

For the Deconstruction of Faith: Could St. John of the Cross be a Worthy Companion?

By Ellen Haroutunian

There is a clear exodus from both the institution of church and the Christian faith that shows no signs of abating,¹ Thousands of people are experiencing what is being called the deconstruction² of their faith. They are knocking down theological and religious constructs and elements of church culture that no longer make sense, and that may even have caused harm. They are not merely rebels or people who “just want to sin,” as some pastor friends have said to me. What many are seeking is an engagement with life and yes, even spirituality, with what is real and authentic, experienced and embodied, and it may never again look like what people in the church are comfortable with.

Karl Rahner once said that the “Christian of tomorrow will be a mystic, someone who has experienced something, or else he or she will not be at all.”³ He was pushing back against the scholasticism of previous centuries, in which it was believed that the grace of God was given through externals— the proclaimed word and the sacraments of the church as isolated events, rather than personal encounter and experience. Harkening back to earlier mystics and the patristic era, he believed grace was everywhere, revealed in the “mysticism of everyday life,” and that God could be met and experienced in the moments of daily, ordinary life. In Rahner’s mind this mystical perspective was not a contrast to the arguments and reason of the

¹ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life* (17 October 2019), <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace>.

² The word deconstruction is borrowed from Jacques Derrida and others, who wanted to unmask the dualistic oppositions in western metaphysics and the privileging of certain words within its many dichotomies. Derrida’s insights may have pinpointed why so many are drawn again to mystery and a new way of being rather than merely a different kind of theology to re-establish certainty.

³ Annemarie S. Kidder, introduction to *The Mystical in Everyday Life: Sermons, Prayers, and Essays*, by Karl Rahner, ed. and trans. by Annemarie S. Kidder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), xviii.

scholasticism nor the sacraments and teaching of the church, but a logical continuation, outflow, and consequence of both.⁴

His words also rightfully challenge some of the effects of the Reformation and the advent of modernism. Reformers like John Calvin pushed back against the localization of grace in things like the sacraments and rituals, because in their thinking that opened the possibility of human action in salvation. Instead, they emphasized beliefs in the abstract, emphasizing the priority of God's grace and action. Thus it became the immaterial, abstract beliefs, not magical things like the host that are the means of grace. (Smith 39) Simply put, the rejection of sacramentalism by Calvin and other Reformers was unintentionally an opening to naturalism, effectively "disenchanted" the world. "If the church no longer had 'good' magic, then 'all magic must be black,' all enchantment must be blasphemous, idolatrous, even demonic."⁵ We lost a deep knowing of the sacred as presence in the world and have dampened our own abilities to sense it.

People in the pre-modern era held a more enchanted view of reality. A belief in supernatural realities was simply assumed, from which we have stories of fairies, and sprites and gremlins and such. Because of this, in the pre-modern world it was almost impossible to not believe in God or gods. In early Christian thought it was believed that all the realities of this world pointed to greater eternal realities, in which they sacramentally shared⁶ and all things were believed to subsist in and participate in God. Prior to the modern era our Christian tradition was

⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Mystical in Everyday Life: Sermons, Prayers, and Essays*, ed. and trans. by Annemarie S Kidder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), xix.

⁵ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 39.

⁶ Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 2.

immersed in a beautifully connected and meaningful cosmos that was saturated with the presence of God, a *sacramental ontology* that informed the early tradition and theology of the church.

Everything was vibrating with Presence.

Existence in the post-modern, post-Christian, Western world which has been flattened by disenchantment, that is, the de-sacralization brought about by enlightenment thinking, is a reality that has been reduced to immanence alone. Meaning is no longer inherent in everything, as once believed, but is created by the individual mind. Minds are inward, bounded spaces and therefore the loss of a sense of transcendence has given rise to an insulated, isolated self which is “giving its own autonomous order to its life.”⁷ What has emerged is “a new self-understanding of our social existence, one which gives unprecedented primacy to the individual.”⁸ The fruit of such a worldview is manifested in extreme loneliness, greed, addictions, anxiety, and lack of meaning. Lost is the sense of the Divine—the ultimate Good, True, and Beautiful—that was understood as the ground of our reality and is that in which we live, move, and have our being (Acts 17:28). The secularization of the world, that is, the utter negation of anything but reality understood as immanence alone that had developed during the Reformation and Enlightenment has made belief in God or a sense of transcendence difficult if not impossible for many postmodern people. In short, postmodern people view the world very differently than even a generation or two ago.

