

THE DARK NIGHT OF GOD

Keith Reeves Barron, O.C.D.S., Ph.D.

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.¹

St. John of the Cross's main purpose for writing his prose works is to show "the way that leads to . . . that high state of perfection we here call union of a soul with God."² According to John, this union is the very reason for human existence, the purpose for which God created each human being.³ Full union of a soul with God can be experienced in this life in the "spiritual marriage," and this "total supernatural union" is consummated in the next life in the beatific vision.⁴ In this transformation, the soul "becomes divine, that is it becomes God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life." For John, this destiny is the only goal in life worth a person's absolute commitment.

¹St. John of the Cross, "The Dark Night," Stanza 5 in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: ICS Publications, 1979). In this text, following John's bridal imagery in *The Spiritual Cantic*, masculine pronouns will be used to refer to God and feminine pronouns to the soul. No sexist intent is implied by this author. Abbreviations used here for John's four major treatises are as follows: *Ascent*, *Night*, *Cantic* and *Flame*.

²*Ascent* Theme. Although John is not always consistent in his use of the term, "soul" generally means for him the total human person, body and spirit together in one "whole harmonious composite" (*Night* 2.11.4) forming "one suppositum" or one "subject" (*Night* 1.4.2; 2.3.1). In this article, the terms "person" and "soul" will be used interchangeably.

³*Cantic* 39.4.

⁴*Ascent* 2.5.4; 1.4.3; *Flame* 1.27; 2.32.

John tells us that the journey to union with God through contemplative prayer is like a dark night. The experiences of darkness and trial that accompany contemplative illumination are difficult to describe and nearly impossible to understand without some personal experience.⁶ The focus of John's work is upon the soul's relationship with God as it unfolds in this contemplative journey, but this relationship is precisely the point of so much cloudiness since, according to John, "God is also a dark night . . . in this life."⁷

Any spiritual friend who has offered a listening heart to a contemplative on this journey knows the great difficulty in trying to help someone sort out this ineffable relationship with God as it unfolds in darkness and obscurity. Some basic questions emerge: Who is this God that I am called to union with? How do I identify the idols or false gods in my life? How do I know God is present to me? Why do I sometimes feel that God does not love me or that God withdraws from me? These and similar questions do not have easy answers. Even John with all his learning and experience found "words are usually lacking" and that everything one can say "is far from the reality."⁸

St. John of the Cross drew upon the scholastic psychology of his own time to explain the person's journey in prayer beyond sensory images in order to be fully united with God who is pure Spirit. The unfamiliarity of today's readers with scholastic theories of cognition coupled with the difficult nature of the subject are the cause of much misunderstanding and misappropriation of John's teaching. It is the position of this article that psychodynamic psychology can provide a fuller understanding of John's description of the dark night. In particular, the contributions from psychoanalytic object relations theory to our understanding of the God representation--that mental image of who God is for us--can provide useful information in interpreting John's teaching on the imageless prayer of contemplation. In the following two sections, an overview of object relations

theory and the God representation will be followed by an exposition of John's understanding of the illuminative stage in dialogue with this theory of object relations.⁹

OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY

Classical psychoanalytic theory, as articulated by Freud and his loyal disciples, does not look favorably upon religious belief and practice. The reductionistic and dualistic positions in classical theory, which negatively regard contemplative experience as a regression to primary narcissism and infantile wish-fulfillment, now contrast with more open positions in psychoanalysis. One of the most important contributions is psychoanalytic object relations theory, which is a broad revision of Freudian psychology.¹⁰

The concept of object relations was implicit in Freud's thought, but as a theory, it has gradually evolved beyond the classical position. It is not an integrated or comprehensive system, and perhaps for this reason is found operating within various psychoanalytic schools of thought and is used by analysts from diverse theoretical backgrounds. These two perspectives, the classical and the object relational, "are different models that characterize psychoanalytic thought . . . not simply organizational devices, but reflect different visions of reality."¹¹

As an ongoing revision of psychoanalytic psychology, object relations theory departs significantly from the classical position precisely in some areas which previously hampered dialogue with theology. Instead of focusing primarily on drives as the impetus for growth, object relations theory stresses the importance of personal relations for healthy development throughout life. It provides a much less reductionistic model of the person which refuses to bifurcate experience into potentially autonomous spheres of inner and outer worlds. Rather, these two worlds are joined by

a "third world" of mutually constructed meanings and values. This third world is the world of culture and religion.¹²

The term "object" was first used in psychoanalysis by Freud himself to designate a person or thing as the object, or recipient, of a libidinal (or aggressive) drive.¹³ The object, therefore, is not simply any thing in the external world, but is specifically "the target of a drive."¹⁴ Freud did not limit objects to persons or things existing outside the psyche. In fact, his understanding of what an object is grew out of the concept of introjection which describes the internalization of attractive aspects of the outer world (persons or things) into one's own ego structure. In this way, objects or their components are internalized or introjected in the psyche. On this basis, Freud proceeded to write of both external and internal objects.¹⁵

Karl Abraham first coined the term "object relations" in 1924 and it was not long before other theorists began developing various interpretations of this concept. Melanie Klein, among others, expanded the meaning of the "object" to describe those internal representations that mediate interpersonal relations in psychic functioning.¹⁶ Raymond Studzinski explains:

The "objects" with which this theory is concerned may be parts of persons (e.g., a mother's eyes) but are ultimately and ideally whole persons with whom a relationship is established. Various memories of interpersonal experience with objects are built up in the mind by a process of internalization to form an inner world of mental representations of objects and self. These mental representations are complex memorial processes which are not carbon copies but subjective, sometimes quite distorted, renderings of affective experience of others and self in interaction. The internal world functions as a "theater" of the mind, where "actors" (mental representations) from the past are used in varying degrees by a person in relating to self and others in the present. Throughout the course of life self and object representations are in dynamic interaction and can be reworked or reelaborated on the basis of ongoing experience and reinterpretations of past experience.¹⁷

All functioning human beings have object representations of the significant others in their

lives, including God. These representations mediate one's communication to another by acting as internal dialogue partners, and these representations keep these others memorially present even when they are physically absent. More important than what one "thinks" or says about these internal objects is how they unconsciously affect one's sense of self and one's interpersonal relations. For instance, all individuals who have had fathers (biological or foster) carry internal representations of them that have conscious, preconscious, and unconscious components.¹⁸

Often the unconscious components of these representations are very influential in a person's life since they affect many diverse aspects of the personality with little or no conscious recognition of their influence. In this way, hatred of one's father, which seems to be incompatible with love, can remain repressed and yet covertly influence not only one's relations with one's father but one's relations with all father figures. At the same time, one might love this same father very much and readily admit this consciously. Most, if not all, relationships contain such ambivalence, although this may be denied since the admission to consciousness of ambivalence would be experienced as a threat to the relationship.

