The Active Life and the Contemplative Life in St. John of the Cross: The Mixed Life in the Teresian Carmelite Tradition

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Abstract: The prophetic and the mystical are two key theological concepts in St. John of the Cross. The aim of this article is precisely to shed light on the essential role that St. John of the Cross played in the history of Christianity by acknowledging the prophetic and the mystical dimensions of his life testimonies and writings. The notion of prophetic mysticism is not altogether foreign to the Carmelite tradition, especially following the prophetic example of Elijah. This article will then explore the intrinsic relationship that exists between the active life (Martha) and the contemplative life (Mary) in St. John of the Cross and in the Teresian Carmelite tradition.

Keywords: prophetic mysticism; mystical theology; St. John of the Cross; Christianity; Carmelite tradition; Elijah; contemplative life and active life; Teresian

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, scholars and pietistic people tend to classify St. John of the Cross (1540–1591) under the category of “contemplatives”, “poets”, or “inspiring authors.” Many Sanjuanist commentators, especially hagiographers, have been interested in giving the Carmelite saint a rigid, austere, and pious image. However, these categorizations into one group often overlook John’s active involvement in the world. As Janet Ruffing notes:

One of the most important—though often neglected—theoretical issues related to types, descriptions, or definitions of mysticism and the mystical is the relationship of mysticism to prophecy or the prophetic. The connection between these two phenomena is rarely explicitly discussed, although it may be evoked in some communities, in some authors, and in some situations. (Ruffing 2001, p. 7)

The purpose of this article is to show that many Sanjuanist commentators and biographers in the past err in portraying St. John of the Cross as a world-negating contemplative by calling him the doctor of the dark night of the soul, a phrase he never used (see Zimmerman 1928; Peers 1945; Doohan 1995; Perrin 1997; Serrán-Pagán 2017). Other Sanjuanist modern commentators have attributed the dark night to John’s imprisonment in Toledo (Matthew 1995, p. 55; McGreal 1997, pp. 13, 25; Hardy 2004, p. 74) when, in fact, John clearly defined dark night as infused contemplation or mystical theology. This misconstrued view of dark night has led many of these modern biographers to imply that John heavily emphasized the contemplative life over the active life when, in reality, St. John of the Cross followed the mixed life of the Teresian reform (see Hardy 2004, p. 102; McGreal 1997, p. 8). Why do many commentators still portray St. John of the Cross only as a contemplative by overlooking John’s active life and his preference for the mixed life which is one of the major reasons why he entered the Teresian Discalced Carmelite Order? “Probably in September of the same year [1567] Teresa met John
at Medina del Campo and convinced him to join the reform because of its stress on contemplative prayer” (McGinn 2017, p. 232). Is this historical view accurate? Even the great contemporary historian Bernard McGinn implicitly participates in this Sanjuanist projection of John being portrayed merely as a contemplative but not as a contemplative in action, as we see in his treatment of St. Ignatius of Loyola in chapter 2 or St. Teresa of Avila in chapter 3 of his voluminous work Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain, 1500–1650. None of these modern biographers subscribe to the view that John was a contemplative in action and when they do, they called it an apostolate of prayer. The “fugi mundi” of some Christian ascetics is attributed to John. For instance, one modern biographer states, “His [John] tragedy was that while his only ambition was to spend his days and nights in prayer and mortification, his fate was to be involved during most of his adult life in a fierce conflict with his brother friars, which ended in his disgrace and death” (Brenan 1973, p. 3). “He [John] did not hate the world or the senses, as so many religious persons have done, but sought rather to escape from them and to leave them behind him. His career, therefore, appears less as a struggle than as a flight—a vertiginous ascent away from everything and towards God” (Brenan 1973, p. 134).

For the Christian mystical tradition, in which the Carmelite saint was deeply immersed, the contemplative and the prophetic are two aspects of the same reality. Mary often symbolizes the contemplative mystic, while Martha best represents the active prophet. The Spanish mystic entered the Discalced Carmelite Order of St. Teresa of Avila not only to be a good contemplative but more importantly to become the great contemplative in action that she is well known for. This misinterpretation is informed by a failure to understand John’s historical context (the problem of “conversos” in sixteenth-century Spain) and the rich mystical theology tradition which John inherited from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (5th–6th century AD) through medieval Christian mystics; then most surely through non-Christian sources from Sufi mystics such as Ibn ‘Arabi of Murcia (1165–1240) and Ibn Abbad of Ronda (1333–1390); and from Jewish Kabbalistic mystics like Moses de León (1240–1305), who by then had left a great spiritual legacy in the Iberian Peninsula (see Cuevas 1972; Asín Palacios 1981, 1990; Swietlicki 1986; López-Baralt 1990, 1998; Satz 1991; Carabine 1995; Valdivia Válor 2002; De Tapia 2006; Girón-Negrón 2008; Conde Solares 2019). This study cannot cover all these topics at once (see Serrán-Pagán 2018). I set up my boundaries to prove once and for all that St. John of the Cross was a contemplative in action.

St. John of the Cross primarily is known today as a poet, mystic, and theologian, and these are but a few of his most important contributions. However, he was for a long time depicted as an abstruse thinker, lacking originality and intellectual vigor. Thus, John’s intellectual capacities were almost forgotten or overlooked for several centuries. St. John of the Cross, the Doctor of “la Nada” (the No-thingness), is also the Doctor of “el Todo” (the All). The Carmelite saint has become an icon for the Catholic Church. Yet, John is often portrayed by past commentators only as a model of sanctity reached by practicing an austere, ascetic, contemplative life. Even worse, some commentators are inclined to believe that John did not play an active role in his time. For example, Bede Frost offers an odd argument for this view claiming that St. John of the Cross played no part, humanly speaking, in that immense and stirring drama which filled the stage of sixteenth-century Europe. Nothing in his writings or in the slight contemporary references to him reveals the faintest interest in that interplay of vast political, economic, social and religious forces, so inextricably mingled, which strove together in that world writhing in the processes of disintegration and reformation. His portrait occupies no place in that gallery upon whose walls there hang the great men and women of the second half of the sixteenth century. (Frost 1937, p. 1)

Frost claims that John’s apparent lack of interest in the world was due to a long Christian practice of dying to the sins and to the things of the world. However, Frost may well be incorrectly interpreting the monastic idea of “contemptus mundi,” even after studying John’s life and thoughts. Thus, this Carmelite saint, widely known as a mystic, is not generally thought of as a reformer, even less a prophet. John the reformer is often characterized only as a pious monk whose.
earnest desire was to strengthen the contemplative side of the constitutions. He feared lest the frequent coming and going, necessitated by sermons and conferences undertaken by the friars, should lead to relaxation of the solitude, prayer and penance essential to the Carmelite vocation. He was also opposed to the undertaking of foreign missions. He considered that there were religious orders enough in the Church with that special end, whereas the Carmelite friars were intended, not to preach the gospel to pagan lands, but to promulgate its perfect practice in the home countries, by their example, their prayers, and their teaching. (The Sisters of Notre Dame 1927, pp. 97–98)

In the words of researcher Peter Slattery:

St. Teresa worked hard with the support of the Prior General and other Church officials to spread the reform among the Carmelite order. St. John of the Cross took a less active role, but nevertheless earned the admiration of all as a faithful religious, renowned confessor and spiritual director. Although St. John did not take much part in actively spreading the reform he was extremely influential as one of the founding friars, from the character of his writings and poetry and his unquestioned sanctity. Others, like Fray Nicholas (Doria) and Fray Jerome (Gracian), took a more active role in the struggles of the early years of the reform. St. John was several times elected prior, definitor and consultor. Apart from some letters mostly dating from the last years of the saint’s life, primary sources contemporary to events are scarce. (Slattery 1991, pp. 70–71)

Another Sanjuanist commentator makes the following observation:

Unlike Teresa, he [John] was singularly devoid of all those vivid and arresting features that one calls personality. We see an inward looking, silent man with downcast eyes, hurrying off to hide himself in his cell and so absent-minded that he often did not take in what was said to him. We note the immense tenacity of purpose that underlay his somewhat feminine sensibility, his strictness in matters of discipline and his entire and whole-hearted devotion to the contemplative life. (Brenan 1973, p. 83)

It is time to study St. John of the Cross as a whole person, bringing together his multifaceted dimensions and his historical context. Attention should be devoted to his active role in the Carmelite tradition as a religious reformer, an administrator, and a prophet; to his intellectual capacity as a mystical theologian and teacher; to his religious devotion as a poet, friar, hermit, spiritual director, confessor, and priest; and to his Moorish and possibly also Jewish roots (see Gómez-Menor Fuentes 1970; Swietlicki 1986; Satz 1991; Dombrowski 1992; Martínez González 2006; Poveda Piérola 2011; Serrán-Pagán 2018). It is my personal hope that future Sanjuanist scholars will find more clear evidence of the link that exists between St. John of the Cross and the shared prophetic mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

