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## Mystic Writers: Religion from a perspective of gender in the poetry of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross

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## Mystic Writers:

### Religion from a perspective of gender in the poetry of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross

#### Abstract

Religion and the way in which people approach it is a complicated topic. There are a multitude of ways in which humans experience religion in their lives. Christian mysticism is a type of thought within the Christian religion, and it is evident in the works of two Spanish writers – Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. These two saints are good examples to study because, as writers and mystics, they worked closely together in the Spanish Catholic Church and had similar religious beliefs. Much of their writings tie into the same Biblical ideas, while their poetry demonstrates a relationship and an experience with God that is situated outside of the world in which they lived. Though these mystic experiences are similar, the way in which they write about and describe them varies. These differences help show an understanding of how religion is communicated differently through writing based on the gender of the writer. The poetry of St. Teresa, as highlighted in the poem “Muero porque no muero,” contains more “feminine” characteristics whereas the work of St. John, as seen in “Noche oscura,” demonstrates more “masculine” characteristics. In this work, I will consider the lives of St. Teresa and St. John and study their poetry from a view of that time period to draw the conclusion that gender does not have a clear impact on one’s religious beliefs but rather on the way in which

an individual expresses these beliefs. Studying both Teresa and John exemplifies this and gives a thorough understanding of the affectionate mysticism which they practiced.

Why mysticism?

It is the twenty-first century and despite the rises in science, technology, and innovation it is evident that something is missing from society. Many people are unhappy, longing to fill a hole within them but uncertain as to what they are looking for. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 1 in 5 adults in the United States will experience some type of mental illness each year. Not only that, but suicide is the second leading cause of death among pre-teens (National Alliance on Mental Illness). Mental illnesses are increasing, and humanity is in need of a savior, of a hope, of a reason to live that is bigger than themselves. Mysticism offers an alternative view to the world. Rather than the secular view of living for the present and placing one's values in tangible things, mysticism offers a belief that there is something more – a divine that humanity can have a relationship with through direct contact of the soul. According to Steven Reiss, a professor of psychology at the Ohio State University, people turn to religion because it fulfills basic desires that all human beings have – acceptance, curiosity, family, honor, idealism, independence, order, power, romance, saving, social contact, status, tranquility and vengeance. In his book, Reiss says he “discuss[es] a mystical personality type – the kind of person who would likely find value and meaning in mystical experiences and would be attracted to religion for that reason.” (“The Psychology behind Religious Belief”). Therefore, studying mysticism not only gives us an alternate worldview but it also helps us better understand other people that Reiss would categorize as “mystical personality types.”

St. Teresa and St. John are two well-known writers whose work focuses on their Christian mystic beliefs. From here arises the question – what exactly is mysticism? There is no simple answer to this question, and the answer will vary depending on the source. According to the article “Mystical union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” mysticism is a way of contacting the divine that is direct and transformative (McGinn 6334). It can be viewed as a meeting of the soul with God or as something more like achieving identity with God. The Spanish mystics like St. Teresa and St. John speak of conforming the self with the divine. However, yet another definition of mysticism by Ernst Troelsch is “the insistence on a direct religious experience internal and present.” In this same article, it is said that mystic experiences are a very personal occurrence (Taves 7738-9). In agreement with this line of thinking, the article “Mysticism” describes it as contemplation, a state of mind, or a private experience. Nonetheless, according to this source, mysticism is important to the center of each religion (“Mysticism” 352). Modern Christianity, however, does not place a strong emphasis on these experiences as much as other religions. Even so, the life of Jesus Christ displayed mystic qualities. For example, He spent much time in solitary prayer and he emphasized living in step with the Father. Additionally, Paul’s epistles discuss living life with the Holy Spirit. All of this is related to mystic themes and ideas – a marriage of the soul with that of God.

