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Whither Old Testament Theology? <i>R. E. Clements</i>	33
The Problem of Choice <i>Peter Vardy</i>	38
Luther and the Mystics <i>Grace Jantzen</i>	43
The Kingdom of God is Justice and Peace <i>Paul Ballard</i>	51
Canon and Criticism: A Response to Professor Childs <i>Francis Watson</i>	55
BOOK REVIEWS	59
FACULTY NEWS Insert	

LUTHER AND THE MYSTICS

GRACE JANTZEN

“Only dilettantes in the field of spiritual history can call Luther a mystic.”¹ Thus says Bornkamm, a major Luther scholar. In spite of the weight of his opinion, however, I propose that this *obiter dictum* should be probed. A great deal, of course, will depend on what one means by the notoriously difficult word “mystic”. If it were possible to give a straightforward definition of the term, with specifiable criteria, we could then comb Luther’s writings to see whether he measured up: it would be a long task, but not a particularly difficult one. But things are not that easy: “mysticism” has meant different things to different people, ranging from predilection for voices and visions, to unification with God and annihilation of the self, to experiential awareness of the compassionate Christ in particular circumstances of human need. Rather than resolve by fiat the many underlying disputes of which these different views indicate the tip of an iceberg, I propose to take three people from within the Christian tradition who were mystics if anyone was: Meister Eckhart, Mother Julian of Norwich, and St. John of the Cross, and compare some of their views with those of Luther. If this does not result in a definitive verdict on whether or not Luther was a mystic, it should at least illuminate some significant strands of Christian mysticism and Luther’s attitudes toward them.

Let us begin with a major contention against the idea that Luther was in any sense a mystic. It is sometimes argued that Luther renounced mysticism in favour of the centrality of faith, seeing mysticism as a version of attempting salvation by works. Thus Walther Von-Loewenich, in his important book *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* argues that the sort of faith that was central to Luther is a faith that always stands before the cross of Christ. The individual recognizes his or her guilt before the holy and infinite God, and looks by faith to the crucified Lord who offers the “life-creating word of forgiveness”². Mysticism, by contrast, Von-Loewenich asserts, does not stand in faith before the Divine Other but rather seeks for unification into One: The quest is not for fellowship but for absorption. There is no room for guilt: sin is creatureliness, not disobedience, and thus the notions of forgiveness and atonement have no real part to play. Thus Luther’s theology of the cross is in direct opposition to mysticism: “faith and mysticism stand in irreconcilable antithesis.”³ I will return later to Luther’s positive theology of the cross and the valuable discussion of it in Von-Loewenich. But for the moment I wish to challenge his account of mysticism: is it the quest for absorption which he describes, and does it really have as little room for divine grace, atonement and forgiveness as he asserts? Looking at the three mystics cited, I suggest, gives a rather different impression.

Eckhart, it is true, is often taken as a paradigm case of medieval absorption mysticism. A favourite ploy of popular writers on mysticism (and even some serious ones, like W.T. Stace and Rudolf Otto⁴) is to show how similar some of his statements are to the monistic mysticism of Sankara for whom “Brahman and Atman are One.” Without doubt, some of Eckhart’s utterances do sound monistic. For example, he says:

Where two are to become one, one of them must lose its being. So it is: and if God and your soul are to become one, your soul must lose her being and her life. As far as anything remained, they would indeed be *united*, but for them to become *one*, the one must lose her identity and the other must keep her identity: then they are one.⁵

And again,

Where I am, there God is; and then I am in God, and where God is, there I am.

And

Why did God become man? That I might be born God himself.

Further similar examples, which sound as though collapse into non-differentiation is the ideal, can easily be found.

The problem, however, is that Eckhart explicitly denies such monism. He says, for example, that although God has impressed his image on every soul, Eckhart cannot go further than this in ascribing identity, because

to ascribe more to it would make it God himself, which is not the case.⁶

Was Eckhart simply being inconsistent, trying to get away with saying whatever he liked? I think a much more plausible account can be given. Eckhart relied on the traditional distinction between the essence of God and his manifestations, and applied the same thing to the human soul. The essence of the soul, he says, is uniquely suited to receive the essence of God (not merely a manifestation) because it is akin to God *in the sense* that the ground of the soul and the ground of God are understood in similar ways as the simple and incommunicable essence prior to manifestations. Thus although God can “enter the soul” and do so with all his fulness, this does not obliterate the ontological difference between God and the soul, Creator and created. The following passage offers a key:

I take a bowl of water and put a mirror in it and set it under the disc of the sun. Then the sun sends forth its light-rays both from the disc and from the sun’s depth... The reflection of the mirror in the sun is the sun, and yet it is what it is. So it is with God. God is in the soul with his nature, with his being, and with his Godhead, and yet he is not the soul. The reflection of the soul in God is God, and yet she is what she is.⁷