2. Historical Analysis and the Problem of Conversos in St. John of the Cross

Juan de Yepes y Álvarez was his secular name, son of Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Álvarez, and the youngest of three sons. John was born in Fontiveros (Ávila), at the heart of the Castilian region known as la Moraña. This region was heavily populated by Moorish converts, or, in Spanish, “moriscos”. There are some disputes about the right date of his birth. Some scholars believe that John was born around 24 June 1540. However, the most accepted year among Sanjuanist scholars is 1542 due to the age recorded as 49 at the time of his death, on 14 December 1591. The story goes that Gonzalo’s family, who were silk merchants in Toledo (a trade that usually belonged to Jewish converso families), disinherited John’s father from their wealth for getting married to Catalina, a poor young woman who could also have inherited the social stigma of having been born into a Moorish family (McGreal 1997, pp. 2–3). This event in John’s life is significant because if it is true, it could prove how close John was to the Muslim world (especially to the Sufi mystical tradition). Luce López-Baralt,
the famous scholar from Puerto Rico, has done an intensive study on John’s poetry and commentaries and has concluded that John’s mystical poetry share many symbols with the Sufi language of the dark night and intoxicated love (López-Baralt 1998, pp. 17–18). It is not an exaggeration to affirm that the Carmelite saint felt at home using Muslim, Jewish, and Christian symbolic expressions. Three reasons come to mind: first, the Iberian Peninsula was historically influenced by the three monotheistic religions of the West, even after the expulsion of the Jews in the fifteenth century and the Muslims in the seventeenth century; second, John not only had access to the best university libraries in the kingdom of Castile (Salamanca, Alcalá de Henares, and Baeza), but he also knew people who were knowledgeable or in contact with non-Christian sources; and third, John himself could have been raised in a Jewish and Moorish household if it is accepted the theory that his parents were conversos (see Serrán-Pagán 2018, pp. 10–14, 61–77, 126–29). As Carlos Conde Solares points out in a recent article published in Religions 2020, 11, 15:

St John of the Cross’s interest in the language of Sufism can be traced in manifold credible ways. His biography provides plenty of opportunities for him to have engaged with the learned traditions of pre-Islamic, Islamic, Sephardic and Eastern spiritualities: we know of his culture, of his thirst for knowledge and of his studies in Salamanca. However, St John was also the ideal recipient of popular currents and their folkloric and oral expressions. The theory that St John would have been in direct contact with the popular expressions of not just Christianity but also other religions finds intuitive backing in his poetic works. (Conde Solares 2019, p. 11)

There are a good number of researchers (Cuevas 1972; Asín Palacios 1981; López-Baralt 1990; Satz 1991; Valdivia Válor 2002) who saw similarities in John’s mystical poetry and his doctrine and Sufism, based primarily on their shared usage of mystical symbols and ascetic practices. So, a great number of connections between John and the world of Sufi mystics in the Iberian Peninsula can be made based on the theory of literary transmission by moriscos. Additionally, many of the places where John lived had a significant number of Moorish (moriscos) conversos inhabiting those cities from Ávila to Granada (see De Tapia 2006). In sixteenth-century Spain, John and Teresa had to suffer the stigma of being new Christians, like all other conversos. Both Spanish Carmelites had to be vigilant at all times knowing that they were under the inquisitorial radar of old Christians who passed the purity of blood (“pureza de sangre”) laws in the kingdom of Castile. According to Serafín de Tapia, the Calced Carmelites adopted these purity of blood laws in 1566 (De Tapia 2006, p. 206). According to this professor of history in the University of Salamanca, the Jewish converso population in Ávila was more than 20% and the Moorish converso population was between 10% and 15%. By 1570, many moriscos came from Granada seeking refuge after being dispersed in Las Alpujarras (De Tapia 2006, p. 210). This new data supports my suspicion that the problem of conversos was at the heart of the major persecutions that both Teresa and John had to suffer at the hands of old Christians, including some of his Carmelite brothers. This alone could very well explain why John and Teresa never mentioned their converso origins and why some people even within his own Carmelite Order treated them so poorly, even though both of them were known historically as being the co-founders of the Discalced Carmelite tradition.

What we can infer from all the new data available to us now is that most probably John’s father came from a Jewish converso family (see Gómez-Menor Fuentes 1970; Márquez Villanueva 1998). In John’s case, we can only speculate because we do not have any documentation to prove or disprove his Jewish roots following his father’s lineage. However, we can deduce that there is enough evidence to link John’s converso lineage not only through his father’s lineage as a “marrano”, which is easier to prove in this case knowing that John’s paternal family came from the “oficio de mercader de sedas” (the business of trading and selling silk products), but in the case of John’s mother we know she came from the occupation of being a weaver; this trade was typical of Muslim conversos, also known as moriscos (see Asín Palacios 1981; Garrido 1989; López-Baralt 1990; Poveda Piérola 2011).
Not only their families played those societal roles well, as did many other converso families, but more importantly, John and Teresa always lived in towns and cities where there was a large converso population that serves them well to protect themselves from the constant pressure exerted by old Christians and the holy inquisitors, whose major task was to make sure that the large Jewish and Muslim converso population in the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon will fully abide by the Christian laws and adopt the Roman Catholic faith without any hesitation or heretical deviation, as Teresa’s family prove to have done in Toledo. As a matter of fact, we know Teresa’s family moved from Toledo to Ávila to escape from any suspicion in the eyes of the “Santo Oficio” (Holy Office). In so doing, her family, coming from a wealthy middle-class family of merchants, was able to purchase an old Christian last name from an “hidalgo” family. In those days, it was a common practice among converso families to convert their old Jewish names into new Christian names; thereby, they were able to escape from any suspicion raised by old Christians living in their new adopted city of Ávila, where the Jewish and Muslim converso population was larger than other cities in Castile.

Could it be that the problem of conversos was one of the main reasons why Teresa’s and John’s writings were denounced to the Holy Inquisition? In John’s case, he was kidnapped twice by his own Calced Carmelite brothers and had to suffer persecutions until the end of his life, including Doria’s effort to send John in exile to Mexico. He ended up in Andalusia, where he received the mistreatment and abuse by his abbot in Úbeda. In other words, the traditional narrative does not take into consideration this important historical factor of the two co-founders of the Discalced Carmelite tradition sharing converso lineages, at least through direct Jewish bloodline. As Daniel A. Dombrowski points out, in one of the most notable Sanjuanist studies of the twentieth century:

No treatment of the social world of John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila would be adequate without the mention of the latter’s Jewish roots. After the nobles and the higher clergy, the Jews had been the wealthiest and most influential people in Spain, a status which, when combined with anti-Semitism, led to the pogroms of the late fourteenth century and to the “reconciliation” of many Jews to Christianity in the Inquisition. Teresa of Ávila’s ancestors were among these. In fact, because her ancestors were, like John of the Cross’s, Toledan silk merchants, there are reasons to suspect that John of the Cross may also have had Jewish roots. (Dombrowski 1992, p. 38)

The lack of references in John’s writings to the historical events and the social environment in which he lived may not be his fault but rather the result of circumstances apart from him. The problem of conversos could partly explain John’s apparent silence. John, who was probably born in a new Christian family, of Jewish and of Moorish converso stock, wrote his prose commentaries, poems, counsels, and letters under great pressure. He would have feared being persecuted by the inquisitors and would have been subjected to constant censorship by his own Carmelite brothers. John was surely aware of the risks people took in his time, especially after seeing how Friar Luis de León (1528–1591), one of the most prominent professors in the University of Salamanca, was arrested and imprisoned for several years. The historical reason for Luis’s imprisonment was his translation from the Hebrew Scriptures of the Song of Solomon (or most commonly known in the Christian mystical tradition as the Song of Songs). Modern scholars have shed some new light on Friar Luis’s Jewish mystical background. As a matter of fact, we now know that Friar Luis was the one in charge of editing the whole collection of writings by Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582, and his nephew Fray Basilio Ponce de León (1570–1629) defended John of the Cross posthumously after the Inquisition was investigating John’s works for being heretical. This proves there was a direct link and connection between all these great Spanish writers descended from converso families who were more inclined to form a network of friends to support each other under such harsh times in sixteenth-century Spain. For all of these converso families, it was a matter of survival to be associated with the right group of people in order to avoid persecution.

