DESIRE AND ATTACHMENT: FINDING UNION WITH GOD

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Abstract

There are many aspects of religion that appear to be inseparable from it, such as leaders and prophets, guidelines or rules passed down both verbally and in written form, and ceremony and ritual. I could also include disagreement, intolerance, and war in this list. Throughout the ages people have fought in the name of religion and blood is continually being shed even today in the name of somebody’s God. As society progresses, it is my hope as well as the hope of many others that humanity transcends these differences and finds peace. In the following essay I will examine two religions that, although they offer different ends, share similarities in their equally difficult methods for achieving those ends. With a more comprehensive understanding of these religions and their similarities, I believe that we can increase our level of empathy towards each other, ultimately leading to a more peaceful world.

Religious traditions are separated by many things. To name a few examples: the number of gods, a total lack of gods, consequences and rewards, metaphysical realms that humans may be able to transcend to, and figures in history worshipped for their religious significance. Many people view themselves as belonging to the right set of religious beliefs and even if they have an open mind, perhaps asserting things like “everyone is entitled to their own opinion,” it is likely that they still think their belief is best. If this were not the case, they would not believe it. Furthermore, many spiritual people in the world do not have a choice in how they feel about the matter because they are born into a belief. To be surrounded by a religion such as Hinduism or Christianity from birth will make an individual prone to thinking of it as more intuitive. The problem with this preferential, potentially ethnocentric treatment of one’s own religious views is that it can cause paralysis in spiritual growth and a disconnect with others whose religious beliefs do not share an affinity with one’s preferred religion. One solution to these problems can be found by looking at the similarities instead of the differences. This is not to suggest ignoring the differences. By closely analyzing different religions, one can find resemblances between them. With this come the potential for growth in all aspects of life. One can use other spiritual beliefs to understand one’s own more fully while simultaneously helping everyone live in a more harmonious world. After all, most major world religions look for harmony amongst humans.

To bring a light to a solution, I will be examining doctrines from two different religions. In his works, The Ascent of Mount Carmel and The Dark Night, St. John of the Cross lays out a path for the beginner to find complete union with God. He explains many concepts that are important for the individual to grasp in order to make the journey. The concept of the darkness of the soul will be expounded upon to draw a between similar concepts in the Buddhist tradition. In the first section of this paper, I will discuss what it means for the soul to travel through the stages of night in order to reach complete darkness. Then, in the second section, I will make a comparison to Buddhism using the four noble truths. In the final section, a brief comparison will be made between the goals of each religion.

Section One: The Dark Night in St. John of the Cross

St. John of the Cross uses the word night three times in his poem The Dark Night. Each time it is used, the word signifies a different stage of darkness the soul enters before finally it reaches union with God. The first stanza reads, “One dark night.”¹ This signals the beginning of the soul’s journey into

darkness. As one begins the path towards union with God, it is first necessary to renounce all of the sense appetites. St. John says that to find union with God, adherents “must deprive themselves of their appetites for worldly possessions.”

Appetites in this case should be understood as an “inordinate longing or craving, an impulse that is not rightly ordered to a moral or spiritual good.” One’s appetites can extend towards anything that the senses can experience, including natural communication with God. The appetites prevent the soul’s transcendence to God in two ways: by depriving the individual of God’s Spirit and by tiring, tormenting, darkening, defiling, and weakening the soul. It is necessary to relinquish appetites because the soul must be completely pure and unaffected to find a true union with God.

One increasingly common example of the sensory appetites consuming individuals can be found within our modern technology. In many developed parts of the world, people struggle to tear themselves away from their laptops and cellphones for more than a few moments. Phones are within an arm’s reach at night, computers tagalong everywhere imaginable during daily commutes, and everyone we know is updated on each minuscule detail of our lives through the expansive social networks that exist on the internet. This constant distraction and consumption leaves less time for spiritual growth.

St. John of the Cross considers the soul to be in union with God when the soul’s will and God’s will are in conformity, “so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other.” One is ultimately striving for perfection in the soul, such that one’s life on earth will be virtuous and one’s reward will follow after death. Having attachments to things other than God deprives the soul of His Spirit because “attachment to a creature makes a person equal to that creature.” If one is consumed by sensory satisfaction it is impossible for the individual to have a “pure union and transformation in God.” Sensory appetites always distract from God and never lead to Him, for nothing on the earth can compare to Him. God is fully incomprehensible by anything manifested to the individual.

