

ATHEISM AND CONTEMPLATION

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IN THIS PAPER I should like to offer some reflections upon two religious movements which not only affect in some general way the character of the twentieth century, but have come to assume such monumental importance that they provide something of the context in which contemporary theology must be done. They pose or circumscribe directly many of the issues which lie at the heart of contemporary religious consciousness, even the ability to believe or not to believe, and they permeate the atmosphere in which theological inquiry is considered either critically valuable or culturally peripheral. These reflections, however, must limit themselves severely to a single aspect of these great concerns. Much that is crucial to their comprehensive description and evaluation—their profound social implications, their historical process, their economic and social bases, the varieties assumed in their modern embodiment—must be omitted. What I wish to argue is that these two movements are not simply juxtaposed, that they do more than constitute two divergent preoccupations and positions within contemporary theological commitments, that both of them treat, as they must treat, the phenomenon of religious experience and its conceptualizations, and that both of them intersect at a single hermeneutical issue: the problem of religious projection. Atheism and contemplation, either in their practice or in the critical theories by which they are described and defended, both raise the question: What is the focus of religious awareness and of its commitments?

ATHEISM

The first of these developments was recognized by men as diverse as John Henry Newman and Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1887, after Nietzsche had published the initial edition of *The Gay Science* and had complemented it with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, he returned to this prior work to complete it with the great fifth book. Earlier the Madman in the marketplace had announced the death of God. Now Nietzsche spelled out the precise meaning which this striking metaphor carried: "The greatest recent event—that 'God is dead,' that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe."¹ In England, the aging Newman felt the same drawing on of night, the same shadow lengthening

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 5 (New York: Random House, 1974) no. 343, p. 279.

over what had once been Christian civilization. In the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* he wrote:

And in these latter days, in like manner, outside the Catholic Church things are tending,—with far greater rapidity than in that old time from the circumstance of the age,—to atheism in one shape or other. What a scene, what a prospect does the whole of Europe present at this day . . . and every civilization through the world, which is under the influence of the European mind!²

For both Newman and Nietzsche, this gradual but profound erosion of religious belief, an erosion not halted but promoted and embodied in the liberal evacuation of dogma, constituted a massive cultural phenomenon: the emergence of a certain cast of mind in greater and greater predominance, one whose sensibilities and educational background, whose ambit of intellectual interests and engagements were so shaped as to define men and women constituted unable to believe. What Nietzsche and Newman grasped was that religious impotence or disinterest would not remain a private or isolated phenomenon. It would increasingly characterize the “educated intellect of England, France, and Germany,” whose influences would eventually tell upon every routine aspect of civilization.³ Both Newman and Nietzsche, albeit with vastly different evaluations, recognized the enormity of what was happening, and in this realization they stand as prophetic figures within the decline of the nineteenth century.

Notice, in the oft-repeated scene from the third book of *The Gay Science*, when the Madman lights a lamp in the day and rushes screaming into the marketplace, it is the Madman alone who cries out: “I seek God! I seek God!” The marketplace convulsed in ridicule: “Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Or is he afraid of us? . . . Thus they yelled and laughed.” The difference between the Madman and the market crowd was not that one believed and the other did not. Neither believed, and God died in the event of His own incredibility. But the Madman alone knew what they had done and what they had lost. “I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? . . . What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives.” Here the Madman fell silent before the astonished listeners. He threw his lantern upon the ground, smashing it into pieces. “I come too early, he said then, my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. . . . This deed is still more distant from

² John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (New York: Norton, 1968) chap. 5, p. 188.

³ *Ibid.*

them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves.”⁴

In his lectures with Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre maintains that the characteristic of the contemporary debate between the atheists and the theists is the decline of its cultural urgency. It doesn't make any difference. The tension between religious belief and unbelief in the nineteenth century, which one can trace in the lives of Matthew Arnold and Henry Sidwick, cannot be found in contemporary culture.⁵ But this is to miss much of the point of Nietzsche's myth. It is precisely the absence of this tension within the latter-day nineteenth-century marketplace which convinces the Madman that human beings do not understand what they have done. Two facts were poignantly obvious for Nietzsche: that the incredibility of God within the marketplace constitutes His death; and that this was the elimination of a radically unimportant God by those who clustered there. The God who was unbelievable was finally irrelevant. Nietzsche never draws out the implications of these two insights, yet this is a point of critical importance. For if the death of God is constituted by His massive incredibility, and if this incredibility rests upon One who is fundamentally unimportant, then the question can legitimately be leveled at the Madman of *The Gay Science* and at the prophetic Zarathustra: What God has died beneath these knives? What is the nature of the religious belief which has perished?

Much of the philosophy of the nineteenth century was in one way or another an attempt to answer such a question. The interpretation of religious belief, the meaning of religious practice and of religious objects, their relationship with art and with philosophy, engaged men of critical reflective authority.

Pivotal to this history of interpretation, perhaps the central figure to alter the flow of Western religious philosophy into radically new channels, was Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach insisted upon a new hermeneutic of religion as it existed, reaching its real assertions—as Freud would later interpret dreams—by moving through symbolic structures into their hidden content. It was Feuerbach, maintains Sidney Hook, who began the Marxist revolution. His critique of religion was the beginning of all critiques—not just for Marx but for all the young Hegelians.⁶ Feuerbach saw himself simply as a translator, and his work only a hermeneutic of religious belief—the religious faith proclaimed by the Christian Church to men and women in the marketplace.

