

John of the Cross - The Man, the Myth, and the Truth

HISTORY AND MYTH

Some years ago, I attended the funeral of Belgian historian, Karel Blockx. The homilist at the funeral concluded by saying: "Today we bury the man, now the myth begins!"

In the dark early hours of December 13, 1591, almost exactly five hundred years ago, John of the Cross died. With his burial, a myth began with which we have been contending ever since.

This presentation, John of the Cross - The Man, the Myth, and the Truth, will attempt to distinguish precisely between what was buried when John died five hundred years ago and what was born in same moment. What happened when John died was similar to what happened when Jesus died, his followers created a hagiography, a myth, which, not unlike what great artists do to reality, heightened certain forms in his person at the cost of sacrificing a more accurate historical description. When scholars study Christ today, they make a distinction between the **Jesus of history** and the **Christ of faith**. When we study John of the Cross we must make a similar distinction. There is the **John of the Cross of history** and there is the **John of the Cross of tradition and hagiography**. This leaves us the problem of sorting out strict historical reality from myth.

In the literature and the circles of devotion and piety that have grown up around John in these past five centuries, what is truth and what is myth? What was he really like? What is true to his person and what is the creation of conscious and unconscious hagiography?

Before examining those questions, it is useful to very briefly consider the reasons why a myth build up around him in the first place. Why did such a myth build up around John? Four factors conspired to help distort, for better and for worse, the image we have of him:

1) A mystique builds up naturally around all people who radiate something extraordinary, be that positive or negative.

We spontaneously paint extraordinary people into saints, demons, weird characters, supermen, monsters, villains, and the like. Every family, religious community, corporate or academic board room, and village or town abounds with stories about its characters. These stories are the stuff of myth. To create them, we, not unlike artists, accentuate certain forms by deliberately distorting and exaggerating them, rather than photographically copying them or journalistically reporting them, in order to highlight and bring out an essence. This exaggeration of form to highlight essence lies at the base of myth.

This has been very operative in the way John has been treated through the

centuries by admirers and his critics alike. What they exaggerate about John we will see later. Suffice here to say that the picture they have handed us of John of the Cross is as much mythical as it is historical.

2) John's mythology has been very much shaped by well-intentioned, but bad, biography.

Today we no longer understand how they used to write biography. Our bias is for history in a stricter sense. We enjoy biography but, when we write biographies, our attempt is to be as critical and factual as possible. Our approach is more that of the journalist than the artist. For us, the truest biography would be a video tape-recording of someone's life. This itch for the factual over the essential is, however, recent in history. Up to a few decades ago, especially in biographies of persons we considered saintly, the idea was much more to glorify and deify them than to present the strict facts. Biography was really hagiography; a certain iconography even. When authors wrote lives of saints, they consciously and unconsciously, distorted and exaggerated history to highlight soul. For example, Nikos Kazantzakis begins his biography of Francis of Assisi by stating explicitly that his concern is not with historical fact and that he will change and distort fact to bring out the essence of Francis. His attempt is more to draw a picture of Francis' soul than to give a documentary-type video tape of his life. This is deliberate hagiography and Kazantzakis does it well. Until recently, almost all lives of the saints were done within this literary genre. And, as is the case still with contemporary biography, some writers were good and others were awful.

John of the Cross has been subjected to more than his share of biography by the latter. This has helped perpetrate and perpetuate a distorted image of him. However, because we no longer understand the intent of hagiography, and tend to read writings in this genre in a literal sense, even good biographies of him have helped to distort his image. Simply put, past writers were trying to paint us a picture of his soul (and art, by definition, exaggerates form) and we have tended to see that art as a photograph. The result has led to a very harmful distortion.

3) Finally, John, because of the way he wrote, did not help his own cause.

It is not easy to read John and understand what he was actually saying and most people who read him end up by misunderstanding him. This adds to the myth. John's writings are so complex that he would need his own hermeneutical textbook for interpretation. He freely mixes a number of literary genres and, unless his reader is sensitive to every shift in literary mode, his reader is likely to misunderstand.