This passage and others employing the mirror metaphor must surely be decisive against interpretations of Eckhart which see him as denying ontological distinction between God and the soul, and show us the sense in which his more startling comments should be taken. Eckhart points out that any image that is *in* the mirror is not an image of the mirror; the mirror can image anything except itself. In *this* sense the mirror has no being of its own: it takes on the being of whatever it reflects. Similarly if the soul is focussed on God it will not retain a reflection of itself but will be one with God — and yet “it is what it is”. Eckhart is finding fresh ways of expressing the concept and experience of the transformation of the self in the presence of God, using the metaphor of the mirror which has a long history in writings on spirituality and finds a source in the writings of St. Paul himself: “We all reflect as in a mirror the splendour of the

Lord; thus we are transformed into his likeness, from splendour to splendour; such is the influence of the Lord who is the Spirit" (II Cor. 3:18). Anyone who is tempted to label Eckhart a monist preaching absorption mysticism will have to ask himself whether St. Paul should not be similarly branded.

If Von-Loewenich's account of mysticism as absorption does not fit the case of Eckhart, it is even less applicable to Mother Julian. Her book recounts the revelations of the love of God mediated to her by visions of the crucified Christ. She is deeply aware of God's compassion and forgiveness, but there is no hint of absorption in her writings. She only rarely speaks even of union, and when she does, it is clear that she does not mean annihilation of the self, but rather such close communion that for the time language is both inadequate and unnecessary. Thus for instance she speaks of God drawing us to himself in prayer

so powerfully that it surpasses all our imagining and everything that we can understand or think. And then we can do no more than contemplate him and rejoice, with a great and compelling desire to be wholly united to him...¹⁰

and when this desire is completely fulfilled (which will not be in this life)

we shall see God face to face, familiarly and wholly. The creature which is made will see and endlessly contemplate God who is the maker...¹¹

Heaven itself is not thought of monistically; the distinction between Creator and creature is retained even there. So Mother Julian's comments about the inadequacy of language do not indicate absorption. Difficulties with language, after all, are not the sole prerogative of mystics: they are a common feature of intense personal relationships which could with more justification be said to fulfil than to annihilate the self.

There is no denying that St. John of the Cross uses the language of absorption when he speaks of union with God, however. In the *Spiritual Canticle* he uses the metaphor of the flame to speak of the love of God which, he says, burns to

consume and transform the soul in God... as is the burning coal with the fire... until it arrives at such a degree of perfection of love that the fire of love, fully and completely, possesses it... and has changed it into God, wherein its movements and actions are now divine...¹²

In his book *The Living Flame of Love* he changes the picture a little, speaking of the soul as

like to the log of wood that is continually assailed by the fire; and the acts of this soul are the flame that arises from the fire of love: the more intense is the fire of union, the more vehemently does its flame issue forth. In the which flame the acts of the will are united and rise upward, being carried away and absorbed in the flame of the Holy Spirit...¹³

And in another place he speaks of

total possession... wherein the soul is made Divine and becomes God by participation...¹⁴

I suggest, however, that what these passages illustrate is not a mysticism of annihilation incompatible with standing in faith as a creature before the cross of Christ; they illustrate rather the traps that lie in wait for those who extract juicy passages from mystical writers without careful attention to the context and overall thought of the author. For example, in the quotation about the soul "becoming God by participation", the setting is St. John's commentary on the Song of Songs, and the immediate context is his description of the consummation of the spiritual marriage. The transformation of the soul is its fulfilment as a human creature made in the image of God and now restored to his likeness. St. John of the Cross explicitly quotes Paul: "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." And lest there be any doubt, St. John spells out his meaning

in the consummation of this most happy estate of marriage with Him... is effected such union of the two natures and such communication of the Divine nature to the human, that, while neither of them changes its being, each of them appears to be God¹⁵.

Brenan in his book on St. John of the Cross suggests that St. John takes up and elaborates the mirror metaphor that we already found in Eckhart, speaking of the two lovers as two mirrors, each reflecting the beauty of the other:

So I shall see thee in thy beauty, and thou me in thy beauty, and thou shalt see thyself in me in thy beauty and I shall see myself in thee in thy beauty and thou shalt appear to be me in thy beauty and my beauty will be thy beauty and thy beauty my beauty; and I shall be thee in thy beauty and thou shalt be me in my beauty because thine own beauty will be my beauty.¹⁶

It is true that difficulties arise in a mysticism of spiritual marriage, but the annihilation of self and a collapse into undifferentiate monism is not one of them. The love of God purifies and illuminates the human personality, but does not eradicate it. Another metaphor St. John uses makes this point clearly. He likens the soul to a lamp,

like the crystal that is clear and pure; the more degrees of light it receives, the greater concentration of light there is in it, and this enlightenment continues to such a degree that at last it attains a point at which the light is centered in it with such copiousness that it comes to appear to be wholly light, and cannot be distinguished from the light, for it is enlightened to the greatest possible extent and thus appears to be light itself.¹⁷

Nevertheless the ontological distinction remains.