An object representation of one's father is clearly not one's father, but neither does the real father remain unaffected by this representation. The memories, feelings, attitudes, and images of another that, in part, make up the object representation are constantly in flux as new experiences feed the image. In turn, this image acts as an internal presence through which dialogue and action with the person are filtered

THE GOD REPRESENTATION

There is a growing body of research within psychoanalytic theory that concerns the

formation and development of the God representation. While this representation is not itself God, it provides for every believer an important psychic link, conscious as well as unconscious, to that ultimate, transcendent Mystery called God.¹⁹

In those cultures where theistic religions make an imprint on each person's life, whether or not they themselves are believers, children inevitably encounter some talk about God and consequently form some conception, positive or negative, about a supreme being. In theistic religions, a person's relationship with God is the most fundamental element of religious faith. This relationship is undeniably conditioned by the particular religious institution or community in which an individual practices his or her faith. God is not simply one other being in an individual's complex sphere of personal relations. God is not tangibly present as are the bodily others one interacts with in day to day living. For this reason, a person's image of who God is is radically formed by what God is not--by the relations, images, experiences, religious doctrines, and knowledge one has from the world of finite, particular reality.

Research indicates that the formation of the God representation is rooted in the earliest interaction of the infant with the nurturing parents or primary care persons who provide an environment which informs the child that the world can (or perhaps cannot) be trusted to provide his or her most basic needs. This nurturing environment expands to include the larger family and significant others who continue to support the basic trustworthiness of life.

The child's parents themselves, however, provide the most significant early content of the God representation. The child's experiences, both positive and negative, of the parents as powerful beings who can be both good and bad (loving as well as punishing or neglectful) become the initial raw material for the representation. Children under the age of three tend to view their parents as

godlike, all-powerful beings. Around three years of age they begin to realize that their parents are not like this, but are, in actuality, limited in knowledge and power. The godlike qualities then "split off" from the representations that the child has formed of the parents, and these provide major content to the developing God representation.

Formed initially from the stored memories, attitudes, feelings, and images of these powerful primordial persons, the God representation is further elaborated upon, as the child grows, through the stories, prayers, rituals, and answers to his or her questions concerning God and the world. This elaboration adds cognitive, symbolic dimensions to the growing existential sense of trust as well as provides description of the supreme being that is said to be the providential source of all things.

As the person continues to grow, the God representation may or may not keep pace developmentally depending on the adequacy of early parental care and the child's own emerging sense of self-esteem--that is how the child values herself in relation to the others of her world, including God. What becomes critical in this developmental process is the balance between formative and deformative content that has become invested or introjected into the God representation: self-worth and a sense of being lovable and loved stand over against an inadequate sense of self and feelings of lovelessness. If a child invests both positive and negative content in the God representation, and this usually happens to some degree, then God, whose relationship with the person is mediated through this, can seem to be an overbearing task master, a tyrant, a cruel judge, or the source of unforgiving condemnation and scrupulosity. Since the God representation is largely unconscious, individuals may say nice things about God: "God is loving"; all the while they live as if God were a tyrant: "I am no good and should be punished for who I am."

The God representation is therefore the unconscious reservoir of both positive and negative components of interpersonal experience which have been introjected or internalized into the personality. Various attitudes and directives will filter into consciousness from this source, and individuals may react to these in an attempt to manipulate God through particular moral acts as well as petitionary prayer and supplication so as to curry divine favor or avoid divine wrath. The attempt to manipulate, seduce or coerce God may take the form of any number of defense mechanisms, particularly projection. Consequently, a developmentally immature cycle of introjection-projection (i.e., "make me like God, make God like me") can dominate one's relationship with God via the God representation instead of being conditioned by the give and take of authentic love.

The reality of who God is for any given person is, therefore, inevitably mediated by his or her own unique representation of God. Psychiatrist William Meissner states:

The individual's relationship to God will be cast in the form set by the God-representation, to whatever extent that representation functions at a conscious and/or unconscious level. . . . It is in terms of the God-representation that the individual shapes the pattern of his attitudes toward, feelings about, and the quality of his relationship to God. . . . God is not loved in His essence, but through a medium that translates that love into terms of human experience. The image of God must be anthropomorphized in some fashion in order for the experience of the love of God to become humanly possible.²⁰

Some individuals' growth may outstrip an inadequate development of their God representations. They may consequently stop believing in an apparently infantile or tyrannical "God" they feel is not worthy of mature belief. Nevertheless, a denied representation continues to exert influence within the personality from its repressed or suppressed position. It can later be reawakened, revived, and given new life within the context of some experience that has allowed a reworking of those reasons for which it was abandoned. For others, the God representation is never

denied. These persons take responsibility for their relationship with God which demands an ongoing, creative refashioning of the God representation in the light of learning and experience within an environment of faith.

Not only does the God representation mediate one's relationship with God, but as indicated above, it significantly affects one's relations with oneself and others as well. As necessary as the God representation might be for mediating the divine in one's life, it is nonetheless not God. The God representation is a human creation and, like all human creations, is imperfect and prone to distortion and can, therefore, be not only a forming but a deforming "presence" within the psyche, radiating unnecessary pain and suffering throughout a person's life and relationships.