After considering the above definitions and explanations of mysticism, the type of mysticism found in the writing of St. Teresa and St. John can be defined. Their mysticism is an affectionate type which John describes as a process of purification (Dupré 6349). Christian mysticism is a complicated topic, but it can be examined and understood through the writings of people such as St. Teresa and St. John who have had and then described these spiritual experiences. Not only that but their similarities allow for an understanding of how the mystic

experiences vary based on gender. When conducting an experiment, typically all variables are held constant and one independent variable is changed. This allows for the impacts of that one specific variable to be observed. Likewise, St. Teresa and St. John had similar life events and worked very closely with one another in their reformation efforts. Therefore, for the purpose of this work, though other variables certainly exist, the independent variable being studied between the two is their gender, Teresa being female and John being a male. As will be discussed later in this essay, their similarities help to highlight the impact of gender on their writings and on their beliefs. This analysis is grounded in the views people held within the church and at the time period of the authors, attempting to capture the zeitgeist of the authors' lives. With that being said, though their written work lasts throughout time, the ways in which we view and interpret it will change as society changes. Furthermore, the selection of "Muero porque no muero" and "Noche oscura" allows us to examine and substantiate claims regarding writing, religion, and gender within this work. Due to time and practical constraints, this analysis focuses on two of the most emblematic poems by these mystic writers. However, this does not exhaust every possibility in terms of the written works of St. Teresa and St. John and further studies can be conducted by examining aspects of other compositions.

### Expression of gender in writing

As mentioned earlier a crucial factor to consider when studying the work of St. Teresa and St. John is the gender of the writer. There is substantial evidence, studies, and philosophical arguments that illustrate how gender impacts the way in which a person lives and writes. For example, Carl Jung, a major figure in analytical psychology, defines two parts of the human soul – the anima and the animus. Anima refers to the feminine and is associated with emotion,

empathy, and sensitivity. On the contrary, animus encapsulates the masculine, including action, intelligence, and exploration. He says that all souls are a balance of both anima and animus, and it is worth noting that these two concepts are not literal descriptions of men and women but rather symbolic. To better illustrate these aspects of the feminine and the masculine, Melik-Akhazarova provides an example in the article entitled “Anima and Animus” that tells the story of a businesswoman spending all her time working. This is considered the “animus” or “masculine.” But something reminds her of her childhood and then arises a longing for more authentic relationships in her life. This is the “anima” or “feminine” that she lacks (Melik-Akhazarova). This can be related to Christianity because the religion contains aspects of both anima and animus. Anima within Christianity could be seen as the relationship one can have with God and the different emotions this brings. On the other hand, the animus within Christianity could include the commandments that Christians are told to follow and the risk of living by faith and following God. Even God himself has both anima and animus characteristics. He is tender, loving, and merciful while also being jealous, just, and powerful. If mankind is made in His image (*New International Version*, Genesis 1.27), then human souls will also have a combination of these “feminine” and “masculine” characteristics. Hence, Jung’s ideas <sup>1</sup> are a useful tool in analyzing the poetry of St. Teresa and St. John because they are rooted in the simple idea that we understand the world through archetypes. The concepts of anima and animus provide a basis on which the different gender aspects of their writing can be studied. <sup>2</sup> Furthermore, from a perspective of hermeneutic philosophy, prejudice, tradition, and authority all affect the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be said that modern feminist scholarship offers a critique of Jung’s ideas. However, for the purposes of this essay, Jungian philosophy allows us to understand and approach pre-modern history and ancient thought.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on this, the article “Filosofía hermenéutica y género” (2000) explains how men and women can produce and use language differently.

relationship between gender and the use of language (Mardones Leiva and Saavedra Gallo 157). From exploring the written works of St. Teresa and St. John, it does not appear that gender impacts their mystic experiences but rather the way in which they communicate and view these experiences, as will be expounded later in this work.

