

**ST JOHN OF THE CROSS
AND SOEREN KIERKEGAARD**

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When one looks at the impressive bibliography of both kierkegaardiana and Sanjuanist studies, in the most varied academic disciplines, the question inevitably arises: Is there anything further to be said? We believe there is; otherwise this humble little study would not have been undertaken. Lack of source-material and time have inevitably restricted and delimited this comparative study. It is the author's hope in publishing it, that it will rouse the interest in others, more competent in the field, who will undertake the research necessary for a more exhaustive study.

It is our conviction that these two Christian writers have more in common, have a closer affinity of spirit and spirituality, than what is commonly recognized. Our thesis is an attempt to prove that. Firstly both St John of the Cross and Soeren Kierkegaard are occupied, indeed passionately occupied, with the Absolute. In Kierkegaard's own words, they "deal with the Absolute absolutely" (*Last Journals*). This in itself settles the topic as inexhaustible. Secondly, as both writers are existential writers¹; delving deeply into man's psyche with the ultimate intent of leading man to God, each one of us will meet them existentially differently, especially as they not infrequently use a more or less different pedagogy in order to teach the same fundamental truth. Being able to shed light on their doctrine from a new angle might prove helpful, and we hope this present paper will thereto make its contribution.

We presuppose their respective biography as known. That will provide ample evidence of the differences of their lives,

¹ We shall discuss this term in greater detail later on.

their psychological make-ups, the times in which they lived, cultures, languages, background, and the like. Consequently, it is not surprising then that they not seldom employ different pedagogies and methodologies. In fact, everything considered, they do so less often than one would have expected, something we like to see as a tacit confirmation of our thesis. Be that as it may, our concern in this paper will be precisely to show that underlying and, by the same token, transcending all these differences is a kinship, yes, a unity in their spirituality – or better (more correctly) expressed: in their existential response to the divine call; a response encompassing the whole of man's reality; man, a creature of God, listening, accepting, obeying.

After a brief general introduction, our paper will be divided into three parts. Nobody, with even the most superficial knowledge of these two thinkers, will deny that the concepts mentioned are of great importance for both of them, whatever value, importance and interpretation we place on them in our analysis. And here commentators differ greatly, probably more as regards Kierkegaard than John.

- I. Man's Nothingness
- II. Surrender to God; Faith
- III. Suffering; Cross

INTRODUCTION

If and when there is a similarity, kinship between two writers, the question inevitably arises: Were they acquainted with each other's writings?

If they were contemporary (without which condition no reciprocity could be envisaged), the further question might be, and should be, raised: Did they know each other personally? In our case the latter question is excluded, and we are left with the one question: Did Soeren Kierkegaard know the writings of St John of the Cross? If the answer is in the affirmative, we have to proceed to ask to what extent he (Kierkegaard) was familiar with Sanjuanist doctrine.

To my knowledge² nothing has been investigated and writ-

² We would be grateful for any enlightenment offered on this particular question.

ten attempting to answer that question. Further, as far as I know, Kierkegaard nowhere mentions or refers to, implicitly or explicitly, the Spanish Saint. On the other hand Kierkegaard was extremely well-read in the most diverse fields with a breadth and a depth that is remarkable, even in the case of a man like Kierkegaard. Could he have missed John of the Cross? Until anything is proven, we must leave this question open and content ourselves with analyzing the text and doctrine of the two writers in themselves – to a certain extent using (without being slaves to) the text-critical method. Text-criticism, like all methods, means and techniques is useful, provided it is used critically, with discrimination, and not absolutized.

Secondly, we will briefly look at their religiosity, and more specifically their Christianity. As they both are notably religious writers and thinkers this paper will fundamentally be an analysis of religion and metaphysics as understood by John of the Cross and Kierkegaard respectively. In these introductory remarks we will deal with some “direct religious” expressions and attitudes of theirs so as to try to delimit their religious-theological milieu. Here Kierkegaard is no doubt the more complete. So let us begin with St John of the Cross.

John of the Cross: Saint, Doctor of the Church. From this official recognition we know his orthodoxy to be beyond doubt. The omission of a discussion of John’s theology at this point must not tempt anybody to think that the Mystical Doctor’s teaching is simplistic or that we understand it in an oversimplified way. It is omitted simply because in the context that concerns us here, the “problem” with Kierkegaard is altogether different.

His case is more complex for a variety of reasons. Firstly, he was not a Catholic; consequently no reason for us to demand orthodoxy or to expect it.

What was he then? What was the religion of Soeren Kierkegaard? What was his *Weltanschauung*? The answer, or attempt to answer, to these two, interrelated questions would require a long study, with a profound analysis of Kierkegaardiana, that we are unable to undertake here. But as these questions, and the answers to be indicated, are of fundamental importance for our comparative study we shall attempt some brief, partial answers, chosen rather at random but not arbitrarily.

Kierkegaard belonged, officially that is³, to the Danish, Lutheran State Church. Despite his controversy with Bishop Munster, he never left his church. In his youth Kierkegaard seriously contemplated the ministry. This religio-sociological belonging in no way answers our questions. Perhaps, if we ask a further question. 'Why did Kierkegaard give up the idea of ministry in the Danish Church?' we shall come closer to an answer, or an attempt to an answer. But that is just to approach the problem from another angle, so we shall keep to our first two questions. As every worldview is built on metaphysics (whether explicitly or only implicitly makes no difference here), the two questions are strictly speaking two parts, two sides, of one fundamental, all-embracing question. And such it was, certainly, to an eminent degree to the author of *Either-Or*.

Now we are approaching the beginning of our attempted answer, by entering into the Kierkegaardian radicality, an uncompromising radicality. This radicality is one of the meeting-points between the Danish philosopher and the Mystical Doctor. It was precisely on this point that Kierkegaard raised some of his most severe criticisms against established Christianity; a Christianity that according to Kierkegaard was not Christian enough or perhaps (at least in some instances) not Christian at all. Was he right? Yes and No. once again, anything like a satisfactory answer (if such is to be had at all) would have to be an almost exhaustive analysis of Kierkegaard's thought; another indication of the organic, indissoluble unity of Kierkegaard's *Weltanschauung*. An analysis of many religio-sociological facets of established Christianity would also have to be undertaken. We deliberately use the expression 'established Christianity' in order to avoid the further question (important, indispensable though it is for a correct and more profound understanding of Kierkegaard's philosophy and religion), if his criticism is levelled against all the established forms of Christianity, perhaps even of religion as such, as some maintain, or only against the establishment of the Danish State-Church.

We would be inclined to favour the latter alternative, while bearing in mind all the time that some of Kierkegaard's criti-

³ It was, and in most cases still is, the custom in the Scandinavian State-Churches, that one becomes a member at birth, not at baptism.

cism inevitably will hit at, and was meant for, all establishment, in so far as it has become bourgeois, pharisaical and a law unto itself. In the last analysis, only the saints would pass Kierkegaard's test of authentic Christianity. But we are anticipating our argument.

St John of the Cross is easier "to place", also existentially-spiritually, as we said at the beginning of the introduction. Nevertheless, he is by no means an ordinary, common-place Catholic. The heights to which he soars and the doctrine he consequently, subsequently teaches, often in the most sublime, lyrical poetry (that on occasions even pre-figures surrealism), are neither easy to analyse nor (even less!) to live. We hope in the succeeding pages to show how the Spanish Mystic, although employing the Scholastic language of his time, uses the existential approach (just like Kierkegaard) long before its time. However, John in his existential approach (here he differs from Kierkegaard – and the philosophers who were to follow him) *presupposes* faith, doctrinal faith, as an ontological basis, while Kierkegaard *arrives* there, while starting from the existential experience.

I. MAN'S NOTHINGNESS

The existential approaches, mentioned at the end of the Introduction, with their subtle yet important philosophical-theological differences, not in the approaches but in the presupposition to the approaches, are probably most clearly manifested in the writers' understanding and experience of Man's nothingness. But as we also mentioned in the Introduction, the conclusion they arrive at is the same. The purpose of this paper is precisely to show that the conclusions arrived at are closer to each other than is commonly held by Sanjuanist and/or Kierkegaardian scholars respectively. The present section on Man's nothingness is one of the most convincing affirmations of the supposition.

The three sections of this essay will overlap many times and in many varied ways, such as nothingness, renunciation is suffering and pain, and the intellect only enters into the nothingness of unknowing so as to live by faith alone. Thus, they in fact confirm each other, and confirm the unity of the one spiritual life of man – indeed the unity of the whole of man, who is becoming more and more unified as he progresses towards

his final consummation in death, into the Beatific Vision. That final end and the loving, longing gaze towards it are certainly common to both John and Kierkegaard. It is that end that makes “nothingness” not only bearable but also meaningful and purposeful for both thinkers. The diversity that exists between them is due to different psychological make-ups and different social, cultural, religious and existential milieus. By existential milieu we understand the people they lived with and their practical “home-living”: so different, between John’s Community-Living with his Brethren and Kierkegaard’s solitary life in a flat in Copenhagen. It is our aim in this modest little paper to show that the diversity, and its expressions, are superficial, while the underlying unity, ontological, metaphysical, theological, philosophical, and existential (with the above mentioned proviso) is fundamental and all-pervading.

Here we must insert another proviso, though: Their philosophical unity (if we may even call it such) is *not* technical. How could it be, with 300 years of intense development in Western thought separating the two? Secondly, John of the Cross was not a philosopher, though he employed (not without skill) the philosophical language of his time, i.e. the Scholastic. Strict critics maintain that Kierkegaard was not a philosopher either. While leaving that question open, we just want to point out that if those criteria of definition are used that would exclude Kierkegaard from the ranks of philosophers (he himself would laugh at this discussion), then neither Pascal, nor Augustine, nor Nietzsche is a philosopher.

Man’s Nothingness: a Presupposition for His Seeking God

To put it simply: St John of the Cross and Soeren Kierkegaard are both seeking the same God, and want to show us the way on that journey. For both of them man’s nothingness is the existential-spiritual presupposition (as accepted) and starting point for man’s surrender to God (which will be the next part of this paper). Consequently, for neither of them is there a question of an absolute nothingness, a nothingness for its own sake (as, eg., for Sartre). It is *nothing for the sake of the All*. However both John and, even more, Kierkegaard experienced to the full the psychological horror of annihilation (more about that in the third part of this paper, where we shall deal with suffering and anguish) and utter emptiness and lone-

liness. But neither the essence nor the ontological foundation of suffering is to be sought there. Thus suffering takes on a completely, *essentially* different meaning if looked at purely naturally, or with the eyes of faith.

