

**Light as a Metaphor
for Spiritual Transformations,
with Reference to
St. John of the Cross**

Essay for
Patterns of Spiritual Growth and
Human Transformations
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(Words taken from St John of the Cross, and Denys the Areopagite.)

Light as a Metaphor for Spiritual Transformations, with Reference to St John of the Cross

In the cold and dark of one of my first Easter vigil services, I can still clearly see the images of priest and people gathered around a brazier outside the church door, the lighting of the Pascal candle, of flames flickering from one persons small taper to another, and the joyful responses and songs of the coming of the Light of the World. It had *felt* like a particularly long Triduum, and the coming of light had an exceptionally powerful and lasting effect.

For some children, fear of the dark is not simply a childhood dread, but a reality that stays with them into adulthood, with nightmares haunting even the daytime hours. Many people sleep with a light on somewhere, just in case...

Our purpose here, starting with a Biblical perspective, is to explore something of light, and of dark, and the effect they can have in spiritual transformations, and with the help of a variety of writers, majoring on St John of the Cross, see in which ways darkness can lead one to God as much as light can.

Lead us up beyond knowing and light

From the first verses in the Bible until the last, images of light and dark are ever-present. God's very first directive, his first act of creation was to command light into being (Gen 1:3, 4); God *gives* light - and in almost the final chapter of the Bible God *is* light (Rev 21:23, 22:5). Not only that, a fundamental value judgement is then placed upon this first light: 'God saw that the light was good.' Having separated light from dark, 'lights' are put in the expanse of the sky, the greater to govern the day, and the lesser to govern the night. It could be argued that in the perfection of God's

creation, there was no space for darkness at all. It was banished, and there was no place for it. Certainly, it is surprising how one small candle can yield such a penetrating light within a dark expanse – the light comes, and the darkness loses its power.

The created, lit, world does not stay like that for long though, and by the book of Job, dark and darkness have become powerful themes, with some 38 references to dark, and interestingly, almost as many references again to light. It underlines the fact that of course it is impossible to think of light other than in relation to darkness: ‘we only know light as light because darkness intervenes’¹.

The other main treasury of biblical quotations on light and dark come from the Psalter, and it is interesting to see that John of the Cross quotes extensively from both the Psalter and Job², to which we later return.

There is also a strong tradition linking darkness with evil: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil (John 3:19). This is not simply a Biblical perspective, but has a universal acceptance, and many phrases and proverbs in our language pick up the theme – though to an extent racial awareness means that black and coloured themes can rightly no longer be so linked in public language.

To be a light shining on the hill, the light of the Gospel, to see Jesus as the Light of the World are also all strong positive biblical images, and themes that writers have taken through the ages. Yet, in practise, writers have often also found that it was not always like that, and they had other matters that moved them. The issue in some

¹ Mother Thekla, *Ikons*, 1994

² Rowan Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 1990, p178

ways is that ‘The fact that the way which spiritual writers call “illuminative” is almost entirely travelled in the dark is to some perhaps misleading’³

No other light or guide, than the one that burned in my heart

John of the Cross, (1542-91), was born near Avila, and after training for the priesthood planned to devote himself to a life of silence and solitude within the Carthusian order. With the encouragement of Teresa of Avila, he was a founder member of the first reformed ‘discalced’ (barefooted) house for men. Persecutions from the ‘calced’ Carmelites meant that he spent quite some time under oppression, and it was whilst in prison that he first started writing his poetry and the commentaries on the poems. His style is, some would say, uniquely identifiable, and is the first of the ‘modern’ writers writing from the medieval mystical tradition. He follows in the style of the Cloud of Unknowing, or of Dionysius (Denys) the Areopagite, and phrases from his work, like *Dark Night of the Soul* have become part of not just theology, but part of the language. His primary canon contains: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, The Dark Night, The Living Flame of Love*.

The ‘via negativa’, the *negative way*, from the Latin Christian tradition, was already well established as far back as when Denys the Areopagite was writing, and it had the same meaning as ‘apophaticism’. Apophatic approaches, says Denys Turner, are to do with ‘interiority’, ‘ascent’, and ‘darkness and light’, and all can be summarised as ‘metaphors of negativity’.⁴ Cataphatic, by contrast, is its complementary partner.

He expands on the definition:

‘the cataphatic is the verbose element in theology, it is the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God, and in that straining to speak, theology uses as many voices as it can...