### The life of St. Teresa

To better understand the work of a writer, it is important to learn about their life. St. Teresa of Avila was an important figure in the Spanish Catholic Church, but she did not have an easy life. In his biography about St. Teresa of Avila, Rohrbach (2005) details that Teresa was born in the Castellan region of Spain and was the third daughter in her family. Teresa expressed a desire to see God from an early age in life. However, during her adolescent years, she was a little rebellious and took an interest in things of the world, such as fashion trends and romance stories (Rohrbach 9084). This all changed at the age of fifteen when her mother died. Suddenly, Teresa lacked a mother figure in her life, and she soon turned to the Virgin Mary to serve as a sort-of spiritual mother. Teresa's father sent her to a religious school, but she was forced to leave due to sickness. During this season of poor health, Teresa spent much time reflecting on religion and religious life ("Santa Teresa de Jesus") and she began to frequently visit the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation (Rohrbach 9084). Her father did not want her to become a nun, but rather to get married and have a family. Nonetheless, Teresa was determined and her father eventually quit trying to dissuade her ("Santa Teresa de Jesus"). When Teresa turned twenty, she joined a convent. But her conversion to mysticism did not occur until later in life. At around age forty, she began to follow a strict personal schedule of prayer and would have religious experiences such as visions of God. Later, she established a convent of Discalced Carmelites in Avila. There they had

a stricter lifestyle with fasting, silence, and limited contact with outside people. This is where she took the name “Teresa of Jesus.” After spending four years in Avila at this convent, she left and founded about one convent each year for the next fifteen years. Her reformed convents focused on a remarkably simple style of life that eliminated distractions and promoted time in prayer. Teresa died of cancer at the age of sixty-seven, having left a profound impact on the church in Spain. During her life, she wrote four works of prose, as well as some poetry, letters, and an autobiography (Rohrbach 9084). It is likely that the events in Teresa’s early life shaped her into the woman and the mystic that she became. Through the loss of a parent, Teresa turned to religion and later direct contact with God to deal with the absence of a mother’s love. It is safe to say that her childhood shaped the way she viewed religion, and then from here her views of religion shaped her writing. This will be explored through one of her well-known poems entitled “Muero porque no muero” (2020).

#### Worldly struggles and devotion to God in “Muero porque no muero”

The devotion and love for God that St. Teresa of Avila had is evident in her writing. A work that exemplifies this is the poem “Muero porque no muero.” In this work we can observe and document Teresa’s mysticism, several Biblical themes, and “feminine” characteristics<sup>3</sup>. First, the phrase “muero porque no muero” is repeated throughout the poem (de la Fuente 1556-9). This echoes the attitude of Paul in his epistles. In Philippians, Paul writes “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1.21). Connecting the two, it is evident that Teresa and Paul understand and have experienced that life in this world is not easy, but that there is a hope of eternal life in heaven with Christ. They both express a desire for what is to come, for the next

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<sup>3</sup> These “feminine” characteristics come from Jungian theories on anima and animus. This analytical approach is aiming for a historical reconstructive view, not a modern or postmodern critique.



life. A large part of mysticism is union with God in this world, but these experiences still cannot compare with eternity in his presence. So, it can be said that St. Teresa is, in a sense, dying to be with God forever.

Another strong theme in “Muero porque no muero” is a strong love for God and an emphasis on relationship with Him. This is apparent in various lines – “en este lazo tan fuerte,” “vivir sin ti no puedo,” y “a Él solo es el que quiero” (de la Fuente 1556-9). All of these exemplify Teresa’s love and passion for God and place an emphasis on the relation and the emotional aspect of the mystic experiences, demonstrating the anima of Jung’s psychology. Continuing with this theme, Teresa writes:

Vivo ya fuera de mí,  
Después que muero de amor;  
Porque vivo en el Señor,  
Que me quiso para sí (de la Fuente 1556-9)

This illustrates how God, despite being all powerful and not needing anything from human beings, still desires a relationship with them, and this relationship is life-giving. Similarly, a parent does not need a child, but the parent takes pleasure in spending time with their children and watching them grow. In a sense, this demonstrates how Teresa could get the parental love from God that she was missing from her mother. This sentiment of a desire to be with God is also found in the Bible. Paul writes in Galatians:

“For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2.19-20).