If my interpretations have been correct, therefore, then at least in terms of these three mystics it would be a mistake to contrast Luther with mysticism on the grounds that the union with God that mystics seek involves the annihilation or absorption of the human personality to such an extent that the ontological divide between Creator and creature is broken down. In none of the three is human selfhood lost, even — or especially — in the most intense union with God. All three think of God as a lover seeking the purification and fulfilment, but never the abolition, of the beloved. The vocabulary of Luther and the tenor of his

thought is quite different from this, but the differences are much more subtle than are suggested by a stark opposition of a Lutheran theology of the cross to a mystical ideal of absorption.

A further reason for supposing that Luther was opposed to mysticism is his attitude to those who claimed special visions or revelations from God. Not the least of the thorns in his flesh after 1520 was the contention with those he came to call the *Schwaermerei*, visionaries like Muentzer and Luther's old colleague Karlstadt who said they received direct spiritual illumination. According to Luther, these men set aside the proper use of Scripture and sacrament, and kept saying "The Spirit, the Spirit, the Spirit..."¹⁸ In his 1524 tract against them, scathingly entitled "Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments" Luther appealed directly to Karlstadt:

Dear Peter, I beg you put your glasses on your nose, or blow your nose a bit, to make your head lighter and the brain clearer.¹⁹

He called them a sect of Satan, and blamed the local uprisings partly on them.²⁰

Already in 1521 while Luther was hiding in the Wartburg he had written to Melancthon in response to his queries about visionaries who had visited Wittenberg. If all their experiences were sweetness and light, Luther declared them to be frauds.

Do not listen if they speak of the glorified Jesus, unless you have first heard of the crucified Jesus... You should enquire whether they have suffered spiritual distress and the divine birth, death and hell.²¹

Unless the pattern of their lives was evidence that they had been called by God, their words should not be believed, nor should their appeal to spiritual experiences be taken seriously.

But this negative attitude to what might be called "mystical phenomena" — sweet experiences, voices, visions, special revelations — does not in fact set Luther in opposition to the three mystics we are considering: quite the reverse. All three of them would agree with him. Eckhart reserves his most scathing language for those who claim special visions and raptures:

Some people want to see God with their own eyes, as they see a cow, and they want to love God as they love a cow. You love a cow for her milk and her cheese and your own profit. That is what all those men do who love God for outward wealth or inward consolation — and they do not truly love God, they love their own profit.²²

God is to be sought for his own sake, not for pleasant religious experiences; the difference will be recognizable from the quality of life of the individual.

St. John of the Cross echoes this sentiment. He speaks of special religious experiences as "spiritual sweetmeats" — God gives them occasionally to the immature who can be lured forward by such trifles, but they are not proper food nor are they in the long run suitable for spiritual progress. The road of advance runs instead through purgation,

stripping down of desires not merely for physical and sensual things but also for "spiritual consolations" which too easily become a trap, a substitute for God. When one is drawn to a deeper spiritual life, St. John says, the soul must

at no time... desire to find help in spiritual sweetness and delight, but it must stand in complete detachment above all this and its spirit must be freed from it.²³

Physical asceticism is not a price to be paid in exchange for spiritual gluttony; it is rather the symbol of the more thoroughgoing asceticism, the asceticism of the spirit.

In illustration of this it is interesting to notice the attitude of St. John of the Cross to a particular woman, Sor Maria de la Visitacion, who was much given to raptures, levitations, and the like, even claiming to have received the stigmata. She was made much of in Spain; her confessor proclaimed her to be a saint, and when the Armada set off for England it sailed in line past her convent so that she might bless each ship. Even the priors of the Discalced Carmelites went to her and came back with relics — pieces of cloth stained with her blood. But St. John of the Cross refused with some asperity to be party to this. Not long afterwards a nun claimed to have discovered Sor Maria painting on her "wounds": the Inquisition began to investigate using the simple method of seeing what a bit of soap and water would do to the stigmata. They came off.²⁴ Luther would have loved it.

Mother Julian, on the other hand, is more tolerant of visions and mystical phenomena than her sceptical brethren; after all, it was by way of visions that she was shown the love of God. Yet she is in complete agreement with them that it is not the visions in themselves which are important, but the resultant lifestyle. She says,

I am not good because of the revelations, but only if I love God better; and inasmuch as you love God better, it is more to you than to me... For I am sure that there are many who never had revelations or visions, but only the common teaching of Holy Church, who love God better than I.²⁵

The things Mother Julian prays for — true contrition, loving compassion, and a longing of the will for God — are not substantiated by the revelations taken in themselves but by the compassion and integrity which she pursued in relation to God.

Yet while none of these mystics advocated mystical phenomena as having intrinsic value any more than Luther did, it is true that, though they de-emphasised experiences, they certainly did think the Christian life was a matter of continuing existential relationship with God: experience mattered, even if experiences did not. A dry intellectual assent to theological propositions was as inadequate as the idea that all had been accomplished because once upon a time one had received the sacrament of baptism. All of life, all of one's activity whether conventionally religious or not, was to be experienced in relation to God. In this sense, religious experience was profoundly important to each of the three mystics; but this should not be confused with preoccupation with mystical phenomena.