⁴ *The Gay Science*, Book 3, no. 125, p. 182.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University, 1969) 5, 17–20, 29.

⁶ Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1962) 248–49. Cf. also Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979) 8; N. Lobkowitz, “Marx's Attitude toward Religion,” *Review of Politics* 26 (July 1964) 22.

What was the truth of this belief? It was and always had been projection. Human beings worshiped what they had found within themselves and had objectified; what they believed is what their fears and loves projected into objectivity, into an imaginative existence over and against their own: "Thus man transforms his feelings, desires, imaginings, and thoughts into beings; though what he wishes, thinks or imagines has no other existence than in his mind, it takes an objective existence for him."⁷ The cumulative critique of religious belief in the nineteenth century and the judgment which has lain upon it throughout the twentieth was succinctly summarized in Feuerbach's synthesis of his own work in a sentence: "This is why I wrote in the *Essence of Christianity* that man's belief in God is nothing other than his belief in himself, that in his God he reveres and loves nothing else than his own being."⁸

Periodically, this assertion has found articulation in the history of Western philosophy, perhaps for the first time in Xenophanes' attack on Homeric theology and his acid statement about the projectional nature of popular religion: "If cattle and horses or lions had hands or were able to draw with their hands and do the work that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves."⁹ This theme would move in its varied way to David Hume: "The Idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflection on the Operations of our own Mind and augmenting those qualities of Goodness and Wisdom, without Bound or Limit."¹⁰ But Xenophanes professed a commitment to the God who was above the gods of Homer: "One God, greatest among the gods and men, in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought."¹¹ Hume—without considering why one was "augmenting without Bound or Limit"—while he came to dismiss institutional religion as the "established superstition," countenanced "one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.*"¹²

But God simply-as-projection comes to an irreversible emergence in

⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) 255.

⁸ *Ibid.* 254.

⁹ Xenophanes, fr. 15 (Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 5, 109, 3); as in G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963) n. 172, p. 169.

¹⁰ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding and Other Essays*, Essay 2 (New York: Washington Square, 1963) 23.

¹¹ Xenophanes, fr. 23 (Clement, *Strom.* 5, 109, 1); as in Kirk-Raven, n. 173, p. 169.

¹² David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Part 12 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1946) 227. Cf. James Collins, *God in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago: Regnery, 1969) 114-22.

the work and influence of Ludwig Feuerbach. Indeed, the psychological use of the word "projection," so pervasive in contemporary English, originates with George Eliot's translation of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. Eliot employed this term to translate two German ones which Feuerbach took from Hegel: *Vergegenständlichung*, "objectification," and *Entäußerung*, "alienation."¹³ In Feuerbach, this interpretation of all religious belief is given a definitive importance and moves out in its influence upon such diverse fields as the revolutionary philosophy of Marx, the psychology of Freud, and the sociology of Durkheim. The conviction of the man/woman in the marketplace that religious belief is no longer possible, that it is some primitive form of human projection—a conviction which for Marx is now more atmosphere than argument, much more part of the air we breathe than a conclusion seriously questioned—must be engaged in Feuerbach as it is mediated into our culture through Feuerbach. In his own words and in contrast with the speculative idealism of Hegel:

I, on the contrary, let religion itself speak; I constitute myself only its listener and interpreter, not its prompter. Not to invent, but to discover, "to unveil existence," has been my sole object; to see correctly, my sole endeavour. . . . If therefore my work is negative, irreligious, atheistic, let it be remembered that atheism—at least in the sense of this work—is the secret of religion itself.¹⁴

Feuerbach takes from Hegel not the dialectical method but the reflexivity of the dialectical method. What becomes reflexive in his method, i.e., in his "historical-philosophical analysis," is a new principle, the real and complete nature of the human person.¹⁵ What constitutes this person, this *ens realissimum*, are reason, will, and affection. It is critical to notice in Feuerbach that each of these has itself for its own object. The agent and the object are ultimately the same.¹⁶ Out of this strong reflexivity of

¹³ Eugene Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (New York: Praeger, 1970) 167, n. 43.

¹⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957) xxxvi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* xxxiii, xxxv, xli.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 3–5: "Reason, Will, and Love are not powers which a man possesses, for he is nothing without them, he is what he is only by them; they are the constituent elements of his nature, which he neither has nor makes, the animating, determining, governing powers—divine absolute powers—to which he can oppose no resistance. . . . In the object which he contemplates, therefore, a man becomes acquainted with himself; consciousness of the objective is the self-consciousness of man. We know the man by the object, by his conception of what is external to himself; in it his nature becomes evident; this object is his manifested nature, his true objective ego. . . . The *absolute* to man is his own nature. The power (*Macht*) of the object over him is therefore the power of his own nature. Thus the power of the object of feeling is the power of feeling itself; the power of the object of the intellect is the power of the intellect itself; the power of the object of will is the power of the will itself."

principle come the three arguments which run through all of the major works of Feuerbach, three central arguments which disclose the secret of religion as atheistic anthropology: the argument from consciousness, the argument from language, and the argument from the historical experience of alienation.