This here is a figurative death, but like Teresa’s verse, says that a death is necessary to be born again and have a new life. If one does not figuratively die, they remain spiritually dead and have a life separate from Christ. Through the trials in her life, Teresa knew that life with Christ is a fulfilling life and that without God, there is no life. The sickness and loss that Teresa experienced taught her the truth of this thinking. While the things of the world are temporary, the God of the Bible is eternal and immutable, and from this people can draw life, purpose, and comfort. This is a large part of the mysticism that Teresa believed – being transformed from the inside out to align the soul with God and become closer to Him in a loving relationship.

Furthermore, Sta Teresa talks of a “divine union” within the poem (de la Fuente 1556-9). This, in its essence, is the concept of mysticism. Teresa believed in a mysticism that was the ability to contact God through visions and deep prayer, and this is not lost on her works. As is observed in “Muero porque no muero,” Teresa writes about struggles in the world, a strong desire to be in relation with God, and a figurative death to oneself. Moving forward, the life and works of St. John, a close companion of Teresa, will be analyzed to see what similar themes are present and further contextualize within the scope of this work.

The life of St. John

Like Teresa, John experienced many difficulties throughout his life. He was born in 1542 in Fontivero, Spain (*Vida y obras completas de San Juan de la Cruz*). He was the youngest of three sons and, like Teresa, there was a death in his family when he was a young boy. His father passed away and the loss of income caused his family to become quite poor (Schneiders 4941). Despite the poverty, John received an excellent education and joined the Carmelite order in the monastery of Santa Ana. In 1567, John was ordained as a priest and a few years later he met St. Teresa of Avila. He partnered with Teresa and joined in her movements of the Carmelite reforms. He did in the masculine branch of the order what Teresa was doing in the feminine branch (Schneiders 4942). However, John was eventually detained by enemies of the reform. There were tensions among the Carmelite friars because not all agreed that change was needed in the monasteries. So, when those who opposed the reforms captured him, St. John spent time in prison from 1577 to 1578 (*Vida y obras completas...* 1960). It was in prison where he began writing poetry. Eventually, John was able to escape prison and when free he directed an administration within a reformed branch for twelve years before passing away at the age of forty-nine (Schneiders 4942). It is obvious that, like St. Teresa, the life of St. John had many difficult moments which worked to impact his faith and mystic views of being in close relationship with God. His mysticism is strongly demonstrated in his writing, but to compare with Teresa's poem, we will look at an example of St. John's poetry.

The journey to God and transformation of self in "Noche oscura"

For this analysis, one of John's most well-known poems "Noche oscura" will be used because it illustrates John's mysticism and contains several references to Scriptures. The poem is about the path or journey of reaching union with God. To begin, a few verses say:

en secreto, que nadie me veía,  
ni yo miraba cosa,  
sin otra luz y guía,  
sino la que en el corazón ardía. (*Vida y obras completas...*413-414)

This paints the picture of taking a risk to be with a beloved. He is going out in secret, in danger of being caught. These characteristics exhibit the animus or the “masculine” aspect of action and adventure. Additionally, here, the light of God is guiding his path. He is trusting on God’s ability and not his own, again demonstrating an action with risk. This is similar to the Psalms when King David writes, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path” (Psalm 119.105). God being a guiding light is also seen other places in the Bible, such as in Exodus when the Lord is leading his people into the promised land:

By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. (Exodus 13.21-22)

Relating this to St. John’s poem, the “promised land” for St. John would be reaching union with God, contacting him through these mystic experiences. Additionally, in these verses St. John says that this is a meeting “en secreto.” This idea is repeated later in the poem when he writes “Salí sin ser notada” (*Vida y obras completas...* 1960). Both phrases emphasize how an important part

of mysticism is spending time away from others to meet with God. The life of Jesus also demonstrates this habit, as there are several recorded times where he would leave his disciples to pray. In Luke it says, “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5.16). There is a similar verse in Mark – “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1.35). It is evident that spending time alone with the Father is very important in having a relationship with him, as seen in the poem and in the Bible. In addition, John uses the feminine of the adjective “notada” although referring to himself. This reflects what many have studied in his work, as he writes of his mystical experiences for souls rather than for men or for women (MJ). It could also symbolize the theme in the bible of the Church being Christ’s bride (Ephesians 5). In the sense of “Noche oscura,” St. John would be the bride, as part of the church, and hence refers to himself as the feminine. To continue, in “Noche oscura,” St. John says that he is transformed (*Vida y obras completas... 1960*). Transformation of a person is also found in several parts of the Bible. For example, Paul writes about this theme in two places:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.  
(Ephesians 4.22-24)