Some outstanding interpreters of Luther deny that he thought experience important even in this sense. Thus for

instance Missouri Synod Lutherans Franz Pieper and J.T. Mueller²⁶ argue that for Luther objective certainty of justification is given in the inerrant pronouncements of Scripture; to look for spiritual experience is to fall into a Schleiermacherian trap of making religion revolve around a subjective "I".

The transference of the gospel from word to man takes place on a purely dogmatic-rational level, as a reasoned acceptance of biblical formulations of truth.²⁷

The same sort of conceptualist analysis is put forward by Karl Holl in his emphasis on the Lutheran interpretation of the gospel as public rather than private. The inner life, the experiential domain, was, according to Holl, of no interest to the theologian. Luther was seen as rational and cognitive, guarding himself against feelings and intuitions. Illumination was conceptual, not emotional or psychological.²⁸ A more nuanced position is presented by Ebeling, who takes seriously the influence of Rhineland mysticism on Luther's early development; yet he too argues that in Luther's mature Reformation theology spiritual experience has no significance. Indeed he goes so far as to take Luther's words "sola experientia facit theologum" — "only experience makes a theologian" — as referring strictly to intellectual experience, not spiritual or psychological.²⁹

The argument which underlies this rejection of religious experience by all these interpreters of Luther is their concern with Luther's insistence on faith and a theology of the cross, contrasted with works and a theology of glory, to which religious experience is said to belong. And indeed we have seen this contrast already in Luther's response to Melancthon on the visionaries: "Do not listen if they speak of the glorified Jesus, unless you have first heard of the crucified Jesus." As early as his Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation of April 1518, Luther had made the cross the centre for theological understanding:

That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.³⁰

The cross of Christ is the decisive revelatory event, and thus requires the transvaluation of all theological values. It shows that God is the hidden God, the God whom we cannot know in himself but only *sub specie crucis*.

To a God who has thus revealed himself, the only appropriate response is faith — an acceptance of the justification which he freely offers. This faith stands in sharp contrast to "works" — any effort on our part to earn God's favour. Such works would be utterly inadequate to justify ourselves, and would serve only to blind us to the fact that salvation is offered freely. If in spite of this we continue to try to save ourselves by our own efforts, this constitutes in effect a rebellion against God, since we are spurning his method and setting ourselves up as knowing better than he does. But if on the other hand we recognize his free gift for what it is, this provides us with enormous relief and liberation from the hopeless effort of trying to justify ourselves in the sight of God. The cross is the manifestation of the love of God, to which we respond in faith.

It is worth looking more closely at what Luther had in mind as the alternative to this response of faith: what did Luther mean by "works"? He did not mean simply "trying to be good", though of course he would insist that even high moral effort would not serve to set us right in the sight of God. "Works" for Luther had as one of its important meanings "techniques" — religious methods for the pursuit of holiness. As all the world knows, his 95 theses were triggered by his distress at the sale of indulgences by the Dominican monk Tetzl: indulgences were seen by the masses as a technique of avoiding divine retribution. And the further Luther probed, the more he came to see many of the rituals and activities of the Church as techniques, efforts at winning the favour of the Almighty or at least avoiding his wrath. The Mass had to be celebrated in a ritually flawless way, vestments and relics had enormous importance attached to them, monks and nuns were bound by rules and obligations which were in many cases wholly unsuitable to their needs but which they felt they had to keep on pain of encountering the wrath of God. All these things Luther came to see as "works", useless in themselves and actually standing in the way of accepting salvation as a free gift available to any who would simply accept it by faith. Thus in his famous treatise "The Freedom of the Christian" of 1520 Luther wrote,

It is evident that no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness and freedom... It does not help the soul if the body is adorned with the sacred robes of priests or dwells in sacred places or is occupied with sacred duties or prays, fasts, abstains from certain kinds of food, or does any work that can be done by the body and in the body... Such works produce nothing but hypocrites...³¹

All these techniques were external. Even more soul-destroying were what might be called internal techniques, efforts to achieve a relationship with God by self-purgation and lifting up the soul to God, as though such a thing were possible. Thus Luther continues in the same treatise,

even contemplation, meditation, and all that the soul can do, does not help.³²

The mystics whom Luther had read had talked about the soul entering into darkness; but while Luther well knew that darkness (I will have more to say about it below) he

objects to a piety that turns the entrance into darkness into a technique, a self-chosen exercise. Thereby it is robbed of its ultimate seriousness. It is then man's work, and remains under the judgement of the cross.³³

As such it is the enemy of faith.

It is here, in this theology of the cross opposed to any theology of glory, faith opposed to any external or internal techniques, that one might look, as Van-Loewenich does, for a decisive contrast between Luther and the mystics. But does the contrast hold up? It would be obviously wrong-headed to lump all mystics together into a bundle as though they all taught the same thing; nor need we suppose that Luther was simply indulging in invective against straw men. No doubt the popular spirituality in the monasteries of his time furnished plenty of examples of such "mysticism by the boot-straps", just as much popular writing on mysticism still does today. But it is instructive to notice that the three mystics I have chosen for comparative purposes would all

agree with Luther in his rejection of techniques, external and internal, or of any efforts to earn salvation. And just before we look at their views, it is worth remembering that Luther's stance on this can be overstated: near the end of his life he composed a beautifully simple treatise on "How to Pray", offering a method of meditation and prayer: it would be a mistake to suppose that Luther considered any and every method to be a "technique" in the perjorative sense of a "work" set over against "faith". But let us turn to the mystics.