John is, first and foremost, a poet. Hence, always in his writings, we are dealing with images and metaphors. He is ever the artist, painting reality rather than reporting it as a journalist. He is not a journalist and when we read his writings as we would a newspaper, then they often seem overwhelming, negative, and masochistic. Reading John of the Cross correctly is more like going to an art museum than it is like reading the daily paper. Unfortunately, he has, too often, been read as one reads the daily paper. His myth partly arises out of that.

Beyond his propensity for poetic images, John, who was a scholar of Aristotle, is fond of using distinctions and language found only in Greek philosophy. He presupposes his reader understands Aristotle and this metaphysics, coupled with the fact that he is writing for professional contemplatives, Carmelite nuns well along in the spiritual life (whom he, to the confusion of today's reader, calls "beginners") obfuscates things even more.

Moreover, his works are pieces of extraordinary subtlety, demanding, for proper understanding, a rare capacity to hold certain polarities in a delicate balance. This capacity for paradox, for subtle differentiation and fine distinction, which you see in all great thinkers, often cannot be sustained by the followers of those same thinkers. Invariably the disciple is not as great as the master, particularly regarding the master's capacity to think in shades of grey rather than in simple blacks and whites. John's followers have, far too often, been unable to grasp and hold in proper balance the central aspects of his thought, especially as these pertain to suffering and joy. Consequently, a myth has grown up around him, among both admirers and critics alike, which has, as we will see, made him out to be rather inhuman and the perpetrator of a spirituality which is only for certain mystical and ascetical athletes.

Given all of this, what does the mythical John of the Cross look like?

JOHN OF THE CROSS OF HAGIOGRAPHY ... THE MYSTIC OF POPULAR PIETY

A generalization is never completely accurate, but, often times, has immense value because, in it, vast amounts of material are seen within one synthetic block. Admitting the limitation of this generalization (and submitting that, in any case, even all scientific theories are undersubscribed), let me risk painting a picture of the John of the Cross of hagiography, the myth of John.

By both his admirers and his critics alike, John of the Cross is often understood this way:

He is a brilliant person, whatever his faults. However, he is, ultimately, a most austere, severe, ascetical, and inhuman person, someone who is insensitive to the normal feelings, urges, and distractions that incurably haunt the rest of us. He is pathologically single-minded, not given to any nonsense, distractions, or humor. He is heavy, the mystic of darkness, suffering, and the cross. He's deep, that we admit, but scary too! Despite this depth, he, in the end, lacks balance. He is a spiritual masochist, counseling us to choose always pain over pleasure, what is more difficult over what is more pleasant, and life after death over life after birth. As well, his system comes from his mysticism, namely, from some extraordinary revelations from God which are the prerogative of certain spiritual athletes like himself and other great mystics. These mystical revelations are themselves a sign that he is divorced from the bread and butter of life (he's not your average neighbor whom you invite over on a Sunday evening for drinks and a barbecue!) He's a saint, but, in the end, he and his spirituality do not enter with true understanding the realm of ordinary day to day life,

with all its heartaches and headaches over relationships, mortgages, money, sex, careers, food, and entertainment. He is a great man, one in a million and his books are great books, but his person is divorced from the ordinary person and his spirituality is a high road for a religious elite.

Bottomline, for the most part, both his admirers and critics, despite gracious or begrudged admiration for him, do not really believe that John of the Cross understands them within their real lives and struggles, that his spirituality offers them empathy and practical guidance. He's distant, like some beautiful, but remote, art object ... something you stare at and perhaps even admire, but that **you go home from!**

Soren Kierkegaard once said of Christ: "What Christ wants is not admirers but followers." The myth that now surrounds John of the Cross and his works has, unfortunately, stigmatized John in that same way. He still has his admirers, but these, for the main part, consider his person and teaching as something too elitist, heavy, fixated on the cross and suffering, and too other-worldly to help them concretely in their ordinary lives.

As long as this particular myth, the John of the Cross of hagiography, survives, John and his works will always be considered by the popular mind as exotic, elitist, unhealthily fixated on the cross and the next life, and as too unordinary to act as a guide for the average full-blooded person.

But ... this is the myth of John of the Cross. This is the John of the Cross of bad biographies and bad reading. What is the real John of the Cross like and what do he and his writings offer to the full-blooded person?

THE MAN AND THE TRUTH

To understand who John of the Cross truly is and what his writing really offer, it is helpful to situate his person and his writings against a four-fold backdrop:

1) Eros lies at the deep heart of his person and his spirituality.