In fairness to the spirit of the Carmelite saint, it is the purpose of this article to carefully analyze John’s life and writings in reference to the mixed life in the context of the Teresian Discalced Carmelite reform. I would suggest that poetry and theology must be brought together for a full understanding of
John’s integral Christian humanism. John’s poetry is intuitive, direct, and experiential, whereas his theology is analytical, reflective, and rational. One complements the other. As Willis Barnstone puts it:

San Juan was a mystical poet because in a formal sense his poems were written, he himself states, as a result of mystical knowledge, and in his commentaries he endeavors to explain the poems, in great detail, as steps toward the mystical union. The question of whether mysticism is a valid religious experience or a form of hysteria, hallucination, psychedelic substitute, or sublimated sexual ecstasy, or even whether the poems themselves convey the mystical experience, is secondary and not the issue. The point I wish to make clear is that the appelation mystical poet—Doctor Mistico as he was called—is correct in that San Juan was himself a mystic and the origin of his poems lies in the mystical experience. (Barnstone 1972, p. 25)

St. John of the Cross the mystical poet is often depicted in his ecstatic moments of union with God. The Carmelite mystic seems oblivious to the world. The poet’s only concern is to be alone with God. Literary critics (see Brenan 1973; Thompson 2015) have praised John’s poetry and his own creativity as a thinker. In mixing different literary styles and intellectual sources, John helped to enhance the Castilian language by bringing old and new elements together into the Spanish grammar, and also by incorporating a vast knowledge accumulated through his years as a student and friar. It is not entirely surprising at all to find out that John never had the popular appeal of other saints. As a mystic, John’s popularity did not cross the Spanish borders until he was beatified, canonized, and proclaimed a Doctor of the Catholic Church. Although the Carmelite saint was not widely recognized outside Spain until recent times, most of his contemporaries knew him as a holy man, even before he was proclaimed a saint. John is recognized today as one of the most important mystics partly as a result of Pius XI (1857–1939) declaring him the Mystical Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. Numerous studies on John’s mysticism have been published since then. However, John is still characterized by some modern Sanjuanist commentators as a life-denying ascetic who loved the detachment of la Nada by calling him the doctor of the dark night of the soul. Some of these Sanjuanist commentators, especially following the writings of hagiographers, have been interested in giving the Carmelite saint a strict austere image. They have ignored altogether John’s involvement in the world. F.C Happold states the following on John’s ambivalent portraits:

To some this gentle little Carmelite saint, as he has been called, the devoted companion of St Teresa, is utterly repellent. Of him one writer uses these words: ‘terrible, sanglant et les yeux secs’; another labels him ‘l’ascète terrible’. Yet others find him the most attractive of the contemplative saints. Why are there these apparently conflicting responses? The answer is not far to seek. St John of the Cross has two faces: he is both the apostle of absolute detachment and also the apostle of absolute love. He teaches a detachment so absolute that it appears, taken alone, to be a complete abandonment of everything earthly, a philosophy of world-negation of a most extreme type. But he can also write such sentences as: ‘All the ability of my soul and body is moved through love, all that I do I do through love, and all that I suffer I suffer for love’s sake,’ and, in one of his letters: ‘Where there is no love, put love in and you will draw love out.’ And these two elements are intimately intertwined; the detachment is absolute because the love is absolute. (Happold 1988, p. 355)

The Sanjuanist doctrine of the dark night is often misrepresented and John is regarded as “a life-denying and world-hating ascetic when in reality his mysticism superabounds in love, vitality, and joy” (Merton 1968, p. 81). For some readers, the dark night means turning away from all created and sensible things so that you will come to know God, even at the expense of excluding fraternal union. For Thomas Merton, “this is bad theology and bad asceticism” (Merton 1990, p. 38). Actually, it is through this dark night that we can let God find us in total surrender by an act of grace. In other words, John’s symbol of the dark night might be interpreted as absence of light in encountering the mystery of the Godhead. Yet the mystic receives infused knowledge from God’s luminous revelations.
As a philosopher and theologian, John was underrated for many centuries. It was the works of twentieth-century French philosophers like Jean Baruzi (1881–1953), Henri Bergson (1859–1941), or Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) that resurrected John by placing him on top of the list of philosophers and mystical theologians of all times. Philosophers tend to be suspicious of mystical thinkers either because they subordinate reason to faith or simply because they want to transcend and move beyond the realm of reason altogether. Ironically, theologians are also very threatened by mystics because their dogmas and doctrines sometimes are not in tune with the language of the mystics.

The aim of this article is precisely to shed light on the essential role that St. John of the Cross played in the history of Christianity by acknowledging both the mystical and the prophetic dimensions of his life testimonies and writings. The notion of prophetic mysticism is not altogether foreign to the Carmelite tradition, especially following the prophetic example of Elijah. This study will then explore the intrinsic relationship between the prophetic and the mystical elements in St. John of the Cross. In the words of a great American religious philosopher, William E. Hocking (1873–1966):

The prophet must know himself; and he must know his world, not in detail but in so far as it is relevant to his purpose: such knowledge as this must come to him through his relation to the absolute. The prophet is but the mystic in control of the forces of history, declaring their necessary outcome: the mystic in action is the prophet. In the prophet, the cognitive certainty of the mystic becomes historic and particular; and this is the necessary destiny of that certainty: mystic experience must complete itself in the prophetic consciousness. (Hocking 1955, p. 511)

By “prophetic mysticism” I do not simply mean to foresee the future as it is frequently understood in popular circles. Rather, the prophetic mystic is one who bears witness to truth, justice, and love. In addition, the mystic in action develops what Hocking called “the prophetic consciousness.” He asserts:

By the prophetic consciousness I do not mean a knowledge that something is to happen in the future, accomplished by forces beyond myself: I mean a knowledge that this act of mine which I now utter is to succeed and hold its place in history. It is an assurance of the future and of all time as determined by my own individual will, embodied in my present action. It is a power which knows itself to be such, and justly measures its own scope. (Hocking 1955, p. 503)

According to Wayne Teasdale, the prophetic voice demands witness and response to the most pressing moral and religious issues of our time:

The prophetic voice vigorously acknowledges the unjust events and policies that cause enormous tension, misery, and dislocation in the lives of countless numbers of people. War; the plight of refugees (most of whom are women and children); unjust economic, social, and political conditions that enrich a small class of rulers while oppressing the masses; threats to the environment—all are matters that should evoke the moral voice and our willingness to respond. We no longer have the luxury of ignoring the many challenges to justice in all its forms. We have a universal responsibility to apply the moral or prophetic function wherever we see justice disregarded, threats to world peace, oppression by states against its people or a neighboring nation, or some other danger as yet unforeseen. (Teasdale 1999, pp. 157–58)

I will define “prophetic mysticism” in the historical context of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and especially following the lines established by John’s Carmelite eremitical–prophetic tradition (see Reeves 1969; Kreisel 2001; Hvidt 2007; Fitzgerald 2017). Then, I will briefly sketch the history of the active life (Martha) and the contemplative life (Mary) following relevant biblical sources and Christian modern theological sources in an effort to better understand John and the Teresian preference for the mixed life. Finally, I will conclude with a selection of passages from John’s writings to elucidate
his theological commentaries on the active life and the contemplative life (also known as the mixed life in scholastic Thomism).

3. Prophetic Mysticism in the Historical Context of the Judeo-Christian Tradition

Christians, like Jews, share a rich prophetic and mystical tradition throughout time. These two religious traditions are familiar with the many prophetic figures in ancient Israel who gave testimony to their special covenant with the Godhead (Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Daniel, and many others). Incidentally, John’s Carmelite Order adopted the Hebrew prophet Elijah as their spiritual founder and patron, although there was no direct historical link between them. The Carmelites saw Elijah as their spiritual role model because he balances the eremitical life and the prophetic life. According to Peter Slattery,

The spirit, the personality, and the work of Elijah dominate the sacred site of Mount Carmel. In his prayer and reflection the great prophet heard the call of God to bring his people back to him. With ardent zeal, prophetic courage, and a certain amount of passion he answered the call of God. The prophet is so present to God that God dominates his whole life. He is moved by the needs of the people who are being neglected and being misled... In this way Carmelite spirituality encourages people to lie continually in the presence of God, and like the prophet, to be attentive to the signs of the times, so that they may hear the cry of the poor. (Slattery 1991, pp. 136–37)

In addition to Elijah, Moses best represents the archetype of the prophetic mystic in Judaism and Christianity. Although Moses never saw God face-to-face because God is not an object among other objects, he became a mystic by virtue of his personal encounter with God. Moses came down from Mt. Sinai to free his people from their enslaved state. Moses, the mystic visionary, became the prophetic exemplar for having received the direct revelations from G-d. Yet it was Moses the prophet who raised his voice against the tyranny of Egypt against his people. He offered them a way out of their captivity by forcing them into a forty-year exodus in the desert (Beal 2013). Mystics often adopt paradoxical symbols to describe the indescribable. The divine is so utterly mysterious that even those who are called the friends of God prefer to speak of “Him” in terms of divine attributes (cataphatic mystics) or they try to explain what God is not (apophatic mystics). Both Jewish and Christian mystics refuse to define God even when they had felt the presence of God within. The Godhead of the mystics is beyond any thought or word. Yet mystics are full of words to describe their personal experiences of the divine. The mystics cannot fully express in words and in thoughts the true nature of the Godhead; nonetheless, they are the ones who have gained immediate loving knowledge of God and have described for us the divine attributes or earthly manifestations of God.