³ Dom H van Zeller, *Moments of Light*, 1949, p111

⁴ Denys Turner, *Darkness of God*, 1995, p 1, 19

borrowing vocabularies by analogy from many another discourse, whether of science, literature, art, sex, politics, the law, the economy, family life, warfare, play, teaching, physiology, or whatever. It is its cataphatic tendencies which account for the sheer *heaviness* of theological language, its character of being linguistically *overburdened*.⁵

This debate between wordiness and astringency in theology was significant in John's time also, and there is in a way a contrast in the apophatic style of the poetry, and the more cataphatic explanations of it. In helping us to see something of how cataphatic and apophatic, affirmation and negation work in theological language, Turner uses some of the ideas of Denys the Areopagite, in affirming and denying all things of God. 'That is why we must say affirmatively that God is 'light', and then say, denying this, that God is 'darkness'; and finally we must negate the negation' between darkness and light, which we do by saying: 'God is a brilliant darkness'.⁶ 'We can only know the inadequacies of our language from within it. It is for this reason that the proper route to the apophatic is, as I have argued, through the dialectics of the cataphatic.'⁷

The brilliant darkness

Within the Christian life, then, where does darkness come from, and where does the pilgrim first come across it for himself or herself? Ruth Burrows describes the sense of elation and power of a new believer after conversion, and the come down afterwards as they try to continue in their own strength. She says: 'John attributes this deflation to a direct contact with the reality of God himself.'⁸ In what John calls the *passive night of sense*, 'God draws us out of the state of beginners, delivers us from a miserable, unworthy manner of knowing and loving him, sets us in the way of

⁵ Denys Turner, *Darkness of God*, 1995, p 20

⁶ Denys Turner, *Darkness of God*, 1995, p 23

⁷ Denys Turner, *Darkness of God*, 1995, p 39

⁸ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p51

the Spirit. *God* changes light into darkness: *God* seals up the springs of sensible consolations.⁹ This early experience of purgation can be upsetting. It is not what we expect; and the idea of God being linked to darkness may well be shocking.

Surely light can only be a good thing for us? Ruth Burrows helps us to understand the danger:

‘Our God is a consuming fire’, and my filth crackles as he seizes hold of me; he ‘is all light’ and my darkness shrivels under his blaze. It is this naked blaze of God that make sprayer so terrible. For most of the time we can persuade ourselves that we are good enough, good as the next man, perhaps even better, who knows? Then we come to prayer – and there is nothing left in us, no ground on which to stand.¹⁰

So how does John’s poetry and theology start to work around the area of darkness and God? Rowan Williams has summarised it:

‘The night – to use (John’s) favourite image – grows darker before it grows lighter. It begins with the activity of deliberately ‘darkening’ the soul, drawing the curtains, so to speak – the liberation of desire itself from external objects and worldly goods. The second and darkest part of the night, the soul’s midnight, is the total extinction of any kind of knowledge, leaving only faith and love. And the third part is God’s communication of his secrets to the soul; this is also ‘night’ because what is happening in the soul is indescribable. ... The states of the night are not simply chronological; essentially they point to three different *kinds* of account of what is happening to the soul in the whole of its life and experience, three levels of conversion.’¹¹

At first glance, John seems to have a simple systematic programme to aid the spiritual seeker on their journey. In practise, simplistic is not what he is suggesting, and his work is much more complex and multi-faceted. Indeed, he warns that his works are not easily understood (which is perhaps something of an understatement), and he recommends the reading of the whole work through, and more than once.¹²

There are a number of very good guides now to help us understand the themes that John found so important. A key aspect is that, though themes of light are very

⁹ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p50

¹⁰ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p64

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Wound*, 1990, p168

important to him, they can only be discovered through the revelation of God to the seeker through the darkness as well as the light. As Burrows puts it: ‘John of the Cross is the evangelist of the hiddenness of God: “God is night to the soul in this life”.’¹³

In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John tells us we have to lose sight of the ego, our selfishness, and put it in the ‘night’ outside the range of our vision. This is what John calls the ‘active night’, or the ‘active night of the spirit’.¹⁴ It is an exploration of the human side of the process. It helps to, in Rowan Williams’ words, ‘identify and interpret this condition - the habits we must cultivate, the dangers we must avoid’.¹⁵ Dealing with the ‘passive night’ is the substance of *The Dark Night of the Soul*, the immeasurably more costly purifying activity of God. It includes the feelings of being without spiritual consolation, the sense of God as distant, as rejecting, and even as hostile. Whereas *Carmel* is partly an account of what we can do in ‘active purification’, *Dark Night* has a long list of sins that mortification cannot expunge. They are so deeply rooted only God can deal with them.

