God. This faith avoids the dangers of vanity, of becoming dependent on sensual experiences instead of the dark way of faith, and of the devil’s deceptions which are more subtle than human reason is capable of discerning completely. John considers long lists of “signs for the discernment of good visions from bad ones” to be both tedious and a waste of time (A2 16.5), and praises his dark way of faith for the “freedom from the care and drudgery” it offers both spiritual director and directee (A3 13.1). Though John gives detailed attention to a great variety of supernatural experiences, he consistently applies his systematic rejection of all forms of knowledge and experience that bear any semblance of likeness to “created forms.” In the end, John is only interested in

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469 Karen Clark Upchurch offers a fascinating look at four Discalced nuns who were Teresian imitators, María de la Cruz (1563-1638), María de San Alberto (1568-1640), Cecilia del Nacimiento (1570-1646), and Angela María de la Concepción (1649-1690), who also construct their “mystical selfhood” in text. *A First Response to St. Teresa of Avila: Imitation and Innovation*, Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2003.
knowledge that immediately effects the goal of the Discalced vocation – union with God – or engenders the virtues that prepare the soul for that union.

The first “defect” John finds in the nun’s written account is her “great fondness for possessing things,” which is opposed to the spirit of detachment “in the appetites.” While there is no indication as to what “things” this nun was attached to, it seems that the next four “defects” may offer a way of reading John’s understanding of the “possessive spirit” that he so stridently protests against in the whole of his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. The second defect is, John says, that she is “too secure in her spirit” and has “little fear of being inwardly mistaken.” John contends in A2 11.7 that a “desire and willingness” to receive supernatural communications leads to a “possessive attitude toward these communications,” which in turn causes the soul to fail “to continue on its journey to genuine renunciation and nakedness of spirit,” which is the hallmark of the Discalced contemplative way. This nun’s third defect is, John continues, that she is desirous “to persuade others that her experiences are good and manifold.” Persons of a “genuine spirit” rather seek to offer no such *apologia* but consider their experiences to be “of little value,” worthy to be “despised.” For John, this quality of her attitude is opposed to the spirit of his counsels for entering the “night of the senses,” offered in A1 13.9, that call on the Discalced to always act, speak and think “with contempt for yourself and desire that all others do likewise.” In addition, her “lack of fear” of the possibility of being “inwardly mistaken” prevents the “Spirit of God” from preserving her “from harm,” since such “fear” opens her to scrutiny from those in authority over her. In fact, Teresa in her Constitutions makes much of the value of a nun regularly “disclosing her thoughts” to the prioress and the confessor as a way to prevent “illusion” and “melancholy,” as well as the dangers of hiding one’s inner experiences from the scrutiny of others (Weber, Spir Admin 138).

The fourth defect, in many ways a summation of the previous three, is that “the effects of humility are not manifest in her attitude.” Evidently, she claimed to have received “favors” that she “calls union,” which for John comes only after the harrowing experiences of the passive nights. These nights bring about an “undoing and annihilating” in the “inner abasement of humility.” They produce a radical humility that comes from self-knowledge and knowledge of God, and gives rise to a manner of
discourse that reflects this humility. The soul approaching union is “eager to speak of...the effects of humility, which, certainly, are so strong that they cannot be disguised.” But in this written apologia John sees none of this attitude “manifest.” Finally, John condemns the style of her writing, which he says is filled with “affectation and exaggeration,” and fails to conform to that of the “good spirit” who teaches a simpler style. In particular, he singles out her use of “dialogue,” and says that “all this about what she said to God and God said to her seems to be nonsense.” In the Ascent, John cautions against ascribing all spontaneous thoughts (locutions) to God, and, in one of his rare references to his own historical context, refers to those who claim to hear God speak:

I greatly fear what is happening in these times of ours: If any soul whatever after a few pennies worth of reflection experiences one of these locutions in some recollection [en algún recogimiento], it will immediately baptize all as coming from God and, supposing this, say, “God told me,” “God answered me.” Yet this will not be true but, as we pointed out, these persons will themselves more often be the ones who speak the words (A2 29.5).

Those who take such inner thoughts seriously, John says, fall often into “vanity of speech,” and, clinging to sensible experiences, flee from the “abyss of faith” (A2 29.5). If locutions are to be judged with any value, they must “engender humility, charity, mortification, holy simplicity, silence, and so on” (A2 29.5). In other words, God’s word must be not only informative but performative, effecting in the soul what is said (A2 31).

After rendering his negative judgment on her claims, he offers his opinion as to how she should be dealt with to test her spirit and see in action what her character is like. He first says that all active interest in her experiences should stop. Her confessor should no longer “command” or “allow” her writing to continue, and he should not show willingness to hear of her experiences, other than hold them in “little esteem” and “contradict it.” Then the confessor and prioress should “try her in the practice of sheer virtue,” which for John means especially self-contempt, humility and obedience. If she has indeed “received so many favors,” the quality of her soul will show itself like the quality of metal does when it is tapped.

What are we to make of this judgment in light of the preceding arguments about John’s construction of Discalced identity and his critique of vying alternatives? It is fascinating to note how much the description of this nun’s rhetorical style, apologia,
revelatory discourse, and writing under the pretext of a confessor’s command sounds like Teresa of Avila herself. So here we have a presumptive imitator of Teresa the beata, the bearer of authority rooted in claims to immediate experience of divine revelation, whom John, in applying his radical apophaticism found in the Ascent-Night, utterly rejects. Indeed, John, who “greatly fears” the dangers posed by such a visionary/revelatory culture in the recogimiento movement, instantiates that fear by the harsh judgment he offers of the experience of a nun. Apart from the robust ascetical and apophatic discipline he proposes in the Ascent-Night, John seems to believe that such a “Teresian mimesis” thwarts the heart of the Carmelite reformed and radically interiorized identity. “Public performances” of interiority by means of written accounts of sensually rich claims to experiences of the divine challenge the model of self-less-ness that John’s ascent of Mount Carmel requires of the Discalced Carmelite. Though Teresa herself would not easily fit into John’s vision of Discalced identity, we might conjecture that John, like Doria, saw Teresa as an exception to the general rule. However, unlike Doria John retains the Teresian ideal of the Discalced reform as essentially a mystical, interiorized reform. What John has done, though, in a way Teresa did not is to detach that mystical interiority from public performance, and wholly interiorize it within an epistemology that is estranged from public discourse. Like the hermits on the summit of Carmel, the “true” identity of the Discalced is hidden from the rest of the world; and even from themselves.

Some conclusions

Ascetic self & social hierarchy

John offers a distinctive synthesis of the ascetical and mystical traditions of the Latin west to offer to the Discalced reform in his texts; a way to critically appropriate the vision of Teresa of Avila. His approach to active forms of asceticism, which informed so many of the monastic reform movements of his day, was heavily conditioned by his

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470 In the Flame 2.12, John alludes to the rarity of reaching the “heights” of union with God, and singles out founders of orders among those granted this “high state.” He clearly would have Teresa (and himself?) in mind, which in some ways makes the John’s description of the soul in union to be a reflection on Teresa. “Few persons have reached these heights. Some have, however, especially those whose virtue and spirit were to be diffused among their children. With respect to the first fruits of the spirit, God accords to founders wealth and value commensurate with the greater or lesser following they will have in their doctrine and spirituality.”
theology of sin and of grace. For John, active asceticism – the doing of “what is in one’s power” (*facere quod in se est*)\(^{471}\) – is ultimately powerless to effect the goal of Carmelite identity: transformation in the union with God through love. Hence, an ascetical theology must be complimented by a mystical theology that gives pride of place to grace, which is itself “ascetical” inasmuch as grace continues and completes the purging work of breaking down all in the self that is at odds with divine action in the soul. For the Discalced such grace comes above all else in the passive contemplation that is at the center of the Discalced identity that Teresa sought to “retrieve” through her reforms. The new “Discalced self” that emerges from this critique of the “ascetic self” is the mystical ideal embodied in Teresa herself, though as we have seen Teresa’s relation to John’s own vision is significantly ambiguous.

The “new self” that emerges in the *Ascent-Night*, un-tethered from the constraints of an identity defined by certain notions of “experience” is to be seen as the original Carmelite self hidden from all sight in the cell of eremitic contemplation. This new self is capable of constructing a new identity that distinguishes them from certain social definitions within and without of Carmel, and re-places them in a uniquely defined Carmelite world. But as that world is rendered unstable by John’s apophatic critique, his uncompromising call for detachment, his rarified epistemology that severs language from its social moorings, his call for “retreat” into the innermost cell of the spirit, his vision does not find a home in the rapidly institutionalizing forces that take hold of the reform shortly after Teresa’s death.

*Negative mysticism*

In the *Ascent-Night* John also offers a broad spectrum of criteria for interpreting the authentic role of mysticism in Carmel as a means of ascending the mountain on which God dwelt. For John, the progressive ascent left behind in stages all of the natural and supernatural experiences that bore the form of “creatures,” and opened the soul to the

\(^{471}\) This phrase was at the hear of the Lutheran critique of late medieval soteriology, and was the most contentious issue at the Council of Trent in the drafting of the declaration on justification. For an excellent discussion of the Lutheran challenge, see Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1985), 128-48. John’s radical critique of the “facere” principle was, in James Arraj’s judgment, what kept his writings from being fully engaged until the twentieth century; especially in light of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Quietist controversies over the role of human agency in salvation. *From St John of the Cross to Us: The Story of a 400 Year Long Misunderstanding* (Inner Growth Books, 1999).
uncreated form of God. Though he does not employ the scholastic ascent through the natural knowledge of *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, he does, through his extended treatment of supernatural knowledge, offer an ascent to God by means of a *analogia mysticae*, a mystical analogy. But unlike the natural and active ascent through a discursive knowledge of being, the mystical analogy in John is passively experienced and, if treaded carefully, creates in the soul the capacity to know God not just in his effects but as cause of the effects. Faith both allows the “contemplative infusion” of supernatural knowledge and experience and critiques that knowledge and experience so that the soul can progress from the “rind” of the senses to the “substance” of the spirit. While John calls for the radical and nearly total rejection of all supernatural communications, his treatment presupposes the crucial role such experiences play even as they are repudiated. This dialectical tension in his approach to mystical experience in the Discalced reform is reflective of the tensions present in the Dionysian cataphatic-apophatic dialectic. The significant difference is that whereas Denys locates the dialectical tension between natural (cataphatic) knowledge of created being and mystical (apophatic) knowledge of God, John locates it between sensual-mystical (cataphatic) knowledge of God and spiritual-mystical (apophatic) knowledge of God. The difference lies in the context. Denys’ concerns are uniquely those of Christianizing a Proclan account of theo-ontology and epistemology, while John’s center around the sixteenth century Spanish controversies over *beatas, recogimiento*, Teresian mysticism and the reforming “return to Carmel.”

**Summary**

John of the Cross offered to the Teresian Discalced reform in the *Ascent-Night* a radical critique of historically and culturally particular identities in Spain by employing the ascetic and apophatic traditions. He sought to construct that identity around the mythical memory of Carmel’s eremitical origins by calling for the interiorizing that memory. That process of interiorization requires, for John, a radical program of denial and negation meant to detach the self from the all that is foreign to the Discalced Carmelite self and to experience a “death of identity” that is not wholly defined by union with God alone. John’s critique of the self is not, as in Turner or even Howells, only a theological or anthropological critique, but is fully engaged with the historical context of the reform.
John addressed in particular the pivotal role played by the culture of honor and social hierarchy in Spain’s monastic communities, as well as the influence of the “mystical reformation” initiated by Cisneros on Teresa’s conception of reform as founded primarily on the construction of an interiorized mystical self. John’s theocentrism, combined with his appropriation of the understanding of humility found especially in the texts of the *devotio moderna* offered him a way of attacking the claims to honor and privilege based on family, purity of blood or socio-economic status. John’s apophaticism offered him a way of translating the interior mysticism of the *recogimiento* into a form of interior eremiticism that both protected the reform from the growing hostility of the Inquisition toward Cisneran mysticism and allowed John to find a way to preserve the eremitical character of Carmel’s origins while still retaining cenobitic nuns and mendicant friars. The tensions in the *Ascent-Night* between the eremitical and mendicant identities of the friars would lead to his works being marginalized or re-read in the light of subsequent developments within the reform, though among the nuns his works appear to have continued to exert a significant influence. John’s relationship to Teresa’s own style of mystical performance is ambiguous, and his critique of the anonymous Teresian nun reveals John’s uneasiness with certain interpretations of the Teresian reform. There are indeed many unresolved tensions in John’s texts which still await critical examination.
CHAPTER IV: THE EROTICIZATION OF DISCALCED IDENTITY

Colin Thompson identifies two primary streams that inform John of the Cross’ eroticism present in his poems and commentaries: neo-platonic eros interpolated in the texts of the Pseudo-Dionysius and the Song of Songs commentary tradition. While other sources of inspiration are no doubt present – e.g. courtly love traditions, a lo divino renderings of Castilian ballads – these two sources overwhelmingly predominate and, in Denys Turner’s judgment, have wholly determined John’s poetic and commentarial vision of the ascent of the soul to God. As I continue to examine the unique construction of the Discalced self in the Ascent-Night, I will engage here John’s employment of that erotic tradition; and in particular his use of the Dionysian stream. I will briefly examine the development of Dionysian eroticism in Christian theological discourse, and look at the ways that John’s poetry and commentaries engage that discourse to offer an image of Discalced identity in keeping with John’s version of the “return to Carmel.” It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the development of this tradition in any sophisticated fashion, but it is essential that we lay out some of the foundational methods, images and ideas that govern this tradition inasmuch as it had direct influence on John.

Dionysian Prism of Eros

Standing at the center of the long and complex history of eros in the western Christian tradition is the work of the mysterious sixth century Syrian author who writes under the pseudonym “Dionysius the Areopagite,” St Paul’s Athenian convert referenced in Acts 17:34. Pseudo-Dionysius (whom I will refer to here as Denys for the sake of brevity), as he is now called, came into the theological world of the west through the translations of Johannes Scottus Eriugena (815–877) and, because of his claims to

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473 Denys Turner in The Darkness of God Negativity in Christian Mysticism, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 191-96. Turner says that John’s appropriation of the allegorical tradition of the interpretation of the Song as a narrative of the soul and God is so complete that it lacks creative engagement of levels of meaning and is overly transparent to allegory. For Turner, this simply means that by the time John comes along the Song tradition has become so well established that no apologia for the use of sexual imagery needs to be entertained (as it did for Origen or even Bernard).
apostolic origins claimed almost universal authority in Europe from the ninth century until the sixteenth century. Denys was deeply formed in the neo-platonism of Proclus and wrote of the mutual “erotic” and “ecstatic” love of God and the soul. Creation, for Denys, flowed from and returned to God in an erotic ecstasy. In his work Divine Names, Denys was concerned to justify his use of the profane eros to speak of the love of God (described in the Scriptures as agape) by asserting that the two words have essentially the same sense. Eros is fundamentally characterized by a natural yearning for union with that which is loved – the Beautiful, the Good – that causes one to “leap out” to the other in an ek-stasis, literally a “standing out” of oneself to join the other in a shared identity. Erotic ecstasy is, for Denys, a cycle that begins in God’s initial erotic act of creation and ends in creation, imprinted by this divine eros, longing for a return to its source. Here both “creation” and “redemption” are, in Denys, joined by the single and circular movement of eros.

At the center of the dynamics of eros in Denys is the ontological tension between God’s supreme unity and creation’s multiplicity. This dialectical tension, inasmuch as it is relevant to our particular consideration of John of the Cross, possessed two sets of difficulties for Denys. First, how could a God who is absolutely simple and one give rise to a multiplicity of beings without becoming multiple himself? And then, how can the multiplicity of creation “return” to the supreme unity of the source without losing its character as multiple? Second, as Denys accepted the Nicene doctrine of the cosmos as freely created ex nihilo by God, he faced the problem of the relation between freedom.

474 The evolution of the influence of the Dionysian corpus on western Christian thought has been extensively studied and debated, especially since critical Renaissance scholarship began questioning the historicity of the claims to first century authorship. By the time John began writing, the status of Denys was in crisis as both humanist and Protestant authors questioned the identity and the Platonism of the author. John shows no sense of hesitancy in accepting the texts as authoritative, since they were standard fare in monastic communities since the Victorines of the twelfth century. See Paul Rorem, Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Rorem argues that the severance of Denys’ apophatic and cataphatic texts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries contributed to the severance of mystics from theology, with apophatic mystics retreating into affectivity and interiority and scholastic theologians into the endless fragmentation of Aristotelian logical distinctions.