Christians borrow from the Jewish tradition the archetypical image of Moses as the prophetic mystic par excellence. As a result, Christians follow the example of Moses in his prophetic response to the divine calling by sharing the fruits of his contemplation with the rest of the world. Thus, Christians believe vision must follow action. Otherwise, the divine message never gets to the community and the mystic’s response to God’s plan is simply nullified by an act of cowardice, total passivity, or rebellion. Therefore, action must be rooted in contemplative wisdom and divine knowledge, not vice versa. In short, the Judeo-Christian God demands from each believer cooperation in an effort towards building the heavenly kingdom on earth.

To place St. John of the Cross within the Christian mystical tradition, one must understand the terms “mystical vision” and “prophetic voice”. Christian mystics define mystical vision as the highest state of contemplation in this life. The mystic is one who has a direct experience of the divine. John defines mystical vision as the last step on the mystical ladder of divine love:

The tenth and last step of this secret ladder of love assimilates the soul to God completely because of the clear vision of God that a person possesses at once on reaching it... [And] this vision is the cause of the soul’s complete likeness to God. St. John says: We know that we
shall be like him [1 Jn. 3:2], not because the soul will have as much capacity as God—this is impossible—but because all it is will become like God. Thus it will be called, and shall be, God through participation. (John of the Cross 1991, p. 445; Dark Night 2.20.5)

John concludes that the mystic who attains a vision of God in this life becomes like God by participation. As St. Paul states in the Bible, God shall be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). As a mystical theologian, John describes that contemplative or mystical state as an ascent to God. It is no wonder why the Carmelites chose Elijah as their archetype in his ascent to the mystical heaven through his chariot of fire. John writes: “Thus, by means of this mystical theology and secret love, the soul departs from itself and all things and ascends to God. For love is like a fire that always rises upward as though longing to be engulfed in its center” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 445; Dark Night 2.20.6).

By prophetic voice, the Christian mystics mean that prophets not only are entrusted with God’s Word but they also announce the deepest troubles of society by denouncing those who commit injustices against the suffering people, even at the expense of dying as martyrs themselves. In fact, many prophetic mystics were killed because they were serving God, even when they knew that their lives were in danger. In this regard, John says:

God truly grants the soul what it formally desired and what he promised it because the formal desire of the soul was not a manner of death but the service of God through martyrdom and the exercise of a martyr’s love for him. Death through martyrdom in itself is of no value without this love, and God bestows martyrdom’s love and reward perfectly by other means. Even though the soul does not die a martyr, it is profoundly satisfied since God has fulfilled its desire. (John of the Cross 1991, p. 219; Dark Night Ascent 2.19.13)

For John, the prophetic mystics are those who act in the world for the service and love of God. They are often called the friends or messengers of God. John understands that there is no greater love of God than the love of neighbor and the love of creation. Charity is the key element to those who are seeking eternal life. Without love, the seeker is condemned to live in darkness. Through love (“caritas”), the prophetic voice is linked to the path of apostolic action by serving God in all that he or she does, says, or thinks.

4. Biblical and Modern Theological Sources on the Active Life and the Contemplative Life

In the Christian mystical tradition, in which St. John of the Cross is deeply immersed, the active life and the contemplative life are well represented in the paradigmatic model of Martha and Mary. They are two aspects of the same reality. Mary of Bethany often symbolizes the contemplative life, while Martha best represents the active life. Mary and Martha are both sisters. The Teresian Discalced Carmelite tradition saw them as the Christian prototype of contemplatives in action, which may explain why St. John of the Cross joined the Teresian reform.

The biblical sources play an essential role in understanding the Christian message of St. John of the Cross because his contemplative desire to become one with God ultimately led him to embrace the world in his apostolic ministry. The biblical passage that creates the apparent dichotomy between contemplation and action in Christian circles comes from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus, answering to Martha’s inquiry about why her sister Mary has left her to serve alone, says: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; but one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41–42).

Some Christians have interpreted that passage as if Mary, who symbolically represents the life of contemplation, chose the best life. Such biblical interpreters believe the passage devalues the life of action, which is depicted in the story of Martha. Jesus never rejected the life of action. On the contrary, Jesus lived a very active life in his own time. The exegetical problem that Luke’s biblical passage poses to the Christian tradition is whether or not Jesus intended to reject the active life altogether. It could be inferred from a careful reading of the Gospel of Luke that Jesus encouraged women to participate in
the meetings if they wished. Otherwise, why did Jesus allow Mary to sit at his feet and hear his word when her duty as a Jewish woman was to take care of the household? (Luke 10:39).

The other historical problem that Christians faced in the past, and one that still is a debatable question in some Catholic and Protestant circles, is whether or not active apostolic work by and of itself is conducive to a more perfect union with God, and thereby may lead practitioners to salvation. However, the paradigmatic models of contemplatives in action today are Jesus of Nazareth, Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566), Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), Dorothy Day (1897–1980), Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), Thomas Merton (1915–1968), and Oscar Romero (1917–1980), among others. These Christians found God in all things. They thought of apostolic service, which resulted from mystical graces from God, as a way of worshipping the Lord. Each one of them stood up as prophetic witnesses to justice and peace in their unique ways, asking for forgiveness and reconciliation in a time when they were fighting against all odds inside and outside the Church. Without doubt, the prophetic mystics did not turn their backs to the suffering inflicted on millions of people in different parts of the world. They did not withdraw completely from society in search for solitude alone. Instead, they protested against the individual and structural evils of their respective societies. Their spirituality was based on the ideal of building a compassionate world, including the love of the enemy. In the words of Wayne Teasdale:

> Socially engaged spirituality is the inner life awakened to responsibility and love. It expresses itself in endless acts of compassion that seek to heal others, contributing to the transformation of the world and the building of a nonviolent, peace-loving culture that includes everyone. (Teasdale 1999, p. 239)

Liberation theologians like Segundo Galilea (1928–2010) or Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928–present) have contributed a great deal in our time to recovering the prophetic element of Christianity. They have studied the life of the mystics and identified their prophetic dimension. For instance, Segundo Galilea was really interested in the study of the Spanish mystics, especially of St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Teresa of Ávila, and St. John of the Cross. Galilea saw the Spanish mystics as great contemplatives in action, or as prophetic mystics. He writes:

> The service of the kingdom is the point at which the great mystics of the 16th century converge in their presentation of the ideal practice of effective love. All of them assumed responsibility in facing the history and needs of their time, and responded to them with a lucid and faithful Christian practice. In this respect they were prophets and their service of the kingdom was not ordinary, but prophetic. A prophet is a person who discerns the signs of the times in order to undertake the attitude and the response which the Spirit wills. Propheticism is an eminent form of the practice of effective charity. (Galilea 1985, pp. 64–65)

Galilea also recognized the social and religious reform taken by the Spanish mystics. The mystics played such an important role because they sanctified not only themselves but also the world. The Spanish mystics were not too worried about their own personal salvation. Their religious commitment was a testimony to their social awareness in a time of great troubles, especially in their mission of establishing religious monastic centers and universities. Both Jesuits and Carmelites were well known for their religious centers of prayer and for their missionary foundations all over the world. Even in the sixteenth century, Spanish missionaries included travels to Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Galilea points out that

> Ignatius, Teresa and John of the Cross have the same attitude and the same prophetic practice: to join extreme fidelity and adherence to the church with a practice featuring not words or criticisms, but rather, daring and significant deeds aimed at reforming the church from within. Their prophetism also manifests itself in their distrust in resorting to temporal means and powers and in their insistence above all on evangelical conversion and on the personal and collective holiness of the church. (Galilea 1985, p. 65)
Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founding father of liberation theology, was also interested in the Spanish mystics. He saw them as prophetic figures responding with their loving wisdom to the signs of the time. Having in mind the Spanish mystics, he says:

A particular spirituality always represents a reorganizing of the fundamental foci of Christian life, on the basis of a central intuition or insight. The intuition is that of great men and women of the Spirit as they respond to the needs and demands of their age. Every spirituality is a way that is offered for the greater service of God and others: freedom to love. (Gutiérrez 1984, p. 89)

In other words, the mystic and the prophet are not two separate beings. Rather, the mystic in action integrates both the mystical and the prophetic elements in himself or herself, like St. John of the Cross or St. Teresa of Ávila who have greatly contributed to their world by founding new monasteries and convents, reforming the Carmelite tradition, and inspiring those who follow them through their teachings and writings. Clearly, their actions are the working effects of God’s love in them. Similarly, Gustavo Gutiérrez describes the intrinsic relationship between the mystical and the prophetic elements in terms of language: “Mystical language expresses the gratuitousness of God’s love, prophetic language expresses the demands this love makes” (Gutiérrez 1987, p. 95).