SYMBOLIC AND DIABOLIC IMAGES OF GOD

Anthropomorphized images and representations of God, including many thought to be reflections of the Gospel's view of Jesus, are often distorted and sometimes pathologically deformed. These images can be so malformed in the psychic life of some people that their real character has virtually nothing to do with the New Testament God of love revealed in Jesus Christ. To say such images are diabolic does not necessarily mean that they have their source in Satan or devils. Strictly speaking, "diabolic" is the antonym of "symbolic." The origin of both words can be found in the Greek root *ballein* which means "to throw" or "to cast."²¹ Diabolic (from *dia-ballein*) literally means "to tear apart," while symbolic (from *sym-ballein*) means "to throw together," or "to unite."²²

Paul J. Philibert points out that symbolic images are integrative in that they join together human experience with those meanings and values that engender life and promote health. They weave together, in a meaningful way, mundane reality and "the experience of transcendence." They

provide continuity to life by uniting healing memories of the past with hopeful visions of the future, thus creating the possibility of an authentic experience of present reality. "The symbolic attitude also connects the individual person with the commonwealth of being that is shared with others in trust and hope. Symbolic images are open, contented, and grateful."²³

Diabolic images do the opposite. They break the relation between ordinary reality and the transcendent. They can become subversive tools used "to domesticate transcendence by setting it apart and aim by so doing to placate or control it."²⁴ In this way, they tear apart the fabric of life from the inside out, alienating individuals from each other and from themselves. "The diabolic lacks a meaningful context or fails to respect the difference which meaningful context makes. Diabolic images are divisive, upsetting, and shattering."²⁵

Diabolical images of God, like most other components of the God representation, are largely preconscious, or unconscious. People who have made a commitment to religious belief often have various degrees of diabolic content all the while intellectually denying it and affirming only positive, loving descriptions of God. Philibert believes that it is imperative for each of us to discover "both the diabolic and the symbolic images which express the transformation of our feelings about God."²⁶ He points out that this is not a simple task since both "diabolic/constrictive imagery" and "symbolic/constructive imagery" are fundamentally "pre-articulate or preformed." Most people, therefore, can be assisted in their self-search through therapy or spiritual direction or other "helping conversation." Philibert contends:

Like John of the Cross, we will become sensitive to the reality that no idea, image, feeling, or desire is itself adequate to the expression of God. There will be a two-fold path of spiritual transformation which opens before the believer who begins to work with God-imagery: (a) to become as alert to the signals of symbolic imagery as we are to those of diabolic imagery, and (b) to move beyond imagery itself into a quiet confidence about

God's unconditioned love.²⁷

The teaching of St. John of the Cross provides valuable insight into the person's relationship with God, especially as it matures through the often dark and confusing way of contemplative prayer. In the final section of this article, the illuminative way or the way of proficients in contemplative prayer, as articulated by St. John of the Cross, will be examined in light of some of the contributions that object relations theory has made to our knowledge of the God representation.

THE STAGE OF PROFICIENTS: THE ILLUMINATIVE WAY

St. John of the Cross does not provide his readers with one consistent, systematic scheme for contemplative development.²⁸ To a degree, he follows the traditional division of the spiritual path into three ways: the purgative (way of beginners), the illuminative (way of proficients), and the unitive (way of the perfect).²⁹ For the most part, however, John refers to only two major divisions of the dark night of contemplative development--the night of the senses and the night of the spirit.

These nights have both active and passive phases or dimensions. In the active phase, the importance of the soul's activity tends to be stressed, but in the passive, the divinizing action of God is emphasized. The passive night of the senses marks a person's entry into contemplative prayer following an active phase of ascetical preparation and devotional meditation which uses affections, ideas, images and words. The active night of the spirit represents a relatively stable, peaceful period in the life of prayer, often lasting years, before the passive night of the spirit, although there are intermittent foretastes of the oppressive passive phase which opens the person to full union with God in the spiritual marriage.³⁰ Ideally, all of these phases or dimensions should be examined to

do justice to John's work, however only those that belong to illuminative way will be explicated here in dialogue with object relations theory.

PASSIVE NIGHT OF THE SENSES

The satisfactions and consolations given to those who actively practice meditation help to prepare and strengthen them for a radically new phase in the life of prayer. According to St. John of the Cross, the passive night of the senses takes the soul beyond its own activity in prayer and is a period of transition into the life of infused contemplation. The soul, in this phase, moves from the stage of beginners to that of proficients.

John believes that as long as individuals are able to receive nourishment "from the breasts of the senses" in meditation they should continue to do so.³¹ Sooner or later, though, most meditators enter periods of prayer in which they suffer aridity and an absence of satisfaction, if not suffering and pain.³² After having strengthened the appetite of the soul for spiritual food, God begins to wean her so as to give her the divine gift of contemplation which is a more intimate and deeply spiritual communication of himself.³³ At this point in the life of prayer, people frequently find that they are unable to meditate or reflect effectively as they once did--if they can at all. This aridity is caused by God's shifting the focus of his communication from the sensory to the spiritual part of the soul. Since the sensory part is unable to receive spiritual goods, it now experiences only emptiness and dryness.³⁴

Often, nothing these souls do provides the satisfaction and delight they formerly knew. This is a critical time. It is a real crisis in prayer that frequently spreads frustration, dissatisfaction, and aridity throughout the whole of one's life.

To find out whether or not the time has arrived to refrain from meditation demands both careful guidance and discernment. "If there is no one to understand these persons, they either turn back and abandon the road or lose courage, or at least they hinder their own progress because of their excessive diligence in treading the path of discursive meditation."³⁵ Believing that their condition is the result of their own negligence or sin, they wear themselves out by working harder than before. What is needed, though, is for them to surrender their own activity in prayer (meditation) since God is now leading them into contemplation. Unlike the active meditations and other prayers of the night of the senses, "in the passive way an individual does nothing, for God accomplishes the work in him, while he acts as the recipient."³⁶

St. John of the Cross provides "three signs" for discerning whether or not one should stop practicing discursive meditation and open to contemplative prayer:

The first is the realization that one cannot make discursive meditation nor receive satisfaction from it as before. . . . The second sign is an awareness of a disinclination to fix the imagination or sense faculties upon other particular objects, exterior or interior. . . . The third and surest sign is that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose.³⁷

John explains that the experiences described in the first two signs-- especially the desire to give up meditation--can easily occur as a result of "dissipation and tepidity" rather than from contemplation. He is well aware of pathological manifestations that can be mistaken for contemplation: "The cause could be melancholia or some other kind of humor in the heart or brain capable of producing a certain stupefaction and suspension of the sense faculties."³⁸ There is also the grave possibility that one desires only the "delightful ravishments" of pseudo- mystical experience. In order to avoid these dangerous pitfalls, John insists that one must have the third sign, which is "loving knowledge and awareness in peace," before leaving discursive meditation.³⁹ This third sign is itself the

inbreaking of contemplative prayer. It is entry into the illuminative way.