John of the Cross was the child of Romeo and Juliet. He was a love-child, conceived of a passion so powerful that his father willingly renounced this family and their rather substantial wealth, privilege, and status to marry a peasant woman for whom he felt a love so strong that nothing else mattered other than consummation and a community of life with her. John was the child of that union, in every way. At the root of his personality and all his works lies this passion, this eros, this single-mindedness, this capacity to renounce all else, to truly leave father and mother and lands, for that one great love.

He was a lover, and his spirituality is incomprehensible when that is not seen as its root dynamism. His famous poem, The Ascent of Mount Carmel, better known as The Dark Night of the Soul, begins with the words: "One dark night, **fired by love's**

urgent longings." The **urgent longings** he is speaking about here are what drove his father to forsake all in order to be with the woman he married. They are the same longings that drove John, throughout his life, from transformation through transformation, to union with his beloved, the body of Christ.

To understand John, one must understand this passion. His temperament showed his breeding ... he was the child of Romeo and Juliet. He was full-blooded and his is a spirituality for the full-blooded in way that very few spiritualities can ever pretend to be.

2) He was a natural mystic.

This is the most critical factor in understanding John. Just as the great artist or intellectual is, in the end, the product of nature and not first of all of intense effort, so too is the great mystic. Great mystics, as is the case with artists and intellectuals, are born not made. What is important about this is that, just as the great artist or intellectual is somewhat, by nature and charism, pathologically single-minded about his or her natural area of interest, so too is the mystic.

However in order to understand more fully what this means and how it impacts our understanding of John of the Cross, it is necessary to, first of all, discuss at some length the concepts of **mysticism** and **mystic**.

What is **mysticism**? Few words are as commonly misunderstood, misused, and maligned as is the word mysticism. Briefly stated, mysticism is being touched by God in a deep inchoate way, that is, in a way that is both revelatory and authoritative, but is beyond what can be adequately conceptualized, felt, or articulated. This caption-type definition draws upon two sets of distinctions:

A) A distinction among the various ways someone can be in union and communion with another.

When one analyzes how he or she can communicate with another and be in union with them, it is profitable to differentiate among four levels:

i) The verbal

We reach each other and communicate through words, speech.

ii) The bodily

We all know that, at times, our bodies speak more honestly and more clearly than do our words. The language of our bodies (anger, tension, rigidity, frigidity, nervousness, ease) often touches others and speaks to them more deeply than does our speech. It is harder to lie with our bodies than with our words.

iii) The ritual

Beyond the power of words and body language, we have too the power to reach each other, and deeply, through ritual language. When our words and our bodies no longer have the power to reach another, we can have recourse to ritual language, namely, ritual gestures that touch others and communicate something to them that the spoken word and the body (divorced from ritual symbol) cannot do. For example, imagine going to the funeral and trying to console someone whom you love. At such an occasion, there are no words that are ultimately very helpful, nor can you, just by being there and having your body radiate your sympathy, enter very deeply into empathy with the one who is mourning a loved one. At such a time, we resort to ritual language. The most timeless and primal ritual of all time is the ritual of the embrace. You go up to your friend and you embrace him or her. Nothing need be said and, in fact, words often get in the way of true communication at such times. The embrace is what communicates what you really want to say. Your friend is touched in a way deeper than can be achieved through words and body language.

Notice how, as one descends these levels from words to body language to ritual, the touch is ever more inchoate - the communication and unity is ever more ineffable, dark, and less available for imaginative, cognitive, and even affective analysis.

iv) The mystical

However, we can touch each other and lie inside of each other in a way that is even deeper than the unity brought about by words, body language, and ritual gesture. Sometimes our deepest communication takes place outside of these. Sometimes we know that we are connected at a deeper level. We spontaneously name this unity in various ways: **soulmate, moral affinity, connaturality, karma,** and **mysticism**, among others names. This the level of mysticism precisely because a **mystique** is present in the communication and union. When we experience a deep revelatory and authoritative connection with someone that goes beyond what is explicable in terms of verbal, bodily, ritual, and even intuitive communication, then we are having mystical experience.