Thus, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, there is no clear gap between the mystical and the prophetic consciousness. The roles of the mystic and the prophet often intertwine. The mystic is the person who has a direct experience of God; the prophet is that person who, after having a vision of the divine, takes the initiative by partaking in the activities of the world without clinging to his or her own actions. The mystic has a vision of the divine; the prophet gives voice to that vision so that he or she becomes a witness and a vessel of truth, justice, and love in the world. The mystic is personally transformed by his or her encounter with the divine; the prophet attaches great importance to social commitment by becoming a “messenger” or “friend” of God. The mystic seeks out personal salvation; the prophet searches for the welfare of the community and the world at large. The mystic withdraws from the world to return more fully equipped to the world as a prophet, fully engaged and involved in his or her social environment. The mystic, therefore, is a spiritual master, a seeker of the really real; the prophet fulfills the task of a social and/or religious reformer, who is committed to building the kingdom of God on earth by fully conforming to God’s vision for the world. The “healthy” mystic returns to the worldly activities fully equipped after having received special revelations from the Divine. At this meeting point, the mystic becomes the prophet. Interestingly enough, the genuine prophet is first of all a mystic, a messenger of God. He or she will not stop working until the message is delivered and implemented. According to José María Vigil (1946–present), “the prophet listens to the living God and then speaks in God’s name” (Casaldía and Vigil 1994, p. 125).

Genuine prophetic mystics are those who commit themselves to an unrestricted desire to love God and persevere in their courageous effort to better serve the community and the world at large by sharing the fruits of their actions. By studying the life and thoughts of the prophetic mystics, one might realize that the mystics’ actions spring from a deep contemplative life in which apostolic service is seen as an extension of their prophetic life. Christian mystical theologians traditionally understood the story of Martha and Mary as two complementary aspects of the divine life, the active and the contemplative. As Thomas Merton rightly observes:

Contemplation and action necessarily have their part in every religious Rule. The two must always go together, because Christian perfection is nothing else but the perfection of charity, and that means perfect love of God and of men... But the active Orders would soon find that their activity was sterile and useless if it were not nourished by an interior spirit of prayer and contemplation, while the contemplative who tries to shut out the needs and sufferings of humanity and isolate himself in a selfish paradise of interior consolations will soon end up in a desert of sterile illusion. (Merton 1962, pp. 31–32)

St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross brought with them a renewed sense of what the Carmelite Order stands for by returning to the primitive spirit of Carmel which includes both the contemplative...
(or eremitical) life and the active (or apostolic) life. Thus, the Carmelite desert experience of silence and solitude led their mystics to become more aware of their special relationship with other creatures and the whole creation. Genuine mystics in action are those who are able to integrate a contemplative love for the glory and honor of God and an apostolic and social commitment for our neighbor and for all creation. As William Johnston declares in *The Inner Eye of Love*:

> I believe that the great prophets were mystics in action—their inner eye was awakened so that they saw not only the glory of God but also the suffering, the injustice, the inequality, the sin of the world. This drove them into action and often led to their death. And just as the great prophets were mystics, so the great mystics had a prophetic role. (Johnston 1982, p. 11)

Now we can turn to St. John of the Cross to explore more in depth what kind of mystic in action he was. The Spanish Carmelite was a great contemplative who served God and his community by holding many different administrative roles within his monastic Order. John’s apostolic service proves his very busy active life and his prophetic mysticism attests to it.

### 5. St. John of the Cross on the Mixed Life

St. John of the Cross received his major training as a contemplative in action following the example set by his Discalced Carmelite tradition, and more specifically through the spiritual guidance of St. Teresa of Ávila, which strives to achieve a perfect balance between the eremitical (or contemplative) life and the apostolic service (or active) life. John, like Teresa, viewed the biblical story of Mary and Martha as two complementary sides in the Christian life. Genuine contemplation always leads to good deeds. The unselfish service that these two Spanish Carmelites offered to the world reminds us of the labor of love and the high price they paid embarking in their Discalced Carmelite reform.

The Carmelite Order, from its beginnings, was devoted to a contemplative and austere life. The holy prophet Elijah lived as a hermit on Mount Carmel. Elijah prayed in silence, listening to the still small voice within. Yet, Elijah was a prophetic mystic not only in the sense of witnessing God’s Word but also one who announces the deepest troubles of his own society. He did not withdraw from the world for its own sake. Hermits traditionally received visits from friends and spiritual seekers in search of wisdom and practical advice. By the thirteenth century, the Carmelites observed the strict rules of the Order of St. Albert, striving to imitate the patron and founder of the Carmelite tradition, the prophet Elijah. The first Carmelites adopted the hermit life as a model of desert spirituality within their religious order in the pursuit of solitude and pure contemplation. However, this model was never intended to replace a life of prayer in community. The thirteenth-century Carmelites erected foundations “not only in desert places but in villages and towns, and thus abandoned the strictly eremitical life” (Zimmerman 1928, p. 3). The Teresian reform did not break with the thirteenth-century Carmelite tradition. On 24 August 1562, Teresa founded her first reformed convent, named after St. Joseph, in the inner domains of the city of Ávila where many Jewish conversos live, especially those who belong to the middle-class status. Scholars often argue that the Teresian reform was an attempt to return to the primitive rule of St. Albert given to the hermits on Mt. Carmel about 1206–1214. Ironically, Teresa founded the first Discalced Carmelite convent inside the famous medieval walls of Ávila, located at the heart of the inner city. Teresa moved away from her previous religious life as a nun in the Convent of the Incarnation, situated in the outer limits of Avila, and built her first religious foundation in an urban setting.

Carmelite spirituality does not seek solitude and silence as ends in themselves. As a matter of fact, what the Carmelite prophetic mystical tradition sought from its beginning was not solitude but solidarity. By displaying acts of compassion and empathy towards others, the friar or the nun fulfills his or her religious vocation in the world. To be a Carmelite is to embody the Carmelite ideal. The etymological meaning of the Hebrew word “Carmel” (כַּרְמֶל) is often translated as paradise or garden. Carmelites are called to build the heavenly kingdom on earth. They make it possible for the ideal to become a reality. For them, the dichotomy presented to us between the life of contemplation
and the life of action, between the mystical life and the prophetic life, is an artificial creation that impedes human beings from reaching their full potential, which has as its highest goal to love God, humanity, and creation. Thomas Merton puts it well when he says:

There is no contradiction between action and contemplation when Christian apostolic activity is raised to the level of pure charity. On that level, action and contemplation are fused into one entity by the love of God and our brother in Christ. But the trouble is that if prayer is not itself deep, powerful and pure and filled at all times with the spirit of contemplation, Christian action can never really reach this high level... Without them our apostolate is more for our own glory than for the glory of God. (Merton 1990, p. 115)

The goal of the Christian mystic is to become God by participation so that the contemplative can share the fruits of his or her mystical vision with others by becoming a messenger of God on earth. St. John of the Cross clearly granted the possibility that some blessed souls become God by participation calling this transformative unitive experience of the human soul in God, “a lo divino.” Mystical theologians called this process of divinization, “theosis” or pleromatization. Therefore, one might conclude that John seems to be closer to the Eastern (Orthodox) Church in his elaborated theology of partakers of the divine glory in God. Nonetheless, John’s panentheistic mystical theology is perhaps rooted in the Pauline recapitulation of all things in Christ. As Manuela Dunn Mascetti notes:

It is easy to forget that the Orthodox doctrine of deification was biblically based. In the famous saying of Peter, Christ saved us so that “we may become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Orthodox theologians leaned on this and other passages in creating this teaching. (See especially John 17:22–3 and 2 Corinthians 8:9). (Dunn Mascetti 1998, p. 99)

St. John of the Cross, as a cofounder member of the Discalced Carmelite tradition initiated by St. Teresa of Ávila, best exemplified the spirit of the mixed life. They both brought together the life of contemplation, which has as its goal a more perfect union with God through the daily practice of prayer following the eremitical model of the Carmelite tradition, and the life of apostolic action, which translates John’s and Teresa’s mystical vision into the realm of worldly activities. Yet John is often portrayed by many commentators only as a model of sanctity reached only by practicing an austere, ascetic, contemplative life. Furthermore, many commentators understand John’s active life only in the context of an apostolate of prayer. Even worse, some commentators are inclined to believe that John did not play an active role in his time. The root cause of the problem lies in that some commentators saw the Carmelite tradition merely as a contemplative religious order. As E.W. Trueman Dicken (1919–2000) notes:

Despite the Western origin of the Crusaders, the spiritual and monastic atmosphere of the Kingdom of Jerusalem had been largely that of the Eastern Church, and the life of the early Carmelites drew much from the traditions of Scete and Nitria. They lived as solitaries, bound together by their common eucharist and by the strict obedience enjoined by their rule. In the Eastern Church the notion of ‘active’ Religious orders is virtually unknown, and the weighty emphasis upon contemplation in the primitive Carmelite community is thus no more than one might expect to find. (Dicken 1963, p. 8)