Object Relations Dialogue. The God representation contains powerful residues of cathected objects, especially the primary care givers. Having been formed through processes of introjection and internalization, the God representation can be said to be part of the person, but also "part" of the many sources which have mediated both grace and alienation. Being largely unconscious, these introjected components can wield much power in the psyche through the representation with which they have become allied. Relations with the God representation, particularly in the life of prayer, permit continued interaction with these internalized components, but this interaction can promote both health and pathology. This interaction allows for a reworking of the representation, so that hurtful, alienating elements of the past can be healed in present experience in as much as the representation is able to mediate love and grace. To the extent it continues to retain diabolic components it must be purged and mortified.

It is clear from the perspective of Christian faith that no created image is God, whether the image is an external object or an inner object representation. St. John of the Cross teaches that since "no form, figure, image or idea . . . is God or like Him," the soul must leave behind all particular knowledge in order to journey farther toward union with God in her prayer.⁴⁰ There is no supernatural knowledge, other than the "general knowledge" of contemplation, that "can serve as a proximate means for the high union with God through love."⁴¹ To reach this union, "one must be united with the darkness" of obscure and loving knowledge that is faith.⁴²

From an object relations perspective, what is important is that the influencing power of the God representation must give way before the obscure presence of God who is experienced like a dark night in contemplative prayer. Only a healthy, symbolic God representation--one that does

not impinge upon the soul in her silence and solitude--can allow the person to enter into the apparent nothingness of incipient contemplation. The healthy (enough) representation allows the presence of God to enter the soul's awareness by giving way to the personal, present reality rather than by mediating this presence through the introjected, internalized past. This means that the truly symbolic representation (as opposed to the diabolic) is itself affected by grace, and that it facilitates the soul's growth in contemplation even though it "disappears" in the moment of contemplative praying. Where there are diabolic elements within the psyche--elements which work against personal integration--the dark night of contemplation becomes, not a gentle inflow, but a raging fire that consumes all that is contrary before it.

THE ACTIVE NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT

The active night of the spirit is said to be "active" because the soul actively seeks to facilitate its contemplative transformation by emptying herself or letting go completely, in prayer, of all feelings, images, and fantasies, as well as particular knowledge and experiences. In prayer, the soul attempts to reject all that is not God in order to ground herself in the divinely infused virtues of faith, hope, and love.⁴³ John is emphatic: the soul "must cast out the strange gods" regardless of their nature and purify herself of their residue. The soul will then be clothed "in a new understanding . . . and in a new love of God in God . . . when the other old ideas and images are cast aside."⁴⁴ This is, according to John, a movement into a cloud of unknowing and forgetting. It is the way of pure and naked faith.⁴⁵ In the active night of the spirit, the contemplative becomes increasingly aware of the divine reality dwelling within her since her vision heretofore was obstructed by fixation upon sensory gratification and particular forms. In contemplative prayer, the

worldly veil of particular forms is torn through to reveal an ineffable light, incomprehensible to the intellect, but available to the soul through the infused virtues of faith, hope, and love.

The following statement by John summarizes succinctly the purpose of the active night of the spirit:

The manifest conclusion is that, when a person has finished purifying and voiding himself of all forms and apprehensible images, he will abide in this pure and simple light, and be perfectly transformed into it. This light is never lacking to the soul, but because of creature forms and veils weighing upon and covering it, the light is never infused. If a person will eliminate these impediments and veils, and live in pure nakedness and poverty of spirit . . . his soul in its simplicity and purity will then be immediately transformed into simple and pure Wisdom, the Son of God. As soon as natural things are driven out of the enamored soul, the divine are naturally and supernaturally infused, since there can be no void in nature.⁴⁶

John clearly stresses here the great importance of the soul's activity in preparing for the divine gift of contemplative union with God. Certain images that he uses, together with his doctrine of the divine indwelling, portray God as one who is waiting, almost anxiously, for the soul to surrender to him in love. "The Father of Lights (Jas. 1:17) . . . is not closefisted but diffuses Himself abundantly, as the sun does its rays, without being a respecter of persons (Acts 10:34), wherever there is room--always showing Himself gladly."⁴⁷ John likens God to the sun who "stands above souls ready to communicate Himself" in the faith and love of contemplation.⁴⁸ This is not the picture of a stingy God who mysteriously metes out contemplation to a few lucky souls. John implies that God stands always ready to give himself and that the ultimate burden of acceptance or rejection rests with the soul herself:

When the soul frees itself of all things and attains to emptiness and dispossession concerning them, which is equivalent to what it can do of itself, it is impossible that God fail to do His part by communicating Himself to it, at least silently and secretly. . . . God will enter the soul that is empty, and fill it with divine goods.⁴⁹

Two points from this quote need to be reiterated. First, it is clearly up to the soul, through grace, to make room for the divine communication; this is all that the soul can do or needs to do. Second, "it is impossible" that God should fail to communicate himself to the soul, although this communication could very well come in silence hidden from the soul.⁵⁰ God's readiness to fill the soul with "divine goods" does not mean that most human beings are ready to receive them. "For God does not bring to contemplation all those who purposely exercise themselves in the way of the spirit, nor even half. Why? He best knows."⁵¹

The "active night of the spirit" is something of a paradox since the soul's "activity" is really a movement into passivity and an openness to God's self-communication and transforming presence. The soul, empowered by grace, acts to remove the blocks and hindrances to contemplation, but then surrenders in passivity to God who infuses this prayer within it. Contemplative prayer in this active night is still "passive prayer." The emphasis on the soul's activity highlights the great amount of work that remains to be done in the spiritual life before divine union is perfectly established. Although this phase may last for years, it is nonetheless an interim between the stage of beginners and the full onset of the passive night of the spirit which prepares the soul for spiritual marriage with her divine spouse.