Since all consciousness is radically self-consciousness, Feuerbach can put in the *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* the argument from human awareness precisely: (a) God is an object for human consciousness. He exists only for the human person, i.e., he is not an object of animal consciousness. (b) The object to which a being necessarily and essentially relates is nothing else than its own revealed essence, its objectified nature. Even if the object is common to several individuals of the same kind, then the form in which each seizes it, i.e., the object so modified, is the subject's own nature. Essential consciousness is essential projection.¹⁷

This conclusion is confirmed by Feuerbach's argument from language: "What the subject is lies entirely in the attributes (in the predicates) of the subject; that is, that the predicate is the true subject; it is also proved that if the divine predicates are attributes of the human nature, the subject of these predicates is also human nature."¹⁸ The burden of *The Essence of Christianity* consists in demonstrating that the predicates of God—omnipotent, wise, good, etc.—are fundamentally human predicates, attributes of human feelings or intellectual skills. If, then, these predicates are at their root human, the empty subject—the unknown which is nothing more than its predicates—is human. Whether the analysis be of human consciousness or human language, the divine subject is found to be human.

There is a third argument, historically far more telling than either of the previous two. To enrich God, the human person must become poor; that God may become all, man must be nothing. What you attribute to God, you take and project—literally, cast off—from the human person. The human is sinful, that God may be holy. "Man is wicked, corrupt, incapable of good; but on the other hand, God is the only good—the good Being."¹⁹ God becomes progressively in this disjunction the projected and alienated essence of the human person, projected into objectivity and leaving the human being impoverished in direct proportion to God's own exaltation: "Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is—man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is perfect, man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God is almighty, man weak."²⁰

¹⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Principle no. 7 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966) 8–11. Cf. *Essence of Christianity* 4–14.

¹⁸ *Essence of Christianity* 18–25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 26–28.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 33.

Feuerbach is often answered by a philosophical psychology which distinguished a modification of consciousness from a creation *ex nihilo*, by an analysis of predication which insists upon analogical attribution of human and divine predication, and by such critiques as de Lubac's, which points to the human, enhancing qualities within the Christian tradition. I am personally sympathetic to each of these criticisms; I think that they can be quite telling. But I wonder if they do not miss something of the point. Feuerbach does not claim to interpret what religious consciousness should be doing, but what it is doing, what is the actual belief of the marketplace. The analyses which he brings to bear upon religious consciousness are very incisive. Is it not obvious from the history of religion, even of Christianity, that the human person spontaneously has tended to (a) create the divine in his/her own image, (b) reduce transcendence to human managements, and (c) destroy human values as if one had to choose between the glory of God and the glory of humanity?

Projection as characteristic of human consciousness and practice was a discovery and a revolution against the objectivity-claims of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and has influenced almost all of the sciences and their concomitant philosophies. Durkheim argued that in religious practice the human society was worshipping itself writ large. History has moved from the objectivity and clean-slate theories of von Ranke to recognize that human interest and preconceptions are always involved in the selection of facts and in the evaluation of data.

Perhaps the most startling and recent change in this direction has occurred in physics. Von Neumann's discussion of observation and measurement climaxes serious questions about the "objectivity" of contemporary physics. In classical mechanics the contribution of the observer to the content of what he studied was regarded as negligible, since the measurement process was fully analyzable in terms of the equations of motion alone. Von Neumann, following a paper of Neils Bohr of 1929, postulated that the intervention of the observer through the process of measurement introduces into the causal propagation of the wave function an instantaneous change which is discontinuous and noncausal.²¹ This means that, in sharp contrast to the universal hopes of the Newtonian physics "to derive the rest of the phenomena of Nature by the same kind of reasoning from mechanical principles" and the centuries of mechanics which followed, "it is no longer possible to formulate the laws of quantum mechanics in a complete and consistent way without a reference to human consciousness."²² The postulation of projection within particle

²¹ Max Jammer, *The Conceptual Development of Quantum Mechanics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 370-71.

²² Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Nature Philosophy* 1 (Berkeley: University of California, 1962) xviii. See Jammer, *Conceptual Development* 373.

physics changed radically the statements which this science would support: "Experience only makes statements of this type: an observer has made a certain (subjective) observation; and never any like this: a physical quantity has a certain value." Despite serious and rigorous attempts to unseat this projection-postulate, it has won many physicists who would agree with Heisenberg that the "laws of nature which we formulate mathematically in quantum theory deal no longer with the particles themselves, but with our knowledge of the elementary particles."²³

Religious interpretation, then, was not alone in its discovery of projection, but assimilated this discovery as a device to discount any independent reality to the object of belief. One more example might underscore the fundamental nature of this modern critique in its religious employment.