... And desire to enter for Christ into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world⁴.

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.
 ...⁵

Kierkegaard writing in the same vein, but with a distinctly more pessimistic tone, that *could* be understood in a real heretical sense, also contrasts the Infinite with the finite. However, if we prescind from Kierkegaard's exaggerated language here, we will find ourselves on the same faith-basis as with John of the Cross.

No one has loved God in the Christian sense who has not sufficiently experienced both pain and repugnance at the bestial nature for men ...⁶

... And then God would say to himself, "I could wish that

⁴ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk I; Ch. 13:6 (*Collected Works*, Washington DC, 1979).

⁵ *Ibid.*; Bk I; Ch. 13:11.

⁶ SOEREN KIERKEGAARD, *Journals of the Last Years*; Page 108 (Henceforward referred to as *Last Journals*), London, 1965.

this man would love me, he pleases me. So there is nothing to be done but to let his relation to men be embittered, through their rewarding him with bestial treatment. For I cannot be loved in straightforward harmony with human love”.

This is how we are to understand pain and repugnance at the bestial nature of men. But this does not at all mean that we cease to love them. No, but the opposition is there in order to make the relation to God recognizable negatively.

So it is not possible to love God in the Christian sense, and be happy in this world. No, the God of Christianity is in opposition to this world, so that he who loves God in the Christian sense cannot be happy in this world⁷.

God and God Alone: to leave everything behind as the “nothingness” it is for God and Him Alone is something John often sings of in his poetry.

Forgetfulness of creation,
Remembrance of the Creator,
Attention to what is within,
And to be loving the Beloved⁸.

The verse “Attention to what is within”, leads our thoughts to Kierkegaard’s *hin enkelte* the solitary one, alone with his God. The authenticity of this one-stanza poem has been questioned, but as it is included in the edition of the Saint’s work that we are using and is in perfect conformity with Sanjuanist thought, we include it in our study.

Tedium Vitae – Longing for God

A poem with even greater affinity with Kierkegaardian thought is “I Die because I do not Die”, which is even called “Stanzas of The Soul That Suffers with Longing to See God”. It is the finite spirit’s insatiable longing for the Infinite, as St Augustine reminds us in his immortal works that the soul is created for God and therefore restlessness until it rests in its

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “The Sum of Perfection”, *Collected Works*; Page 737.

Maker. The writings of St John of the Cross and Soren Kierkegaard vibrate with that longing that often is so painful.

This life that I live
 Is no life at all,
 And so I die continually
 Until I live with You;
 Hear me, my God:
 I do not desire this life,
 I am dying because I do not die.

Kierkegaard once again put it more strongly in the last annotation of his Journals, written a week before he collapsed in the streets of Copenhagen – to be taken to a hospital and die a month later. While John's longing, pain, tiredness with this life is expressed in the lyrical language of a Baroque or a Renaissance-poet, Kierkegaard in this private journal cries out at the end of a life of suffering and affliction. (Such was John's life too, but the material living out was different. We will have more to say about that in Part III). However, that both men experience, understand and express the same longing for the same God, the same tiredness with this life (valley of tears) is evident even without any preknowledge of the two writers.

"The definitioin of this life is to be brought to the highest degree of disgust with life". Thus opens the last aforism of the 19th century philosopher. The existentialist begins with his experience "disgust with life". The scholastically trained mystic describes the same experience (make no mistake about it being the same experience) objectively "This life that I live/Is no life at all". John employs (not always consistantly, which adds to the interpreter's difficulties) the Scholastic philosophical and theological language then in current use. But before we even reach the end of that stanza (see above) the poet/mystic has taken over from the Scholastic theologian, and existential language is used here, too. Further on in the poem John will use expressions like: "the bitterest death known", "pitiabile life", "all things are affliction"⁹. "I am so wholly miserable",

⁹ We must bear in mind, that, unfortunately, during this analysis we use the English translations in our comparative study (although the originals in both cases have been consulted), as otherwise the study would

“mourn my living”. The last two expressions approximating closest to the above citation from the Danish thinker.

We could extend the analytical comparison between this Sanjuanist poem and the last annotation of Kierkegaard’s. So as not to make our paper too long, we shall let the above-said suffice as illustrating our two writers’ longing for death as the entry into that fullness of existence that Christianity calls Heaven; death thus understood as the birth of true life, this present life being a mere nothingness. As we have established that both John and Kierkegaard were Christians in the truest sense of the word, we are perfectly justified in using a decidedly Christian terminology. It must further be remembered that “nothingness”, and such-like terms, must not in this context be taken in their absolute philosophical sense, in which case it would mean the non-existence, of, say, Existentialist philosophy, but rather in a spiritual-mystical, analogical-allegorical sense, if the later could be understood without compromising the reality of the expression. Before we conclude, however, we shall quote another passage from Kierkegaard’s *Journals of the Last Years* that has an even greater affinity with the Mystical Doctor’s poem, but again conveys a more pessimistic tone in the Danish philosopher.

... Therefore spirit is to will to die, to die to the world./ Now it is easy to see that to die to the world is suffering of a higher potency than dying. For dying is merely to suffer, but dying to the world is freely to engage oneself in the same suffering; moreover dying is a fairly brief suffering, whereas dying to the world lasts the whole of one’s life...¹⁰.

Man’s Existential Experience of His Own Nothingness

We shall now move on to a more detailed study of the nothingness of man as understood by St John of the Cross and

reach unmanagable proportions, and have to become an almost complete philology, too. Due to this fact (of using translations) we cannot press the use of certain words and expressions too far but must try immediately to go beyond the word used to the intended meaning.

¹⁰ SOREN KIERKEGAARD, “To be Spirit” (We have been unable to document this article).

Soeren Kierkegaard. We have already in the Introduction touched on the different methodology employed in their respective writing; a difference though that should not be over-emphasized. It is precisely a difference of methodology, influenced by the different times, cultures, and intellectual climates in which they lived, partly also their different psychological make-ups. The part of the latter though, is difficult to determine, as the three first-mentioned causes are very influential, more so the more unconsciously they are present – particularly as it concerns a choice of methodology. The question how far John and Kierkegaard were different in their psychological make-ups and consequent religio-psychology would be the most interesting and decisive for our present study. However, here we must keep rigorously to known data and strict logical analysis, and not allow conjectures to colour our assessment.

We shall not attempt to name the different approaches, as that would be to give them over-due emphasis and importance. Briefly they can be stated like this: John chooses the more objective, scholastic approach of mystically-theologically laying down the datum of man's nothingness and then moving on to the same man's experience of this fact (in his description of the experience John is certainly ahead of his time), while Kierkegaard begins with man's existential experience of his own utter nothingness ("the anguished cry of existence"), and from there moves to its "resolve" in faith and surrender to God and His inscrutable will. Thus both the saint from Fonteveros and the philosopher from Copenhagen, despite all differences in style and language, will end on, and in hope: the hope of heaven that attains as much as it hopes for (celebrated quotation from one of St John of the Cross poems). We must always bear in mind that "mystical" language is not, cannot be, that of dogmatic theology or philosophy. According to the latter it would be gross heresy to state man's absolute nothingness – and a psychological perversion on man's part to long for annihilation. This difficulty in describing mystical-spiritual states and yearnings is one of the reasons why so many mystics have been judged as heretical, at least in their writing (e.g. Meister Eckhardt). Limited space prevents us from employing the whole corpus of texts available to illustrate this point, so we shall make a selection from our two writers, chosen somewhat at random.

... God's passionate desire to show men their nothingness, he always deliberately choses his instruments with that in view...¹¹

... To arrive at being all
desire to be nothing.

... To come to be what you are not
you must go by a way in which you are not...¹²

John is still more akin to Kierkegaard in a letter from 1589. In these citations it is Kierkegaard who chooses to approach the nothingness of man from God's point of view, if we may say so, and John who describes the human approach and attitude; all of which shows that we cannot draw the distinctions mentioned above in a clear-cut fashion – a further proof of the closeness of spirit between the two writers.

... For he who is poor in spirit is happier and more constant in the midst of want, because he has placed his all in nothingness, and in all things he thus finds freedom of heart. O happy nothingness, and happy hiding place of the heart...¹³

That only the man who is stripped of everything to utter nothingness is free, is a profound insight, taught by all major Christian thinkers and mystics. The theme of freedom would require a treatise of its own, so we shall not enter more deeply and explicitly into it here.

The nothingness that first terrifies us becomes happy and blessed (see for example, the letter quoted above) once the soul has fully realized in a truly existential way the incomprehensible truth that this nothingness is in the last analysis the only way to the All. It is true to say that Kierkegaard dwells more on the first aspect, though the second is by no means lacking, as some critics have maintained (it is in fact the *metaphysical* foundation of Kierkegaard's whole philosophical edifice, though held only in hope while on this earth), while the Castilian poet mostly rests in the second aspect, especially in *The*

¹¹ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*; page 106.

¹² JOHN OF THE CROSS, "Drawing of Mount Carmel", *Collected Works*; Page 67.

¹³ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Letter to Madre Maria de Jesus*, Prioress at Cordoba, July 1589.

Spiritual Canticle and *The Living Flame*, though we are never allowed to forget the first, that in fact dominates the major parts of *The Ascent* and *The Dark Night*. Our being reduced to nothingness and accepting it is the condition of any service we can and do render God. "When God wants to use a man, He first crushes him to nothingness" (Kierkegaard)¹⁴.

Since you walk in these darkneses and voids of spiritual poverty, you think that everyone and everything is failing you. It is no wonder that in this it also seems that God is failing you. But nothing is failing you, ... He who desires nothing else than God walks not in darkness, however poor and dark he is in his own sight...

You were never better off than now, because you were never so humble nor so submissive, nor considered yourself and all worldly things to be so small, nor did you know that you were so evil, ... living here below like pilgrims, the poor, the exiled orphans, the thirsty, without a road and without anything, ...¹⁵

... if you will truly love God, this must be shown by your gladly and adoringly letting yourself be quite annihilated by God, that the may unconditionally promote his will¹⁶.

And shortly before: "...despite every suffering it is some thing indescribably great to be God's instrument, ..."¹⁷

Nothingness: The Way to The All

Ultimately then, for both Kierkegaard and John of the Cross, nothingness is positive, as it is not an absolute nothingness (as with the modern existentialists, but a nothingness, an annihilation that is a means toward an end, never a goal in itself: nothing for the sake of All, the way, and in the last analysis, the only way to the All; in John's terminology, *Via Negativa*. "He is humble who hides in his nothingness and knows how to abandon himself to God"¹⁸.