Some people believe that God is understandable and that by merely consuming hallucinogenic drugs, they can connect with their inner spirituality. Saint John would object to this activity because in reality it is detrimental to spirituality. Because they occur primarily through the bodily senses, these experiences lack authenticity and produce spiritual experiences that are untrustworthy. As a result, they will eventually fade away. Using hallucinogenic drugs stimulates the senses and these are inadequate to manifest any likeness of God. To use Anselm’s description, God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. This eventually leads Anselm himself to declare that it is in fact impossible to think of God accurately; being able to think of something so great that nothing greater can be thought makes it possible for something greater to exist, i.e. something so great that it cannot be thought.

The appetites tire the soul because they constantly fail to fully satisfy the soul. This torments the soul because the more one seeks to satisfy it, the more the soul will crave and, as a result, remain unsatisfied. Take for example those who smoke cigarettes. One does not simply abolish the craving they feel for smoking by having just one. Sure, the satisfaction will last for a while, but eventually that feeling will dwindle and another cigarette will have to be smoked to satisfy the renewed desire. Of course, one could also decide to quit smoking, but often times one addiction must be replaced with another. If one considers everything the senses find joy in, the problem clearly becomes much greater. This habit of fulfilling of one’s appetites with anything other than God, that is to say by filling a void in the soul with something not wholly good and eternal, will cause the soul to be tormented because it will never find true satisfaction. God is the only thing that will provide ultimate satisfaction because everything else is deficient.

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2 Ibid., 120.
3 Editors’ footnote in Ibid., 118.
4 Ibid., 130.
5 Ibid., 163.
6 Ibid., 124.
7 Ibid., 124.
In addition to undergoing torment, the soul will also be darkened or rather blinded\(^9\) by the appetites since “any appetite, even one that is just slightly imperfect, stains and defiles the soul.”\(^10\) This defilement will prevent a union with God because the soul must be completely clean in order to receive Him. The constant tiring, tormenting, blinding, and defiling that is caused by the soul’s insatiable sensory desires eventually weakens the soul and causes it to fall off the path towards God. All of these agitations caused from constantly feeling the need to satiate the sensory appetites of the soul lead reason and sensory perception towards something that they think will cause satisfaction. This can easily guide one down the wrong path. St. John of the Cross claims this is because at every step “we mistake evil for good and good for evil.”\(^11\) This is caused in part because of one’s ignorance of that which is good and, in part, because the devil can disguise sin as something desirable. An appetite, which is blind because “of itself, it has no intellect,”\(^12\) is an easy target for the devil. Thus, the only way to escape this suffering is by renouncing all sensory perceptions and appetites by proceeding with a passive attitude towards them. To have a passive attitude towards these things requires that one acknowledges and accepts the reality of their existence, even going so far as to willfully let the experience happen without becoming attached. In doing this, one still functions in the world while protecting the soul from false apprehension.

At this point it is important to note that St. John of the Cross is not advocating that it is necessary to eliminate all of the natural appetites. He states that, “to eradicate the natural appetites, that is to mortify them entirely, is impossible in this life.”\(^13\) He acknowledges the need to satisfy basic instinctual needs such as the \textit{desire} for food and water. Furthermore, in concentrated meditative prayer one may unintentionally enjoy sensory appetites while remaining unattached to them in the soul. What is important in the meditative case is that one acknowledges these appetites with a passive nature and does not become attached to the temporary satisfaction they might bring. What is really being asked for is a mortification of the appetites. To achieve this, one must commit to doing two things. First, one must “have a habitual desire to imitate Christ”\(^14\) in all actions. Second, one must “renounce and remain empty of any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honor and glory of God.”\(^15\) Having a habitual desire to imitate Christ will help one find happiness in actions that are virtuous. But it is perhaps more important that one must renounce sensory satisfaction as this allows guiding light of God into the soul. As indicated by St. John of the Cross, “The first purgation or night is bitter and terrible to the senses,”\(^16\) and although not an easy task, it is more often accomplished than the second part of the night, the darkening of the soul. The first night is the only way that the darkening of the soul can begin. Through the rejection of all sensory things that are not God, one can then transcend to the next stage of night.