Object Relations Dialogue. Meditators, in the precontemplative stages of prayer, tend to confuse the presence of a God representation, experienced perhaps in consoling images or reassuring feelings of presence, with the actual presence of God. They tend to look for loving gestures from God and, in their desire, unconsciously seek to retain the object representation under their own control in an effort to secure these reassuring gestures. This attempt at control begins to break down when satisfaction from prayer begins to dry up and the person can no longer resort to meditation or

reflection, but is compelled to wait in the silence, emptiness, and loving awareness of contemplation.

The fullness of object love is not possible until the object representation is destroyed in fantasy so that the real person (of God) can be known as someone other than mere representation. According to British psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott, there is a destructive drive within humans that seeks to awaken the person to the reality of otherness and separateness.⁵² Winnicott observed this destructive drive in the older infant whose anger toward the mother is, at times, vented upon her representation, which is tantamount to its destruction in fantasy. This momentary illusory "destruction" allows the child to begin to see the mother and consequently the child's own self as separate persons. This drive is not restricted to infancy but is found at every stage of human development and is instrumental in the emergence of personal autonomy necessary for mature, mutually responsible relationship.

The motivation for destruction rises from the growing incongruence in the subject's experience between the real person and the psychic representation of the person. The subject attempts, often unconsciously, to destroy or at least defuse the power of the inadequate projection, image, or representation in an effort to locate the real person outside of the subject's control. This occurs, for instance, when an individual, who is angry with another, stops projecting destructive anger upon the other (via a vilified representation) and begins to empathically listen to what the other has to say. In this way fantasied destruction leading to remorse can actually engender an experience of empathy for the object.⁵³ One "stands in their shoes" and begins to sense how the real other must feel. Empathy for the other, made possible by this destruction, will expand into love as the subject seeks authentic communication with the object, which in turn permits independence

and autonomy for the subject.

God's presence, which is no-thing in the soul, cannot abide in union with the spiritual faculties of intellect, memory and will (through faith, hope, and love) as long as the soul continues to relate to God through the spiritually less mature cycle of introjection- projection via the God representation ("I become like God; God then does what I want"). In contemplative prayer, the soul is called beyond the residues of earlier development that make up the object representation even though the representation may have mediated and may, for a long time to come, continue to mediate the real presence of God outside of contemplative union. The soul is called into immediate and intimate relationship with God which transcends all created images. And this transcendence is necessary if the diabolical components are to be healed and the whole person transformed by this deep wound of contemplative love.

These psychic dynamics characterize the person's relation to God in the active night of the spirit as he or she actively seeks to empty the fantasy and imagination of all that is not God. As John insists, the soul must "destroy all strange gods" since God cannot be properly represented by a sensible species.⁵⁴ Knowledge of God through the God representation is remote, not proximate, knowledge. John states that "God has no form or likeness" and that the soul cannot "see" God through any image, comparison, likeness, or figure. The mind that is preoccupied with forms and images, conscious or unconscious, cannot receive the formless, imageless communication of God in contemplative prayer.⁵⁵

John urges the soul to embrace the "pure spiritual cross" which is the "annihilation of all sweetness in God."⁵⁶ This annihilation amounts to nothing less than the active "destruction," or placing aside, of the representation in fantasy and the acceptance of God as one who is beyond the

subject's control. Ideally, this annihilation is not replaced by neurotic longing, or by anxiety over separation, or by despair over the object's perceived absence, but rather by a love that surrenders every claim of control or manipulation over the One who is loved. This annihilation of the God representation is also necessary to heal the distorted and diabolic images, memories, and feelings that are joined with it and continue to fester in the psyche.

Normally, progression to full object love, through the representation's destruction in fantasy, is sometimes accompanied by "attacks," at least symbolically, upon the object. This progression may unfold differently in a relationship with God. Since God, who is pure spirit, cannot directly receive them, these attacks might well be turned in upon the self or projected upon another. The proper target of this destructive drive, however, is the God representation. The tendency toward a certain self-destructiveness as an inadequate expression of this destructive drive might explain some of the intense suffering and felt alienation from self and others experienced in the dark night. This might also account for some the seeming self-hatred that occasionally crops up in the writings of some mystics.

Contemplatives in the active night of the spirit are aware that the divine, loving Mystery dwelling within them transcends every thought, image, feeling or idea. In response to God's self-communication in contemplative prayer, they know that they must pass through and even "destroy" the gods of their own making, as necessary as they might have been in the course of development. To move fully into the contemplative love of God, one must surrender the projective images of God and the corresponding tendency to idolize these projections as a disguised idolization of the self who created them. One must pass through the god of one's own making in order to arrive at the dark, mysterious embrace of God unmediated by any created image.

Love of God is hindered or possibly even blocked by the least remaining residue of the diabolic radiating from a deformed God representation. Communication with God mediated through the inevitably deformed representation is largely unavoidable in the early phases of the journey toward full contemplative union, but at this stage this regressive form of communication must be transcended in the embrace of divine Reality which cauterizes the wounded self with the healing gift of God's perfect love.⁵⁷

THE PASSIVE NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT

Because imperfections still reside in the soul, the active night is not all consolation and peace. Painful foretastes of the deep, annihilating aridity of the passive night break in upon the soul from time to time, with greater or lesser intensity. These periods of dryness and desolation show the proficient that many disordered appetites and desires still afflict her and that she has not yet completely surrendered herself and her desires to God. The soul's disorders and imperfections are all rooted in or reside in the spirit which must enter this purgation of the passive night in order to be finally freed of them.⁵⁸