One dark night, fired by love’s urgent longing

It appears there were streams of teaching in John’s time that advocated a variety of experimentation, and the pursuit of ‘experiences’ of God. This was not his understanding of God. ‘(John’s) ‘dark night of the soul’ are not principally metaphors descriptive of them, but embody, on the contrary, a spiritual temperament resistant to the claims of spiritual ‘experiences’. In short, John’s ‘dark nights’ are the

¹² Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p10, 9

¹³ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p20

¹⁴ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p22

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 1990, p170

metaphors not *of* experience, but of a dialectical *critique* of experientialist tendencies.’¹⁶ In John’s own words:

The dark night is a certain inflowing of God into the human creature, which purges it of the ignorances and imperfections belonging to its very nature. It is identified with infused contemplation or mystical knowledge of God, whereby God teaches it in a strange, secret way, educating it to perfect love. He does this himself; the creature can only be lovingly attentive, listening, receptive, allowing itself to be enlightened without understanding how.¹⁷

Is John’s work impossibly negative? Historically, there have been abuses of some of his teaching, by those who have probably misunderstood hi. Context is important in John’s work. In answer to his own question in *Carmel*, ‘What do you really want?’ - his recommendation is for us always to choose the less congenial way in any decision. Out of context, Williams points out the impossibly negative tone – yet within the context of the discussion, it has an inescapable logic.¹⁸

For many individuals, the concept of *dark night*, without its technical usage in theology, would probably imply something to do with clinical depression. Turner in particular explores the issue of whether John’s description of the ‘dark nights’ of the soul can be related to depression:

‘John is probably the first (writer) in modern times to attach great importance to the lived experience of that great purgative suffering, to the extent of mapping out in detail its psychological topography... The significance of this detailed topographical description lies in the fact that at the first-order level of experiential description John’s accounts of the sufferings of the ‘dark night of the soul’ are uncannily similar to what a person will give from the inside of the experience of depression.’¹⁹

This parallel between a number of the symptoms of depression and aspects of the *Ascent* are quite marked: some of the physical ones such as diminishing sensory perceptions in taste, sight and sound; anxious churnings of the stomach; are all tied

¹⁶ Denys Turner, *Darkness of God*, 1995, p 227

¹⁷ St John, *Dark Night*, Book 2:5

¹⁸ Rowan Williams, *Wound*, 1990, p169

¹⁹ Denys Turner, *Darkness of God*, 1995, p 231

with what John calls the ‘passive night of the senses’. He also identifies a ‘passive night of the spirit’, which suffers unidentified fears, loss of a sense of meaning, a re-shuffling of memory, on overwhelming feeling of pointlessness. Turner finds that one of the most significant links here is the experienced passivity of both of the two identified ‘nights’, and of the feelings of a clinical depressive.²⁰

One reason why John finds a *passive* asceticism as more important than an *active* asceticism is that it is possible whilst pursuing a particularly stringent self-denial, to actually develop into an almost masochistic goal of itself. This achieving of self-denial becomes a pleasure, which in a way contradicts the denial of pleasure in the first instance.

O night! that was my guide, O night! more lovely than the dawn

John sees a difference between a psychologically caused melancholia, and a ‘dark night’ spiritual experience brought about by God. Turner finds in John that whereas both depression and dark night can ‘dismantle the whole apparatus of sensory ego-compensation, ... depression simply leaves the matter there. ... But in the case of the dark nights, ego-dependent agency is destroyed as such only to reveal the presence within us of other sources of agency which, without the disablement of our active natural powers, we could not have detected.’ Turner goes on to outline that ‘This ‘purgative dryness’ is distinguishable from melancholia, for in the latter case there are none of the desires to serve God which accompany the purgative dryness.’²¹

Having spent time in the darkness, does it point to anything else, or is the darkness itself never ending? Burrows states rather eloquently, that God’s darkness is not

²⁰ Denys Turner, *Darkness of God*, 1995, p 232

²¹ Denys Turner, *Darkness of God*, 1995, p 236

simply bleak. ‘God is darkness in this life but a blessed darkness, a darkness our deepest self wants... Loyally we must accept him in darkness, refuse to identify him with any means to him no matter how sublime and spiritual these may seem.’²²

Amid the deepest shadow pour overwhelming light

When we can then get a grasp of God within darkness, we might find it hard to see why the darkness is so vital to John. Using one of his own illustrations, Burrows helps to explain:

John illustrates his teaching with an image. We are like windows: divine light, the natural presence of God – is there, always beating on the panes, but the panes are dirty, so dirty that the light cannot penetrate. Our task is very simple indeed: ‘God, like the sun, is above us, ready to communicate himself to us’. (*Living Flame St3*) We do not have to make the sun shine, we have not created our little suns, all we have to do is let the sun in and this is accomplished by cleaning the windows. When they are free from every stain the pure unadulterated light pours in. Then the cannot be seen; it is all one with the light and, in its own way, has become light and light-giving.²³