In 1907 Sigmund Freud published his hypothesis that obsessional neurosis and religious practice are parallel. Both are defense mechanisms against instinctual satisfaction and against future punishment, linked with an inner sense of guilt. The essential resemblance between religious practice and obsessional neurosis lies with the renunciation of the satisfaction of inherent instincts, and the chief difference between them is that neurosis is predominantly sexual, but religious practices are egoistic in origin. The parallel is so close that one could define obsessional neurosis as a private religious system or describe religion as a universal obsessional neurosis. What is interesting here is that these patterns of religion come out of psychic displacement to the eternal or ceremonial, a displacement which allows a person to express unconscious motivations through symbolic activity, warding off pervasive anxiety, guilt, and danger.²⁴

By *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Freud had worked out a much more complicated structure of religious belief, one which corresponded to the two aspects of culture or civilization: knowledge (*Wissen und Können*) and regulations (*Einrichtungen*). Every civilization depended upon these two aspects of social life, and consequently had to compensate its members for the instinctual sacrifices which each enacted in the form of work and renunciation of destructive antisocial drives. Religious ideas become for Freud the fourth mental asset of a civilization, means by which the masses could be coerced or reconciled or recompensed for these needed renunciations. Religions exhibit the two aspects which civilization possesses: what is knowledge in civilization, becomes belief in

²³ Newton, *ibid.*

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 9 (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74) 116 ff.

religion; what are regulations within a civilization, become the practices and observances alluded to above. The structure of religion mirrors in its anatomy the structure of all civilized life.

Belief can be followed in its history as a series of projections: first in the humanization of nature through the projection of psychic forces into natural events and things; then a polytheism in which the gods withdraw from nature; and finally in a monotheism where the gods of antiquity are condensed into one father figure. Animism does not equal religion for Freud, but it is the foundation of religion.²⁵ The causal factors which effect the various stages of religious belief are (a) desire, the human need to make its helplessness before nature and civilization bearable, and (b) infantile prototypes which govern the features and path of development of the projected objects of belief. It is this latter which Freud considered his chief contribution to the analysis of religion and which he could put very simply in his work *Leonardo da Vinci*: "Psycho-analysis has made us aware of the intimate connection between the father-complex and the belief in God, and has taught us that the personal God is psychologically nothing other than a magnified father."²⁶

Just as religious practice within such a system becomes an analogue of obsessional neurosis, so religious belief becomes Meynert's amentia universalized—both of which are patterned by early Oedipal experiences and fashioned after instinctual craving for a father figure who originates the warrant both for belief and practice.²⁷ "The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity, it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life."²⁸

Freud continued the tradition that God is projection, but there are significant differences between his position and that of Feuerbach. In Feuerbach, what was projected was the perfect essence of the human; in Freud what was finally projected was a protecting-and-threatening father figure. In Feuerbach, the human person was essentially reflexive and infinite, the mind and the will and the feelings had themselves for their own objects, and consequently they could only finally and essentially be conscious of themselves. In Freud, the human person is essentially actional, finite, and threatened; out of his need for narcissistic satisfaction

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (New York: Norton, 1965) 75.

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (New York: Norton, 1965) 103. "I have said nothing which other and better men have not said before me in a much more complete, forcible, and impressive manner. . . . All I have done—and this is the only thing that is new in my exposition—is to add some psychological foundation to the criticisms of my great predecessors" (*The Future of an Illusion* [New York: Norton, 1961] 35).

²⁷ *Ibid.* 42–45.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961) 21.

before the demands of civilization and for physical security before the threats of nature and death, he/she projects a God who will minister to a sense of worth and provide protection from the horrors of the future. The shape of Freud's God is not the projected perfection of the human; it is the Oedipal Father figure, projected by human energies because in the final analysis "libido follows the path of narcissistic need."²⁹ For Freud, God emerges either out of the needs for satisfaction or behind those demands of the superego to "do it right." As Paul Ricoeur has indicated, in Freud

the mechanism of "projection" explains the appearance of transcendence connected with the religious source of the forbidden and the feared; the mechanism of introjection, by which a source of authority is set up within the ego, is thus complicated by the mechanism of projection by which the omnipotence of thought is projected into real powers—demons, spirits, gods. Projection is not meant to account for institutions as such, but for the illusion of transcendence, attaching to the belief in spirits and gods, that is, in the real existence of powers higher than man.³⁰

But whatever the difference between Feuerbach and Freud, they agree that what is believed in religion is projection—and a projection of the human. The difference between them only underlines their agreement; whatever variances they exhibit lie with their understanding of the human. In fact, as Eugene Kamenka maintains, "The modern social theorist is not so much inclined to choose between theories like Feuerbach's, Freud's, and Durkheim's, as to combine them."³¹

CONTEMPLATION

It is here, I think, that the advance of contemporary atheism intersects with another great religious movement of our times: the development of contemplation and of an interest in the mystical life. As perhaps never before in American Christianity, the interest in religious experience is not a question of religious enthusiasm or a sweeping call to revival, but a serious engagement with the "passive" experience of God and with the ascetical and psychic disciplines prerequisite for this engagement. This contemplative growth within American culture encourages a rising interest in the literature of spirituality and is reinforced by a strong influence from Eastern religious practices. It is here, it seems to me, in the richness

²⁹ *The Future of an Illusion* 24.

³⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977) 203 n. Ricoeur maintains that Freud worked out the theory of projection in the third section of the Schreber case and that "this text is his most important contribution to the study of projection, and more precisely of projection in a religious theme" (ibid. 238 n).

³¹ *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* 63.

of the contemplative tradition, that the conviction from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries becomes co-ordinate with a movement equally aware of the proclivity of religion to become projection.

