

"helplessness, a suffering and undergoing for the sake of what is desired and, implicitly, the possibility of a tragic outcome."¹⁴

Romantic love is bodily, sexual (though not necessarily genital) love; it is concentrated on the experience of passion; it is not platonically "spiritual." But as fully human love, it is a radical realization of spirit in the flesh. Romantic love is experienced as a breakthrough that smashes ordinary awareness and creates an exchange of spiritual power. In this passionate love lovers come to self-awareness in the awareness of the beloved; they are defined in the very exchange of life that is love.

But romantic love, Haughton insists, is not just passion, it is also commitment. Romantic love might seize one unawares, but, as the poets of courtly love maintained, only a commitment to love—absolute, unconditional, permanent—can count as a proper response to the revelation of love.

It is impossible to do justice to this notion of passionate commitment in a few paragraphs, but I hope I have been able to give at least some hint of the way Haughton has enriched our understanding of affective conversion by retrieving the doctrine of romantic love with both her theological hands.

The work of Rosemary Haughton and Carol Gilligan are just two examples of how women colleagues have helped in distinctive ways to make my own work—and, increasingly, the entire theological enterprise—more fully human. I have not yet figured out the sound of one-hand clapping, but for the time being I am delighted to hear both my hands joining the growing applause in appreciation of this invaluable contribution. From the rhythm of applause, perhaps we can all move to the poetic meter of two-handed theology.

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TOWARD A CONTEMPLATIVE THEOLOGY

What is distinctive of women's theological reflection? I believe it has unique potential for being theology in a genuinely contemplative mode because it demonstrates characteristics of the profound religious transformation, imaged as the dark night, which makes contemplation possible.¹ Contemplation means here a deep experience of God's empowering presence, a communion with God effected through a transformation of one's desire and understanding that opens one to ever greater care for everyone

¹⁴ Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 6. For critical reviews of this book, see the Review Symposium with essays by Joan Wolski Conn, Lawrence S. Cunningham, PHEME PERKINS, and Brian O. McDermott, and Haughton's response in *Horizons* 10,1 (Spring 1983), 124-40.

¹ I am completely indebted to Constance Fitzgerald, O.C.D., "Impasse and the Dark Night," in *Living with Apocalypse: Resources for Compassion*, ed. Tilden Edwards (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) for this approach to the issue, and for the signs of the dark night.

and everything. Since theology is participation in and critical reflection upon the God-experience and the expressions of that experience in the community, done from the distinctive horizon of the theologian's own religious experience, if the theologian is experiencing this transforming dark night then she has unique potential for contemplative theology.

In order to generate further reflection, let me offer a brief summary of three signs of the dark night, correlating each sign with initial observations about women's theological reflection. Our subsequent discussion can expand these observations and their implications.

Initial indications of creative religious disintegration, or the dark night, focus on powerlessness to pray with one's reason, with discursive thought. That is, one's usual way of relating to God is ineffective and one experiences ambiguity, frustration, or boredom, and feels the situation as distasteful, as darkness, as walking by oneself.²

Why is this happening? Because everyone receives God's spirit in and through her or his own imperfections, limitations, projections, and false images.³ Therefore, movement into more authentic insight and love for God, for others, and the world demands that we somehow be set free from these illusions. In this context, embracing this dark night is a matter of experiencing and admitting the need for positive disintegration of immature religious experience.

Women theologians can uniquely locate themselves here, not because their reflection springs from any distinctive feminine nature, but rather because it is insight into a distinctive experience. We experience God only through the complex human situation of a faith community, in this case one in which the exclusive, or, at least, the dominant God-images and language are masculine. Lip service to a theology of all humanity as God's image is contradicted at every turn by sacraments, preaching, theological discussion, and informal conversation that are unreservedly male-biased. Experiencing ourselves as religious "outsiders," as patronized or excluded has generated deep frustration and alienation or boredom.

Participation in this distasteful, frustrating faith, and critical reflection upon our experience has allowed us to expand John of the Cross's insight into this aspect of the dark night. We are deeply aware not only of our personal limitations (his point) but also, and especially, of the cultural imperfections through which we all receive God's spirit. This promotes a contemplative manifestation-oriented theology which tries to mediate a horizon of Absolute Mystery.⁴ Using female God-language is helpful but also frustrating, because Scripture's God is feminine only in the stereotypical ways: birthing, nursing, etc. Thus, we are drawn into Mystery. Even

² *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D. C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1973). *The Dark Night*, Book I, chap. 9, no. 2; *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, chap. 13, 2.

³ John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, I, 16, 2.