God works in the soul to purge completely her "faculties, affections, and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior." John describes how God thus "leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings."⁵⁹ This is necessary since the purgation of the passive night of the senses cannot reach the habitual imperfections residing in the spirit. "The difference between the purgations is like the difference between pulling up roots and cutting off a branch."⁶⁰ All

imperfections, inordinate attachments and desires are confronted in this night. Since "two contraries cannot coexist in the same subject," God, who is communicating his deep love in this dark contemplation, and imperfection, still residing in the soul, "combat one another" so that the soul herself "becomes a battlefield."⁶¹

This "cruel, spiritual death" is necessary because the soul cannot attain total supernatural transformation in God if there is even "one attachment or one particular object to which the spirit is actually or habitually bound." All that is not God within the soul is consumed in the raging contemplative fire of His steadfast love. The soul's love is thus deepened and impassioned by this "spiritual inflaming" and "is now beginning to possess something of union with God."⁶² Paradoxically, this night is, for this reason, also called a "happy night." After all the inordinate attachments and desires are expelled, the soul experiences herself overwhelmingly "transformed in these divine touches" of love.⁶³

Object Relations Dialogue. John states that the soul, in this passive night, feels as though she has been completely deserted by God. The peace and delight that the soul knew in the relatively tranquil active night of the spirit are now taken away. Here the fear of total disintegration breaks in on the soul that feels a wrenching separation between herself and God. Why should God do such a thing? According to John, it is not so much God who causes the soul's anguish, but her own inordinate desires and appetites still residing in the spiritual part.⁶⁴ The soul continues to yearn for the consoling breasts of satisfaction, and fears the separation (from her own projections) and the autonomy that must accompany mature object love.

Winnicott defines trauma as "the breaking of the continuity of the line of the individual's existence."⁶⁵ Continuity is threatened, if not broken, when, in a relationship of dependency, an

individual experiences separation from the cathected object or its representation. Anger leading to depression is a typical response to such separation. Too sudden or too great a separation leads to trauma and a corresponding sense of personal derealization.⁶⁶ This is why two people still experiencing the infatuation-dependency of new love will devote themselves to highly ritualized, protracted good-byes before a necessary period of separation. One can only imagine how an engaged bride would feel if her fiancé left town for several days without telling her why or where he was going. It is the trauma of separation, or threat thereof, that engenders and prolongs the anguish of passive purification as the God representation is completely annihilated and emptied out in contemplative prayer.

Another aspect of this trauma concerns the contemplative's loss of her own former identity. Most married persons can remember the moments of doubt--and sometimes fear--that preceded their marriage. Marriage demands sacrifice and permanent commitment; one gives up a great deal to become the spouse of another. Lingering adolescent traits and behaviors must be surrendered as one takes on the mutual obligations and responsibilities of marriage and children. In a similar way, the contemplative fears her approaching spiritual marriage to Christ her divine Beloved with its apparently infinite responsibility and commitment.

Object relations theory contends that authentic love always seeks relationship that promotes personal integrity and autonomy, rather than symbiosis or absorption. Just as mature adults look for a possible spouse among their peers, God calls mature saints to divine union. As John points out, God wants equals and companions in mutual, self-giving love.⁶⁷ This union of love is no infantile fusion, but a union of responsive, responsible persons. It is a union with difference: two become one, but remain two in this unifying love.

As a prelude to the spiritual marriage, the spiritual espousal marks the soul's final encounter with passive purgation in the night of the spirit. The soul's experience of inner annihilation, at this stage, reveals the last vestiges of diabolic components, in both the God and self-representations, still conflicting her from within. The false god and the false self have finally begun to be completely annihilated. Only when this is done can the soul be fully transformed in the realization that she not only is the dwelling place of God, but is Christ's divine spouse here and in eternity.

One's old identity must be traded for the new. It is the artificial identity of diabolic imagery (of God and self) that is under attack in this final battle within the soul. Mature relationship demands a breaking through of authentic selfhood. Here there is both terror and exaltation, agony and ecstasy in the ongoing self-Other revelations that occur in passionate love.⁶⁸ No longer can the mere representations of self and Other maintain their facades. They are stripped bare, laid open, and annihilated in this night. For one whose life-long identity has been caught in the shroud of these distorted images, this is a terrible trauma in the sense that Winnicott defines the term; one's very identity seems to be broken and lost. What was thought to be personal continuity is destroyed as both the self and God representations recede in the darkness of this transforming love.

At this phase of development, the false self has met its ultimate challenge. Its companion, the diabolic god, cannot endure the overwhelming love infused within the soul by the true God who abhors these imposters that have ravaged his beloved from within. It is the diabolic god that is destroyed by God's own loving presence in this dark night of faith and love. With it, the false self disappears forever. It is easy to see how this loss would be received by the contemplative as a mixed blessing. In one moment, it brings both anguish and rapture.

CONCLUSION

Both the raptures and torments that characterize the passive night of the spirit are virtually brought to an end in the spiritual marriage.⁶⁹ This dynamic state is "the unitive way of the perfect" in which the soul is totally, supernaturally transformed in divine union with God. This is the "highest state" that the soul can reach in this life and, for all practical purposes, it can be considered a permanent condition.⁷⁰ This supernatural union between the soul and God is not a union of natures or essences. This is not a pantheistic immersion into undifferentiated unity in which the personhood of the soul is absorbed into the being of God in any absolute manner that would destroy the uniqueness of her own being. While John is emphatic on this point, this union is nonetheless remarkable since "though neither changes its being, both appear to be God."⁷¹

Love is, for St. John of the Cross, the transforming power and cohesive agent in this divine union. He quotes St. Paul who states that "love is the bond of perfection" (Col. 3:14). In this enduring union of passionate love, the soul affirms: "All the ability of my soul and body (memory, intellect, and will, interior and exterior senses, appetites of the sensory and spiritual part) move in love and because of love. Everything I do, I do with love, and everything I suffer, I suffer with the delight of love."⁷²