Perhaps no one represents this sensitivity more artistically and at the same time more analytically than the great Spanish Carmelite John of the Cross. For the question which is posed by the nineteenth and twentieth century is critical. If one admits that religious belief can be analyzed into episodes of projections, whether psychologically individual or social, and if one admits this not as a metaphysics but as a phenomenology of belief and of religious experience, does the force of this discovery indicate a movement towards the rejection of all divinity, the death of God and the end of religion? Or can it equally indicate that faith must move into a contemplation, one moment of which is apophatic, that for many the alternative in the seriously religious quest is atheism or contemplation?

The vitality of this second option figures continually in the theological literature of today. Recent issues of the *Journal of Religion* and *Theological Studies* carry articles on apophatic theology, and the writings of John of the Cross are found importantly within each.³² But what is crucial to underscore is that apophatic theology is not primarily one which does or does not make statements about God. It is not a theology about conclusions in statements. It is primarily an experiential process, a process of entering into the infinite mystery that is God, so that gradually one is transformed by grace and this grace moves through the intense experiences of darkness into the vision of the incomprehensible God. Apophatic theology involves both interpretation and criticism, conceptualization and theological argument. But all of these are descriptive or explanatory of the process in which one is engaged, a process in which one must be engaged in order to grasp its interpretation in any depth.

In the Alexandrian School, for example, the literal interpretation (*historia*) of the text or of the actual event gives way to the deeper, more spiritual meaning (*theoria*) beyond the obvious sense of the words. The value of this spiritual sense, whether *theoria*, *allegoria*, or *dianoia*, is that it grasps how God's working is typified in this incident, so that it provides a paradigm for His working within other individual lives or in other communities. *Theoria*, in the Alexandrian School, opens up the Scriptures beyond the recording of the memories and faith of a particular epoch, to a revelation of how God characteristically enters into human experience and transforms it into Himself.³³ So the *Life of Moses* for Gregory of Nyssa, the greatest of the apophatic Fathers, becomes "some

³² Harvey Egan, S.J., "Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism," *TS* 39 (1978) 399-426; John F. Teahan, "The Dark and Empty Way," *JR* 58 (1978) 263-87.

³³ Cf. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist, 1978) 6-8.

counsel concerning the perfect life . . . taking God as the guide of our treatise."³⁴

John of the Cross, perhaps the most influential of the apophatic doctors, does not write works of scriptural commentary, but he does share with Gregory of Nyssa the emphasis upon *praxis*. The *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is "el modo de subir hasta la cumbre del monte," "the way that leads to the summit of the mountain, that sublime state of perfection we here call the union of a soul with God."³⁵ In John of the Cross, finally, it is not theology speculatively interested in God or in human beings, but descriptive of a process by which God "takes His abode in a human being by making him (her) live the life of God."³⁶ In a word, it is theology not about process, but theology which is essentially an experiential process with its description, its analysis, and its prescriptive counsels. In this, John is much more like Freud than like Feuerbach.

Interestingly enough, the hearty figures of the nineteenth century were not wild in their admiration for John of the Cross. When William James wanted a passage which would exhibit "the passion of self-contempt wreaking itself on the poor flesh, the divine irrationality of devotion making a sacrificial gift of all it has (its sensibilities, namely) to the object of its adoration," he chose the celebrated chapter 13 of the first book of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. He chose John of the Cross, whom he described as a "Spanish mystic who flourished—or rather existed, for there was little that suggested flourishing about him."³⁷ James's judgment becomes somewhat more mild as the *Varieties of Religious Experience* develops, but his voice parallels other religious writers of the nineteenth century. R. A. Vaughan, in his *Hours with the Mystics* (1856), finds John's mysticism "miserably mistaken . . . a dark negation, permeated with a fantastic gloom and a passionate severity." Dean Inge, in *Christian Mysticism* (1899), dismissed John of the Cross as one who "carried self-abnegation to a fanatical extreme and presents the life of holiness in a grim and repellent aspect."³⁸

³⁴ Ibid. 29–30.

³⁵ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, "Theme," in *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, tr. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1964) 68. All subsequent references to John of the Cross in English are taken from this edition. For the Spanish, see Crisógono de Jesús, O.C.D., Matias del Niño Jesús, O.C.D., and Lucinio de SS. Sacramento, O.C.D., *Vida y obras de San Juan de la Cruz* (5th ed.; Madrid: BAC, 1964) 363.

³⁶ John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, "Prologue," no. 2, p. 578. Cf. *Ascent*, "Prologue," no. 4: "With God's help, then, we shall propose doctrine and counsel for beginners and proficients that they may understand or at least know how to practice abandonment to God's guidance when He wants them to advance" (p. 71).

³⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library of World Literature, 1961) 240.

³⁸ Cf. Edgar Allison Peers, *St. John of the Cross* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1970) 25.