Once the soul has made progress on its journey to union with God, it begins to share the likeness of a child: bright-eyed, naive, and delicate. One can become attached to the satisfaction of the virtue they practice, so it is of the utmost importance to remain diligent in rejecting the appetites.\(^17\) Beginners tend to develop a secret kind of pride and “in their hearts they condemn others who do not seem to have the kind of devotion they would like them to have.”\(^18\) They also risk falling into spiritual envy, in which they become “so evil-minded that they do not want anyone except themselves to appear holy.”\(^19\) It is because of these dangers that one must continue to reject the appetites. In doing all of this, the soul will prepare itself to enter this second night.

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\(^9\) Blindness (not darkness) is used because the light of the Spirit of God is obscured by the soul’s appetites.

\(^10\) John of the Cross, \textit{The Ascent of Mount Carmel}, 140.

\(^11\) Ibid., 137.

\(^12\) Ibid., 135.

\(^13\) Ibid., 142.

\(^14\) Ibid., 148.

\(^15\) Ibid., 148.

\(^16\) Ibid., 362.

\(^17\) Ibid., 362.

\(^18\) Ibid., 363.
St. John of the Cross uses midnight to describe the second phase of darkness, the phase before the soul receives union with God. The corresponding verse from his poem begins with, “On that glad night, in secret, for no one saw me.”\(^{20}\) Once the soul has rejected sensory appetites, it becomes necessary that the soul should be completely darkened by relinquishing all natural and supernatural intellect and lead completely by faith. According to St. John, the second night is the “darker night of faith [that] belongs to the rational, superior part; it is darker and more interior because it deprives this part of its rational light, or better, blinds it.”\(^{21}\) Faith is the necessary component in this second phase of darkness because what the soul must undergo in order to reject intellect is so extraordinary that the only thing left to guide the soul is the light of God.

One can receive ideas of God either naturally or supernaturally. Natural understanding is bodily understanding and reflection.\(^{22}\) Supernatural knowledge “comprises everything imparted to the intellect in a way transcending the intellect’s natural ability and capacity.”\(^{23}\) and is divided into two categories of knowledge: corporeal and spiritual. Corporeal knowledge of God is received through exterior and interior senses (sight, taste, smell, hearing, and touch). This type of knowledge should never be trusted because the devil has the ability to affect the exterior senses (more than he has the ability to affect the soul’s knowledge). The interior soul is more protected than the exterior perceptions because “God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially.”\(^{24}\) If corporeal apprehension is truly divine, the knowledge will produce its effect anyway and will do so “first and foremost in the soul rather than the body.”\(^{25}\) Thus, one should not fear mistakenly rejecting God when rejecting the apprehension. Supernatural spiritual knowledge can lead one on misleading and dangerous routes towards God in the same way that corporeal knowledge does because there can be no certainty for the individual that what is experienced is directly from God. God is so incomprehensible to the mind’s eye that anything one thinks one comprehends about God is likely to be incorrect as nothing can portray the true likeness of God. In short, one should not trust spiritual or corporeal knowledge. Knowing this, it is best then for a soul to reject even divinely inspired ideas because the “intellectual comprehension of God through heavenly or earthly creatures is impossible; there is no proportion of likeness.”\(^{26}\) St. John believes it is better to proceed in a complete darkness, by “unknowing rather than by the desire to know,”\(^{27}\) because in this way one is guaranteed not to be deceived. One also shows a sense of humility and submission to God by unknowing, which shows the strength of the soul’s faith. Furthermore, revelations should not be desired or attended to because often times one’s understanding of God is incomplete and will cause a misinterpretation of such revelation. Often the revelation might appear to represent one thing, but really mean something completely different. Trusting in it will cause one to act in error. These misinterpretations occur because “God’s language is another one, according to the spirit, very different from what we understand, and difficult,”\(^{28}\) which is why faith is so important. In this circumstance, faith is having the understanding that one cannot know how God works. Instead of grasping for an unknowable insight, the soul must instead reside in complete and total darkness through a rejection of the natural and supernatural intellect. In letting go of all of apprehension, one makes room for God’s light to lead the soul into a union with His Spirit.