Did the Teresian reform follow the primitive Carmelite spirit in the lines interpreted by Trueman Dicken? Most certainly not. Merton clearly understood the role of prophetic mysticism in the Spanish Carmelites when he declared: “Unless I am much mistaken, it was St Teresa and the Carmelite mystics of the sixteenth century who first brought into prominence the apostolic role and fruitfulness of the pure contemplative” (Merton 1980b, p. 61). The Carmelite reform is a perfect example of how central it is for Teresa and John to live a balanced life between interior prayer and apostolic action. As Merton observes in his essay, “What to Do - The Teaching of St. John of the Cross”: 

The words of St. John of the Cross must be understood in the context of the saint’s own life. He was not preaching an absolute repudiation of all duties and responsibilities and all works and labours for the Church of God or for other men. He and St. Theresa of Avila, the greatest contemplatives of their time, were also very active and laboured and suffered much for the reform of the Carmelite Order. (Merton 1981, p. 68)

It is important to understand John’s writings in the historical context of sixteenth-century Spain. Needless to say, Sanjuanist scholars ought to reinterpret John’s texts and his mystical thoughts in reference to the historical context in which he lived. Bringing out the multifaceted dimensions of St. John of the Cross illustrates more accurately the Carmelite saint’s enormous contribution to the world. This study offers a new vision of St. John of the Cross as a contemplative mystic engaged in the socio-religious issues of his time. To illustrate this point, Merton rightly attributed the extremist austerity to John’s age in general and to the new ideas implemented by Nicholas Doria (1539–1594) as the general definitor of the Discalced Carmelite order. He writes:

[I]n the sixteenth century, within the Discalced Reform, there was also an extreme wing which sought solitude along with austerity and centralization: and this was the faction of Doria and the Friars of Pastrana, who eventually persecuted St. John of the Cross, and hounded him to his death. The curious thing is that St. John of the Cross, the defender of the pure Carmelite ideal of mystical contemplation, was himself not an extremist in favor of pure solitude, nor did he advocate extreme austerity, but took the middle way, favoring the combination of solitude and contemplation with preaching and the direction of souls.

Hence it is evident that in the history of the Carmelites the pure and primitive spirit of the Order always remains incarnate in a kind of “prophetic” union of solitude and apostolate. When this balance is disturbed, when the shift is made too far in one direction or the other, then the primitive spirit is lost. That is to say that when too much emphasis is placed on apostolic action, the primitive spirit is of course weakened and eventually destroyed. But that does not mean that the return to the original ideal is a mere matter of abandoning the apostolate and embracing a solitary life that is primarily ascetical and austere. It seems likely that the apostolate in its own way encourages contemplation, just as contemplation is the source of a genuine apostolate. (Merton 1965, pp. 179–80)

Studying the Bible and the Christian tradition was a precondition for opening new Carmelite houses of study in the Teresian reform. As a result of achieving this final integration between the eremitic spirit of the earlier Carmelites and the apostolic fervor of the Teresian reform, John shows the sacramental link between the mysticism of action, wisdom, and devotion. St. John of the Cross wholly embraced a mystical theology of holiness in action by taking care of administrative businesses; serving as a spiritual director, priest, or confessor; and fulfilling his poetic talent and theological vocation. In other words, John consecrated his life to God by unfolding a special love for the world and for all creatures living in it.

On 28 November 1568, John and a senior friar named Antonio de Heredia (1510–1601) (later known in religious circles as Antonio de Jesús) founded at Duruelo the first male house following the Teresian ideal. From then on, John and Teresa would work together building new Carmelite monasteries and convents and traveling throughout Spain and Portugal. Among the administrative and religious tasks that John had to fulfill in the earliest stages of his monastic order were the establishment of new Carmelite houses for nuns and friars, and the spiritual direction of novices. The first Discalced Carmelite friary built in Duruelo was a tremendous victory for the Teresian reform. By extending the reform to male houses of the religious order, Teresa has fulfilled her dream by opening Carmelite houses for nuns and friars. No woman ever before Teresa was allowed to become the foundress of a religious order for friars. John was appointed subprior and novice master of the first Discalced Carmelite friary of Duruelo in 1570. John also held other important administrative positions within the Carmelite Order. In June of the same year, John became master of novices at the Carmelite foundations
of Mancera de Abajo and Pastrana. He guided the Carmelite novices in their intellectual and spiritual development. The Teresian reform encouraged and almost required them to combine mental and spiritual exercises with apostolic service. They served in their monastic duties as confessors, preachers, and administrators, and were required to perform manual labor during certain hours of the day. This is further evidence that the Discalced Carmelites embraced the mixed life. In the spring of 1571, John was transferred to Alcalá de Henares. In April, John was appointed rector of the Carmelite College of Alcalá de Henares. His famous lectures and his spiritual guidance attracted people from all walks of life. He often met with lay university professors for discussions in public and in private. John integrated in his curriculum the study of theology and philosophy so that the students were ready to discern, with the help of a spiritual director or confessor, the mysteries of life. At Teresa’s request, John left Alcalá to attend to the religious needs of the nuns in Ávila. In 1572, John was appointed the vicar, spiritual director, and confessor at the Convent of the Incarnation. John spent approximately five years working closely with Teresa. He held that office until 1577, when he was kidnapped in Ávila and later arrested in Toledo in that same year. He was held for nine months captive in a Calced Carmelite monastery.

Most commentators believe that the tug of war between Calced and Discalced Carmelites culminated in the incarceration of John in Toledo. He was accused of “rebellion and contumacy” against the Carmelite Order. He had been shut up in a cupboard, six feet by ten, through the bitter cold of the Toledan winter, and the scorching heat of the summer. “Imprisonment, flogging, fasting on bread and water were standards penalties in religious orders of the period,” Peter Slattery notes (Slattery 1991, p. 71). In 1578, John escaped from prison after nine months of captivity. It is said that he finally managed to escape from the monastery at night, by tearing his bedding into strips to use as a rope to climb down the steep stone walls. He then made his way through the city to a convent of Reformed nuns, who sheltered him and nursed him back to a semblance of health. He then travelled to Madrid, and from there to El Calvario (where he became the vicar). He was now no longer in immediate danger, as the attempts to halt the Reform had, at least temporarily, slowed down. Although political disputes within the Carmelite Order were numerous, I believe there were other hidden motives behind John’s persecutions. Why would he be persecuted by both Calced and Discalced Carmelite brothers? It cannot simply be said that John suffered persecution because he was on Teresa’s side. I suspect that John’s converso background played an important role, especially in the later persecutions at the hands of his Discalced Carmelite brothers.

I would argue that the Discalced Carmelite Order, cofounded by Teresa and John, affected not only the religious reforms of the sixteenth century but also the social fabric of the Castilian society, especially by providing a monastic refuge for women and conversos (both Jewish and Muslim converts). Needless to say, women and conversos were the social groups that suffered the most during Philip II’s reign as the monarch, and some of his delegates persecuted those who departed from the newly established codes for the Kingdom of Castile. Women and conversos were seen as potential threats to the new social and religious identity adopted by old Christians in the so-called reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula. Some of these converso women had strong ties to so-called heretical sects (“iluminadas” or “alumbradas”) and they were seen as a threat to the new social and religious policies of the Spanish empire. In the meantime, Teresa and John opened their convents and monasteries to those women and conversos who did not have a place in the new society by accepting them in large numbers and by allowing them to play a significant role inside the Carmelite tradition (see Márquez Villanueva 1998).

5.1. John the Mystic (or the Contemplative Life as Mary)

St. John of the Cross was certainly a mystic because he had a direct experience with the Divine. John’s poetry is impregnated with many mystical symbols from the living flame of love to the dark night. John explicitly defined mysticism as contemplation when he said: “For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and loving inflow of God, which if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 382; Dark Night 1.10.6). He also defined contemplation as “an inflow of
God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which the contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 401; Dark Night Dark Night 2.5.1). For St. John of the Cross, infused contemplation meant experiential faith, or union with God. For John, the mystic is not simply someone who is seeking union with God but rather someone who has already experienced the loving wisdom of God at the deepest center of his or her soul. John lived his mystical experience of intimacy with God with great intensity. His devotional poems clearly illustrate his purpose of guiding the spiritual seeker to achieve union with God in this life. This spiritual journey in search of union with God is better expressed in his celebrated poem, the Ascent of Mount Carmel. However, it is in his poems, the Spiritual Canticle and the Living Flame of Love, where John fully expressed his deep intimate union with God using the nuptial imagery of the spiritual marriage between the lover and the beloved.