Mysticism is then, as we saw, a deep, but inchoate, experience of union with someone. More specifically, the word is used to describe this kind of union with God. By definition, it is an experience with befuddles somewhat language, the mind, and even the heart. That is why classical mystics so often use the word **dark** when speaking of this kind of experience.

What is important to highlight in this analysis is that mysticism is an ordinary experience. Like spoken, bodily, and ritual communication it is an ordinary everyday experience for everyone.

B) A distinction among various faculties within us.

Medieval philosophy used to make a distinction which, today, finds an echo in

circles of pop psychology:

i) The Intellect (the **head**)

This is our thinking center from which issues forth our rationality.

ii) The Will (the **heart**)

This is our feeling center from which issues forth our passions and emotions.

iii) The Memory (the **gut**)

This is neither a center of thought, nor of feelings in the sense of affective or emotional feeling. The **Gut** is the center where we are touched, and very deeply, in a way that is precisely beyond words, rational thought, and emotions. It might perhaps be described as our **ought** center. It is the place inside of us where, inchoately, we sense certain dictates, things that we **ought** to do. It is like a religious and moral **brand** inside of us. At its worst it is experienced as an obsession or a compulsion; at its best, it is mysticism. This center touches both the head and heart, but in a dark way. As John of the Cross, himself, says, it rests "upon nothing of what one understands, tastes, feels, or imagines. All these perceptions are a darkness. ... [it] lies beyond this understanding, taste, feeling, and imagining." (The Ascent to Mount Carmel, Book I, chapter 13, no. 11 & Book II, chapter 4, no. 2).

Mysticism lies mainly at the level of the **gut**. Irrespective of the rather terrible aesthetics of the word, it is in the **gut** there is true mystique, where we are strangely and powerfully drawn to where, as John says, "we understand more by not understanding than by understanding." (The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 3, no. 48.)

Again, as in the previous set of distinctions, it is important to see that the experience of mysticism is very ordinary, normal, an everyday experience. In a sense, it is the extraordinary experience of the ordinary person - an experience which, while powerful, morally non-negotiable, and morally binding, befuddles the ordinary self-reflective logic of the head and heart. And it is, in the end, the experience of being in unity with something; specifically, in union with God.

Given the ordinariness of mysticism, does this make us all mystics? No. mysticism is common and everyday, mystics are not. What is the difference?

Most persons, to paraphrase Ruth Burrows, have mystical experience, but have it "light off". The mystic has the same experience, but he or she has it "light on". What makes someone a mystic, therefore, is that he or she can give a certain expression, however inadequate, to what is happening dynamically at that deep inchoate level. The mystic is to the religious realm what the artist is to the aesthetic one. Everyone has deep aesthetic experiences, but only the artist can give to them some kind of proper expression. Everyone has mystical experiences, but only the mystic can give them some kind of proper expression. The artist and the mystic thus also play similar

roles in the respective communities. By attempting to give expression to that which is beyond adequate expression, they help sensitize the larger community to what it is actually experiencing.

And now, to our point: The artist and the mystic also have similar origins and obsessions. Great artist and great mystics are born. They are gifted that way primarily by nature rather than effort. In both cases, normally too they are somewhat obsessed by their gift. Little in life can distract them for long from a non-negotiable **vocatio** that they feel. Soren Kierkegaard, once defined a saint as someone who "wills the one thing." Not all great mystics and artists are saints because they do not necessarily will **the** one thing, but all **will one thing**. All are pathologically single-minded.

One must understand this in order to relate properly to John of the Cross' personality and his works. John, much like Teilhard de Chardin in our own century, was born a mystic. He was naturally obsessed with God and his pathological single-mindedness comes from that. When his myth accuses him of not being ordinary and full-blooded, it does so only because it absolutely misses this point. He was pathologically full-blooded and the experiences we writes about are, in the end, ordinary experiences open to all of us. What was not ordinary about him was his greatness. His personality and works are not exotic and weird. They are simply characterized and marked by all the qualities of the great mystic. He was not ordinary, but the intimidation we feel from him and his works is the same intimidation that the amateur musician feels when listening to and examining the works of great composer such as Mozart, Handel, or Bach. They are frightening to us amateurs because they are out of our league, not because their music is frightening. On the contrary, their music is beautiful. John of the Cross is often seen this distant, obsessed, inhuman figure, for precisely this reason.