One justification that St. John frequently uses for the complete sensory and intellectual deprivation that the soul must endure is that it is necessary to ensure that individuals can “free themselves from the task and danger of discerning the true visions from the false ones.”\(^{29}\) The question this brings to mind is...

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\(^{21}\) Ibid., 156.

\(^{22}\) This is the kind of sensory experience that the first phase requires us to reject in order to reach the second stage. Our appetites for all things other than God fall into this category and are a hindrance to spiritual union.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 178.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 163.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 181.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 174.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 176.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 216.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 209.
why would God bother to communicate with human souls in the first place if such communication must be rejected? If some of the visions, revelations, locutions or spiritual feelings truly are from God, why does St. John require the soul to reject all of these spiritually pleasurable and potentially beneficially experiences? As one is ascending up the ladder to God one must understand that in the beginning, before one begins to climb and relinquish all grasp on the appetites, the soul needs coaxing and encouragement from God. This is why God allows these communications to occur. “God, to achieve his work gently and to lift the soul to supreme knowledge must begin by touching the low state and extreme of the senses.”

Once one commits to the ascent to God, it should no longer be necessary to crave or desire these communications with Him because what is waiting for the soul at the end is much more meaningful than anything that immediately satisfies the appetites.

Section Two: How the Soul Experiences Dukkah

These first two stages of night offered in St. John of the Cross’ works are similar to the three realms of existence, in which Buddhists believe all beings experience dukkha (suffering). The first noble truth of Buddhism states that all life is suffering. This suffering is experienced in the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm. These realms, taken figuratively, are the mindset one experiences while inhabiting this world. As the Buddhist follows his own path to enlightenment, like those on the path to a union with God, he leaves one stage behind while entering the next until he eventually achieve enlightenment. The desire realm is similar to the domain of sense appetite felt in the first night of the soul. When one is in this realm one is attached to and craves temporal objects, thoughts, and sensory perceptions and this causes suffering because these things will not last. By holding on to these desires, similar to the appetites of the first night, vision is clouded and virtue becomes secondary to achieving some sort of sustenance.

The second and third realms of existence for Buddhists are very similar to St. John’s second night. The second night applies to two parts of the soul: the sensory and the spiritual. In the second realm, one remains attached to inner states of joy or bliss that arise from external experiences. Once one uses diligent meditation to learn to release their grip on these experiences, one enters the third realm of existence, which entails suffering in the formless realm. This type of suffering might be the most difficult to compare to the darkness the soul endures. In the spiritual night, the soul is being communicated to by God and potentially the devil through visions and revelations. St. John never instructs the individual in this stage of the night to “rely on them or accept them.” The task of rejecting what might be a communication from God can cause much suffering in one’s soul because it seems odd to reject that which one is seeking. Similarly, Buddhists suffer in a formless realm by having an attachment to the Self, which they wrongly perceive as something that is constant and truly their own. While they have managed to alleviate all other suffering, they still maintain a special sense of self-importance, as if all things are empty other than themselves. As in the spiritual night, a counterintuitive method is applied and one is being instructed to reject something that appears to be good. What both Christians and Buddhists who have not yet found perfection in their practice do not realize is that the attachment to self and the relishing in revelation, respectively, damage the journeys on which they have embarked. Those who wish to unite with God and yet do not reject the visions and revelations might feel as though they are “special.” This can cause a hubris that would prevent union. St. John also notes that the soul begins to “develop a possessive attitude toward these communications and fails to continue on its journey to genuine

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30 Ibid., 206.
32 As opposed to taken literally. In Buddhism it is thought that the realms can be inhabited by someone through reincarnation and karma. There is not time in this paper to discuss these aspects.
33 One’s mindset is ultimately the cause of the suffering experienced.
34 Gyatso, Four Noble Truths, 45.
renunciation and nakedness of the spirit.” 36 Similarly, if the Buddhist does not eliminate attachment to self and inner emotion, enlightenment will never be achieved because one will continue to suffer on the basis of believing the self can remain permanent.