⁴ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 376-98 explains manifestation, proclamation, and action-oriented theologies.

more, this experience generates a proclamation theology oriented to break through the idolatry of identifying God with males and with authority which dominates and oppresses.⁵

To experience the second sign of the dark night is to feel life is empty and desire is dead.⁶ One's life-project is disillusioning, one's hopes are dashed. Because desire seems dead, one can be overwhelmed by a temptation to quit, by a sense of worthlessness.

What is really happening here? In the dark womb of our life-situation a more mature love is developing. Immature egoism is dying and genuinely self-donating love is being generated. A primary effect of this purification is positive: increased self-knowledge, and transformed affectivity.⁷

Many women theologians could tell the story of empty feeling and loss of desire to do theology at all if it had to be done with resources that excluded their experience and dismissed their emotional involvement, especially their anger at male bias or their fascination with women's religious experience. They tended to lose hope about theology done with male colleagues whose cultural conditioning to be overly independent and autonomous⁸ prompted them to see "the old boy network" as collaborative effort in theology and tended to have them identify aggressive argumentation or androcentric concerns with "serious theology."

Attentiveness and discernment about the meaning of this experience yielded profound self-knowledge and mature love. Our thinking is not more innately intuitive or imaginative than men's, since some of the best work on imagination comes from men (e.g., Paul Ricoeur); we can reason with brilliant logic and razor sharp precision (e.g., Sandra Schneiders, Margaret Farley). However, we insist on working in a genuinely egalitarian manner and we can enjoy doing theology with anyone (women or men) who function this way. Our concern to recover and mainstream women's religious experience enables us to raise distinctive issues. Examples would be: How does the differing image of Jesus for medieval men (as mother) and women (as heart) demonstrate their contrasting experiences of ministry?⁹ What does a feminist hermeneutic of the New Testament uncover?¹⁰ How does recognition of sexism as serious sin effect a radical redefinition of ministry and church?¹¹ The mature love born of this dark night encompasses two aspects. First, our own exclusion enables us to be more sensitive to racism and classicism both in ourselves and in the church and

⁵ See, for example, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) and Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

⁶ John of the Cross, *Ascent*, II, 13, 3; *Dark Night*, I, 9, 3.

⁷ John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, I, 9, 3.

⁸ See Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 110-262.

¹⁰ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 3-40.

¹¹ Rosemary Ruether, "Where Are They Heading?" *Christianity and Crisis* (4 April 1983), 111-116; Mozella Mitchell, "The Black Woman's View of Human Liberation," *Theology Today* (January 1983), 421-25.

society. Second, it enables us to be inclusive in our care; to include ourselves in our range of concern; to discern that genuinely self-donating love requires a strong, differentiated self who can freely move beyond autonomy to authentic collaborative relationships and to adult religious surrender.¹² Already this dark night has functioned as a hermeneutic of the nature of God and of ourselves. It has purified our knowledge and affectivity, energizing a prophetic, action-oriented theology.¹³

The third characteristic of the dark night has two phases and moves from anxiety about one's mistakes and one's culpability for them to a new appreciation of God and others in peaceful attentiveness.¹⁴ One's usual support systems are gone; one's limitations are embarrassingly apparent. The only way to break free of incessant self-doubt is to go beyond self-justification and whatever formerly gave meaning and value and freely embrace finitude, admit paradox, give one's weakness over to the spirit of God. Then a new vision can break through, a new sense of affirmation, self-esteem, compassion, and solidarity with others.

What enables this new vision, this new experience to happen? When a theologian appropriates in her own person the pain of human limitations with conscious and free consent and hands it over, in herself, to God's spirit in the contemplative process a new, deeper experience of integration can gradually take over. Then re-visioning of every single aspect of theology can slowly become her pervasive horizon,¹⁵ and practical actions and attitudes of mutuality can be her ordinary life-style.

These manifestations of the dark night of religious transformation indicate that women's theological reflection has unique potential for contemplative theology. How shall we support it and benefit from the fruits of this contemplation?

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SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

Twelve groups returned notes on their discussions. I shall condense their data and then summarize the main import (topics with implications for future research) the data seem to carry:

1) No work is better than premature work. Hiring women theologians is not just a matter of justice but also a matter of achieving a fuller theology. How can we get at least two women on every seminary faculty?

¹² Joann Wolski Conn and Walter E. Conn, "Self-Transcendence in Christian Life," *Human Development* (Fall 1982), 25-28.

¹³ For example, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*; Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*.

¹⁴ John of the Cross, *Ascent*, II, 13, 4; *Dark Night*, I, 9, 3.

¹⁵ For development of the issue see Joann Wolski Conn, "Women's Spirituality: Restriction and Reconstruction," *Cross Currents* (Fall 1980), 293-308.