There is no doubt that in John of the Cross there is abnegation; there are nights in which no satisfaction is found in God and in which there is no experience of religious reassurance; there is a resoluteness of longing in which one desires nothing with God, but all things only in God; there is a starkness of faith which moves beyond images and concepts into a surrender to a God whose infinite light is blinding. There is no question that there is suffering in the doctrine of John of the Cross, and he warns away from his works "the kind of spiritual people who like to approach God along sweet and satisfying paths."³⁹ Written both in his theology and at the base of his sketch of Mount Carmel are the almost Zen-like verses in which he summarized the movement of a human being into the contemplative possession of God:

To reach satisfaction in all
 desire its possession in nothing.
 To come to possess all
 desire the possession of nothing.
 To arrive at being all
 desire to be nothing.
 To come to the knowledge of all
 desire the knowledge of nothing.
 To come to the pleasure you have not
 you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.
 To come to the knowledge you have not
 you must go by a way in which you know not.
 To come to the possession you have not
 you must go by a way in which you possess not.
 To come to be what you are not
 you must go by a way in which you are not.
 When you turn towards something
 you cease to cast yourself upon the all.
 For to go from all to the all
 you must deny yourself of all in all.
 And when you come to the possession of the all
 you must possess it without wanting anything.
 Because if you desire to have something in all
 your treasure in God is not purely your all.⁴⁰

These aphorisms are particularly difficult to understand; they are the very ones which roiled the exuberance of William James. The poetry and the hundreds of prose pages of John of the Cross are little more than an embodiment and a very nuanced theological reflection upon their meaning. But neither the poetry nor the prose mitigates the starkness of the demand within this process and the moments of suffering that are

³⁹ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, "Prologue," no. 8, p. 72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 1, chap. 13, no. 11, pp. 103-4.

essentially part of the contemplative maturation of the soul. It is an evolution in which the experience of the desert is the essential preparation for contemplation and in which the reality of the cross with its sense of abandonment figures critically as the final movement into union with God.

The question is: why? "Since the things of God in themselves produce good, profit, and assurance in the soul, why does God in this night darken the appetites and faculties?"⁴¹ The question appears over and over again throughout the progress of his writing. And in his answer John sounds very much like Feuerbach and Freud. He takes the Scholastic dictum, "whatever is received is received according to the mode of the one receiving it," and applies this to the person's conceptions and images of God.

What Feuerbach and Freud cited as projection, John of the Cross subsumed under this more general maxim: "Quidquid recipitur secundum modum recipientis recipitur." Andrew of the Incarnation credits Aquinas with the origin of this usage in John of the Cross, but the proposition was common coin in the Scholastic theology of the Middle Ages, taking on different meanings as it was thematically embodied in different systems.⁴² St. Thomas himself attributes the doctrine, or at least the insight, to Plato: "Plato saw that each thing is received in something else according to the measure of the recipient."⁴³ The Quaracchi editors of St. Bonaventure attribute it to the *Liber de causis*, where it stands as the ninth proposition: "Aliqua ex rebus non recipit quod est supra eam nisi per modum secundum quem potest recipere ipsum."⁴⁴ This formulation suggests both Neoplatonic origins and embodies the concern it will carry for John of the Cross: "Because in the initial stages of the spiritual life, and even in more advanced ones, the sensory part of the soul is imperfect, it frequently receives God's Spirit with this very imperfection."⁴⁵

Even if God miraculously were to impart Himself directly to the persons seeking Him,

they would be unable to receive it, except in their own way, very basely and naturally. . . . Since these natural faculties do not have the purity, strength, or capacity to receive and taste supernatural things in a supernatural or divine mode,

⁴¹ *The Dark Night of the Soul* 2, chap. 16, no. 4, p. 364.

⁴² Cf. *Vida y obras* 546, no. 6.

⁴³ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* 1, lect. 10 (Chicago: Regnery, 1961) no. 167.

⁴⁴ Otto Bardenhewer, *Die pseudo-aristotelische Schrift Über das reine Gute: Liber de causis* (Freiburg: Herder, 1882) prop. ix, p. 174. I am grateful for the labors of Robert W. Schmidt, S.J., of Xavier University in Cincinnati, who researched this history of the Scholastic dictum. For the best single source, cf. Robert Henle, S.J., *St. Thomas and Platonism* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1956) chap. 4, sect. c, "The Reception Principle."

⁴⁵ *Dark Night of the Soul* 1, chap. 16, no. 2, p. 304.

but only according to their own mode, which is human and lowly as we said, these faculties must be also darkened regarding the divine so that weaned, purified and annihilated in their natural way, they might lose that lowly and human mode of receiving and working.⁴⁶

What John of the Cross is stating is a critique of religious consciousness. Our understanding and our loves are limited by what we are. What we grasp and what we long for is very much shaped and determined by our own nature and personality-set. If this is not changed—gradually transformed by grace and by its progressive affirmation within religious faith working its way into the everyday of human history and choices—then there is no possibility of contemplation of anything but our own projections. The human person would receive the divine not “spiritually, but rather humanly and naturally, no matter how much his faculties are employed in God and no matter how much satisfaction he derives from this.”⁴⁷ With Feuerbach, John is sensitive to the humanization which consciousness works upon its God; with Freud, he is acutely aware that the religious movement towards God can emerge either from the desire for satisfaction or from the drive to be morally reassured. In contrast to both, what he elaborates is not a process of assimilation or of psychotherapy, but of the transformation of the person by grace, the gradual becoming God by participation in the divine nature.⁴⁸

The nights of John of the Cross indicate something of this process. A human being can come to God initially for the same reason that instinctual energies move towards any pleasure fulfilments. “The love of pleasure and attachment to it usually fires the will towards the enjoyment of things that give pleasure.”⁴⁹ Until the person has broken the automatic conjunction between instinctual satisfaction and the motivation of his choices, he will “be incapable of the enlightenment and the dominating fullness of God’s pure and simple light.”⁵⁰ In the night of the senses this motivation is gradually purified: actively through an immersion in the life of Jesus, so that the motivation of Christ’s life gradually becomes one’s own; and passively through the aridity, sometimes protracted over many years, when there is no experience of felt satisfaction either from the things of God or from other elements within one’s life. On the contrary, there is often a distaste or disgust, coupled with a painful sense that one is not integrally serving God and that one can no longer pray discursively, making use of protracted insights and imaginations. This night of aridity gradually interiorizes a new love of God, not dictated by

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 2, chap. 16, no. 4, p. 364.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 5, pp. 364–65.