475 Denys Turner says that, by the time Denys wrote, these words had acquired the same meaning in usage; which would explain Denys’ matter of fact reference to their equivalence. Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs. Cistercian Studies Series (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 47-51.

and necessity. If God is said to be free in creating, then one must posit potentiality in God: God could have freely chosen to create or not create, or could have chosen this universe and not that. For the Platonist, this is a problem as it created a gap between what God could be and is. These dialectical tensions present to Denys a problem to which he offers a solution in the form of cataphatic and apophatic theology, and a dialectical metaphysics of *eros*.477

Denys’ theological solution directly addresses the problem of language about God, and is founded on his metaphysical view of the outflow and return of all things from God. The affirmative “saying,” or cataphatic manner of discoursing about God corresponds to the outflow of all things from God, while the negative “unsaying,” or apophatic manner of discoursing about God corresponds to the return of all things to God. For Denys, in the movement of “outflow” from God all created things bear an image or trace of the divinity, and so all things are a potential source of language about God. In his treatise on the cataphatic way, the *Divine Names*, Denys crafts a hierarchical “ladder” of language that allows the erotically impelled mind to ascend from the “lower,” material images of God (e.g. rock, lion, light) to the “higher,” immaterial and intellectually abstract ideas (e.g. goodness, power, wisdom) until at last the language stretches in “sheer exhaustion”478 to its breaking point and passes the mind over into its opposite, the apophatic way of negation that is the topic of Denys’ other treatise, *Mystical Theology*. The cataphatic ascent through creation is, in Denys, from the multiple and irreducibly complex to the simpler and more unified, though the demands imposed by God’s absolute simplicity and transcendence lead the mind to eventually renounce all language and concepts taken form creation as it approaches union with God in the “divine darkness” that is, in fact, an excess of light that blinds. The process of ascent, again driven by the erotic dynamism “built into” creation, is understood as a “purgation” of the soul of all that is foreign to the divinity so that the soul might become capable of uniting with its absolutely simple Source. The soul as it ascends grows in likeness to God, though once united with God in the dark “cloud of unknowing” its identity loses all

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477 Turner posits these problems as axial to all attempts in medieval mysticism to articulate the nature of the journey of “return” to God in union. *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*. Cistercian Studies Series (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 47-70.

definability. As the mind renounces all that can be known in the proximity to union with God, it begins to “belong to him who is beyond everything,” Denys says, simultaneously becoming “neither oneself nor someone else.”\textsuperscript{479} In other words, in the approach to union God is not only beyond language, but the identity of the one approaching that union also shares in that apophatic moment of being “unsaid.”\textsuperscript{480}

As Denys sees all created reality as pregnant with potential for speaking of God, he has no serious difficulties with the language of \textit{eros}. In fact, as I alluded to above, he sees erotic discourse as necessary to his theological purposes. \textit{Eros}, woven into the dialectical language of cataphatics and apophatics, allows for the manifesting and reconciling of the (Platonic) tensions of unity and multiplicity, freedom and necessity. For Denys, the yearning for union does not obliterate differentiation between a lover and beloved, but enriches it by including the “other” beloved in the identity of the lover. Erotic yearning obliterates the “contrast” between union and differentiation, transcending that contrast by refusing to exclude one in the definition of the other. In regard to the binary of freedom and necessity, erotic yearning imposes not an external but an internal necessity that is, for Denys, defining of the nature of freedom as self-giving.\textsuperscript{481} Freedom is lived as necessity and necessity as freedom in \textit{eros}, as \textit{eros} transforms each of the terms by its own inner dynamic. In this sense \textit{eros} is, for Denys, paradoxical in a way analogous to the interdependence of cataphatic and apophatic ways that refuse to exclude

\textsuperscript{479} Ibid, 54.
\textsuperscript{480} Denys Turner, \textit{The Darkness of God Negativity in Christian Mysticism}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19-46. Turner (like Michael Sells) refers to this as Denys “apophatic anthroplogy” which eschews all attempts to locate the self-in-union within conceptually definable, definite categories. John’s version of this anthropological apophatics is attenuated by his unique “parallel” epistemology that grants to the “spirit” a language and capacity all its own that can render even the ineffable in a new cataphatics. It is what Howells refers to as John’s “temporary Dionysianism.” See Edward Howells’s \textit{John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood}, (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 130. In this Howells disagrees with Turner.
\textsuperscript{481} Turner notes that later notions of “arbitrating” freedom developed post-Descartes, notions that posit God mulling over innumerable options before choosing what to do, are foreign to the platonic worldview. “Being is by nature self-diffusing” (\textit{bonum est diffusivum sui esse}) was a platonic medieval axiom that was nearly universally accepted as descriptive of the divine nature. The sixteenth century was the first to question its relevance to Christian theology by criticizing its roots in platonic, rather than Scriptural tradition. Denys Turner, \textit{The Darkness of God Negativity in Christian Mysticism}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 59-60. See also Paul Rorem for discussion of the link between this conception and medieval theology: \textit{Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 176.
each other; and which both point beyond the limits of language.\footnote{Michael Sells argues that such uses of erotic and apophatic paradox also are also literary strategies used to draw the reader of the text into the experience of deconstructing the boundaries of language and thought in order to release a “meaning event” that opens language to newer vantages. Michael Anthony Sells, \textit{Mystical Languages of Unsaying} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1-13.} As Denys portrays the union of the mind with God, he affirms not only the ineffability tropes that refuse to define what exactly union is, but also affirms the freedom of the one who is now one with the erotic God. Again, the language invoked in terms of union with God is intentionally and unalterably paradoxical: what it means to be human and what it means to be divine are held together as long as language remains, but when the strain of paradox becomes too strong Denys ends the \textit{Divine Names} and begins the \textit{Mystical Theology}. And this textual progression leads from like toward unlike, and from unlike toward final a silence the demonstrates, for Denys, that language is inextricably multiple and ultimately incapable of bearing the weight of the wholly simple event of union with the One. As we ascend from multiplicity to unity, from complexity to simplicity all the way back to the wholly simple cause, we encounter and go beyond the last differentiation of all – between unity and difference itself. So, Turner argues, “\textit{eros} comes into its own just where the ‘way of negation’ begins,” where language itself falls away.\footnote{Denys Turner, \textit{Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs}. Cistercian Studies Series (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 62.}

\textit{Eros}, for Denys, draws the mind beyond its own capacity to ascend by means of reason and language, drawing it into a union with God that is beyond its own innate capacity. \textit{Eros} is ecstatic, causing the mind to “go out” beyond itself and to be transformed in what it cannot of itself become. Hence, it is “through love,” as John would frequently phrase it (e.g. A1 2.4; N1 8.1),\footnote{John uses the phrase fifteen times in the \textit{Ascent-Night} to describe the means by which the soul comes to union, but the concept permeates all of his texts.} that the mind is drawn to union with God, and not through rational thought acting on its own agency.\footnote{Turner makes the point that Denys and his heirs argue that only erotic ascent to God can effect union, and. Jaroslav Pelikan makes the point that \textit{eros} is Denys’ version of the Augustinian theology of grace, and notes the western medieval theological attempts at a synthesis of Augustinian grace and Dionysian \textit{eros}. See Jaroslav Pelikan “The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality” in \textit{Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works. The Classics of Western spirituality. Pseudo-Dionysius, trans. Colm Luibhéid, and Paul Rorem} (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 11-24.} And because God, utterly simple and beyond all multiplicity, transcends all things God cannot be contrasted with creation because God is \textit{not} some-thing that can be opposed or compared to anything else. In union, God cannot displace the creature’s identity, or be opposed to the
creature because God and the creature are not in any way comparable either by way of comparison or of contrast. Though there is, for Denys, a hierarchy of likeness that marks creation, it is only a hierarchy of likeness from the side of creation ascending to God, as God transcends all things in an equally infinite way. The soul in erotic ascent must progressively, hierarchically (“actively,” in John’s terms) strip itself of all knowledge as it returns to the One, since union with the One demands a likeness in the simplicity and oneness of the mind that knows. And the soul, as it relinquishes the multiplicity of creatures in its knowing progressively finds itself alone in the cloud of unknowing. Union, in the final analysis, brings about a solitude and estrangement from the “realm of unlikeness” that alienates it from the world of multiplicity. As creation is, in Denys’ vision, God-standing-outside-himself in erotic ecstasy, it is most fully itself only when it returns to the source for which it yearns. And so, for Denys, the “divinizing” ascent to union does not eradicate the creature’s nature as creature, but fulfills and completes it.

As in Greek mythology, for Denys eros and thanatos, love and death implicate each other as the surrender of a self determined by the “many” and the embracing of a self determined by absolute “oneness” brings about a fundamental change of identity – in union, Denys says, “one is neither oneself nor someone else.”486 The Dionysian erotic return to the One requires a “death,” Turner says, as the approach to an immediate vision of the One in the apophatic darkness radically transforms the mode of the self made capable of such a vision. Here the Exodus trope we have seen already – “you cannot see me and live” (Ex 33:20) – is offered a platonic-erotic interpretation, and death before God becomes a requisite means of passage from the mode of creation to the mode of Creator. However, as Turner also observes, Denys shows no interest in his texts of the nature of the experience of that ascent into darkness, of the stripping of multiplicity in the approach of the soul to absolute unity, of the solitude of the soul in union with the God beyond all language, or of that death that must be passed through to the reach the ineffable vision of God. Denys does not concern himself, but the Dionysian John of the

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Cross, a man of the dawn of the modern era, does. But we get ahead of ourselves, and must first treat briefly the reception of the Dionysian vision in the Latin west.

Medieval interlude

Denys’ neo-platonic theological vision entered the European mainstream especially beginning in the twelfth century with the emergence of the “schools,” the university centers of the scholastic movement that was seeking a synthesis of the Greek philosophical texts coming from the Arab through Spain and the theological (especially Augustinian) tradition of the Latin west. As Jean Leclercq argues, the rise of the schools, and their distinctive “scholastic theology” began to rival and supplant the dominance of “monastic theology” that had carried theology through the chaos of the fall of the Empire in the west up through the Carolingian era and beyond. Scholastic theology, which saw philosophical (Greek) reason as a welcome tool for bringing understanding to the sources of divine revelation, eagerly engaged Denys’ neo-platonism as an emblem of the “early,” and in their minds, apostolic-age synthesis of Greek and Christian thought. The monastic schools of theology, especially the Cistercian, did not directly engage these emerging sources but instead continued their theological method of interpretive readings of Scriptural texts in dialogue with the established authorities of the Latin tradition (especially Augustine). Bernard McGinn inserts a third category into Leclercq’s twofold division of medieval theology by including “vernacular theology.” Vernacular theology emerged largely in relation to women’s religious movements, like the Beguines, both in terms of rendering theological texts accessible to women and in terms of allowing women to create new theological texts. This growing theological movement would gradually integrate the Dionysian texts, and their vision of the soul’s ascent to God into a vernacular idiom.

490 Bernard McGinn traces the importance of the Franciscans and Dominicans in translating Dionysian thought into a spirituality that was subsequently embraced by lay religious movements (e.g. Beguines, Beghards) in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This same (Franciscan) influence would also decisively shape the Carmelite reform and its appropriation of Dionysian themes. See Bernard McGinn,
Among the bearers of the Dionysian inheritance to the western theological tradition in the early medieval period would be the great representatives of “scholastic theology” like Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure; while in the later medieval period northern European authors of the mystical tradition of “vernacular theology,” like Eckhart, Ruusbroec, the author of the Cloud of Unknowing and Jean Gerson would fully engage the Dionysian vision. In contrast, Denys’ influence would not be found in the representatives of the tradition of “monastic theology” like Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux or William of Saint Thierry. In looking especially at the monastic tradition’s lack of enthusiasm for Denys’ writings, it is clear that Denys’ “abstractness” and “little basis in sacred scriptures,” a monastic theologian’s first love, played a prominent role. What Denys found in Proclus to give voice to his erotic vision of the cosmos and of God, the monastic authors, beginning with Origen, found in the Song of Songs. Bernard of Clairvaulx, for example, developed an erotic and highly individualized monastic theology based on his commentaries on the New Testament letters of St John and the Song of Songs. Turner says that Bernard developed from the letters of John a fusion of selfless love (caritas) of God and knowledge of an unknowable

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491 However, there are notable exceptions to these rather rigid distinctions, where Denys’ works were explicitly integrated, is the twelfth century Parisian school of St. Victor – especially Hugh and Richard – that engaged the scholastic-philosophical, monastic-exegetical and mystical-experiential styles of theology. This school, through complex channels of transmission, would have particular influence in John of the Cross who also combined scholastic, monastic and mystical-vernacular styles, along with an explicit appropriation of Denys’ neo-platonism. See Bernard McGinn, The Growth of Mysticism, vol. 2 of The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994), 363-418.


493 Turner argues that Bernard’s turn toward the soul-God hermeneutic of the Song was influenced by his blend of courtly love literature and Song commentary tradition. C.H. Lawrence argues that the “turn to the individual” in the twelfth century was influenced by growing urbanization, and the idealization of the eremitical life that influenced the Cistercian reforms. See his Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages (Harlow, England: Longman, 2001), 146-60. See also Caroline Walker Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” in Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 82-109. Bynum offers in this fascinating essay a corrective for scholars who have, in her estimate, too heavily emphasized the emergence of the “individual” in literature. Her examination of Bernard’s work demonstrates that the “discovery of the self” in this century was “for a purpose” – “the development of the self toward God” (87).
God into an experience that rendered knowledge of God an affectively charged love
(\textit{amor ipse notitia est} – love is a form of knowing).\textsuperscript{494}

Bernard also included in his idea of affective and noetic love the idea that love as
ecstatic, that love was itself an impelling, at times violent force that caused one to go
beyond one’s limits toward union with God. Bernard contends that though God is in
himself unmoving, the dynamism of \textit{amor} (the Latin equivalent of \textit{eros}) sets creation in
motion as a yearning for return to the One in whose likeness creation was made. Here,
Leclercq argues, is the sign of the influence of Denys’ eroticism on Bernard’s exegesis of
the Song of Songs.\textsuperscript{495} This love violently drives the soul toward God, and toward a union
where it is “made wholly to be in the whole beloved.”\textsuperscript{496} In this union, the soul becomes
“God with God,” though in this life only imperfectly and in the moments of ecstasy that
anticipate the vision of God in heaven. But more interesting to Turner, and to McGinn, is
Bernard’s transferal of the ontological roots of \textit{eros} in Denys’ cosmos to the \textit{experiential}
roots of Bernard’s monastic context.\textsuperscript{497} The dynamic of a yearning for return to God in
union is not an objective ontological context in which the soul finds itself embedded as
part of the cosmos, but rather, as Turner says, Bernard discovers himself as “loving God
erotically,” executing his exegesis as a personal act of seeing God as the bridegroom \textit{from
the vantage of the bride} of the Song text. In other words, Bernard represents a shift in
Christian eroticism as he existentializes the erotic impulse, in the words of McGinn, and
makes the subject’s vantage the objective ground of knowing and loving.\textsuperscript{498} If the
“mystical” was, in its origins, descriptive of a style of exegesis of Scripture by means of
allegorical method (e.g. Origen), in Bernard the “mystical” has become the ability to
achieve an “erotic sympathy” with the text of the Song of Songs by means of one’s

\textsuperscript{494} Jean Leclercq, \textit{The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture} (New York:
\textsuperscript{495} Jean Leclercq, \textit{The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture} (New York:
Fordham University Press, 1982), 211-16.
\textsuperscript{496} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{497} Ibid., 79. Also, Bernard McGinn, “Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity:
\textsuperscript{498} Bernard McGinn, “The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism,” \textit{Church History}, Vol. 65, No. 2
(Jun., 1996), 213.
affective experience. As Bernard says, “only the touch of the Spirit can inspire a song like this, and only personal experience can unfold its meaning.”

This “Bernardine shift” places as a subtext in the reading of the book of Scripture the *liber experientiae*, “book of experience;” and in Bernard’s case, it is the experience of the individual monk who makes the Song of Songs commentary tradition that stretches back to Origen, Ambrose and Gregory the Great *his own*. But where the earlier tradition had interpreted the Song text in an ecclesiological and historical manner, seeing the bride as, alternately, Israel, the Church, or the individual soul within a wider ecclesial and sacramental context, Bernard read the Song as a dialogue between the individual soul and God *in isolation*. Here the “experiential hermeneutic” offered a new way to accommodate traditional exegetical tropes from a social-historical sense to a personal-ahistorical sense. This “shift” stood at the threshold of a revolution in European religious discourse that locates the experience of the *individual* at the center of theological discourse and, for McGinn, opens a window especially for women to have their voices heard as they translate their religious experience into a vernacular, authoritative and public discourse. In the age of scholastic synthesis Denys’ neo-platonic eroticism will gradually come into a more explicit synthesis with Bernard’s “bridal-mysticism,” and with his shift toward a hermeneutics of individual experience, giving birth, especially in fourteenth and fifteenth century northern Europe, to a mysticism that emphasizes the subjective experience of the erotic ascent to God. This complex development will decisively influence the mystical reformation in Spain, and will be adapted by both John and Teresa to serve the interest of their reform of the Carmelite order.

John’s erotic night

John of the Cross’ appropriation of the Dionysian erotic tradition that was so radically transformed throughout the medieval period plays a crucial role in shaping the contours of the “Discalced self” that the *Ascent-Night* seeks to construct. John’s engagement with that tradition was also shaped by the demands of his historical contexts, some of which we will now explore. As we have seen, Teresa’s Discalced reformation

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sought to return the Carmelite friars and nuns to the “primitive” model of the early Carmelite Rule and way of life that characterized its eremitical origins. At the heart of this “reform by return” Teresa had discovered “mental prayer,” the recogimiento movement promoted by the Franciscans in Spain. By means of recogimiento she had discovered herself, in the midst of a still-unreformed Carmel in Avila a way to achieve that “return” to mythic Carmel by retreating into the solitude of the “interior castle” where God alone dwells. John appropriated this manner of interpreting the reform of Carmel, and rendered explicit the identification of recogimiento mysticism with a return to Carmel: the Discalced were to ascend a wholly interiorized Mount Carmel. The return to the summit of “Carmel within” would find its own language and imagery in Dionysian and Song of Songs eroticism, while this journey would simultaneously require the ascetic renunciation of all that prevented the union of the soul with God on the summit. And it was in the “all” of his beloved Spain, with all its historical contingencies, where John would find both the way to eternal Carmel and the obstacles along that way.

John’s lyric poem, One Dark Night, and the poem’s two commentaries, the Ascent-Night, emerged amid the conflicts between the Discalced and Calced branches of Carmel and were utilized by John to instruct and construct the nuns and friars that had joined Teresa’s reformation. John’s poems were committed to memory and sung within the convents and monasteries of the reform, much to Teresa’s delight. John’s decision to freely circulate his poetry strongly suggests his didactic intent in writing them, and surely this intent was intimately linked to Teresa’s request that he help give shape to the self-understanding of the reform. The commentaries he would come to write were, as he states in his prologues, written at the request of those same nuns and friars who wished to have an interpretation of those poems. In other words, those who received his poetry understood their formative function and wished to have John explicate what the poems implied in regard to that identity. The manuscripts of his commentaries were privately circulated within the various convents and monasteries in Castile and Andalusia, and unlike Teresa who actively sought to publicize her work, his texts remained within the reform.\footnote{John’s texts saw limited circulation among the friars, but was widely circulated among the nuns. John’s decision to not circulate his works outside of the reform, or, as in Teresa’s case, submit his works to the}
weight of the ideals of the Teresian reform, John employed elements of the Christian erotic tradition. His poems reflect primitive Carmel’s quest for a return to eremitical and contemplative solitude where union with God is possible, and give gendered voice to the feminine, Teresian core of the reform. His *Ascent-Night* commentaries locate that erotic quest within the unique world of sixteenth century Spain, and turn eroticism into a means of criticizing all vying conceptions of identity not congruent with the Discalced return to Carmel. And it is to John’s erotic critique that we must now turn.

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

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

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

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

scrutiny of a *letrado* (though he mentions in his prologue to the *Ascent* that his work is open to scrutiny) no doubt reflects in part the importance of gender. John as a university educated male cleric and friar did not have to justify his production of authoritative texts as did Teresa, and did not have to face the guilt-by-association that Teresa did as a *beata* claiming visionary status. See Edward Howells *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood*, (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 60-9.

502 Alison Weber argues that Teresa wished to place the erotic, nuptial theology of contemplative union with God at the center of the Discalced reform, but the heavy restrictions placed on women did not allow her to offer a robust commentary on the Song of Songs. In addition, Weber says, the Inquisition had become deeply suspicious of the link between *beatas alumbradas* and nuptial mysticism as accusations of sexually deviant behavior among the *alumbrados* came to fever pitch in the 1570s. I suggest that John may have made full use of his privileged gender precisely in order to give voice to Teresa’s vision of a Discalced nuptial mysticism. Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 114-22.
5. O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved in her Lover.