Here in his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul teaches that choosing a relationship with Christ should result in a transformation of a person, of their character. Their old habits and passions

should be replaced with a righteousness that comes from Christ. Similarly, in his letter to the church of Colossae, Paul outlines the new traits that ought to define a believer in Christ.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3.12-14)

This concept of being transformed is related to dying to oneself – being willing to leave everything and follow Jesus. St. John talks about this also when he writes “*olvidome*” in the poem. He forgets himself, his human needs and desires because he is so passionate about God and being with him. This belief is important to the mystics and is a necessary step in achieving union with God. Another interesting point in “*Noche oscura*” is in the following verses:

el rostro recliné sobre [el Amado]  
cesó todo y dejóme,  
dejando mi cuidado  
entre las azucenas olvidado. (*Vida y obras completas*...413-414)

John is saying that God oversees everything and those who trust in him do not have to worry. The love of God can heal wounds and worries (“*El Dios vulnerado, el hombre herido en San Juan de la Cruz*”). In John's life he had wounds and worries – the death of his father and time in

prison. But the healing power of his relationship with God gave him a reason to push on and a hope to look forward to. Overall, “Noche oscura” is an example of the work of St. John that beautifully illustrates his mystic beliefs – describing the process of arriving at union with God and then describing the loving experience. It discusses God being his guide, the importance of spending time alone with the Father, the transformation that occurs when one accepts God, and the healing power of a relationship with Him.

### The perspective of gender

Before diving into the comparison of these works, it is important to contextualize the view on women within the church and within the sixteenth century society. Starting with the church, although women were the first witnesses to the resurrection, there are not many widely known women in Christianity. On top of having less renown, women were barred from roles of institutional leadership within the church (King). Hence it is no surprise that during Teresa’s time, it was against the normal social order for women to speak publicly on religion (Carvajal Jaramillo 2). In addition, the Holy Inquisition of Spain was happening with the intent of better unifying the nation. However, this created a strong distrust of mystic ideas and mental prayer, especially when practiced by women (“Saint Teresa of Avila – In the Context of Her Times”). Teresa was careful in avoiding persecution by the Inquisition – she accepted the social convention that said women were inferior and ignorant (Carvajal Jaramillo 3). Nonetheless, she defended her mystic views and the legitimacy of her spiritual experiences (Carvajal Jaramillo 2). Considering the treatment of women that Teresa faced, it is logical to conclude that her gender and the treatment thereof would impact her written communication of her religious beliefs.

There is no doubt that life events and the gender of a person have an influence on their development but, when it comes to Christian mysticism, gender has a greater impact on the way in which a writer expresses their ideas than it does on their spiritual experiences. Looking at St. Teresa and St. John, both mystic writers worked closely together but their poetry about their mystic experiences have different elements to them. But, to first look at similarities, both writers experienced the death of a parent early on in life. This is likely a reason that they turned to God to have a close personal relationship. Drawing near to God filled the absence that a deceased parent left at an early age and this affection for and from God is a strong characteristic of their mystic beliefs. Further, a common theme in both works of poetry is the transformation of a person when they begin to follow Christ. The old self dies and is replaced by a new version that is filled with the Holy Spirit. This dying to self is important for the mysticism of John and Teresa because it is an important part in their process of achieving union with God. According to Pastor Matt Chandler, dying to self is a manner of living for others and living for Christ, not for one's own desires. It is to confide in the word of God more than human intuition (Chandler). Hence, though most modern Christians would not claim to be mystics, this characteristic of Teresa and John's mysticism is present in the modern church. Additionally, St. Teresa and St. John write about how the experience of uniting their souls with God feels. They describe the path to reaching contact with God, the emotions that come with it, and the strong love that they have for him. This journey, these feelings, are all essential characteristics of the Christian mysticism that Teresa and John wrote about. Overall, the mystic beliefs of St. Teresa and St. John are united by an intimate relationship with God, a transformation of the heart, and a process it takes to achieve union with the Creator.