All of this has contributed to post-modern deconstruction of the faith. To understand deconstruction is to understand that in these days of late modernity/postmodernity we no longer have the eyes to see a cosmic frame of reference for meaning, hope, and unity, nor a shared sense of purpose and order. Though sociological research reveals that there are multiple reasons for the

⁷ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 30.

⁸ Smith, 45.

cynicism and loss of trust in Christianity, one significant reason is the modern reduction of the message of Christianity to a mere rationalistic philosophy or set of beliefs—objective propositional truths, that merely exist in competition with many others in the world.⁹ The practical outworking of this has reduced the reality of God-with-us to a mere ideology, philosophy, or a set of propositions rather than an embodied, experiential faith. One pastor friend said, “More and more I struggle with Christianity’s investment in what exactly transpired at the cross, or whether the Bible should be perceived as literal or metaphorical or whether Jesus was actually divine. Every day I see scores of people who are lonely, under-resourced, and marginalized who remain shackled in pain while those who were directly called to love their neighbor sit around obsessing over conversations made possible by privilege.” He’s not speaking of ministry projects or “ministering to,” but embracing these people as neighbor and friend.

What has been created in its stead is a poor facsimile. Another deconstructing friend said, “I felt like I was becoming less human.” He had learned to ignore his own heart in order to conform to the pressures of church expectations. No real questions were allowed, and disagreement with theological positions endangered one’s standing in the church. Also significant is the “church’s attempt to commend the Gospel on grounds that have nothing to do with the Gospel.”¹⁰ Deconstructing friends describe some of these things as exclusion of women in leadership, exclusion of LGBTQ persons, resistance to examining racist and sexist ideas, and conflating faith with political ideology. Loving the outcast or the “goats” with whom Jesus

⁹ James S. Bielo, “The Dynamics of Belief and Experience: Cultural and Psychological Responses across Religious Traditions,” *Ethos* 40: 3 (Sept 2012): 273-274; Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism For a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 45.

¹⁰ Jonathan Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: From After Virtue to a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 29.

identified himself (Matt 25) was not seen as a manifestation of the gospel, but the emphasis on moralism and the exclusion of many who did not fit well into their church culture was.

In addition, many were taught to ignore inner promptings that seem to conflict with the church culture or their biblical interpretations. When I was told in seminary in the 80's that to even ask about a call for women to preach and teach was rebellious, I knew in my soul that it was not true but could not explain how I knew that. It was offensive enough to them that I'd have complete strangers come up to me on campus and tell me they were praying for me. During my college years I was part of a para-church student organization that was going to evangelize the whole world. A big conference was schedule for the same time as a cousin's wedding. She was the first of that side of cousins to be married and would be a big family celebration. The pressure was on for me to "think about eternal consequences" and I went to the conference instead. Today I can't remember a thing about that conference. However, I do remember that I knew in my heart that the wedding was the right choice, but I did not yet know how to trust that inner wisdom. I abandoned my own heart and my family, for a conference. At the time I could only trust what the other Christians were saying was true and that this kind of obedience would please God.

The violation of the self by ignoring heart and body and living in approved cognitions only is an experience I've heard repeated hundreds of times from my Spiritual Directees. They are longing for wholeness, integration within their own being, and freedom from pressure, shame, and guilt for themselves and others. They desire to live as embodied beings, present to their own lives and those of others. Sadly, many have had to leave the church or faith communities to find these things. Some have deconstructed into agnosticism or atheism, because hurtful or traumatic experiences have made it impossible for them to even hear religious language or "Christianese," or even discussions of God. They are often re-traumatized by former

church friends who accuse them of backsliding or selfishness. I believe that what they are really doing is growing! They are moving from a black and white, rationalistic understanding of God, the world, and themselves to a broader, more colorful, more mysterious, more risky, more inclusive, and more loving one.¹¹

The good news is, what remains is a sense of longing for mystery again, for connection and community that is open and egalitarian, and for real meaning. In addition, Creation is still fundamentally enchanted and mysterious. The Presence has never left. Spiritual Directors know that when people learn to deeply attend to their own subjective experience they can begin to sense faint echoes of transcendence again which can challenge the very cultural belief system that ridicules and negates it.¹² Experiences of transcendent, the Divine, the other-worldly can move one past unfortunate experiences of faith and creating an opening to a deeper knowing of God. I believe that humans are intrinsically oriented toward transcendence (Eccl 3:11).¹³ We long to experience a sense of the transcendent within our immanence—incarnation. The Logos-at-play has saturated the meaning of all things, and dances amidst everything with ecstatic love in a quest for intimacy with all beings. As the poet wrote, Christ plays in ten thousand places.¹⁴