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

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

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

The eroticism of John of the Cross is invariably associated with the image of the
“dark night,” and rightly so as it is the governing image of John’s erotic poem, *One Dark Night*, on which the commentaries of the *Ascent* and *Night* are based. However, this image is *not* predominant in his other two major poems, the *Canticle* and *Flame*, which draw their language and imagery more from the language of the Song of Songs. As Colin Thompson says, the *Ascent-Night* represents John at his most “Dionysian,” and therefore at his most neo-platonic as he narrates the ascending journey of a soul through the darkness of negation of all that is not-God to union with God in the darkness of unknowing. But, as Turner argues, even if we can firmly embed John within the Dionysian tradition much has changed in John’s account of this Dionysian erotic ascent. The framework of the cosmic hierarchic ontology within which Denys embedded the mind’s ascent to God has been vacated, as that ontology has been wholly

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interiorized and personalized. The journey is no longer upward through the knowledge of the Divine Names, or through the mediating ranks of ecclesiastical and celestial hierarchies. The journey is now inward, devoid of mediations as the Augustinian anthropological version of neo-platonism has supplanted the Dionysian-Proclan cosmology.\(^{505}\) In addition, the Bernardine placement of the “book of experience” within the “book of Scripture” displaced the objective and ontological description of the ascent in Denys and wholly personalized it as a description of the interior experience of the erotic ascent of the soul to God by means of an inner negation of all that is not God. John of the Cross bears the inheritance of this transformation of Dionysius’ erotics, and in particular exploits the intensely individualized and de-ontologized schema of ascent to God. In the poem, One Dark Night, and its commentaries John offers an exceptionally detailed “psychological” description of the experience of the pain and pleasure, absence and presence, anxiety and ecstasy that accompanies the “dying” of the soul as it mounts from the nada of creation to union with the todo, the transcendent God on the summit of Carmel.

The poem One Dark Night, written shortly after John’s escape from prison, clearly bears the narrative textures of both his imprisonment and his escape. According to Eulogio Pacho, John’s experience of deprivation and suffering in the Toledo prison infused John’s Dionysian apophaticism with existential texture, while its solitude and isolation shaped his view that the “way” to return to an authentic Carmelite eremiticism is the way of absolute renunciation (what John refers to as nada) that opens up into the erotic desire to be in solitary union with God.\(^{506}\) The narrative elements of the poem manifest this via nada that marks the entire journey of the ascent described in the Ascent-

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505 Turner’s narrative of the evolution of erotic discourse from Denys to John interprets the transformation of that discourse as a gradual unmooring of erotic rhetoric from its metaphysical foundations. For Turner, the synthesis of Augustinian and Dionysian traditions by Bonaventure, followed by the nominalist critique of metaphysics and the schism between scholastic and mystical traditions led to a highly individualized and psychologized eroticism. De Certeau argues that the influence of Renaissance humanism and the dawn of early modern consciousness accounts for John’s unprecedented thick account of the psychological experience of a neo-platonized erotic union with God. See Michel de Certeau, The Mystic Fable. Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 125. Andrew Louth also argues that the separation of Denys’ Mystical Theology from his more ontologically and liturgically robust texts contributed to the radical individualizing of mystical piety in the late medieval period. See his Denys the Areopagite (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 101-9.

506 Federico Ruiz, et al., God Speaks in the Night, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 171-77. Although Pacho only hints at this idea, I would like to suggest that John’s imprisonment had a decisive effect on his view of Discalced identity and the way to construct that identity.
Night – the nameless lovers who speak no words, who meet in darkness and in concealment, in the midst of stillness. The lover departs her house by means of a secret ladder, and no one witnesses anything of what happens between the lover and beloved. The last stanza swirls in a collection of negations – an abandoned and forgotten self, all things ceased, leaving cares forgotten – but the poem as a whole is suffused with the movement of amor, or erotic love that impels lover and beloved into a transforming union in the night. While the poem moves the lover to abandon everything, the lover simultaneously gains possession of the beloved. It is interesting to note that, in the poem, the union of the lover and the beloved does not lead to the abandonment of language and imagery, but rather invokes most forcefully the sensual language of the Song. The commentaries, as we will see, call for a total renunciation of all sensual imagery in the approach to God in the active and passive nights until the final passive night of the spirit begins to wane and the dawn of union begins. Then the soul, stripped of all natural ways of knowing and loving, is able to speak the language of the Song from a new vantage: that of God himself.

The erotic night as a quest for unity

At the heart of John’s construction of Discalced identity is the search for unity. As I argued in Chapter Two, John shared the medieval conception of reform as a return to the deiform and archetypal sources found in the historical origins of a tradition. As the argument went, the progress of history, as an emanation from those pristine sources, gradually fragments and corrupts what was once pure and unified. The historical founders of those traditions, themselves standing at the source, were understood as exemplars by which all future generations within that tradition would judge themselves. The Teresian reform understood itself very much in this manner, looking back to the exemplars – Elijah, the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist – and to the Rule that encapsulated in juridical form the spirit of those exemplars for the models of reform. The unity of the emerging Discalced reform depended on its fidelity to the models. But more than that,

Teresa and John, as Jane Ackerman suggests, saw themselves as a fresh instantiation of the original exemplars and so saw their persons and doctrine as crucial unifying centers within the reform. In this sense, Teresa and John saw their experience of Discalced identity as normative for the reform at large, and both of them attempted to encase that experience in texts that would be capable of eliciting imitation. Certainly Teresa would become a model for women within Carmel not only through her mystical doctrine, but also though her *Vida* which, as Alison Weber argues, is written precisely to put forward a model to be imitated. And John, though his influence among the friars was controversial, was offered the highest regard among the nuns largely in imitation of Teresa’s own forceful promotion of him. John distributed his poetry and counseled, along with Teresa, that it be “performed” by committed to memory and set to music. He dedicated the commentary on the *Canticle* to Ana de Jesús, the second most powerful nun in the reform after Teresa. Ana refused to cooperate in the canonization interviews after John’s death because, she said, the link between John and her most intimate spiritual experiences was too close to set out for public scrutiny. At the end of his life, John would stand beside Ana to defend what they saw as an abandonment of the Teresian model by the aggressively Counter-Reformation minded Doria. It was that “model” that John sought to exemplify and enshrine in his writings, and no doubt he understood that without adherence to that model of identity the Discalced reform would fragment and

509 This fact constitutes Hans Urs von Balthasar’s central critique of John of the Cross: that he tried to make his experience of the path to union with God normative for the “whole Church.” But this argument misses John’s main objective, which was to make his experience normative for the Discalced reform and not for the universal Church. In addition, Balthasar criticizes John’s “critique of finite forms,” but does so apart from any consideration to John’s conception of the particularity of the Carmelite ideal. Hans Urs von Balthasar, and John Kenneth Riches, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Vol. 3, *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 168-71.
512 A stark example of this is when John first came to the convent in Grenada where Ana de Jesús was prioress. Ana was uncertain about John’s assertion of authority, and especially about John’s reference to Teresa herself as “my daughter.” Ana wrote a letter complaining about John to Teresa, but Teresa responded by confirming John’s authority in the reform and calling John “the father of my soul.” Federico Ruiz, et al., *God Speaks in the Night*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 152-54.
513 Ibid., 224-25.
corrupt. It is that model we will not attempt to understand in the texts of the *Ascent-Night*.

John applies the dialectics of Denys to his narrative of ascent of Carmel by setting the binary of unity-multiplicity into a critical spiral that progressively eliminates all aspects of the self that are defined by relation to multiplicity. Erotic love draws the soul away from the multiplicity of creatures toward the absolute simplicity of God, but the ascetic struggle requires that the will freely “apply itself” (A1 1.3) in response to this movement and actively choose to eliminate all attachments. The senses, inherently wed to the world of multiplicity, and so the source of all access to that multiplicity for the spiritual faculties, must first be “despoiled” of all attachments by a systematic program of detachment. This work of detaching essentially turns the senses away from creatures and toward the spirit, so that the spirit might again preside over the “lower” part of the soul.

For John, the spirit is the center of unity for the body-soul *suppobitum* (N1 4.2; N2 1.1; 3.1), and the ultimate unity of the self rests on the unification of the faculties of the spirit in their single erotic pursuit of union with God alone. The purification of the intellect, in both active and passive nights, involves the reduction of multiplicity by the rejection of all sense-based “forms and figures,” particular knowledge that represents God by means of discursive reason and imagination. This includes, we might add, the entire scholastic project of theology as well as the vast majority of “spiritual ways” promoted by the *letrados* dominated Inquisition. The purification of the will requires the liberation of the appetite’s attachment to particular objects, as the will dispossesses itself of all attachment to any particular good. In this way, the whole appetitive power, which is rooted in the will, can center itself wholly and exclusively on God as the one good, and refrain from dissipating itself into a multiplicity of created goods. The purification of the memory requires that all the “archives” of imagination, as well as all

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514 Daniel Dombrowski finds in John the medieval scholastic distinction between the first movement of the will spontaneously toward the good (*voluntas*) and the free, arbitrating will (*libero arbitrio*) that involves rational deliberation and choice. For John, *eros* is an act of *voluntas* while the ascetical endeavor is an act of *libero arbitrio*. As in the case of Augustine, John believes that the *libero arbitrio* is enslaved to sin and must be healed by grace; but only after it has been disabled in the passive nights. *St. John of the Cross: An Appreciation*. Suny Series in Latin American and Iberian Thought and Culture (State University of New York Press, 1992), 61.

particular knowledge yielded by the intellect’s abstraction of sensory forms, must be renounced and forgotten so that the memory can become capable of receiving God’s infinite form that is without distinctions or images. The spirit, in order to enter into union with God, must acquire a likeness to the divine by renouncing all that is unlike the divine. And for John, in contradistinction to Counter-Reformation scholasticism, no created form bears a likeness to the divine (A1 3).\footnote{516}

John calls the Discalced to strip themselves of all elements of their identity not in conformity with the ascent of the mountain of Elijah, where they can hide from all creatures in contemplative solitude.\footnote{517} He uses metaphors like nudity (e.g. A1 5.6; N2 9.1), the void (e.g. A2 6.2; N1 11.2), emptiness (e.g. N1 10.5) and poverty (A2 22.17; N2 4.1) to describe this state of detachment that must characterize the soul desirous of ascending the mountain to God. Only the “naked spirit” can reach the summit. Only the void of a soul emptied of all creatures, in total poverty of spirit, can receive the erotic self-communication of God. He uses the image of a dirty window through which light only imperfectly passes to describe the need for the soul to eradicate all attachment to creatures, which serve only to cloud the soul’s ability to receive the light fully. And it is the “erotic” force of love that drives the soul on to cleanse and purify all that prevents the light from fully penetrating the window. He says,

A soul makes room for God by wiping away all the smudges and smears of creatures, by uniting its will perfectly to God's; for to love is to labor to divest and deprive oneself for God of all that is not God. When this is done the soul will be illumined by and transformed in God. And God will so communicate his supernatural being to the soul that it will appear to be God himself and will possess what God himself possesses (A2 5.7).
As God and creatures bear “no likeness,” the possession of God must mean the dispossession of creatures, and so of all “particular” knowledge and affections. David Hart asserts that John’s conception of the soul’s divinization bears the marks of a theology more reminiscent of the eastern Christianity into which Carmelite hermits first set their roots, suggesting that John’s mysticism of divinizing union may itself be part of the attempt to construct a “return” to ancient Carmel.518 What John adds to the eastern tradition, Hart says, is the more western emphasis on the suffering implicated in the erotic longing of the soul to enter into union with God.519

John describes the ascending Discalced contemplative as gradually surrendering the central role of discursive reason as expressed especially in the practice of meditation.520 He offers distinguishable “signs” by which a friar or nun may recognize that God is disabling discursive agency so as to prepare the soul for the “infusion” of divine light into the spirit, bypassing the sense-based discursive powers.521 As with

518 The theology of “divinization” was not standard fare in Counter-Reformation polemics, and the fourteenth century condemnation of Eckhart and other Rhineland mystics like Tauler for their language of divinizing union with God made such language generally suspect. The alumbrados were themselves accused of using this same language which, Kavanaugh says, John tried to salvage by giving it an “orthodox” sense in a scholastic medium. “Faith and the Experience of God in the University Town of Baeza,” Carmelite Studies VI: John Of The Cross edited by Steven Payne, OCD (Washington Province of Discalced Carmelites, Inc.,1992), 156-84. See also James Wiseman’s excellent history of divinization in Europe during the two centuries before John, “To Be God with God: The Autotheistic Sayings of the Mystics,” Theological Studies 5 (1990): 230-5.

519 David Bentley Hart, “The Bright Morning of the Soul: John of the Cross on Theosis,” Pro Ecclesia (Summer 2003): 324-45. We might add, with Turner, that this synthesis finds special focus in the Franciscan (Bonaventurian) tradition.

520 John’s rejection of the use of imagination or discursive reason in the “higher” states of ascent, as one transitions from active to passive purgations sets him in stark contrast from the Ignatian models of spiritual exercise. Jules Toner ascribes this difference to the particularity of each author’s audience. Ignatius’ Society of Jesus embraced the activism of the mendicants, and saw great value in the cultivation of imagination and discursive reason in prayer for men whose identity was constructed around preaching and teaching. John, on the other hand, had retrieved the early Carmelite tradition’s discomfort with the mendicant identity and was attempting to construct identities that valorized passive, contemplative selves whose identity was fundamentally shaped not by human but by divine agency. O’Reilly says that John’s passive night of the spirit would be disastrous for a Jesuit to identify with, as it would incapacitate his ability to fulfill the mission of the order. Jules J. Toner, A Commentary on Saint Ignatius’ Rules for the Discernment of Spirits: A Guide to the Principles and Practice. Series III--Original studies, composed in English, no. 5 (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982), 271-82. See also Terence O’Reilly, From Ignatius Loyola to John of the Cross: Spirituality and Literature in Sixteenth-Century Spain (Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain: Variorum, 1995).

521 The reference to “infusion” comes from the early scholastic tradition that distinguished acquired from infused virtues to distinguish, in Augustinian fashion, the operations of nature and grace. The authors of the recogimiento made much of this distinction. John and Teresa developed the language to refer to various forms of prayer, with John using the language of “active” and “passive” as equivalent forms of acquired and infused. See a good discussion of John’s relation to the scholastic tradition in this regard,
Denys’ ascent from “lower,” more material images to “higher,” more abstract ideas, John affirms that the ascent involves a progressive simplification in one’s knowledge of God; and this move toward greater simplicity “darkens” the intellect accustomed to converse with sensory and discursive ways of knowing. This is why the onset of “contemplation,” which is the immediate inflow of God into the soul apart from the senses, is experienced as dark and insipid by the still unpurified spiritual faculties. The knowledge given in contemplation is “so simple, so pure, and so general, and is unaffected and unrestricted by any particular intelligible object, natural or divine” (N2 8.5), and because the soul is unaccustomed to this way of knowing the experience is felt as painful, disorienting, terrifying, and as a death. This epistemological reordering constitutes the soul’s crisis described in the Dark Night precisely because the manners of knowing and loving that define the “center” of the identity (the spirit) are being changed not by graded degrees, but by a series of ruptures (often, for Teresa, in the form of raptures). The Discalced soul that has surrendered its own agency, expressed in discursive meditation, begins to think, will and remember from a vantage different in “kind” from what preceded it. This ulterior vantage, for John, “belongs more to the next life” than to this (N2 9.5), and the Discalced who approaches union with God understands herself as more “heavenly than earthly” (N2 22.1). The Discalced comes to long for the consummation of union in heaven where the new “mode” of knowing and loving will no longer.

In the dark night, although the soul has been despoiled of the natural light of the senses and the intellect, it continues its ascending movement. No longer able to ascend to God by means of discursive reason, the soul “goes out beyond every natural and rational boundary to climb the divine ladder of faith that leads up to and penetrates the deep things of God” (A2 1.1). It climbs to “plunder, know, and possess the goods and treasures of heaven” (N2 18.1) by means of “divine faith.” This faith, as Eugene Maio states, is not a rational assent to revealed truths but a “fierce hunger, a restless desire of the Beloved.”

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“dynamic of Eros.” Faith is not itself vision, but the movement to transcend all created media that could be confused with the vision of God itself. John asserts that “faith is a dark night for the soul” and a “dark loving knowledge” (A2 24.4) whose content is hidden from the intellect that still conforms its mode of knowing to sensual forms. Faith forms in the intellect the desire to renounce all that is not God (A2 8-32), just as love forms in the will and hope in the memory the desire to renounce all that is not God (A3 1-45). John argues that all three “theological virtues” (A2 6) are distinguished by the single movement toward God alone that they effect, while all three deconstruct everything in the soul that impedes the achievement of that goal. Discalced identity is, for John, wholly defined by these three virtues inasmuch as they facilitate the unification of the whole soul around the pursuit of a single end. The Ascent-Night can be seen, in this light, as a project of accommodating the self to the demands of these faith, hope and charity understood as orientations toward fulfillment in God alone; and a description of the suffering that attends that accommodation.

For John, Discalced life is fundamentally a question of right-desire; and the whole ascetical life is a pursuit of reorienting that desire. John’s critique of desire does not call for its extinction, but for the turning of all desire – in the sensory appetites, the faculties, passions – toward God alone. Near the beginning of the Ascent, John remarks that

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524 Eugene Maio would say that this approach to the theological virtues is thoroughly subordinated a neo-platonic, Augustinian and Dionysian conception of *eros* as the wholly singular pursuit for the One, and that the pain that John describes is descriptive of the experience of the process of the total reduction of all human agency to the pursuit of a single good. Eugene A. Maio, *St. John of the Cross: the Imagery of Eros* (Madrid: Playor, 1973), 170-99. John interprets the Deuteronomy commandment to love God with all of one’s heart, soul, mind, strength in precisely this sense in the introduction to his critique of the heteronomous will. A3 16.1

525 This would distinguish John from Eckhart and Porete, who call for a radical extinction of desire. If Sells is right in saying that Porete’s apophatic call for the destruction of desire “with a why” was the basis of Eckhart’s own theological speculation, I would argue similarly that Teresa of Avila’s cataphatic vision of nuptial union and affective desire tempered John’s apophatic critique of desire. Michael A. Sells,
without the experience of being “fired by love’s urgent longings” for God, the soul would never have the strength or the motivation to renounce all attachments and endure the hardship of the nights (A1 14.2). These erotic “urgent longings” become the principle around which all desire and all appetites are integrated. The purgative nights serve to isolate, strengthen and orientate “the root desire for God,” and the will “directs these faculties, passions, and appetites toward God, turning away from all that is not God, [so that] the soul preserves its strength for God, and comes to love him with all its might” (A3 16.2). While desire is redirected, what John says is annihilated and extinguished in the soul are all of the sensory pleasures and gratifications that once informed the desire and kept it from intending God alone as its only Good. This is what Howells refers to as John’s “temporary Dionysian” critique of desire that has not yet striped itself of attachment to created goods.