¹⁴ We have been unable to trace this quotation in Kierkegaardian texts.

¹⁵ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Letter to Doña Juana de Pedraza*, October 1589.

¹⁶ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*; Page 145.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Minor Works*; "Other Counsels", 5 (*Collected Works*, Washington DC, 1979).

We know from John's drawing of the Mount too, that the way of, and for, the perfect soul is the one of nothing, nothing ... encumbered with nothing; not weighed down by possessions and attachments but free, it journeys towards its God. As we shall see in the section on Faith, that, too, is a nothingness, a nothingness of the intellect, an unknowing that surpasses all human comprehension and possibility of comprehension. And in this nothingness, this unknowing, the intellect is free to journey to God and know Him for the first time, for "this highest knowledge lies in the loftiest sense of the essence of God", to use the poet-mystic's own words.

The mystical nothingness that must be willingly accepted and lived and finally accomplished and undergone in biological death in order to attain God has always been insisted upon by spiritual writers. Any true encounter with the Creator Himself demands this, and the higher the union to be attained, the more radical and drastic the annihilation of man must be. Even if he cannot name it, pilgrim-man in his loneliness and pain is constantly confronted with his own nothingness. And both Kierkegaard and John uncompromisingly insist on man's acceptance of this nothingness, even if there are differences in approach and emphasis between them; differences that, as we are trying to show in this paper, are not ultimate and fundamental but rather due to different psychologies, cultural, theological background and educations.

...Few there are with the knowledge and desire for entering upon this supreme nakedness and emptiness of spirit. As this path on the high mount of perfection is narrow and steep, it demands travellers who are neither weighed down by the lower part of their nature nor burdened in the higher part. This is a venture in which God alone is sought and gained, thus only God ought to be sought and gained. Obviously a man's journey must not only exclude the hindrance of creatures, but also embody a dispossession and annihilation in the spiritual part of his nature... (If anyone wishes to follow My way, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me. For he who would save his soul shall lose it, but he who loses it for Me shall gain it. (Mk 8:34-35)¹⁹.

... It happens that, when some of this solid, perfect food (the

¹⁹ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Ascent*, Bk II; Ch. 7; 3-4.

annihilation of all sweetness in God – the pure spiritual cross and nakedness of Christ poverty for spirit) is offered them in dryness, distaste, and trial, they run from it as from death and wander about in search only of sweetness and delightful communications from God. Such an attitude is not the hallmark of self-denial and nakedness of spirit, but the indication of a “spiritual sweet tooth”.

Through this kind of conduct they become, spiritually speaking, enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:18)²⁰.

This is one of the passages most illustrative of what we said at the beginning of this section on Man's Nothingness, namely that many texts would equally well fit into any of our three sections: Man's Nothingness, Faith and Surrender to God, Suffering - Cross. Consequently the sections, because of their themes, will of necessity overlap. Before we commence our commentary and study of this Sanjuanist text, we shall cite a few further passages, omitting, however, those paragraphs that doubtless are more suitably analysed in the section on Suffering – remembering, though, what was said above regarding “overlappings”.

This Chalice symbolizes death to one's natural self through denudation and annihilation. As a result of this death a man is able to walk along the narrow path in the sensitive part of his soul, as we said, and in the spiritual part (in his understanding, joy, and feeling). Accordingly, one can attain to dispossession in both parts of the soul. Not only this, but even in his spirit a person will be unhindered in his journey on the narrow road, for on this road there is room only for self-denial (as our Saviour asserts) and the cross. The cross is a supporting staff and greatly lightens and eases the journey²¹.

“Few there are...”; in case anybody is tempted to think of Kierkegaard's *Hin enkelte* (the alone one)²² we will immediate-

²⁰ Ibid.; Bk; Ch. 7; 5.

²¹ Ibid.; Bk II; Ch. 7; 7a.

²² R.G. Smith has pointed out that Kierkegaard's *hin enkelte* often in current English translation is rendered as “the individual”, which is highly misleading. “The alone one”, “the single one”, though clumsier in English convey the author's intention better (especially the first expression).

ly state, that this is not what is meant here. In fact, the question of *hin enkelte* is probably one of the issues where we would find a difference between our two writers. We have already in our introduction referred to the complicated issue how far, on certain points, there is a real theological-philosophical, essential difference between John and Kierkegaard, and how far, to what extent, it is only a matter of different psychological make ups, different sociological, cultural situations and different languages. We do not hope to conclusively settle the issue here, but the purpose of this paper is a discussion of that question. What John is talking about in the text quoted above is how few there are who accept the demand of renouncing the world for the sake of a higher reality, namely God Himself. Kierkegaard would contrast true Christianity (rare as it is, in his opinion) with official Christendom, that he would call a lie. All through his writing Kierkegaard will insist on "interiority"; a term that has ever since been almost identified with Kierkegaard's spirituality. John is spiritually, we do not say doctrinally, close to this "interiority" when he in *The Dark Night* speaks of the *intimate* and refined love the soul will possess after *intimate* and penetrating suffering. Continuing the same line of thought, John would say that Christ is to a large extent unknown by those who claim to know Him. John is obviously not referring to atheists, few and far between as they were in his days, or non-Christians, as they do not claim to know Christ, but to Christians who are so more in name than in actual fact. Both writers are equally severe in castigating the hypocrisy we make of our religion, because we do not want to accept the inexorable demands it lays on us. The willing acceptance of our annihilation (what we have said regarding the term 'nothingness' applies equally to annihilation i.e. its use in the mystic-spiritual and not philosophic-technical sense), also in the spiritual part of man, was not so easily understood in John's time as in Kierkegaard's and later on. Man's painful and confused experience of his own nothingness is probably more common today than ever before. Thus Kierkegaard begins precisely with man's *experience* of his own utter nothingness, a difference between the two in approach and also, we venture to say, in experience.

John's unmasking and stern reproof of mediocre Christianity that we quoted above from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, where he does not hesitate to call Christians seeking their own spiritual pleasures and satisfactions "enemies of the Cross of

Christ", could not be more Kierkegaardian. We shall not delay any further on their castigation of false Christianity and of mediocrity, where they are at one, but proceed to a discussion of their deeper interior and theological, philosophical unity, or kinship of spirit to be more cautious. "Death to one's natural self...", says John. Kierkegaard tells us that when God wants to use a man, He first crushes him to utter nothingness. We could say, with due caution but not without justification that our two writers experienced and lived the negative side, so to say, of the Magnificat (Kierkegaard more so than John). "I am the lowly handmaid..., be it done unto me..." – a painful, "empty" negativity that it would not have been possible or feasible for the Immaculate to live through. By this we are not denying that the Blessed Virgin lived a Faith-life like everybody else.

Courage to Live One's Own Nothingness

Why and how is it that man's nothingness, and his excruciatingly painful experience of it, so much an existential reality today, became, and/or was, (For Kierkegaard more "became", for John of the Cross more "was", as we have already pointed out.) a firm foundation of and for faith for both John and Kierkegaard, and, yet, for modern man (this nothingness) often ends in utter despair with consequent moral nihilism (if he nevertheless decides to go on living)? The difference is not in courage, as John and Kierkegaard boldly faced their nothingness with open eyes. Indeed, they will and desire their nothingness. "To arrive at being all desire to be nothing"²³. Perhaps the answer lies in the first part of the above-quoted sentence, "to arrive at being all".

Kierkegaard and John knew that was the end, purpose and goal of nothingness. This is certainly true theologically, ontologically, but it still does not, sufficiently explain it psychologically, existentially, as at least Kierkegaard *began* in the crushing experience of his own nothingness. Even if John all the time (if we may so put it) knew that God was waiting at the other side of the dark tunnel, his experience in the dark and his

²³ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Ascent*, Bk I; Ch. 13:11.

knowledge of how heavy and crushingly depressing that darkness could be would have been enough to lead him to similar attitudes and conclusions as modern man often arrives at, and explicitly so, the Existentialist philosophers. Sanjuanist scholars have always debated, without ever coming to a definitive conclusion, how much John himself had experienced of the "dark night", and how much he had learnt from his direction of souls. Interesting as the question is in itself, it has got no immediate bearing on our doctrinal discussion, and will be left open. "Why, then...?" we repeat. Perhaps the answer is too simple and because of that too difficult: God's grace, and His grace alone; A remarkable example of this truth, lived to the full, is given us in a later Carmelite, who explicitly referred to her existential situation as being in a dark tunnel, namely St Therese of Lisieux, who is a true daughter and faithful disciple of St John of the Cross. She has got much to say to our contemporary, despairing, unbelieving philosophers (and non-philosophers). However, this answer, that certainly is correct absolutely speaking, does not prevent us from continuing our query at the lower level (N.B. lower level). Looking at it from a slightly different angle we can see that both John and Kierkegaard allowed the Angst that is in the deepest recesses of the heart of fallen man to become the anguished cry of existence. The real danger for man, theologically, morally, psychologically, even physically, arises when that conscious surfacing of Angst is not allowed to take place. It is either choked, in which case we suffocate, or its existence is denied and an escape is sought into various mundane activities and pleasures, sin not exempt. We are reminded of Dostojevsky's very apt remark that if God does not exist, everything is permissible, and of the morally devastating consequences of that "norm".

The chief benefit that this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and of one's own misery. ... make the soul recognize its own lowliness and misery...

...

As a result the soul recognizes the truth about its misery, of which it was formerly ignorant. When it was walking in festivity, gratification, consolation, and support in God, it was more content, believing that it was serving God in some way. Though this idea of serving God may not be explicitly formed in a person's mind, at least some notion of it is deeply embedded within

him owing to the satisfaction he derives from his spiritual exercises. Now that the soul is clothed in these other garments of labor, dryness, and desolation, and that its former lights have been darkened, it possesses more authentic lights in this most excellent and necessary virtue of self knowledge. *It considers itself to be nothing*²⁴ and finds no satisfaction in self because it is aware that of itself it neither does nor can do any thing²⁵.

We begin to approach an understanding of the question posed above if we look at the concluding sentence in the citation above. It (the soul, man) is nothing: An excruciating, painful experience, the existential cry from emptiness and desolation. But, here the despair is checked (and *this* is the fundamental difference between, on the one hand, Kierkegaard and John, and on the other philosophers, writers standing on the ground of atheistic metaphysics) by the awareness, the knowledge, however dark and vague, that *of itself* it can do nothing. That implies that there is something or somebody who *can* do something; Kierkegaard's insistence on faith as the only possible answer to our anguished cry of existence was aptly pointed out by Pope John Paul II, a former professor of ethics, during his visit to Copenhagen in 1989.