Many who are deconstructing faith are grieving the loss of what once was a place of comfort and home. They are often lonely on the journey. Their old communities are typically

¹¹ In developmental psychologist James Fowler's view, as one is able to reflect on one's own beliefs there is an openness to a new complexity of faith. In that light, many in deconstruction are moving into his stage 5 which is "Conjunctive" faith, which acknowledges paradox and transcendence relating to reality behind the symbols of inherited systems. The individual resolves conflicts from previous stages by a complex understanding of a multidimensional, interdependent truth that cannot be fully explained by any particular statement or statements. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 174-198.

¹² Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 113.

¹³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 113.

¹⁴ See "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

unable to assist them on this path because even the most well-meaning tend to reinforce the very things that are sending them away. I want to suggest that for those who desire it, John of the Cross, a 16th century Carmelite priest and mystic, may be a worthy guide. Of course, the work of John of the Cross can appear to be a form of extreme asceticism. Indeed, author and professor Susan Muto states that reading John of the Cross is like “taking a cold shower in a frosty apartment on a snowy morning when the furnace is shut off.”¹⁵ However, what John’s way of deconstruction asks us to relinquish is quite often the very things that have caused us distress in the first place. So how does John’s night of the senses, night of the spirit, and the joyful dawn of awakening into Love guide us, especially if we are burned out, wounded, and just *over* religion?

John believes that the deepest longing of the human heart is union with God, in God’s infinite love. His dark night, like the kenotic path of Jesus, is the way towards the union we desire. Admittedly, John’s language is unfamiliar and typically not enticing to people hurt and disappointed by the church. However, John’s way is not just for the spiritually elite in churches or monasteries,¹⁶ nor are all called or enabled to travel the darkest parts of the night, as John has. Rather, John says, “God treats us with order, gentleness, and *in a way that suits the soul.*”¹⁷ (italics mine) He sees the uniqueness of each person, and trusts that God will lead each one on their particular road.¹⁸ “The dark night ... is our unique and universal reality. It is a description of our world, our neighborhood, our family life. It is about pain and loneliness, anxiety and

¹⁵ Susan Muto, *John of The Cross For Today: The Ascent* (Pittsburgh, PA: Epiphany Books, 1991), 62.

¹⁶ My monastic friends find the idea that they are perceived to be the “spiritually elite” amusing and untrue.

¹⁷ John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 206.

¹⁸ Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), 15.

grief.”¹⁹ The path that John of the Cross teaches, no matter to what extent one is called into it, can be an invaluable tool for healing and growth in the “night” that comes to us through the experiential reality of our own lives. John essentially gives us permission to bring the practices of the contemplative way in his dark night to our modern and postmodern experiences of hurt, questions, and trauma. The purpose is to bring us to a deeper and purer experience of love.

John identifies the entrance into the Dark Night as when we find that what once was comforting and consoling no longer brings comfort or help as it once did, which is a common description of nearly every deconstructing person I meet. It is a journey of letting go of attachments (say, internalized beliefs and behaviors) that no longer serve us well. They may be things that keep us fragmented, like my need to please my campus faith leaders. They can be things like faith in what is finite, the certainties that we have wrestled with and tried to believe or have needed to outgrow. John calls that the purgation of the intellect. It is a refinement of faith beyond the mind. It is a place of safety and love that cannot be measured by external measurements. It is a path to knowing and experiencing the love of God beyond concepts. “We need the night to reawaken our capacity for the transcendent in our sense perception of things.”²⁰

There may be memories that cause us to internally constrict. Carmelite Sister Constance Fitzgerald says the work in the night on the purification of memory detaches it from its “props and boundaries,”²¹ including wrongs suffered as well as good experienced. We are more than our wounds and our accomplishments. “When memory is de-constructed in the dark night, the past

¹⁹ Susan Muto, *John of the Cross For Today: The Dark Night* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1994), 18.

²⁰ Muto, *John of The Cross For Today: The Ascent*, 20.