⁴⁸ *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2, chap. 5, no. 7, p. 116; *Living Flame of Love* 2, no. 34, p. 608; 3, no. 8, p. 614; 3, no. 78, p. 641.

⁴⁹ *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 1, chap. 14, no. 2, p. 105.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 1, chap. 4, no. 1, pp. 77–78.

the human needs for immediate religious satisfaction but brought to birth by the infusion of purgative contemplation: "For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, inflames the soul in the spirit of love."⁵¹ What the night of the senses brings about is the development of a contemplative love beyond the pleasure principle in religion, either actively through choices made under the guidance and motivation of Christ, or passively when satisfaction is gone and one continues to follow the movement of grace even though there seems to be no recompense. Gradually out of this night arise a surrender to One who defies the immediate demands for satisfaction and a new kind of prayer that is peaceful and without images. What is critical to see here is that one allows this to take place through a love which is gradually being infused and which serves as the basis of contemplation.

The second night, maintains John of the Cross, is far more terrible and demanding than the first. It is the night of the spirit, the night of faith. Here it is not so much a question of motivation as of support systems: the concepts, the systems of meaning, the symbolic structures by which reassurance is forthcoming. In the movement towards deeper union with God, faith alone becomes the ultimate guide—a faith which puts us into mystery because it "informs us of matters we have never seen or known, either in themselves or in their likeness."⁵² What functions critically here for John is the infinite distance between human concepts or experiences and the divine, and it is this gap that will suggest religious development: "Like a blind man, he must lean on dark faith, accept it for his guide and light and rest on nothing of what he understands, tastes, feels, and imagines." Through faith he moves into mystery, what is incomprehensible and unimaginable; "for however impressive may be one's knowledge or feeling of God, that knowledge or feeling will have no resemblance to God and amount to very little."⁵³

This night also has its active and passive aspects: active, in that a human being takes faith profoundly as the guide of his or her life, a faith which both opens a contact with what "transcends every natural light and infinitely exceeds all human understanding" and relocates everything known within a new horizon in which it is radically reinterpreted and transvaluated; passive, when all the supports drop away from one's consciousness and there is only the experience of emptiness, impurity, weakness, abandonment, and death. It is the experience of the cross, for John, and what the "soul feels most is that God has rejected it and with an abhorrence of it casts it into darkness."⁵⁴ Paradoxically, it is precisely

⁵¹ *Dark Night of the Soul* 1, chap. 10, no. 6, p. 318.

⁵² *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2, chap. 3, no. 1, p. 110.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 2, chap. 4, no. 3, p. 113.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 2, chap. 6, no. 2, p. 338.

within his experience of the cross—when images, concepts, symbols, and experiences seem to provide nothing but their own emptiness—that the final union between God and the person is being effected. It is in the experience of this abandonment that God is transforming a human being in love, a possession which is not understood at the time and whose symbolic expression is dispossession and death.

There is really only one night in John of the Cross: the progressive purification and transformation of the person through what he cherishes and through what gives him security and support.

This continual contemplative purification of the human person is a progressive hermeneutic of the nature of God, the gradual disclosure of the One who infinitely “transcends the intellect and is incomprehensible to it.” The darkness is an event of the disclosure, and contemplation becomes much more the reception of a reality which is beyond grasp, of the bringing into awareness of what is inexhaustibly mysterious. Whatever knowledge one has does not move into the objectification of God but passes through objectifications, contradicts their adequacy, and in faith “reaches God more by not understanding than by understanding.”⁵⁵ This dark disclosure of God—dark because it gradually introduces a surrender to the unconcealment of Mystery—is not anti-intellectual or antihuman. John has both a quality of poetry and a profundity of theology of rare achievement. It is rather that clear knowledge gives way before the incomprehensible, that there is a *docta ignorantia*, a recognition that whatever is grasped is not the ultimate mystery by which one’s own self is grasped.

Nor is John’s mystical theology antidogmatic. The articles of faith are the rungs of the ladder by which the person moves into the Mystery.⁵⁶ The doctrine of John coincides here with much of the theology of Karl Rahner. For both, God is the infinite, the holy Mystery; for both, the individual dogmatic statement possesses a “represented conceptual content” which is “merely the means of experiencing a being referred beyond itself and everything imaginable.”⁵⁷ The function of dogmatic stability is not to explain the mystery of God but to lead into it and to safeguard its incomprehensibility.

The self-disclosure of God, of One so infinitely Other, is finally only possible within the experience of the contradiction of finite concepts and human expectations. The darkness and its pain are here, but they are finally dialectical movements in which the human is purified from projection by a “no” which is most radically a “yes.” The disclosures of God

⁵⁵ *Living Flame of Love* 3, no. 48, p. 628.

⁵⁶ *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2, chap. 1, no. 1, p. 107.