Using a slightly different metaphor, van Zeller’s perspective on God’s darkness is that ‘God wraps people up in a cloud of darkness - it is the principle of stunning a man in order to rescue him from drowning ... He applies the same principle to the seed, letting it lie inert in the ground and breaking it of its former habit before it shows itself alive and fruitful on another level and in another element’.²⁴

Rowan Williams picks up on the sort of light that may be dawning, what illumination there is:

And *this* is illumination; not rare mystical trances, visions or ecstasies, but the sense of being drawn into a central magnetic area of obscurity. Illumination is the running-out of language and thought, the compulsion exercised by reality drastically and totally beyond the reach of our conceptual apparatus. Illumination is the entry into that ‘contradiction’ at the heart of Christian belief represented by Jesus on the cross.²⁵

²² Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p73

²³ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p76

²⁴ Dom H van Zeller, *Moments of Light*, 1949, p105

²⁵ Rowan Williams, *Wound*, 1990, p172

Williams quotes John's list of 'illuminative' experiences – visions, 'locutions', clairvoyance – whether imaginative or intellectual, spiritual, super-natural, or natural in origin: a list that highlights the dangers of self-deception in spiritual life. He concludes that no spiritual experience can provide a clear sign of God's presence, or favour.²⁶ While illumination through windows is a very positive metaphor, in *Dark Night* John shows that though we may think it, our windows are too dirty to let the light shine through. We do not even know what light is. Our perception of light might in itself be deceptive.

Though John's influence and wisdom have been great, it is perhaps worth noting that his background was as a Carmelite eremite, and his audience were primarily members of religious orders, often nuns, living a particularly withdrawn solitary life. As Burrows points out: 'this is not the normal vocation for Christian people; it is a special one... What is right for people whose inherent calling is to be in the midst of the world would be an infidelity in those hosen to live apart and serve the Church in this particular way'²⁷. This begs the question as to how applicable John is to the ordinary Christian in ordinary life today, and it is certainly an important one for us in the application of his work.

It appears that, unlike perhaps *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which has reputedly never been out of print, and still regularly bought from High Street bookshops, John's work needs a good deal more interpretation, and living with. The primary thrust of his work is for a particularly narrow group of individuals. However the continuing interest in spiritual direction, and explorations of asceticism, would be incomplete

²⁶ Rowan Williams, *Wound*, 1990, p173

²⁷ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p11

without a thorough examination of his work afresh – and fortunately there is a growth industry in suitable reading and teaching materials.

How might he usefully be applied? Burrows introduces the helpful metaphor of laundering to describe spiritual journeys, and what John has been explaining, within that. A linen tablecloth being boil-washed; an angora jersey being gently washed in soapy water; a camelhair coat at the dry cleaners. Some of *Dark Night* feels like it may be a boil wash, with dramatic, passionate intensity. Life in our own time might feel much more like a dry clean ‘a long-drawn-out greyness where nothing happens and it seems inconceivable that anything will happen, ever.’²⁸ We may even find ourselves seeking something with a little more excitement; even seek some suffering just to show something is happening - the Holy Saturday feel, where one feels between times, and there is just waiting-time.²⁹ - Then that would be our actions again, not God’s actions.

Living flame of love

Having brought us through the dark night, John brings us to the culmination, the summit of the mountain. Moreover, on reaching it, we find something that may initially be a surprise: ‘nothing – nothing – nothing – even on the mountain nothing’ (from John’s drawing of the mountain). That is nothing of the self. The dark night has washed away all egotism from the individual, leaving them ready for the union with God. Truly the bride of Christ.

The bride lives in light, surrounded by it, penetrated by it from every angle. Because it is unimpeded, naked, full, circumambient, it is essentially formless like an atmosphere. For most of us light can get us here and there, now from this angle, now from that, and more persistently as we progress. But with the bride the inflow is total. ... She has chosen to abandon all for his sake, to lose

²⁸ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p109

²⁹ after Dermot Power, *The Holy Saturday Experience*, *The Way* Vol. 38 No1, 1998

her very self and live in deep solitude. ... He is now her sole guide and works in her directly and immediately all the time.³⁰

‘John of the Cross’s doctrine (how aptly he is named!) is thoroughly Christocentric. It would make no sense whatever without the vision of Jesus crucified...’³¹ For the Christian, the darkness felt on the journey is often tied with the journey of Christ on the cross. ‘Jesus crucified is the dark night into which we must enter so as to be one with God.’³²

A final word from the Psalmist: If I say “Surely the darkness will hide me, and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. Ps 139:11, 12

³⁰ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p116

³¹ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p83

³² Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 1987, p83

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