It is clear from this, that the whole person, including the sensory and spiritual parts, participates in this transforming union.⁷³ In this loving union, the soul experiences an "awakening of the Son of God" within her in which "all things seem to move in unison."⁷⁴ This is an awakening "from the sleep of natural vision to supernatural vision" in which "the soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures."⁷⁵ The soul is now said to have "God's view of things" and regards them as God does.⁷⁶ One's vision of all created reality is transformed in this

supernatural revelation; all things now seem to move in God and God in them with continual motion.⁷⁷

Final transcendence of the God representation allows for a full, enduring embrace of the personal reality of God in mutual self-giving love. In the spiritual marriage, the person maintains an ongoing awareness of the divine presence and does not depend on representational mediation in her continual union. The good, symbolic representation is not completely eliminated, however, but continues to mediate the mystic's communication to others of her experience of the divine Mystery. Instead of knowing God mediated through the representation, the person now, in her supernatural knowledge of God, uses the representation as a cognitive tool to share her divinely infused knowledge with others. The God representation thus continues to facilitate the necessary symbolization of experience, even though the experience itself, abiding in the soul's awareness, remains essentially ineffable.

Thus Your omnipotence, and justice,
And wisdom will be well descried,
I will tell it to the world,
And spread the tidings far and wide
Of Your beauty, power, and sweetness
In one sovereignty allied.⁷⁸

NOTES

1St. John of the Cross, "The Dark Night," Stanza 5 in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: ICS Publications, 1979). In this text, following John's bridal imagery in *The Spiritual Canticle*, masculine pronouns will be used to refer to God and feminine pronouns to the soul. No sexist intent is implied by this author. Abbreviations used here for John's four major treatises are as follows: *Ascent*, *Night*, *Canticle* and *Flame*.

2*Ascent* Theme. Although John is not always consistent in his use of the term, "soul" generally means for him the total human person, body and spirit together in one "whole harmonious composite" (*Night* 2.11.4) forming "one suppositum" or one "subject" (*Night* 1.4.2; 2.3.1). In this article, the terms "person" and "soul" will be used interchangeably.

3*Canticle* 39.4.

4*Ascent* 2.5.4; 1.4.3; *Flame* 1.27; 2.32.

5*Canticle* 22.3.

6*Ascent* Prol. 1,4; *Canticle* Prol. 1-3; *Flame* Prol. 1.

7*Ascent* 1.2.1.

8*Flame* Prol. 1.

9Much of the following article has been condensed from my dissertation "A Study of St. John of the Cross's Theology of Transformation from the Perspective of Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory" (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1989). My work is indebted to my dissertation director Raymond Studzinski, O.S.B. and inspired by his article "Impasse, Finitude, and Guilt," in *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 51 (1987) where he brings St. John of the Cross into dialogue with object relations theory.

10Three good texts on object relations theory are: Rubin Blanck and Gertrude Blanck, *Beyond Ego Psychology: Developmental Object Relations Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1986); Peter Buckley, ed., *Essential Papers on Object Relations* (New York: 1986); and Jay R. Greenberg and Stephen A. Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983);

11Greenberg and Mitchell, 19-20.

12For those who argue in favor of a rapprochement between psychoanalysis and theology see: William W. Meissner, S.J., *Life and Faith: Psychological Perspectives on Religious Experience*

(Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1987); *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); John McDargh, *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion: On Faith and the Imaging of God* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983). *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 18, 1978-88 supplement, s.v. "Object Relations Theory," by Raymond Studzinski. They are in turn significantly influenced by the work of D. W. Winnicott, Paul Pruyser, and Michael Eigen among others. See for instance: Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971); Pruyser, "Forms and Functions of the Imagination in Religion," in *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 49 (1985): 353-70; and Eigen, "The Area of Faith in Winnicott, Lacan and Bion," in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 62 (1981): 413-33.

13Greenberg and Mitchell, 21-22. In classical psychoanalysis, a drive is an innate quantity of psychic energy that empowers psychological processes which facilitate gratification of organismic needs.

14Greenberg and Mitchell, 13.

15Benjamin B. Wolman, ed., *International Encyclopedia of Psychiatry, Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and Neurology* (New York: Aesculapius Publishers, 1977), s.v. "Object Relations Theory," by Peter L. Giovachini.

16For an accessible survey of the history of object relations theory see Richard L. Gregory, ed. *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), s.v. "Freudianism: Later Developments," by John Hunter Padel. For a more technical history, see Greenberg and Mitchell cited above.

17New Catholic Encyclopedia, s.v. "Object Relations Theory."

18Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), especially Chap. 4 "The Representations of Objects and Human Psychic Functionings," 54-84. God is not an object in any literal or particular sense. In object relations theory, however, the term "object" encompasses the concept of "person." Christian faith affirms that God is, analogously speaking, personal and in this sense capable of object (i.e., personal) relationships.

19In the following discussion of the God representation, I will be drawing largely on the work of Rizzuto and to a lesser degree on the work of Meissner and McDargh cited above.

20Meissner, 51-2.

21Paul J. Philibert, O.P., "Symbolic and Diabolic Images of God," in *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 6 (1985): 87-101. See also Kevin G. Culligan, "When God Changes, We Change: God's Image in Psychotherapy." Paper presented in the symposium, "Religious Imagery, Paradox and Metaphor in Psychotherapy," at the 92d annual convention of the American Psychological

Association, 1984, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. For a sociological study of malevolent images of God, see Hart M. Nelsen and Alice Kroliczak, "Parental Use of the Threat 'God Will Punish': Replication and Extension," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23 (1984): 267-77.

22New English Dictionary, ed. James A. H. Murray (Oxford, 1897); cited by Rollo May, *Love and Will* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969), 137.

23Philibert, 92.

24Ibid.

25Ibid. Rollo May states that "the symbolic is that which draws together, ties, integrates the individual in himself and with his group; the diabolic, in contrast, is that which disintegrates and tears apart" (*Love and Will*, 137).

26Philibert, 93.

27Ibid. Philibert cites Ascent 2.4.4.

28For an excellent discussion of this see: Steven Lawrence Payne "The Philosopher and the Mystic: An Analysis of Some Contemporary Philosophical Approaches to Mysticism in the Light of the Teachings of St. John of the Cross," (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1982), 125-37.