We will follow this topic up in the section on Suffering, as suffering is intrinsically, indissolubly united with man's discovery of and subsequently accepted endurance of his nothingness. Note that in the Cristian context, within a Cristian *Weltanschauung*, within which both Kierkegaard and John lived and explicitly wrote, this nothingness is always relative. Thus, the very negativity ultimately turns out to be positive the paradox, and folly, of the Cross. This, however, in no way eradicates or even diminishes the psychological, existential pain. The pain, the agony is concomitant with (and usually remains so for the whole of life) the faith-knowledge that it is not absurd. The Scholastic language of St John of the Cross is here a clarifying help. Faith will be the deliberate act of the will in the intellect. The pain would be relegated to the lower sense-part of the soul – or even analogously the spiritual sense;

²⁴ Our italics.

²⁵ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Dark Night*, Bk I; Ch. 12:2c (*Collected Works*, Washington DC, 1979).

mainly irrational.? Thus it is comparatively easy to understand, that it can co-exist with the rational act of faith. *If*, and to the extent that, the pain enters into the faculties it would then be in the memory. But here we must break off, so as not to commit the too common Scholastic fault of trying to systematize everything, even the unsystematizable.

Anguish, darkness, suffering have a purpose, however veiled to our eyes; They lead somewhere. "The affliction must lead to something". (Kierkegaard) "A person suffers affliction ... because of his natural, moral, and spiritual weakness. ... Both the sense and the spirit, ... undergo such agony and pain that the soul would consider death a relief. ... God's aim is to grant it favors and not chastise it"²⁶. God is, as it were, behind the nothingness, which is precisely why it is (despite all horrors and sufferings) endurable, but also why it does not allow any escape, any dulling of the pain, the agony. We have already quoted Kierkegaard's "When God wants to use a man, he first crushes him to nothing". John says in the Dark Night; "God humbles the soul greatly in order to exalt it greatly afterwards"²⁷.

II. SURRENDER TO GOD

Faith

Although we have divided our paper into three main consecutive sections, that does not imply that man's life unfolds chronologically from one to the other. All three are present, albeit in varying degrees and intensity at various stages in man's life, right up to the moment of death. We chose this order for the three sections of our analysis as it is *theologically* the most relevant, which is by means to deny that *existentially* man might very well first be consciously aware of and experience the third section and so on. Probably, most men arrive *chronologically* in their lives at the second section last.

Let us take a brief look at our two thinkers. What chronological order did their lives take, roughly, and speaking in a gen-

²⁶ *Dark Night*, Bk II; Ch. 5:6, 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Bk II; Ch. 6:6.

eralized, oversimplified way? This question, or rather the attempted answer to it will be a help (nothing more) at entering into their respective existential *Weltanschauung* and philosophy. Both were, "officially" so to speak, believers, Christians all their life, being baptized as infants and raised in Christian homes. That one was a Protestant and the other a Catholic we prescind from at the moment as our immediate concern here is the faith-experience as such. There is no public defection from faith either later on. That Kierkegaard on his deathbed refused to see the Lutheran Minister was no real public defection, rather a personal incident, a lack-of-encounter or whatever we would like to call it. It could also be interpreted as a rejection of the Danish Lutheran State Church as such. We have to leave the question open if it were or not. That they both grew in a faith that ever deepened is furthermore beyond dispute; faith that became ever more supernatural, purer, stronger and more heroic, as God drew them to Himself, revealing Himself more and more. When and how did they encounter and later, or earlier, conceptualize man's radical experience and (subsequent?) understanding of his own nothingness, and then in holy courage take the big leap of faith (understood here in its full existential, religious, anthropological sense) and definitively, in so far as is possible in this life, surrender to God?

Faith, radical, uncompromised faith, is the hinge on which absolutely everything, the whole of life depends. This is the strong, unsupported, uncomforted faith and trust that make the Kierkegaardian *leap of faith* – as often quoted as it is misunderstood. The one decisive question is: Faith or No-faith? We are here faced with the Kierkegaardian Either-Or. There is no place for the comfortable both – and.

Nobody has questioned or would question the faith of St John of the Cross, not even his Catholicity would be queried, though some scholars have had problems with his "general" mystical language, that does not always employ the terminology of the catechism. Kierkegaard's faith on the other hand has been questioned, scrutinized and analysed. As some astonishing suggestion have been made (Professor J. Thompson, seemingly unaware of a long Christian tradition of ascetical and mystical writing, does not hesitate to explain Kierkegaard's cross-center spirituality as "a fascination with the horrific"!), we shall have to briefly discuss Kierkegaard's faith before we continue.

The Doctrinal Faith of Soren Kierkegaard

The first thing to be stated as beyond all dispute is that Kierkegaard was a believer, and he was a Christian. The latter statement has been disputed. As proof one normally quotes some of Kierkegaard's own sayings, that he never counted himself as a Christian. The point we will come back to later, as the interpretation mentioned is an inadmissible over-simplification, if not a complete misrepresentation of the whole foundation of Kierkegaard's thought. Here we shall just state, without proving it at this point, that those sayings of Kierkegaard were due to his high standard of Christianity, the high ideals he set. It has often been debated if Kierkegaard *drew* the ideals of Christianity too high. A simple answer to that question cannot be given as the answer would depend entirely on the angle from which, and in what connection, one raised the question. As this particular issue does not directly concern us in this comparative study we shall not discuss it here. Let us not forget, however, that Kierkegaard was deliberately provocative so as to awaken the consciences of his contemporaries. That was certainly a concern of John of the Cross, too; yet the question cannot be asked in the same way of him. A discussion of the reason for that would at present be too far a digression from our set purpose and will consequently have to be omitted.

We return to Kierkegaard's denominational belonging, i.e. existential not religio-sociological belonging. Was his *belief* Catholic or Protestant? This question cannot be answered with a simple statement either. It would demand a long, thorough and profound analysis. Even after that we feel it would elude a definitive answer. Kierkegaard scholars have battled with the problem for close to a century without really and completely solving it²⁸. Perhaps even here Kierkegaard escapes, tran-

²⁸ A remarkable fact however, is that only Catholic commentators seem to have been able to grasp the whole or the true content of Kierkegaard's doctrine. We will briefly return to this controversial statement in the chapter on suffering and sacrifice. Having said this we must mention one non-Catholic scholar who has probed deeper into Kierkegaard and understood the spirit of the Danish philosopher better than most commentators, past and present: Professor Ronald Gregor Smith.

scends, our too limited and narrow definitions and categories – he, the lonely one (*hin enkelte*), God's stormy petrel. Gabriel Marcel's epithet for Simone Weil, "Pilgrim of the Absolute" is equally applicable to Kierkegaard.

The Catholic slant, though, of Kierkegaard's whole philosophy and worldview is evident and beyond dispute. What is disputed, however, is how far that "slant" goes, how deep it is. An anecdote, that is more pregnant with meaning than is always understood, illustrates this: When Kierkegaard broke the engagement with Regine Olsen, she said to him: "You will end up as a Jesuit one day".

Many quotations from the body of Kierkegaard's texts could be appealed to, in order to verify this "Catholicity". We shall choose only a few at random, from his Last Journal, 1853-55, as they represent his mature thought, and Kierkegaard at his most personal, at an intimate level. "If Protestantism is to be anything but a necessary corrective at a given moment, is it not really man's revolt against Christianity"?²⁹ This quotation may not be very appropriate to prove any Catholicity of Kierkegaard's thought, being purely a criticism of Protestantism, but we have chosen it as it shows an unusual line of thought in the time of Kierkegaard, and in his milieu. It must always be remembered that Kierkegaard never had any "direct", practical contact with Catholicism – or at least not to any considerable degree. He never left Denmark (hardly ever Copenhagen) except for four very short trips to Berlin. His was a purely interior journey, into the depth of his being; that journey that is the longest, according to Dag Hammarskjöld.

A few further quotations from the Journals of the Last Years, without comment and/or analysis, all of which would lead too far, will have to suffice to illustrate our point. "Catholicism always has some who are Christians in character"³⁰. I have often observed that Luther has altered Christianity"³¹.

It is true, that just before the sentence quoted above, Kierkegaard in parenthesis, referring to Luther says: "Who for the rest was right in opposition to Catholic abuse"³². That

²⁹ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*; Page 49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*; Page 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*; Page 82.

³² *Ibid.*

remark is by no means strange. It is commonplace. The remarkable is the other observations made by Kierkegaard as regards Luther and Protestantism. The whole discussion that follows, where Kierkegaard emphatically maintains that Luther has changed Christianity, bears witness to this. We shall content ourselves with quoting one more passage, most remarkable, as it concerns a controversial topic, namely the saints.

...Here Catholicism is in a certain sense right in, wishing to worship³³ the saints; for a saint is of a higher quality than the man who wants to have a materially good life at the expense of the sacrifice of another³⁴.

The paragraph following this one is a sharp criticism of Protestantism on this point, employing all the Kierkegaardian to emphasize the point.

That there undoubtedly are Gnostic and dualistic elements in Kierkegaard's writing is evident. The question to be posed, however, is: How much is that a stylistic and psychological reaction against comfortable, bourgeois Christianity, "Sunday-folk-costume Christianity" (whatever we like to call it), without much depth, and to what extent is it an expression of a really heretical theological *Weltanschauung*? The question demands serious and profound study before any attempt at an answer can be made. We shall have to content ourselves with just having pointed out this tendency in Kierkegaard's writing, especially in his later works. How much his strong language is coloured and influenced by his own suffering, that he felt (even though fully accepted), intensely remains an open question as it is always difficult to distinguish, much less separate in a clear-cut way, the objective and the subjective in Kierkegaard's writing, something he himself was well aware of. He said that when he was dead the professors, "those rescals", would lecture on him, and complain that one could not even lecture on that "peculiar" man.

³³ Note the use of the controversial term "worship" in this context. We shall not here enter into a discussion, as we do not have the Danish text accessible. Most likely Kierkegaard uses a Danish word, *tilbe*, the meaning of which is precisely "worship". In that case there is no doubt he intentionally chose that term.

³⁴ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*; Page 135.

... How should a man borne and brought up in this Danish-Protestant eudaimonism, have any eye for what is Christian, unless a Providence helped him ... true Christinity. And of course it is true that this has become something quite unusual, especially in Protestantism especially in Denmark³⁵.