3) His concern for structural transformation.

The myth of John presents him as an unbalanced ascetic and a spiritual masochist, someone obsessed with the cross, suffering, and heavy parts of the gospel. This too is a misunderstanding. In the end, John is obsessed with consummation, joy, and play, the wedding banquet and marriage bed as Christ describes them.

If this is true, then why are his books so severe and so focused on the paschal mystery?

Given what we just saw, the impatient erotic character that he inherited by being the child of Romeo and Juliet and the strongly obsessional nature that he had as a natural mystic, it is logical that he would be restless for depth and impatient with anything that delays or distracts one from union with one's beloved. Hence, his proclivity for structural transformation over lesser types of transformation and his itch to remain focused on the central mystery of transformation within our Christian faith, the paschal mystery.

More simply put, when you are an incurable romantic by nature and are

obsessively in love, you do not want to waste a lot of time in things that will distract you from your wedding bed. You want to get on with pursuing the consummation, irrespective of the renunciations this will mean. When John looked at the gospels, he correctly understood that only by being radically transformed (structurally transformed, in psychological terminology) can we come to that marriage bed ... "unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it cannot come to eternal life." There is not final and full life without first there being a Good Friday. The pattern of Christ's passion-death-resurrection-ascension-pentecost (undergoing the dark night of the soul) is the way to the consummation, ecstasy, restfulness, play, and joy that our erotic hearts demand. John was focused so heavily on the cross only because it is the means to get us to the consummation of the true marriage bed. He is not a masochist, but an eroticist; he is not hung up on suffering, but on consummation; he is not fixated on Good Friday, but is impatient for Easter Sunday. A careful examination of his personality and his writings reveals this without equivocation.

4) He wrote all his works for professional religious in whom he presupposed initial conversion.

Many of the confusions that surround John of the Cross clarify when one places his life's ministry and his written works within their proper context. John spent his life trying to reform contemplative religious life, particularly among his Carmelite male brethren. He penned his works mainly as guides for the prayer life of professed religious within contemplative orders.

When this is considered, many things in his writings which, right now, seem abrasive, unbalanced, and even masochistic become more palatable.

Two things in particular needed highlighting here:

i) Because his supposed audience is always professed religious living in contemplative convents or monasteries, he links all the movements within transformation (the passage through the dark night of the soul) to prayer (one's fidelity to it and its various stages and methods). This perspective, looked at by someone who is outside the walls of a contemplative religious order, seems dangerously weak vis-a-vis the dimensions of social justice and human relationships. This, as we will see, is again a misreading, a bad hermeneutical rendering of his works. For a contemplative monk or nun, one's prayer life is one's central relationship, work in life, and outreach in the area of social justice. Moreover, the dynamics of prayer, the natural transformation that will occur if one prays honestly and regularly, are, as we shall see, the same dynamics that one finds in relationships and in social justice work (or in any ministry or service whatever). John was writing to professional contemplatives. He traces out what they should do and what they should expect will happen to them by using the dynamics of formal prayer. Had he been writing to any other group of persons (married couples, social justice advocates, missionaries, teachers, housewives, or politicians) he would have, ultimately, said exactly the same thing, though in a slightly different language. The fact that he uses the language surrounding prayer and its dynamics to describe how structural transformation occurs

is accidental and incidental. Unfortunately this is rarely seen and understood and, hence, his spirituality is seen as unbalanced, privatized, elitist, and unrealistic for someone living in the world.

ii) The fact that John is writing for vowed contemplative nuns and monks accounts too for another major misunderstanding.

There is an leit motif in his writings wherein one hears regularly the refrain: "You should be separated from the world; you should avoid the world's distractions; and you should, even in the monastery or convent, not be a socialite. Withdrawal is the surest way to God." When this refrain is taken as counsel for anyone who is not a religious within a contemplative order, it betrays an attitude towards the world and towards human community which is not at all Christian and is dangerously unhealthy. However, John was not offering this as counsel for persons who are not inside contemplative walls. For someone outside those walls, his or her relationships, duties of state, and work then functionally substitute for many of the dynamics that would, for the professional contemplative who has withdrawn from the world, take place through withdrawal and prayer. Again, a proper reading of John reveals this.

