
MYSTICAL LIFE AND DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY

AN INQUIRY FROM JOHN OF THE CROSS AND TERESA OF AVILA

**Mar Alvarez-Segura^{1*}, Joan Juanola¹, Dolores Barroso¹,
Montserrat Lafuente¹, Patricia Antonín¹, Martin F. Echavarría¹,
Gloria Morelló-Torrellas² and Paul C. Vitz³**

¹ *Universitat Abat Oliba CEU, C/ Bellesguard, 30, Barcelona, 08022, Spain*

² *Parc Sanitari Sant Joan de Déu (PSSJD), C/ Camí Vell de la Colònia, 25, Sant Boi de Llobregat,
Barcelona, 08830, Spain*

³ *Divine Mercy University, Institute for the Psychological Sciences, 2001 Jefferson Davis Hwy.,
Suite 511, Arlington, VA, USA*

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Abstract

This article analyses the consequences of mystical experiences in changing personality based on the writings of two great Spanish mystics, Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila, who are a paradigm of Catholic mystical life. The idiosyncrasy of Catholic Christian mysticism and how mystical states affect personality in a positive way in major domains (sensory, emotional, cognitive and behavioural) are analysed. For this purpose, we describe the distinctive characteristics of Catholic Christian mysticism, which differ considerably from other mystical experiences that do not have the Trinitarian God as the object of these experiences.

Keywords: mysticism, personality, spirituality, purification, identity

1. Introduction

The mystical experience has been a topic of interest to the Psychology over the past decades [1-4]. Psychologists have seriously debated the meaning of mystical experiences [5] which have been described as “those states in which the form of experience is altered from normal consciousness, resulting in a new understanding of the basic nature of reality, life and the individual” [6]. For many scholars the experience of unity is what characterizes mysticism. James B. Pratt also described the intuition of a Beyond as part of the mystic life [7].

*E-mail: malvarezs@uao.es

Mystical experiences have been subjected to critical analysis from the beginning of the 20th century. For example, the label of insanity was placed upon these experiences by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry in 1976 [*Mysticism: Spiritual quest or psychic disorder?*, Report No. 97, formulated by the Committee on Psychiatry and Religion, New York, 1976]. Some authors such as Pierre Janet [8] equated mystical ecstasy to pathology of emotions that ultimately destroy the personality. These misinterpretations were based upon established similarities between mysticism and madness at the purely experiential level [9]. In the same vein Freud himself speaks of mystical experience as a regression to an earlier infantile state that is manifested with narcissistic symptoms, withdrawal from the world, and with conflicts for which solutions are sought by religion [10].

For such authors these experiences are capable of being reductively explained by psychological processes [11]. However, William James insisted that mystical experiences are valid forms of human experience incapable of being reductively explained by psychological processes. James provided a counter to natural-scientific and psychoanalytic psychologies, which denied the possibility that religious experiences might have a truly transcendent dimension [12]. The study of spirituality and mysticism in Psychology has tried to move away from traditional religious views [13]. Due to the fact that social scientists cannot confirm any ontological claims based upon mystical experience, they have ignored them and reduced the study of mystical experiences to their phenomena experience. In this line, James described mysticism as a state of consciousness that is passive, transient, ineffable and noetic. The consequence of that reductionism is that it places mystical states, dream states and alcoholic intoxications at the same level [W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Kindle Edition, A public Domain Book, 1994, 336].

We see then that the exclusive study of this phenomenon from a scientific approach has led to a loss of wealth and complexity in trying to gain a greater understanding. However, an approach involving Philosophy and Theology has been suggested by theorists such as Garrett, who proposed that “troublesome transcendence” must be confronted by social scientists as much as by theologians and philosophers [14].

From our perspective mystical experiences cannot be adequately understood without the assumption that transcendent objects of experience are believed to be real and foundational to those who experience them [15]. Not only can social sciences illuminate the true nature of mystical experience, it is also necessary to turn to ontological foundations that uphold mystical experiences [16].