This is again an "anti-Protestant" quotation, chosen as it appears in the text we are now considering. Kierkegaard's horror of the crowd is everywhere obvious. "...eternity by merely being itself *eo ipso* holds off alla that is called the mass"³⁶. "...As soon as the mass appears, God is invisible"³⁷. There is no doubt we are close to the election-theme of Gnosticism here. At the same time we must warn against oversimplification, Kierkegaard is holding up the mass, the compromising, easy-going, as against *hin enkelte*, the solitary, the lonely one. God's vagabond, or His prophet, the voice crying in the wilderness. Under the general heading of Gnosticism and Dualism we must place another cherished theme that we cannot enter into here: Kierkegaard's "anti-feminism". "Woman is egoism personified"³⁸. Let it suffice to say that its importance is much over-emphasized. it is very ephemeral in Kierkegaard's whole philosophy. This short discussion of Kierkegaard's religion and theology, insufficient though it is, will have to suffice for our present purpose.

The Via Negativa

...
 To come to the knowledge of all
 desire the knowledge of nothing
 To come to possess all
 desire the possession of nothing
 To arrive at being all
 desier to be nothing
 ...³⁹

³⁵ Ibid.; Pages 93-94.

³⁶ Ibid.; Page 94.

³⁷ Ibid.; Page 95.

³⁸ Ibid.; Page 92.

³⁹ JOHN OF THE CROSS, "Drawing of Mount Carmel", *Collected Works*; Page 67.

This poem is another example of how our three sections, however necessary analytically to keep distinct, are indissolubly united and fused in lived life; i.e. man's existential experience of himself and his response to that experience. Man can choose his response (How theologically free and therefore responsible he is, is a judgement only God can and will make); *either* cynical return to his animal nature with consequent moral nihilism *or* a responsible Yes to God and His demands: Surrender in dark, difficult faith with the ethical duties to be true and act justly. As a good pedagogue John repeats his doctrine, highlights it, analyses it from various angles, teaching us our different approaches of activity and passivity to the one self-same reality: our faith-journey towards and into the incomprehensible God. – To come to be what you are not / you must go by a way in which you are not...⁴⁰

That way of nothingness, the horrendous, annihilating and purifying experience of utter emptiness and loneliness now turns into a free, willing Yes to God's actions on and in us – a loving co-operation as God leads us through incomprehensible darkness in faith to Himself. The celebrated Sanjunist Via Negativa is for Kierkegaard the "big leap". And that big leap is precisely the courageous trusting leap into utter darkness without any support, believing and hoping against all hope with nothing left but faith: a hard and bitter thing to do, infinitely removed from the cloy sentimentality popular preachers attach to the expression "big leap" today. To find yourself in seventy-foot deep water and yet believe⁴¹, cries Kierkegaard. "The path of Mount Carmel the perfect spirit nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing and even on the Mount nothing", says John's Sketch. When we are stripped of everything, literally everything, only faith remains, faith that will lead us to God and gives us Him, *as He is in Himself* (a celebrated Sanjunist expression). Therefore John tells us on the same sketch that the spirit finds its rest in this nakedness. We are reminded here of the hard, suffering, often humiliated lives of both John and Kierkegaard.

John speaks more often than Kierkegaard of the "end-

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Our translation.

result” of a life of unconditional surrender in faith, of suffering endured with Jesus in His Passion; that is of rest in love and peace before the dawn of the Eternal Day: the fruition of union with God. To what extent their different approaches are due to the writers’ different psychological make-ups and to what extent to the difference between Catholic theology, to which John of the Cross adhered undeviatingly, and Protestant theology, that at least, educated Kierkegaard and certainly shaped his early childhood, is a problematic issue that we have often alluded to without being able to suggest a solution.

But in Kierkegaard, too, there is now and then a gentle tone, a tone of love and longing, as well as a simple cry from his suffering heart. Kierkegaard was as little a Stoic as was John. Both felt to the full the life-burden, blessed life-burden, of faith and suffering. “...what I rest in is that it is of love, yes, of love, that you do this, infinite Love! I know that in love you suffer with me, more than I, infinite Love – even if you cannot change”⁴². That faith is trans-rational, trans-intellectual (*non* anti-intellectual) is an often recurring theme in the Spanish Doctor as well as in the Danish philosopher. So faith has to be, as it is faith in, and our relationship with, the incomprehensible God. God’s incomprehensibility, his inconceivability, is the pre-supposition on which the darkness, the supernatural faith, rests. Faith is supernatural as God is supernatural, says John of the Cross. That is why the Mystical Doctor insists that only supernatural faith can lead us to, give us God. “If I could objectively believe, I would not believe. It is precisely because I cannot objectively grasp God that I believe”, says Kierkegaard in another language but with the same spiritual message. “Faith, we know, affirms what cannot be understood by the intellect”⁴³.

... In order to journey to God the intellect must be perfected in the darkness of faith, the memory in the emptiness of hope, and the will in the darkness and absence of every affection.

As a result, the necessity of the soul’s journey through this dark night with the support of these three virtues will be manifest⁴⁴. ...

⁴² KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*; Page 140.

⁴³ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Ascent*, Bk II; Ch. 6:2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; Bk II; Ch. 6:1.

“... Absence of every affection”. In that phrase we can hear an echo of Kierkegaard’s *hin enkelte* – the alone one, the single one: This Kierkegaardian concept is far too complex and difficult for us to be able to analyse in a short paper. Let it suffice to indicate the *mental, existential* tone of kinship with John; but here it is not a doctrinal kinship.

The dark night of faith through which the emptied, non-understanding intellect travels, would by Kierkegaard be expressed as drastically as to lose one’s understanding for faith⁴⁵.

We must deal with the Absolute, absolutely, writes Kierkegaard⁴⁶. How often we Christians deny true faith, not in words but in deeds and behaviour. How often we too happily accept mediocrity and the standard of the world. But there are, and will always be, splendid exceptions to this sad truth. Man, fallen man, is a sinner. At heart he is very much the same, wherever on the earth he appears, or in whatever age. This truth both John and Kierkegaard were keenly aware of, and knew with great pain and sadness. All their writings had as one of their motives the attempt to remedy the situation.

Radicality of Uncompromised Gospelfaith

... Christianity being the truth, demoralization tends towards lies... after Christianity has appeared, as the truth, one no longer has simple paganism, but the life of being a Christian, one has a subtle form of paganism through the dishonourable acceptance of one side of Christianity as a gain for an epicurean life; and this lying style of life is painted up to be Christianity...⁴⁷

... I should not consider any spirituality worthwhile that would walk in sweetness and ease and run from the imitation of Christ⁴⁸.

Conformity to Christ, to Christ crucified, the following of Jesus to the Garden, and to Golgatha, to suffer with Him, is the cornerstone of Kierkegaard’s spirituality, as we shall see fur-

⁴⁵ Our translation.

⁴⁶ We regret our inability to trace this saying in Kierkegaard’s writing.

⁴⁷ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*; Page 176.

⁴⁸ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Ascent*, Bk II; Ch. 7:8.

ther in our final section. Our choice is, says Kierkegaard, between a religion from which we get benefits, material too, and a religion for which we suffer. John is equally explicit in his unmasking of false religion.

... From my observations Christ is to a great extent unknown by those who consider themselves His friends. Because of their extreme self-love they go about seeking in Him their own consolations and satisfactions. But they do not seek, out of great love for Him, His bitter trials and deaths⁴⁹.

They wander about in search only of sweetness and delightful communications from God. Such an attitude is not the hallmark of self denial and nakedness of spirit, but the indication of a "spiritual sweet tooth".

Through this kind of conduct they become, spiritually speaking, enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:18)⁵⁰.

When the battle for the faith demands it, the gentle Castilian mystic-poet can be as ironic and sarcastic as the Danish academician, who would not hesitate to apply the last paragraph to the vast majority of professed Christians.

We, who are weak in faith, run from the demands it lays on us, while these two great believers boldly, courageously faced them. "...That which seems able to appeal to our self-indulgence is selected, what does not please is discarded, and so we concoct a knavish religiosity which purports to be Christianity"⁵¹.

Their stark, demanding, uncompromising faith, the Christian faith, the Gospel without compromise, that requires nothing less than our unconditional surrender, is a blessed, life-giving faith that leads to light, happiness and eternal beatitude. This faith, that is our blessed task and duty, is from beginning to end a gift: a free, gratuitous gift from the Giver of all good gifts. Both Kierkegaard and John often repeat this; repeat it because they are grateful. They know what they have received, and they want us, too, to be grateful, to give thanks and to sing the praises of our great God, Who has redeemed a fallen world, and only asks us to accept the salvation He offers us.

⁴⁹ Ibid.; Bk II; Ch. 7:12.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; Bk II; Cf. 7:5.

⁵¹ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*; Page 106.

Make no mistake about this, my dear brothers: it is all that is good, everything that is perfect, which is given from above; it comes down from the Father of all light; ... accept and submit to the word which has been planted in you and can save your souls⁵².

These very words from James are directly cited by both John and Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard devoted one of his "Edifying Discourses", from 1843, to this passage from the New Testament. The "bibliocality" of these two champions of the faith and the firm biblical roots of their doctrine⁵³ is a theme that has to be examined and analysed in a separate study, as it is far beyond the scope of a preliminary comparative study, and is too extensive and involved to allow for a few cursory remarks.

In this Section on Faith and our Surrender to God, we have tried to show that John and Kierkegaard equally stress the omnipotence and sovereign freedom of God, Who gives freely to whomever He chooses. At the same time, we must cooperate, many times under extreme difficulties and hardships. This is living faith. Quietism has no place in either of them.

... The soul cannot practice or acquire the virtues without the help of God, nor does God effect them alone in the soul without her help. Although it is true that *every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, having come down from the Father of lights*, as St. James says (Jas. 1;17), yet this gift is not received without the ability and help of the soul receiving it. ...⁵⁴

The End of the Journey

Let us conclude our Faith-Section with one of the few passages where Kierkegaard stresses not the suffering of Good Friday but the blessed forestate of Easter, already present.

⁵² Jm. 1:16, 17a, 21b.

⁵³ The biblical roots of St John of the Cross spiritual theology have been briefly examined in an admirable little study by the late Fr. Fabrizio, OCD.

⁵⁴ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Spiritual Canticle*; Stanza 30:6 (Collected Works, Washington DC, 1979).