Just as St. John mentions that one cannot completely suppress all desires in this life, the Buddhists also realize that this is quite unreasonable. For anything to happen at all, including a union with God or the cessation of suffering through enlightenment, one must have a desire to do so. In his book *Buddhist Thought*, Paul Williams says that “the Buddha does not wish to say that wanting *per se* is faulty. I take it that if we knowingly engage in rational actions that can be expected to bring about X we can be said to want X.” 37 What both groups are asserting is that the real problem is not the objects of desire but, rather, our attachments to them. For the Buddhists, attachment is the true culprit of suffering because the nature of all things is impermanence. The second noble truth states that all suffering is caused by craving. Nothing impermanent can satisfy the cravings of an individual, just like nothing in the world can quench the thirst of the appetites. For those following the path to God, their appetites 38 for anything other than God will ultimately produce dissatisfaction because nothing but God can satisfy the soul’s wants.

To know something by unknowing might at first seem counterintuitive, but this is precisely how St. John thinks one can see the light of God. In Buddhism, the third and fourth noble truths (cessation of suffering is possible and the path to cessation is found in the eight fold path) instruct followers to do the same in order to achieve enlightenment. One fundamental principal the Buddhists subscribe to is that seeing emptiness in all things will help one arrive at enlightenment. Paul Williams describes this principle saying that, “all things are empty. On the level of what is an ultimate, primary existent there is nothing.” 39 What St. John of the Cross is asks of those climbing the summit towards the Light is not much different from the Buddhists seeing the emptiness in all things. Both are asking their followers to see the temporality and the lack of real substantial worth in all things. For both approaches, one realizes how things really are by unknowing rather than by craving to know because by craving anything the senses are clouded and judgment is led astray. To use St. John’s example, God’s light is like the sun. 40 One cannot truly know the sun’s strength by looking at that which it casts its light on. Also, one cannot remedy this by simply staring at the sun either, for this will cause great physical damage and possibly the loss of sight altogether. It is best to know that there is a sun that casts a light on all things, but it is really not anything like what it appears to be indirectly. Rather, it is best to passively accept those representations without attaching one’s self to them. In order to protect the soul from blindness, one must not crave to see God’s light directly because the brilliance will be blinding. The light seen through the senses must be perceived passively, without attachment, in order to prevent the soul from being misled by something that is not God’s light.

**Section Three: Union and Enlightenment**

St. John refers to the final night as dawn. In his poem “The Dark Night”, he says, “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.” 41 Imagine the sun finally breaking through at the horizon after the most difficult, strenuous, perilous journey through darkness one has ever faced. This light provides warmth, protection from the dangers of the night, and most of all sight. This metaphor is a poor representation of how the light of God will shine on the soul once purified completely, but it is useful for St. John’s purposes. In his treatises *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*, said he says more about what will obstruct the soul from receiving God’s light than about what this light actually is. This introduces an important

36 Ibid., 182.
38 Appetites can be interchanged with the Buddhist understanding of the word attachment
40 John of the Cross, *The Dark Knight*, 402.
41 Ibid., 359.
difference that must be acknowledged between Buddhism and Christianity, which concerns the final outcome of both paths. For Christianity, the result is a union with primary existence, namely God; for Buddhists, the outcome is nirvana, often described as oceanic bliss. Both, however, do remain somewhat vague about this actual experience and spend more time explaining how to get there.

Religion has provided the world with extremely important and useful guidelines while simultaneously causing some of the greatest wars and crimes ever to occur in human history. Many disagreements stem from a lack of knowledge of another religion and a failure to acknowledge that most religions try to achieve a world of peace and virtue for earth’s inhabitants. St. John’s path to God and the Buddhist path to enlightenment share many similarities. Hopefully, focusing on these similarities will inspire the religious and non-religious alike to seek a more universal understanding, rather than focusing on the differences and condemning those who do not agree with the “right” one. Much more needs to be understood in the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity, as well as the rest of the world’s faiths. It would serve us all to heed St. John of the Cross’s statement: “The more intimate and highly finished the work must be, so more the intimate, careful, and pure must the labour be.”

To obtain a universal understanding between all religions is an arduous task. The larger the variety of faiths that enter into comparison, the much higher chance there is for the differences to be highlighted. It is a task that should be taken on with great care in order to ensure that the process truly results in an understanding.

REFERENCES


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42 Ibid., 415.