The Discalced self in the Ascent-Night is characterized above all else by a painful, dialectical sense of incompleteness as the impulsion to be unified in one’s desire is obfuscated by a growing awareness of the reality of one’s fragmentation of desire. Book One of the Ascent, which details the active night of the senses, plays out this dialectical tension by arguing that the soul seeking God alone, when it lingers in its sensory appetites, remaining attached to creatures, finds that these appetites “weary, torment, darken, defile, and weaken” (A1 6.1) the soul, preventing it from receiving the unifying Spirit in its fullness (A1 6.3). The divine love, on the other hand, “finds that the soul is equipped to receive the wound and union in the measure that all its appetites are brought into subjection, alienated, incapacitated, and unable to be satisfied by any heavenly or earthly thing” (N2 11.2). The soul suffers in the ambiguity of the “betwixt and between” state, losing all satisfaction in creatures but not yet finding satisfaction in God alone. The descriptions of the soul in N2 6-10 as suffering an excruciating longing for a God who seems unattainable give voice to this radical ambiguity. For John these unfulfilled longings among the greatest sufferings of the nights, but are also the clearest sign that one is nearing the exemplary identity that the Discalced aspires to.


The “release of appetite” from its mooring in creatures is an integral feature of the nights, and this “liberation” permits the excavation in the soul of a desire capacious enough to receive the total communication of God in contemplation *per modum divinum*. Here the *nada-todo* dialectic present in his Sketch of the Mount\(^{528}\) finds its place as the appetites are turned away from creatures and toward “nothing” so to become open to the “all” that is the infinite God. In this “starving” of the appetites, the soul becomes more and more passive before the action of grace, as the passions, affections and all the activity of the faculties are “quieted” by the active and passive nights that progressively deny them of all the *sensory* satisfactions that once kept them occupied and agitated in the land of multiplicity and change. This is John’s version of the tradition of *apatheia*, which sees the quieting of the passions as a means to allow for the exercise of inner freedom (A1 15.2), since it was the passions that held the spiritual faculties bound to the sensory part of the soul.\(^{529}\) It is in this “stillness” that virtue can flourish, and that the faculties can begin to accustom themselves to that which is beyond sensory experience, and what is against the inclination of the senses. Virtue in the Discalced is, for John, pursues all good in God alone and despises every other form of good that threatens to contradict the single-minded pursuit of the only Good. “[V]irtue does not consist in apprehensions and feelings of God, however sublime they may be, or in any similar experience. On the contrary, it comprises what they do not experience: that is, deep humility, contempt for themselves and all things (very explicit and conscious to the soul), delight that others feel contempt for them also, and not wanting to be worth anything in the heart of another” (A3 9.3). For John, virtue renounces all desires to make the self or any created media an “end,” or a place of resting in the “satisfaction and delight” of joy (*gozo*) in the acquisition of those goods. As we saw earlier, the way to attain such a singular intention

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528 John offered the sketch as a visual representation of the *Ascent-Night*. See Kieran Kavanaugh, *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 43-4. *Nada*, or “nothing” traces the straight path up Carmel, and is said to be the means toward the end, which is God’s *todo*, or “all.”

529 John understand the line in his poem, “my house being all now stilled” as a reference to the state of inner order as the passions have submitted to the spirit’s rule under the influence of the active and passive night of the senses. This state is not yet an end, but rather a new beginning as the spirit enters the final passive night to effect its accommodation to God. See A 1 15.2; N2 14.1-3.
is, for John, to cultivate contempt for everything that does not lead to union with God as the sole good or tend toward God’s “glory and honor.”

The Discalced friar or nun aspiring to ascend Mount Carmel must be willing to surrender all active ascetical constructions of identity when contemplation begins, and allow the force of longing to replace the valor of striving (N1 11.1). John offers the standard scholastic opinion that the soul is not capable of acting by its own agency except “through the means and aid of the corporeal senses” (F 1.9), and since God is beyond the reach of the senses the soul must render itself passive so that God can exercise agency apart from the senses in the spirit to bring it to union. This stillness, because it disables the senses’ active agency, creates an inner solitude as the spirit begins to operate apart from the senses under the influence of grace. This inner “alienation” begins to draw the person in this state to seek more external solitude: “this contemplation, which is secret and hidden from the very one who receives it, imparts to the soul, together with the dryness and emptiness it produces in the senses, an inclination to remain alone and in quietude” (N1 9.6).

Here erotic love informs John’s vision of the Carmelite call to solitude. The total renunciation of attachment to a life of externality, combined with the...
inner-quest in prayer for God alone begins to create an “inner space” that defines itself against all things external. Eros, in this mode, gradually leads to a rupture between internal and external, estranging the newly constructed self from all ties of identity with what is other than God. After the passive night of the spirit has passed, there is an “awareness of being brought into a place far removed from every creature” (N2 17.6). Wholly passive, alienated from external social space, the soul entering erotic union with God comes to awareness that it is unable to communicate its deeply interior experience of “divine things as they are in themselves” (N2 17.6). Even the “new language” that the spirit speaks is understood to be incomprehensible to those occupying the sense-bound world. “In the activity that is then entirely spiritual there is no communication (no comunica) with the sensory part” (N2 23.14).

Many of those who testified in John’s canonization process said that John seemed to be a “pure spirit,” to be more “angel than man.” The Ascent-Night counsels such a transformation. The words Teresa heard as she struggled to resolve the tension between her life as a Calced nun at the Éncarnacion, and the new self that was emerging through the practice of recogimiento seem to have defined John’s Discalced self: “No longer do I want you to converse with men, but with angels.” The journey through the purgative nights to erotic union with God leads to the total “spiritualization” (espiritualice) of the person, making them “more like angels” than humans (N2 12.4). This transformation completes the unification of inner identity as the whole soul intends God alone in all its acts: “The more spiritual they are, the more they discontinue trying to make particular acts with their faculties, for they become more engrossed in one general, pure act” (A2 12.6). In addition, the soul that has been torn from all attachment to creatures now enters into an unmediated relation to God that obviates the mediations it once relied on. The

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536 In Counter-Reformation Spain, it is stunning that John allowed so little space in his works for the mediation of church, sacraments and so on as Teresa was so careful to do. Even John’s critical treatment of the use of images, popular devotions and the role of good works in the Book Three of the Ascent is surprising in light of the heavy emphasis on mediation in post-Tridentine Catholicism. He is clearly critical of much of Spanish ecclesial piety. An incident between John and Teresa in this regard is instructive. While he was serving as confessor in Avila, John decided to mortify Teresa by breaking a Eucharistic host in half right after she had told him how much she, in keeping with medieval piety, loved “large hosts.”
inner spirit, now in “darkness and concealment” from the outer world of the senses, begins to experience “substantial touches” of the naked essence of God on the naked spirit stripped of all external mediations. Prior to the passive night of the spirit such touches were experienced in the sensual part of the soul, yielding an experience of “sweetness” that John warned possessed the danger of being confused with the touches in the spirit (N2 23-24). In other words, for John the ever-present danger in the recogimiento movement is to spiritualize sensual pleasure and reduce monastic practice to the pursuit of that pleasure. In classical Augustinian fashion, John affirms that the more “internal” one’s encounter with God is, the closer to Carmel’s summit one has come. And if we can interpret the “summit” of Carmel as the core of John’s exemplary Discalced identity, then it becomes clear that John locates that identity in the “inner self” that lives in distant exile from the world of Spain the Discalced inhabit. God is “touched” at the summit-center, and the purpose of ascetic praxis is to realize that state of exile and return the friar and nun to Carmel.537

These touches also “inflame” the affections and passions of the will with desire for God, and so affect the will, though they do not move the will directly since the “will is free” (N2 13.3). That said, the effects of these touches of love in the will overwhelm the will as “the will thus becomes captive and loses its freedom, carried away by the impetus and force of the passion” (N2 13.3). Eventually, the process of spiritualization is completed in the nights and the touches reach the very “foundation” of the soul, the “substance of the soul” (N2 23.12). The very center of one’s identity has been penetrated by the desire for God alone, and the exemplary Discalced self has been wholly internalized. The former “self” that has been renounced by the Discalced, God has “bound up” (N2 9.7), leaving “no support in the intellect, nor satisfaction in the will, nor remembrance in the memory” (N1 9.7). This “void” in affection and desire for sensory goods in the spiritual faculties is gradually replaced by desire and affection for “goods of

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Teresa saw this act as mean, while John, no doubt, saw it as a necessary critique of what he saw to be Teresa’s exaggerated attachment to the host. Caroline Walker Bynum offers a remarkable account of the devotion to sacramental physicality in the late medieval period, Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

537 Kees Waaijman makes this argument, that Carmelite reformers prior to John generally saw themselves as exiles “bearing Carmel within.” John is the first Carmelite to systematize this “return” in a mystical itinerary. The Mystical Space of Carmel: A Commentary on the Carmelite Rule, (trans.) John Vriend, The Fiery Arrow Collection, (Leuvun: Peeters, 1999).
the spirit,” which are the proper goods to be desired by the Discalced. Desire is to be wholly determined by God, and affectivity is to find its meaning in service to one’s desire for God alone. The “affection is purely spiritual if the love of God grows when it grows, or if the love of God is remembered as often as the affection is remembered, or if the affection gives the soul a desire for God” (N1 4.7).

The goal of ascetic and contemplative practice is, as we have seen, to produce a void that opens up the “infinite capacity” (capacidad infinita) of the soul (A2 17.8); the infinite horizon on the summit of Carmel. Emphasis is not placed on God as “object” of desire, but rather on God manifest in the movement of desire. Prior to the dark nights, the movements of desire for creatures had always left the soul “wearied, tormented, darkened, defiled, and weakened” (A1 6.1). The alienation from exteriority produced by the purgative nights makes space for an inwardly turned desire whose origins are experienced as unknown. This turn toward the interior brings death to the “old self” that once longed to quench its thirst through the senses: “the longings for God become so intense that it will seem to such persons that their bones are drying up in this thirst, their nature withering away, and their ardor and strength diminishing through the liveliness of the thirst of love. They will feel that this is a living thirst...Since this thirst is alive, we can assert that it is a thirst that kills” (N1 11.1). The Discalced friar or nun is now defined by a single desire that excludes all other desires. This is the heart of his ascetic program, to cultivate the single, totalizing desire for God that slays all other desires by its unitary force.538

The annihilation of heteronomous desire is not, for John, a destruction of human nature per se. John incorporates Augustine’s idea that the soul, in its spiritual/rational operations, is an image of God capable of participating in the Trinitarian “operations,”539

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538 McGinn explores how the use of metaphors of “absorption” – desert and ocean – in the mystical tradition served to express, among other things, their belief that in the encounter with God all other goods were displaced and radically relativized. Bernard McGinn, “Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition,” The Journal of Religion, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Apr., 1994), 155-81. Jan Ruusbroec, whom Hatzfeld argues influenced John, sees the heart of erotic love as “singly intending God with God.” In other words, Ruusbroec argued that human beings cannot love God with single intent until God has united himself to the soul in such a way that the soul participates in the single act of God loving himself. See Rik van Nieuwenhove, “Ruusbroec: Apophatic Theologian or Phenomenologist of the Mystical Experience?” The Journal of Religion, Vol. 80, No. 1 (Jan., 2000), 83-105.

539 As Augustine says, what humanity has is an image of the Trinity, not the Trinity itself. This is not an eschatological statement (one day we’ll really have the Trinity, but we don’t have it now) but a relational
but that this capacity is only engaged by the redemptive Incarnation of God in Jesus. The Ascent-Night, Iain Matthew contends, is in this sense an extended meditation on how the Discalced nun or friar engages the redemptive Incarnation, especially in its "most intense" moment: the cross. On the cross Jesus was, for John, the exemplary eremite: living in the solitude of "abandonment, aridity and darkness" (A2 7.13). Indeed, John no doubt understood this model in interpreting his own eremitical "abandonment, aridity and darkness" in the Toledo prison. Eros drives the soul into the "thicket of suffering" in order to be stripped of all that "is not God" (A2 5.7). The ascent of Mount Carmel involves a radical redefinition of human agency that transfers the center of agency from the "pole of sense" to the "pole of spirit" where God unites himself with the soul. There at the "center" the soul is moved by only by the God who acts from the cross (CB 37 2-3). John argues, in this sense, that the infinite distance between divine and human modes of agency (A2 17) is the precise reason that the experience of the transformation from one mode into the other is analogous to death (A2 7.11), destruction (A3 2.7), annihilation (N2 19.1). And once that distance has been crossed by means of the "abyss of faith" (A3 7.2; A2 4.1; 18.2; 29.5), one’s vantage becomes "strange" (N2 9.5), and sense-based language itself breaks down. The soul in union resorts to "stammering" and to speaking "absurdities," and appearing to act "foolishly," motivated by an "inebriation and courage of love" that finds its textual model in the erotic Song of Songs (N2 13.6-8). The Discalced self becomes estranged from all it once knew in the external world, and finds its center of gravity within itself. Though the empire of Spain might fall, the soul united to "his Majesty" is secure in itself and can never be shaken (A2 19.8). This Discalced who has ascended Carmel is, for John, no longer of this world (N2 13.11),

one (the way in which we are Trinity is in the quality of our relationality, how we relate to God). Edward Howells says that for John, the way that we possess the Trinity, even if we reach the mode by which that Christ possesses it, is by relation to a God who remains fully other, not by collapsing the human onto the divine. God can be other while also we relate to God exactly as God relates to himself -- if the incarnation is at the centre of our view of how God does his relating. John is trying to keep the relational character of his statements about the final state of mystical union alive, by remaining tentative about what is actually possessed in human nature of God: God is never possessed, while simultaneously human nature can be fully trinitarian and transformed into Christ. The Dionysian element of continuing dialectic and transcendence is reconcilable with an anthropology of full attainment of Christ, on this approach. Edward Howells, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 125-28.

forgetting even the most basic customs (A3 2.8). But is it really the case that one in union with God is truly a stranger to the Spain that gave birth to the Discalced reform? 541

*Contexts of Unity in the Discalced Reform*

*The quests for unity in Spain*

John of the Cross found in the neo-platonic narrative of exile and return to the One a paradigm of imagining religion. This paradigm provided him with a way to integrate the inner quest for union with God with the social and institutional demands of a monastic reform movement. The Discalced reform sought to preserve its own inner unity by construing itself as a “return” to the one mountain of God from which they were long ago unjustly exiled. For John, the truly “urgent longings” (A1 14.2) of the Discalced were for that mountain where God awaited them as a bridegroom awaits his bride. Life on that mountain was a past memory that had to be retrieved by the reform, but it was also an interior reality that structured the all the powers of the Discalced soul. The decision of the Discalced to break from the Calced, though clearly driven by a complex play of forces, 542 seems to have been in the mind of Teresa from the beginning. Her furtive move to found the convent of Saint Joseph, and later to reform of the friars by the founding of a new monastery in Duruelo reflected her opinion that her vision of reform was incompatible with the state of the Carmelites in Spain. The *recogimiento* provided a model of reform for Teresa not only as a pattern of mental prayer, but also as a model of social withdrawal within the Carmelite order. The break from the unity of unreformed Carmel is the necessary prerequisite to establishing a “social space” conducive to the cultivation of an interior life of recollection. 543

541 It is interesting to note here that John, unlike Teresa, made scant use of the monarchical images of God. Whereas Teresa’s “Interior Castle” was dominated by the image of a unifying King at the center of the soul, in John the unifying image is a God who is (a) the erotic beloved of the soul, and (b) radically unlike the analogical tropes that dominated scholastic, and Hispanic discourse. In fact, in the *Ascent* Book One John decimates all appeals to worldly images of power to represent the divine in all but a remote manner. A1 4.7.

542 Rohrbach argues that the break was largely a result of the fragmentation of leadership on church and state levels, with Spanish and papal politics at the center. However, it also seems clear to me that the Calced friars perceived very clearly that Teresa’s incorporation of elements from multiple Spanish religious movements into her reform (e.g. *beatas*, *alumbrados*, *recogimiento*, Renaissance humanism) threatened to fundamentally alter the mendicant culture in the Carmelite order. Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, *Journey to Carith: The Sources and Story of the Discalced Carmelites*, (Doubleday & Co., 1966), 171-228.

543 Richard Valantasis, in his study of the social character of ascetic movements, notes that ascetic movements always define themselves by their movements of withdrawal. In order to facilitate the promotion of a particular idea of subjectivity (i.e. *recogimiento*), a new set of social arrangements,
The emerging nation state of Spain, especially from the time of the uniting of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon in 1479 and the fall of Grenada in 1492, was a nation in quest of unity in identity. The age of *convivencia* gradually gave way to the age of *reconquista*, and the drive to expel the Moors from Spain became the banner around which the divided kingdoms north of the kingdom of Grenada would unite. Those northern kingdoms would identify themselves more readily with the Christian territories to the north than the Muslim lands to the south. After the fall of Grenada, Spain would begin to define itself differently in regard to the rest of Europe. In 1530 Spain’s King would become Emperor Charles V, the last Holy Roman Emperor to be crowned by the pope, capable of extending Spain’s influence into European political life. In addition, Spain had expanded to become a world empire of unprecedented power, wealth and influence, exporting its culture, faith, language and military might. But it might be said that at the heart of Spain’s expansion of influence was not an integrated Spanish identity that included the immense diversity of its people, but rather it was a Castilian Spain that predominated.

The expulsion and forced conversion of the Jews, and later of the Moors, served to reinforce the hegemony of Castilian identity, while the evolution of the Inquisition insured the expulsion’s ongoing success by imposing Catholic orthodoxy of a certain brand. The unity of church and state in Spain, exemplified by Cardinal Cisneros’ synthesis of identities in his service as reformer, prelate, Grand Inquisitor and Regent, infused volatile forces into reform movements.

The Discalced reform movement was deeply immersed in the nexus of church and state, and its crises and ultimate success in gaining independent jurisdictional status as a

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relationships and attitudes must be cultivated that support that new subjectivity. This withdrawal and newly formed social group also requires a new “symbolic universe” that is capable of supporting the new subjectivity and its new social relations, and this, Valantasis says, is often provided in the forms of texts by a founder. Teresa’s Interior Castle, or John’s *Ascent-Night* certainly provide that service to the Discalced reform. Richard Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol. 63, No. 4* (Winter, 1995), 775-821.


545 Helen Rawls’ work on the interrelationship between orthodoxy, reform and the political agenda of Spain’s monarchy demonstrates the unparalleled cooperation between church and state in Spain in the pursuit of unity. Helen Rawlings, *Church, Religion and Society in Early Modern Spain* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
new monastic order was due in large part to successful maneuvering between the two. But John and Teresa also were immersed in a cultural and religious revolution, a quest for a unifying identity in Spain that embraced and excluded competing definitions. John had no doubt experienced the tensions of diverse conceptions of that identity in Salamanca just prior to the conclusion of the Council of Trent. At Salamanca, the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of Spain was concentrated, as well as formidable influences from European centers of culture and learning. Though the Dominicans largely held control of philosophical and theological agenda, the influence of northern European biblical humanism was still powerful in John’s time. These tensions may very well have led to his “vocation crisis” of 1568 when he had decided to leave the Carmelites and join the radically eremitical Carthusians.