That aspect occurs but rarely in an explicit sense in Kierkegaard, whose spirituality was dominated by the Passion of Christ and our following Him in suffering. It is a passage (and note, from the last dark years of his life) where he speaks with almost Sanjuanist lyricism of loving communication with God. This reminds us of John beginning to write the *Spiritual Cantic* in his prison-cell in Toledo. In the following passage from *Last Journals* there even seem to be some hints at John's "union", or at least some degree of it. But our documentary evidence is too scant to allow for an analysis of this doctrine's place and importance in Kierkegaard's thought; We do not even know if he was to any considerable degree familiar with this doctrine, that is so prominent in John's teaching. However that may be, the following quotation at least leads our thoughts to the Sanjuanist teaching on "actual union" as the sparks shooting up from the ever-burning flame of "habitual union" We will find yet another similarity to John's in this remarkable Kierkegaardian passage. here we could in fact even say sameness as they both speak of an existential-psychological experience of the believer, namely that of "thinking" he is forgotten and abandoned by God, which, of course, he is not.

As I have said elsewhere, a real relation to God is of such infinite value that even if it lasted only one moment, and the next moment one were kicked and derided, cast off, pitched far away, forgotten (which is, however, impossible for not only is God love, but these relations are remembered eternally, so that the end must be that one lays hold of God again) – it is nevertheless of infinitely more value than all that the world and men have to offer⁵⁵.

III. SUFFERING

The areas under which we will chiefly be examining suffering; suffering as existentially experienced, but also the theology and ethics of suffering, will be The Cross, The anguished Cry of Existence, and Affliction. All three are expression of suf-

⁵⁵ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*; Page 176.

fering, the same suffering (i.e. the whole vast phenomenon of suffering), yet emphasizing various aspects of its multifarious existence, its essence being one and the same. We employ the Scholastic distinction between essence and existence. We shall return later to the issue of how the essence of suffering was changed in the Christian economy of salvation, i.e. after the Cross on Golgatha. It was changed but not removed, as suffering is an ontological datum for fallen man. *If it had been removed, it would not have been changed and the whole of salvation-history would have taken a different turn.* And it is precisely man's ontic appropriation (in the Christian economy) of this datum that (through God's grace) makes him whole, heals his wounded ontological fabric. If, at this stage, it is objected that our discussion has dispensed itself from the logic of the schools, we will counter by querying if without it ontology makes sense at all; if we have the courage to face that question (something that unfortunately Christian philosophers have not always had). Be that as it may, it is irrelevant in our present context, as both John and Kierkegaard grappled with precisely this appropriation. It is at the very heart of their teaching.

Suffering divorced from metaphysics is nothing but a loss, a negativity to be overcome as fast and as best as possible. That it will not be eliminated from "this life" is a problem the materialist will have to face and explain. Operating within a theistic metaphysics, and in our present context a decidedly Christian one, the "problem" of suffering is not solved but transposed into mystery, the term mystery used here as in spiritual rather than domestic theology. This, as we have pointed out on several occasions, is neither masochism nor quietism, nor, we will add, defeatism. Rather, for both John and Kierkegaard the incomprehensibility of suffering reveals the incomprehensibility of God, to use an expression of Karl Rahner's. That in no way diminishes its burden, pain, and agony. Well does the term *Angst* convey what the sufferer goes through. With Kierkegaard we have learnt that the believer, too, must live through all the horrors of *Angst*, something John of the Cross would agree with using another terminology. We employ the conventional English translation of 'Angst' as 'anguish', although 'anguish' has got neither the force nor the depth of 'Angst'. However, we have no better suggestion to make.

What is Suffering

Suffering is by no means an unequivocal concept. It is often used in a cursory way to describe any little hardship or difficulty. Thus it is difficult to get to the heart of the matter. And even when we enter into an analysis of its profoundest depths, scholars are divided, often due the different metaphysical foundations, they, consciously or unconsciously, begin from, and the consequent and (we insist) subsequent *Weltanschauung* they develop.

What is suffering then? Let us first state what it is not: It is not physical pain. Physical pain can be suffering, but the two are not synonymous. Animals experience physical pain, but they do not suffer in the theological-philosophical sense of the word. Imprisoned, waiting for his execution, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "Suffering is something great. This is not suffering, just a misfortune in life". He was close to a real, shatteringly true grasp of the very essence of suffering.

Simone Weil suggests that we should, in a spiritual context, rather speak of affliction, as a more significant term. Affliction is one of our major concerns in this present study of suffering, and it is the poignant, as with it we immediately enter into the mental sphere. We would add mental-spiritual, as without spirit there is no suffering. *A pure psychological problem, if such were conceivable, would be the animal pain (man is an animal too) referred to above.* This is precisely the crucial point of the definition of suffering; Inanimate matter cannot suffer. Pure spirit can suffer – e.g. the souls in Purgatory – because pure spirit can sin – the fall of the angels. We shall prescind from a theological discussion of the interconnection and complicated relationship between freedom, sin and suffering, as that is outside the scope of this paper. We are dealing with the theological-spiritual-existential appropriation of suffering in St John of the Cross and Soeren Kierkegaard. Let us only state the dogmatic truth: We suffer because we sin. That, as we all know, does not imply that each one suffer in proportion to his/her sin. Such an understanding, apart from being heretical, would be naïve in the extreme. Simple experience teaches us that it often is just the reverse, saints suffer; the supreme example being the incarnate God Himself. Jesus and His Mother, the only sinless, innocent members of the human race there ever were, suffered. But, the truth is:

mankind sinned (and sins!), mankind suffers. In a time when there is so much talk about the solidarity of all mankind, the truth of our indissoluble unity as human beings should not be difficult to comprehend; In Catholic theology we say there is a communion of sinners, as there is a communion of saints.

The Cross

The cross of Jesus Christ. This is the way, the only way, as we hope to show in this third and final section of our paper, to understand, appropriate and live suffering and sacrifice according to both St John of the Cross and Soeren Kierkegaard. Both having been equally misunderstood on this point by minds too vulgar to appreciate the depth of their doctrine, something they already suffered cruelly from in their own life-time. Misrepresentation and/or lack of understanding of their respective doctrine still continues.

Jesus' suffering and death, the decisive, irrevocable turning-point in salvation-history is *therefore* also the "turning-point", the objective change of the essence of suffering. What previously was an evil, a loss, is now changed into a blessed purification, preparing us for the celestial community of angels and saints. Subjectively, it is still open to us to accept or reject it. If rejected and rebelled against, it is an evil, unredeemed suffering. This purification is not only for ourselves. Our suffering, if freely accepted and lovingly joined to Jesus' passion, suffered as a blessed participation in his redeeming sacrifice, will be of benefit for all mankind. Here we encounter another difficult theological concept, namely vicarious suffering – today almost forgotten, due partly to a reaction against some psychological perversion of former days and an often over-estimated, sentimental understanding of the smallest suffering, some of which would not be suffering at all according to the definition we have given here. And it remains true that we will never know, and should not want to know, the "proportion" and "distribution" of suffering, reparation etc.

Suffering under the Cross and on the Cross with Jesus: All our suffering as a blessed participation, a necessary participation, in His Passion and Death this is how St John of the Cross and Soeren Kierkegaard taught and lived suffering. Suffering divorced from Christinity is nothing, pure negativity. The suffering union with Christ's need not however be explicitly rec-

ognized in every case. John's and Kierkegaard's suffering is neither a psychological perversion nor a morbid escapism. Without a correct comprehension of suffering it is impossible to enter into the depths of their writing,; and on this point a great number of modern critics make gross mistakes and consequently misinterpret th whole of Sanjuanist and Kierkegaardian teaching, especially the latter. "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me" (Mt. 10:38). "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24). "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" (Mt. 20:22). "Can you drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptized, with the bapstism with which I must be baptized?" (Mk. 10:38). "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me" (Lk. 9:23); "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wirsh it were blazing already!" (Lk. 12:49). "Anyone who does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:27). "...unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yelds a rich harvest. Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for the eternal life. If a man serves me, he must follow me, ..." (Jn. 12:24-26). "If the world hates you, remember that it hated me before you. If you belonged to the world , the world would love you as its own; but because you do not belong to the world, because my choice withdrew you from the world, therefore the world hates you" (Jn. 15:18-19).

Suffering as Our Vocation

Failing to understand, or lacking courage (and love – It must not be forgotten!) to live this radical Gospel-demand on the part of the majority of professed Christians called forth some of the severest passages from Kierkegaard's pen. It was in the light of these words of Jesus that he understood his own vocation in life, as did John of the Cross. The last cited passage from St John's gospel could provide a basis for our understanding of Kierkegaard's *hin enkelte*, the lonely (or better, the alone one), the single one, where we would have to voice some reservations on doctrinal grounds, but existentially, as a prophet's witness, life and cry from the wilderness, it is heroic and should be taken *ad notam*.

In response to the call to follow Jesus in sacrifice and suffering, Kierkegaard broke the engagement with Regine Olsen (probably the most famous engagement in the history of philosophy). A stance, a decision almost impossible to comprehend, much less appreciate, by a generation brought up in, and educated to, nihilism and self-indulgence at its grossest. It has been suggested that Kierkegaard's philosophy, especially his teaching on suffering, developed as a "compensation" for the loss of Regine. That this suggestion founded on the misunderstanding of Kierkegaard's whole philosophy that we referred to at the beginning of this section is evident from a closer examination of all Kierkegaard's writings, especially his explicitly spiritual texts. A proof in favour of our statement is that Kierkegaard broke the engagement, not Regine. "I was an eternity too old for her", he wrote later. It was a freely chosen sacrifice, a renunciation for the sake of the Absolute and His work to be done on earth. Private notes and later incidents in Kierkegaard's life show this. He knew what it meant, and what it demanded to "deal with the Absolute, absolutely". Christianity for Kierkegaard was primarily a following of, conformity, configuration to Christ Crucified. It was being nailed to the Cross with Christ – the excruciating pain of the nailing, the suffering not to be escaped, but at the same time never forgetting that it is a suffering with Jesus and in Him. It is but a purification, a necessary purification of fallen man. So Kierkegaard can write in his *Private Journals*, the last entry, a few weeks before his death, that God does this *out of love*. At the very beginning of his career, Kierkegaard wrote that his devotion was completely centered on the crucified Christ. Other aspects of Jesus' life were secondary to him.