Catholic Christian mysticism offers a rich model to fully understand the wealth and beauty of these experiences because it is based on ontological reality: the presence of the Trinitarian God in the bottom of our soul or spirit [17, 18]. Saint Teresa states it and calls this Trinitarian God “the Beloved”: “With her, we penetrate into the inner world to find, in an exciting journey to the centre of the

soul, the Beloved, a Hidden God beyond that superficial level of the senses where we are used to living” [19]. Therefore, according to Garrigou-Lagrange [20], to understand Catholic Christian mysticism and the extraordinary phenomena that can be present in it, one has to regard its formal object and not only to its manifestations.

With the study of the consequences of mystical experiences in personality development, in this article we will try to understand them based on the writings of two great Spanish mystics, Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila, who are a paradigm of Catholic Christian mystical life and known for their mystical experiences, beyond the specific extraordinary phenomena they describe. We will describe the main changes in personality at the sensorial, emotional, cognitive, identity and behavioural domains that arise from their writings.

2. Transformation of the personality

Christian mystical life is understood as a state of “deification in which the person, keeping her identity, is fulfilled by the divine activity” [21]. This process has consequences at the sensory, affective, cognitive and behavioural levels. In Christian mystical tradition, the soul includes the psychological capacities whose centre is the spirit where mystical experiences take place. For Saint John of the Cross the centre of the soul, or spirit, has an intentional objective, and it is the point where all the energies of the soul are aimed: “And so, when we speak of union of the soul with God, we speak of the union and transformation of the soul with God, which is not being wrought continually, but only when there is produced that likeness that comes from love” [22].

The spiritual opening towards the presence of God causes a radical transformation of the soul, but it nevertheless requires a love-based recognition of this transcendence. We will analyse the order of this transformation that starts in the sensorial domain and progresses to the cognitive (including identity), emotional and behavioural domains.

It is important to clarify that the person that goes into the mystical life does not suffer a nullifying process of his/her human condition [21], but rather a transformation in which he/she reaches greater moral and psychological perfection, through being united with God. In the Christian Catholic tradition perfection or ‘purification’ is understood as the *potentiation* of all psychological and spiritual capacities as the person becomes the image of God. It implies also the cultivation of an exercise of virtues, what is called an *edification* [23]. This process is preceded by an emptying that is not against the personal individuality but is the opposite, a deification of her/his being [21]. The human faculties progressively lose their tendency and desire to gain other objects than God, because the person is progressively more attracted by God.

2.1. Sensorial reorganization

Saint John of the Cross writes about the ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ in reference to the state of the soul in which he/she ceases to feel desire for the sensorial pleasures (or inferior goods). He uses words like ‘emptiness’, ‘dryness’ and ‘insipidness’ to explain this metaphorically. This state of the soul is a means of purification of the imperfections of the soul, i.e. the soul’s attachment to the pleasures of the body and fame and pride. This prepares him to value superior goods. John of the Cross metaphorically writes about it as the purification of gold in the melting pot [24]. It is then not a way towards a denial of oneself, but towards ones ‘perfection’ or *edification*.

Teresa understands it in the same way in her book ‘The Interior Castle or The Mansions’ [Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*, B. Zimmerman (ed.), 1921, http://hjpg.com.ar/teresa_moradas/moradas_7_2.html]. She describes her nature before this transformation of the sensorial domain as a creature. Only by putting the sensory domain in service of love to God can the transformation of the personality start: “if we empty ourselves of all that belongs to the creature, depriving ourselves of it for the love of God, that same Lord will fill us with Himself” [http://hjpg.com.ar/teresa_moradas/moradas_7_2.html, 122].