One of the things that got Eckhart into trouble with the ecclesiastical establishment was precisely his preaching against techniques. We have already noted his scathing remarks about those who seek visions of God. The same could be applied to any other sort of method to which one becomes unduly attached. Eckhart points out that

whoever seeks God by a special way gets the way and misses God³⁴

— and may not even notice it, so entrapped is he in the "religiousness" of it all. He says dramatically,

Indeed, if a man thinks he will get more of God by meditation, by devotion, by ecstasies, or by special infusion of grace than by the fireside or in the stable — that is nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak around his head, and shoving him under the bench.³⁵

Eckhart has much to say about what can be dubbed a "merchant mentality" — the effort to bargain with God, doing good works or indulging in pious activities in order to get something out of it. One can easily develop such an attachment to religious exercises or even to the sacraments that they become a barrier to true communion with God, serving only our own fantasies while we suppose that we stand high in God's favour. Eckhart recognizes that if we see life in terms of this mentality of getting, it removes joy and freedom, and condemns one to endless calculation — a calculation which can in any case never come out right for us; we will always be on the infinite debit side. Eckhart is very far from disagreeing with Luther on the salvific inefficacy of "good works": indeed, Luther in all probability owed some of his insights here to Eckhart via Tauler.

In the case of Mother Julian we find less emphasis and less drama but the same point of view. She says that in one of the revelations

our habits of prayer were brought to my mind, how in our ignorance of love we are accustomed to employ many intermediaries. Then I saw truly that it is more honour to God and more delight if we faithfully pray to him for his goodness, and adhere to this by grace, with true understanding and steadfast belief, than if we employed all the intermediaries of which a heart may think. For if we employ all these intermediaries, this is too little and it is not complete honour to God; but this goodness is full and complete, and in it is nothing lacking.³⁶

There is nothing here with which Luther need disagree.

Julian, it is true, goes on to express her appreciation for intermediaries, especially for our Lady and the saints and "all the blessed company of heaven" so long as these are

seen not in and of themselves but as expressions of the grace of God "which comes to us to our humblest needs."³⁷ Perhaps because for her these have been a stimulus to faith rather than a barrier to it she does not need to reject them in such strong terms as Luther does. Yet even his rejection should not be overstated. He is indeed vehement against any of these things becoming "works", that is, a substitute for faith, but that does not mean that they can have no value whatsoever. Because of their personal and social history, some people need to dispense with them if they are to grow in faith; but Luther is opposed to legislation or any action which forcibly removes them from any person for whom they are an aid. If Christian freedom does not require all the trappings of traditional religion, neither does it require their abolition: Luther did not support the statue-bashing and binges of relic destruction which some of his followers undertook in his name.

An interesting addition to this theme is Mother Julian's comments on penance — just the sort of thing which might have been a prime target for an "anti-works campaign". Julian says that she received no special insight into the sort of penance which one adopts of one's own accord.

But what was revealed, specially and greatly and in a most loving manner, is that we ought meekly and patiently to bear and suffer the penance which God himself gives us, with recollection of his blessed Passion... And then you will see truly that all your life is a profitable penance. This place is prison, this life is penance, and he wants us to rejoice in the remedy. The remedy is that our Lord is with us, protecting us and leading us to fulness of joy...³⁷

We do not have here any self-chosen exercises or "boot-strap mysticism", but a trust in God in the situations in which we find ourselves. One would have to out-Luther Luther to object.

John of the Cross comes nearest, among the three mystics, to discussing what might seem like techniques of spiritual growth, and yet curiously he is in the end most like Luther in what he says. He does not make nearly such heavy weather of the rejection of external techniques — relics, rituals, and the like — as Luther does, but that is because in his situation he can take for granted that these things are at their best only aids to faith. This is not disagreement between them: because of the time and place and the people for whom he was writing, Luther has to make an issue of what John the Cross can assume. The same can be said up to a point about internal methods: St. John is at least as aware as Luther that devotions and meditations can easily degenerate into self-indulgence and become barriers instead of helps to encounter with God. Nevertheless in his books *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* John gives what amounts to a pattern of ascent to union with God. At first sight one might think that offering such a pattern would be the antithesis to Luther: I shall suggest that it is not.