²¹ Constance Fitzgerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory,” *CTSA Proceedings* 64 (2009): 23.

can no longer weave its thread of meaning through the person's lived experience into the future."²² The familiarity of an identity that has been shaped and distorted by memories is disrupted and our value is no longer determined by them.²³ This can feel like "a loss of authenticity, truthfulness, and even identity."²⁴ Many deconstructing people express this discomfort or fear. Who am I without that religious container? "To find yourself [your true and deepest self in God] you must lose yourself [the egocentric "I" that functions as if God were an appendage of human need]" (Mk 8:34-35).²⁵ Losing these things is the beginning of allowing the true self to emerge; it's a new birth.

The radical emptying out of a religiously constructed and harmful selfhood is profoundly united with the kenosis of Jesus.²⁶ However, kenosis, or self-emptying, as described in Philippians 2, can feel particularly perilous for those who have experienced trauma or oppression. Indeed, there are theologians who have dismissed kenosis as a legitimate Christian path for this very reason. However, the kenotic path of Jesus is never "a kind of selflessness that is unwilling or unable to achieve a strong agency."²⁷ Jesus's kenotic way is not the result of a system that re-victimizes or oppresses. As Jesus said when speaking of his coming death at the

²² Fitzgerald, "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope," 23.

²³ John's work in *The Dark Night of the Soul*, and *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel* focus on the purification of memory, but also on the intellect and the will—all three faculties of the soul—as well. Constance Fitzgerald explores the purification of the intellect in that it reaches a point of impasse itself, because reason cannot heal or change trauma within or conflict without. Of course love, which is connected to the will, is the goal and the fruit by which the "success" of contemplation is seen. See Fitzgerald, 26.

²⁴ Fitzgerald, 23.

²⁵ Muto, *John of the Cross for Today: The Ascent*, 139.

²⁶ Fitzgerald, 29.

²⁷ Fitzgerald, 38.

hands of the Roman Empire and religious powers, “No one takes my life from me, I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:18). It is impossible to lose a self we do not have.²⁸

A world that is soaked in the presence of God and aflame with Mystery, and that is being held and enticed forward in love towards an ultimate telos of union with God and all things (however one comes to understand that) speaks of meaning and purpose in life right here and right now. This gives assurance that the relinquishment of the many attachments, defenses, and lesser loves that we collect as human beings is not a mere ascetical performance, rather, the night of purgation of these things and the perfection²⁹ of the soul will make space within us for the infilling of God, our heart’s desire. Thus, we are enabled to live in the naked authenticity of who we are, and can learn to love ourselves and others as we all should be loved—as God loves us.³⁰

This is not the path for everyone. As mentioned, there are many, too many, who have been disappointed, traumatized, and betrayed enough by their experiences within faith communities that they need distance and must shed everything, and they may have no desire to embrace anything remotely connected to God-language. It’s important to remember that their path is just as valid. There is integrity in refusing what insults the soul, and in honoring the inner pushback that they feel, without which healing is not possible. For those who have found healing and a deeper way within the Christian tradition it is crucial to trust that theirs is also a divine pathway.

²⁸ Muto, *John of The Cross For Today: The Ascent*, 17.

²⁹ Perfection does not refer to the pressure of always doing everything right. It refers to the integration or wholeness of the self, as the desires and appetites within that compete with love for God are purged or negated. Matthew, *The Impact of God*, 13; Muto, *John of The Cross For Today: The Ascent*, 33.

³⁰ John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 308.

We all have a certain internalized understanding of God. Mystical scholar Jim Finley says that essentially, John of the Cross is asking, “Can I learn to join God, in God’s understanding of me, of who I am, hidden with Christ in God before the origins of the universe? And can I join God in understanding who God understands me to be? Can I join God helping me to understand God’s way of understanding God?”³¹ That is a whole new way of being in faith.

Churches of all kinds would do well to re-examine its understanding of authority in light of the kenotic way in which Jesus understood power and authority. I believe that there is an important place and role for the Body of Christ in this world, but we have forgotten much from our own history, and are often unable to see the real needs and concerns right in front of us. We don’t see what we’ve become. We have forgotten the Way. Rather than trying to control access to God, we can learn to enhance it, to set paths straight, and trust that the Holy Spirit is quite capable of awakening us to what is Good, and True, and Beautiful again. John of the Cross, who was jailed and tortured by those in his own order, has been down this road and will gladly lend a compassionate hand to anyone who desires it.

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³¹ James Finley, *Turning to the Mystics: St. John of the Cross: Session 4*, podcast audio, April 19, 2021, <https://cac.org/podcasts/st-john-of-the-cross-session-4>.

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