Indeed, there can be no doubt from John’s writings that, in his mind, the ultimate resolution to the tensions between unity and diversity were to be found in the individual and erotic quest for the unification of the whole self around the desire for union with God. For John, the grands simplificateurs du monde, the insoluble divisions that plague historical life are cogent signs that creation itself in incapable of giving rise to the kind of unity John believed the human spirit naturally craved; and which was found in God alone. For John the sharp division between sense and spirit offered an epistemological and theological explanation for the impossibility of achieving unity in church and society. The world around him seeks to achieve unity in the realm of flux,

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546 Luis de León, a converso biblical scholar at Salamanca, taught during John’s studies. Luis was eventually arrested by the Inquisition for his criticisms of the Vulgate and his translations of the Hebrew Bible (especially the Song of Songs) into Castilian.

547 Luis Enrique Rodríguez-San Pedro Bezares believes that John’s crisis, and his love for Dionysian apophaticism both are intimately tied to his experience of seemingly irreconcilable theological diversity at Salamanca. La Formación Universitaria de Juan de la Cruz, (Valladolid, Junta de Castilla y León, 1992), 52-60.


549 I think here of John’s description of the passive night of the senses that deconstruct the attachment of the spirit to sense-based discursive reason, which is itself irreducibly complex. “…such souls are filled with a thousand scruples and perplexities, so intricate that such persons can never be content with anything, nor can their judgment receive the support of any counsel or idea. This is one of the most burdensome goads and horrors of this night - very similar to what occurs in the spiritual night” (N1 14.3). Like so much of the late medieval and early modern era, the great quest is the pursuit of certitude.

550 Steven Payne and Edward Howells’ excellent studies of John’s epistemology fail to locate it within John’s historical context, and so find the “double epistemology” John proposes to be a unique way of representing a neo-platonic paradigm in terms of Christology, Trinitarian theology, and so on. But John
in the world as accessed through the senses. However, what the world judges to be true, good, beautiful, powerful and so on are in reality only fragments of the whole that exists in God alone (A 1 3-4). Sought apart from God these creatures become false, evil, ugly, weak, and so on. Unity can ultimately only be achieved in the spirit (apart from the senses) which alone has unmediated access to God. For John, only those who have reached unmediated union with God are, in the end, capable of effecting authentic unity in the world (CB 29 1-3). So the unity of the nascent Discalced reform must be rooted in the unity of the Discalced self, who in turn is in union with God.

In offering a critique of identity rooted in created goods, John gets most specific in his treatment of the will (A3 17-45). Eros resides in the affections/passions of the will, and so the cultivation of authentic erotic love for God requires a “purification” of the will. John sees, with the tradition before him, that *eros* is fundamentally about the singular quest for union God alone, to the exclusion of every other good. In John’s “purging critique” of the will, he targets certain ways of “rejoicing” in created goods that are characteristic of the cultural patterns that shape the men and women who join the Discalced reform. The goods that generally ground identity are to be found in “creatures,” and John proposes throughout the Ascent-Night a full scale assault on those foundations in the Discalced nun or friar. John argues in the Ascent that to ground identity in any created good is perilous and leads to misery, and that liberation is only to be had in the detachment of all desire for created goods. His list of those “goods” is

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551 Though in the “end” John believes that the soul who has renounced all other goods in light of erotic union with God receives them “back.” However, those goods are then love “through God” and not God loved “through them.” See Edward Howells discussion of John’s “theological a priori” in *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 58-9.

552 In this sense we might say that John’s critique of identity, culture, theology, etc. can be located in his “purging nights” that are ascetic critiques enacted by human agency or divine grace. But what exactly John’s critique targets is a matter of debate. N. Grace Aaron argues that the fundamental critique offered in John’s “night” is of knowledge and language, while José Nieto argues that the “night” is used by John to express his critique of the structures of power that seek to marginalize the priority of the interior quest for God. See N. Grace Aaron, *Thought and Poetic Structure in San Juan De La Cruz’s Symbol of Night* (New York: P. Lang, 2005), 4-48; José C. Nieto, *Mystic, Rebel, Saint: A Study of St. John of the Cross* (Travaux d'humanisme et Renaissance, no. 168. Genève: Droz, 1979).

553 In A1 5 John lays out the presupposition of all his work: humanity *de facto* finds itself enmeshed in creatures in a way that defines all human desire. And it is desire for its object that determines one’s identity, as one becomes “like that which he desires.”
sweeping, and in the course of twenty-six chapters he offers a critical assessment of many of the aspects of sixteenth century Spanish life: riches, titles, status, positions, children, marriage, beauty, grace, elegance, bodily constitution, and all other corporeal endowments; also, in the soul, good intelligence, discretion, and other talents belonging to the rational part of humans, all the goods apprehensible to the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, and to the interior faculty of discursive imagination, the virtues and their habits insofar as they are moral, the exercise of any of the virtues, the practice of the works of mercy, the observance of God's law, political prudence, and all the practices of good manners, statues and paintings, oratories and dedicated places of prayer, festivals, ceremonies, and all the gifts and graces of God that exceed our natural faculties and powers – gifts of wisdom and knowledge given by God to Solomon and the graces St. Paul enumerates: faith, the grace of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, knowledge and discernment of spirits, interpretation of words, and also the gift of tongues (A3 18-45). All of these goods must be, for the Discalced, entirely subordinated to the supreme good of union with God; and all attempts to establish unity based on any of these will lead to fragmentation. The implications for monastic discipline are, for John, clear and radical, and the Discalced must view of all of life through the lens of this erotic single-mindedness.

John began his reforming work with Teresa in Castile, his “beloved home,” and all his life intended to die there. After his arrest, imprisonment and escape, he was forced to flee into exile to Andalusia, out of the Calced friar’s jurisdiction, to a land foreign to John’s temperament and his language. As a Carmelite, John also viewed himself as part of a community lodged perpetually in exile, always cultivating in their collective imagination the mythical memory of Elijah’s sons hidden on Mount Carmel in solitary contemplation. As a man who embraced the neo-platonic narrative of exile and return to the One, John saw himself living in the land of unlikeness erotically longing for return to

554 While obviously these goods that make John’s list are general to human life and culture, John gets specific with examples here as he does no other place.
555 In a letter to discalced nun, Catalina de Jesús, in Baeza, dated July 6, 1581, John wrote the following reference to his exile to Andalusia: “be consoled with the thought that you are not as abandoned and alone as I am down here. For after that whale swallowed me up and vomited me out on this alien port, I have never merited to see her [Teresa] again or the saints up there. God has done well, for, after all, abandonment is a steel file and the endurance of darkness leads to great light. May it please God that we do not walk in darkness!” (L 1)
the One from whom he came. John lived in a time of Spain’s history that believed in a mythical past – a Christianized Roman empire and Visigothic kingdom – that, of necessity, was being revived. The monarchy in Spain sought a unity, founded on a Christian, cultural and ethnic unity, that was in part a “retrieval” of that past. The struggles of the sixteenth century to impose that memory on a diverse people must have demonstrated to John that achieving unity by means of coercive force, cultural hegemony or reasoned argument failed to effect the unity so-desired. Even the desire for unity within the church, or within monastic institutions, faced repeated failures. John and Teresa responded to these historical realities by seeking within the Carmelite tradition a path to return to their own mythical past, and both of them believed the core of that tradition lay in the recogimiento movement. The reformer’s way back to Carmel’s mythic past is by the way of interiority, and the motive force for that journey to Carmel’s summit within is the “force of love” (N2 19-20).

Defined by the unity of desire (Eros’ Ladder)

While it is true that John’s most obvious “erotic commentaries” on his three erotic poems are to be found in the commentaries on the Canticle and the Flame, the Ascent-Night offers its own distinctive form of eroticism. The Ascent-Night in general avoids the use of the Song of Songs, using more scholastic terminology and structure of argument to describe the nature of the journey toward union with God. However, the great themes of neo-platonic eroticism thread through the Ascent-Night, from the metaphor of ascent to the dialectical drive toward unity as the soul leaves behind the fragmentary world of sensory experience. In the Ascent-Night, John proposes to the Discalced an evolving identity that increasingly defines itself by the single desire for God alone, and that is ever-more determined by the force of an erotic movement toward God. The purgative nights function to “determine” the experience of desire within, so that, not without immense pain, the nun or friar finds her/himself desiring nothing but “the honor and glory of God” which dwells on the summit of the mount.556 To acquire a thicker perspective on John’s manner of constructing Discalced identity by means of this narrative of erotic transformation in the Ascent-Night, I will briefly examine a remarkable

and little-studied selection that offers a sort of précis of the entire *Ascent-Night* narrative: the mystical ladder of love.\textsuperscript{557}

In the *Dark Night*, both in the first Book and in the first ten chapters of the second, John describes the agonies of the passive nights of sense and spirit that are gradually reconfiguring the inner self in preparation for union with God “through love” (N2 5.1). As was already noted, John’s use of the Song of Songs is largely to be found in the *Canticle* and the *Flame*, both of which treat at great length of the experience of erotic union with God through the structure and language of the Song of Songs. The *Ascent-Night*, conversely, deals mostly with the purgation that is required before one nears union.\textsuperscript{558} For John, as for the exegetical tradition before him, the use of the Song of Songs is reserved for description of the higher states of spiritual advancement that are more “distant” from sensuality, while the earlier stages draw on the Hebrew Wisdom literature (especially Proverbs and Ecclesiastes).\textsuperscript{559} This may explain in part the absence of the Song’s nuptial imagery, like “betrothal” and “marriage,” and the explicitly sexual language from most of the *Ascent-Night*, which more often has recourse to scholastic “substance metaphysics” to describe the approach to union – “participation,” “substantial union,” “substantial touches.”\textsuperscript{560} While this language is not absent from the other two commentaries, it does not predominate there as it does in the *Ascent-Night*. However, this difference between the *Ascent-Night* and the *Canticle-Flame* begins to evaporate as we cross over into chapter thirteen of the second Book of the *Night*, which narrates the

\textsuperscript{557} Colin Thompson’s treatment of this section of the *Ascent-Night* is indicative of what I have found to be a broader approach to N2 18-19: “The contents of the ten steps of the mystical ladder need not detain us.” Colin P. Thompson, *St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night* (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 217. Most commentators find the text to be so out of place as to break the logical progression of John’s text. I will have more to say on that below.

\textsuperscript{558} Though it must be added that the *Ascent-Night* deals with the question of “union” often in places where John says he deems it useful “so as to shed greater light” on why the road to union is so demanding (A2 5.1). See, for example, his treatment of “the nature of union” before his discussion of the active night of faith-hope-love in A2 5. There he argues that explaining the “nature of union” as an “end” helps one to understand better the “means” John counsels Discalced to follow.


commencement of the soul’s exit from the terrifying passive night of the spirit, approaching union with God. That passage into union continues up through chapter twenty-four, which ends of sudden in mid-sentence without explanation. In those final twelve chapters, we find eighteen explicit quotations from the Song and a crescendo of nuptial erotic imagery, in contrast to the seven references found in the previous one hundred and eighteen chapters of the Ascent-Night.

Chapters eighteen to twenty of the second Book of the Night constitute John’s mini-treatise on the entire ascent to God, constructed in terms of erotic desire. It anticipates in nuce the whole narrative of the Canticle which takes the soul from the beginnings of the journey into eternal life. This condensed narrative is built on the poetic image found in One Dark Night, the “secret ladder.” The “ladder to heaven” is a classic trope used in the Christian tradition to describe the stages that mark the ascent to God. This ladder, “secret” because it is accessible to the spirit alone and not to the senses, is also, John says, Jacob’s ladder described in Genesis 28. On it the angels, bearers of divine wisdom, ascend and descend. John exploits this duality to explore the “secrecy” of divine wisdom from the sensual mind that cannot see how the “communications produced by this secret contemplation extol the soul in God and humiliate it within itself,” or how “how abundance and tranquility succeed misery and torment” (N2 18.2). The experience of exaltation and humiliation is experienced in terms of sudden shifts between knowledge of God and of the self. As the soul approaches the top of the ladder of union with God, the distance between these two distinct forms of knowledge grows smaller since the soul’s likeness to God is increasing (N2 18.3). The “secrecy” of the ladder is also found, for John, in its inversion of appearances, “since ordinarily the losing and annihilation of self, which bring the most profit to individuals,

561 Inez Isabel Macdonald argues that this section of the Night served as a model for John’s reworking of “Canticle A” that rearranged the poem from its original order that mirrored the “narrative order” of the Song of Songs, to a more “stylized order” according to the progressive logic of ascent found in the “grades of love”. See her “The Two Versions of the ‘Cántico Espiritual’” The Modern Language Review, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Apr., 1930), pp. 165-184. For the debates surrounding John’s redacting intent, see also Colin Thompson, Poet and the Mystic: A Study of the Cántico Espiritual of San Juan De La Cruz, (Oxford modern languages and literature monographs. Oxford [Eng.]: Oxford University Press, 1977); David Perrin, Canciones entre el alma y el esposo of Juan de la Cruz: a hermeneutical interpretation, (San Francisco, Calif: Catholic Scholars Press, 1996), 316-67. and Georges Tavard, Poetry and Contemplation in St. John of the Cross, (Athens: Ohio University, 1988), 117-36; 217-28.

are considered the worst for them, whereas consolation and satisfaction (which are of less value and in which one ordinarily loses rather than gains if attachment is present) are considered the best” (N2 18.4).\(^{563}\)

Finally, John presses on to what he considers the “principle property” of the secret ladder, that it is a “science of love” and an “infused loving knowledge” that “illuminates and enamors” the soul, and elevates the soul “step by step to God” (N2 18.5).\(^{564}\) John’s description of this “loving ladder” (escala amorosa) explicates the dynamism of desire, “love’s urgent longings,” that have driven the ascent of the soul from the active nights (A1 14.2) through the passive nights. The soul is now, for the first time, explicitly identified with the “bride” of the Song, and nuptial imagery comes to dominate the ascending quest for union with God, the “beloved.” This ladder, like God himself, is in itself unknowable (conocerlos en sí), secret and known only by its effects (N2 18.5).\(^{565}\) The “steps” are ascending “modes of grace” that create erotic desire in the soul for God, and are shown to be the ever-present passive element of the ascent.\(^{566}\) John’s repeated use of the verbs hacer, causar and dar – “to make happen,” “to cause,” “to give” – to introduce the “effect” of each step in the soul intensifies the sense of his theological conviction that longing eros progressively defines the core identity of the Discalced ascending and descending the ladder.

\(^{563}\) This is John’s version of the revaluation of values, and the change in perception represents the shift in identity. The Discalced has a very specific way of viewing the world and God, which for John is different from that of the rest of humanity. See Alain Cogno’s comments on the role of “disorientation” in John’s works as one progresses through the transformation of the nights. Alain Cugno, St. John of the Cross: Reflections on Mystical Experience (New York: Seabury, 1982), 32-50.

\(^{564}\) This series of steps were, Kieran Kavanaugh says, modeled on fourteenth century Helvicus Teutonicus’s De dilectione Dei et Proximi (On the Love of God and Neighbor) contains the section De decem gradibus amoris secundum Bernardum (On the ten degrees of love according to Bernard). It was commonly believed that this work was by Thomas Aquinas, and that Aquinas was influenced in turn by Bernard, which explains John’s remark prefacing his treatment of these “ten steps”: “We will distinguish [these steps] by their effects, as do St. Bernard and St. Thomas” (N2 18.5).


\(^{566}\) The alumbrados were accused of counseling mystical passivity, and Teresa worked mightily to extricate herself from those accusations. The posthumous attacks on John’s orthodoxy centered around the heresy of Quietism, and John’s emphasis in this text on the passivity of the soul being carried by the erotic force of grace received special attention. Daniel A. Dombrowski, John of the Cross: An Appreciation (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 47.
Stepping into a Discalced selfhood

The first step (N2 19.1), John says, makes \textit{(hace)} the soul “sick in an advantageous way,” and image he borrows from Song 5:8, “conjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, if you encounter my Beloved, to tell him that I am lovesick.” This sickness, which he likens to Lazarus’ sickness that led him through death to resurrection, is the experience of pain that accompanies the “loss of appetite for things,” which is itself brought about by love’s “excess of heat…sent to it from above.” Here John argues that it is only the onset of desire for God that begins to expose the “contraries” that divide the soul, and the beckoning to “annihilation” that makes it “unable to find satisfaction, support, consolation, or a resting place in anything” (N2 19.1). The second step (N2 19.2) makes \textit{(hace)} the soul search for God unceasingly, not in the “bed” of sickness in which she lay in the first step, but in the streets of Jerusalem at night. There she searches for him “in all things,” but “pays heed” to nothing \textit{(ninguna)} until she finds him. The bride seeks for the beloved in her “thoughts,” “converse,” “business,” “eating, sleeping, keeping vigil, or doing anything else.” In the midst of these activities the soul finds herself centering “all care on the Beloved.” This restless “search” purifies intention, John says, and leads the soul to pause in all activities only long enough to “ask them” about the Beloved. But, under the impetus of love’s compelling force, the soul at once “leaves them behind.” The force of \textit{eros} simultaneously intensifies and erases the desiring subject in her longing for union with God alone.\textsuperscript{567}

The third step (N2 19.3) makes \textit{(hace)} the soul active and fervent in “performing works” through the experience of “holy fear,” which John calls “a child of love.” But though the works are great, many and for a great length of time, the increase in “love’s burning” becomes so overpowering that these works seem “small,” “few” and of a “short duration.”\textsuperscript{568} This causes “deep sorrow and pain” as the distance between desire and

\textsuperscript{567} This tension between erotic intensification of identity and the apophatic/ascetic drive to break down that same identity are often, in the mystical tradition, left in paradoxical tension. This tension is what Gavin Flood calls the “ambiguity of the ascetic self,” since the ascetic in the very act of self-denial as asserting the very will being denied. But for John, the erotic dynamic, understood as a work of grace that is undergone and not enacted, becomes an expression of the surrender of identity to the divine in union. Ascetic renunciation in the active nights gives way to the breakdown of all agency, and the only ambiguity left is the inability to define the self-in-union with an ineffable God. Gavin Flood, \textit{The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13-20.

\textsuperscript{568} The restrictions on the value of good works, though classic in the western mystical tradition, stands in marked contrast with the piety of late medieval and Counter-Reform Catholicism. The late medieval
action lengthens, forming in the soul a new humility that vanquishes “vainglory, presumption and the practice of condemning others.” The fourth step (N2 19.4) causes (causa) unwearisome suffering “on account of the Beloved,” and is the step in which apatheia has been reached. Here the sensory part of the soul has been “brought under control,” and the spirit “possesses so much energy” as it has now lost all desire for seeking any “consolation, satisfaction or favor” for itself and looks only to “please God, though the cost may be high.” The capacity to intend “God alone,” which emerges on this step, is the lot of “few,” and it “obliges” God to give “favors” to this soul “continually” because “we make use of them for [God’s] service alone.” The reciprocity of eros begins to be manifest.