It is in the first place not accidental that when St. John joined the struggling band of Discalced Carmelites he took as his religious name "of the cross". For him, as for Luther, the cross was central, and revolutionized all one's preconceived theological ideas. The values of his society — the triumphalism of the Spain of the Inquisition and conquistadores, the Spain that had defeated the Turk and was

busy building the Armada, having purified itself of Moors, Jews, Lutherans and other undesirables — all these values of power and success are radically questioned by the crucified Christ. St. John of the Cross sees not triumph but suffering as the place of intimacy with God, because it was on the cross, in the midst of the most intense physical and mental suffering, that Jesus most fully manifested God even while feeling utterly deserted by him. And what was true for Jesus is also true of his followers: it is in suffering and in the cross that God is present and manifested, not in the sense that in these situations he provides comforts and consolations, for he very probably does not, but in the sense that in sharing the broken body of Christ, encounter with the ultimate reality can occur. What Van-Loewenich wrote about Luther's statement that God is to be found in the cross and in suffering could apply equally to John of the Cross:

“Cross” and “suffering” refer, in the first place, to Christ's suffering and cross. But Luther is thinking at the same time of the cross of the Christian... That is to say, the cross of the Christian corresponds to the cross of Christ. To know God “through suffering and the cross” means that the knowledge of God comes into being at the cross of Christ, the significance of which becomes evident only to one who himself stands in cross and suffering.³⁸

St. John of the Cross develops this theme in his teaching on the dark night. In his account as in Mother Julian's, afflictions are not courted, but when they come, they are deliberately accepted as from God, and thus as a means of identification with the suffering Christ who is in God's presence even while feeling most forsaken by him. It is worth remembering that John's account of the dark night is based on a poem he wrote while in prison undergoing the most appalling physical and psychological suffering inflicted upon him through no desire of his own. So the “dark night” is not just any sort of despondency or depression — though of course these, too, can become occasions for identifying with the suffering Christ, as Luther also discovered.

As John of the Cross describes it, the dark night can be divided into stages, though these should not necessarily be seen as chronologically successive. The first he calls “the dark night of the senses”. It begins from the basic presupposition that God is not the same as anything else. Therefore physical things, the things of creation, are at best pointers to God who created them, and at worst a distraction from God or a substitute for him if we become entangled with them. He is in agreement here with Luther and with Eckhart before him who sees God as the hidden God: the things of creation ought to point to their creator, and in a sense they do, but they can be properly understood only from the perspective of the cross. Beautiful as they are, they are indications of the absence of God, just as a letter from a loved one, welcome as it is, is a poignant reminder of his absence. Thus they generate a longing for God rather than for themselves, and in themselves cannot satisfy.

We have an inherent tendency to become entangled in these things in destructive ways: nature, art, possessions, and even human relationships can become disordered in our affections. The person who is serious about God, therefore, must allow his physical senses to be stripped down, not in the sense of despising or devaluing the things and relationships, but rather transcending them, finding inner

liberation from their entanglements so that love and appreciation for them may be rightly ordered and freely given without hidden self-referential motivation. What is essential in this “stripping” is not necessarily what we would choose, but rather the abandonment of what is secure and familiar as these things are required by God; hence this is a costly process, a dark night of the senses. Yet it is not a “technique”: it is rather a deliberate response to what, under severe guise, is in fact the liberating grace of God. Both John of the Cross and Luther knew it well: one need only remember John's suffering in prison, and Luther's traumatic detachment from all that was familiar in his enforced retreat in the Wartburg.

Yet the physical aspect of all this is in a sense the least of it. Not only the senses, but also knowledge, is inadequate to the things of God. Thus the stripping down process involves the intellect as well, which must be relieved of the smugness of having all the answers, knowing our theology and not having intellectual problems. John speaks as though at least sometimes this “dark night” of the intellect involves total intellectual and even moral bewilderment, where all certainties are gone and God himself seems absent. John is again speaking from his own experience in prison, where the psychological sufferings and moral bafflement he endured through finding himself at variance with the senior members of his own order were by his own confession a far worse ordeal than all the physical afflictions he had to undergo, awful though they were. Luther likewise knew the pain of intellectual and moral suffering: the theological securities and monastic stability of a loyal son of the Roman Church were one by one stripped away as Luther had to confront one thing after another with the implications of the cross of Christ. From being forced by his own principles into recognition of the uprightness of John Huss, to his repudiation of the authority of the papacy, to coming to terms with his own sexuality, and at many points in between, Luther was abandoning erstwhile certainties and probing the unknown. It is true that both for John of the Cross and for Luther these successive strippings were also liberations, but it would be superficial to see these as freedoms lightly won: they cost everything. This I believe provides part of the context in which Luther's sometimes disparaging remarks about philosophy and reason should be understood: the cross of Christ opposes natural understanding and indeed is an offence to it; its smugness and its certainties are radically called into question by the scandal of the cross.³⁹

And even this is not the end. As John of the Cross recognized, people might be willing to give up physical and intellectual pleasures, and even undergo considerable hardship, if in exchange they could be given spiritual pleasures and gratifications. But sometimes God in his severe mercy requires that even these things be given up, in what John calls the “dark night of the spirit”. As the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus on the cross had to give up even the sense of the presence of God, and in this way, in his forsakenness, God is truly manifest in him. Similarly, if we are to know God in Christ, and not just be preoccupied with our own pleasures (even if they be rarified spiritual pleasures) we must give up all illusions of spiritual grandeur and the spiritual satisfactions of sensing God or his consolations when these are taken from us.