We have no explicit statement of John of the Cross to that extent. But an incident in the young friar's life speaks for itself. When John embraced the new Reform of Carmel as one of its first two friars he changed his name from John of St Mathias to John of the Cross. The cross is a supporting staff, he was later to write. Like Kierkegaard he was faithful to his doctrine all his life, and John, too, felt the pain, suffered under the burden, but knew it was God's loving predilection, the vocation to share the Cross of Jesus Christ. There is no trace of masochism in the asceticism and suffering of either John or Kierkegaard. It was John of the Cross himself, in a time when the most peculiar and extraordinary penances were practised, who

warned against the “penance of beasts”. At the end of his life, in the midst of suffering, misunderstanding and contradiction, he wrote to Madre Ana de Jesus, his faithful disciple, to whom he addressed the prose-commentary on *The Spiritual Canticle*.

Now, until God gives us this good in heaven, pass the time in the virtues of mortification and patience, desiring to resemble somewhat in suffering this great God of ours, humbled and crucified. This life is not good if it is not an imitation of His life...⁵⁶.

You imprison a man – and then you make a fool of him. Yes, but you do it from love, and so you do not make a fool of him, o infinite love...⁵⁷.

Kierkegaard continues the entry with a masterly dialectics that does not change the meaning and devotion of the prayer. Let us not hesitate to call the exclamations of the *Last Journals* prayer. In another entry in his *Last Journal*, about himself, Kierkegaard speaks of his sorrow, suffering and torment, his “thorn in the flesh”, and concludes:

Then come, revision of history! Everything is in order, and nothing is lacking not even that I have *voluntarily* exposed myself to this, and that it did not simply come upon me⁵⁸.

This difficult, nevertheless real, however much misunderstood in one way or another, voluntariness of suffering, vicarious and con-joined with Christ’s suffering, is equally present to John of the Cross, who once, after having rendered the Lord a service, was asked what reward he wanted. John answered: “To suffer and to be despised for You”. Suffering and sacrifice are indispensable in the Christian economy of salvation. Both John and Kierkegaard insist, despite what certain critics maintain, that they are means, participations in the Cross, inflicted (The term is correct, if properly understood) on us out of love, because of love, with one single purpose: an eternity of love with God, to sing His praises. Our purification is painful, not because of God, but because of what is not God in us, says Pas-

⁵⁶ JOHN OF THE CROSS, Letter to Madre Ana de Jesus, July, 1591.

⁵⁷ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*; Page 145.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; Page 159.

cal. The dying John of the Cross could say that he would sing Matins in Heaven. (The theological difficulty inherent in his statement will continue to intrigue theologians). The last anguished cry of existence from Kierkegaard's pen, a week before he collapses in a street of Copenhagen and is taken to hospital to die, is a cry of faith, hope and love.

Suffering the Only Way to Resurrection

Only the men who are brought to this point of disgust with life and are able to hold fast by the help of grace to the faith that God does this from love, so that not even in the inmost recesses of their soul is there any doubt concealed that God is love – only these men are ripe for eternity. And it is these men whom God receives in eternity. For what does God want? He wants to have souls who are able to praise and adore and thank him – the occupation of angels. That is why God is surrounded by angels... And what pleases him even more than the praise of angels is a man, who in the last lap of this his life, when God is transformed as though into sheer cruelty, and with the cruellest imaginable cruelty does everything to deprive him of all joy in life, [This is John of the Cross's dark night.] a man who continues to believe that is love and that it is from love that God does this. Such a man becomes an angel. [Not ontologically correct but the analogy is powerfully suggestive.] And in heaven he can surely praise God. But the apprentice time, the school time is also always the strictest time... the uttermost point of disgust with life, ... he himself was present with that man, and helped him so far as God can help what only freedom can do... he thankfully attributes everything to God. And he prays God that it may remain so, that it is God who does it. For he does not believe in himself, but he believes in God⁵⁹.

This last entry is dated 25 September 1855. The extract given above is one of the most Sanjuanist of all Kierkegaardian texts: dark night, annihilation, faith, gratitude, gaze towards, and into, eternity. The dawn of day after night; a favoured motif of John's. In classical spirituality we say: The way of the cross to resurrection. And Kierkegaard and John are equally emphatic that this is the way.

⁵⁹ Ibid.; Page 368.

... Suffering is the means of her penetrating further, deep into the thicket of the delectable wisdom of God. The purest suffering brings with it the purest and most intimate knowing, and consequently the purest and highest joy, because it is a knowing from further within. Not being content with just any kind of suffering, she insists: "And further, deep into the thicket", that is, even to the agony of death in order to see God, ...

Oh! If we could but now fully understand how a soul cannot reach the thicket and wisdom of the riches of God, which are of many kinds, without entering the thicket of many kinds of suffering, finding in this her delight and consolation; and how a soul with an authentic desire for divine wisdom, wants suffering first in order to enter this wisdom by the thicket of the cross! ... The gate entering into these riches of His wisdom is the cross, which is narrow, and few desire to enter by it, but many desire the delights obtained from entering there⁶⁰.

We find the same teaching in the Ascent of Mount Carmel.

Oh, who can explain the extent of the denial our Lord wishes of us! ...⁶¹.

... If a man resolutely submits to the carrying of this cross, if he decidedly wants to find and endure trial in all things for God, he will discover in all of them great relief and sweetness...⁶².

Suffering is inevitable in human life, according to Kierkegaard, *because of man's turning towards the Absolute*.

A Christian, at least when he has reached a certain level of spirituality and gained, however faint, a glimpse of God, suffers gladly, willingly for his God. This joy is not a masochistic but a supernatural joy. There can impossibly be a natural joy in suffering.

If my contemporaries could understand how I suffer, how Providence, if I may dare to say so, maltreats me, ...⁶³.

... God bars the way for those he makes use of. For all their suffering is understood by their contemporaries as pride, which means that their contemporaries take delight in heaping more

⁶⁰ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Spiritual Canticle*; St. 36:12, 13.

⁶¹ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Ascent*, Bk II; Ch. 7:6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Bk II; Ch. 7:7.

⁶³ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*; Page 140.

suffering on them – because of their pride. / Yet so it must be, o infinite love!⁶⁴.

The idea that God first “crushes” the man He is going to use (to put it in Kierkegaard’s language) is difficult for the average, mediocre man and Christian to understand, but it holds a prominent place, in whatever language it may be expressed, whatever terminology used, in the masters of spirituality and philosophy of life. John of the Cross would speak of the purifying flame and divine stripping and denudation of the soul to utter annihilation. “God humbles the soul greatly in order to exhalt it greatly afterwards...”⁶⁵.

We saw above how John expounded the Gospel-word of the narrowness of the road, a favoured theme amongst ascetic writers, so also with Kierkegaard, who puts it explicitly into the context of affliction. Affliction for Kierkegaard is not, never mind its serverity, a desperate end, but the *Via Negativa*.

The kinship with John’s dark night is evident even to the most superficial reader. And there is the same constant return to Scripture as in John, who in the Prologue to the Ascent writes: “... my help in all that, with God’s favor, I shall say, will be Sacred Scripture, ... Taking Scripture as our guide we do not err, ...” John’s Scripture interpretation is always done in conformity to the Church’s exegesis, as he later in the Prologue states explicitly. Most often the Carmlite Mystic, like the early Fathers, uses the accomodated sense, especially as regards the Old Testament.

Consequently, the spiritual fact, how one travels on the way of life, make the difference and the difference of the way..⁶⁶.

The moral implication of the choice is immediately apparent.

... Rely upon the complete and perfect impression of the common teaching of the Scriptures, that on the way of perfection one walks in tribulations; and therefore we shall for the edi-

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Dark Night*, Bk II; Ch. 6:6.

⁶⁶ SOREN KIERKEGAARD, *The Joy in the Thought that It Is not the Way which Is Narrow, But the Narrowness which Is the Way*, Page 203 (*Edifying Discourses IX*, London, Glasgow, 1958).

fictionation of a sufferer (for these discourses are indeed the Gospel of Suffering), consider the joy in the thought.

THAT IT IS NOT THE WAY WHICH IS NARROW, BUT THE NARROWNESS WHICH IS THE WAY⁶⁷.

When affliction is the way, then is this the joy: ...⁶⁸.

Joy in Suffering

That there is a deep joy in the midst of suffering is a Christian truth enunciated by John, too. It is difficult to write about, as it evades any conceptualization. It is not a feeling of joy. It goes far deeper than that. We might say, it is a transsensual joy; a joy rooted in faith, dark faith and love. And love is not tested by ease and comfort, says St John of the Cross. Now we shall be in a position to see the mysterious connection between joy, love and suffering; a connection totally inconceivable without God.

... When the affliction is the way, the fact that there is affliction on the way cannot possibly signify that he has gone wrong; on the contrary, this is the sign that he is on the right way. ... when affliction is the way, then it is indeed impossible to walk on some other way. ...⁶⁹.

John of the Cross confirms this teaching in the Ascent, where on the sketch he writes:

The path of Mount Carmel the perfect spirit nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing and even on the Mount nothing. Elsewhere we read:

A man suffers all these afflictive purgations of spirit that he may be reborn in the life of the spirit by means of this divine inflow, ...⁷⁰.

This war or combat is profound because the peace awaiting the soul must be exceedingly profound; and the spiritual suffering is intimate and penetrating because the love to be possessed by the soul will also be intimate and refined...⁷¹.

⁶⁷ KIERKEGAARD, *Edifying Discourses IX*, Page 204.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; Page 205.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Dark Night*, Bk II; Ch. 9:6.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*; Bk II; Ch. 9:9.

*The affliction must lead to something...*⁷².

These are the Master's own words: "Narrow is the way which leadeth unto life"⁷³;

... If the affliction itself is the way, what wonder then that one must go through, what wonder then that the affliction leads to something! Doubt will gladly deprive the sufferer of confidence, will let him stick in affliction, perish in the despondent, aye, the presumptuous thought, that he is forsaken of God, as if he had fallen into a way which could only circumscribe him, as if it were in a despondent sense that the Aposle said: "We are all appointed to affliction (1 Thess. 3:3), as if there were no purpose in the affliction, but we were merely destined to affliction. If, on the contrary, the purpose of the affliction is to be the way, then there is immediately a breath of air, then the sufferer breathes, then it must lead to something; ..."⁷⁴

We could extend our study into a minute examination of the whole body of text available from both St John of the Cross and Soeren Kierkegaard. Such a study is beyond the intention and scope of this paper. Our intention was simply to show the kinship between the spirit and teaching of St John and of Kierkegaard. What has been said so far should, however, suffice to confirm our proposition that the Cross, suffering, annihilation, is the way, the only way to God according to both John of the Cross and Soeren Kierkegaard. A few poignant, coherent passages will conclude our comparative study, one from *The Dark Night*, the other from Kierkegaard's *Last Journals*. Both reveal man's intrinsic need for purification.