The fifth step (N2 19.5) makes (hace) the soul impatient with desire, hunger and longing “to apprehend and be united with the beloved” without delay, while any delay, “no matter how slight” causes the soul to “faint” and, in the absence of “seeing its love,” to die. Because the soul is still not purified fully of all its attachments, it cannot yet enter into union with God. Here erotic longing intensifies its purgative effect, as it continues to displace all other affections and attachments and leads to a final death that is requisite for union. The sixth step (N2 19.6) makes (hace) the soul run swiftly toward God and grants (dar) touches (toques) that accelerate the final purifying. These touches, which John describes later in more detail (N2 23.11-12), are unmediated encounters between God and the soul that both presuppose and effect detachment from all that is not God to make way for union. These touches can be violent as they carry the spiritual faculties beyond their own power, and make them capax Dei, capable of God (see A3 2.5). In this step the soul, mostly liberated from all attachments, is now wholly caught into the dynamic of the neo-platonic erotic “return” that accelerates toward the summit of Carmel.  

569 “heresy of the free spirit,” to which the alumbrados were often likened by the Inquisition, was condemned for its critique of the value of good works in the higher states of mystical life. Malcolm D. Lambert, Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation (Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 204-7. Again, Teresa was much more at pains to clarify the importance of good works in her writings. No doubt this was due in part to the intense public scrutiny she faced as a female monastic reformer and beata.

569 The image of “violence” in descriptions of union were common throughout the high and late medieval period, given most systematic expression in Richard of St. Victor’s About the Four Degrees of Violent Love. For a discussion of this theme, see M. B. Pranger, ‘Monastic Violence’ in Hent de Vries and S. Weber (eds.), Violence., Identity and Self-Determination (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 45-57.
The seventh step (N2 20.2) makes \((hace)\) soul daring and ardent, refusing to “wait,” “retreat” or be “curbed through shame” but rather daring to ask God to grant the coveted “kiss of the mouth” that opens the Song of Songs (1:1). But, John cautions with his Augustinian theology of grace, “[i]t is illicit for the soul to become daring on this step if it does not perceive the divine favor of the king’s scepter held out toward it [Est. 5:2; 8:4], for it might then fall down the step it has already climbed. On these steps it must always conserve humility.” The self-of-desire must yield to, and become defined by the primacy of divine initiative, which becomes the substance of what we might call John’s call to an “erotic humility.” The eighth step (N2 20.3), which makes \((hace)\) the soul “lay hold of the Beloved without letting him go,” is the beginning of the “state” of union with God. For John union through love is the highest state one can achieve in this life. The experiences of this “holding,” John says, are transitory as in a sustained experience “a certain glory would be possessed in this life” which is reserved for the \textit{lumen gloriae}, the light of glory that comes after death. The ninth step (N2 20.4), which is the achievement of “habitual union” makes \((hace)\) the soul “burn gently” with the same fire that burned in the apostles at Pentecost. Here the purification has been completed and the fire is no longer perceived as painful since there is no longer any resistance within the soul to the movement of grace in the soul. The tenth step (N2 20.5), which comes after the “death of the body,” makes \((hace)\) the soul wholly assimilate to God in the clear vision of “his face.” These souls, “few that there be,” because they have been wholly purged do not “enter purgatory” but, in accord with the beatitude “blessed are the clean of heart,” they see God. Referencing 1 John 3:2, John says that these souls who “see” God will “become like him,” and “will be called, and shall be, God through participation.” He union of the likeness of love, given prior to death, becomes the union of the likeness of vision. Here on this last step “God rests,” and the soul’s erotic quest for “total assimilation” \((\textit{toda dilación})\) comes to fulfillment where the economy of faith and hope has passed away (N2 196).

As I mentioned earlier, while some scholars like Colin Thompson contend that John’s sudden introduction of the “ladder” image from his poem disrupts the flow of the
commentary,570 I think its placement after the description of the terrifying passive night of the spirit has reached its conclusion allows John to retell the entire story of the Ascent-Night, but from a differing vantage. While the Ascent-Night largely narrates the ascent of the mountain of Carmel as the experience of suffering, negation and darkness, the narrative of that same “ascent of the loving ladder” (N2 19.3) re-describes the ascent explicitly in terms of erotic and nuptial desire constructed from the language and imagery of the Song of Songs. John concluded his treatment of the active night of the senses in the Ascent with a brief allusion to the crucial role played by “love’s urgent longings.” He asserted that apart from the “force of longing” for God the soul would never be strong enough to “overcome the yoke of nature nor to enter the night of sense; nor will it have the courage to live in the darkness of all things by denying its appetites for them” (A1 14.2). However, after this allusion, John immediately adds that it is “not the appropriate section for a description…of the nature of these longings of love or of the numerous ways they occur at the outset of the journey to union” (A1 14.3). As with the mystical tradition before him, beginning with Origen, one must first strive to purify desire, represented by the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, before daring to interpret the language of erotic love found in the mystical text of the Song of Songs.

Eugene Maio,571 in his work of interpreting John in terms of Plotinian metaphysics, says that at the heart of the Plotinian dynamic of eros is the dialectic of poverty and possession, of nothing and all, and that from within the tensions of this dialectic erotic desire is born as a mediator between the two. And this desire always aspires in one direction: “upward” toward the possession of all.572 In A1 13.11 John interprets the whole ascent in terms of this dialectic:

To reach satisfaction in all (todo)
desired satisfaction in nothing (nada).
To come to possess all
desired the possession of nothing.
To arrive at being all
desired to be nothing.

570 Colin P. Thompson, St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 217. Though Thompson argues that John’s decision to return to the stanza-commentary style is probably reflects the lesson John learned from the dead-end of the Ascent’s adherence to a scholastic schema.
572 Or, in the case of John’s Augustinian schematic, “inward” toward the possession of the All.
To come to the knowledge of all
desire the knowledge of nothing (A1 13.11).

Maio further states that within this dialectic of desire two further movements are at work, both of which, I contend, structure the entire Ascent-Night. First, there is the movement of desire toward the poverty of nothingness, which causes the erotic soul to know and experience its lack. For John, this means a radical turning away from creatures and from self which is, at first, a turn toward no-thing that leaves the soul in a mere state of negation. This descent into nothingess in turn gives birth to a second movement of desire away from nothingness toward the plentitude of the all, which is God alone. And it is only inasmuch as the soul becomes nothing that it can become capable of possessing all.

The Ascent-Night is structured, as I said, according to this pattern. The ascent is first, John says in the preface to the narrative of the ladder, a descent before it is an ascent (N2 18.2-4). The active and passive nights are both a descent into nada, into the poverty, nakedness, detachment of the “first movement” of the erotic dialectic, while the “loving ladder” (N2 19.3) described at the end of the nights is seen from the vantage of an ascent of desire to God. If the passive and active nights are the narrative of John’s dialectical descent of “desire…nothing,” the narrative of the ladder tells of the ascending desire to reach-come-arrive…all. Though the journey up the mountain is a single journey, it can be read, for John, in terms of the experience one has of the two movements. The first, the turn toward nothingness, is quintessentially an experience of being emptied in suffering, and is encapsulated in the symbol of ascending in a “dark night.” The second, the turn toward the all, is quintessentially an experience of being moved by desire, and is encapsulated in the symbol of the “amorous ladder.” In the nights not-seeing is the goal, in order to excavate the “void” of nothingess and so birth a desire capacious enough for the infinite. On the ladder, seeing is the goal as desire unveils what was hidden: the secret ladder is “not very secret to the soul, for love reveals a great deal through the remarkable effects it produces” (N2 20.5). The apophatic night of the first movement is complimented by the cataphatic erotic desire of the second, this vindicating Howells’ objection to Turner that John cannot be read only in terms of his apophasis, but also in
terms of his cataphasis. “Thus, by means of this mystical theology and secret love, the soul departs from itself and all things and ascends to God. For love is like a fire that always rises upward as though longing to be engulfed in its center” (N2 20.5).

Erotic Carmel
Emerging from the destructive night

The Night was written, according to Truman Dicken, in a very brief time in response to a specific request from a Discalced friar for a written explication of John’s doctrine of the passive nights. It was written especially for confessors who were responsible for directing Discalced penitents through the tortuous experience of the contemplative night that prepared the soul for union with God. Both the Ascent and the Night are largely preoccupied with the impact of the soul’s experience of sin and the suffering that accompanies the graced struggle to be liberated from sin’s enslaving effects. In this vein, Colin Thompson notes that the Ascent-Night shares much in common with the general preoccupations in both popular religion and theological discourse of the sixteenth century: the radically sinful condition of humanity. However, Thompson also notes that John’s eroticism, his vision of humanity caught in a

573 Though Howells sees this critique more in terms of John’s double epistemology of sense-spirit that allows an affirmative “saying” in the knowledge of God in the clarified spirit. Here my argument is that John’s two vantages on the same journey allow for both an affirmative and negative ascent to union with God. See Edward Howells, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 130; Denys Turner, The Darkness of God Negativity in Christian Mysticism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 264.

574 Dicken lays out a detailed argument in regard to the Ascent that it was written in a five to six year period. It was meant to encompass the active and passive nights, but ended abruptly in the midst of the active night of the spirit. Dicken notes that the Night is markedly different from the Ascent in its closer adherence to the poem One Dark Night, in its abandonment of the scholastic system of categorical analysis and in its more fluid syntax. See E. W. Trueman Dicken, The Crucible of Love: A Study of the Mysticism of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 156-91. Among the friars, it seems that their interest in the text was largely tied to their roles as confessor and director for the Discalced nuns. See James Arraj, From St John of the Cross to Us: The Story of a 400 Year Long Misunderstanding (Inner Growth Books, 1999), 41-50.

575 The Night shared the same intended audience as the Ascent: the friars and nuns of the Discalced reform. See N2 22.2

“nuptial” economy of salvation, stands in stark contrast to so much of the popular religious imagination of his age that emphasized humanity’s precarious state beneath God’s impending wrath.\(^{577}\) So while John does deal with the late medieval preoccupation over sin’s devastating effects in the *Ascent-Night* as the soul suffers the experience of being wholly rejected by God (N2 5.5; 6.2; 7.7), the text also opens up into the primacy of the liberated erotic desire for union with God. This shift occurs especially in the last ten chapters of the *Night*, and is signaled by the introduction of the image of the ladder. The ladder appears at the threshold of union in the *Night*, at the moment when the “life of heaven” begins to define the reconfigured identity of the Discalced contemplative (N2 18.3).\(^{578}\)

As we mentioned above, very little has been written on the function of the erotic ladder of ascent in the text of the *Night*, and especially on its function as an eschatological sign of the newly formed Discalced identity that emerges from the final purgations. Monastic identity from its earliest days in the deserts of Egypt and Syria conceived of itself as a “celestial” or “angelic” form of life that instantiated the ideals of life in the next world.\(^{579}\) Even pseudo-Dionysius’ erotic vision of creation construed *eros* as a mimesis of the prototypes of earthly life found in the “celestial” hierarchies: eros was at heart a yearning for celestial life to begin *now*.\(^{580}\) Turner argues that monastic exegetical and theological literature found erotic metaphysics and anthropology a compelling vision precisely because it gave a language that could


\(^{578}\) According to David Perrin, John’s “new self” that emerges from the nights is a “celestial-erotic” self, defined by what the Christian tradition sees as the life of heaven. In particular, the construction of heaven as a nuptial banquet dominates John’s exemplary “Discalced self” – the Spiritual Canticle and Living Flame both detail this identity, while the Ascent-Night refers to the *via* for arriving at such an identity. David Brian Perrin, *For Love of the World: The Old and New Self of John of the Cross* (San Francisco: Catholic Scholars Press, 1997), 18-27.


interpret their life as a restless anticipation of the life to come.\textsuperscript{581} John clearly embraced this valuation of \textit{eros} and found in it a way to reinterpret the Carmelite form of life (mendicant and cenobitic) as an anticipation of the life to come. But because the outward form of their life could not embody the ancient Carmelite eremitical form of celestial life, both he and Teresa proposed a radically interiorized conception of true Discalced identity. In this sense, John himself preserved both the historical tensions within Carmelite identity in Europe, and proposed a resolution within his unique theory of a “double” epistemology.\textsuperscript{582} Erotic yearning does not carry the Discalced into the mountain solitude in Palestine, but rather it draws the Discalced into the mountain solitude of the spirit hidden deep within. In addition, John’s “realized eschatology”\textsuperscript{583} offered a critique of the Spanish Counter-Reformation obsession with salvation beyond the grave. In contrast, John had offered his Spaniard Carmelite companions a new vision of a soul liberated from divine judgment now, and not only in the life to come.\textsuperscript{584}

\textit{Discalced self as “being one-desired”}

In addition, John’s employment of the “ladder” metaphor to interpret the evolution of Discalced identity in the midst of his treatise on the passive deconstruction of that identity further embeds the idea that the greater portion of the Discalced selfhood is experienced as endured more than enacted. In other words, John’s emphasis on an

\textsuperscript{582} Edward Howells, \textit{John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood}, (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 201-23.
\textsuperscript{583} Iain Matthew applied this idea to John’s mysticism, meaning that for John the “beatific vision” reserved for the next world begins in the present for the contemplative Carmelite. Iain Matthew, \textit{The Impact of God: Soundings from St John of the Cross}, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995).
\textsuperscript{584} The intensity of concern with salvation from divine judgment was expressed in late sixteenth century Spain with an intensified focus on Masses offered for the dead to liberate them from the pains of Purgatory. John entirely ignores this dimension of salvation, and calls for the Discalced to realize Purgatory in the present. See especially N2 12. This suggests to me that John held a critical view of such an eschatology, and its attendant popular piety. Neither prayers for the dead, nor the idea that one should prepare for purification after death finds place in his thought. Find no role in his writings. For a vivid account of the sixteenth century Spanish (especially aristocratic) obsession with Masses offered for the dead, see Carlos M. N. Eire, \textit{From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain}. Cambridge studies in early modern history (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See Stephen Haliczer’s discussion of the “aristocratization” of salvation, with its emphasis on achieving salvation by mystical means as an especially “aristocratic” quest, e.g. only the rich can truly become poor, mysticism required aristocratic virtues, monies to ensure Masses for the dead. Stephen Haliczer, \textit{Between Exaltation and Infamy: Female Mystics in the Golden Age of Spain} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48-104. But it is only in the \textit{Canticle} and \textit{Flame}, though, that John fully develops this construction of Discalced identity as celestial identity. The Counter-Reformation economy of prayers for the dead and indulgences find no place in his texts.
erotic identity construction is read fundamentally an act of grace that passively liberates the soul from its desire to act autonomously of its own accord (*facere quod in se est*), and reconstructs a “new” desiring that is suffered as a movement of God. This melding of Dionysian erotics and an Augustinian theology of grace offers a critical reappraisal of monastic asceticism much akin to that of Luther.\(^585\) John emphasizes to an extreme in the *Ascent-Night* that asceticism is at heart a *critique of thought and desire* and not a spectacular regimen of bodily performances enacted by a relentless will. The latter form of asceticism he referred to as the “penance of beasts” (N1 6.2) when it is disconnected from the action of grace and the critique of the rational spirit. Such a spectacular performative asceticism, which in Spain enjoyed a respect deeply infused into popular religious culture, was for both John and Teresa a threat to the Discalced reform.\(^586\) It threatened both the health of its members and the core conception of Discalced identity as a contemplative one, rooted in a posture of passive receptivity expressed most perfectly, for John, in the experience of suffering. Authentic asceticism must serve to cultivate the capacity to intend God alone as the only good that fulfills the Discalced friar or nun. The ladder, both as a descent into humility and as an ascent of desire reveals that asceticism serves to not only “kill” heteronomous desires by either actively thwarting them or by permitting them to be killed by purgative grace (see N1 11.1). It also reveals John’s conception of Discalced selfhood that defines the new self as a “desiring self” that is made capable of singly desiring.\(^587\) To identify oneself with the “loving ladder” is to

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\(^{585}\) Grace Jantzen argues that the most striking similarities between John and Luther are precisely in their respective “theology of the cross” with its emphasis on salvific faith as an act of despair in one’s own capacity to achieve salvation. Where they differ is (a) on the critical role of asceticism as a preparatio for that experience of despair, and (b) on the role of erotic love, as John embraces *eros’* divine-human mutuality while Luther roundly rejects it. See her “Luther and the Mystics,” *King’s Theological Review*, vol. VIII No. 2 (Autumn 1985), 43-50. Luther’s rejection of the eroticism of the Song commentary tradition was intimately linked to his critique of Platonic allegorical forms of exegesis, and not just because of his soteriology. See Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 33-5.

\(^{586}\) Although Teresa herself had an ambivalent attitude toward spectacular penances, her general approach was to accommodate asceticism to the particular physical and psychological constitution of each nun and friar.

\(^{587}\) David Perrin describes John’s “new self” as defined by longing for God alone; an identity wholly appropriate for a monastic author whose vocation is eschatologically defined, i.e. the Carmelite vocation to “taste in this life something of the glory of the next.” David Brian Perrin, *For Love of the World: The Old and New Self of John of the Cross* (San Francisco: Catholic Scholars Press, 1997), 68-90. In many ways, the pains of the night can be seen as the existential description of what it “feels like” to pass through a constructing of all desire according to a single good that is by definition incapable of cognitive and affective assimilation.
define oneself by an eschatological longing for union with God beyond death, a longing that relativizes all other contingent forms of identity rooted in culture, language or gender. The critique of desire thus becomes the critique of identity, and for John the localization of the new identity becomes the hidden caves of Carmel that are to be found within.\textsuperscript{588}

\textit{Apophatic and cataphatic (re)constructions of Discalced Identity}

The \textit{Ascent-Night} is dominated by the rigor of John’s relentless apophatic critique of all the faculties of body and soul, sense and spirit. For John, the cataphatic way of ascent to God through created media yields only a “remote” access to God \textit{ad nos} since it of necessity reduces God to its own finite strictures. The Carmelites of the reform, on the other hand, cannot linger in the land of remote access at the base of Mount Carmel, but must pass on to the proximate means of access to God \textit{in se}, on Carmel’s summit; means which John entirely identifies with the theological virtues of faith, hope and love.\textsuperscript{589} In the \textit{Ascent-Night}, these three virtues elicit in the soul an active asceticism that progressively denies the natural appetite of its proclivity to seek God obliquely in created, sensual media. Simultaneously, in conjunction with the onset of contemplation (A2 13-15), they render the soul susceptible to the action of purgative grace that completes the “starvation” of those appetites and, after putting them “to sleep,” awakens them in one accord to yearn for God alone. In both cases, these three virtues become, in John, fully eroticized as their effect is to color the entire ascetic project of monastic life with the “fire of love’s urgent longings” (A2 2.12).

Most of the \textit{Ascent-Night} is taken with the process of negating “all that is not God” in the soul, and so largely defines the emerging Discalced identity as an act of

\textsuperscript{588} For John’s use of cavernous imagery to idealize Discalced identity, see A2 42.2; CB 14.14; F 3. We might say that God, the center of the soul and Mount Carmel are commensurable terms, and that they bind together John’s three major facets of Discalced identity: God, the self and Elijah on Carmel. See Kees Waaijman, \textit{The Mystical Space of Carmel: A Commentary on the Carmelite Rule}, (trans.) John Vriend, The Fiery Arrow Collection, (Leuvun: Peeters, 1999), 262-77.