The parallel to Luther is quite striking. Luther speaks in his *Explanation of the 95 Theses* of the greatest trial a person

can be called upon to undergo, the trial of seeming forsaken and abandoned by God.⁴⁰ All that remains at such a time is faith, clinging to God in God-forsakenness.⁴¹ One cannot even blame the intensity of this abandonment on the devil, for the devil is only an instrument of God himself, who, ultimately, is attacking the individual in these trials. God seems to be playing games with the individual and making up the rules as he goes along; and only he knows the point of the game anyway.⁴² Thus the struggle of faith at this time is, in Luther's words, "nothing less than a struggle with God against God..."⁴³

Luther's term for all this is *Anfechtung*, the dereliction of the absence of God which for the Christian is the ultimate hell. Yet the Christian is upheld in this suffering by the identification with Christ who himself felt utterly abandoned by God and so "descended into hell". Rowan Williams put it well:

In Christ we see holiness fully present in the most extreme *Anfechtung*: the fact of Christ's perfect oneness with the Father is not touched by his *experienced* agony. Christ's cross is, from one point of view, the supreme demonstration that holiness has nothing to do with mere states of mind.⁴⁴

And it is this, surely, which underlies Luther's comment to Melancthon that he should pay no attention to people who spoke of the glorified Jesus unless they had first spoken of the crucified Jesus. Dramatic spiritual experiences are no indications whatsoever of the holiness of the person — not even if those experiences are sensations of union with God. This merely trivializes the cross of Christ and with it the cross of the Christian.

In this sense, Luther is certainly not a mystic — but then, in this sense, neither are Eckhart, Julian or Norwich, or John of the Cross. Nor should the teaching of the latter on the dark night of the soul be seen as a technique for self-manufactured holiness in the sense that Luther disparaged. John does, to be sure, counsel deliberate acceptance of the various stages of suffering, rather than either railing against them or seeking to escape from them by distractions or false comforts and consolations. But he emphasizes that this is not a matter of effort on our part, "boot-strap mysticism", or what Luther would call "good works" but a response to the painful grace of God. And in the end, even the response is seen as a divine gift.

But what is the purpose of all this suffering? The answer for Luther as for the three mystics is already implicit in their recognition that suffering is (or at least can be) identification with the cross of Christ, "being crucified with Christ". In his *Meditations on Christ's Passion* of 1519 Luther said,

The real and true work of Christ's passion is to make man conformable to Christ, so that man's conscience is tormented in like measure as Christ was pitifully tormented in body and soul by our sins... for it is inevitable, whether in this life or in hell, that you will have to become conformable to Christ's image and suffering.⁴⁵

And this for Luther was surely experiential, existential — not in the sense of having nice experiences or warm spiritual sensations, but in the sense that the conformity to Christ through suffering must take place at the core of one's

being and from there permeate the whole of one's existence. Here is true conversion, genuine shedding of the defences and solaces of the self, and turning in faith to God: it is a conversation which begins

in each person's private hell, in the meeting with God the crucifier and the crucified in the depths of the heart.⁴⁶

This also sheds light on Luther's understanding of faith. It is not a bare, intellectual holding to doctrinal propositions about justification, without existential dimensions. Faith is rather a clinging to the grace of God, even while feeling bereft of him.⁴⁷ In Luther's words it is the ability to hear "the deep, secret yea beneath and above the nay."⁴⁸ And again the parallel to St. John of the Cross is strong. In his poem on which the teaching of the dark night is based, he speaks of a "secret ladder" and explains,

The "secret ladder" represents faith, because all rungs or articles of faith are secret to and hidden from both the senses and the intellect, and went 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.⁴⁹

And the allusion is to I Cor. 2:10, where the "deep things of God" are spoken of precisely in the context of St. Paul's determination to know nothing "save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." St. John of the Cross says in one of his *Maxims on Love*, "He who seeks not the cross of Christ seeks not the glory of Christ."⁵⁰ It could have been Luther saying that.

This conversion, turning to God from one's deepest centre, is however not simply a private matter. The daily dying in identification with Christ in his suffering is at the same time identification with his compassion: Christ after all did not die for the private benefit of his own soul! Luther therefore recognizes that the internal liberation of the *Anfechtung* sets one free from the compulsive demands of the ego in order that one may be sensitive to the needs of others.