The way, in which Saint John of the Cross and Saint Theresa of Avila, write about it indicates a direct initiative and action of God in this process. They do not think of mystical life as a final act of God for one’s efforts and success in maintaining certain practices. Catholic mystical life can only be understood as grace received freely from God [21]. It would not be correct, consequently, to conceive mystical life simply as the highest grade of an ascetic practice, reachable solely in methodically maintaining certain practices of self-repression of the natural desires of the body. This way of understanding could be considered a kind of semi-pelagianism, which would overestimate the human capacity [25].

This is the reason why Saint Teresa of Avila talks about the rejection of the corporeal. It is a rejecting not intended as rejection itself, but rather so as to be filled by God: “This withdrawal from the corporeal must doubtless be good, since it is advised by such spiritual people, but my belief is that it must be practiced only when the soul is very proficient: until then, it is clear, the Creator must be sought through the creatures” [26].

2.2. Cognitive and emotional reorganization

Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila are insistent in their writings about the desire they have to be united with God and to become suitable to receive grace to mould their nature to God. According to their writing, mystical life is subsidiary to different degrees, and leads to a progressive state of complete union with God that Saint Teresa calls ‘spiritual marriage’ (*matrimonio espiritual*). In this process there is not only a purification of the senses, but there is also an emptying of the mind and detachment of the will. It is

ultimately through this second *purification* process that it is possible to be completely united to God. His grace is the common root for two distinct but simultaneous effects: the enlightenment of the mind and the kindling of affection [27]. This enlightenment of the mind implies penetrating and distinguishing reality in the way God understands it. This process goes through an initial state of ‘impotence’ of our own reason to catch Divine realities which produces mental struggle until Divine understanding penetrates our reason and allows us to understand reality from Him.

Not only the mind, but also the will has to go through a process that is emptied of personal satisfaction. It allows the mystic to appreciate and desire reality in the way God wants him or her to: “Similarly, since the affection of love which is to be given to it in the Divine union of love is Divine, and therefore very spiritual, subtle and delicate, and very intimate, transcending every affection and feeling of the will, and every desire thereof, it is fitting that, in order that the will may be able to attain to this Divine affection and most lofty delight, and to feel it and experience it through the union of love, since it is not, in the way of nature, perceptible to the will, it be first of all purged and annihilated in all its affections and feelings, and left in a condition of aridity and constraint, proportionate to the habit of natural affections which it had before, with respect both to Divine things and to human.” [24, p. 116-117]

At this point human desires are taken from them in an indescribable manner; they are rapt from themselves and are immersed in the Divine Will [28].

2.3. Identity reorganization

As Paloutzian et al. argue, spiritual transformation experiences can affect radical and profound life changes in one’s identity and purpose in life [29]. The central psychological feature of this experience is characterized as a transformation of the self-due to commitment to the sacred [30].

In the context of Catholic Christian mysticism, the mystical experience, far from having dissolution and disintegration of identity as the main feature (or a self-delusion), involves the mystic acquiring a strong identity. It offers coherence in contrast to the psychotic experience that provokes disintegration [4, 12]. Velasco suggests that there are several crucial features in the mystical experiences at the phenomenological level. These are mystical passivity and encounter with the Divine. According to this author, all mystical reality is supported by personal reality between the passivity and the Divine [18, p. 320-321]. The passivity as an internal disposition is the acceptance and receptivity of the Divine. In this positive perspective, some authors speak of this psychodynamic reality as a fuller experience of selfhood and identity [4]. This transformation consists of a kind of clash of consciousness [31] because of the proximity of the self, thus forcing the mystic to a true awakening.

In this context we can situate ‘passivity’, in which the person stops being self-centred and discovers the call to divine truth [18, p. 320-321], showing the nature of grace which confers a strong sense of spiritual identity [32]. This

feature breaks the overwhelming emphasis on the self that other spiritual methods propose. Without clearly recognising Divine initiative and grace, spiritual methods easily end up promoting self-deification combined with a belief in the ability of the omnipotent self [33, 34].