\textsuperscript{589} John’s approach to the theological virtues as a means to union with God is quite standard medieval fare. However, John’s accent on these virtues’ capacity to “destroy” the natural operation of the faculties in order to open a space for grace to create a supernatural capacity in the soul is quite radical, and much akin to Jan\textsc{3} Ruusbroec’s treatment of the theological virtues as a way to subvert all mediations and grant immediate access to God alone. John differs from Ruusbroec in his emphasis on the essential role of suffering in the experience of these virtues at work in the soul. See Rik van Nieuwenhove, “Ruusbroec: Apophatic Theologian or Phenomenologist of the Mystical Experience?” \textit{The Journal of Religion}, Vol. 80, No. 1 (Jan., 2000), 83-105.
“unmaking” of all that once constituted one’s former identity. In contrast, both the Canticle and the Flame engage in a robustly cataphatic construction of Discalced identity by means of the flourish of metaphors, similes and images taken especially from the Song of Songs. The notable exception to this generalization in the Night is the “ladder” which anticipates the erotic narrative of the Canticle in summary fashion, and offers a way of re-reading the “unmaking of desire” in the nights as the “remaking of desire.” Here I suggest that the Ascent-Night was written by John as a necessary pre-text for the Canticle and Flame, in a manner consonant with the earlier Song commentary tradition’s emphatic insistence that “Song mysticism” can only succeed an “ascetical mysticism” that “purifies” the heart. In addition, the Ascent-Night as pre-text served as a corrective of what the Inquisition had forcefully condemned as pseudo-eroticism among the alumbrados. This condemnation had precipitated the banning in the Index of 1559 of vernacular versions of the Song of Songs, and the discouraging of (especially) women

David Perrin argues that the “other” for John, the foil for Discalced identity which John calls the “old man” (viejo), can be described by detailing all the characteristics John insists the Discalced must detach from. As I have attempted in part in this study, one could fruitfully explore this negated “other” relative to the cultural milieu from whence Discalced novices came and infer John’s critique of his Spanish environs. In fact, his “critique of joy” in A3 28-45 does precisely this as John describes examples of what Discalced should not “rejoice” in as their constitutive good. David Brian Perrin, For Love of the World: The Old and New Self of John of the Cross (San Francisco: Catholic Scholars Press, 1997).

Very little has been written on what the significance of this difference is in terms of John’s audience. Major portions of the commentaries on both the Canticle and One Dark Night were written simultaneously, both in response to requests from Discalced for an interpretation of the poetic text. Both poems are rich in erotic imagery, though the Canticle is more obviously drawn from the Song of Songs; while One Dark Night is more distant from and opaque to the Song text, lending itself to a more “literal” reading as a narrative of sexual love. José Nieto argues that John became aware of that “distance” and offered a commentary far removed from the text’s own language. In effect, Nieto argues that John’s radical apophaticism in the Ascent-Night insures a careful reading of the erotic poetic text that avoids the problems faced by alumbrados charged with illicitly eroticizing mysticism. To truly penetrate the opacity of the text’s “spiritual sense” one must first pass through immense trials that themselves involve confusions of sexual arousal and spiritual longing for union with God (N1 4). José Nieto, San Juan de la Cruz, Poeta del Amor Profano (Navacerrada, Madrid: Swan, 1988), 40-52. See Colin Thompson’s critique of Nieto’s view, St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 85.

McGinn and Louth demonstrate that the “exegetical mysticism” of Origen and his successors linked the ascetical prequel to the Song’s eroticism with the wisdom books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, which respectively lead the soul to advance in moral virtue and natural knowledge of God. For the more cataphatic Origen, those two naturally lead to the Song’s mysticism of union; while for the more apophatic Gregory of Nyssa, those two texts lead to the impassible chasm that stands between finite and infinite, and passage into the Song is simultaneously an entry into the darkness of Sinai’s cloud. Bernard McGinn, The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism. v.1 The Foundations of Mysticism (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 108-30; 139-44; Andrew Louth, “Eros and Mysticism: Early Christian Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” in Jung and the Monotheisms, ed. J. Ryce-Menuhin (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 241–54.
from identifying their spiritual aspirations with the eroticism of the Song. The introduction of the “ladder” and its erotic ascent of love toward union with God after the purifying nights embeds that approach into the center of the logic Ascent-Night; but also includes the cautions that John no doubt sensed were necessary in late sixteenth century Spain. There can be no doubt as well that John’s radically apophatic prequel to the erotic sequel implies a response to the criticisms lodged against Teresa’s who employed the Song’s eroticism to construct Discalced identity.  

It must be kept in mind that Teresa had attempted what no woman in the Latin Christian tradition before her had ever attempted – an exegesis on the Song of Songs, variously known as Meditations on the Song of Songs and Conceptions of the Love of God. As the Inquisition’s Index of 1559 explicitly prohibited all vernacular commentaries on the Scriptures, as well as all vernacular versions of the Song of Songs, both John and Teresa had to be careful in their works to avoid the sense of transgressing the Index prohibition. In fact, Teresa’s confessor was so concerned about her Meditations that he ordered in 1580 that all copies be burned; a command

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594 That is at least the contention of Denys Turner, who marvels at the absence of such a female commentary tradition. Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs. Cistercian Studies Series (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 26-7. But Alison Weber argues that the absence was reflective of the medieval strictures on women that barred them from engaging in direct exegesis, Teresa de Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 114-22. Alison Weber says that women in sixteenth century Spain were excluded from the work of exegesis, and that after Teresa’s death the call by some Dominicans to burn all her works was largely based on the perception that she had attempted exegesis. See her “The Fortunes of Ecstasy: Teresa of Avila and the Carmelite Reform,” Harvard Divinity Bulletin 28.4 (1999): 12-4.  
595 Humanist biblical scholar, Augustinian friar and converso, Luis de León, was arrested by the Inquisition largely for his translation of the Song into Castilian for Isabel Osorio, a nun in Salamanca. His translation was taken both as a criticism of the Vulgate and as an “overly literal” rendering of the text as an erotic song between the soul and God (devoid of the ecclesiological interpretations vogue after the Council of Trent). Colin P. Thompson, The Strife of Tongues: Fray Luis De León and the Golden Age of Spain. Cambridge Iberian and Latin American Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 26-33.  
596 Although it has not been clearly argued in the scholarship, it seems plausible to argue that John’s largely unprecedented practice of commenting on his own poetic texts as if they were Scripture was a way of getting around the Index prohibition and offering to the Discalced a robust commentary on the Song. John would have been aware of Teresa’s Meditations before he began writing his poetry, and certainly would know her desire to utilize the Song to shape the reform.
Teresa promptly complied with. In addition, earlier versions of the Interior Castle contained more explicitly erotic language (e.g. her reference to “those who have consummated marriage”) that later versions expunged or severely attenuated (e.g. “consummated” becomes “two who can no longer be separated”). In that context, it is stunning that Teresa would have ventured on such a commentary on the Song, and her boldness seems to reflect her desire to have a “Song mysticism” at the center of an authentic interpretation of the reform. While she could not fulfill that desire in her texts, John could; and did. Indeed, John’s nearly myopic focus on an erotic construction of Discalced identity seems to offer a theological and exegetical elaboration of what Teresa wanted to offer her nuns but could not. His poetry and commentaries proffered in the language of sixteenth century scholastic, monastic and vernacular discourse a thick description of what Teresa wished to offer her reform: that Discalced Carmelite identity was an erotic identity that privileged the contemplative quest for union with God alone in the depths of the soul. The Carmelite reforming quest for a return to its origins had been reshaped by Teresa in the context of the complex mystical reformation begun by Cisneros in Spain, and John saw himself as its interpreter in much the same way that Bonaventure saw himself as the interpreter of Francis.

Erotic histories of selfhood sought

John’s use of the erotic tradition employed a number of variants that suited the needs of the Discalced reform. In particular, the exigency of the Carmelite rule that the monk “meditate on the law day and night” in the solitude of his cell presented insuperable obstacles especially to the Discalced friars whose mendicant identity remained. The neo-platonic eros tradition offered much of the early monastic tradition

597 Alison Weber, Teresa de Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 117. Her text survived only because Discalced nuns who had acquired copies of her text refused to comply with the order.
598 Ibid., 124.
599 On November 18, 1572 Teresa reported having a vision of Christ taking her right hand and saying, “Behold this nail, which is a sign that from this day you will be My spouse.” Interestingly, this experience occurred immediately after John had communicated her with a fragmented Eucharistic host. Teresa had shared with John her love for “large hosts” and John responded, in keeping with his ascetic-apophatic theory, by striking at her attachment to the size of the host. Teresa interpreted the vision as a direct response to John’s “meanness,” though John no doubt would have seen in it a confirmation of his theory! Quoted in ibid., 114.
of Egypt and Syria a language within which to situate the quest for God as an “eremitical quest” for God in solitude. To be “alone with the Alone,” the zenith of Plotinian erotic ecstasy, was to become for many in the monastic tradition a tidy summary of their conception of the goal of ascetic life. However, as Paul Rorem argues forcefully, early medieval eastern Christian neo-platonists like pseudo-Dionysius did not conceive of this solitary quest apart from a cosmological and liturgical context. The medieval Latin tradition, especially shaped by Augustine, effected a transformation of neo-platonic metaphors by re-centering them in a language of interiority. This shift, which Turner says represented a revolution in European mysticism, would inspire new forms of eremiticism and a new interest in exploring the nature of interiority. The rapidly expanding quest for an “interior citadel” between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries was accompanied by an explosion of literature on the nature of the self and its capacity to experience union with God. This shift to the interior created a revolution in mysticism, and opened the self as a site of exploration that increasingly preoccupied religious specialists in pursuit of unity and stability in an increasingly fragmented world.

The “turn to the individual” in the twelfth century found a certain synthesis with the erotic tradition in Bernard of Clairvaux’s emphasis on the Song of Songs as a colloquy between the individual soul and God. For Bernard, it was principally the affective reading, from the “book of experience,” of the Song of Songs that held the key to its deepest truth. Bernard introduced into the exegetical tradition a vivid concern with the affective experience of the texts of Scripture, and exhorted the monastic listeners

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601 Origen particularly developed this dimension of eros, and his monastic heirs (especially Evagrius) would place it in service to an eremitical approach to monastic life, even within cenobitic communities. Later authors would modify this emphasis, but its presence in monasticism would perdure. See Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. v.1 The Foundations of Mysticism (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 131-188.
604 Caroline Walker Bynum critically engages this new exploration of the self in her “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31 (1980), 1-17. Bynum argues that the new conception of the “self” was thoroughly theological, based on a new and systematic exploration of the soul as an image of God; as a microcosm of the whole of creation.
605 For Bernard, affectivity was principally the sensually “felt” experience of erotic desire for God; senses in this case being the “interior senses” that provided access into the hidden “interior self” that was the goal of ascetic and mystical striving. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 42-76.
to his homilies on the Song of Songs to be attentive to a “glowing affectivity” in the soul as the words of the Song stirred within. The growing interest within twelfth century monasticism (including Bernard’s own Cistercian reform) in eremitical monasticism coincided with the growing interest in exploring the “inner” experience of the individual. Eremitical literature reflected these interests in its expanding concern with the nature of inner states, particularly with forms of affectivity induced by highly sensual events (e.g. visions, ecstasy).

The fourteenth century witnessed a resurgence of interest in neo-platonism, read through a synthesis of Dionysian and Augustinian systems. This shift, combined with the predominance of the Nominalist attention to the particular and singular, led to yet another form of erotic mysticism represented classically in the Rhineland tradition of Porete, Eckhart and their intellectual heirs. Much of the mystical literature of this period was intensely focused on individual interiority, the critique of mystical charismata, and the growing alienation between “simple faith” and “scholastic reason;” juxtaposing love and knowledge, affectivity and rationality, speculative theology and mystical piety. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were increasingly dominated by the Renaissance’s particular form of humanism that broke down the medieval theocentric cosmos in favor of an anthropocentric one. In addition, the nominalist critique of scholastic-Aristotelian realism created in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a climate of profound incertitude and fragmentation of discourse in theological circles that prompted within more popular


607 Though we should remember here Bynum’s caution to interpret “individual” in a modern, post-Cartesian sense. For Bernard the individual’s experience was merely an appropriation for the community of faith’s collective identity. See her “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” Journal of Ecclesiastical History 31 (1980), 3-9.

608 Niklaus Largier argues that much of the development of affective mysticism was intimately linked to the development of an epistemology of the “spiritual senses” as interior analogues to the exterior senses in their ability to incite affective states. Niklaus Largier, “Medieval Mysticism” In The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion, ed. John Corrigan (Oxford University Press, 2008, 364-72.

609 Oberman’s study of G. Biel includes a fascinating examination of the effect of nominalism on mysticism. At the center of that impact is the turn to the individual as a way of addressing the crisis of metaphysical agnosticism. Heiko Augustinus Oberman, The Harvest of Medieval Theology; Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism. The Robert Troup Paine prize-treatise, 1962 (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1967), 351.
reform movements like the *devotio* an embrace of a more radical apophaticism and a retreat into the interior as the only locus of certitude.\(^{610}\)

Barbara Mujica contends that the rise of skepticism as a philosophical movement in the mid-fifteenth century exacerbated the crisis of knowledge that the nominalist critique had unleashed.\(^{611}\) The crisis of certitude had come to the fore and was, in the sixteenth century, to come to full crisis. The employment of skepticism was blended with a religious call to “mystic silence” before the mystery of God which, Mujica argues, laid the groundwork for a growing trust in those who claimed immediate illumination from God apart from the learning and power of the clerical elite. Teresa’s Carmelite reform would largely rest on her skillful employment of such an “illuminative” mysticism (and rhetorical self-skepticism. As Weber adjures, Teresa knew that if she did not claim the authority of immediate divine illumination, she would lack the grounds necessary to inaugurate a reform and produce a corpus of literature that claimed to “teach” both men and women.\(^{612}\) John’s own blend of apophasic skepticism and illuminist certitude, though in many ways different from Teresa’s, also laid heavy emphasis on the locus of certitude being within the soul apart from all of the usual mediations that clerical culture relied on for its own claims to authority.

In addition, John’s own retreat to the interior was built around the erotic schema of solitary flight to a God within who transcends all sensually accessible categories of language and thought. Here, an interiorized eremitical monastic identity (i.e. *recogimiento*) becomes a stronghold against the tensions created by the irreducible multiplicity of identities that composed Spain.\(^{613}\) The Inquisition sought to create a climate of social, political and religious certitude by means of force and coercion, turning


\(^{613}\) M. J. Rodríguez-Salgado explains that Spain of the sixteenth century was riven by its inability to overcome local identities in the quest for national unity and empire status, and that only vis-à-vis its transnational Catholic faith and the “enemies” of Spain overseas and in Europe was it able to forge an identity capable of transcending the local. John does something analogous by unifying the Discalced self both in relation to God and in relation to the “enemies” of the Discalced self. M. J. Rodríguez-Salgado, “Christians, Civilised and Spanish: Multiple Identities in Sixteenth-Century Spain,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Sixth Series*, Vol. 8, (1998), 233-251.
a critical eye toward those who would seek certitude in the claim to personal and immediate illumination (i.e. *alumbrados*). And more broadly Spain itself sought to forge its precarious claim to a unified identity by reference to a historical memory of a national myth of empire, by reference to the foil of Spain’s enemies and by reference to a Catholicism nationalized in a manner otherwise unknown in Europe.\textsuperscript{614}

There can be no doubt that the crises of Spanish identity in the sixteenth century informed Teresa and John’s approach to their own pursuit of a Carmel reunited around its “original” identity in Palestine. Not only is John’s use of neo-platonic *eros* as a drive toward unity through the painful dialectics of the nights reflective of Spain’s own quest to purge into unity all those under its sway, but his *eros* is simultaneously a *reditus*, a “return” to the One. This erotic *reditus* suggested to John a way of thinking about how the Carmelites could end their exile and reclaim their origins on Elijah’s Mount Carmel even while they remained in Spain. As in neo-platonism, that return is simultaneously an ascent, and as with Augustine that ascent is also a descent into the interior where God dwells in a soul made *imago Dei*. John exploited all of these themes in the *Ascent-Night*, and thoroughly eroticized Carmelite identity. What is interesting in this context is the particular role played by biblical Palestine in Spanish imagination in the sixteenth century. A recent dissertation by Adam Beaver describes the powerful influence of the Holy Land on Philip II. Beaver argues that Philip employed biblical typology (e.g. Davidic kinship) to interpret his rule and the expanding empire of Spain. In contrast to the neo-Roman image projected by his father, Charles V, Philip presented himself as an Old Testament monarch in the image of David or Solomon, complementing this image with a program of patronage, collecting, and scholarship meant to remake his kingdom into a literal “New Jerusalem.” His dissertation explores how, encouraged by the “discovery” by Franciscans in Palestine of typological similarities between Spain and the

\textsuperscript{614} Henry Kamen argues that Spain’s “imagined” identity was far afield from its empirical identity, but also contends that an imagined identity is in many ways more important for understanding the evolution of Spain from disparate kingdoms to unified world empire. See his new *Imagining Spain: Historical Myth & National Identity* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2008). Though the book largely focuses on modern attempts to re-imagine Spain’s historical identity for various political ends, it also is helpful in understanding how Spain struggled with plural and singular claims to identity.
Holy Land, sixteenth-century Spaniards created a novel discourse of national identity previously lacking in Spanish history.615

Scholars generally agree that the Discalced Carmelite reform was clearly seen by Philip II as an effective model for reform in Spain (especially with its origins in Castile), and took special care to protect Teresa from the machinations of Rome and the Carmelite Provincials who represented Roman interests. But what has been little explored in the literature is the connection between Philip’s “biblicizing” and the Carmelite links to Palestine. Whatever Philip’s own interests in this link were, Beaver’s more relevant evidence points to the intimate connection between the Franciscans and this interest in Palestinian typology in Spain. As we have seen already in this study, Teresa and John’s vision of Carmelite reform was deeply shaped by Franciscan conceptions of reform. I would like to suggest that the predominance of Holy Land models of Spanish identity that Beaver argues shaped Philip’s interpretation of that identity also influenced the Carmelite reform so thoroughly informed by Spanish Franciscans. If Philip conceived of Spain as a historical instantiation of Jerusalem, Teresa and John conceived of Spain as the appropriate locale for the “appearance” of a new Carmel, and a new Elijah.616 Hence, John’s erotic quest for return from exile to Carmel was not just an abstracted idealization that allegorized a geographical location in a mystical itinerary, but rather it participated in a concrete historically contemporary idea that had permeated the Spanish concept of national identity. In fact, the Discalced Carmelites began in the 1590s founding “deserts” around their monasteries in order to be able to replicate the spirituality of the deserts of Palestine.617 John’s decision to use the image of the “Ascent of Mount Carmel” is, in this light, not only appropriate for a Carmelite, but is also for a Spanish Carmelite who wishes to succeed in a Spain whose changing fortunes threaten to extinguish the fire that sustains this tiny movement. In a sense he has, in the Ascent-Night, eroticized Spain’s emerging national myth and appropriated it to construct the ethos of Teresa’s reform.