The self that is killed by God in order to be made alive must experience this death in the social, the public world at the hands of other human beings. The daily dying, daily taking of the cross, is precisely this exposure of the self to the devouring needs of others... The cross is borne internally in *Anfechtung*, externally in enduring whatever may be attendant on the state of life in which we find ourselves.⁵¹

Luther rejected the idea that certain forms of life or causes required self-emptying and identification with Christ while others did not; compassionate giving of oneself to one's neighbour is important no matter what the societal context. The Christian calling or vocation is not so much to one particular form of service, like priesthood or monasticism, as it is a vocation to be *Christian* whatever the actual worldly conditions. Thus it is not a question of certain vows or rituals making one holy in the presence of God but the identification in faith with the crucified Christ and his compassion for humankind: here also is the basis for the doctrine of the priesthood of the believers. The priest — the believer — is the one who finds in his own private hell that the message of the Gospel is true, and thereby finds the right

and the possibility of communicating that Gospel to others in their own sufferings. Thus in the 1539 Introduction to the collected edition of his works, Luther wrote of *Anfechtung* as the real touchstone. These desolations, he says,

teach you... to experience how right... God's word is wisdom beyond all wisdom. As soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will hurry you and by his attacks will teach you to seek and to love God's Word.⁵²

The three mystics we have been considering are in very different social contexts from that of Luther and therefore express the public implications of the private experience of God very differently. Yet difference, as we have seen, is not incompatibility; each of them in their lives and in their writings demonstrate the costly nature of the freedom and compassion of God and the way in which this is translated in their own public contexts. Luther shared many of their views, learned in the same hard school of experience and prayer; and joins them in the company of those whom, as he put it, experience has made into theologians.

1. H. Bornkamm *Luthers Geistige Welt* (Heiland Verlag, Lüneburg, 1947) p. 264.
2. Walther Von-Loewenich *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (E.T.H.A. Bowman, Christian Journals Ltd., Belfast, 1976) p. 150.
3. *Ibid.* p. 166
4. cf. Walter Terence Stace *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Macmillan, London, 1961); Rudolf Otto *Mysticism East and West* (Macmillan, New York, 1932).
5. Meister Eckhart *Sermons and Treatises* Vols. I and II (Translated and edited by M. O'C. Walshe (Watkins, London, 1979)) Vol. I p. 52, cf. p. 140 (Quint Sermons 5 and 28).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 51 (Quint 5).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 138 (Quint 29).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 125 (Quint 16b).
9. *Ibid.*, Vol. II p. 81 (Quint 1955 26).
10. Julian of Norwich *Shewings* L.T. 43 (Eds. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, New York with S.P.C.K., London, 1978) p. 255.
11. *Ibid.*
12. St. John of the Cross *Spiritual Canticle* XXXVIII.2 (E.T. Allison Peers *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross* Vols. I-III, Burn Oates & Washbourne Ltd., London, 1953) Vol. II pp. 172-3.
13. *Living Flame of Love* I.4; in Peers Vol. III p. 18.
14. *Spiritual Canticle* XXVII.2; in Peers Vol. II p. 133.
15. *Ibid.*, XXVII.3; p. 134.
16. *Spiritual Canticle* XXXV.3 as translated by Gerald Brenan *St. John of the Cross* (Cambridge University Press, 1973) p. 137.
17. *Living Flame of Love* I.12; in Peers Vol. III p. 23.
18. Quoted by John M. Todd in *Luther: A Life* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1982) p. 253.
19. *Ibid.* pp. 255-6.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
22. Meister Eckhart in Walshe Vol. I p. 127 (Quint 16b).
23. St. John of the Cross *Living Flame of Love* III.33; in Peers Vol. III p. 71.
24. Brenan, pp. 61-2.
25. Julian of Norwich L.T. 9; in Colledge and Walsh p. 191.
26. Franz Pieper and J.T. Mueller *Christliche Dogmatik* (Missouri Synod, St. Louis, 1946).
27. Bengt R. Hoffman *Luther and the Mystics* (Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1976) p. 35.
28. Kall Holl *Was Verstand Luther unter Religion?* (J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1917) pp. 27-30.
29. Gerhard Ebeling *Luther, Einführung in sein Denken* (J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1964).
30. Martin Luther *Luther's Works* American Edition Vol. 31 p. 40 (Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, 1963f).
31. Martin Luther *Three Treatises* (E.T. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1970) pp. 278-9.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
33. Von-Loewenich p. 84.
34. Meister Eckhart in Walshe Vol. I p. 117 (Quint 5b).
35. *Ibid.*
36. Julian of Norwich L.T. 6; in Colledge and Walsh p. 185.
37. *Ibid.* L.T. 77, pp. 330-1.
38. Von-Loewenich p. 20; cf. Luther, American Edition Vol. 31 p. 53.
39. cf. Luther *D. Martin Luther Werke* Weimar edition (1883f) II.606; II.113; XXXI.2.500; etc. (Hereafter *W*) cf. Von-Loewenich pp. 58-77.
40. Luther *W* I.557; XLIV.97.
41. *Ibid.* VI.208.
42. *Ibid.* XLIV.97 and 536.
43. *Ibid.* XLIV.99; cf. Von-Loewenich pp. 136-7.
44. Rowan Williams *the Wound of Knowledge* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1979) p. 150.
45. Luther *W* II.138.
46. Williams p. 154.
47. Luther *W* VI.208.
48. *Ibid.* XVII.2.203.
49. St. John of the Cross *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* II.1.1 (E.T. Kieren Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, D.C., 1973, p. 107).
50. *Maxim* 23, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez p. 675.
51. Williams p. 154.
52. Quoted in Todd p. 356.