Although the two have much in common, it is necessary to study the differences in their works as well. Using Jungian philosophy as a framework, we can study characteristics of their poetry from a perspective of gender. From a Biblical standpoint, men and women are created differently. In Genesis, the Bible says “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1.27). Not only that, but society and culture have created roles and conventions for men and women that have shaped their experiences. Hence, it would make sense to say that they have different perspectives and means of communicating. In looking at the two poems, both seem to have similar mystic experiences. This is described in the paragraph above. However, the details of these experiences that are highlighted in the poems vary. In “Muero porque no muero,” Teresa repeats the idea of longing to be with God forever. This could be because of losing her mother at a young age and missing that parental love. But it also illustrates Jung’s theory of anima and animus. Here, Teresa, a woman, is highlighting more “feminine” or anima characteristics within her writing – the emotional and the relational aspects of mysticism. This is not simply a product of her being a woman but also of what it meant to be a woman in the church during her time. On the other hand, in “Noche oscura,” St. John also talks about an intimate relationship with God, but he highlights the process of arriving at this union with God. He paints the picture of sneaking away, trying not to get caught, taking a risk, all to get away and be with God. He writes “en una noche oscura,” “por la secreta escala,” y “en secreto...” (*Vida y obras completas*...413-414) which all demonstrate this theme of a journey and give the impression of action and adventure which are animus or “masculine” characteristics of Jungian psychology. Consequently, we can conclude that gender has a greater impact on how religious views are communicated rather than on the religious views themselves. This is logical since gender is not a concern of God. He does

not look at his people as men versus women but rather all as his children. The Bible says that “the Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16.7). Hence, the poems describe an unquestionably similar religious belief, but the ways in which the writers communicate their mystic experiences differ.

## Conclusion

In this essay, the connection between life events, mystic religious beliefs, and gender were explored to answer the question: does gender impact one’s religious experiences? In the case of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, it appears that gender does not impact their mystic views or experiences. Gender seems to dissolve when it comes to uniting the soul with the divine. Nonetheless, gender does impact how they communicate these experiences through their writing. As outlined earlier, reading the poems “Muero porque no muero” and “Noche oscura” through the lens of Jungian philosophy shows that St. Teresa’s poem contains more anima, or “feminine,” characteristics whereas St. John’s poem contains more animus, or “masculine,” characteristics. Furthermore, the analysis of both writers’ lives allows for connections to be drawn from their life events to their relationship to God. Both saints lost a parent early on in their life, and this was a catalyst for their pursuit of an intimate, personal relationship with the divine. Hence, we make the claim that life events impact the way in which a person views religion and then their gender impacts the way in which they communicate their beliefs in written works such as poetry.

Analyzing these two writers and their works together gives a more complete perspective and understanding on the concept of Christian mysticism in which they both devoutly believed.

Not only that, but studying their lives gives a glimpse of their testimony and why they held their mystic beliefs. St. Teresa and St. John also can teach us much about life and persevering through trials. They experienced hardships but instead of letting that define them, they drew near to God through their devotion and mystic experiences, and then were able to start reforms and spread the gospel. Though mysticism is not a customary practice or belief in present day Christianity, the modern church still encompasses topics that are present in Teresa and John's mysticism. These main themes include devotion to God, desire to be with Him, and the transformation from within. All these practices and themes within their writing can be applied to the modern person's life, whether they have faith or not. It teaches that despite the hardships present in the world, there is a hope and a reason to persevere and a different lens through which we can see the world.

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