Like so many late medieval thinkers, such as Giles of Viterbo, John understand history and anthropology within the general schema of neo-platonism. As we saw in O’Malley’s study of Giles, for late medieval thinkers history as it processes away from its source in time and space slowly corrupts, fragments and loses its primal unity. History is always getting worse, becoming more sinful, and is, especially in the sixteenth century, read in apocalyptic categories that present good and evil in stark terms. The triumph over history’s decline will require a rupture, a definitive intervention of God in history that will reverse the tide of exitus and commence a reditus back to the Source. Reform is also based on the same model: reform is always a matter of returning to a primitive “deiform” origin that has been untouched by history’s flow. Teresa and John’s conception of reform was just such a “return,” though as we have seen this return was wholly conditioned by the passage of Carmel through innumerable interpreters. John’s Ascent-Night offers to the Carmelite reformation a safe and speedy path to return. He constructs a scholastic anthropology and a monastic ascetical strategy that permits the Discalced to traverse time and space, back to the origins, without ever having to leave Spain. His eros provides the yearning to return to the mountain, his apophasis provides the means of liberating the self from all that delays our succumbing to the force of yearning to return to the Source. His demands of apophatic renunciation are relentless, and in the Night he confesses that the experience of the loss of identity rooted in the present is terrifying, disorienting, painful and destructive. But for John, the only path to retrieving the ancient source of Carmelite identity is to surrender one’s present identity and internalize, enact and perform the new identity that is found on Carmel’s summit: union with the God who precedes and exceeds the historical moment. All of the force of erotic longing, for John, draws one within, and forces the paradox that to ascend the erotic ladder or mountain is to withdraw into the “mystical space within” that is the center of the cosmos (N2 20.6).

The extraordinary success of the Discalced Carmelite reform rested on its ability to adapt itself to the complexities of sixteenth century Spain. This was, as Weber,
Ahlgren and other scholars argue, largely as the result of Teresa’s deftness in successfully maneuvering through the cultural, political and religious conflicts that had, by the end of the century, extinguished much of the creative energy of earlier religious movements. The Teresian reform harnessed, among other things, the charismatic freedom and authority of the beata movement, the mystical interiority of the recogimiento reformation, the “virtuous nobility” of the conversos, the Dominican and Jesuit of love of learning, the Franciscan love of poverty, and the erotic mysticism of the monastic Song commentary tradition. She enlisted John in the founding of the male branch of her reform largely because he, in her judgment, embodied the very creative tensions that she characterized her new movement. He was an educated Carmelite cleric from an impoverished background, and had a wide reputation in the Carmelite province of Castile for a severe asceticism. He had requested and received permission to observe the primitive rule Teresa saw as a reform model, and was en route to the Carthusians. The Carthusian motto, “numquam reformata, quia numquam deformata,” never reformed because never deformed, lent itself well to Teresa’s desire to establish a permanent Discalced reform. In addition, John’s desire for the Carthusians’ eremitical life must have spoken to Teresa’s own hope that the mendicant friars of Carmel could in some way appropriate the spirit of the ancient eremites of Carmel even if they would largely retain the active, mendicant form.

In addition to the happy coincidence of personal qualities and attitudes, Teresa must have also seen in John a way that she could provide her reform with a theological interpretation that satisfied the demands of the Inquisition’s scholastic Dominicans, and the need her nuns had for authoritative ascetical and mystical texts that expressed

623 As Edward Howells argues, John’s gender and clerical status afforded him an authoritative voice. This may be why John eschews the role of “experience” and centers authority on his role as exegete in the Prologue of the Ascent. His dismissal of the role of (scholastic) “science” may be for other reasons – e.g. the women for whom he wrote, untrained in scholastic theology, would not find scholastic language compelling. Teresa centered the nuns around lectio reading of sacred texts – and this is precisely what John is about in his poems and his commentaries. See Terrence O’Reilly’s compelling treatment of John’s
Teresa’s own vision. While Teresa could not comment on Scripture, and especially the Song, John could; while Teresa could not offer counsel on discernment directly, John could; while Teresa could not employ scholastic discourse with authority to defend the mystical via of recogimiento as a privileged way to union, John could. As we have seen throughout this study, John worked tirelessly to accomplish precisely these goals. He utilized his education at Salamanca to craft an anthropology and epistemology that could bear the weight of the Teresian reform, with all its inherent tensions and ambiguities, and offer a discourse capable of shaping a uniquely “Discalced identity.” One could even read the Ascent-Night as an apologia for her vision, against the objections to recogimiento mysticism that had come to dominate the post-Tridentine reforms in late sixteenth-century Spain. But though we might say that John attempted a careful theological synthesis, his style reflected Teresa’s creative freedom more than, say, the studied conservatism of an Alonso de Fuente. John’s eclectic use of his sources witnesses to the freedom he felt in adapting the auctores of tradition to the vision of nuestra Madre, the Elijan matriarch of the new reform. For example, John found in the Dionysian apophatic tradition a powerful lexicon for describing the painful and disorienting experience of rupture as the “self” transitioned to its new identity on Carmel alone with God. He also found in apophasis a way of translating the Franciscan synthesis

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commentaries as in the lectio tradition, From Ignatius Loyola to John of the Cross: Spirituality and Literature in Sixteenth-Century Spain (Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain: Variorum, 1995), 105-26. John’s “thicker” use of scholastic language in the Ascent may reflect his intention to address the friars. Some of the Discalced nuns who were John’s directees were reported as saying that “even if they did not understand his words [in the Ascent], they were moved by their spiritual power.” See Victoria Lincoln, Teresa, A Woman: A Biography of Teresa of Avila, ed. Elias Rivers and Antonio T. de Nicolás (New York: Paragon, 1984), 170-73.


625 But see Alison Weber, who argues that Teresa secured extraordinary freedom for women to direct women: “Spiritual Administration: Gender and Discernment in the Carmelite Reform,” The Sixteenth Century Journal, Vol. 31, No. 1, Special Edition: Gender in Early Modern Europe (Spring, 2000), 140-44. Doria would soon dismantle Teresa’s model of autonomy, though John would fight him on this.


627 Ahlgren contends that after Teresa’s death, when John completed much his writing, the Teresian synthesis had lost its favor with the Inquisition and no longer could serve as an effective model for women beatas or monastics. As we have seen, John is clearly caught, in the Ascent-Night especially, within the volatile arguments for and against this democratized form of mysticism. Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 114-45.

628 Ibid., 117.

629 John refers remarkably to Teresa as “our Mother, blessed Teresa of Jesus” in the Canticle 13.8.
of poverty and Christology, and utilizing this synthesis as a way of proffering a critique of the forms of monastic patronage and conceptions of honor and nobility that had held on so fiercely to the orders of Spain. And again, he utilized the apophatic tradition to critique the excesses of the *alumbrados* who had placed mystical phenomena at the center of their agenda. At the same time, as Edward Howells argues, John places his Dionysian apophasis in the service of Teresa’s emphasis on union as an ineffable cataphatic event, and to this end creates a novel epistemology to hold both traditions in dynamic and unresolved tension.630

John’s stunningly original erotic poetry, on which his two most significant commentaries are based, offered a way for the nuns in the vernacular631 to read themselves into the neo-platonic and exegetical erotic traditions.632 Not only did John’s poetic rendering of the Song open to the nuns what the Index of 1559/1584633 had forbidden, but it also modeled a way of internalizing the Song as a mode of one’s own highly personal experience.634 John did not just mimic the Song, but he translated it by “entextualizing” himself and incarnating the text: the Discalced was meant to wholly identify herself with the bride of the Song.635 The commentaries, especially the Ascent-

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631 John’s use of the vernacular to address women in monastic is not unusual in the late medieval and early modern period, though in the late sixteenth century it had come under severe attack. What would be a fascinating study is the way John uses Latin in his commentaries, and what motivates him eventually to largely abandon the use of Latin along with translation.

632 Much has been written on John’s unique manner combining courtly love traditions, the Italian *lira, a lo divino* renderings of secular love songs, and the Song exegetical tradition. See Colin P. Thompson, *The Poet and the Mystic: A Study of the Cántico Espiritual of San Juan De La Cruz*. Oxford modern languages and literature monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 169.

633 The Vadés Index of 1559 was expanded under the Inquisitor General Quiroga in 1583, which implemented Trent’s restrictions on vernacular translations of Scripture and theological texts. The Inquisition in Spain saw this as an opportunity to target the *alumbrados*, most of whom were *beatas* and relied on vernacular texts. See Andrés Martín, *Los Recogidos: Nueva Visión de la Mística Española (1500-1700)*, (Madrid, 1976), 40-5.


Night, provided a method, an ascetic practicum for this process of internalizing the poetic text: the way “into” the text of the poem is “through” the text of the commentary. Though the poem was written before the commentary, the commentary is the only way to read the poem as an enacted text. In this sense, the commentary of the Ascent-Night provides an interpretation of Discalced ascetical practice of the Rule that, in the ideal, leads to an identity embodied by the erotic poems. The eroticism of the poems offers a number of ways to the Discalced friar or nun to see themselves, through their ascetic and mystical praxis, as having “returned to Carmel.” In particularly, John’s synthesis of the Dionysian ascent and Augustinian interiority in the image of the “loving ladder” offers an imaginative language by which that return might become defining of the Discalced self. Erotic yearning for return interprets the historic Carmelite struggle for a settled identity in “exile” from Palestine.

Carmelites must see themselves as residents on a mountain they are estranged from, and when they finally reach its summit, where God dwells, they are “hidden;” and rendered incapable of communicating their identity to those around them who live far from that mountain. As in the history of Carmelite discourse, being “hidden” is, for the Discalced, an essential aspect of their eremitical identity. Erotic longing also grounds the “hidden” identity of the Discalced in an eschatological mode, securing the social distinctiveness of the Discalced already “living the life of heaven” (N2 13.11). A celestial identity, “hidden with Christ in God,” further embeds the Discalced self in the

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636 Colin Thompson, who argues against many interpreters for the unity of the poetry and the commentaries alludes to this medieval ascetical approach. However, little has been written on this subject in John’s regard. Following José Nieto’s lead, most commentators tended to separate the poetry and commentaries arguing the poetry should be understood independently.


638 The role of hermits in the Discalced reform was often linked to the need for a certain number of discalced friars and nuns to be “hidden” so that the order would not lose its anchoring in origins. Doria opposed allowing too many hermits, since he thought it would drain away the “best” ascetics from the active work of the mendicants. Trevor Johnson traces the fascinating history of “desert gardens” in Discalced monasteries from 1590-1700, which served to instantiate the eremitical “secret space” within the grounds of the monastic community. It’s eventual disappearance accompanied the abandonment of the eremitical ideal in the eighteenth century. “Gardening for God: Carmelite deserts and the sacralisation of natural space in Counter-Reformation Spain,” in Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe, by Will Coster, Andrew Spicer (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), 193-210.
eremitical ideal. For John, the essential crisis of the nights is experienced as an exterior and interior alienation from the sensually accessible world, and the exit from the nights into union is experienced as the acquisition of a wholly redefined self. John’s erotic “new self” reconfigures desire so that the monastic identity of the Discalced stands determined by a single, supreme good that detaches her from every other good. By performing John’s ascetical and mystical vision in the Ascent-Night, the Discalced becomes free from tethers that bind to any other form of identity. By means of the strategies of the recogimiento every Discalced can hope to experience the same transformation of identity that had initiated Teresa’s monastic revolution. The entire Discalced project, in John’s mind, is to foster this act of “turning within” that allows for the creation of an inner world of “social” space within which the Discalced identity – in-union-with-God – can flourish. Separated from the fragmented complexities and unresolved tensions of Spanish identities, the Discalced is free to claim the One Good that Plato had once proclaimed as the supreme object of all erotic longing. If l’homme est double, then the Discalced self of John’s Ascent-Night seeks first within herself the Kingdom of God while without she inhabits the Kingdom of Spain. It is a tension from which the Discalced self longs to be set free.

O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest center! Since
now you are not oppressive,
now consummate! if it be your will:
tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!

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639 Richard Valantasis describes the essential contest for power within eremitical asceticism as the quest for an identity defined by the rejection of one social group, and the creation of a new identity constituted by an “internalized” society. Richard Valantasis, “Construction of Power in Asceticism,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 63, (1995), 775-821. John’s ascetical texts pay scant attention to the identity of the Discalced as a social group, and rather concentrate on a quasi-solipsistic self in solitary pursuit of God. This problem in John’s texts reflects in part the historical Carmelite disjunction between eremitical and cenobitic/mendicant identities. As we have seen, whereas in the past Carmelites expressed this by juxtaposing their mythically defined eremitical history and their juridically defined mendicant present, John presents the problem as between what I will call here a “mystically defined eremitical self” and a “juridically defined mendicant self.”

Summary
In this chapter, we have seen the central role that *eros*, from its Platonic roots into the medieval period, played in John’s conceptions of the Discalced reform as a faithful interpretation and critique of the Teresian reform. John’s inheritance of that tradition betrays all of its historical complexities, as well as his intimate concern with adapting that tradition to the unique demands of the Discalced, and John’s own education, experience and role as co-founder. In particular, we saw how the Spanish historical context of the reform found the great themes of its own meta-narrative – especially of unity, diversity – echoed in John’s erotic quest for a unified identity rooted in an imagined history, the memory of which alone was capable of effecting unity within the soul, within Carmel and within Spain itself. In this light, the erotic “nights” of John’s narrative of the soul’s return to Carmel, with all of their characteristics of ambiguity, were consistent with the ambiguities inherent in Spanish national/imperial identity. We looked also at the ways that John’s employment of the erotic desire of God alone as the highest good shaped his construal of the pains of having one’s heteronomous desires reoriented by the labors of ascesis and the work of grace, with a particular emphasis on the role the “Ladder of Ascent” plays in the final portions of the *Night* commentary. In this way, we see the complex interrelationships that exist between text and context in John’s *Ascent-Night*, and how John creatively adapted the erotic Christian tradition to give more definite shape to the Discalced identity Teresa had tasked him with instantiating. And we can see the tensions that such a project reflected and produced in John, and in the nascent Discalced reformation.
CONCLUSION
FINDING CARMEL IN THE MIDST OF SPAIN

“...while there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion — there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy.”
– JZ Smith

JZ Smith’s hyperbolic assertion that “religion” is wholly a scholarly construct injects some epistemic humility into the academy of religion, but it also touches on the host of twentieth century debates over the precise meaning and nature of mystical traditions. In the early twentieth century, scholars like R. C. Zaehner, W. T. Stace, and N. Smart attempted to utilize the specialized literature of a number of religious traditions, literature categorized as “mystical,” to provide universal, experientially-based data capable of arguing for an underlying metaphysical and epistemological “essence” of religion. For such scholars, mysticism’s unique access to this “substrate” could effectively serve as a basis for comparative scholarship in the study of religion. In the 1970s, Steven Katz spearheaded a robust critique of this attempt “to provide various cross-cultural phenomenological accounts of mystical experience which are phenomenologically as well as philosophically suspect.” He argued that the theories of knowledge and of language crafted by these scholars are so reductive “that they fail to respect the recalcitrant differences between the varying experiences of differing cultures.” In the last decades, a plethora of scholars have answered Katz’s challenge by taking seriously mysticism’s value as a unique window into religious language, culture and tradition. While there may be, for a scholar of religion, no special data in

mystical traditions that offers a privileged epistemic or metaphysical window into a Ding
an sich, or the transcendent ground of ultimate concerns, mystical traditions do offer an
amplified exemplification of how homo religiosus constructs, as Thomas Tweed puts it,
“organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human
and superhuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.”

John of the Cross, as we have seen in this study, engaged in precisely such a
venture by constructing in his texts a worldview that helped the Discalced Carmelite
reform to define a social and interior space within which the Teresian Carmelite ideal
could be realized. In particular, in the Ascent-Night we recognized a complex amalgam
of histories, traditions and texts that John had woven into a unified interpretive apologia
of Teresa’s nascent reform. Whether he employed scholastic idiom or forms of prayer
developed by Spain’s Franciscans, Augustinian anthropology or a lo divino poems,
monastic styles of exegesis or Italian forms of lyric poetry, Dionysian apophasis and
erotics or Carmelite understandings of reform as a return-to-Carmel, John had a single
goal in mind: to textually construct a normative vision of the “Discalced self,” so that
members of the reform could effectively “perform” his texts and achieve the order’s goal
of union with God on Mount Carmel.

In order to fulfill Tweed’s demand that scholars of religion work from a multitude
of “positioned sightings,” I engaged an array of scholarship remotely and proximately
linked to the study of John’s Spanish context, the Ascent-Night, Teresa of Avila and the
Discalced Carmelite reform. I was astonished by the complexity of the influences that
are discernable within John’s texts, and with the paucity of scholarship on the
interweaving of those influences with John’s written works. The special interest of this
study was the “construction of the self,” especially as it related to the scholastic,
apophatic and erotic traditions, and how John reinterpreted those traditions to provide a
most radical itinerary – a journey in “nakedness,” as he would memorably word it – for
his fellow Carmelites to abandon the distortions of identity wrought in exile, and return to
their primal “form” by entering within to the summit of Mount Carmel. I examined, for
example, the role of gender and language, of socio-cultural norms regarding conceptions

647 Thomas A. Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard
University Press, 2006), 54.
of honor, of religious movements and institutions, or the function of public performances of mystical identities in shaping John’s specific determination of how a Discalced friar or nun should think, act, feel, or speak within their cultural milieu. And by gazing on John’s texts from all of these vantages, I discovered a writer engaging in precisely what Tweed said religion is about: homemaking. The ascetic performances, the suffering of loss and bewilderment, the desires and hopes are all part of John’s meta-narrative of becoming a Discalced self, defined over and against a myriad of other selves that amble throughout the Discalced lands of Spain. If in John’s Ascent-Night the self is said to become “homeless” in the dark nights, it is only homeless while in transit to the new dwelling place imagined in the Carmelite myths of Elijah and his spiritual progeny.

There can be no doubt that John himself, and his intended audience, understood that the Discalced quest for erotic union with the Christian God was a journey that traversed and transcended the boundaries of time and space, of language and culture. But what is equally clear, and what this study attempted to give consideration to, is that this quest, this ascent of Mount Carmel, is as incarnate in language, history and culture as the Christian narrative asserts God became in Jesus of Nazareth. Though the Carmelites of Teresa’s reform could not return to build their cells in the mountains of Palestine, they could engage in an extraordinary act of religious imagination capable of traversing time and space, and carve out in Spain’s imperial terrain a home hidden on the summit of Carmel’s mystic peak.
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