As a mystical theologian, John identified the highest degree of mystical union in this life with infused contemplation. Ultimately, it is only God who could grant the gift of grace to the human soul, although Christians prepare themselves to receive God within by fasting, meditating, or doing apostolic work for the service of God. John claimed that the mystical vision of God “is proper to the intellect” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 531; Spiritual Canticle 14.14). John, following St. Thomas Aquinas’s (1225–1274) epistemology, explained his theory of divine knowledge and union with God through the concept of active and passive intellect. For him, the intellect was not associated with the rational faculty of the human soul but rather with intuitive understanding, a category that belongs to the realm of mystical theology. Moreover, this experiential loving wisdom was defined by John as the highest state of contemplation in this life. The blessed soul was able to hear the still small voice of God. “These are pure spiritual revelations or visions which are given only to the spirit without the service and help of the senses,” as John observes (John of the Cross 1991, p. 531; Spiritual Canticle 14.15).

St. John of the Cross was a Christian mystic because he adopted the mystical language of Christianity as his own experience. He writes: “Insofar as infused contemplation is loving wisdom of God, it produces two principal effects in the soul: by both purging and illumining, this contemplation prepares the soul for union with God through love” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 531; Spiritual Canticle 14.15). Thus, the Carmelite saint, being rooted in the Christian mystical tradition, identified the purgative, illuminative, and unitive as the three stages of the mystical life. Here, below, are a few examples of how John followed the three stages in his writings.

The purgative stage corresponds to the beginners (or “principiantes”). John understood purgation as a spiritual discipline in which one prepares the soul to receive God by practicing asceticism. The ascetic person seeks God by fasting or praying. At the same time, the Christian monastic tradition requires from the practitioner or spiritual seeker great discipline and human effort (acquired contemplation). As a result of this effort, God will purge the human soul of all its bad habits (infused contemplation). John writes: “If you desire that devotion be born in your spirit and that the love of God and the desire for divine things increase, cleanse your soul of every desire, attachment, and ambition in such a way that you have no concern about anything” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 91; Sayings of Light and Love, p. 78). The illuminative stage corresponds to the proficient ones (or “aprovechados”). The religious believer desires to know God. With God’s help, the seeker will experience union with God in this life by virtue of his or her own degree of receptivity of the divine light within. He or she who has been blessed by God will have the opportunity to know the hidden mystery of God. According to John, “a revelation is nothing else than the disclosure of some hidden truth, or the manifestation of some secret or mystery, as when God imparts understanding of some truth to the intellect, or discloses to the soul something that he did, is doing, or is thinking of doing” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 244; Ascent 2.25.1). God infuses wisdom and understanding to those who receive the divine life in their hearts. As John puts it, “God supernaturally illumines the soul with the ray of his divine light. This light is the principle of the perfect union that follows after the third night” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 156; Ascent 2.2.1). In another passage, John states:
Jeremiah shows clearly that the soul is purged by the illumination of this fire of loving wisdom (for God never bestows mystical wisdom without love, since love itself infuses it) where he says: He sent fire into my bones and instructed me [Lam. 1:13]. And David says that God’s wisdom is silver tried in the fire [Ps. 11:6], that is, in the purgative fire of love. This contemplation infuses both love and wisdom in each soul according to its capacity and necessity. It illumines the soul and purges of its ignorance, as the Wise Man declares it did to him [Eccles. 51:25–27]. (John of the Cross 1991, p. 422; Dark Night 2.12.2)

Finally, the unitive or transformative mystical stage belongs to the perfect or blessed souls (or “perfectos”). The goal of the Christian mystic is to become one with God. However, this mystical union is only possible by grace, not by nature. The human soul becomes God by participation. The one who is reborn in the Holy Trinity will be able to see the kingdom of God, which is the highest state of perfection in this life. As John explains in his theological commentaries:

When God grants this supernatural favor to the soul, so great a union is caused that all the things of both God and the soul become one in participant transformation, and the soul appears to be God more than a soul. Indeed, it is God by participation. Yet truly, its being (even though transformed) is naturally as distinct from God’s as it was before, just as the window, although illumined by the ray, has being distinct from the rays. (John of the Cross 1991, p. 165; Ascent 2.5.7)

John’s mystical language of union echoes the experience of the Desert Fathers and the Greek Orthodox Christians, especially in their theology of participation (or theosis). As John points out, “[h]aving been made one with God, the soul is somehow God through participation. Although it is not God as perfectly as it will be in the next life, it is like the shadow of God” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 706; Living Flame of Love 3.78).

5.2. John the Prophet (or the Active Life as Martha)

St. John of the Cross uses the definition of prophecy in two different ways. On the one hand, the prophet is one who listens to the Word of God; and the blessed soul receives a message from God, that is, a divine revelation. John asks, “Whom will God instruct? And to whom will he explain his word and prophecy?” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 215; Ascent 2.19.6). On the other hand, the prophet is one who bears witness to truth, justice, and love (or charity). John quotes St. Paul to support his second definition of prophecy in the following passage:

If I speak in human and angelic tongues and do not have charity, I am like a sounding metal or bell. And if I have prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all of faith so as to move mountains, and do not have charity, I am nothing, and so on [1 Cor. 13:1–2]. When those who esteem their works in this way seek glory from Christ saying: Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and work many miracles? He will answer: Depart from me, workers of iniquity [Mt. 7:22–23]. (John of the Cross 1991, p. 324; Ascent 3.30.4)

John’s ascetico-mystical teachings are not designed to cause pain and anguish to the human soul as an end in itself. On the contrary, John’s major task is precisely to free the soul from all personal and societal obstacles that impede union with God. Nevertheless, a human soul cannot feel totally free without experiencing some degree of pain and suffering in this life. Suffering is an integral part of life. Otherwise, human beings would not be able to grow. This could explain why John spoke so tenderly about his trials and afflictions. As he puts it in the Sayings of Light and Love, “Have great love for trials and think of them as but a small way of pleasing your Bridegroom, who did not hesitate to die for you” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 92; John’s saying is catalogued as number 94). John understands that prophesy, in the sense of mystical revelations, must go hand in hand with the second definition of prophesy in the sense of serving God with true love, “for in charity lies the fruit of eternal life” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 324; Ascent 3.30.5). As Peter Henriot points out:
"Faith without works is dead." This is the blunt answer given by the Apostle James to the perennial question about the relationship between belief and deeds. Today, we might phrase the question differently. We might ask about the relationship between faith and justice, prayer and action, spirituality and social commitment. But the answer is still the same. Faith without works is dead. (Dyckman and Carroll 1981, p. ix)

The question then becomes: Is John’s faith fully alive without the works of peace, justice, and apostolic service? Clearly, John embraces the two definitions of prophecy in his writings. He says:

The prophets, entrusted with the word of God, were well aware of this. Prophecy for them was a severe trial because, as we affirmed, the people observed that a good portion of the prophecy did not come about in accord with the letter of what was said to them. As a result the people laughed at the prophets and made much fun of them. It reached such a point that Jeremiah exclaimed: They mock me all day long, everyone scoffs at and despises me because for a long time now I have cried out against iniquity and promised them destruction, and the Lord’s word has become a reproach to me and a mockery all the time. And I said: I do not have to remember him or speak any more in his name [Jer. 20:7–9]. (John of the Cross 1991, p. 222; Ascent 2.20.6)

Like the ancient prophets, John endured suffering. It is not shocking at all to find out that John was persecuted in his own time by inquisitors and by a few of his own Carmelite brothers. According to John’s foes, he was holding unorthodox Christian ideas and practices. He was accused of being an illuminist, a quietist, and a rebel. In sixteenth-century Spain, mysticism was not welcomed in some religious circles. His foes were suspicious of new religious movements mainly composed of lay people, Jewish and Moorish converts, and Lutherans, because many of them rejected the position of the Catholic Church in matters of faith, salvation, sin, and sacraments. Some of these Lutheran figures believed that the human soul can find salvation without the mediation of the Catholic Church, meaning that humans do not need to confess before a priest, or receive certain sacraments, and so forth, because, eventually, God’s grace alone will save the human soul.