⁵⁷ Karl Rahner, “What Is a Dogmatic Statement?” *Theological Investigations* 5 (New York: Seabury, 1966) 18–19.

contradict the programs and expectations of human beings in order to fulfil human desire and human freedom at a much deeper level than subjectivity would have measured out in its projections.

My point here is not to persuade anyone that the theogenesis, the becoming God by participation, is correctly schematized by John of the Cross, a schema that is finally no schema. My point is that the foundational persuasion of the need for this kind of purification coincides with the radical criticism of religious belief in our own day. Ludwig Feuerbach and Sigmund Freud on one side and John of the Cross on the other are persuaded that much projection lies at the heart of our relationship with God. For the former, the response is to deny the reality of God; for John, it is to insist that the evolution or personal development of faith must pass through the desert and the cross.

In this purification of desire and of awareness, the critical influence for John is Christ. The active night of the senses begins with immersion into the Jesus of the Gospels.⁵⁸ The intelligibility of night of the spirit is essentially found in him: "Because I have said that Christ is the way (*el camino*) and that this way is a death to our natural selves in the sensory and spiritual parts of the soul, I would like to demonstrate how this death is patterned on Christ's. For he is our model and light."⁵⁹ And the completion of the mystical union is achieved through being touched by him and absorbed into him: "You subtly penetrate the substance of my soul, and, lightly touching it all, absorb it entirely into Yourself."⁶⁰

It is the Spirit of Christ which is the agent of this passive transformation of the person, gradually permeating individual experiences and influencing the patterns of direction and growth—the Spirit which John of the Cross calls fire and whose progress he repeatedly compares to "the fire that penetrates a log of wood . . . that first makes an assault upon it, wounding it with its flame, drying it out, and stripping it of its unsightly qualities until it is so disposed that it can be penetrated and transformed into the fire."⁶¹ The contemplative evolution is an assimilation into Christ through the progressive possession of his Spirit.

It is in this assimilation into Christ, this gradual movement from the initial stages of purification from expectations and conceptual clarity until the final moments of union, that John throws into bold relief what is the experience, in various degrees and infinite varieties, of many deeply good Christians. What appears at first sight as a rare or highly specialized experience of mystical development "writes large" the outline by which faith evolves into its own fulness in many lives. Any serious following of Christ leads by way of reversals or disappointments or sacrifice or

⁵⁸ *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 1, chap. 13, no. 3, p. 102.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 2, chap. 7, no. 9, p. 124.

⁶⁰ *Living Flame of Love* 2, no. 17, p. 601.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 1, no. 19, p. 586.

suffering into the awareness that God is beyond control and beyond form. There is in Christian living an abiding purification from expectations and projections that social workers or mothers of families or dedicated teachers undergo—must undergo if they are to continue faithful to the God who dwells in light inaccessible and whose incalculable reality is embodied in Jesus. Aquinas maintains that this progression is the dynamic intrinsic to the gifts of the Spirit which are native to the life of faith, specifically to the gift of understanding which “de auditis mentem illustrat.” Understanding involves a *depurgatio*, the purifying movement within all of those graced by the indwelling Spirit, by which a person comes to see that what he believes transcends everything he grasps. The gift of understanding is that through which “while we do not see what God is, we do see what He is not. And we know God in this life so much more perfectly as we understand that He transcends (*excedere*) whatever is comprehended by our understanding.” It is this gift of the Spirit, gracefully present in the mystery of lives which look externally so ordinary, which grounds Aquinas’ contention: “The contemplative life is begun here and reaches its completion in a future existence.”⁶²

René Voillaume makes a similar point as he introduces the *Journal* of one of the major disciples of John of the Cross in the twentieth century, Raïssa Maritain:

The contemplative prayer of Raïssa, whose life was above all dedicated to intellectual work, and who was called on to testify mainly in the world of thought and of art, is but one with the experience of a factory girl or a woman wholly occupied in domestic tasks in a poor neighbourhood. I have known some such, who by these paths in appearance very different have found the same simplicity of gaze on God and endured the same acute ordeals of purification, to achieve a more complete union with the supreme object of their love.⁶³

This contemplative purification, which in one way or another catches up the lives of those who move within the grace of Christ, is delineated in its progressive moments and in its fullest completion by the mystical theology of John of the Cross.

Not all atheism comes out of Feuerbach and Freud; not all contemplatives are influenced by John of the Cross. But there is an intersection here of religious criticism that seems to me highly significant. If it is correct, then the focus of theology should be less to refute Feuerbachian and Freudian analysis than to provide an alternative to the processes they elaborate of anthropological assimilation and psychotherapy. The model for such an alternative may well lie with the patterns within the

⁶² Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.* 2-2, 8, 7; also *In 3 Sent.*, dist. 34, q. 1, a. 4.

⁶³ Jacques Maritain, ed., *Raïssa's Journal* (Albany, N.Y.: Magi, 1974) xvi.

theology of John of the Cross or with the mystagogical theology of Karl Rahner. What I am suggesting is that the contemporary interest in spirituality may well not be of incidental importance or of accidental occurrence, that for the reflective and sensitive mind—one which grasps the conditionality of imaginative and cultural structures, the necessities which issue from a background of which one can only be half aware, the profound limitations of one's knowledge and social situation—for such a person, the alternative may well lie between atheism and contemplation.