

SPIRITUAL CANTICLE OF JOHN OF CROSS; AN EXPERIENCE OF ECSTASY AND SAINTLINESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Ecstasy and experience of saintliness in the poems of John of Cross. The word ecstasy has the meaning of both physical and spiritual realm of the human. In the poems of John of cross the ecstatic union is of two souls rather than two bodies. The soul, observing that its sigh and prayers suffice not to find the Beloved and that it has not been helped by the messengers. The searching is real and its love great, leave undone anything itself can do. The soul that really loves God is not dilatory in the union with God. The ecstatic state of the poet experience the love of God and make the poet more saintly in this world.

KEYWORDS: *Ecstasy, Saintliness, Transcendental, Spiritual*

INTRODUCTION

St John of the cross is one of the greatest mystics in the Catholic church and he considered as one of the greatest poets in Spanish literature. Born near Avila, Juan de Yepes Alvarez (John of Crosses) entered the Carmelite order when he was 21 and moved to Salamanca, in western Spain, where he did his studies in philosophy and theology. As ordained priest, he met St. Teresa of Ávila, who inspired him with her work in reforming the Carmelite order, seeking to restore its original contemplative character. St. John worked with her for ten years, establishing and helping administer monasteries around Spain. A group of his religious leaders countered their effort and jailed him. The after a while, though the higher Carmelite authority approved his work, he was imprisoned for nine months and treated harshly. Out of his tiny cell came his most famous work, *The Spiritual Canticle*. After nine months he escaped and continued his work. He was canonized in 1726, and in 1926 he was made a doctor of the church, the highest honor. In his writings, St. John describes experiences of transcending ecstasy during Transcendental Meditation practice of the mind settling inward, beyond thought and perception, to a state of quiet inner wakefulness and deep peace.

Spiritual Canticle

The Spiritual Canticle was composed during the long imprisonment St. John underwent at Toledo from the beginning of December 1577 till the middle of August of the following year. Being one of the major supporters of the Reform of St. Teresa, he was also one of the victims of the war waged against her work by the Superiors of the old branch of the Carmelite religious order. John of Cross's prison was a narrow, stifling cell, with no window, but only a small loophole through which a ray of light entered for a short time of the day, just long enough to enable him to say his office,

but affording little facility for reading or writing. However, St. John stood in no need of books. Having for many years meditated on every word of Holy Scripture, the Word of God was deeply written in his heart, supplying abundant food for the conversation with God during the whole period of his imprisonment. From time to time he poured forth his soul in poetry; afterwards, he communicated his verses to friends. One of these poetical works, the fruit of his imprisonment, was the “Spiritual Canticle,” which, as the reader will notice, is an abridged paraphrase of the Canticle of Canticles, the Song of Solomon, wherein under the image of passionate love are described the mystical sufferings and longings of a soul enamored with God.

Ecstasy

Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines ecstasy, “a state of overwhelming emotion” and a “mystic or prophetic trance”. “The Ecstasy” is a kind of spiritual experience in which the individual soul ignoring the physical body and the soul holds communion with the God. In this state of trance, the individual gets the vision of the Divine. John of Cross experiences the feelings of two lovers and finds that the essence of love is not the fulfillment of physical lust. Here the true love is the activity of the soul when the lovers have the experience of divinity and there is an amalgamation of two individual souls and makes the lovers realize that love is, in its peak experience and the essence as spiritual. Thus, the poet uses a religious and mystical experience to interpret the complexity and depth of secular love. This kind of loving union can be achieved by the saintly persons only. Therefore the poet is a saint by his love towards God and his experience of ecstasy is a major point in this poem.

In search of my Love

I will go over the mountains and strands;

I will gather no flowers,

I will fear no wild beasts;

And pass by the mighty and the frontiers.

This stanza provides the physical setting of the two lovers. The soul, observing that its sigh and prayers suffice not to find the Beloved and that it has not been helped by the messengers it invoked in the first and second stanzas, will not because its searching is real and its love great, leave undone anything itself can do. The soul that really loves God is not dilatory in its efforts to find the Son of God, its Beloved; and, even when it has done all it could it is still not satisfied, thinking it has done nothing. Accordingly, the soul is now, in this third stanza, actively seeking the Beloved, and saying how He is to be found; namely, in the practice of all virtue and in the spiritual exercises of the active and contemplative life; for this end it rejects all delights and all comforts; and all the power and wiles of its three enemies, the world, the devil, and the flesh, are unable to delay it or hinder it on the road

There He gave me His breasts,

There He taught me the science full of sweetness.

And there I gave to Him

Myself without reserve;

There I promised to be His bride

Here, John of Cross, a mystic has defined the evolution of love from physical to the spiritual plane. He has artistically explained the religious and philosophical belief to throw the light on physical. Love the greatness of the poem lies in reconciling the opposite physical love with the spiritual, the philosophical with the scientific and the abstract with the concrete the poet feels that the physical aspect of love must precede the spiritual union. The poet has carefully selected images, metaphors and concepts to support his view. The inter-dependence of the body and soul is expressed through metaphors. The image of the body as lovers is very vivid and convincing. The romantic setting of the poem is described through the imagery of flowers and their fragrance. The mystical experience is analyzed in a rational manner. The poem takes the form of an argument and has an intellectual appeal.

CONCLUSIONS

The poem spiritual canticle is a description of the deeply restful state of the ecstatic state of transcendental consciousness which make the poet a saintly person. The love of God and unity experience of ecstasy gives the body the opportunity to dissolve stress with exceptional efficiency. In that way, the poet overcomes all the difficulties of the severe trial in the prison during the time of his imprisonment. At the same time, the mind has settled into its source, pure consciousness, a field of infinite creativity and intelligence. St. John gives us his most extended description of this experience in his poem "Stanzas concerning an ecstasy experienced in high contemplation." He closes each stanza with the phrase *transcending all knowledge*. By this, he means going beyond anything that can be known intellectually by the mind transcending all thought, all mental content.

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