However, through mystical experience the person is perceived as an object of intense and penetrating love. The indwelling of God in the soul implies a strong sense of wholeness [32]. Saint Theresa explains it clearly in her poems: “Myself surrendered and given,/ the exchange is this:/ my Beloved is for me, / and I am for my Beloved” [35].

All these experiences are characterized by staying in ‘poverty of spirit’ as a humble subjection to God because one appreciates God’s beautiful mercy. They perceive and experience the love of God within and being raised to an increased knowledge and love of God [36]. These mystics then do not confuse their own identity; quite the contrary, they are able to know themselves much better through God’s wisdom. Edith Stein clarifies this: “When [the soul] has reached [this inmost sphere] God will work everything in the soul, itself will have to do no more than to receive. Yet its share of freedom is expressed in just this receiving. Beyond this, however, freedom is involved even far more decisively, for in this state [mystical marriage] God works everything only because the soul surrenders itself to God perfectly. This surrender is itself the highest achievement of its freedom. Saint John [of the Cross] describes the mystical marriage as the voluntary mutual surrender of God and the soul [in love] and attributes to the soul at this stage of perfection so great a power that it can dispose not only of itself, but even of God.” [37]

2.4. Behavioural reorganization

According to Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Ávila, a mystical state or union with God cannot be attained without a moral purification or change in life. Thus, we see a call to the person to a commitment to concrete changes in his/her life as a waiver of the sensual, power, vanity, pride, etc. Other mystical traditions also pose this requirement; the Sufis speak of renunciation and detachment from anything that distracts the heart from God and the Upanishads propose a first sort of moral order: elimination of violence, lies, greed, sexual disorder, external and internal purification [38].

This kind of experience, when a considerable union and constancy is acquired based on previous explanations, becomes the organizing centre of a new plan of life. It is due to the fact that all inner capacities are reoriented more and more toward the Absolute and are attracted then by His mercy and Love. This reorientation of the heart towards absolute love is the key to the transformation of the abilities of the soul and the transformation of life. Life appears dynamic and constructive since God becomes the centre of the spirit and provides an extraordinary dynamism. The presence of the Absolute appears as the dynamic principle of the person and holds a reorientation of the heart towards absolute love. This allows a radical change of orientation that prints the

conversio cordis in the person [18]. Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks about a transmutation of the soul because it holds a restructuring of all the dimensions of the person around the new centre of existence [39].

An extraordinary unification of personality takes place, and it involves a greater life commitment. Therefore, the mystics do not withdraw or keep their own experience to themselves. On the contrary, they extend enormous generosity and creativity that is manifested for example in the foundations of monasteries in the case of Saint Theresa, or creative art as in the poems of Saint John of the Cross. Life appears stronger and more beautiful than it had been before. Therefore, their existence is full and complete and they have a positive effect on those surrounding them as well [40].

3. Discussion

After the exposition of the effects of mystical life in personality development, some general features regarding mystical life need to be clarified. They are related with similarity to depressive disorders [41], the incompatibility with a self-sufficient attitude and the role of divine grace.

This entire mystical journey is a painful process, although hopeful and sweet at the same time. If it is studied by authors who are not familiar with spiritual or mystical life it can easily be misinterpreted as a depressive process. Phenomenologically it carries a different qualitative appearance that cannot be captured with quantitative methods [42]. In the *purifying* states the mystic comprehends the contrast between his/her own nature and the magnanimity and beauty of God. The love of God offers clarity to his/her imperfections which brings about a state of personal unworthiness, constriction and sadness.

This sadness however could be described as sweet-sad because it is accompanied by God's mercy, which at the same time fills the human heart with hope [43]. Joy and sadness intertwine because they are touched by Divine love, which allows the mystics to contemplate the distance between them and the Trinity. They cannot fully enjoy the eternal life that they have touched temporarily. This experience therefore increases their longing for eternity. It is brilliantly expressed in Saint Teresa's poem "I live without living in myself": "this jail, these iron bars / in which the soul is put! / Just awaiting my departure / causes in me such a pain, / that I die because I do not die." [44]

This 'pain of love' cannot be captured with a scientific approach and has easily and superficially been misinterpreted as a depressive episode.

Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa as masters of inner life offer wise advice regarding authentic spiritual life. They know how easily spiritual greed can penetrate the soul and as a consequence make one place oneself in the centre of the spiritual life, promoting a narcissistic enrichment. This is the reason for the discourse about the importance of following what is commanded by the spiritual guide. It is the way to prevent believing that one's desires are God's will. Such an attitude could lead to a misunderstanding of mystical life, looking avidly for the fruits of God in ourselves, and not for God Himself. This is a

crucial point to differentiate from other forms of spiritual experience. Paul Vitz advises on the important risk that in the desire to be guided, God becomes a narcissistic projection of our own needs and desires [33].

The entire mystical life could not be understood without the act of sanctifying grace. It is described in by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church as a quality or supernatural or infused disposition that inheres in the soul, making it a partaker of the divine nature [45]. Our substantial nature receives a new supernatural and divine being that makes us participants in the intimate life of three divine Persons [46]. This is essential doctrine for Catholicism: grace heals and fulfils human nature. Grace transforms in a real and radical way, not only the substance of the soul but also its capacities through theological and moral virtues, and gifts from the Holy Spirit [47].

4. Conclusions

In favour of the recognition of Catholic mystical idiosyncrasy, we must note at least three distinctive characteristics: first, mystical life does not nullify the person, but potentiates him/her; second, mystical life is not achieved by one's own power, so a spiritual guide is necessary; and third, mystical life does not transcend or leave aside the ordinary channels for receiving the divine Grace.

In the study of mystical influence in personality Catholic mysticism offers a rich model to fully understand the wealth and beauty of these experiences. This analysis cannot be reduced to its psychological manifestations, but it is its ontological reality that makes it possible as well as the presence of the Trinitarian God in the spirit. Without an adequate religious foundation, the complexity and richness of these experiences can easily be reduced to the study of diverse phenomena that have only a 'similar look' but are opposed to the Catholic Christian mystical experiences treated here, being focused solely on subjective, egocentric and sensory aspects. On the other hand, they can be misunderstood as depressive episodes.

For the Catholic Christian tradition, mystical experiences imply a new understanding of reality, life and the individual. The process also implies the acquisition of higher mental functional and emotional levels, where new meanings about life and reality come into play. It also implies much more since it entails a whole transformation of the psychological capacities because mystics open up and receive Trinitarian richness. This union is primarily God's movement toward presence in us, rather than our moving ourselves. In order for this process to be effective, the person needs to abandon the pretence of being subject and centre, which presides over all his/her relations in reference to worldly objects, and to accept a radical decentralizing, the exit from himself/herself, toward God. The spiritual way to perfection is then, according to these preeminent Spanish saints, neither an autonomous process nor guided by one's own feelings. It implies a decentralization that does not suppose an annihilation of the personality. It is quite the opposite since recognizing the presence from which we originate is to coincide with that which is beyond

ourselves, which makes us permanent, and therefore it is to enter in the only way of realization of ourselves beyond ourselves. The complete union or ‘*mystical marriage*’ serves to break up negative sets, ideas and attitudes and to make a new synthesis possible. This synthesis is the opposite of disintegration since it allows a whole integration of personality under the action of Divine love.

All this transformation justifies the fact that some people, throughout their lives, have been able to face difficulties and problems without despair and to conquer, with extraordinary patience, the highest summits of hope and love. It makes it possible for a pact with the Infinite to sprout from the depths of the human soul and be penetrated by God’s love, illuminating a complete personality. The true meaning of mystical life and the comprehension of the new unified personality can only be grasped from a transcendental perspective.

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