29Canticle Theme 2; see also Night 1.9.6; 1.14.1; Canticle 22.3; Flame 1.19.

30There is some debate among scholars over the precise order, number, and sequence of the various stages and nights. John offers "three reasons for calling this journey toward union with God a night": (1) the denial and privation of the appetites, which concern the Ascent, (2) the darkness of faith in the intellect, and (3) the communication of God, which concern the Night (Ascent 1.2.1). Steven Payne suggests that "these 'three reasons' are not consecutive stages of religious development," as some authors assert, "but different aspects of the entire journey; God is always offering Himself to the soul in one way or another, while faith and the complete mortification of the appetites are tasks of a lifetime" ("The Philosopher and the Mystic," 133).

31Ascent 2.17.7.

32Night 1.8.1,4.

33Flame 3.32.

34Night 1.8.3; 1.9.4.

35Night 1.10.2.

36Ascent 1.13.1.

37Ascent 2.13.2-5; compare Night 1.9.1-9; Maxims on Love 40; see also Ascent Prol. 6.

38Ascent 2.13.6.

39Ibid., see also Ascent 2.14.6-7.

40Ascent 3.11.1-2.; see also Ascent 2.16.7-12.

41Ascent 2.8.5; see all of 2.8 & 2.9.1; also 3.11.1.

42Ascent 2.9.4; 2.12.3; 2.24.4; 2.26.5,8,10; 3.12.3. "In contemplation God teaches the soul very quietly and secretly, without its knowing how, without the sounds of words, and without the help of any bodily or spiritual faculty, in silence and quietude, in darkness to all sensory and natural things" (Canticle 39.12). It would seem, perhaps, that John is anticognitive in his insistence that all knowledge, except contemplation, be removed from the intellect. John teaches, however, that the soul does not actually lose her acquired knowledge. Instead, this knowledge, while not in the soul's focal awareness during contemplative prayer, is actually "perfected by the more perfect habit of supernatural knowledge infused in her" (Canticle 26.16-17). Contemplation is received in the absence of discursive thoughts, not by denying the truths of faith (Ascent 2.22.7).

43Ascent 2.6.1-7.

44Ascent 1.5.7.

45Ascent 2.3 & 4.

46Ascent 2.15.4.

47Flame 1.15.

48Flame 3.47.

49Flame 3.46.

50This is not to say that human nature demands grace or that contemplation is not a completely free gift from God. It is clear in John's doctrine that God's radical offer of himself to humanity is a free and perfectly gracious offer and is not mandated by anything in nature.

51Night 1.9.9. Thomas Merton offers insight into this problem when, in his book *What Is Contemplation?* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1978), he explains that although "the great majority of Christians will never become pure contemplatives on earth," this does not mean that they are excluded "from all graces of a deep interior life and all infused prayer." Many are brought to the "threshold of contemplation" without knowing it, and they even experience deeply the "graces akin to contemplation." Merton calls them "masked contemplatives" and says that "they enjoy a kind of 'masked' contemplation" (30-32).

52D. W. Winnicott, "The Use of an Object" (1969), in *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971).

53For Christian contemplatives, this might be expressed as compassion, love, guilt or sorrow over the crucifixion of Christ who died for the sins of humanity.

54Ascent 1.5.6; 2.16.7.

55Ascent 2.16.8-9.

56Ascent 2.7.5.

57Meissner comments on mystical experience: "In these contexts we may not be dealing with regressive merger phenomena in any sense, but rather with a capacity to transcend the usual limits of object relationship in the direction of a consummate union with a loved object" (*Life and Faith*, 50).

58Night 2.3.1. "God so curbs concupiscence and bridles the appetite through this arid and dark night that the soul cannot feast on any sensory delight from earthly or heavenly things. . . . For when the appetites and concupiscences are quenched, the soul dwells in spiritual peace and tranquillity. . . . There is no disturbance but only God's peace and consolation" (Night 1.13.3; see also *Canticle 14 & 15.30*).

59Night 2.3.3. It should be noted that "there is nothing in contemplation or the divine inflow which itself can give pain" (Night 2.9.11). It is the soul's imperfections and sinful habits that are the real source of all the affliction that she suffers (*Ascent 1.12.5-6*; see also 1.7.4).

60Night 2.2.1.

61Night 2.5.4.

62Night 2.11.2. John says that "nothing is obtained from God except by love" (*Canticle 1.13*).

63Night 2.9.3.

64Ascent 3.16.3-6; Night 1.13.3.

65D. W. Winnicott, "The Concept of a Healthy Individual" (1967), in *Home is Where We Start From*, compiled and edited by Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeline Davis (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 22.

66This is why mothers instinctively pursue what Winnicott calls a "graduated failure of adaptation" by which they encourage their children gradually to take responsibility for themselves by simply not providing it for them; see "Mind in Relation to the Psyche-Soma" (1949), in *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

67Canticle 39.3,6.

68John writes: "Wounded by your love I begin to reveal myself● to you in your high contemplation, and I am refreshed and renewed in the love which arises from your contemplation" (Canticle 13.2). He states that in experiences of "supreme contemplation" the imperfect soul seems to take flight from her body, but that these flights of the spirit cease to occur in the state of perfection (Canticle 13.6).

69Canticle 13.6-7; 14 & 15.30; 20 & 21.10-16; 24.5. "In this state these tribulations are now ended, for the soul being purified suffers no more" (Flame 2.24).

70Canticle 12.8; 22.3. It is truly a dynamic state since "love is never idle, but is in continual motion" (Flame 1.8).

71Canticle 22.4. (Such a union is really more remarkable than any absorption into God, since the creature is elevated to God rather than annihilated or absorbed.)

72Canticle 28.8.

73See also: Canticle 28.8; 40.5; Flame 1.36.

74Flame 4.4.

75Flame 4.5-6.

76Flame 1.32.

77Flame 4.7.

78St. John of the Cross, "Romance VII: Continues the Incarnation," Stanza 9, translated by Roy Campbell, *The Poems of St. John of the Cross, with a Preface by M. C. D'Arcy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1951), 73.