John sided with those who suffered in his own time, especially the Carmelite nuns and Father Jerome Gratian or Gracián (1545–1614). John announced the deepest troubles of his Carmelite brothers and sisters. Because of that, he suffered persecution at the hands of some of his own Carmelite brothers. He was mocked and humiliated, put in prison for nine months, forced to leave his administrative offices, and sent to La Peñuela as a forced exile. Why did John get into so much trouble? Why was John forced to quit his administrative positions within the Carmelite Order? Why did Nicolás Doria want John to leave the Iberian Peninsula? Could it be viewed as an attempt to get rid of John by sending him to Mexico and, thus, remove him from the religious order? The plan never took place because John died in Úbeda before embarking with other Carmelites to the new world. However, it is well known today that some Carmelites working for Doria took the necessary steps to remove John of his Carmelite habit. As William Barnstone notes:

he [John] was stripped of all office and exiled to la Peñuela, a desert house in Andalusia. Evidence was collected against him, some of it tragi-comic, such as a false accusation by a nun in Málaga that she had been kissed by Fray Juan through the grille of her window. At Beas de Segura, his favorite convent, the nuns destroyed all papers and letters from him, for fear of being implicated with the heretic monk. There was a move to expel him from the order, and only his sickness spared him this last step. (Barnstone 1972, p. 17)

John stood against Doria’s efforts of centralizing the Discalced Carmelite Order, which left the nuns at his mercy, even at the expense of losing all his power within the Carmelite Order. John, the co-adjutor and co-founder of the Discalced Carmelite friars and a loyal friend to the Teresian reform, was released by Doria’s decree of all his office duties before he died. John was sent to the hermitage of la Peñuela, away from the new Council formed by Doria. In 1591, John became very ill. He suffered
from fevers and gangrenous sores on his foot. He moved from the convent of la Peñuela (today located in la Carolina) to Úbeda, where he received poor treatment from the prior, Friar Francisco Crisóstomo, who even denied him medical attention. John died on 14 December 1591. Because he acted on his prophetic vision and suffered for his actions, John was definitely a modern prophet, not the simple rebel as he was often accused of being. Unfortunately, John faced the martyrdom of rejection by his own Carmelite brothers. He paid the price of aligning himself with those who were oppressed. Like Jesus, he suffered persecution. Perhaps his death was linked to his enemies’ constant oppression. Peter Slattery correctly understood John’s prophetic dimension when he wrote:

St. John, the poet, being a person of discernment, was sensitive to the injustices and exaggerations of his time, and in his innocence he made people aware of them. Poets are uncomfortable people to be with. Certainly, toward the end of his life those with power did not want him close to them. St. John, the poet, called on his fellow religious to examine stagnation in their lives and institutions—he did this by the force of the sanctity of his life and the power of his poetry. He was a silent contemplative who suffered, not only because of his own empathy, but because he threatened the powerful. Out of his silence he caressed and challenged all who read his poetry. (Slattery 1991, p. 74)

St. John of the Cross, like the ancient prophets, aligned himself with the oppressed or “anawim” (in that case, with the nuns, but John also stood behind the moderate Carmelite, Gracián, who was ultimately expelled from the Order). Thus, St. John of the Cross does not write his mystical writings in isolation from his religious and cultural environment. Rather, the Carmelite writer needs to be seen in the light of a continuous line of mystical thoughts that are primarily rooted in the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition, and yet not completely deprived of other possible influences coming from the non-Christian world (particularly the Greek, Latin, Jewish, and Muslim traditions). It is, therefore, not difficult to understand now why it took so many decades, even centuries, before John was beatified, canonized, and given the honorific title of Mystical Doctor of the Catholic Church. On 22 January 1675, Clement X beatified John of the Cross, a beatification that took longer than was expected, for St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Teresa of Ávila (1614) were beatified right after their deaths. In 1726, Benedict XIII canonized him. On 24 August 1926, St. John of the Cross “was solemnly declared a Doctor of the Universal Church” by Pope Pius XI (Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen 1954, p. xi). Pope Pius XI proclaimed St. John of the Cross “Doctor Ecclesiae” in his Apostolic Letter *Die Vicesima*. For many Sanjuanist specialists, the year 1926 marks the turning point of future critical studies once John has become the “Doctor Misticus” of the Catholic Church. In 1970, Teresa was the first woman to be granted this title by Pope Paul VI. In 1952, the Spanish Ministry of National Education named St. John of the Cross the patron of Spanish poets. Ironically, John’s texts became the norm for testing the authenticity of what could be regarded as the model of sainthood and nowadays called by Pope Francis (1936–present) the model of holiness. Priests, monks, and theologians, especially in seminaries, still spend many hours studying John’s writings. They see him as an authority in matters of faith. In an apostolic letter dated 14 December 1990, Pope John Paul II (1920–2005), who wrote his doctoral dissertation on St. John of the Cross, dedicates a whole document to the Carmelite saint calling him “a master in the faith” and a “witness of the living God.” Today, people from all walks of life (particularly religious figures, poets, scientists, artists, philosophers, theologians, atheists, and so forth) have demonstrated a special interest in studying John’s life and writings. The studies on St. John of the Cross have increased dramatically in the twentieth century. Researchers from an array of fields of knowledge have discovered new data on the historical background and the life events of the Carmelite saint, on the authenticity of his writings, and on the originality of his thoughts. This article has reconsidered the life and the thoughts of St. John of the Cross in light of these scholarly studies.
6. Conclusions

St. John of the Cross develops a holistic mystical theology by seeing the sacramental life as the body of religion in a twofold way which can be best expressed through the inner life of the liturgy during Mass, and through the outer life of carrying out the Christian message to the world by engaging with the social and apostolic issues of one’s time; it also consists of seeing the theological life as the head of religion, and the mystical life as the heart and dynamo of religion. These three aspects of religion—the sacramental, the theological, and the mystical—are well integrated in the life events and thoughts of St. John of the Cross. The Sanjuanist mystical theology provides concrete and practical guidelines in addressing the physical, mental, and spiritual needs of the whole person. St. John of the Cross was a mystic of action who responded prophetically to the social and religious issues of his time. By being firmly rooted in the eremitical–prophetic Carmelite tradition, John was able to reach out to those in need by virtue of his apostolic ministry. In monitoring the progress made by friars and nuns in their respective ministries, John avoided the sorts of religious trapping of a contemplative Docetism which was prevalent in some religious circles of his time, especially in monastic communities. The Carmelite mystic recognized his social and religious responsibility to be morally engaged in his time. Because John had the courage to follow God’s calling, he suffered persecution.

The prophetic mysticism of St. John of the Cross is sharply at odds with the old Carmelite picture of a contemplative who completely withdrew from society in search of God. John’s mysticism does not reject the human condition in order to seek one’s own individual salvation without manifesting any concern for the rest of humanity and all other creatures. Nor is his mysticism a matter of praying all day inside a monastic community for the sake of saving his soul. As Bernard McGinn notes:

A large part of the secret of the Carmelite contribution seems to have been found in the ongoing tension between the desire for solitude—that is, withdrawal into the desert, especially the desert of the heart—and the need to be actively engaged in the work of spreading God’s love in the world.... In an activist age and in a culture that tends to prize action above contemplation, this part of the Carmelite heritage is important both for the Carmelites themselves and for the witness they give to the rest of us. (McGinn 2017, p. 47)

From this study one thing becomes clear. St. John of the Cross was ahead of his time because he had the intellectual capacity to link the scientific, the literary, and the theological sources of his day. It has been suggested from previous sources that John belonged to the Renaissance age, although he was still living under the control of a medieval Church. In actuality, John played an important role as a pioneer thinker in the Christian humanist movement of the Iberian Peninsula. As a bridge builder, John understood quite well the relationship between primitive and medieval Christianity, especially in the context of monasticism. Yet John was a man of the Renaissance Age by having one foot at the gates of modernity and another foot anchored in the primitive Church. By incorporating new theories and ideas unheard of in his own time, John undisputedly contributed to the spiritual progress of sixteenth-century Europe. Proof of that is the fact that centuries later he was admired by people from all corners of the world, even in Asia where Eastern religious leaders have suggested that John was a sort of spiritual master. The contemplative John was also ahead of his time when he rightly saw the urgent necessity of courageously confronting the problems that were affecting the fragile thread of the Iberian family. John advocated for a non-violent way to shed light on the injustices committed in his own time, following the Christian principles of the Gospels. For John, the true contemplative was not only the blessed soul who achieves union with God in this life but also one who works for peace and unity in the world. “The finally integrated man is a peacemaker, and that is why there is such a desperate need for our leaders to become such men of insight,” as Thomas Merton notes (Merton 1980a, p. 207). John was able to create in the midst of a harsh environment of hatred and resentment a non-violent, loving response to those who characterized themselves as his enemies. In his famous twenty-sixth letter addressed to Mother María de la Encarnación (1565–1618), John writes: “And where there is no love, put love, and you will draw love” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 760). John exposed in public the
systematic expressions of sin that were part of the social and the religious establishment of his time. He chose writing, preaching, confession, and spiritual direction as the prophetic mediums for speaking out against such injustices as intolerance, hunger, illiteracy, or mistreatment of women. John was well rooted in the eremitical–prophetic tradition following the Carmelite tradition (particularly, the Teresian reform) which perfectly balances the contemplative life and the active life. In my humble opinion, Teresa’s preference for the mixed life could easily explain why John left the Calced Carmelite Order, forgot his plans of joining the Carthusian Order (which is known for its austere life advocating long periods of silence and ascetic practices), and became the coadjutor and religious reformer, together with Teresa, of the Discalced Carmelite tradition. This article has demonstrated that St. John of the Cross was a contemplative in action within the parameters of his own monastic religious order.

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