Rarely is John of the Cross examined against this backdrop. This explains why he is rarely properly understood.

What was he really like? What kind of man lurks behind the myth?

The Greek philosophical tradition of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, believed that, as human beings, we are fired in to life with a madness that comes from the gods and which makes us incurably restless for a great love, for the perpetuation of our own seed, and to contemplate the divine.

Few phrases are as apt to describe John of the Cross. He was a man of great eros and passion, driven towards attaining the great love; he was a man of great artistic ability, driven towards perpetuating himself in some great creation; and he was the natural mystic, obsessed with contemplating the divine.

We can picture him then, the child of Romeo and Juliet, the natural mystic, restless, with high energy, bright, creative, impatient, single-minded, obsessed, driven towards attaining the great love. He, ever acutely aware that in this life all symphonies remain unfinished, is then, understandably, obsessed with depth, with whatever offers a route towards great love, immortality, and permanent union with God, others, and the world. That makes him impatient with distractions. Understandably he becomes a monk, and a contemplative one. He is often impatient with those within his own community who are less pilgrim of soul. He becomes friends with those whom he senses as soulmates. Theresa of Avila becomes his friend and co-conspirator. He, like a lover looking forward to the consummation of the wedding night, becomes impatient with life itself and "laments that a life so weak and base impedes another so mighty and sublime." (Living Flame, Stanza I, no. 31.)

His complexity befuddles us. His sharp mind demands that the heart and gut obey it, even as he writes from the heart and tells us that love is more important than thought. However, in all of this, he is clear that, in the end, the gut, our mystical center, is the truest indicator of God's voice. It must be obeyed ... its compulsions are our liberation.

Undergirding all of this, his contemporaries assure us, was a man of gentleness and deep charity who, while novice master, got into trouble for taking his novices out on too many picnics and who constantly taught that play is the ultimate goal of the spiritual life.

A MASTER OF SOULCRAFT

Samuel Butler once distinguished between what he called **statecraft** and **soulcraft**. In his mind, both are needed to come to wholeness and community.

Statecraft is the art of creating community among people. It combines sociology, politics, justice concerns, institutional structures, and religious insight. Soulcraft is the art of shaping the soul, channeling eros and ordering the mind, heart, and gut correctly. It combines psychology, physiology, and religious insight.

John of the Cross is one of the great masters of all time of the art of soulcraft. What John offers in this realm is parallel to what a Mozart offers in the area of music, a Michelangelo offers in the area of painting and sculpture, and what a Shakespeare offers in the area of literature. He is a master and what he produced is, in a manner of speaking, the purest of the pure. It can seem elitist and intimidating to the amateur for that reason.

George Eliot once wrote a book entitled, The Lifted Veil. In it, she tells the story of a woman who had extraordinary psychic powers. She could see into the future because, for her, the veil of time had been lifted. Looking into the future, she saw many things, some of which frightened her quite badly.

John of the Cross is a master of soulcraft because, for him, the veil was also partially lifted. As a great mystic, he was not given insights into the future, but he was given privileged insight into the dynamics of love, prayer, transformation, suffering, and consummation. His books might too aptly be entitled, The Lifted Veil. Only a person seeing for whom the veil has been partially lifted can articulate soulcraft of the following kind:

**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 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.
In this nakedness the spirit finds
its quietude and rest.
For in coveting nothing,
nothing raises it up
and nothing weighs it down,
because it is in the center of its humility.
When it covets something
in this very desire it is wearied.**
(The Ascent to Mount Carmel, Book. I, Chapter 13, Number 11)

Given this, we see that, while his person and his writings are somewhat beyond the ordinary, his spirituality is not elitist, a high road for spiritual athletes. Shakespeare was a one-in-a-million writer, but his plays are meant to be enjoyed by the millions. John of the Cross was a one-in-a-million mystic, but his works are meant to give insight and challenge to the millions. The common folk enjoy the Mozarts, Michelangelos, and Shakespeares ... even as they know that these were not ordinary composers, artists, and writers. They were rare, great geniuses who gave a precious expression to ordinary experience.

John of the Cross, once the myth is excised from the reality, should be understood in the same way. He is a rare, great genius, an one-in-a-million master of soulcraft, who gave precious expression to ordinary religious experience.