... There are two reasons why this divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul, but also affliction and torment. First, because of the height of the divine wisdom which exceeds the capacity of the soul. Second, because of the soul's baseness and impurity; and on this account it is painful, afflictive, and also dark for the soul⁷⁵.

It is also evident that this dark contemplation is painful to the soul in these beginnings. Since this divine infused contemplation has many extremely good properties, and the still

⁷² KIERKEGAARD, *Edifying Discourses IX*, Page 214.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.; Page 215.

⁷⁵ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Dark Night*, Bk II; Ch. 5:2.

unpurged soul that receives it has many extreme miseries, and because two contraries cannot coexist in one subject⁷⁶, the soul must necessarily undergo affliction and suffering. Because of the purgation of its imperfections caused by this contemplation, the soul becomes a battlefield in which these two contraries combat one another...⁷⁷.

The soul, because of its impurity, suffers immensely at the time this divine light truly assails it. When this pure light strikes in order to expel all impurity, a person feels so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against him and that he is against God.

Because it *seems*⁷⁸ that God has rejected it, the soul suffers such pain and grief... Clearly beholding its impurity by means of this pure light, although in darkness, the soul understands distinctly that it is worthy neither of God nor of any creature. And what most grieves it is that it thinks it will never be worthy, and that there are no more blessings for it...⁷⁹.

A person suffers affliction in the second manner because of his natural, moral, and spiritual weakness. Since this divine contemplation assails him somewhat forcibly in order to subdue and strengthen his soul, he suffers so much in his weakness that he almost dies, particularly at times when the light is more powerful. Both the sense and the spirit, as though under an immense and dark load, undergo such agony and pain that the soul would consider death a relief...⁸⁰.

How amazing and pitiful it is that the soul be so utterly weak and impure that the hand of God, though light and gentle, should feel so heavy and contrary. For the hand of God does not press down or weigh upon the soul, but only touches it; and this mercifully, for God's aim is to grant it favors and not chastise it⁸¹.

... it so disentangles and dissolves the spiritual substance – absorbing it in a profound darkness – that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death; it feels as if it were swallowed by a beast and being digested in the dark belly, and it suffers and anguish comparable to Jonah's when in the belly of the whale [Jon. 2:1-3]...⁸².

⁷⁶ John is a faithful Scholastic, following Aristotelean philosophy.

⁷⁷ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Dark Night*, Bk II; Ch. 5:4.

⁷⁸ Our italics.

⁷⁹ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Dark Night*, Bk II; Ch. 5:5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*; Bk II; Ch. 5:6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*; Bk II; Ch. 5:7.

⁸² JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Dark Night*, Bk II; Ch. 6:1.

The Anguished Cry of Existence

What has been said so far of suffering is sufficient to justify the sub-title Anguished cry of Existence, at first more appropriate for Kierkegaard, but on a closer examination not far from John's teaching either, especially as verbalized in *The Dark Night*. We concede, though, that the "Cry" is louder and more prominent in Kierkegaard. According to Jacques Maritain, philosophy owes it to Kierkegaard that it has rediscovered "The Anguished Cry of Existence". That anguished cry is keenly experienced by 20th century man, who does not always know, or want to know, the hope held out for him at the end of the dark tunnel of affliction. The important doctrine in spiritual theology that the extreme pain and affliction of suffering is a purification due to the infinite distance between an all holy Creator and a sinful creature is not recognized. Nevertheless, both John and Kierkegaard are emphatic, as has been amply shown by many of the texts we have quoted, that we travel safer in affliction and darkness than in light, ease and spiritual consolation. We must remember, however, that they both *knew* we are travelling *somewhere*. When that is lost sight of, despair takes over. Raissa Maritain was not far from that truth when she wrote of her and Jacques conversion: "Life could be hard, it could be cruel, but it could not be absurd".

... It is fitting that the soul be in this sepulcher of dark death in order that it attain the spiritual resurrection for which it hopes⁸³.

But what the sorrowing soul feels most is the conviction that God has rejected it, and with an abhorrence of it cast it into darkness...⁸⁴.

... He feels very vividly indeed the shadow of death, the sighs of death, and the sorrows of hell, all of which reflect the feeling of God's absence, of being chastised and rejected by Him, and of being unworthy of Him, as well as the object of His anger...⁸⁵.

Nothing could be more Kerkegaardian than this existential feeling of God's absence and its accompanying fear. And noth-

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.; Bk II; Ch. 6:2.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

ing but faith will keep the soul from despair. "Christianity remains to the very end suffering – then eternity"⁸⁶. Kierkegaard, in the very last annotation he made in his life (cited above), made disgust with life the very definition of life. The following entry was made on the 23rd of September, 1855. On the 2nd of October Kierkegaard collapsed in the street and was taken to hospital, where he died on the 11th of November.

Only a man of will can become a Christina, because only a man of will has a will which can be broken. But a man of will whose will is broken by the unconditioned or by God is a Christian. The stronger the natural will the deeper can be the break...⁸⁷.

Nothing is spared the soul in this purification. In stripping man of all natural affections and attachments, God lets him experience the rejection by creatures too, as did Jesus on the Cross and all through His preceding life. Kierkegaard's concept of "sick unto death" is connected with this radical purification that is, and must be, the death of "the old man", but "sick unto death" is far too complex and complicated a concept to be forced into our analysis at this stage.

"A person also feels forsaken and despised by creatures, particularly by his friends"....⁸⁸. Anybody acquainted with the biographies of St John of the Cross and Soren Kierkegaard will know that that rejection was just too true in their lives as well. In Kierkegaard's life we must also take into consideration a strong childhood experience of the rejection of God due partly to an accentric, neurotic old father.

A true follower of Christ will soon be cast headlong out of this world...⁸⁹... I do not expect to be acknowledged by my contemporaries...⁹⁰

No one wants to be a single person, everyone shrinks from the strain.

But not merely for this reason does no one want to be a sin-

⁸⁶ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*, Page 161.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Page 358.

⁸⁸ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Dark Night*, Bk II; Ch. 6:3.

⁸⁹ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*, Page 353 (Dated 22 September 1855).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Page 62.

gle person, but also from fear of the envy and opposition of the surrounding world...⁹¹.

Another excellence of dark contemplation, its majesty and grandeur, causes a fourth kind of affliction to the soul. This property makes the soul feel within itself the other extreme – its own intimate poverty and misery. Such awareness is one of the chief afflictions it suffers in the purgation⁹².

For God's majesty is not of the kind, when rebellion becomes stronger, to lower the price: no, he raises it...⁹³.

Alas, in a certain sense it is a terrible thing for the poor man who is to be used in this way, to be constantly maintained at the nearest approach to nothing; and this, moreover, in every sense, in order that the majesty can be properly seen...⁹⁴.

... It is fitting that it [the soul] be brought into emptiness and poverty and abandonment in these parts, and left in dryness and darkness...⁹⁵.

God does all this by means of dark contemplation. And the soul not only suffers the void and suspension of these natural supports and apprehensions, which is a terrible anguish (like hanging in midair unable to breathe), but it is also purged by this contemplation... the heavy affliction the soul suffers from the purgation caused by the fire of this contemplation. For the prophet [Ezekiel] asserts that in order to burn away the rust of the affections the soul must, as it were, be annihilated and undone in the measure that these passions and imperfections are connatural to it.

Because the soul is purified in this forge like gold in the crucible, as the Wise Man says (Wis. 3:6), it feels terrible annihilation in its very substance and extreme poverty as though it were approaching its end...⁹⁶.

And here too is torment: for since despite every suffering it is something indescribable great to be God's instrument, so the apostle⁹⁷ has always the further effort to make – to be thankful without cease for this infinite benefit⁹⁸.

⁹¹ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*, Page 51.

⁹² JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Dark Night*, Bk II; Ch. 6:4.

⁹³ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*, Page 160.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Dark Night*, Bk II; Ch. 6:4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*; Bk II; Ch. 6:5, 6.

⁹⁷ Kierkegaard devoted a special essay to the difference between a genius and an apostle.

⁹⁸ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*, Page 145.

We say that as God's creatures we must love God – and the only one who truly loves God is the apostle, he who, that he might become an instrument, has been absolutely annihilated by God.

To love God because he has created you is to love yourself. No; if you will truly love God, this must be shown by your gladly and adoringly letting yourself be quite annihilated by God, that the may unconditionally promote his will⁹⁹.

Only a humble man can truly be a Christian. St John's fellow Carmelite mystic Teresa of Jesus defined humility as to walk in truth before Truth Itself.

... Its terrible divine sharp-sightedness is as though intended to exasperate and embitter man in the most frightful manner – unless he can humble himself. For Christianity is the sovereignty of God¹⁰⁰.

... My reward in this world is suffering...¹⁰¹.

Insisting upon how hard discipleship is, and as always, refuting mediocrity, Kierkegaard refers to the Gospel incident, when Peter out of love and concern tries to dissuade Christ from suffering. The incident is a supreme example of misguided charity. Now, if Christ had to suffer thus, it follows that the disciple must suffer too, but however much the truth-witness has to suffer, Christ's suffering was greater.

... The apostle Peter: as an apostle he towers above what we call mediocrity, ... Peter, when Christ seems to will deliberately to expose himself to death (which by ordinary human ideas is not permissible), and also because of the personal love he has for the Master, from whom he is so reluctant to be separated – Peter takes the opportunity to reproach him. And Christ says – take heed, you battalions of mediocrity, who in comparison with Peter are but ants, ... "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me, for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matthew 16:23).

So high in Christ's judgement is Christianity and being a Christian that to try to dissuade his teacher and friend from vol-

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journals*, Page 114.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., Page 61.

untarily exposing himself to death is the scandal, it is a suggestion of Satan¹⁰².

... If you will not renounce everything you cannot be my disciple – for the world's resistance will be so great for you... The world will cast down your tower, or laugh at you for having begun at all¹⁰³.

The difference between the God-Man and the witness to the truth is that the God-man took suffering upon himself absolutely freely – hence this ultimate and most fearful suffering¹⁰⁴.

Christianity is that which God must suffer on account of us men¹⁰⁵.

Alas, what have I, a poor man, not experienced in this regard! This contradiction of not being able to change and yet of loving! Alas, what have I not experienced! This helps me, from a great distance, to have a faint notion of the suffering of the divine love¹⁰⁶.

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¹⁰² Ibid., Page 351.

¹⁰³ KIERKEGAARD, *Last Journal*, Page 59.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.; Page 146.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.; Page 147.

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